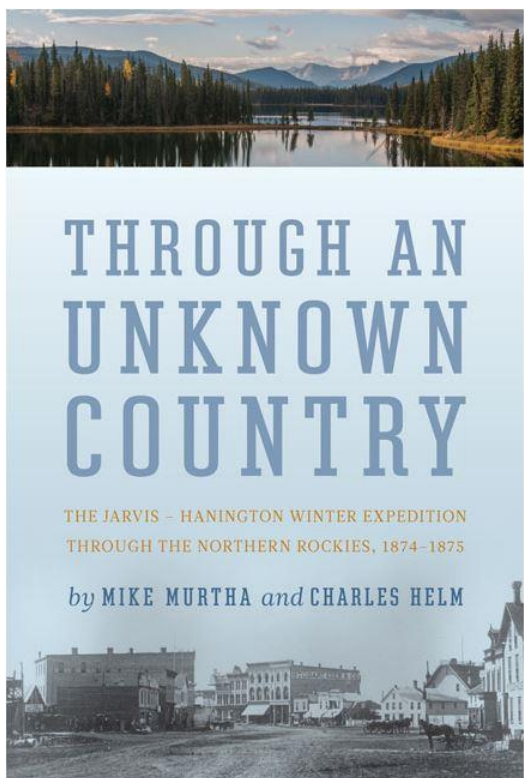


Through an Unknown Country: The Jarvis–Hanington Winter Expedition through the Northern Rockies, 1874–1875

Review by Mike Nash - 2016 Canadian Alpine Journal

In January 1875, two men set out from Fort George (Prince George) in the dead of winter to explore the unknown country north of the Fraser River through the Rocky Mountains. Their urgent charge from Sandford Fleming, head of the Canadian Pacific Survey, was to find a northerly route through the Rockies for the future Canadian Pacific Railway. The Canadian Pacific Survey was established in 1871 and construction of the railway was a project critical to Canada's future as a nation. The railway was intended to be completed by 1881, but by 1875 the route had not yet been settled.



Through an Unknown Country is the latest work of Mike Murtha and Charles Helm on the exploration history of Canada's Northern Rocky Mountains. Helm is a physician in the resource community of Tumbler Ridge in the heart of the Northern Rockies and is the author of several books and journal articles on the area and its history. Mike Murtha was a planner with BC Parks in Prince George, where he took personal interest in researching the history of many of BC's northern parks. Together, Murtha and Helm have written about historical explorations of the region including Samuel Prescott Fay's 1914 trek through the Northern Rockies¹ and Prentiss Gray's 1927 exploration from the Peace to the Fraser². There is a symmetry between their works on Fay and Jarvis in that the respective journeys intersect at present-day Jarvis Lakes.

The editors were stirred by three historical quotations to undertake the task of combining E. W. Jarvis' and C. F. Hanington's accounts of their epic journey. The first was in 1925 by a young school teacher in BC's Peace region, Gerry Andrews (later to become Surveyor General of British Columbia) who noted the importance of this part of Canada's history to its citizens, especially to its young people. The second quote was by an apparently disillusioned Charles Hanington who remarked in a 1926 letter that his and Jarvis' 1875 exploration "...is of little value to modern people, who don't give a Damn for what has happened in the past." The third quote is by archivist, Douglas Brymner in his 1887 report to Canada's Parliament. Commenting on Jarvis' vivid but formal narrative and Hanington's unreserved personal account of their day-to-day experiences, he declared: "*Both narratives should be read together.*"

Jarvis and Hanington left Fort George on January 14, 1875 after a week of below minus 40 temperatures had frozen the Fraser River sufficient for safe travel. The first part of the expedition included several native men recruited in Fort George, along with supplies for two months and 24 dogs in six sled trains. Hanington had earlier established a supply cache seven days travel upriver, plus they had prearranged to buy salmon cached by a native man near the Bear (Bowron) River. For gear, each man had a pair of snowshoes, a pair of blankets, a light cotton sheet for a lean-to shelter (no tents), and several pairs of moccasins. For the next

¹ *The Forgotten Explorer — Samuel Prescott Fay's 1914 Expedition to the Northern Rockies*; edited by Charles Helm and Mike Murtha; Rocky Mountain Books, 2009.

² *Early Exploration in the Neglected Mountains* by Charles Helm and Mike Murtha; Canadian Alpine Journal, 2004.

two months, they battled severe cold, difficult canyons, cold water immersions, heavy snowfall in-filling their tracks, a steady death toll among their working dogs, and near starvation as they neared Jasper House to find it deserted and devoid of supplies.

They first investigated the ‘north fork’ (Herrick Creek) to its upper reaches below Mount Ovington³ to ascertain that it was entirely unsuited for a railway. Retracing their steps, they ascended the ‘south fork’ (McGregor River) and eventually took the north tributary branch (Jarvis Creek) up ‘the summit’ (present day Jarvis Lakes in BC’s Kakwa Provincial Park). Passing below a beautiful pyramidal mountain resembling the Matterhorn, that is the northernmost peak over 10,000 feet in the Rockies, Jarvis records that they named it *Mount Ida*.

Jarvis had by now determined that a railway was infeasible by any proximate route through the Rockies, but despite fear of death by starvation they decided to push on to complete a through survey. One of the startling facts coming out of the narrative is that Jarvis and Hanington took turns counting paces for the entire journey as a measure of distance traveled. Anyone who has tried navigating with just a compass and paces for short distances will appreciate the enormity of just this one aspect.

‘Through an Unknown Country’ is suited to academic and lay readers, and both should be prepared for some initial hard work as the book opens with Jarvis’ formal report which must be read alongside extensive end notes by the editors. The reader’s early perseverance is soon rewarded, however, by Hanington’s plain-spoken letters to his brother in chapter 2.

Jarvis’ and Hanington’s treatment of First Nations team members in their respective narratives is typical of nineteenth century mores, although by the end of the book the reader senses a deeper regard for their native companions than is at first evident in their writings. Jarvis emerges as a quiet, competent, thoughtful leader, but one who didn’t share a lot of his thinking with his companions; and yet it is the stalwart Hanington who is key to Jarvis’ life and death decision not to turn back at the ‘summit’ (Jarvis Lakes). Thus both of them were instrumental in the ultimate prosecution of Sandford Fleming’s orders. Gerry Andrews later recognized their achievement as “*an epic of Canadian exploration,*” and Sandford Fleming in his 1889 paper to the Royal Society of Canada highlighted this as the most noteworthy of the many Canadian Pacific Survey expeditions.

Through an Unknown Country: The Jarvis–Hanington Winter Expedition through the Northern Rockies, 1874–1875 edited by Mike Murtha and Charles Helm; Rocky Mountain Books, 2015; ISBN 978-1-771601-33-7; \$30.00 (CAD). **Highly recommended.**

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<http://www3.telus.net/pgoutdoors>

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<sup>3</sup> *Kitchi-Kakwa Mountaineering from 1875 to the BCMC Sumer Camp – Ovington Creek Area, 1-8 August 1992* by Michael Feller, *B.C. Mountaineer*, Vol. 62 (1994).