

Theelon



A River Sanctuary

David F. Pelly

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*For my parents, JFP & JKP,
who first put me in a canoe,
who fostered my urge to seek
the wilderness, and who,
in their 70th year, paddled
this river sanctuary with me.*

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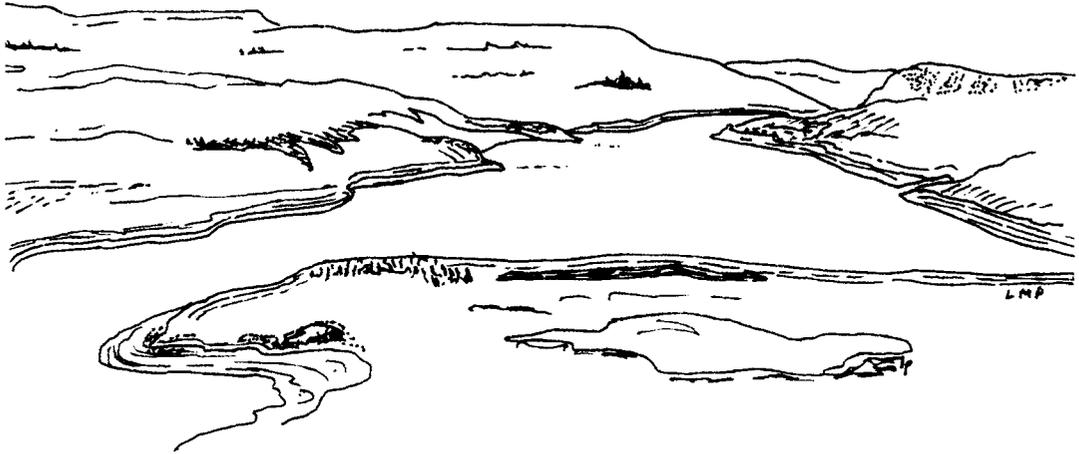
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Preface



What is wilderness? Is it both a physical place and a concept, or perhaps an attitude? The very word conjures up a sense of remote mystery.

For me, the Thelon is the quintessential “wilderness.” But what is wilderness for me may not be to the next fellow, particularly if that fellow’s grandfathers lived in my wilderness, and hunted there for their food, as did both Dene and Inuit before white man ever thought about the Thelon. And yet we agree, really: it is a region where industrialized society’s impact is minimal, where nature remains the supreme force. It is a place where a human presence is only incidental, and where mystery prevails. Such is the Thelon valley, still today.

This book aims to tell you the Thelon's story, a tale replete with adventure, intrigue, joy, sorrow and drama. I'm not going to harp on the Thelon wilderness being the largest, the wildest, or the greatest — though it may be any of those in Canada, or in North America, or in the world? — but it does in some way stand apart. In the Canadian context, it was recognized as a valuable wilderness, as a sanctuary, very early. Canada as a dominion was only 60 years old when the Thelon Game Sanctuary was created by Order in Council. That gives it seniority, as formally recognized wilderness, which exceeds most (if not all) others in this country.

But wilderness, to survive as wilderness, needs a voice. Its own voice cannot be heard beyond those who enter it as a sanctum. It cannot speak for itself, to defend itself against our intrusions. That underlies my motive for writing this book: to add my effort to the communal voice speaking on behalf of the Thelon wilderness.

That voice includes many others, to be sure, each of whom knows parts of the Thelon valley or parts of its history much better than I do. Whenever possible I have conferred with them; I was privileged to meet and listen to several old Thelon hands. I am indebted to numerous people who co-operated with my efforts to compile the Thelon's story: they know who they are, and to them I convey my sincerest thanks, literally from coast to coast to coast in Canada and overseas in Europe. I cast my net as widely as possible.

