

Northland: A 4,000-Mile Journey Along America's Forgotten Border
By Porter Fox
W.W. Norton & Company, 2018

reviewed by Abby Paige

As the United States rang in the new year 2019, the Republican fever dream of a giant wall along the border with Mexico had pushed the federal government into partial shutdown. Donald Trump was considering whether to declare a national emergency to force construction if Congress refused to fund the project. Meanwhile, a manufactured emergency was indeed unfolding at the border, where asylum seekers were met with tear gas and the high probability of indefinite detention. The deaths of two Guatemalan children in the custody of Customs and Border Protection (CBP) made the news at the close of 2018, but more than a dozen others had also died in CBP and ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) custody during the year, mostly at facilities near the Mexican border.

Those of us who live along the U.S.'s northern border watched this melodrama with a unique mixture of schadenfreude and dread. (*Thank goodness it's not happening here! Will it happen here?*) We have seen the U.S./Canada border, the longest in the world, steadily thicken and militarize since 2001, and we wonder how long it will escape the attention of national security hawks and hysterics. There are certain advantages to its being "forgotten," as the title of Porter Fox's latest book claims it to be.

Northland: A 4,000-Mile Journey Along America's Forgotten Border chronicles Fox's travels along the length of the northern border of the continental U.S., from Passamaquoddy Bay in Maine to Bellingham, Washington. "On a map the boundary is a line," he writes. "On land, it passes through impossible places—ravines, cliff bands, bogs, waterfalls, rocky summits, whitewater—that few people will ever see." Traveling by canoe, container ship, and car, he retraces the steps of early European settlers, *voyageurs*, pioneers, and prospectors, narrating the history of the line, as well as his own travels.

Like Champlain, La Salle, and Lewis and Clark, Fox is interested in the Northland primarily as a wilderness, and he paints it as a place still largely uninhabited and untamed. To those who live there, this portrait may seem incomplete. While it is true that only 12% of the U.S. population lives within 100 miles of the northern border, Fox seems determined to avoid most of those 39 million people. He does not visit Seattle, Detroit, Chicago, or Cleveland, nor explore how the border influences the cultures of communities near it. Other than interactions with border guards and a few accidental excursions across the line, for the most part he ignores the presence of Canada altogether, as only an American could. (90% of the Canadian population lives within 100 miles of the U.S. border, 35 million people for whom, it seems worth noting, the very notion of “northern” has an entirely different meaning.)

“Northlanders have little interest in the rest of the Union, and the rest of the Union has little interest in its northern fringe,” Fox asserts. His interest is not in Northlanders, but the spaces between them — the rivers, lakes, mountains, and plains. *Northland* is less about the border than that portion of the continental U.S. immediately to the south of it, an area that is indeed remarkable for its natural beauty, unforgiving climate, economic deprivation, and isolation that can either preserve or inhibit certain ways of life.

Fox, who grew up in Maine, is a seasoned travel writer and editor of the on-line travel magazine, *Nowhere*. Here, he is a skilled narrator of the rich and sometimes comical history of how the border was drawn, and he ably captures how it continues to be negotiated and improvised. He canoes up the Saint Croix River and into the Madawaska Republic; hitches a ride on a Great Lakes freighter; visits the Northwest Angle, a spit of Minnesota cut off from the rest of the U.S. due to cartographic error; camps with the Standing Rock Sioux at Oceti Sakowin during their Keystone XL protests; meets white supremacist militiamen in northern Idaho; and ends up in the Lummi Nation on the Pacific Coast. His prose is vivid and engaging, and his enthusiasm for the natural world and his fellow travelers is deeply felt. For him, the Northland represents a heroic past where people lived more independently and closer to the natural world, a place left behind by progress, the setting of America’s origin story.

“It didn’t make sense that Americans had lost interest in this,” Fox laments, but by “this” he doesn’t mean the Northland, so much as wilderness more generally, the crucible within which European men were forged into prototypical Americans. While he pays careful attention to the history of indigenous peoples in the north country, there is persistent nostalgia here for a time when Great (White) Men roamed the northern forests. Such men, and the masculine colonial myth they embodied, seem to exist for Fox along a narrative trajectory separate from the “relentless resource extraction” and “northland profiteering” that, he acknowledges, have impoverished many northern communities for generations. This connection, waiting to be made, trails through the book like an untied shoelace.

Indeed, at the center of *Northland* is the contradiction between Fox’s affection for the north country and his tendency to relegate it to the past, as though it were not a place where people currently live and where American (in the broader, continental sense) identities continue to be forged. It is not unusual to frame economically stagnant places as stuck in time, but Fox’s failure to connect the history of the northern places with their present-day realities feels like a willful omission.

This tendency to slide from admiring to romanticizing to oversimplifying is a pitfall embedded in the travel-writing genre. Conquerors and colonizers were the original travel writers, and anyone who writes in the same vein must contend with that legacy. The traveler is necessarily an outsider in the territory he depicts and usually passes through unscathed by its realities. A writer may connect with local guides or travel companions, but the subjectivity is his, and this is part of the enjoyment of the genre: the ease of the anonymous observer, the comfort of adventure without risk.

To readers who live in proximity to Fox’s “forgotten border,” such vicarious comfort is less accessible. Our invisibility, which he reinforces, contributes to the economic challenges and social problems that many communities face, especially First Nations. We are insulated from

some of the dangers—but also many of the freedoms—of life in less marginal places. Currently, as we watch our southern counterparts contend with the real and painstaking attentions of the U.S. Homeland Security machine, many of us are grateful for the relative protection our obscurity provides, although we know it is provisional and temporary. Great Men will turn their eyes northward again, and when they do, our survival will depend on whether they can see that we exist.