

Nookapingwa (1893-1956)

Nookapingwa¹ was one of the best hunters and most experienced dogsled travellers in northernmost Canada and Greenland during the first half of the 20th century. He played a crucial role in the European exploration of the Queen Elizabeth Islands and northern Greenland, having acted as a guide and hunter for such explorers, scientists and government officials as Donald B. MacMillan, Lauge Koch, officers of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (notably Inspector A.H. Joy and Staff-Sergeant H.W. Stallworthy), Edward Shackleton and David Haig-Thomas. He was instrumental in many of their achievements and sometimes their survival.

Nookapingwa was born in the summer of 1893 in the Thule District of northern Greenland. His father was Akkommodingwa (officially "Akumalinguaq") and his mother was Nivikana. He was married three times, having three children by his first wife, Juliane "Vivi" Hendriksen (marriage dissolved in 1929), none by his second wife, Enilungwa (officially "Inalinnguaq"), and a daughter by Nivikannguaq ("Ninikannguaq"), his third. It is worth noting that "Vivi" was a daughter of the famous interpreter Hans Hendrik (1834-89), who worked for the explorers Kane, Hayes, Hall and Nares.

The first published reference to Nookapingwa is to his hiring by MacMillan at Nerky, now "Neke," a small settlement between Etah and Qânâq, in August 1913. Thus, he became a member of the Crocker Land Expedition, which penetrated the sea ice northwest of the northern tip of Axel Heiberg Island, to King Christian Island in the west, as well as much of Ellesmere Island and northwestern Greenland. He was 20 years old then and showed his prowess by carrying an emergency message 160 km by sled in "two marches." His knowledge of sea ice was phenomenal. For example, in February 1916, when MacMillan's party was halted by newly formed ice, Nookapingwa, before turning in for the night, looked it over by candlelight and declared it to be safe. Even then, MacMillan considered Nookapingwa, his youngest and most active assistant, to be a fine hunter who was "always in at the death." As a hunter, he tended to be independent and always looked for the greatest challenge — e.g., "Nookapingwa preferred to go after the bear rather than join the rest of us in the musk-oxen kill."

In 1921, Nookapingwa joined Lauge Koch's Danish Bicentenary Jubilee Expedition (1920-23). The object of the expedition was to map and collect fossils from northwestern Greenland. Koch's trust in Nookapingwa is shown by the fact that in May 1921 he selected him over his other Eskimo companions to aid with detailed mapping near the northernmost tip of Greenland. Nookapingwa's extraordinary powers of observation were demonstrated when he caught sight of a muskox herd on the opposite side of Brønlund Fiord at an elevation of about 500 m. Koch stated, "They

were so distant that only with the greatest difficulty we were able to distinguish them by the aid of good a Zeiss telescope. . . ." This was a critical sighting too, because the party had nearly run out of food. Nookapingwa's ingenuity as a traveller was demonstrated the next day when he managed to overtake the main group by making a sail for his sled out of a tent, allowing his exhausted dogs to trot merrily behind unharnessed.

Near Morris Jessup Glacier in July 1922, Nookapingwa's dogs and sled fell 6 m into a crevasse. Fortunately, he had jumped back quickly and avoided the fall. Five hours later, he and his companions had recovered the dogs one by one, and then the sled *with* its load of fossils. During this expedition, Nookapingwa accompanied Koch on his crossing of the Greenland Ice Cap.

