

# The Legend of John Hornby

## A THELON RIVER TALE

by David F. Pelly

IT IS A LEGEND THAT HAS FEW, PERHAPS NO PARALLELS IN THE NORTH.

Imagine, if you can, that you are a 17-year-old boy in England in 1925, and have just finished your studies at a private boys school, passing out successfully, but not distinguishing yourself in any way. As the son of an officer in the British army, you have been imbued with a sense of pride in your family's standing. You feel undefined expectations placed upon you, and yet you have no idea what to do next. Then your mother's favourite and rather eccentric cousin, some 30 years your senior, comes to visit your family's comfortable country home and enthral you with wild tales of Canada's North. It would, surely, seem like the most exciting place imaginable to a young mind that had been, as much as anything, somewhat stultified by academic challenges. So, when the suggestion is made that you might accompany your cousin, whom you call "Uncle Jack," on his next trip to Canada, you fairly beg your parents for permission to go, not only for the adventure, and the answer to your uncertainty of direction in life, but also to demonstrate to your father that you have what it takes. Such is the story of Edgar Christian.

Uncle Jack, actually John Hornby, was, like Edgar, born into privileged circumstances in England, and grew up in the shadow of his father's championship-level prowess on the cricket pitch. The younger Hornby had every reason to believe he did not measure up to expectations, even though he attended one of the most prestigious boys schools in the country. Eschewing his family's wealth and status, in 1904 at the age of 24, John Hornby came to Canada in search of adventure. That quest became the defin-

ing feature of his life. Four years later, he had found his way to Great Bear Lake where he fell in love with the North country, with a subsistence lifestyle based on trapping and hunting, and with the challenge of survival in extreme circumstances. On more than one occasion, some years later, he claimed to have learned how to "out-Indian the Indians" in this matter of survival.



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John Hornby, 1923



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Edgar Christian, 1925



Hornby saw the oasis of spruce trees which lends to part of the Thelon valley an air of beauty and tranquillity, deluding Hornby into believing that this would be a hospitable spot to spend the winter.

Two of the crosses, marking the graves of the men, overlooking the Thelon River.



A stretch of the Thelon River just upstream of Hornby Point

After several years of adventures in the North — interrupted only by a brief stint at the front during the First World War, which earned him a Military Cross — Hornby found himself returning to England in 1925 to be at his dying father's bedside. It was on that occasion that he met young Edgar and filled the boy's head with images of great adventure. Just a few months later, on April 19, 1926, the two set sail from England in a ship bound for Canada. In his pocket, Edgar carried a letter from his father the Colonel, saying, "You are out to lay the foundation of your life" — weighty words for a paternal farewell. In his first letter home from Canada, Edgar wrote to his mother: "... one of Jack's old friends told me in Montreal, 'that I was with one of Canada's best and anyone who is with J. Hornby can never go wrong.'"

The confidence expressed by this young man amounts to nothing short of hero-worship. It was indeed an era of such heroic fantasies — the previous year all of England had watched the most successful ever assault on Mount Everest and then reeled with the heroic death of George Mallory only feet from the summit. And, though some years had passed, the dramatic death of Robert Scott during his return trek from the South Pole continued to offer every schoolboy in the country the greatest example of heroic challenge imaginable, and was still the subject of lectures and articles. It was in this context that Edgar set out to accompany his Uncle Jack on an expedition to Canada's North.

Hornby himself had contributed to the myth. "The North has never known such a traveller as I," he said. He wanted to stand apart from other trappers and government surveyors who travelled the northern wilderness. "What do these men know of travelling?" he is quoted as saying to one of his earlier travelling companions, James Critchell-Bullock. "There is not one of them who could stay with me if it became a matter of living off the country. They are not accustomed to hardship." Hornby and Critchell-Bullock had themselves only just survived — as was Hornby's habit — when they over-wintered east of Great Slave Lake in 1924-25, and then paddled down the Thelon River to Baker Lake the following summer. During this trip, for the first time, Hornby saw the oasis of spruce trees which lends to part of the Thelon valley an air of beauty and tranquillity, deluding Hornby into believing that this would be a hospitable spot to spend the winter. It was there he was determined to go with Edgar, although he was hesitant to reveal the full extent of his plan to others.

