



Harrison '71

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

# CHILDREN OF THE YUKON

*“A painter’s task is to open people’s visual minds to even the commonplace. In my paintings, they see the Yukon they want to see.”*

Ted Harrison’s prediction — that he was destined to become “a teacher who sometimes painted” — was not to be. By the mid-1970s, he had found his stride and was now strutting his stuff from North to South in a dramatic, daring surge of exhibitions. Ted painted in his home studio, he painted in the classroom, and he painted in a one-room trapper’s cabin he and Nicky bought at Crag Lake, a few miles from Carcross. There, on weekends and holidays, they lived simply among the stunning landscape as Ted further refined his imagery of the North.

The little log cottage, complete with caribou antlers over the threshold, became the family’s getaway and offered Ted a reflective retreat, with fishing just a short stroll away. Although the cabin lacked electricity, indoor plumbing, and running water, it had a million-dollar view of Mount Nares in the foreground and the wild Yukon all around. Here, wrapped in the serenity of the wilderness, Ted let the Yukon seep into his soul.

His affection for his lakeside hideaway is captured in *Our Cabin*, a cheerful painting depicting Ted at his easel, Nicky chopping wood to burn in the stove, and young Charles carrying a fishing rod. Chico, their pet dog, bounces about. The composition is delightful. As with all the paintings in this early Yukon period, it is the people and the stories they tell, that draws viewers into the pictures. So Canadian. So very Northern Canadian. So quintessentially Yukon.

Just as the sultry beauty of Malaysia’s jungles and the shadows on a New Zealand plain had captivated Ted earlier in his life, the Yukon’s distinctive rhythm and its particular light now utterly entranced him. As he approached his fifties, he was drawn into a euphoria that verged on religious conversion. “The painting experience became akin to walking a tightrope . . . It got so I could *feel* the colours, *feel* the land,” said Ted. “It was like an adventure each time I sat before a virgin canvas. I started a new life every time I painted.”



OPPOSITE:  
*Our Cabin (detail) 1971*  
*Acrylic on Board*  
*Private Collection*

Throughout the late 1970s, Ted worked like a whirlwind dervish. “I had to have a brush in my hand,” he said of his passion for painting. Haydn, Purcell or Vivaldi kept him company as he’d set to work. “My mind was filled with ideas for pictures, as if they were queuing up in my head. Just like the English do in a fish and chips shop.” With a cup of tea, or a glass of beer at hand, he’d let his mind wander into a never-never-land and “ah, there’d be a picture.”

Vancouver, as well as Canada’s epicentres of culture — Ottawa, Toronto, and Montreal — begged for Harrisons, Harrisons, and more Harrisons. Ted was still teaching, as was Nicky. And because Ted painted up to four hours most evenings, Nicky became the first-line chauffeur and cheerleader for Charles, now in mid-adolescence and fully engaged in school activities and community sports. “I remember those days,” said Charles. “When Dad wasn’t teaching, he was in his studio. Mom would take him tea and sandwiches. She was basically a single parent while completely supporting him in his work.”

In 1977, Ted held exhibitions in Ribe (Denmark), Montreal, Anchorage, and Whitehorse. Toronto City Hall requested five works on loan to display throughout December. UNICEF requested Harrison designs for its annual Christmas cards, and a major Canadian magazine featured his work.

Ted’s rising profile caught the attention of May Cutler, a tenacious and brilliant publisher of Montreal-based Tundra Press, which specialized in books for children. Would he consider writing and illustrating a story, she queried? Ted liked the idea very much. He had scribbled a few short stories in Malaysia and New Zealand, and he had thoroughly enjoyed developing *Northland*

*Alphabet* during his one-year term in Wabasca. Why not write and illustrate a book about the Yukon for children who lived South of Sixty?

