

Pacific Northwest

November 1980

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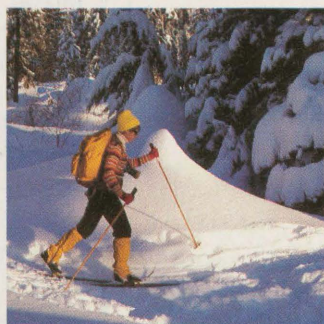
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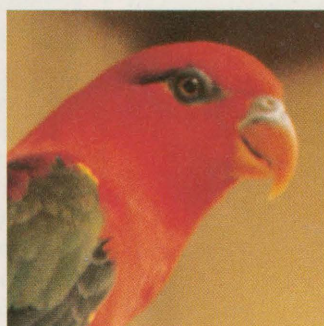
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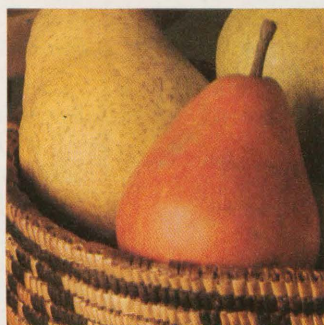
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Cover: Beat Supersaxo, a Swiss helicopter-skiing guide employed by British Columbia's Canadian Mountain Holidays, begins a steep run through the powder snow of the Bugaboo Mountains. Unique to the Northwest, helicopter skiing in the interior ranges of British Columbia is considered by some to be the best skiing available anywhere in the world. Photograph by Mike Epstein. Story, page 28.

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Winter Brothers

A Season at the Edge of America

An excerpt from the new book by Ivan Doig

Seattle resident Ivan Doig, a frequent contributor to this magazine in years past, has turned his attention to writing books. A recent book, This House of Sky, an account of Doig's coming of age in rugged, elemental Montana, was a nominee for a National Book Award and a contender for a Pulitzer Prize in 1978. With his latest book, Winter Brothers, Doig explores the pioneer impulse that drew settlers to the Pacific Northwest more than 100 years ago—as it drew him here in more recent years. Using the hitherto unpublished diaries of James Gilchrist Swan, an unconventional Bostonian who in 1850 fled the civilized world to find freedom in the wilds, and excerpts from a winter diary of his own, Doig reflects upon the parallels and contrasts in the two lives, the feel of winter on the coast, and the need men have to flee the larger society and to exist along a lonely, frontier edge. The following excerpt, "Day Forty-Three," finds Doig contemplating the beheading of the famous pioneer and settler Isaac Ebey by Tlingit Indians.

Whidbey Island, this first dawn of February. Admiralty Inlet, with the Strait of Juan de Fuca angling like a flat blue glacier into one end and Puget Sound out the other. This promontory surge of the island's steep edge, lifting me to look west onto the entire great bending valley of water. And south to the trim farmland where on a summer midnight in 1857, Indians snicked off a head.

The beheaders were northern Indians: Tlingit warriors from an Alaskan island near Sitka, knifing downcoast eight hundred miles in their glorious high-prowed canoes. The victim they caught and decapitated was a settler named Ebey, a militia officer and member of the Washington territorial legislature. There was no specific quibble between the raiding party and Ebey; simply, one of their tribal leaders had been killed during a clash with an American gunboat the previous year and the Tlingits now exacted a chief for a chief.