It is the richness of human experience, layered on top of the natural splendour of the river valley and its wildlife, that really sets the Thelon apart. The place has a history, both Native and non-Native, which gives it standing beyond the intrinsic value of wilderness itself. That may prove to be the difference between preservation and destruction of the Thelon wilderness; history may be its saving grace. This book is my attempt to render that history accessible, thinking it may make a difference to the future. The Thelon is a wilderness which deserves a voice and, I believe you'll agree, it offers a Canadian tale that ought to be told.

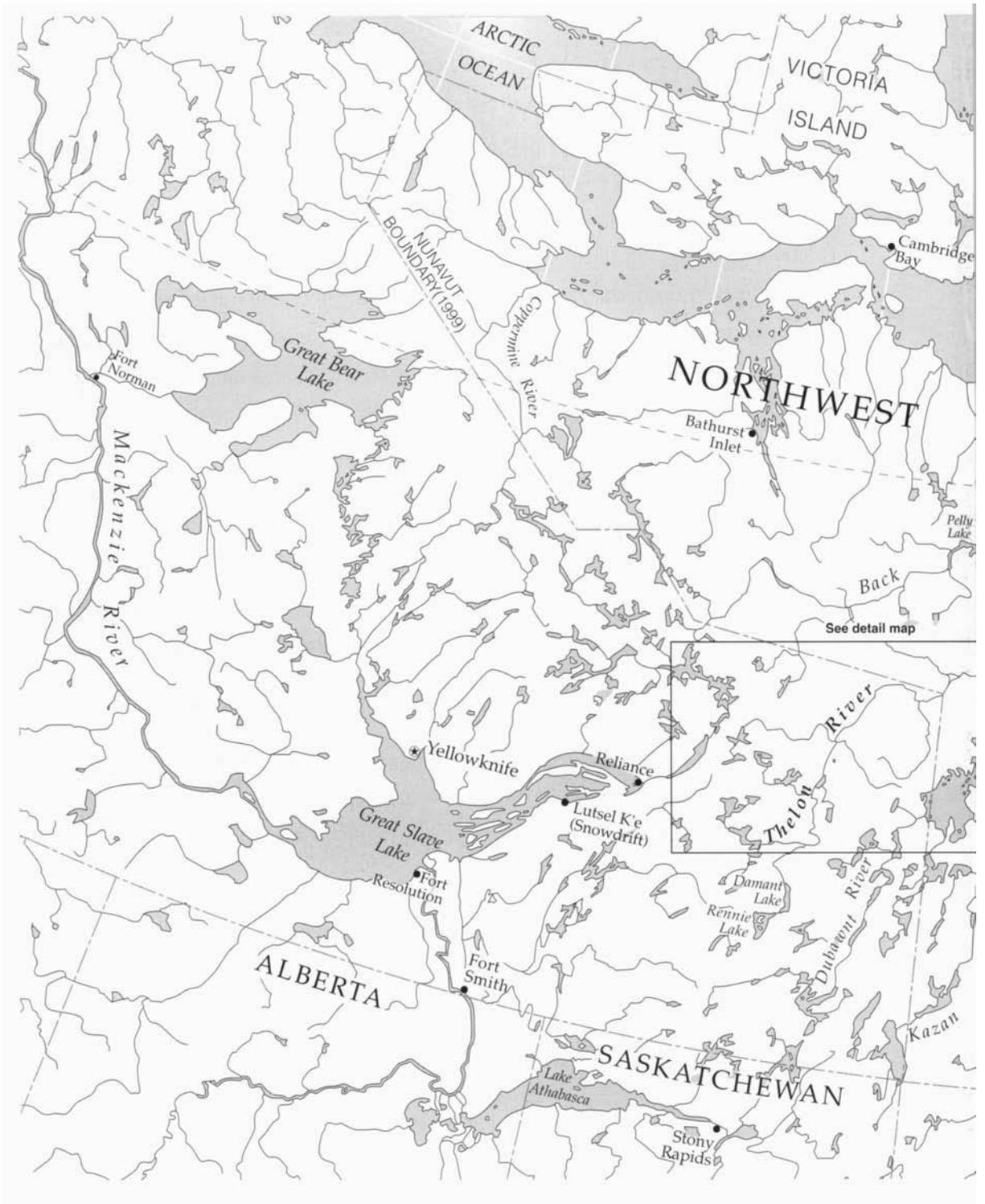
I am confident of that because I have been there, I have experienced the Thelon's mystery — a mystery which this book explores but could not possibly explain.

