

title **THREE AGAINST THE WILDERNESS**

author **Eric Collier**

category Autobiographical / Commentary

publisher E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc.
1959 hard cover edition, 349 pages
Library of Congress Catalogue Number: 59-10777
<http://us.penguinroup.com/static/html/aboutus/adult/dutton.html>
illustrations by Joseph Cellini and map
by Joan Scott

who will be interested in this book?

Anyone interested in BC history will want to read this classic ranching story illustrating early-mid 1900's survival. It is included in this Water web site review as the main theme throughout this book is the beneficial effect of the re-establishment of beaver to a watershed (see also the review of "*Water – A Natural History*" by Alice Outwater, which discusses the value and place of beavers in the watershed and water cycle).

why read this book?

A personal experience story of wilderness life in the BC Chilcotin, it both entertains and enlightens. Not only do we get a sense of the hardships and rewards of early BC life, but underlying the story is the Colliers' efforts in re-establishing beaver in Meldrum Creek marshes where he and his family lived. With the return of beaver comes stored water and wildlife. Some readers will recognize local family names such as Becher (Becher's Prairie) and Moon as well as many locations. All in all, a very uplifting story.

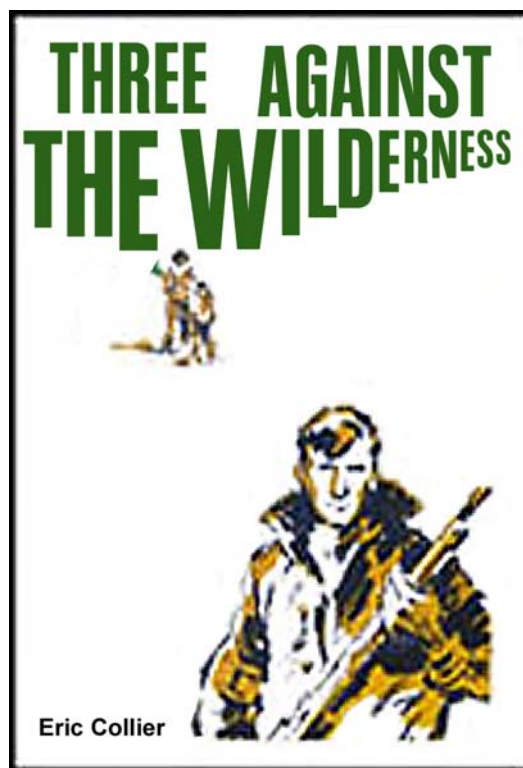
review / outline by Lance Brown, vistadelsol@telus.net

Overview

The Colliers moved into the Meldrum Creek area of the BC Chilcotin in 1920's, and during a summer forest fire he comments "The creek is dying, the trees are dying, the land everywhere is dying". By the early 1930's they were settled in for an adventure. Some thirty years later, with beaver re-established and water in the marches of Meldrum Creek, the situation is very much changed.

Points of Interest

- "The solution to it all glared us in the face. With the beaver dams, there lay the answer. At the mouth of every tract of marsh, large or small, was a beaver dam. Repair those beaver dams then and let these wastelands produce!"
- "In 1860, and during the early part of the nineteenth century, that water was there, in the creek. It was there because for ages long gone as one generation of beavers following another had been dedicated to the purpose of ensuring that it would be there."
- by 1932, the Colliers rebuilt beaver dams that collect water and attract wildlife



- in the spring of 1935, with a large freshet coming, large dams were rebuilt, one flooding 200 acres and providing irrigation water
- in 1941, a visit from a provincial Game Warden leads to “help with those dams” – two pairs of beaver to stock the ponds, ten years after the Colliers had started to dream of beavers again in Meldrum Creek they were there
- life with the beavers has many changes
- by 1950, nine years later, their ponds and many others are fully stocked with beaver and they start trapping some; much change in the pond and surrounding vegetation
- a forest fire doesn't reach their home due to the water ponded behind the beaver dams
- the flood of 1948, but water is held back in the beaver dams reducing flow to the Fraser River

other review **BC Bookworld**
by Alan Twigg

One of the most famous books about British Columbia, Eric Collier's gripping Chilcotin memoir *Three Against the Wilderness* (Irwin Publishing, 1959; London: Companion Book Club, 1959) is a classic homesteading account that is gradually slipping into obscurity, along with the reputation of its author, although the Meldrum Creek homesite where Collier and his family lived in isolation for 27 years was restored by the Chilliwack-based Canadian Army Engineers in 1994.

