



## North Star: The Legacy of Jean-Marie Mouchet

**John Firth**

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*North Star is an inspiring biography that recognizes the quiet heroism of its subject, a dedicated priest.*

In *North Star*, Yukon Story Laureate John Firth delivers a compassionate portrait of Father Jean-Marie Mouchet, the French “skiing priest” whose athletic programs changed the lives and futures of Indigenous youth throughout Northern Canada.

Mouchet’s life, as told through Firth’s extensive interviews with his colleagues, friends, family, and historians, seemed to reflect all the despairs and hopes of the twentieth century. Raised in the French mountains and destined for the priesthood, Mouchet just survived the 1944 Nazi massacre that killed many of his fellow seminarians. This book follows Mouchet from the wreckage of postwar France to his missionary post in the “Great White North” of the Yukon, where he puzzled and then charmed his new parishioners with his passion for skiing and his indifference toward “converting” locals. Mouchet also created a ski program as a means of helping local Indigenous children “connect ... with the land,” balancing physical exercise with traditional spiritual practices. It burgeoned into a nationwide athletic campaign, producing several national and international champions.

Herein characterized with affection, Mouchet is memorialized as an irreverent, sometimes boorish, and life-affirming force in the lives of generations of Canadians at the fringes of the Arctic. Against a background of shocking violence, the book plumbs Mouchet’s interior life with plausible and engaging flourishes. After its opening flashback, its narrative is chronological and displays an exceptional sense of direction, allocating appropriate space to every major “beat” in Mouchet’s colorful youth while keeping its essential focus on the highlights of his later career. Indeed, the early chapters foreshadow his later triumphs and failures well, and later chapters draw attention back to earlier events with clarity.

Aside from a few stylized passages, the book adheres to a disciplined documentary style, putting its subjects’ voices in the foreground. *North Star* is flush with quotations from sources whose own stories meld into Mouchet’s and whose voices add a range of perspectives that capture the many aspects—religious, athletic, personal, and romantic—of Mouchet’s life. *North Star* also addresses the dark undercurrents of its subject matter with care, sketching in the changing lifestyles of Northern Canada’s Indigenous communities, covering the enduring legacies of abuse within Canada’s Indian residential school system, and addressing the despair and violence that claimed the lives of even some young people whom Mouchet’s programs were meant to protect.

*North Star*, for all its admiration of Mouchet, doesn’t treat him as a saint. Still, even as it repeats a range of criticisms toward his programs, it doesn’t linger on what may be the most troubling revelation in the book: Mouchet’s long and unwitting association with an abusive clergyman who targeted many of the same children whom Mouchet had taken under his guidance. It absolves Mouchet of responsibility here, though the speed with which it moves through this particular saga leads to a lack of closure. Everywhere else, its treatment of Mouchet is thorough and even-handed, resulting in a compelling portrait of a flawed, eccentric, and virtuous personality.

*North Star* is an inspiring biography about the quiet heroism of a dedicated priest.

ISAAC RANDEL (April 23, 2024)

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