“Keep it simple,” advised Cutler. As with all the books he would write, Ted used a pencil, saying his mind didn’t work well with a mechanical machine such as a typewriter. Drawing upon his skills as a teacher, and his experiences during a recent trip down the Yukon River, he sought to interpret his adopted home in words and pictures. From gold panning at Bonanza Creek to dogsled races on frozen rivers, *Children of the Yukon’s* twenty-two paintings take readers on a tour from Dawson City to the little town of Bennett, bringing northern life, south. Multicoloured waves of campfire smoke snake skyward. Bands of yellows, lime-greens, and crimson demarcate rolling hills that rise behind village vignettes. Snow glows pink, lime, and soft blue. Black outlines encase the Harrison palette of other vibrant colours. The pictures clearly state that Ted’s formal art school teachings have been firmly sent packing.

With the exception of the painting of the *S.S. Tushi* painted in 1973, the pictures are dated 1976 or 1977, suggesting they were rendered exclusively for the book. In the *S.S. Tushi* picture, the old paddle-wheeler sits proudly upon a frozen snow-covered lake against a steel-grey sky, a colour that soon disappears from Ted’s palette. This earlier picture represents Ted’s short but distinct Early Yukon Period (1968 – 1973). The solid background and foreground differs dramatically from the curvy bands of colour in his subsequent paintings.

Ted included in the book, a painting of a Christian church with two spirit houses in the distance to suggest a Native cemetery. “Religion has many faces in the North.



Memories of a Yukon Town, n.d.  
*Acrylic on Canvas*  
*Private Collection*

In Native cemeteries, small houses were built over graves and a favourite possession was laid inside, such as a toy for a dead child,” Ted wrote beneath the picture. The inclusion of, and commentary about, the spirit houses greatly offended Saskatchewan’s Catholic school administrators,

who banned the book. “I guess they thought I was promoting spiritualism,” explained Ted in an interview. “Spirit Houses are... a natural thing in the North, something I didn’t think was wrong. This was after all, I believe, the first children’s book done with Native children in mind.”<sup>67</sup>

Tundra Press simultaneously launched *Children of the Yukon* in Canada and the U.S. in November 1977.

The publisher timed the launch to coincide with an exhibition of the book's illustrations at Montreal's Shayne Gallery. Notwithstanding the Saskatchewan fuss, the book was a success. The *Montreal Star* declared *Children of the Yukon*, "a bright new book...a collection of beautiful paintings." The *Canadian Book Review Annual* gushed, "This book is a vivid, colourful representation of the Canadian scene and should be in every public library." The *Alaskan Journal* announced, "The strength of *Children of the Yukon* lies in Ted Harrison's ability to paint the Yukon Territory gloriously!...Certain to give joy to all children of all ages." But to one Whitehorse resident, the book didn't ring true. "You made a big mistake. Any fool knows it takes more than two men to carry a moose," he said, referring to a picture in the book. Ted shot back, "I know two men can carry a blue moose."

Ted's work, which clearly depicts the Yukon's Native people, raises the question of cultural appropriation. Is it acceptable for an Englishman to interpret in words and pictures a culture that is not his? Can we trust the expressions of the outsider? Ted takes the question head on. "No picture books about Native children existed before I did mine," he told Judith Saltman in an interview for *Picturing Canada: a History of Canadian Children's Illustrated Books and Publishing*. "If others were interested, they would have done something. Whether it's a white man or a black man

Wilderness, n.d.  
Acrylic on Canvas  
Private Collection







*Ted, Nicky and Brunhilde, 1980*

or a purple man, as long as the person has empathy with the culture and makes a solid attempt to learn about it, it's valid. When I lived in New Zealand, I taught Maori design to my students. I didn't *appropriate* their culture, I just shone a light on it, re-introduced it. The whole school took up those designs: the Maori students, white ones, everyone."<sup>68</sup> The journal *Quill and Quire* agreed. "He picks out the most interesting aspects of northern life and emphasizes Indian children as much as white. His words hint gently at the Yukon's way of life, which is threatened by the South."