I'm well aware that I am not an old-timer in the Thelon. I first travelled there in mid-winter 1984 with a small party of Inuit hunters from Baker Lake, up the river valley nearly to (but not over) the eastern boundary of the game sanctuary. It captured my imagination then and I've been back several times since: on canoe trips in summer, and in winter with my friends Tularialik, Mannik and Piryaq.

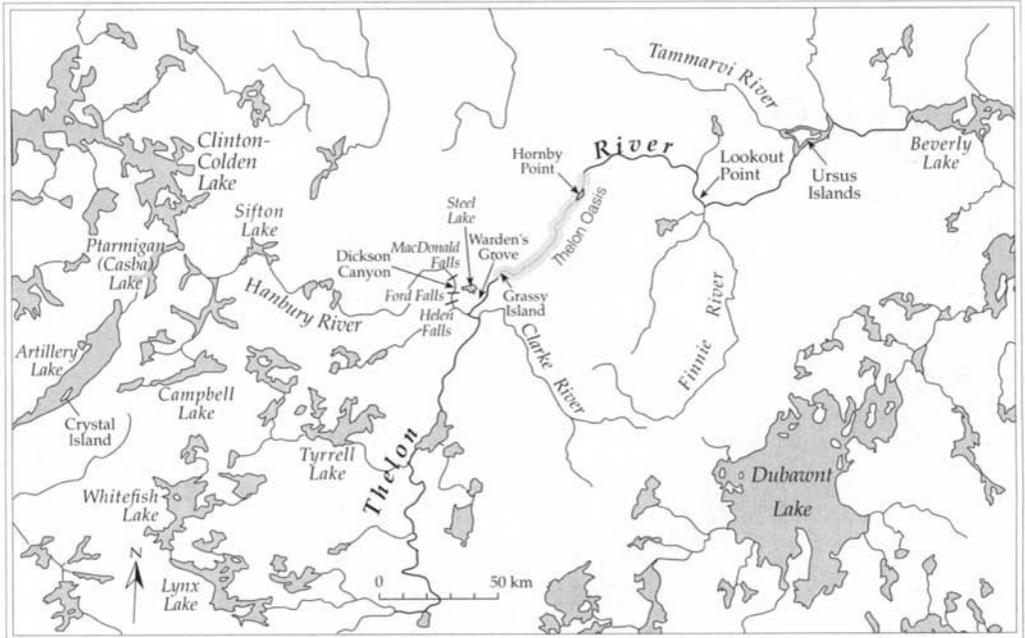
Over the years, the Thelon wilderness has become a special place for me, bestowing lasting gifts and memories. Although this book as a whole is my spiritual response to the place, most of my personal experience of the Thelon is not to be found in these pages. I could describe meeting Laurie on the Thelon: I was there researching a story on assignment for an American canoeing magazine; she was there on a package holiday, her first wilderness canoe trip, with other Americans as diverse as a midwestern farm-wife, a sci-fi writer from California exploring “a parallel universe,” and a security guard from JFK airport seeking to escape “the electromagnetic radiation” in New York. Together Laurie and I have returned to the Thelon several times, to paddle various parts of the watershed, and when we’re not up there, we’re often talking about the place; it remains central to our life, and her multi-dimensional support as I worked on this book has been unfailing. I could tell you about the grizzly that swam across the river and stalked along the bank toward our camp ... or the grinding portages enduring shirt-soaking heat and swarming bugs ... or sitting quietly atop an esker looking out over thousands of square miles of rolling tundra ... or surveying geese and falcon and musk-ox populations in the aid of science ... or paddling across wave-tossed lakes into relentless headwinds ... or the terror of facing a charging musk-ox ... or the beauty of the midnight light ... or being blockaded, first by ice then by gale-force winds, on the big lakes — all of which have happened. But that is my story, best saved for a campfire circle some day, and this is the Thelon’s story.

