

William Francis Sir Butler



ENRICHED EDITION
+

The Wild North Land

William Francis Sir Butler

The Wild North Land

**Enriched edition. The Story of a Winter Journey with
Dogs across Northern North America**

*In this **enriched edition**, we have carefully created added
value for your reading experience.*



Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Jordan Pierce

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Introduction

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In *The Wild North Land*, the desire to move through an immense, indifferent landscape is tested by the limits of endurance, judgment, and imagination.

William Francis Sir Butler's *The Wild North Land* belongs to the tradition of nineteenth-century travel and exploration writing, presenting an account shaped by movement across the northern interior of North America. It is grounded in the physical realities of remote routes, severe weather, and long distances, and it proceeds as a sustained journey narrative rather than a constructed adventure plot. Butler writes as a participant-observer, and the work carries the documentary ambition typical of its era, aiming to record what was seen, traversed, and learned in regions that resist easy summary.

The book's premise is straightforward: a traveller undertakes demanding overland travel through sparsely settled country, relying on practical skills and the cooperation of companions and local expertise while confronting the logistical challenges of transport, shelter, and supplies. The reader follows the forward motion of the route, the changing conditions, and the continual need to adapt plans to terrain and season. The emphasis rests on the process of travel itself, the accumulation of daily decisions, and the gradual shaping of perspective that long exposure to distance and hardship can bring.

As a reading experience, *The Wild North Land* combines close observation with a measured, disciplined tone. Butler's

prose is attentive to geography and the lived texture of travel, often lingering on what can be directly perceived: the feel of cold, the obstacles of water and forest, and the strain of repeated exertion. The narrative voice tends toward clarity and restraint rather than melodrama, making the most vivid passages feel earned by circumstance. The pace is episodic and itinerary-driven, with momentum supplied by the next stage of the journey and the practical problems it presents.

A central theme is the encounter between human intention and environmental scale, where planning must contend with conditions that cannot be controlled. The book repeatedly returns to the ethics and psychology of travel under constraint: how leadership, discipline, and morale are maintained; how risk is assessed; and how reliance on others reshapes a traveller's sense of self-sufficiency. Alongside this runs a quiet meditation on perception, as the landscape is not only crossed but interpreted, and the act of describing it becomes a way of making meaning from austerity and uncertainty.

The Wild North Land also matters as a specimen of its genre, revealing how exploration narratives translate vast spaces into legible experience through selection, emphasis, and language. Contemporary readers can attend to the difference between what the text observes and what it assumes, using that tension to think critically about how travel writing frames places and peoples. Without requiring the reader to share the author's era, the book invites reflection on how knowledge about unfamiliar regions is

produced, circulated, and authorized, and how narrative can turn movement into a form of claim or comprehension.

For modern audiences, Butler's work remains relevant because it dramatizes pressures that still accompany travel and fieldwork: uncertainty, fatigue, dependence on expertise, and the gap between maps and reality. Its patient attention to conditions on the ground anticipates current interests in environmental awareness and the lived consequences of climate and season. At the same time, the book offers a disciplined model of sustained observation, reminding readers that the hardest part of any journey is often not spectacle but persistence. Read today, it is both a record of travel and an education in attentiveness.

Synopsis

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The Wild North Land is William Francis Butler's travel narrative of a difficult journey through northern Canada in the late nineteenth century, written from the standpoint of an army officer attentive to geography, logistics, and human endurance. The book opens by framing the North as both a physical region of extreme distances and a test of character, and it sets up Butler's purpose as practical observation rather than romance. He describes preparations, routes, and the constraints imposed by season and supply, establishing an investigative, on-the-ground method that guides the work's progression.

paragraphs

Butler follows the early stages of movement away from settled corridors into a sparsely inhabited interior where transport depends on waterways, portages, and improvised planning. He treats travel not as a continuous march but as a chain of decisions shaped by weather, river conditions, and the availability of guides and provisions. Encounters along the way bring in multiple perspectives on the region's possibilities and hazards, and Butler balances admiration for the landscape with repeated reminders of its indifference to human aims. The narrative's forward motion is consistently tied to risk management and timing.