Peculiar, for a timber and water empire which appears so everlastingly placid and was explored by whites and yielded by the natives with perhaps less bloody contention than any other early American frontier, that the practice of beheading crops up so in the Sound and Strait country. Recall the Makahs bringing home to Neah the pair of Elwha heads from Crescent Bay like first cabbages of the season. The earliest white expedition in from the Pacific, Vancouver's in 1792, was met with "A Long Pole & two others of smaller size . . . put upright in the Ground each having a Human Skull on the top." That trio of skulls rode the air at Marrowstone Island, in direct line of sight across Admiralty Inlet from where I am perched, and the exploring Englishmen were blinklessly deferential about the display. Lieutenant Peter Puget, whose quote that is, proceeds to remark that he does not wish to criticize a people "whose Manners Customs Religion Laws & Government we are yet perfect Strangers to." Whether His Majesty's lieutenant would have been as equable about the northern warriors' manners in carrying Ebey's head away from here with them and eventually peeling the scalp off it and swapping the skin-and-hair hank to a Hudson's Bay trader for six blankets, a handkerchief, a bolt of cotton, three pipes, and some tobacco—the trader then returning the grisly prize to Ebey's family for burial—it would be interesting to know.

Come look from this eminence of bluff now in the soft hour before daybreak and you will declare on Bibles that the Tlingits' act of 122 years ago was the last sharp moment on this landscape. The island's farm fields are leather and corduroy, rich even panels between black-furred stands of forest. Tan grass which broomed the backs of my hands as I climbed the path up to here now whisks soundlessly against a four-wire fence line. The sky's only clouds are hung tidily on the southernmost Cascade Mountains at the precise rim of summit where the sun will loft itself. Yes: Rural America of the last century, your eyes say—or Westphalia, or Devonshire.

Directly below where I stand sits an aging barn with its long peaked eave pointing southeast, like the bill of a cap turned attentively toward sunrise. We will sunwatch together.

Across Admiralty the streetlights of Port Townsend begin to

quench into the day. The timber-heavy shoreline angling westward out the Strait from the town seems not so black and barbed as it was minutes ago. That shoreline is my reason—one of my reasons; the other is sheerly that I love this blufftop arc above the tiering horizons of water and shore and mountains—to be here. Across there, invisible yet imprinted, curves the canoe route which Swan traveled time on time during his Neah Bay years.

A hundred water miles stretch between Port Townsend and Cape Flattery, and the journey along the fjordlike shore of the Olympic Peninsula usually took three days. *The Olympic range*, recorded Swan from afloat, *presents a wild forbidding aspect. But then: the line of foot-hills . . . disclosing deep ravines, with fertile valleys lying between them, and reaching quite to the base of the great mountains.* As for the long rough-hewn channel of the Strait itself, *Bays and points are bold, precipitous and rocky. The water at these points is deep, and, when the winds are high, dashes with tremendous force upon the cliffs, making a passage around them, at times, a difficult and dangerous matter.*

I can see exactly to where one such matter occurred, beyond the headland where Port Townsend nestles. Early in his years on the Strait, Swan was inbound from Neah Bay one afternoon when his Makah canoe crew pulled ashore to camp at Discovery Bay instead of paddling on the half-dozen miles to Port Townsend. Since the Indians' canoe pace seemed to be regulated part of the time by weather savvy and prudence and the other part by indolence, it required some knowing to tell the moods apart. (Swan had mused on a similar puzzle of canoe etiquette during his time among the Chinooks and Chehalis at Shoalwater Bay. *Speed will be kept up for a hundred rods, he wrote in Northwest Coast, then the paddles put to rest and all begin talking. Perhaps one has spied something, which he has to describe while the rest listen; or another thinks of some funny anecdote . . . or they are passing some remarkable tree or cliff, or stone, which has a legend attached to it. . . . When the tale is over. . . all again paddle away with a desperate energy for a few minutes. . . .*) This day Swan decided the crew was being entirely too casual with his time and insisted they continue. An old Makah woman in the canoe grumbled her disagreement, *for she said she knew we should have a gale of wind from the northwest.* As promptly as she predicted, the weather lambasted them. *We met the tiderips, and had a fearful time. . . . On we flew like an arrow, every sea throwing a swash into the canoe, keeping two persons constantly bailing. The old squaw began to sing a death song. . . .* The paddlers at last managed to teeter the canoe atop breakers which skimmed it to shore, and a shaken and wiser Swan hiked the rest of the way to Port Townsend.

