

Park Politics and Passion

Healy Park

reviewed by Marcus Eyre in *Alternatives*, July 2000

In its disclaimer, *Healy Park* is described "a work of fiction, set in Banff National Park, Alberta." But it is also a blend of journalism. Allusions, for example to institutions such as the railroad or the local newspaper, confirm that "readers may recognize places and allusions to events." Indeed, it is only the scope or particulars of the main events that are clearly fiction. The disclaimer goes on to state that, with few exceptions, "all characters in the work are fictional, as is the rationale given for their thoughts and actions." Reactions from readers who have worked for the park, however, have ranged from mild amusement and discomfort to claims that "this is not fiction."

Healy Park is a fairly eventful read, with enough incidents for their cumulative impact to give a park administrator a heart condition. The novel follows the backcountry journeys of Gregory Phillips, who shares more than just his initials with the author. Pole is at least in part describing himself when he describes Phillips as "a mountaineer, writer, and environmentalist ... an iconoclast [arguing] against the incremental development that threatened park wildlands." The story also follows the real-life adventures and frustrations of the wardens entrusted with the protection of the park. Many developments, in particular a plan to lease out the wilderness heart of the park to generate revenue, intertwine to bring together the paths of the mountaineer, wardens, bears, developers, and historic spirit outlaw prospectors.

As the author of five non-fiction books on the Canadian Rockies, Pole's writing flows with natural history notes, although some readers may find his descriptions too meticulous. Along with frank observations on the harsh mountain environment, Pole combines in-depth research on technical subjects, with more metaphorical musings. And some who share Gregory's passion for exploring the mountain wilderness may intuitively relate to his "map dreaming" and the underlying motive of his outings, to unlock the intangible karma of high places. Ultimately, however,

the work is a passionate plea for the protection of our mountain parks, and an indictment of Parks Canada's administration.

The scope of the book may at first seem narrow since the events occur entirely in the vicinity of Banff. However, there is a broader story being told about how a history of development and an administrative culture increasingly concerned with corporate issues are impacting our national parks. Throughout the book Pole condemns the adoption of a "facade of business vernacular" where the parks have become "business units." And since the parks must not be a "drain" on the taxpayer, they therefore have to pay their way by "partnering with business" and by generating revenue through user fees.

The novel also portrays the relationships between various interests, including the sometimes cozy relationship of certain managers with the development community. Similarly, Pole also covers the conflict-of-interest position that Parks Canada can be in as both proponent and evaluator of projects like the twinning of the Trans-Canada highway. Pair that with the often uncontrollable flow of leaked information from frustrated staff, and it is not surprising that environmentalists are scrutinizing Parks Canada and just waiting for the opportunity to frame a court challenge. As one of the characters points out, there is plenty to work with.

As Pole describes a story in the local Banff *Cliff and Chasm* newspaper, "If the predictions of the environmentalists were true, that the park was perishing from over-development, it would be easy to re-read this material a few decades hence and map that demise." Let's hope this novel helps forestall rather than confirm that outcome.

Marcus Eyre is a former park warden now working in environmental assessment in Calgary.

Copyright 2000 Alternatives Inc.