

Józef Starski. Kanada - kraj bobra i klonowego liścia. [Canada – the Country of the Beaver and the Maple Leaf]. Safari Poland: Warszawa, 2004, 154 pages. ISBN 83-913407-3-2

This certainly is not the book to recommend to a Greenpeace activist.

If asked what this book is essentially about I would say: hunting. If asked what point about hunting it makes I would answer that the hunting should go on as it used to in the past: big game hunting, wildfowl hunting, beaver hunting and so on. The same about fishing and trapping. All types of game are discussed and “killed” on 154 pages: white bears, black bears, moose, virgin deer, wolves and also beavers whom the author likes the most and considers the emblem of Canada alongside the maple leaf. (Hence the title of the book).

The author is a happy hunter himself who tells a story based on his own private experience: he takes the reader on hunting trips through Canada and shows how to use the hunting gear to get the job done, how to find a hunting lodge, or a guide, or an orange hunt outfitter or other hunt-related services.

He gives tips on tracking, shooting, fishing and caring for guns. Also on making a canoe himself. He admits he is a hunting enthusiast and he cannot wait to share his impressions about hunting in Canada with the Polish readers. The renewed international fashion trend in furs which he has been observing since 2003 (?) gets him into a mood of exhilaration – the historic traditions of Canada will not die and the hunters and trappers who hunt and trap simply because “they like it” will have their fur Eldorado there.

I am not an anti-hunting activist nor an animal rights radical and I accept the idea that hunting is animal population control method. The need to reduce the number of moose, bears and beaver’s sounds convincing enough for me and I accept that it means a good opportunity for hunters. Yet I get extremely frustrated when I read that today’s trapping uses “highly humanitarian methods” like, for example, breaking the animal’s backbone which, according to the author, is completely painless. Searching for the author’s philosophy of hunting we get the regular pro-hunting stuff that those people who defend animals (whom he calls “nawiedzeni”) and postulate irresponsible („nierozważne”) hunting bans are detached from the realities of where our food comes from. So, it is difficult to say what the author gets out of hunting – is it a challenge or a satisfaction or just fun for him? And besides, in the days when the British ban fox hunting and in Poland an annual “save the carp” campaign is launched around Christmas should not one rather commit oneself to the cause of the beleaguered beaver than foster its slaughtering?

The book takes us on a trip through Ontario and this account is richly illustrated with coloured photographs and one would wish to say that the photographs are an added bonus to the text but they either show dead animal bodies or their skins or the instruments which were used for killing these animals or they are completely unrelated to the text where they appear. (For instance, the recently taken pictures in the chapter entitled “Keewatin- the Northern Wind” are meant to illustrate the highly confusing, since written in the first person, 18th century story of a French Canadian *voyageur*.) Other illustrations show hunt locations on maps and charts and the author and his friends on his trips through Canada together with some really beautiful Canadian landscapes.

The author is a geography teacher who used to teach this subject in a school in southern Poland, and who has been residing in Canada for 14 years now. Understandably, therefore, that there is plenty of geography in his book: forests, lakes and rivers figure predominantly in it. This is as it should be since Canada, as every one knows "is mainly about geography". His first book (which I have not read) judging by its title *Zew kanadyjskiej puszczy*¹ seems also to be about Canada as a land of immense geography. He admits having read the classic piece of work written in Polish about Canada - Arkady Fiedler's *Canada Smelling with Pine*". Published in Poland in 1935, it became extremely popular and therefore it was re-published in 1938, 1939, 1942, and at least six times in the years 1946 - 1986. It instilled in Poland that stereotype image of Canada as a wilderness full of Indians and it still functions as the basic literary canon to present Canada. Starski's book published 75 years after still perpetuates this very same anachronistic stereotype of Canada as a non-urban place. As if nothing has changed in the meantime, he addresses it to the young people in Poland presuming that they still, like he did in his youth, play Indians and get excited over gold rushes or filling a hunting trophy wall.

Surely, modern Canada is more complex than this and there are other aspects of life in Canada other than the natural beauty or the Indians to talk about especially when one claims, as the author does, to be writing about the present day Canada. I cannot help thinking that claiming to be one of the "Solidarity" stock, and being a teacher himself, he missed the chance to talk in more length about the links between the history of Poland and Canada, or Polish children's adaptation in Canadian schools, or the parents' fight for the preservation of the Polish language, or Polish ethnic literature in Canada - all of which topics are hinted at in the text but not developed. Or he could have shared with us his knowledge about Canadian wines - the passages about icewine are really informative for Polish wine consumers. And even though one may admit that the *voyageurs*, *coureurs de bois*, the portage lake trips, the trapping may possess some degree of novelty for the Polish readers yet, as topics they are very remote from their present day interest in Canada. This image, although central perhaps to the construction of the (French?) identity of Canada has deeper implications. It could be used as a symbol of the freedom to escape from the constraints of an old way of life, and as such it could stand for all kinds of transformations in the Canada of today. But no attempt to bridge the past with the present can be found in this book.

Nonetheless, in the absence of almost any information whatsoever about Canada in Poland, this book may be making its small contribution to a fuller image of Canada in Poland, and it may stir the imagination of the readers towards the appreciation of the tourist value by revealing to us something of this country's quality of being able to fascinate people, both those who live there, and those who visit it.

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¹ The titles of J.Starski's books *Canada - the Country of the Beaver and the Maple Leaf* and *The Call of Canadian Woods* - are my translation.