

Diamond Jenness (1886-1969)



Photo courtesy of National Museums of Canada.

In the spring of 1913 Diamond Jenness, a young New Zealand-born anthropologist, was invited to participate in a four-year scientific expedition to the Canadian Arctic. He accepted, and so began an illustrious 65-year career devoted to the study of Canada's native peoples. Diamond Jenness — ethnologist, linguist, archaeologist, musicologist, and physical anthropologist — ranks among the prominent Canadian social scientists of this century.

Born on 10 February 1886 in Wellington, Jenness attended local schools and colleges, graduating from the University of Wellington in 1908 with First Class Honours in Classics. Upon graduation he entered Balliol College, Oxford, where he planned to continue reading in Classics. However, a friendship struck with Marius Barbeau (later to become a celebrated Canadian folklorist) sparked Jenness's interest in anthropology, an interest that ultimately led to a Diploma in Anthropology in 1911 and an Oxford M.A. five years later.

Jenness quickly found his curiosity about anthropology blossoming into a vocation. In 1911 he was appointed Oxford Scholar to Papua, New Guinea, where he spent twelve months studying the Northern Entrecasteaux. Upon his return to New Zealand, he was asked to join the Canadian Arctic Expedition, an ambitious government-funded scientific enterprise under the direction of the well-known arctic explorers Vilhjalmur Stefansson and R.M. Anderson. In June, 1913, Jenness found himself aboard the refitted whaling vessel *Karluk* steaming northward to the Bering Strait and beyond to the Beaufort Sea.

The voyage of the *Karluk* was destined to be a tragic one. In the autumn of 1913, the small vessel became locked in the sea ice off the northern coast of Alaska. Unable to free itself, the ship drifted helplessly westward towards the Siberian Sea, where it was finally crushed in the ice off Wrangel Island. Eight men perished in their bid to reach the mainland. By a stroke of fortune, Jenness was not aboard the *Karluk* when she drifted off; he, Stefansson, and several others had left the ship earlier on a routine hunting trip. Abandoning the hopeless task of searching for the *Karluk*, which was lost to sight when they returned, the hunting party headed for Barrow, Alaska to rendezvous with the remaining two vessels of the expedition, the *Alaska* and the *Mary Sachs*.

Jenness spent his first arctic winter at Harrison Bay, Alaska, where he learned to speak Inuktitut, gathered information about Western Eskimo customs and folklore, and experienced at first-hand the precarious existence of the northern hunter. In the spring of 1914, he set out along the coast to the expedition's base camp at Bernard Harbour in the Coronation Gulf region. Here he engaged in one of the most important goals of the Canadian Arctic Expedition — the study of the Copper Eskimos of Victoria Island, a people first brought to the attention of the "civilized world" by Stefansson only four years earlier.

When Jenness arrived in the Coronation Gulf region, only a handful of Europeans had visited the land of the Copper Eskimo. Merchants had only just begun to ply their trade in the area, and the missionaries and Northwest Mounted Police were yet to arrive. As a consequence, the Copper Eskimo remained largely unaffected by contact with the outside world. Jenness, therefore, was charged with recording a virtually pristine aboriginal way of life that would change radically within a generation.

Jenness spent two years with these Central Eskimo people, living for one year as the adopted son of the hunter Ikpuhuak and his shaman wife Higalik. During that time he hunted and traveled with his "family", sharing both their festivities and their famine. The monographs and publications that resulted

from this field work have been recognized by scholars as "the most comprehensive description of a single Eskimo tribe ever written."

After serving with the Canadian Expeditionary Force in France during World War I, Jenness returned to Canada to marry Frances Ellen Bleakney and to take up a position with the National Museum of Canada. He continued to write up his research from the Canadian Arctic Expedition and also conducted several "salvage ethnology" programs among the Sarcee, Carrier, Sekani, Ojibway, and Coast Salish Indians — groups thought at the time to be doomed to cultural extinction. *The Indians of Canada*, the partial fruit of this labour, is still considered the definitive work on the aboriginal peoples of Canada.

During his tenure with the National Museum, Jenness published two seminal articles on northern archaeology. The first paper identified a new prehistoric culture in the eastern Arctic — the Dorset Culture — which Jenness believed to have preceded the Thule Culture (the ancestors of the contemporary Inuit) by a millenium or more. The second paper hypothesized the Old Bering Sea Culture of the Bering Strait area, a complex which Jenness believed not only preceded the Thule Culture in the western Arctic but which was ancestral to it. Considered radical at the time of their publication, these theories are now widely accepted, having been vindicated by carbon-14 dating and subsequent field research.

Jenness's interest in the Arctic never waned. As late as 1968 he was still articulating his concern for the Inuit struggle to survive. Among his last works was a series of five volumes published by The Arctic Institute of North America that reviewed government policies toward the Inuit of Alaska, Canada, and Greenland.

Numerous universities awarded Diamond Jenness honorary doctorate degrees during his lifetime. He was also named a Fellow of such societies as the Royal Society of Canada, the Royal Danish Geographical Society, and The Arctic Institute of North America. In 1962 the Royal Canadian Geographical Society awarded him its highest accolade, the Massey Medal. His most prestigious laurels, however, were granted posthumously, four months after his death: in March 1970, Diamond Jenness's adopted country presented his widow with the Companion of the Order of Canada Medallion.

FURTHER READINGS

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