Born in Northampton, England in 1903, tall and lean Eric Collier was the son of a successful iron foundry owner. At age 14 he joined the navy and served for two years a signalman prior to being sent to Canada to work as a 'mud pup' on his uncle's property near Clinton, B.C. in 1920. That uncle was Harry Marriott, author of *Cariboo Cowboy*. Collier also worked at Riske Creek store for Fred Becher, at the Gang Ranch, and at Cotton Ranch. He married Lillian Ross in 1928 at Riske Creek and took up meadows at Madden Lake in 1929. Two years later, in spite of his wife's hip deformity due to a childhood accident, the couple took a wagon, three horses and their 18-month-old son Veasy, along with a tent, some provisions and \$33, and reached the Stack Valley where they lived in an abandoned cabin built by trapper and carpenter Tom Evans. In a few years they relocated to Meldrum Creek, ten miles away, where they lived in a tent and built their own cabin. He and his wife Lillian had promised her 97-year-old grandmother, LaLa, to bring the beavers back to the area that she knew as a child before the white man came. Collier imported several pair of beaver, and raised the area's water table sufficiently to reinstate the beaver population.

In 1939, Eric Collier sold his favourite saddle horse in order to purchase a radio and hear news of World War II. In 1946, Collier became the first president of the B.C. Registered Trappers Association, an organization he co-founded with Ed Bobbs. With the second guiding license to be issued in the Chilcotin, Collier earned a meagre income to supplement his trapping and hunting. He increasingly accepted speaking engagements and sometimes took adversarial positions in talks with the B.C. Game Department. To encourage more humane trapping methods, Collier undertook field tests for the Conibear trap invented by Frank Conibear and increasingly turned his hand to writing for *Northwest Digest* in Quesnel, the *Williams Lake Tribune* and *Outdoor Life* in the U.S. In 1949 he became the first non-American to win that magazine's Conservation Award.

In the 1950s the staff at *Outdoor Life* encouraged him to consider writing a book about his experiences. Written by longhand and then transcribed onto his Remington typewriter, Collier's recollections of 26 years of family life and 'roughing it in the bush' for *Three Against the Wilderness* (1959) were soon condensed by *Reader's Digest* and re-sold in at least seven translations around the world. Nonetheless Collier's hugely successful book is not cited in major guides to Canadian literature.

Soft-spoken and usually unassuming, Eric Collier moved his family to Riske Creek in 1960. He sold his 38-mile trapline to Orville Stowell and Val Coulthard on March 26, 1964 for \$2,500. He died at Riske Creek on March 15, 1966. The *Williams Lake Tribune's* obituary stated, "To watch Eric Collier stride through the

woods was a joy to behold.... Gun crooked comfortably in his arm he moved along as easily as the city dweller would stroll down Granville Street."

Collier's wife and trapping partner Lily moved to Williams Lake and died in 1992. Their son Veasy, schooled by correspondence, served in the Korean War, married Judy Borkowski, and settled at Williams Lake. Erected in 1946, the Collier's much-deteriorated, second, four-room log home at Meldrum Creek was slated for demolition in 1989, under the auspices of the Chilcotin Military Reserve north of Riske Creek, but local protests in Cariboo encouraged Captain Paul Davies and the Canadian Army Engineers to resurrect the remote dwelling and its log barn with new roofing, shakes, doors and windows. A very rough road leads 40 kilometres off Highway 20 to the site--one of the few literary historical sites that have been preserved in British Columbia.