

# Biographical Portrait

## JAMES OLIVER CURWOOD

(1878–1927)

BY BYRON ANDERSON

James Oliver Curwood, journalist, adventurer, conservationist, and popular fiction writer of the out-of-doors. Curwood was described by his biographer H.D. Swiggett as the man who knew the beautiful Canadian Northwest better than any other. He was born June 12, 1878, the last of three children to James Moran and Abigail (Griffin) Curwood in Owosso, Michigan. His father was related to Captain Marryat, a writer of sea stories, and his mother, according to the legend, was remotely descended from an Indian princess. Much of Curwood's youth was spent in Vermillion, Ohio near Lake Erie. According to his autobiography, he dreamed of being an author from early childhood. Though he lacked the writing skills, he improvised a 200,000-word novel by the time he was nine years of age. On November 23, 1894 his first published story appeared in the local newspaper, *The Argus*.

Curwood's education was lackluster and sporadic. He was expelled from school, and at sixteen years of age embarked on a bicycle tour of many of the southern states. At seventeen he travelled in a carriage selling proprietary medicines. Curwood returned to Michigan and for two years studied at the University of Michigan. During the next eight years he was employed as a reporter and later editor of the Detroit News-Tribune. He wrote stories he felt people would love to read by combining tales of nature and adventure. His stories reached beyond the newspaper and began to be accepted regularly by popular magazines such as *Gray Goose Magazine*, *Munsey's Magazine*, *Outing*, and *Good Housekeeping*. In addition, he contributed more than one hundred nature sketches to *Leslie's Weekly*. While employed by the News-Tribune he was



James Oliver Curwood about 1906.

PHOTO COURTESY IVAN ACONGER AND THE SHAWASSEE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

introduced to Canada by M. V. "Mac" MacInness, the Canadian Immigration Department representative in Detroit. The introduction proved vastly significant in Curwood's life and writing.

Beginning 1906, Curwood started to write novels, and a year later he resigned his position as editor in order to devote a full time effort to writing. His first novel, *The Courage of Captain Plum* appeared in 1908 followed in the same year by *The Wolf Hunters*, both published by Bobbs-Merrill. He then went on a long vacation to Hudson's Bay, an area that became the ruling passion of his life. He began to write about the vast wilderness of the Peace River country, the great reaches of the Athabasca and Mackenzie River districts, the solitary arctic plains, and the uninhabited forests. The Canadian government recognized the rising popularity of his stories, and hired him to explore the prairie

provinces of the West and further up into the North. Curwood gathered material for articles and stories, and these, in turn, were intended to induce settlers into that country. He was the only American ever to be employed by the Canadian government as an exploratory and descriptive writer.

All of Curwood's stories dealt with the outdoors and usually the setting was the northwest territory of the United States and Canada. Curwood lived many of the stories about which he wrote. He and his second wife, Ethel Greenwood Curwood, would for months bury themselves in the wilderness hundreds of miles from civilization. With wilderness as the background, his novels were infused with adventure and romance. A flavoring of the novels can be sensed, in part, by the titles, for example, *Philip Steel of the Royal Mounted* (Bobbs-Merrill, 1911), *The Honor of the Big Snows* (Bobbs-Merrill, 1911), *Isobel: A Romance of the Northern Trail* (Harper and Brothers, 1913) and *The Valley of Silent Men* (Cosmopolitan Book Corp., 1920). Of great success was his describing the northern wilderness areas as "God's country." This phrase ended up in numerous articles as well as in the titles of several novels including *God's Country and the Woman* (Doubleday, Page and Co., 1915), *Back to God's Country* (Grosset and Dunlap, 1920), and *God's Country—Trail to Happiness* (Cosmopolitan Book Corp., 1921). The latter was composed of four essays that summarized the author's pantheistic views and feelings about nature. Curwood defined God's country as "green forests and waters splattered with golden sun."

Curwood's success as a writer did not happen over night. He wrote for ten years before he sold his first story, and twenty-five years before he made a comfortable



Curwood as the very young explorer for the Canadian Government.

living at it. His advice to authors was the same that he took for himself, “hard and steady work for years, with a fixed purpose.” Curwood had great success in lining up publishing contracts first with Bobbs-Merrill, later bought out by Harper and Brothers, followed by contracts with Doubleday, Page and Company, and finally beginning in 1919 the Cosmopolitan Book Corporation.