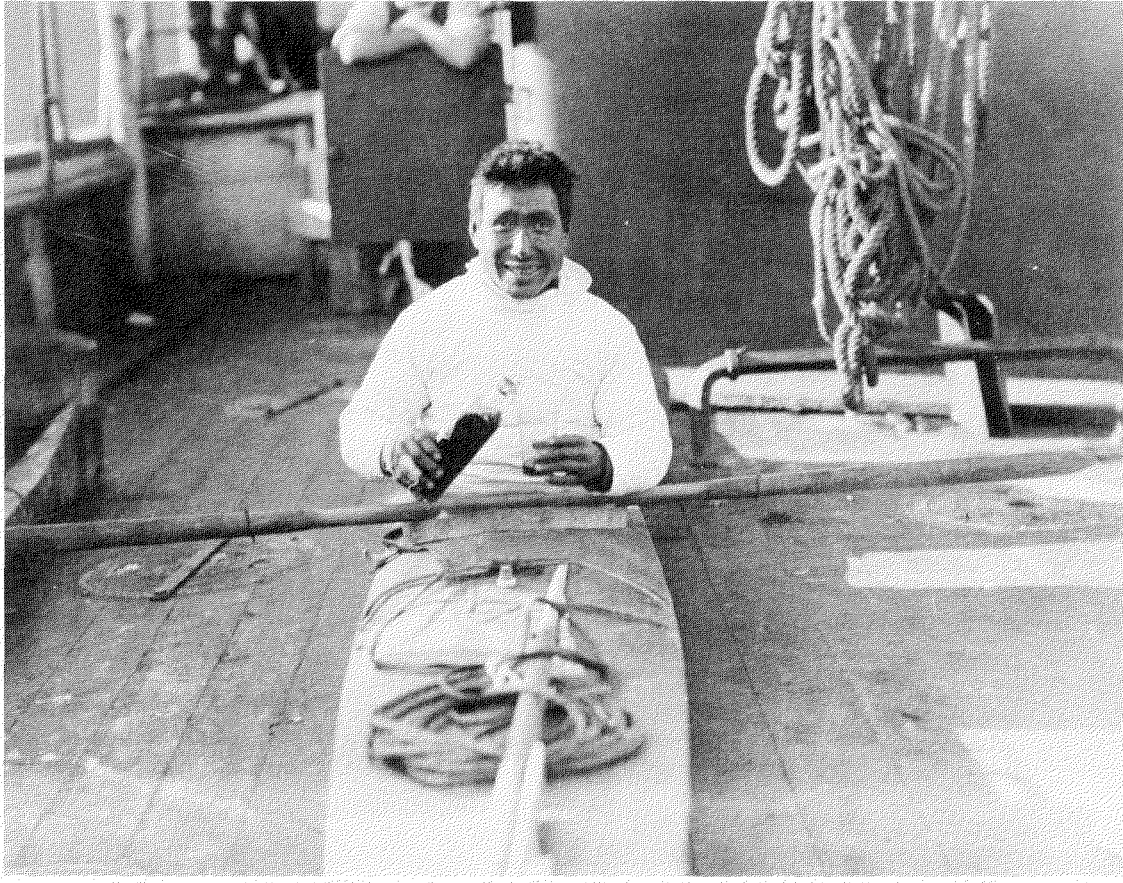
He began working for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in 1925, when he arrived alone at the Bache Peninsula Detachment on Ellesmere Island. The following year he accompanied Staff-Sergeant Joy to Axel Heiberg Island via Jones Sound and the west coast of Ellesmere Island — a sled trip of about 1520 km in 40 days. Joy commended Nookapingwa's "splendid assistance." Soon after, he, Joy and Constable Dersch pioneered the crossing of the Devon Island Ice Cap on a patrol to Dundas Harbour.

An insight into Nookapingwa's daily life at the Bache Peninsula Detachment can be gained by reading the entries in its daily journal for 1926. For example, Nookapingwa and Ahkeoo left on 4 December for the head of Flagler Fiord to hunt. Ahkeoo returned from Flagler Fiord on 7 December, reporting no success in the search for fresh meat. Nookapingwa returned at midnight on 17 December from Bay Fiord, where he killed two muskoxen and was shadowed by a pack of four wolves. In crossing Ellesmere Island alone, he broke his komatik and was compelled to cache the meat and his equipment, returning to the detachment with a makeshift sled about 1 m long!

In 1927, he, Joy, Constable Garnett, Oodee and Ahkeoo travelled more than 2090 km by dogsled to Axel Heiberg Island, after which Joy reported that Nookapingwa was a cheerful and willing worker under difficult circumstances and a "first-class" traveller. The following year he accompanied Constable Anstead and another Eskimo to the islands west of Ellesmere, covering about 1370 km in 40 days. These patrols prepared him for one of the most remarkable arctic sled journeys. In 1929, he accompanied Joy and Constable Taggart from Dundas Harbour on southeastern Devon Island to Winter Harbour on Melville Island, and thence northward and eastward via Edmund Walker, Lougheed, King Christian, Ellef Ringnes, Cornwall and Axel Heiberg islands to Bache Peninsula on the east coast of Ellesmere Island — an epic journey of more than 2740 km (about the distance between Calgary and Sault Ste-Marie). In 1930 and 1931 he made other patrols of approximately 1600 and 1300 km respectively.

About this time, Nookapingwa's father, Akkommodingwa, brought his young wife to Ellesmere Island, where she took a fancy to the younger and more dashing son. The situation became so tense that father and son were not speaking. Finally, H.W. Stallworthy, who was in charge of the Bache Peninsula detachment, managed to resolve the problem tem-

¹This is the spelling most commonly used in published records. Koch (1927) uses "Nugapiinguaq," and Malaurie (1982) uses "Nukapiinguaq." Records in the Department of Ethnography of the National Museum of Denmark give "Nukaggiinguaq." The name means "small nice bachelor." In the 1950s, with other Polar Eskimos, he was given a last name, "Simigaq." ©The Arctic Institute of North America



Nookapingwa about 1934 near Etah, Greenland, when he was a member of the Oxford University Ellesmere Land Expedition. (Lord Shackleton's collection, Scott Polar Research Institute.)

porarily. Akkommodingwa died shortly afterward in 1931, and Nookapingwa formally took Enilungwa as his wife.

