
At that time in Canadian history when the ring of the miner’s pick echoed through the gold-filled valleys of the Klondike, ten men at the other end of the world were living through a winter on the Antarctic continent. They were the first to do so; the year was 1899. Though the name of Scott has become synonymous with the Antarctic, it was Carsten E. Borchgrevink, a Norwegian, leading a small expedition flying the British flag, who was the first to experience the inhospitable, desolate, yet uncannily beautiful land which had remained elusive for such a long time.

Ever since Sir James Clark Ross had returned from his eminently successful 1840-41 voyage, from bountiful seas and what one of Ross’s scientists called “the whitest if not the brightest jewel” in Queen Victoria’s crown, interest had been growing in the Antarctic. As a member of H.J. Bull’s 1894 expedition in the steam whaler Antarctic, Borchgrevink had been one of the seven-man boat party to effect a first landing on the Antarctic continent. Returning to England after that epic experience, Borchgrevink obtained financial support from Sir George Newnes to lead his own expedition. He departed on 22 August 1898 for that mystical land in the steam-powered barque-rigged Southern Cross. The Borchgrevink expedition received comparatively little publicity in England at the time of its preparation; and has remained somewhat obscure ever since. There is little doubt that there was some indignation at the thought of a polar party carrying the British flag and financed by an Englishman, being led by a Norwegian, particularly at a time when plans were being made for the formation of a large British national expedition (Scott’s Discovery expedition).

The subsequent account of Borchgrevink’s establishment and occupancy of Camp Ridley at Cape Adare, Victoria Land, during the winter of 1899 has been overshadowed ever since by the accounts of the Scott and Shackleton expeditions which followed a few years later. While it is inconceivable to imagine that Scott did not benefit from great deal from Borchgrevink’s report, no reference is made by Scott to the Southern Cross expedition; this is especially surprising in view of the fact that Scott had two of Borchgrevink’s men with him in 1903.

First on the Antarctic Continent is a book for the polar historian and for every library. It is needed to fill in the blanks and serve as the opening paragraph in the story of Antarctic exploration through the heroic era. The price tag is stiff but it is nicely bound and printed, and lavishly illustrated with photographs representing the first scenes the world saw of the “unknown continent” and its maritime fauna, and of man’s activity in a polar environment.

One must question the extent and dimension of the scientific program and whether Borchgrevink’s men did not make a great effort to explore inland: was he in fact so topographically confined to the beach? It is obvious that as a leader he did not realize the great value and importance of constant activity during a polar winter that confines all members to the shelter of the base hut. Members of the Borchgrevink party grew weary of one another through inactivity, and that esprit de corps that permeated later expeditions was clearly absent. Of course, the fact that many polar expeditions in the early years were essentially naval in structure, with the attendant discipline, would account for much of the contrast.

The zoologist Hanson died of natural causes, but otherwise the party survived the winter in good health. Some spring sled journeys were made during the early spring, accompanied by a sled party, with perquisites, augmented by his previous experience, were exploited by him to his advantage. For example, he knew what was the best dog-harness material and got it for his own team. There were recurring problems, such as ship’s stores for the staff not being distributed equally but instead being traded for furs. This did not set well with staff nor local traders Peter Freuchen and Knud Rasmussen. (In due course the Danish administration made restrictions regarding who had permission to trade.) Hunt declined to cohabit with Inuit women. His reactions to isolation were good, but he could be critical. For instance, he regarded Borchgrevink as a bad manager. Borchgrevink and Rasmussen as bad planners when they traveled with dogs in poor condition, with minimal food, and with women. If he himself were to do it again, he would have taken out the Inuit women and used his best dog harness material.

There is a chapter on persons and life at Etah, one on the polar Inuit, and a chapter on the environment of the area. Matters went awry from the beginning. Hunt (and others) signed aboard on faith, not having checked the contract which had not been revised as promised; later, they felt that they had been bamboozled. All publication rights belonged to MacMillan and materials “of every kind” were to be paid up in the vicinity of the Bay of Whales (later used by Amundsen), from which point a sled journey was made to provide the expedition with a base. The two Borchgrevink men were replaced by two of Borchgrevink’s men with him in 1903.

The expedition personnel were new to the north—except for MacMillan who had been there before with his hero, Peary. His status as leader (with perquisites), augmented by his previous experience, were exploited by him to his advantage. For example, he knew what was the best dog-harness material and got it for his own team. There were recurring problems, such as ship’s stores for the staff not being distributed equitably but instead being traded for furs. This did not set well with staff nor local traders Peter Freuchen and Knud Rasmussen. (In due course the Danish administration made restrictions regarding who had permission to trade.) Hunt declined to cohabit with Inuit women. His reactions to isolation were good, but he could be critical. For instance, he regarded Borchgrevink and Rasmussen as bad planners when they traveled with dogs in poor condition, with minimal food, and with women. If he himself were to do it again, he would have taken out the Inuit women and used his best dog harness material.
women recur in Hunt’s book and not in MacMillan’s. Some expedition members, incidentally, had a penchant for naming geographical features, both in Greenland and in the Canadian sector.