Curwood’s novels and stories depicted well the immensity of the Far North—the forest isolation, untrodden fields of snow, the silent places where no trail had yet been blazed, the glory of the Northern Lights, and the quiet, loneliness and peace of the wilderness. Set against this background, Curwood’s stories of romance and adventure slowly gained in popularity and sales increased steadily. His contract with the Cosmopolitan Book Corporation was enhanced with the use of modern advertising and sales methods and proved unexpectedly lucrative. Prior to the contract, Curwood’s novels sold an average of 10,000 copies. *The River’s End: A New Story of God’s Country* (1919), the first Cosmopolitan title, sold more than 100,000 copies in the initial edition, no doubt facilitated by the addition of illustrations by Dean Cornwell. *The River’s End*

is considered by his biographer H. D. Swiggett as his greatest and finest work. This was followed by *The Valley of Silent Men* (1920) that had an initial print run of 105,000 copies. The novel with the greatest sales overall was *Kazan* (Bobbs-Merrill, 1914), a story about a wolf dog, which sold over 500,000 copies. The success of this novel was followed by a sequel, *Barbee, Son of Kazan* (Doubleday, Page, and Co., 1923). The *Kazan* novels proved popular in both England and France, and competed for a place held by Jack London’s *White Fang*.

The success of Curwood’s later novels kept his earlier works in print. As a result, most of his books ran to five editions or more, and a number were translated into foreign languages. Curwood’s novels proved popular in Europe, especially France. French readers, it was surmised, saw America as wild and untamed, and Curwood’s novels met their expectations and stereotypes. Curwood’s success later found its way to new mediums. Eight of his books were eventually made into full-length feature films, though these appeared after his death, mostly during the latter 1940s and early 1950s. Exceptions were *The River’s End* which was released by Warner Brothers in both 1930 and again in 1940, and *The Trail Beyond* from Lone Star Productions in 1934 starring John Wayne and Noah Beery based on his novel *The Wolf Hunters* (Bobbs-Merrill, 1908). His novel *Nomads of the North* (Doubleday, Page and Co., 1919) was released by the Associated British and Pathe Film Distributors as *Northern Patrol*, 1954, and by Disney as *Nikki, Wild Dog of the North* in 1961. The movie, *The Bear*, released by RCA Columbia Pictures in 1990, was based on Curwood’s *The Grizzly King* (Doubleday, Page and Co., 1916). Several of the movies have since been released on videocassette giving Curwood a modern day presence.

Curwood’s writing was not without its critics. Curwood accredited the popularity of his writing to the fact that it was clean and wholesome. His critics charged that his heroes and heroines were flawless in virtue, unbelievably strong in character, and too good to be true. The gray areas of life were missing—the bad were always punished, the good rewarded, and justice served. Curwood weaved these general themes through all his novels causing later critics to complain that his works

had become standardized and nothing of consequence occurred that had not been previously written. Curwood’s novels were criticized for having well-worn plots with saintly and uninteresting characters. Curwood, on the other hand, believed that happiness did come to those who deserved it, and he wrote of things to which all individuals aspire.

While writing was central to Curwood’s life, he was also active in committees and associations working for conservation of wildlife and the forests. He asserted that the country’s animals and forests were being destroyed by man and politics. Curwood was particularly appalled by the situation in his own state of Michigan. Here he urged that politics be eliminated and that men properly prepared by study and



Curwood holding his 15½ pound Northern Pike at the Mounds Resort, Houghton Lake, 1923.

experience be delegated to take charge of the state’s natural resources. In 1927, he was made chairman of the Game, Fish, and Wildlife Committee of the Conservation Department of the State of Michigan. In this capacity he was able to limit the capture of certain species of birds, set a lower bag limit on others, and eliminate spears as a hunting weapon. He was a charter member of the Izaak Walton League.

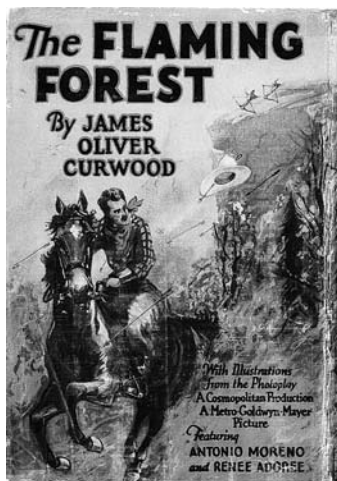
He furthered his involvement in conservation by personally changing from being an enthusiastic hunter to one who embraced wildlife and nature. He wrote, “It is not wild life that is at war with man, but man that is at war with wild life.” He admitted to being a “killer” of animals and foreswore the activities of a hunter. Where



at one time he took pride in the diversity of his wildlife killings, as a writer he took pride in getting others to love wildlife and nature. It appears that he was particularly stirred in his role as a conservationist by the magnanimous conduct of the bear, an animal he came to know and love. The bear shows up in a number of Curwood's writings.