Twin gulls break into my sight around the bend of the bluff. "Slim yachts of the element," Robinson Jeffers christened them, and taking him at his words these two are gentleman racers.

They stay paired, the inshore bird a few feather-lengths ahead, in a casual motionless glide past me, and on down the bluff line.

Then one flaps once, the other flaps once—evidently the rules of this contest of air—and they flow on out of my vision.

While I am monitoring birds the first full daylight has reached into the peaks of the Olympic Mountains, brightening the front pyramids of white and surely Olympus itself, eight thousand feet high but so discreet of summit it hides in the western back file of the range. So a ceiling of sunshine is somewhere up there and in minutes I will be granted the floor of it down here.

I hurry north along the bluff, wanting to watch the light come

onto the lagoon which bows out from the shoreline below. The lagoon is not quite like any other piece of coastwork I have ever seen: a narrow band of gravel beach which mysteriously has looped out from the base of the bluff—the curve of the gravel snare about two hundred yards across at its widest—and entrapped several acres of tidewater. Drift logs by the hundreds float within it like pewter tableware spilled across marble.

At two minutes before eight the first beams set the lagoon aglow, the pewter suddenly becomes bronze.

The sun now rides clear of the mountains, but so far onto the southern horizon at this time of year that its luster slants almost directly along the Sound and Admiralty Inlet, as if needing the ricochet help from the water in order to travel the extreme polar distances to the lagoon and, at last, me.

The canoes that slipped through these water distances like needles; they stitch and stitch in my mind this morning. *Beautifully modeled*, Swan said of the crafts of the Makahs, *resembling in their bows our finest clipper ships. . . . Formed from a single log of cedar, carved out with skill and elegance. The best canoes are made by the Clioquot and Nittinat tribes, on Vancouver Island, who sell them to the Mackahs, but few being made by the latter tribe owing to the scarcity of cedar in their vicinity. . . .* Propulsion was either the deft broadhead paddles carved by the Clioquots or square sails of woven cedar bark, which caused the vessels to look all the more like small clipper ships, diminutives of that greatest grace of seafaring. The grace perhaps flowed up out of the cedar into the canoemen. Swan records that when the Makahs would convey him down-coast from Cape Flattery to the Hosett village at Cape Alava, for the sheer hellbending fun of it they would thread the canoe into the archways where waves have pounded through the big offshore sea stacks. On one of these through-the-hole voyages Swan and the Reservation doctor *had an opportunity of witnessing the operation of three tremendous rollers which came sweeping after us and which I feared would knock us against the top of the arch. The doctor said he had his eye on a ledge which he should try to catch hold of in case of emergency, but fortunately we had no occasion to try our skill at swimming as the Indians worked the canoe through the passage beautifully.*

Makah canoemanship introduced Swan to Swell, dressed in that fresh suit of Boston clothes, bound out from Port Townsend to Neah Bay on a mid-September day of 1859 with a cargo of *flour, bacon, molasses and blankets.* Swan climbed in for the jaunt and ever after was impressed with Swell, wrote at once of him that line that *he is still quite a young man, but if he lives, he is destined to be a man of importance among his own and neighboring tribes.*

If he lives. Why those edged words amid the admiration, on a fine bright journey out this valley of water to Neah?

Whatever the reason for those three uneasy jots of Swan's pen, they were exactly augury, Swell long since dead by the time seven Septembers later Swan canoed away from the Neah Bay teaching job, reversed that original route to arrive in from Cape Flattery to Port Townsend across the water here.

A second illumination of this sunrise. I realize that I bring myself back and back to this bluff because here scenes still fit onto each other despite their distances of time. Becoming rarer in the West, constancy of this sort. What I am looking out over in this fresh dawn is little enough changed from the past that Swan in a Makah canoe, coming or going on the Port Townsend-Neah Bay route, can be readily imagined across there, the sailing gulls slide through his line of sight as they do mine. Resonance of this rare sort, the reliable echo from the eye inward, I think we had better learn to prize like breath. △