

Mad Dogs and an Englishwoman by Polly Evans

Imagine breathtakingly beautiful country, dozens of excited canines, frost-bite weather and nonstop excitement and you have the set-up for Polly Evans' **Mad Dogs and an Englishwoman**, coming out in paperback late January 2009 from Delta.

Having been to Alaska years ago (a place I did not leave without bringing home an Alaskan Husky), I was ready for this travel book and it was a great trip. I had to give up marking passages I wanted to share—there were just too many.

Evans has said she is cowardly but it does not show itself in the types of books she chooses to write. Her first book was *It's Not About the Tapas* which left her with a set of very sore limbs. Second was *Kiwis Might Fly*, for which she traveled around New Zealand. Next came *Fried Eggs with Chopsticks* which took her around China. Then she learned to ride horses in Argentina for *On a Hoof and a Prayer*.

It should surprise no one by now that she decided to take on the Yukon Quest for **Mad Dogs and an Englishwoman**. For this book she braved the frigid cold of Canada's far northwest and its Alaskan neighbor.

Evans writes, "I flew out on Friday, Jan. 13, and returned home on April 1. The dates had almost selected themselves, but they seemed curiously appropriate, for I feared I was embarking on a fool's errand. I was going to spend eleven weeks in the heart of winter, in one of the most inhospitable climates on earth.

"The Yukon is a triangular-shaped territory in the far northwest of Canada. It borders Alaska to the west; at its northern tip lie the icy waters of the Beaufort Sea. The average temperature in the Yukon in January is minus 15 degrees Fahrenheit but the mercury can plunge much lower."

What attracted her to write this particular book? She says, "It was the dogs that drew me. During my time in the north I'd be based at Muktuk Kennels, the operation of one of Canada's most famous mushers, Frank Turner, and his wife, Anne. I'd scoop poop, help with feeding, and learn to drive a sled. From Muktuk, I'd make further trips around the region. I'd follow the Yukon Quest—a thousand-mile dogsled race that runs between Fairbanks, Alaska, and Whitehorse, the capital of the Yukon Territory. I'd visit Dawson City, the town that sprang up in response to the frenzied Klondike gold rush. I'd fly to the very far north, to the Arctic Ocean itself. And through it all, I'd learn all I could about the howling, capering, tail-wagging world of sled dogs." And that she surely did.

For the uninitiated, the Yukon Quest is said to be even more arduous than Alaska's highly publicized annual Iditarod and preparing for either of them is a year-long endeavor. While Evans only came in on the latter part of preparations for the Quest, she got a rapid education.

One of the things she learned right away is the love the human beings who train the dogs have for these mischievous, hearty, fleet animals. There were 108 dogs in the kennels at Muktuk. Puppies came, veterans went, she writes. A handful of geriatrics roamed loose. Frank and Anne refused to cull their retired dogs but kept them through their old age. As a result, she says, the house and yard were well populated with elderly dogs living out their lives in leisure.



The dogs were a blend of breeds as are most modern sled dogs. "These were Alaskan husky, combined with a bit of Siberian from way back when, mixed with Labrador retriever, Indian village dog, and collie."

Evans' first attempt at handling a team was not a great success but suffice to say she survived it, as did the dogs. She got better!



"The Yukon Quest was born in 1984," Evans writes. "It was conceived in response to the increasing commercialization of the Iditarod—the more famous long-distance dogsled race that runs between Anchorage and Nome. The Quest's creators designed a course with just ten checkpoints as opposed to the Iditarod's twenty-five. With more than 200 miles of frozen wilderness between some of them, competitors would be alone with their dogs for long stretches, day and night. They'd need an in-depth understanding of the willfulness and wiles of this cold natural world if they were going to reach the finish line. The prize money would be smaller than the Iditarod; the number of entrants would be fewer—but this, said the Yukon Quest's initiators, would be the toughest dogsled race on earth."

Frank Turner son's, Saul, now 25, was entering his first Yukon Quest and you'll need to read the book to see how he fared.

Near the end of the book, as Evans thinks about returning to London the next day, she reflects that "it wasn't a prospect that filled me with joy."

She adds, "Eleven weeks ago, I'd been nervous about coming here to the far north... But as the weeks passed, I'd grown to love the Yukon. The people who lived here were passionate about their unspoiled land. They took perpetual delight in the tracks of a fox in the snow or the distant sighting of a caribou... I'd been infected by their enthusiasm."

And she writes poignantly of her last outing with the dogs. "The creak of a sled and the patter of paws on snow cut into my thoughts. The teams came around the trail's final bend and emerged onto the lake. Sonar and Dawson appeared first, with Trooper and Sue, Vanek and Marley and Stefan riding behind. Then came Jeta, Cooder, Belle, Log, Alex, Casper, and Fabian. I watched the dogs trot toward me one last time, their movements almost balletic as they danced rhythmically through the deep, fresh powder. Their tails pointed up with enthusiasm, their ears were pricked and alert. They were joyful, beautiful, mischievous creatures, these sled dogs. I sat still and watched until they passed me. And then I fired up my skidoo, and reluctantly I followed them through the blissful white wilderness toward home."

—Ginny Strait-Trowbridge, Brodart