In autumn of 1914 Hunt already was thoroughly frustrated and yearned to be back home in Maine, but he had his orders and obeyed them. Much later, when he was ordered to go south, he began his epic journey. With Knud Rasmussen, W.E. Ekblaw, and an entourage including women, children, and some 70 dogs, Hunt started from North Star Bay on 18 December 1916. The group stayed briefly at Cape York and then, in bad weather, continued on beyond Upernavik; most of the party then turned around and headed back home. Ekblaw was in bad shape, especially after a brutal crossing of Melville Bay, and so stayed at Upernavik to recover and to catch a southbound ship later at Jakobshavn. Then Hunt, with three Inuit, continued on south—parts of the journey overlaid over nearly impassable terrain (see the map) and with difficulties from thin ice and open water around coastal islands — to Jakobshavn (8 March midnight) and (more bad travel) to Egedesminde. He left there on 18 March, via skin boat, and arrived at Holsteinborg on 22 April — three months later than anticipated. On 12 May the Hans Egede arrived there. She sailed with Hunt aboard and reached Copenhagen on 1 June 1917. It was wartime, his 39th birthday, and he was penniless and still wearing the sealskin clothing of the south Greenlanders. He was given credit and clothes and traveled to Oslo; thence, via U.S. ship, he arrived in New York on 20 June.

The whole expedition might be viewed in another context. In the Russian sector, very early in the 1800s, one Jacob Sannikov thought he saw land north of the New Siberian Archipelago. Perhaps he saw icebergs on the horizon, or possibly (from refraction) Bennett Island — so named by De Long in 1881 for the American newspaper publisher, James Gordon Bennett, Jr. This was the genesis of “Sannikov Land”, in search of which Baron Toll and companions lost their lives, as recounted in The whole expedition might be viewed in another context. In the Russian sector, very early in the 1800s, one Jacob Sannikov thought he saw land north of the New Siberian Archipelago. Perhaps he saw icebergs on the horizon, or possibly (from refraction) Bennett Island — so named by De Long in 1881 for the American newspaper publisher, James Gordon Bennett, Jr. This was the genesis of “Sannikov Land”, in search of which Baron Toll and companions lost their lives, as recounted in De Long’s Geographical report of the Crocker Land expedition. Natural History Bulletin 18(1):3-63.


The quality and strength of this anthropological study of the Aleuts lies in the author’s ability to integrate ethnological, archaeological, linguistic and physical information. Laughlin’s perspective is both humanistic and scientific, resulting in a refreshingly vital study of a people. The volume is part of the Case Studies in Cultural Anthropology Series, edited by George and Louise Spindler. The series, in the editors’ words, is designed “to bring . . . insights into the richness and complexity of human life”, particularly for those interested in social sciences. Laughlin addresses this book also to the Aleut people, to scientific researchers, and to government and legal personnel involved with the Aleuts. It demonstrates clearly the anthropological approach to human studies: each sub-discipline contributes to the goal of producing a complete view of the Aleuts and their lifeway. This example of the procedures and results of anthropological research should prove particularly valuable to the student and to northern scholars from other disciplines. Because of its brevity and summary nature, however, Aleuts lacks the technical detail and documentation necessary to the scholar of the particular area and discipline.

The volume opens with a list of “key items in the Aleut information matrix” (p. 1-2), which is in fact a straightforward list of things to keep in mind in understanding the Aleuts. The occasional use of terminology such as “information matrix” is unfortunate because it obscures the presentation of basic and interesting facts. Following this introduction, however, the book is organized into one chapter each on physical anthropology, Aleutian Islands geography and environment, the historic period (which focuses on contact between Aleuts and Russian fur seekers) and language; two chapters on archaeology; and three covering various aspects of Aleut culture. These latter are categorized under hunting, village life and treatment of the dead. The final chapter places today’s Aleuts in the context of the modern world, including organization into native corporations, administration under the Alaskan and United States governments, and adaptation to new village groupings brought about through population decline and resettlement within the Aleutian Island chain.

Those familiar with northern anthropology will immediately recognize Laughlin’s unswerving conviction that today’s Aleuts are the ethnic, physical and linguistic descendants of the people who first occupied the Aleutian area about 8500 years ago. The archaeological sequence of the Aleutians begins with the well-dated unifacial core and blade material from the Anangula Blade site. This sequence continues with evidence from the Anangula Village site which is interpreted as the “transition culture” (p. 70-75) linking the early unifacial lithic material with later, well preserved and documented Aleut archaeological remains. The Chalaka Village site provides remains from the most recent 4000 years of Aleut prehistory.

Cultural and geographic interpretation and numerous radiocarbon dates support this sequence. The ethnic identity of the people responsible for the remains is, however open to interpretation. Extension of the ethnic identity of living peoples into the past is always tempting, yet it can be misleading. Here, the archaeological evidence indicates several shared traits between the Aleuts and the Eskimos of the North Pacific. The ethnohistorical, physical and linguistic evidence in this study lends support to the argument for an 8500-year time depth to Aleut ethnic identity. In this case, there is no question of the course of events, only of the time span of their occurrence. Archaeological evidence from elsewhere on the islands and coasts of the Gulf of Alaska and the Bering Sea may yet indicate that the final divergence between Aleuts and Eskimos occurred well after the first occupations at Anangula, or at least after a significant period since the cultural, physical and linguistic boundaries between them were less clear than they are today. Laughlin’s viewpoint, however, is so strong as to verge on bias.

One strength of the book lies in the careful blending of descriptive material with examples of problem-solving through research. The summation of Aleut prehistory and history (p. 92-95), the description of training children to hunt (p. 128-211), and the historical chapter (“Cossacks”) are particularly vivid examples. In the latter, Laughlin reviews the oral Aleut account of the premeditated massacre of several Russians, then describes the discovery and excavation of 13 skeletons found with Russian artifacts. Osteological study showed that the skeletons were not Aleut. Russian journals provided information about the identity of a