I offer it — imbued with respect, admiration and gratitude for all the old-timers, both Native and non-Native, who have gone before — in the hope that this small voice recounting their stories, the Thelon’s story, will serve to buttress its defenses and enhance its chances of survival as a wilderness. It is, after all, part of us.

D.F.P.







Sigyn Fritzsche-Fick

1

Enter the Sanctum

Free again. The first, fleeting moments alone beside a barrenlands river deliver a sensation I can never forget. Impossible to hold onto, it is nonetheless so profound that its memory is permanent. Left alone beside the river, with no more than a tiny pile of gear, a silent travelling companion, and an immense wilderness all around, the solitude penetrates through every sense, every pore of my body. It is palpable, flowing over me like a wave.

I have been here before, indeed to this very spot beside the Thelon River, but more important, to this emotional moment at the beginning of a barrenlands canoe trip. It is familiar, and expected, and all the more profound because of that. There is mystery, but the feeling must have something to do with the anticipation of what lies ahead, of what the wilderness holds in store. One thing is certain: we have escaped from the impositions of “civilized” life, though it is temporary, and somewhat contrived to be sure. But nothing could be more real than the river at my feet, with its crystal clear water, or the expanse of wilderness beyond its banks, or our deep impression of isolation. We look at each other; the sight of just a single person in this vast landscape only emphasizes our solitude. There is a feeling of having awoken from a dream, to find yourself within a beautiful, peaceful sanctum. There is stimulation everywhere, and yet there is nothing, absolutely nothing, imposing itself upon you.

The closest human settlement is about 450 kilometres away. In fact, the Northwest Territories capital Yellowknife to the west, the Inuit community of Qamanittuaq (Baker Lake) to the east, Stony Rapids in northern Saskatchewan to the south, and Bathurst Inlet on the arctic coast to the north are all roughly equidistant from our position in the middle of

continental North America's largest tract of wilderness. In the Twin Otter that brought us here, any one of the four settlements could be reached in about three hours. By canoe, now our only choice, we could also head toward any of the four destinations — such is the extensive network of waterways that weaves together the patterned landscape of the northern wilderness. But even the most direct route, downstream to Baker Lake, will require nearly a month of paddling. We have allowed 40 days.

Before anything else, we are both eager to walk up onto the land. We breathe in the unique aroma of crushed tundra plants and lichens, as our first footsteps carry us up the slope. In minutes we are high enough above the river to look up and down its course, detached from the immediate sense of its current that absorbed us at the water's edge. Now we see its full breadth, a hundred and fifty, maybe two hundred metres across. The water shines blue and silver, as clean as any water on Earth can be. This river will run through the centre of our lives for the rest of this summer. It is like an old friend, I think, and smile.

Just downstream beyond the bend where the river disappears there is, I know, a cliff-face housing a colony of swallows in their beehive-like nests. We will visit them in the days ahead. Upstream, there is a regularly used peregrine falcon nest that I want to check. But there is no rush. First we will make camp here, where the plane has deposited us — as much by chance as by choice — and spend a day or two adjusting to the river valley's cycle of life. We are here to become a part of this valley, as much as that is humanly possible. And that means first we must find the rhythm.