Curwood's primary contribution to conservation, however, lay in his stories and writing. He knew it was impossible for the great multitudes to go out and find nature as he had experienced it, so he brought what he could to millions of readers through his writings. In his books, readers could take, for example, an eighteen-hundred mile trip along the arctic coast and live with the Eskimo as presented in *The Alaskan* (Cosmopolitan Book Corp., 1923). In all, Curwood wrote thirty-two novels, one historical work, *The Great Lakes* (G. P. Putnam, 1909), and two autobiographical works, one published in England by Hodder and Stoughton (1928?) and later reprinted in the United States by Aeolian (1983) entitled, *The Glory of Living: The Autobiography of an Adventurous Boy Who Grew into a Writer and Lover of Life* and another entitled *Son of the Forests*, completed by Dorothea A. Bryant (Doubleday, Doran and Co., 1930).

Other novels by Curwood included *The Gold Hunters* (Bobbs-Merrill, 1909), *The Danger Trail* (Bobbs-Merrill, 1910), *Flower of the North* (Harper and Brothers, 1912), *The Hunted Woman* (Doubleday, Page and Co., 1916), *The Courage of Marge O'Doone* (Doubleday, Page and Co., 1918), *The Flaming Forest* (Cosmopolitan Book Corp.,



COURTESY IVAN A. CONGER.

Curwood's 32 novels reached some 7 million readers and his articles and short stories many more.

1921), *The Golden Snare* (Grosset and Dunlap, 1921), *The Country Beyond* (Cosmopolitan Book Corp., 1922), *A Gentleman of Courage* (Cosmopolitan Book Corp., 1924), *The Ancient Highway* (Cosmopolitan Book Corp., 1925), *The Black Hunter* (Cosmopolitan Book Corp., 1926), *Swift Lightning* (Cosmopolitan Book Corp., 1926), *The Plains of Abraham* (Doubleday, Doran, and Co., 1928), and *The Crippled Lady of Peribonka* (Doubleday, Page and Co., 1929). One additional work, *Green Timber*, was completed by Dorothea Bryant and originally published by Grosset in 1913 and later by Doubleday, Doran and Co. in 1930.

In all, it has been estimated that Curwood's novels reached some seven million readers and his articles and short stories many more. There is no question that he loved nature and all living things, and that he placed this love into a narrative of color and adventure that popular fiction readers enjoyed. Publication rights to many of Curwood's books were later purchased and reprinted by other publishers, some for years beyond his death, including many in foreign languages. As late as 1990, Newmarket Press brought out *Barbee, the Story of a Wolf Dog*. The popularity of the movie *The Bear* caused Newmarket to publish Curwood's original *The Grizzly King* under a new title, *The Bear: A Novel* (1990) which was reprinted by Curley Publishers in 1992.

Overall, it can be said that while some of the themes in Curwood's novels have maintained their popularity, Curwood as a novelist has fallen into obscurity. Whereas he was once popular and mentioned along with Jack London and Upton Sinclair, few today would recognize his name. Given that Curwood never rewrote or redrafted any of his writing except to correct grammar and spelling suggests some limitations in his style. Curwood's literary reputation did not hold up in the long run. Then why was he so popular? The answer is, in part, that he was a writer for his time. His novels and stories were simple and straight forward, and he possessed all the elements of a good story-teller.

Curwood was a vivid, forceful and immensely popular writer who brought the message of nature, wildlife and conservation to millions of readers. Curwood wrote, "It is my ambition to take readers with me into the heart of nature." The out-of-doors life was for him a universal panacea. He encouraged all to partake and experience nature and enjoy all its benefits.



PHOTO BY MARSH VAN ANTWERP.

*The Curwood Castle, built in 1922, was his writing studio and a number of his later works were composed in the tower, overlooking the Shiawassee River. It is a historical landmark in Owosso, Michigan and is open to the public 1-5 p.m. daily except Monday.*

He even believed that he would live to be a hundred years old, but his life was cut short by blood poisoning possibly caused by a spider bite. He died August 13, 1927, in Owosso, Michigan, his birthplace.

Curwood was twice married. On his death he left behind his second wife, Ethel, who had experienced first hand so much of what Curwood had written, and their son. Curwood's legacy lies in his writings that acted as a liaison between the masses and nature. What Curwood did, perhaps not by design, but inadvertently, was to lead millions of readers a step closer to an appreciation for nature and wildlife. □

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