

Review of *In the North of Our Lives*, by Geoffrey Norman (*Outside Magazine*, 1989)

More than a decade ago, six young men came up with a novel idea for an expedition across Canada's Northwest Territories. They would canoe some 2,000 miles from the Yukon to Hudson Bay, wintering over on the Barren Ground near Great Slave Lake to commemorate the life - and death- of the legendary English explorer John Hornby, who had starved there 50 years before. Hornby had planned to survive on caribou from migrating herds that never appeared. The six young men who would be wintering where he died planned to portage in all they needed - and they would have a radio so they could call for resupply or rescue, if the need arose.

Still, the expedition was ambitious and, in its way, reverent. These were serious young men - too serious, in the case of one of them, who gradually withdrew from the others as winter deepened and exposed the raw edges of personality. (Earlier, when fighting the river currents, they had been cheerful to the point of considering themselves the stars of an imaginary production they called "Bozos of the North.")

But while the expedition had its difficulties, the men were up to them and by the deepest part of winter were relishing them. They were where they wanted to be, doing what they wanted to be doing. And then a kind of hyper-reality, something out of Thomas Pynchon, literally descended on them: A nuclear-powered Soviet spy satellite, Cosmos 954, fell out of orbit, and fragments fell across the Barrens. The world, in its grimmest aspect, invaded their camp.

They were evacuated and for a while became the subject of intense media scrutiny (I wrote an article about them). Then, when the debris had been cleaned up and the world turned its attention to other things, they returned to their camp and eventually completed their expedition.

Chris Norment, one of the six, has written a long, lavish, sensitive recollection of the trip. *In the North of Our Lives* is a fascinating account of a journey that would have been worth writing about even if the Russian space engineers had not put their satellite into a clumsy orbit. His descriptions of the vast, forbidding country where the group wintered, his respectful and honest account of their difficulties, and his eye on the absurdity of the accident that rained down on their heads, all make this a very strong and satisfying narrative, with a message too big to miss.