paragraphs

As the journey presses farther north and west, Butler dwells on the practical realities of cold, hunger, fatigue, and

the fragility of equipment. He records how small failures can cascade in remote country and how disciplined routines can avert worse outcomes. The land is presented through concrete particulars—ice, forest, open water, and long stretches with few signs of habitation—rather than through scenic generalities. At the same time, he keeps returning to questions of what reliable knowledge about the North looks like: what can be mapped, what must be learned by experience, and what remains uncertain.

paragraphs

A substantial part of the book is shaped by Butler's interactions with Indigenous people and other northern travelers, whose expertise in routes, survival, and local conditions becomes indispensable to understanding the region. He notes differences in travel methods, priorities, and interpretations of the same environment, and he treats these contacts as a corrective to purely outsider assumptions. The narrative also brings in the workings of frontier institutions and commercial or administrative interests that touch the North, not as distant abstractions but as forces that affect provisioning, mobility, and security on the ground at each stage of travel.

Historical Context

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William Francis Butler's *The Wild North Land* (1873) belongs to the late-Victorian moment when Britain's imperial, military, and scientific institutions took strong interest in northern North America. The book reflects travel writing and exploration narratives read in Britain and in the Canadian colonies after Confederation (1867). Butler wrote as a serving officer and emphasizes distance, climate, and logistics in the Canadian interior. His account is anchored in places and institutions shaping the region: the Hudson's Bay Company's trading network, emergent Canadian authority in the North-West, and military forces used to project state power across vast territories.

paragraphs

In 1869-1870, the transfer of Rupert's Land from the Hudson's Bay Company to the new Dominion of Canada transformed governance over the interior. The change culminated in the Red River Resistance led by Louis Riel and the creation of Manitoba (1870). Ottawa's subsequent decisions to assert authority west and north made the region a focus of policy and security. Butler's travels occurred in this environment of administrative transition, when older HBC practices, Métis communities, and Indigenous nations faced new Canadian institutions, surveys, and legal frameworks that sought to reorient the territory toward the Dominion.

paragraphs

To reinforce sovereignty after 1870, Canada sent the Red River Expedition under Colonel Garnet Wolseley, a British Army officer, to the settlement at Fort Garry. Butler served in the British Army and was connected to this expeditionary world, which shaped how many officers perceived the North-West: as a strategic space requiring disciplined movement, supply, and communications. The expedition's route—through Lake Superior, the old fur-trade waterways, and to the Red River—underscored the dependence on canoes, portages, and local expertise. This military-logistical lens is central to Butler's narrative voice.

paragraphs

During the early 1870s, Canadian leaders pursued westward expansion through treaties and settlement plans. The numbered treaties began in 1871, marking formal negotiations between the Crown and First Nations for large land cessions in exchange for defined obligations. At the same time, Indigenous nations and Métis communities maintained complex political, economic, and diplomatic systems tied to the fur trade and to buffalo hunting on the plains. Butler's travels across parts of the interior and prairie borderlands coincide with this treaty-making period, when cross-cultural relations, provisioning, and security were contested and changing under Canadian pressure.

