

William Duval (1858-1931)

Photograph from Kenn Harper collection.

A legend has grown up around the circumstances of the arrival of William Duval, a young whaler, in the Canadian Arctic over 100 years ago. The story has it that, as a young man, Duval, son of a well-to-do family in New York, had become engaged to be married but wanted a year of adventure before settling down. He shipped on a New England whaler to spend a winter in the Arctic. The following summer he returned to the United States to find that his fiancée had married a clergyman in his absence. Despondent, he returned to the Arctic and vowed to remain there.

The facts are only somewhat less romantic. Duval had been born Wilhelm Duval in Germany in 1858. Two years later his parents emigrated with their young family to New York City. At the age of 21, William Duval shipped aboard a whaler for the Arctic; he arrived in Cumberland Sound in the summer of 1879 and remained there for the next four years. He was usually employed as second helmsman aboard the *Lizzie P. Simmonds*, a whaler owned by an American firm, Williams and Company. In 1883 he returned to the United States for a year.

His activities over the next 20 years are little known. In 1884, when he returned north, it was to Williams's whaling station at Spicer Island in Hudson Strait, and the following year he ran Williams's station at Cape Haven. Two years later he was back in Cumberland Sound. When Williams sold out to his rival, Crawford Noble of Aberdeen, Duval went to work for the Scottish concern.

In the Arctic, Duval lived a life not unlike that of the Inuit whom he came to know so intimately. He learned to speak their language fluently, and they gave him an Inuktitut name — Sivutiksaq, the harpooner. He married a native woman, Aullaqiaq. They had at least four children. A daughter, Towkie, was born in 1900 at Blacklead Island and another daughter, Alookie, was born there two years later. Two sons died in childhood.

In 1903 Duval and his family, with other Cumberland Sound Inuit, accompanied the Scottish whaler James Mutch to Pond Inlet to establish the first shore station there for Robert Kinnes's Dundee-based whaling and trading firm. Duval remained in northern Baffin Island until 1907, when he returned to the United States for a winter. The following year he went out again and for the next eight years ran a post for Kinnes at Durban Harbour on the Baffin coast of Davis Strait. In 1916 he joined Henry Toke Munn's Arctic Gold Exploration Syndicate, despite its name a fur-trading company; he and his family accompanied Munn to Southampton Island, where they traded for two years. Duval returned to Cumberland Sound in 1918 and established a post for Munn at Usualuk, the American Harbour of the whalers. He remained there until 1922; in that year he returned to the United States again and spent the winter with relatives in New Jersey.

The following year the Canadian government employed Duval as interpreter for the trial at Pond Inlet of the Inuit charged with the murder of the trader Robert Janes, the first trial in the High Arctic. In interpreting the words of the judge and the verdict of the jury against the three Inuit accused, Duval, a man who had long straddled two immensely different cultures, felt an empathy for the Inuit who could not possibly,

he thought, understand the implications of the proceedings of which they were a part.

Back in Cumberland Sound, Duval rejoined his family. That same year he applied for naturalization as a British subject. The year held many changes for Duval and for the Inuit of Cumberland Sound. In that year, Munn sold his syndicate to the Hudson's Bay Company, which now had a monopoly on trade in the sound. As a condition of its agreement with Munn, the Company gave employment to Duval as manager of the outpost it opened at Usualuk. In 1924 he established a new outpost for the Company at Livingstone Fiord, but it was unsuccessful and closed the following year. Duval's health was poor — he was by then 67 years old — and he returned to New Jersey for another year after the post's closure.

In the latter half of the 1920s, Pangnirtung served as a base for official government scientific activity in southern Baffin Island. Geologists, naturalists, and map-makers explored Cumberland Sound and beyond. Some of them met the old man of Usualuk, whom they rightly recognized as a living store of knowledge on the Inuit and their land. Maurice Haycock, a geologist, was made welcome in the Duval home, as was Dewey Soper, who had first met Duval aboard the *CGS Arctic* in 1923. The Duval home was laid out in the traditional manner of an Inuit dwelling so that Aullaqiaq, by then totally blind, could more easily perform household duties. Duval, pleased to have the company of English-speaking visitors, would open his home to these guests and chat long into the night on those rare occasions when scientists like Haycock or Soper stopped by. In failing health, he was, nonetheless, a man content, devoted to his wife and family, and expressing no regrets about the unusual life he had chosen to live.

William Duval died at Usualuk on 8 June 1931. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police went there to take his body to Pangnirtung for burial, but Duval's son-in-law, Akpialialuk, objected; it had been the old man's wish to be buried in the shadow of the mountain at Usualuk, and Akpialialuk buried him there. Another mountain, however, bears his name. Mount Duval, rising 900 metres behind the community of Pangnirtung, had already, during his lifetime, been named in his honour by his naturalist friend Dewey Soper.

William Duval chose to make the Arctic his home. A man living in two realities, he helped those of both his native and his chosen cultures to understand each other's worlds. Recorded history has had little to say about William Duval, but elderly Inuit of Baffin Island, especially those of Pangnirtung, where many of his descendants live today, remember Sivutiksaq with warmth and admiration.

Kenn Harper
Arctic Bay, N.W.T., Canada
X0A 0A0