In Ottawa, on their way across Canada, Hornby told the government surveyor and seasoned northern traveller Guy Blanchet that he and Edgar were headed for Great Slave Lake. In a letter home, Edgar summarized the plan as presented to Blanchet: "This time Jack says he is going to live more in comfort if he can because he has plenty of time on hand and



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The scene at John Hornby's cabin as it was first discovered after the three men's deaths.

will take plenty of provisions and stores." Hornby continued his deception, whether intended or perhaps only a measure of his own uncertainty, with everyone he met on the way across Canada. Not until he arrived at Fort Chipewyan did he reveal to anyone his final plan - to over-winter on the banks of the Thelon River, in the oasis of trees, where he was sure caribou and other game would be in abundance. As it happened, he again met Blanchet, also on his way North. When the old hand heard Hornby's plan, he urged his friend not to pursue this wild idea. "I warned him about no caribou on the Thelon, from my own observation and what I had heard from [the trappers]."

Hornby, it seems, had something to prove. Not just that he knew the land better than anyone else, which in itself is questionable to say the least, but also that he could survive where others could not. Aware or not, he was about to gamble, and not only with his own life, as he had before on many occasions, but this time equally with the life of his young cousin.

The central issue in this gamble was the caribou. Everyone knew the caribou migrated out onto the barrenlands for the summer and retreated down near or into the forests south of the tree line for the winter. Hornby argued that, since there are pockets of trees in the oasis along the Thelon, even though it is several hundred kilometres north of the tree line, there would be caribou there all winter long. No one actually *knew* if he was wrong. But the fact is, the white trappers who had been working this corner of the barrenlands for several years, and indeed the Dene who had been using it for generations, had established a successful means of

The journal kept by Edgar Christian, found in the cabin following his death, now preserved at his former school in England.



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survival in the area, travelling out onto the barrens by dog team in pursuit of their livelihood, but basing their main camps within reasonable reach of the forests and the caribou. The trappers' routine also included, significantly, arriving in camp in late summer in time to catch the caribou migration as it passed through, so that a stock of meat and fish could be laid up for the winter. Hornby failed to apply any of this rationale to his own plan. He must have known he would arrive in the Thelon long after the majority of caribou had passed. He took no dog team. His gamble was based almost entirely on his (and *his* alone) unproved hypothesis that some caribou must over-winter in the Thelon oasis.

John Hornby loved the northern wilderness. There is no doubt about that. He was drawn by the isolation, the tranquillity and the raw beauty. He was also driven to conquer the barrenlands, to do what no white man had done before, as he saw it. Time and time again, through his career in the North, he had pitted himself against the wilderness. Each time he had emerged, sometimes only by the skin of his teeth. But this compulsion urged him on, always to up the stakes. It is only a matter of time, for any barrenlands traveller with this attitude, before the land will impose its will.

Young Edgar Christian followed along gleefully, delighting in his Uncle Jack's version of the adventure. "I am safe as a house with Jack... This is, although bad with flies, a wonderful life and one could not wish for better." Joined by another young man along the way, Harold Adlard, the expedition paddled its heavily laden canoe from Fort Chipewyan to Great Slave Lake, then east the length of the big lake. They carried everything — probably more than 1,000 kilograms of food and equipment, including a woodstove — over Pike's Portage up to Artillery Lake, and continued north toward the headwaters of the Hanbury River which would carry them down to the Thelon Oasis. This in itself was an epic journey of roughly 1,000 kilometres. It was late September or perhaps early October before the threesome arrived at Hornby's chosen spot on the banks of the Thelon River. There they began work — even as the advancing autumn chilled the air, and snow flurries hinted at what was to come — to build the cabin which would shelter them through the winter.

Edgar was committed to keeping a journal of his experiences. It is largely due to the contents of this



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small, red, leather-bound volume that we know what happened over the next eight months.\* On October 14, 1926, Edgar Christian opened his account of their sojourn beside the Thelon River with these words:

The stove inside the cabin, where Edgar Christian's journal was found.