So we go for a walk. The top of the closest rise will do just fine for now. Other, higher, more distant hills can wait for tomorrow or the next day. For now we want simply to let the wilderness wrap its arms around us, embrace us if it will. As we walk, the land spreads out before us, mile after mile after mile of open tundra. There are shades of green that defy description. Here and there, the land sprouts boulders, as if exposing a dry river course; in fact it is the signature of some ancient glacial action. In places we walk over the exposed granite surface of the Canadian Shield, scraped clean by the Ice Age glaciers, which gouged striations into the 2.5 billion-year-old rock at our feet. It is the oldest rock in the world, I remind myself, looking up again into the distance. Pockets of spruce dot the landscape to the east, for we are near the edge of the Thelon Oasis. Trees grow here, several hundred kilometres north of the treeline, in the shelter of the river valley. Beyond the valley, north and south, is the treeless barrenlands. In all that space, as we search to the horizon, there is not another human being. There are other animals, to be sure, but we can see no movement, apart from the occasional pair of Harris' sparrows hopping nervously from boulder to boulder as we pass through their territory.

Off in the distance we see a ridge of golden sand, winding snake-like across the land. An esker, it marks the course of a glacial river during the latter stages of the last ice age, which retreated from here between eight and nine thousand years ago, leaving this valley flooded by a post-glacial lake. It took centuries, but eventually nature created this panorama of life, with all its subtle hues.

As glacial Lake Thelon drained, the climate warmed, and vegetation spread over the newly exposed surface. It was not long before small mammals moved north from the refuges sought during the ice age. Then came the caribou, and shortly after, Man followed.*

The land may *seem* empty today as we stand high above the river and absorb its grandeur, but the humbling reality is inescapable. There is life everywhere around us, and there has, in the past, been human life in this scene. Native people before us were here for thousands of years, living on this land and from its wealth. The mysterious signs of their presence are there, and in the days ahead we will look closely to see them.

Now it is time to return to the riverbank, retrieve our pile of gear, and set up camp. There is no urgency. The huge, open sky is clear of cloud. The weather promises to be agreeable for awhile. The sun is still high enough in the western sky to suggest that it may not set tonight. It is early July, when daylight persists around the clock.

The first day of a barrenlands canoe trip is always full of adjustments, a time for the realignment of thought. It starts dramatically with the roar of turbines as the Twin Otter lifts off, followed by the traditional salutatory waggle of the wing tips and then, moments later, silence and solitude. For me, there is a sense of homecoming.

Later, the tent up, the gear sorted, and supper cooked, we celebrate our arrival. In the tradition of voyageurs and Native travellers everywhere, we offer a small amount of a treasured commodity to the river and to the land. I splash some of our scant supply of rum into the river. It must be enough to feel the sacrifice, “to please the river-gods.” Our routine for the next 40 days will unfold at the whim of the river. Life now is a simple matrix of food, shelter, travel, and the land — and *the river runs through it*.

That night, as we settle into our sleeping bags, the sun shines into the tent through the north-facing bug-screen door. I glance at my partner writing in her daily journal. “Home again!” she has penned boldly in her first entry for the summer. I smile inside, content to know that she too feels that way. It will be a good summer on the Thelon.

* See Appendix IX: *A Short Geological History of the Thelon Valley*.

My paddle dips into the bright clear water of the Thelon and silently urges our canoe forward, stroke upon stroke, in a rhythm as gentle as the current's flow. By now, after several days, it almost feels like *our* river. My eyes cast upward onto the land, and the daily feast begins. It is, I cannot help but remark, such beautiful country. I feel privileged to be here, like a visitor to a holy sanctum, a place I could never possess.

Why am I here? The question haunts me, even though on the surface the answer seems obvious. But why *here*? What is it about this place that draws me and many others back time and again on modern-day canoe trips? What is it about this place that nourished the lives of those before us, not only physically but spiritually? What is about this place that moved the barrenland trappers to call it "The Country?" What is about this place that made it really the last frontier in continental North America, a place where explorers, map-makers, and scientists only came in the course of this century? What is it about this place? Why, now, am I *here*?