Nookapingwa returned to the Thule District from Ellesmere Island in 1933, and Jens Olsen, the priest at Thule, was happy to see him. He was the last Polar Eskimo to be baptized; but despite that, he held a strong belief in the spirit world of his ancestors, being particularly intrigued by dreams and their portent for the future.

In 1934, he moved to Etah as a member of the Oxford Ellesmere Land Expedition (1934-35), being reunited with his former companion on the Kruger Relief Expedition, H.W. Stallworthy, RCMP, who had been seconded to the Oxford expedition. Edward Shackleton, organizer of the expedition, states: "Nookapingwa was a very experienced traveller, and one of the best hunters in North Greenland. . . . [His] chief assets were his knowledge of Lake Hazen, which he had visited on a short excursion from Fort Conger during his journey with Lauge Koch, his ability as a hunter, his self-confidence and his experience with white men." Nookapingwa was an excellent craftsman too, for Shackleton mentions receiving from him a Christmas present of a walrus-ivory paper knife decorated with a polar bear and seal on one side and a walrus on the other. It was carved in exquisite detail with only a penknife.

On 3 April 1935 a party consisting of Nookapingwa, Stallworthy, A.W. Moore and Inutuk set out from Etah for northern Ellesmere Island. Stallworthy mentions that, "Owing to a splendid piece of piloting by Nookapingwa we

crossed [Kennedy Channel] within a few hours. During the whole way across he could see only a few yards ahead, but he never faltered in leading us straight across to Ellesmere Island." After a brief stay at Fort Conger, Nookapingwa and Moore reached the summit of Mount Oxford (82°10'N, 73°10'W) on 1 May, thus achieving the main goal of the expedition — the penetration of Grant Land.

Another expedition, led by David Haig-Thomas, developed from the Oxford Ellesmere Land Expedition. Its highlight was his and Nookapingwa's sled trip in the spring of 1938 from Thule across Ellesmere Island to Cornwall Island and then north, where they discovered new land (now Haig-Thomas Island) near the east coast of Amund Ringnes Island. Both men were excited by the find. Haig-Thomas provides the most perceptive published remarks on Nookapingwa, and he demonstrates how white explorers could be influenced by their Eskimo assistants. For example, he comments on Nookapingwa's proposal to combine their dog teams and use one sled for greater efficiency: "I was very disappointed for I was looking forward to driving my own sledge all the time; but I had tremendous faith in Nookap's experience. He had once sledged 1800 miles in 80 days — probably the finest sledge journey ever made. So I agreed."

Nor was Nookapingwa jaded by these trips. Haig-Thomas states: "Nookap was excited, for once more he was going on a long sledge journey, and there was nothing he loved better." Another comment shows Nookapingwa's natural philosophic bent: "Of course, said Nookap, there is one real

difference between white men and Eskimos. White men always think of ice as frozen water, but Eskimos think of water as melted ice. To us ice is the natural state." Further, he knew a great deal about arctic animals and their habits. He had particular respect for polar bears: "If I only had the brains of a bear I should never go hungry for a little seal meat." Through long experience, he was also deft in treating veterinary problems of sled dogs.

Nookapingwa's "last bow" is recorded by Jean Malaurie about 1950, when near Foulke Fiord, he spotted the silhouette of a man seated on a sled behind his dogs. "I reached the man at last. . . . We shook hands heartily. He was as breathless and as pleased about our meeting as we were. His cheekbones and nose were blackened by frostbite; his eyebrows and lashes were frosty white against a dirty old face alight with laughter. It was Nukapianguaq. . . . Now fifty-seven years old and still vigorous, he had just married for the fourth [third] time. His bride was the charming young Nivikannguaq. . . . He proceeded to give an animated account of how only yesterday he and Maassannguarsuaq had succeeded in killing a large bear near the Crystal Palace we had just left. He was listened to closely. The Thule Eskimos had the greatest admiration for the four families who had settled in Etah, so far north in their country — who indeed lived in the world's northernmost settlement . . . Ultima Thule. . . ." Nookapingwa died in the summer of 1956.

Several geographic features have been named after Nookapingwa: Nookap Island (off the north coast of Devon Island); Mount Nukap (1783 m) and Nukap Glacier (both near the head of Gilman Glacier, northern Ellesmere Island); Nukapingwa Glacier and Nukapingwa River (north of Borup Fiord, northern Ellesmere Island).

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