*Weather turned much milder and made travelling on [snow]shoes bad so could not get in rest of meat. I took a short walk down stream in morning but saw no tracks beside weasel. All spent rest of day digging out sand from the house and fixing up the roof permanently. Temp 26 °F. Wind moderate, north easterly.*

He continued four days later:

*October 18 — Jack returned in the evening with glad news having seen 30 caribou on a distant ridge behind camp, so tomorrow we all go out in last effort for winter's grub.*

*October 19 — We all started out early to see if caribou were grazing still on ridge behind camp but were soon disappointed in seeing nothing for miles around.*

As a reader, one senses that the severity of their situation is beginning to hit home. Edgar, however, trusting in his Uncle Jack, maintains a confident and determined voice through the pursuing months of his journal. The first blizzard hit on October 25 and lasted four days. After that, they redoubled their efforts to hunt cari-

Some of the March 1927 entries written by Edgar Christian in his journal.



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\* *Edgar Christian's journal was published first in 1937 with the title Unflinching: A diary of tragic adventure, and again in 1980 as Death in the Barren Ground. It is compelling reading.*

*The recently published Cold Burial, by Clive Powell-Williams, provides an unprecedented insight into Edgar Christian's background and character, in the latest re-telling of the story.*

*For a complete account of the Thelon's history, including more of this remarkable tale and many others, see Thelon: A River Sanctuary by David F. Pelly.*

bou, but there were none to be found. By the end of November, they were surviving largely on ptarmigan and fish. December was a difficult month, but they caught just enough small game to maintain the status quo. Hornby worked prodigiously at hunting, trapping and setting nets through the ice, in a vain attempt to sustain his young companions. The pattern continued through January, with temperatures dropping into the minus forties, even, on one occasion, down to  $-54^{\circ}\text{F}$ . At month's end, Edgar's diary records their situation:

*At last the end of the worst month is over and still grub on hand for 10 days but damned slim at that.*

The next day, they sighted caribou, the first in several months, and killed one to provide what seemed to them a feast. But the feasting spirit was short-lived.

*February 11 — Hope to God we get Caribou soon as nothing seems to get in traps and flour is nearly gone and we are grovelling round for rotten fish.*

*February 16 — We have 12 cups of flour and 20 lbs of Sugar and hides for food now.*

A week later they killed another caribou, their last as it turned out. As March passed, the men grew ever weaker. They had abandoned the futile fish nets and the traps produced only a scant supply of foxes, hares and birds. They resorted to digging up bones from previously discarded remains and subsisting on boiled animal skins. Survival hung in a delicate balance. As he had many times before, John Hornby clung to life, against incredible odds. This time, however, the deprivation was too much for him. On April 6, he made his last fruitless outing in search of food. Four days later, lying in pain on his bed, he told the two younger men that he was "sinking fast." Edgar attended to his hero with dedication and love, until the end.

*April 17 — At 6:45 Last Evening Poor Jack passed peacefully away. Until that minute I think I remained*



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*the same but then I was a wreck. Harold good pal was a Marvel in Helping me and putting things a little straight for the night ... We both are very weak but more cheery and determined to pull through and go out to let the World know of the Last days of the finest Man I have Ever known ...*

Two days later, Harold Adlard took to his bed, never to rise again. He died on May 4, 18 days after Hornby, leaving the youngest member of the threesome to fend for himself. Hornby and then Adlard, each in turn, wrapped in blankets and canvas, were laid to rest in the snow just outside the cabin. Edgar Christian soldiered on bravely, too weak to hunt, relying on what lay under the snow around the cabin. The journal entries continue through May, a litany of terse, poignant facts describing his declining condition, always

The graves of Edgar Christian, John Hornby, and Harold Adlard, 1929.

The crosses were erected by the RCMP in 1929 to mark the graves of the three men.



## Cold Burial

Clive Powell-Williams  
Viking 2001.

This book offers a new dimension to the legendary tale of John Hornby and Edgar Christian's fateful journey to the barrenlands. Clive Powell-Williams has plumbed the depths of the social context in England, and the family background underlying the experience of the two cousins. More than any previous writer, the author seeks to understand Edgar, and to see the adventure through his young eyes.

Powell-Williams argues convincingly that the youthful Edgar Christian fully accepted his fate, in the end, even considered the venture a success. "So the expedition, in this stark final moment, did not seem to Edgar to have

really failed at all. What had failed was unimportant — the mortal body. In terms of the spirit, and as a testament to comradeship, mutual help and struggle — to human love itself — Edgar could see only what was positive and honourable," writes Powell-Williams. "It was their Everest and their Pole. And, even in failure, it honoured their family and their nation, turning physical defeat into moral victory and justifying everything."