May Cutler's promotion team, encouraged by the reception of *Children of the Yukon*, arranged a five-day media tour that included appearances on Toronto's prestigious morning show *Canada AM*, and CBC-TV's *Ninety Minutes Live* with host Peter Gzowski. Following Toronto, Ted was to dash west to meet Vancouver media. The Canada Council

agreed to pick up the \$650 airfare and Ted applied to the school board for one-week's leave *without pay* from his classroom duties.

Superintendent John Ferbey denied his request. Ted's first duty was to his students, Ferbey reasoned, saying Ted ought to do his promotions during Christmas and Easter school breaks. Cutler countered the denial by trimming the tour to three days. This, too, was refused. Cutler was furious.

"In my ten years of publishing I have never encountered such ridiculous behaviour on the part of any public authority," she pronounced in a scathing press release. "The Yukon depends on tourism and at the present moment there can be no better ambassador for it than Ted Harrison. Not since Robert Service has the Yukon had such an opportunity to tell people about the life and fun of living there. The Yukon is scarcely so rich in artists and writers that it can afford to treat them just as any other person who might like some time off for a pleasant little holiday in the South."<sup>69</sup>

The *Whitehorse Star* took up the story with a bold, half inch headline that declared, "Artist Refused Time Off to Promote Book in South." Ted's bosses held their position, even when the issue came before the Minister of Education.<sup>70</sup> May Cutler, unwilling to concede, took the issue to the airwaves, prompting gallery owner Lois Shayne, who was exhibiting the book's paintings, to console Ted with a letter: "You are going to have more publicity for *not* being able to come than if you had." After the issue garnered national attention, the school board relented, giving Ted a "certain amount of time off for artistic pursuits, *without pay*."



*Ted, Nicky and Mike Craigen at Crag Lake, 1980*

Imagine the chatter among the Yukon naysayers when the following year the Child Study Association Best Children's Book award went to *Children of the Yukon*. It also made "List Choice" at the 29th Annual International Youth Library Exhibition. And, after being selected from among 368 other applicants, Ted was invited to attend the prestigious 1978 Illustrators Exhibition of the Children's Book Fair, in Bologna, Italy, a supreme honour and the

first ever for a Canadian. He chose for the competition five paintings entitled *Ravens of the Yukon*, "little Yukon turkeys" as he called them. "I knew it was a tough competition, but I thought, oh well, we'll just send in [the illustrations] anyway," he said. "When they chose me, I was over the moon!"

This time, the school board graciously acknowledged Ted's achievement, allowing him a ten-day leave to attend

the Fair. He sent word of his Bologna invitation to Walter Gray in Toronto via the sixty-mile Carcross-to-Atlin Commemorative Dog Team mail run. “The letter took nine days to reach Toronto,” recalled Gray. “Ted says the envelope was supposed to have dog teeth marks on it, but I didn’t see any. Anyway, he was pretty thrilled about Bologna.”<sup>71</sup> Nicky, who was still teaching, stayed behind to mind Charles. “The little devil would love to be with me and pretended to be miffed at being left at home,” wrote Ted in his diary. “How nice it would have been had we all been together.”

The international exposure of the Fair was a powerful promotional medium and offered Ted a prime opportunity to wax poetic about the Yukon. He distributed pins, flags, and literature about his beloved North, acting as an unofficial ambassador. “One Italian asked if I lived in an igloo! I can’t really blame him because back then, very few people knew much about Canada and even less about the Yukon.” His success at Bologna sent his stories and pictures around the world, igniting a frenzy of interest in the North not seen since the Gold Rush of 1898.

When the Fair concluded, Ted left Bologna by train for a sightseeing trip to Florence and Venice. While he wandered among those great cities, his reputation as a writer and painter was making its own journey elsewhere. Australian bookstores ordered hundreds of copies of *Children of the Yukon*. Back in Canada, Sheila Reljic was making plans with the National Film Board to produce *Harrison’s Yukon*, a twenty-two-minute short film to be narrated by Ted. (The film won the Golden Sheaf Award for Best Arts Film at the Yorkton Short Film and Video Festival in 1979.)<sup>72</sup>

By 1981, the film had been placed in forty locations beyond Canada, including: Nairobi, Kuala Lumpur, and Dar Es Salaam; cities Ted had visited thirty-five years earlier as a young soldier. While Ted’s success now offered him an international stage on which to tout the charms of the Yukon, he learned it also needed at-home promotion. When he visited the Empress Hotel in Victoria in 1978, a clerk inquired, “where in the United States is the Yukon?”