paragraphs

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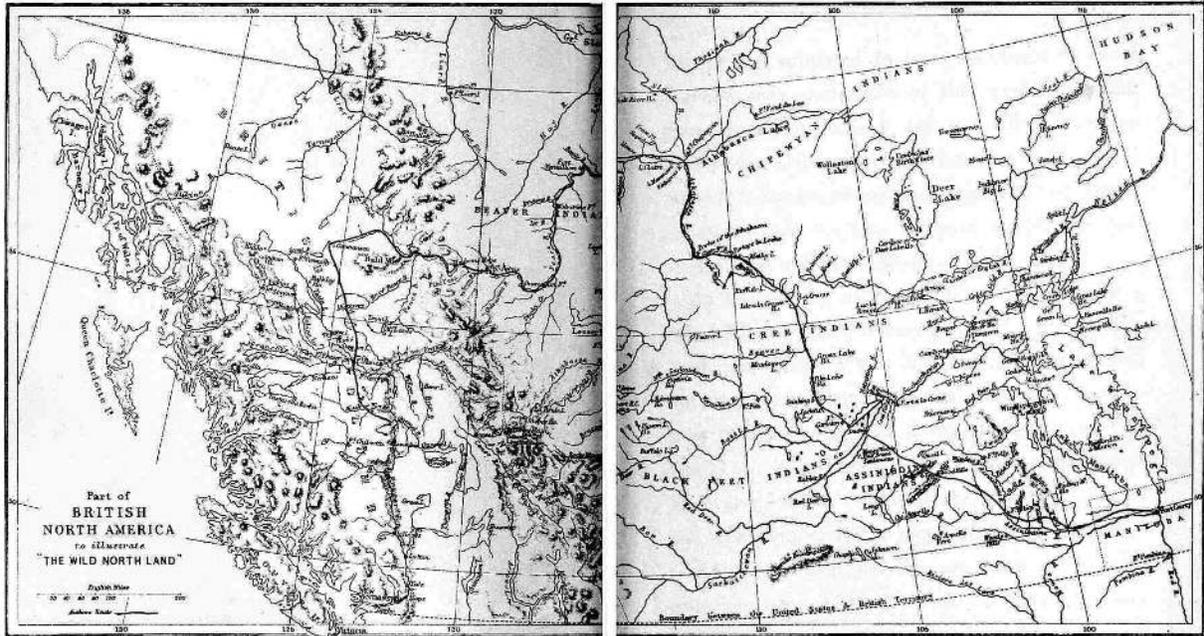
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Part of
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NORTH AMERICA
to illustrate
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PREFACE.

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People are supposed to have an object in every journey they undertake in this world. A man goes to Africa to look for the Nile, to Rome to see the Coliseum or St. Peter's; and once, I believe, a certain traveller tramped all the way to Jerusalem for the sole purpose of playing ball against the walls of that city.

As this matter of object, then, seems to be a rule with travellers, it may be asked by those who read this book, what object had the writer in undertaking a journey across the snowy wilderness of North America, in winter and alone? I fear there is no answer to be given to the question, save such as may be found in the motto on the title-page, or in the pages of the book itself.

About eighteen months ago I was desirous of entering upon African travel. A great explorer had been lost for years in the vast lake-region of Southern Central Africa, and the British Nation—which, by the way, becomes singularly attached to a man when he is dead, or supposed to be dead—grew anxious to go out to look for him.

As the British Nation could not all go out at once, or together, it endeavoured to select one or two individuals to carry out its wishes.

It will be only necessary to state here, that the British Nation did not select the writer of this book, who forthwith turned his attention from African tropic zones to American frigid ones, and started out upon a lonely cruise.

Many tracks lay before me in that immense region I call "The Wild North Land." Former wandering had made me familiar with the methods of travel pursued in these countries by the Indian tribes, or far-scattered fur-hunters. Fortunate in recovering possession of an old and long-tried Esquimaux dog—the companion of earlier travel—I started in the autumn of 1872 from the Red River of the North, and, reaching Lake Athabasca, completed half my journey by the first week of March in the following year. From Athabasca I followed the many-winding channel of the frozen Peace River to its great cañon in the Rocky Mountains, and, journeying through this pass—for many reasons the most remarkable one in the whole range of the Rocky Mountains—reached the north of British Columbia in the end of May. From thence, following a trail of 350 miles through the dense forests of New Caledonia, I emerged on the 3rd of June at the frontier station of Quesnelle on the Frazer River, still 400 miles north of Victoria.