This new book, written and published in Britain, but available in Canada and the U.S., offers some interesting conjecture on what may have transpired on the banks of the Thelon River during the winter of 1926-

27. Unfortunately, the author's (and presumably editor's) lack of first-hand knowledge of the area allows several innocent errors of detail to slip in. Nonetheless, it is a good read, essential for anyone wanting to know "everything" about this legendary episode in barrenlands history.

heartened by a slight ray of optimism. He kept a loaded rifle beside the door, praying a caribou would walk into camp. On May 18, he saw three robins and a swan fly over, reassuring him that spring was indeed coming, and with it the caribou. The final entry in the journal is a disjointed scrawl.

*June 1st — Got out too weak and all in now.  
Left Things Late.*

It was not until more than a year later, in the summer of 1928, that the lifeless bodies of the three men were discovered at the cabin. Today, visitors, primarily passing canoeists, can still see the remains of the cabin and, off to one side, the three graves, marked by simple crosses. The ground around the cabin, paradoxically, is worn with a network of animal trails weaving in amongst the trees on the sheltered slope, and is littered with the scat of caribou, moose and assorted small game. Seen in the summer, it has all the appearance of being a hospitable environment.

“Left things late” — it would be hard to compose, this succinctly, a more fitting summary of their predicament, or a more suitable epitaph for John Hornby’s career, although we can be certain this was not Edgar Christian’s intent, for he would never have voiced even the slightest criticism of his cousin. Hornby’s story has grown into one of the most enduring legends of the North, in the 75 years since his death, a legend which offers a most poignant illustration of the northern wilderness adage “Failing to plan, is planning to fail.”

Some, perhaps more sympathetic than others, have suggested that John Hornby had thought through a plan, based on his belief not only that the elusive over-wintering caribou in the Thelon valley would sustain them, but also that he had considered first the musk-oxen (sighted by him at Grassy Island, just upstream of his cabin, during his first trip down the Thelon by canoe in 1925) and secondly the small game — ptarmigan, hare, fox, etc. — as his “guarantee” of survival, his reliable back-up. It all seems implausible, when one considers his previous record. More likely, he simply believed he could face whatever challenges the wilderness might throw at him, and rise above them. To suggest that his calculations went any further than that, is giving him more credit than is his due. He was simply not that methodical. Hornby was driven not only by his genuine attach-



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ment to the land, but also by his desire to achieve immortality. In that regard, one could say that he succeeded. His story is remembered by every passer-by, and will be for generations to come — it would seem entirely appropriate to establish an official NWT historic site at the cabin near Hornby Point.

That said, it should also be remembered that Hornby was not “defeated by the incalculable” nor was he the victim solely of “some mysterious change in the normal migration of the caribou” as was proposed by the man who edited the first published edition of Edgar Christian’s journal in 1937. Those suggestions amount to little more than a weak attempt to construct the heroic myth which, in its time, achieved a significant measure of success. As one letter of condolence to Edgar’s parents said: “It is boys and men like him that have made England what she is.”

The sad reality is, Edgar’s fate was all but sealed when he left England with his cousin. Short of a dramatic change in John Hornby’s foolhardy but essentially secret plans, the outcome of Edgar Christian’s grand adventure was nearly unavoidable. Hornby was defeated by his own bravado. The greatest tragedy is that he took two young men with him. Today, we are left with a legend. 

**Fort Resolution, on Great Slave Lake, as it appeared when John Hornby and Edgar Christian passed through in 1926.**

## Film production underway

A joint Canadian-Welsh film-crew spent a week at Hornby Point last summer, in preparation for an hour-long documentary. The film will follow the 1926-27 journey undertaken by Edgar Christian, whose family lived in Wales at the time, beginning from his English boys school

and ending on the banks of the Thelon River. It is one of the most tragic and most moving stories to be found among the North’s many legends. Writer David F. Pelly accompanied the crew at Hornby Point, to assist with constructing the story as it will be told in the film. Welsh

film director, Helen Williams-Ellis, on her first visit to Northern Canada, said afterwards: “It was a fabulous trip for me and really amazing to see Hornby Point. I loved the Barren Grounds.” The film will be broadcast, in Canada, on History Television next year.