Encouraged by the success of *Children of the Yukon*, Ted embarked on a memoir, published on March 1st, 1981, by Merritt Publishing Company. *The Last Horizon*, a 112-page collection of personal stories with illustrations, featured a foreword by Pierre Berton, the first of three he would write for his friend. Along with the standard edition, Merritt offered a deluxe edition of 175 numbered-and-signed copies that included a signed serigraph and sixteen hand-tipped coloured plates.<sup>73</sup> The prose in *The Last Horizon* is down-home, yet poetic. “I believe that the Yukon is a treasure trove for imagination lovers of wild places and natural beauty. It is a land to enchant the eye, stimulate the senses and excite the imagination. In a world which is all too often tawdry and insincere, it is a place of beauty, hope and idealism.”

The critics raved and *Last Horizon* quickly sold out. A second printing followed in 1982. The publisher then decided to reproduce the book’s pictures as serigraphs, cutting a deal with Ted that later left him unhappy. “[The prints] were selling for about \$300 each and all I got was \$15. I chalked that up to experience.” Then, without notice, the company ceased operations. The unsold second-edition books ended up with a Vancouver company that cut out

the pictures, framed them, and offered them for sale. “It is most Machiavellian when I contemplate what is going on,” wrote Ted in a letter to the Writers’ Union of Canada.

Although keenly disappointed by that experience, Ted put it behind him to embark on another children’s book with May Cutler and Tundra Press. The next year (1982), *A Northern Alphabet*, rolled out the doors of Tundra Press. This picture book is a more elaborate version of *Northland Alphabet*, the booklet he had produced in Wabasca. With signature Harrison aplomb, the book cover features a shocking pink moose and a rainbow-coloured moon.

Right from the start, we know this book is quintessential Harrison.

“I used local, environmental objects. I wanted to stress the North as few learning books do,” said Ted. He rendered each of the twenty-six Harrison pictures in the boisterous colours of Malaysia. Pink clouds, orange bears, tilting telephone poles, and campfires wafting purple, green, and bright blue smoke, captured the fun of living north of sixty. He framed each page with place names beginning with the featured alphabet letter. “It took me longer to find those names than it did to write the book,” laughed Ted, recalling how he and Nicky sat together night after night pouring through the atlas.

Accolades flooded into the Harrison mailbox. Among them was a letter from the parents of a young son.

“The Prince and Princess of Wales have asked me to send you their warmest thanks for the two marvellous books . . . as soon as Prince William is old enough to read, I can promise you he will be presented with *A Northern Alphabet*,” wrote the Hon. Edward Adeane on behalf of the royal couple. “It’s tempting to think that a future king may learn his ABCs from *A Northern Alphabet*,” quipped Ted to publisher May Cutler.

The 1984 International Board on Books for Young People Congress (IBBY), held that autumn in Nicosia, Cyprus, selected *A Northern Alphabet* for the Youth Honour List for Illustration. Ted attended the awards ceremony, where he met the movers and shakers of children’s literature, so important to his burgeoning career. But for all the pomp in Nicosia, he was most impressed with a child he saw while exploring the old sites of Cyprus. “I was struck by the face of a girl that was so captivating it could have been in an ancient Grecian painting — absolutely fascinating.”

In *A Northern Alphabet*, and in the books to follow, Ted melded his knowledge of how children learn with his vision of a distinct Yukon identity. By doing this, he was changing how others viewed the North and positioning his work as unique to Canada’s cultural mosaic. As his star ascended, his role as a teacher “who sometimes painted” was in jeopardy. Could he, should he, continue to do both?