In the ensuing pages the story of that long tramp—for it was mostly performed on foot—will be duly set forth. Written by camp fire, or in cañon, or in the little log-house of a northern fur fort, when dogs and men rested for a day or two in the long icy run, that narrative will be found, I fear, to bear many indications of the rough scenes 'mid which it has been penned; but as, on a former occasion, many critics passed in gentle silence over the faults and failings of another story of travel in the Great Lone Land, so now it may be my fortune to tell to as kindly an audience, this record of a winter's walk through more distant wilds—for in truth there has been neither time for revision nor correction.

Fortune, which eighteen months ago denied me African adventure, offers it now with liberal hand.

I reached the Atlantic from the Pacific shore to find an expedition starting from England against Ashantee; and long ere this story finds a reader I hope to be pushing my way through the mangrove swamps which lie between the Gold Coast and Coomassie. To others even must fall the task of correcting proofs, while I assume my part in the correction and revision of King Koffi Kancalli, and the administration to his subjects of that proof of British prowess which it has been deemed desirable to give them.

Meantime, my old friends Chief Kar-ka-konias, Kalder, and Cerf-vola, will be absent from this new field; but, nevertheless, there will be present many companions of former travel, and *one* Chief under whose command I first sought the Great Lone Land as the threshold to remoter regions.

W.F. BUTLER.

LONDON,

September 21st, 1873.

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WILD NORTH LAND.**
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CHAPTER I.

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The Situation at Home.—The West again.—A Land of Silence.

There had never been so many armies in England. There was a new army, and there was an old army; there was an army of militia, an army of volunteers, and an army of reserve; there were armies on horse, on foot, and on paper. There was the army of the future—of which great things were predicted—and far away, lost in a haze of history (but still more substantial than all other armed realities, present or future), there lay the great dead army of the past.

It was a time when everybody had something to do with military matters, everybody on the social ladder, from the Prime Minister on the topmost round to the mob-mover on the lowest.

Committees controlled the army, Departments dressed it, Radicals railed at it, Liberals lectured upon it, Conservatives condemned it, Peers wrote pamphlets upon it, Dukes denounced it, Princes paraded it, and every member of Parliament who could put together half a dozen words with tolerable grammatical fluency had something to say about it.

Surely such a period must have been one in which every soldier would have recognized the grandeur and importance of his profession, and clung with renewed vigour to a life which seemed of moment to the whole British nation. But this glowing picture of the great “nation of shopkeepers,” suddenly fired by military ardour, had its reverse.

The stream of advancement slowly stagnating under influences devised to accelerate it, the soldier wearied by eternally learning from masters the lesson he could have taught, the camp made a place of garrison routine and not of military manœuvre, the uniform harness which had galled a Burton, a Palgrave, a Ruxton, and a Hayward, from ranks where the spirit of adventurous discovery sickened under chilling regulation—this harness made more unrelaxingly irksome; a system of promotion regulated by money—the offspring, it is true, of foul corruption, but which had become not a little purified by lapse of time; this system, supplanted by one of selection theoretically pure, but destined to fall into that lowest of all corruptions, the influence of political jobbery: all this formed the leading features in that order of things, old and new, which the spectacle of a neighbouring nation, struck suddenly to the ground by a mighty army, had caused the panic-stricken British people to overhaul and to reconstruct.

Taken any way one can, an army on paper is not a satisfactory profession. It is subject to sudden and unlooked-for bursts of military zeal; it is so bent upon nervously asserting itself fit for anything; it is from its nature so much akin to pen, ink, and envelope of a common-place type; it has such disagreeable methods of garrisoning the most pestilential spots upon the earth, and abandoning to republican bluster whole continents called colonies; those who shape its destinies are so ready to direct it against matchlock monarchs and speared soldiery; while arms are folded before those conflicts which change the past and future of the centuries; all these considerations go a great

way towards making the profession of arms, on paper, at any time an anomaly.

