

George Weetaltuk (ca. 1862-1956)



George Weetaltuk in 1954, aged 93 years. Courtesy of Fred Bruemmer. Neg. no. CA4.

The historic Inuit occupation of the James Bay region is largely associated with the name of one man, George Weetaltuk. This Inuit leader was a respected Hudson's Bay Company pilot, boat builder, and artist, as well as patriarch of the Cape Hope Island Inuit community. His reputation and accomplishments are attested to in various written sources, and his many drawings comprise the earliest extensive collection of Canadian Inuit graphic art.

One of the earliest and most widely reproduced of Weetaltuk's sketches is his 1910 map of the (then unknown to map-makers) Belcher Islands archipelago in Hudson Bay. This remarkable map, drawn about twenty years after Weetaltuk had left the Belcher Islands to live in James Bay, led Robert Flaherty to search for and subsequently explore the Belcher Islands during the years 1914 - 1916. Indeed, Weetaltuk's map is a more complete and accurate representation of the archipelago than the map Flaherty published in 1918, which clearly is based heavily on Weetaltuk's chart. Both maps have been reproduced in standard cartography and geography texts to illustrate the extraordinary map-making skills of the Inuit.

Such detailed and extensive geographic knowledge (the archipelago is a maze of islands with deeply indented coastlines, covering an area of over 8000 km²) doubtless served him well during the years when he acted as pilot on the Hudson's Bay Company's ships entering James Bay. This employment resulted in his moving in 1892 with his family to Charlton Island, at that time the northern terminal for the Company's transatlantic sailing fleet serving the James Bay posts. In 1933 the railway to Moosonee was completed, however, and Charlton Island was no longer the northern terminal and transshipment point for the James Bay fur trade. Weetaltuk then moved his family to Cape Hope Island, and by 1935 a thriving community of eight families was permanently established. A granddaughter, recalling those days, has written:

On Cape Hope Island he was the leader of his people...He chose where the seasons would be spent. He performed the church services, did baptisms and burials and divided the animals that were killed. When freeze-up came he was the first to test the ice to see if it was safe to travel. His supply of *qallunaat* goods — sugar, tea and flour — was always plentiful...His house was the centre of every activity: dances, church and feasting. He lacked no equipment of any sort... (Freeman, 1978:70).

Between 1930 and 1950 Weetaltuk gained fame as a canoe and boat builder. He had constructed a sawmill and a steamer on the island for shaping wood, and there he built the renowned Cape Hope Island canoes, which are still being made today in Poste de la Baleine, Québec, by his descendants. However, especially noteworthy were the three large, masted boats he built; the largest, the *Carwyn*, was over 50 feet long and was built in 1944 when Weetaltuk was more than 80 years

old. The first large boat he built was resold by the Hudson's Bay Company to the Roman Catholic missions, who renamed it *Notre Dame de l'Esperance*, and under that name it sailed the East Main and Labrador coasts for many years. Weetaltuk, though an excellent draughtsman, did not build his boats from plans. He did, however, make a wooden model from which he developed the *Carwyn*. Apparently his model-making skills were well known, for it is reported that he made an exact replica of the Hudson's Bay Company vessel *Discovery* from memory, many years after it had been scrapped.

Weetaltuk's woodworking skills resulted in the arrival of many orders for handmade furniture, from cities and towns all over Canada and the United States. The Anglican churches at Old Factory, Québec, and Moose Factory, Ontario, commissioned him to carve their ornate bishop's chairs.

The Cape Hope Island community consisted, for the most part, of Weetaltuk's descendants, and was the most southerly Inuit community in Canada until its relocation in 1960. The community enjoyed harmonious relations with adjacent James Bay Cree communities, and all the Inuit spoke Cree (several spoke French and English too).

Mentally active and still spry at the time of his death, Weetaltuk had outlived three wives. There are now about thirty grandchildren and more than sixty great-grandchildren alive, and as befits their adventurous forebear, they are scattered from Resolute Bay and Baffin Island to Yellowknife, and throughout Nouveau-Québec.

The largest bay in the Belcher Island archipelago, Wetaltok Bay, commemorates George Weetaltuk's role in the early explorations and mapping of this region of Hudson Bay.

FURTHER READINGS

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