

Book Review

GOING TO EXTREMES full of superlatives

By ANN CHANDONNET

GOING TO EXTREMES.

By Joe McGinniss.

Hardcover, 285 pp., \$11.95, Alfred A. Knopf, 1980.

In November, 1976, Joe McGinniss, author of the best seller, *THE SELLING OF THE PRESIDENT* 1968, set off from Seattle by ferry to Alaska. For two years, he travelled from one end of the state to the other, gathering material for a book about it. The book, published in August of this year, was *GOING TO EXTREMES*.

In McGinniss' *GOING TO EXTREMES*, he does. Specifically, he goes to the superlatives and hyperbole. The blueberries on the Arctic tundra in September are "big as apples" (p. 190). Howard Weaver writes "as well as anyone on an Alaskan newspaper has ever written" (p. 213). When McGinniss is beginning a hiking trip into the Brooks Range, it is full of "nameless," "unclimbed" peaks, and hundreds of "unexplored" valleys (236). "No one - at least since the time of the ancient Eskimos - had hiked up the valley that led to Cockedhat Mountain from the east" (237).

The final example in the preceding paragraph is typical of McGinniss' misleading, inflated, slanted style herein in more than one way. First of all, it gives the non-Alaskan reader the feeling that there was a gap of time between the ancient and contemporary Eskimos, and during this gap no one walked in the Brooks Range. This is patent foolishness; current archeological digs support the idea that Eskimos and Athabascans have continually inhabited Alaska for a period of at least 30,000 years. Secondly, there is no reason given for the clinching detail, "from the east." We are simply to take this on trust.

It is difficult for any Alaskan reader to take anything McGinniss has to say on trust, when he makes errors like describing a marmot (a Cocker Spaniel size rodent of the mountain slopes) as squirrel-like. Throughout *GOING TO EXTREMES*, McGinniss seems to shut his eyes to truth, seeing only what he wishes to see.

There are several factual errors in the book. For example, the small, inset map at the beginning of the book has Alyeska (the ski resort) located in Muldoon - rather than Portage. On the large map, main map, Palmer is located south of Anchorage where Portage should be. In the text, Windsong, a new defunct real estate development, is, according to McGinniss' travelogue, located in the middle of the Matanuska Valley - rather than along the river bank.

(Continued on Page Four)

BOOK REVIEW **Going to Extremes** "noxious and bitter book" 13

Continued from 2)

When McGinniss described towns he never sees libraries, churches, single family dwellings, schools, playgrounds. But he habitually counts bars, trailers, real estate offices. According to McGinniss, when approaching Goldie's and the Montana Club in Anchorage, "you can smell the stale beer and piss a block away" (p. 35). He specializes in sordid, sensational detail...detail quick to sell books to the gullible, but not quick to accuracy. Every "Native" McGinniss encounters seems to be drunk, disorderly, discontented, and/or foul-mouthed. "Native" is in quotation marks here because McGinniss seems unfamiliar with the different aboriginal peoples of Alaska, unable to differentiate among them; apparently they all look alike to him.

McGinniss portrays Alaska as a get-rich-quick state. We see very little of Alaskan homelife, and a great deal of Alaskan business. Very little of women and children (the only woman he deigns to interview

is the widow of a famous Mt. McKinley pilot), established universities, art, the cultural life of the state. (The jacket design of the book reinforces this slanted portrait, showing a night-sky, a motel, and a massage parlor in neon, with blue water in the foreground.) All Alaskans seem to be (when not hiking the Brooks Range and encountering bears) making money, thinking about making money, thinking about recreation from making money - like a remote cabin in the bush, harboring grudges, or consuming alcohol. Depressing details are standard fare: a Fairbanks ice fog is "microscopic particles of foulness; a blanket of frozen filth" (43).

Beyond the depressing details, McGinniss' notion of the picturesque is to supply us the place name of every thing he encounters, repeatedly, until we are quite sick of Spenard, the Knik River, Kuyuktuvek, Arctic, Brooks, Trembley Creek, the Vitus Bering Hotel, and Front Street; and to inform us of the brand name of every item of cold-weather clothing he dons in the course of the book. This may be an

attempt at establishing verisimilitude, but much of this is so unnecessary (we readers can remember where he is and what he is wearing for more than the space of three paragraphs, after all) that it clogs the brain and grows wearisome.

McGinniss' style - full of sentence fragments - is nearly unreadable, with absolutely no saving graces. McGinniss may be known for his wit on talk shows, but little of that wit carries over into this prose.

The memorable portions of **GOING TO EXTREMES** are, without exception, those in the words of persons other than the author: John Seiberling on the significance of wild Alaska (pp. 220-222), Ray Bane on a hidden valley (280), Rowland Snodgrass on the lure of life in Palmer (172-5), and a trapper's 1939 diary (pp. 128-30).

To sum up, **GOING TO EXTREMES** is a pot-boiler, an obvious attempt by Knopf to cash in on the continuing interest in books about Alaska, an interest brought to its most recent peak three years ago by John McPhee's **COMING INTO THE COUNTRY**. **GOING TO EXTREMES** is a particularly noxious and bitter book.

BOOK REVIEW

ARTISTS OF THE TUNDRA AND THE SEA

by Dorothy Jean Ray, University of Washington Press
Paperback reprint, 1980. Original Publication, 1961.

This is a reprinting of Dorothy Jean Ray's classic book about the carvers of Northwestern Alaska. It is a classic in many respects. First, it has withstood the test of time. For many years, this has been the book on Eskimo carving, and now it is available in a less expensive paperback edition. Secondly, the original work was written after careful research and actual field observation. In addition to looking over the museum collections, Dorothy studied the archaeological and historical reports on this area of Alaska. She spent an entire summer observing the artists at work. Finally, she writes with clarity and simplicity, but with a sincere understanding of whole role of art in Eskimo life. There are more than a hundred photographs and illustrations which give the reader a deeper understanding of the traditions that gave rise to this beautiful art form.

Traditionally, these people have had to live and work in a very difficult environment. They learned to be practical, innovative, hardworking. Yet they showed a fine artistic appreciation of the material and ideas they wanted to express. To compete in the modern world, they have modified their works to fit the market place. This is not necessarily a corruption of the old art forms, but a way of combining the old ways and the new situation. Since the turn of the century and the days of "Happy Jack" Angokwashuk, they have come up with new ideas but shape them with the same skill and beauty that has always been characteristic of Eskimo art.

For anyone who wants to know the whole story of Eskimo carving, or for teachers of Native arts and crafts, or for those who just enjoy good reading, this new release of the **Artists of the Tundra and the Sea** is a "must."

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