But when there was also present to the memory of one who thus regarded the new order of military life, the great solitudes, the inland oceans, the desolate wilds, the gloomy forests of a far-away land, through which his former wanderings had carried him; when thought re-sought again those vast regions of the earth where Nature has graven her image in characters so colossal, that man seems to move slowly amidst an ocean frozen rigid by lapse of time, frozen into those things we name mountains, rivers, prairies, forests; man a mere speck, powerless so far to mark his presence, in blur of smoke, in noise of city, in clash of crank, or whirl of wheel: when these things came back in pictures touched by the soft colours Memory loves to limn with, there were not wanting dull professional outlooks and dearth of service to turn the footsteps gladly into the old regions again, there to trace new paths through the almost exhaustless waste which lies between the lonely prairies of the Saskatchewan and the icy oceans of the North.

What shall we call this land to those who follow us into its depths?

It has prairies, forests, mountains, barren wastes, and rivers; rivers whose single lengths roll through twice a thousand miles of shoreland; prairies over which a rider can steer for months without resting his gaze on aught save the dim verge of the ever-shifting horizon; mountains rent by rivers, ice-topped, glacier-seared, impassable; forests whose sombre pines darken a region half as large as Europe;

sterile, treeless wilds whose 400,000 square miles lie spread in awful desolation. How shall it all be called?

In summer, a land of sound, a land echoing with the voices of birds, the ripple of running water, the mournful music of the waving pine-branch; in winter, a land of silence, a land hushed to its inmost depths by the weight of ice, the thick-falling snow, the intense rigour of a merciless cold—its great rivers glimmering in the moonlight, wrapped in their shrouds of ice; its still forests rising weird and spectral against the Aurora-lighted horizon; its notes of bird or brook hushed as if in death; its nights so still that the moving streamers across the northern skies seem to carry to the ear a sense of sound, so motionless around, above, below, lies all other visible nature.

If then we call this region the land of stillness, that name will convey more justly than any other the impress most strongly stamped upon the winter's scene.

CHAPTER II.

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Powder *versus* Primroses.—The American Lounger.
—“Home, Sweet Home.”

It was just time to leave London. The elm-trees in the parks were beginning to put forth their earliest and greenest leaves; innumerable people were flocking into town because custom ordained that the country must be quitted when the spring is at its finest; as though the odour of primroses had something pestilential about it, and anything in the shape of violets except violet powder was terribly injurious to feminine beauty.

Youthful cosmopolites with waxed moustaches had apparently decided to compromise with the spring, and to atone for their abandonment of the country by making a miniature flower-garden of their button-holes. It was the last day of April, and ere the summer leaves had yellowed along the edge of the great sub-Arctic forest, my winter hut had to be hewn and built from the pine-logs of the far-distant Saskatchewan.

In the saloon or on the after-deck of a Cunard steamship steering west, one sees perhaps more of America's lounging class than can be met with on any other spot in the world; the class is a limited one, in fact it may be a matter of dispute, whether the pure and simple loungeur, as we know him in Piccadilly or Pall Mall, is to be found in the New World; but a three, or six, or twelve months' visit to Europe has

forts typically had a palisade and grouped buildings for trading, storehouses for furs and goods, and accommodation for company staff and visiting Indigenous traders.

19 A seasonal dog-sled packet service that carried mail, supplies, newspapers and letters between distant trading posts and settlements in winter; these runs often covered several hundred to over a thousand miles and were the main link to the outside world for remote posts.

20 A French term for rural French-Canadian settlers or smallholder farmers in Lower Canada (now Quebec), especially used in the 18th–19th centuries; often anglicized as “habitants.”

21 A smoked black tea (commonly known as Lapsang Souchong) from Fujian province, China, that was widely traded and consumed in Britain and its colonies in the 18th–19th centuries.

22 Refers to Fort Dunvegan, a fur-trade post on the Peace River in what is now northwestern Alberta; it was established in the early 19th century (around 1805) and was operated by fur companies such as the North West Company and later the Hudson’s Bay Company.

23 A French phrase literally meaning ‘snowshoe sickness,’ historically used to denote the soreness, fatigue, or foot troubles resulting from prolonged travel on snowshoes.

