The Long Trail: My Life in the West
by Ian Tyson (with Jeremy Klaszus)

Reviewed by J.M. Bridgeman

In the best way possible, Ian Tyson’s memoir The Long Trail: My Life in the West is a book you don’t have to read twice. It is straightforward, honest enough (considering most of the collaterals are still around to counter and/or to sue), chatty, and reflective in the way of barroom banter. It’s as if we were sitting with Tyson at the table, swapping stories, considering possibilities, laughing, concluding with “that’s life” shrugs. The memoir is a Canadian “portrait of the artist,” structured chronologically, with locations, relationships, employment history, and artistic development intermingled. Themes emerge of a man who took some time to discover his passions and more time to find his voice. But soon the combination of love for women, for working people, for horses and the romance of the old west coalesced with a comfort being the centre of attention on stage, and a growing knowledge about music. Performance, networking, professional ambition guide him to songwriting.

Tyson’s autobiography surprises with how much we do not know about a Canadian music icon so familiar from television and tours. Although I’ve seen him only once live in concert, Ian Tyson’s music has been part of the soundtrack of my life, from “Summer Wages” and Ian and Sylvia, to Cowboyography, my favourite album of all time, to “Four Strong Winds” at the Mayerthorpe funeral. I think of Tyson every time I drive through Pincher Creek (and now I know that his ranch is near Longview, farther north, closer to Calgary). I did not know that he’d grown up “west of the West” on Vancouver Island. Didn’t know a parent had been born in England, or about the sibling rivalry, juvenile delinquency, private school, footloose youth. Didn’t know that he’d worked guiding tourists in Banff or logging up Harrison Lake. Didn’t know he was a graduate of the Vancouver art school (now the Emily Carr University of Art + Design) [sic +]. Although I assumed he had a passion for horses, I didn’t know about his being a weekend rodeo cowboy or an injured rodeo rider. Didn’t know that anyone could teach himself to play guitar during a two-week stint in hospital. Didn’t know that he hung out with Bob Dylan. Didn’t know that Cowboyography refers not to biography but to geography. This combination of the ordinary and the particular adds to the biography’s appeal. Not to mention the dust jacket cover photographs, guaranteed to elicit hyperventilation.

There seems to be an underlying thread of fate, chance, destiny, and luck – both good and bad. Sitting in a dentist’s office and discovering the art of Charlie Russell. Hitchhiking in California and being picked up by Sam Peckinpah. Stumbling through art school without realizing he is learning about aesthetics. Headlining and designing an award-winning poster for the first Mariposa folk festival. Being serenaded by Bob Dylan and heading off to write his first song, “Four Strong Winds.” There are confessions of personal failings, including a propensity towards jealousy, bitterness, feeling victimized rather than accepting responsibility and taking control. There are regrets where relationships are concerned, especially with his two children. There is not a lot of dwelling on what appears to be the logical connection between distance, dalliance, and divorce. Or distance, dalliance, drink, and divorce.
The glimpse into a music career starting in Toronto in 1958 is both surprising and enlightening. Much depends upon luck, timing, relationships – with whom you hook up, sign, compete. The role of the record company and promotion; the importance of the producer; the challenges of marketing and merchandising; the focus on authenticity in a world of fads and ever-changing fashion. There are also the more basic challenges – stage persona, voice grooming, adjusting to drastic changes. Tyson describes how he turned the loss of his voice into a reinvention, his new croak into “raven rock.” Maturing. Learning to be less irascible. Recognizing the importance of consistency. Developing discipline. Disappointments and misunderstandings are overshadowed when, by popular vote, “Four Strong Winds” is voted the song of the century. A triumph.

I thoroughly enjoyed reading *The Long Trail*. In his own words, before he was part of the “sagebrush Renaissance,” Tyson “was a beatnik cowboy, I guess. I liked the idea of being an outsider hipster who loved literature and music but lived the outlaw life.” He concludes with a lyric sketch of the beauty of the Rockies, “so aesthetically over the top – changing every morning, orchestrated by the light” (195), and with the confession: “The fact that I can still move people with my stories – I live for that” (196). Which of Tyson’s lyrics does his story pull back into my brain?

“never hit seventeen when you play against the dealer” – “Summer Wages”

“you gotta get her all down, ’cause she’s bound to go” – “The Gift”

“coyote is a survivor” – “Coyote Song” ♫

J.M. Bridgeman writes from the Fraser Valley.

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