My canoe drifts forward and the mystery begins to unfold, subtly, in the way of this wilderness sanctuary. For me, something about this place speaks of rebirth; why, I am not certain. It has become an essential part of my existence. I am here to answer a need, to seek something inside — inside me, inside humanity, inside this place. This river valley offers the inner sanctum of my quest where, surely, the answers can be found.

We are in the heart of the so-called Thelon Oasis, that stretch of the river valley from the Hanbury junction down to just below Hornby Point. The spruce grow thickly here, defiantly holding their position well north of the treeline. The banks on either side of the river are dense enough with spruce that a fleeing wolf or caribou or moose can disappear in an instant. Nevertheless, looking up higher, to the hills on either side that form this valley, one can see the tundra landscape that belongs to this latitude. It is only in the low-lying portion of the valley that the forest remains so thick, in places almost impenetrable.

Four to five thousand years ago, the entire area, even the hills, was heavily treed. While walking up in the hills, I have come upon old stumps as big as my thigh where there is nary a live tree to be seen. The forest coverage that far north was temporary; in due course it retreated south. Today trees survive only down close to the river. The valley is oriented in such a way that these trees are sheltered from the worst blast of the arctic climate. The soil is relatively rich. The river itself rises from the southwest, so its warmer water nurtures the Oasis. Conditions, so far, have conspired against the arctic environment to sustain this small pocket of forest growth.

It takes only a few days to transit the Oasis by canoe, and even here a tongue of tundra landscape occasionally licks down to the river's edge, enough to remind you where

you really are, in the barrenlands. It is seldom more than a fifteen minute walk away from the river to the forest's outer edge, as the land climbs away from the water. There, I can stand on the open tundra.

All of these mysterious elements of the land surround me as our canoe moves forward with the river's current. Details that sometimes I do not even see. Together they comprise the wilderness that embraces the passer-by. Together they have a power and influence that none could achieve on its own. Assembled into the landscape of the Thelon valley, from its sweeping grandeur to its detailed ground patterns, it is enough to humble the transient human. Always as I paddle, I allow ample time for walking, for leaving the canoe on the beach and climbing up into the hills. That is where this valley offers its greatest gifts.

Nevertheless, the river itself holds a compelling fascination. The Thelon River drains a vast area, approximately 150,000 square kilometres. The result is that even here in the Oasis, where the land is quite flat, the water flows with a noticeable current, inexorably toward the sea, still 1,000 kilometres away. In the early summer, shortly after break-up, the river is fairly flying, with a peak discharge that exceeds 4,000 cubic metres per second. Usually sometime in early June, the ice can no longer contain the pressure of the underlying water, swollen by the melting snow. So it bursts, and great chunks of ice go hurtling down the river. Only by July 1 can one usually count on finding an ice-free river, and then only as far downstream as Beverly Lake. The large lakes between there and the sea often remain partially covered by floating ice until the end of July, sometimes even into August.

Beside the river just upstream from Beverly Lake there is a small cabin used by the Water Survey of Canada crews as they do their rounds of the northern rivers, measuring water levels and discharge. In the cabin's log-book, in 1991, one member of the crew made the following entries. They illustrate the drama of spring break-up.

June 8 - all bench marks underwater, river at door step ... total discharge 9135 cubic metres per second or 322,647 cubic feet per second ... She's really boogieing — that's equal [in volume] to 80 semi-trailers per second rolling down the river.

June 28 - water has dropped some 6 metres since June 8th. An historic year on the Thelon. We have probably witnessed a 1 in 100 year flood.

The river now is running more slowly, but still it is running, carrying our canoe — and us — through the valley. It is the river that binds together all these thoughts and all these sights. It is running day and night, but it is more than a constant flow. For us, the travellers, as for all the other living things that inhabit the valley, the river is the source of life. It reflects the life around it even as it sustains that life.