24 A Scottish explorer (1764–1820) who led expeditions for the North West Company and in 1793 completed the first recorded overland crossing of North America north of Mexico to the Pacific; he had earlier reached the Arctic in

1789 and is commonly cited as the first European to traverse that northern continental route.

25 A simple trap used by hunters and trappers in which a heavy log or piece of timber is propped and released to fall onto an animal (also called a 'deadfall'); Indigenous peoples and frontier trappers used versions of this device to catch fur-bearing animals like martens.

26 An anglicized name used in the chapter (rendered elsewhere as "the Three Thumbs") for an Indigenous moose-tracker; the text describes his method of circling to leeward and silently stalking a moose lying in the willows.

27 Historic name for the vast territory in British North America that was largely administered by the Hudson's Bay Company from the 17th century; most of Rupert's Land was transferred to the Dominion of Canada in 1870.

28 Pemmican is a concentrated travel food made from dried, pounded meat (here, moose) mixed with fat and sometimes berries; it was widely produced by Indigenous peoples and used by fur traders and travellers across North America from at least the 17th through 19th centuries as high-energy provisions.

29 Short for an aneroid barometer, a portable instrument that measures atmospheric pressure without liquid and was commonly used in the 19th century to estimate altitude; the narrator's phrase refers to the instrument's reading of an unusually high elevation after the immersion.

30 Belfort is a fortified town in eastern France, notable for its citadel and for several 19th-century military sieges, most prominently during the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71).

31 “Vigilants” refers to mid-19th-century extrajudicial vigilance committees, especially those in Gold Rush-era San Francisco, that carried out summary trials, punishments and occasional executions outside the formal legal system.

32 A firearm whose barrel is smooth inside (not rifled); common in the 18th–19th centuries for muskets and shotguns, it is less accurate at long range than rifled guns but effective for close-range hunting with shot or single balls.

33 A mountain pass/valley formed by the Peace River in the Canadian Rockies region (north-eastern British Columbia/near Alberta); it was a notable 19th-century route and scenic feature mentioned in exploration and fur-trade accounts.

34 A cache here means a hidden or stored supply of provisions or equipment left by previous travellers; the word (from French) commonly denotes a stash used in wilderness expeditions to preserve food or gear for later recovery.

35 Portaging refers to carrying a boat and its cargo overland between stretches of water or around obstacles (such as rapids or falls), a standard practice in canoe travel and inland exploration.

36 A popular 19th-century gambling card game played with a single deck in which cards were drawn against bets on card positions; it was commonly played in saloons and frontier mining camps and was known for heavy betting and frequent losses.

37 “Hydah” is a 19th-century spelling of the Haida, an indigenous people of the Pacific Northwest Coast (notably Haida Gwaii and parts of coastal British Columbia);

contemporary accounts often used variant spellings when referring to individuals from that community.

38 The name given here to the long channel discovered in 1756—today commonly called the Strait of Juan de Fuca—which separates Vancouver Island from the Olympic Peninsula and leads into Puget Sound; it was named for a Greek pilot (often identified as Ioannis Phokas) who claimed a late 16th-century voyage to the area, a claim whose details remain debated by historians.

39 A German-born American merchant (1763–1848) who founded the Pacific Fur Company and financed the establishment of Fort Astoria on the Columbia River around 1811 as part of a U.S. fur-trading venture in the Pacific Northwest; his outpost was later taken over by the British North-West Company during the War of 1812.

40 From French, a voyageur was a professional canoeist and labourer employed by fur-trading companies (chiefly French-Canadian) to transport people and goods across rivers and lakes in the 17th–19th centuries.

41 Refers to the U.S. Army detachment led by Captain William J. Fetterman that was ambushed and killed by Lakota, Cheyenne, and Arapaho warriors in December 1866 near Fort Phil Kearny, an engagement commonly known as the Fetterman Fight or Massacre.

42 Plantation House is the official residence of the Governor of Saint Helena, the South Atlantic island where Napoleon was exiled; it is historically noted for its lawn and long-lived giant tortoises, some of which have been claimed to live for a century or more.