

# Historical Records and Relics from the North Greenland Coast

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**ABSTRACT.** The recent recovery of nine historical records and associated relics on the rarely visited northern coast of Greenland is reported. The material comes from five late nineteenth and early twentieth century arctic expeditions to the Robeson Channel area. Pages from two records are reproduced in facsimile.

**RÉSUMÉ.** *Documents et historiques de la côte nord du Groënland.* L'auteur rapporte la découverte récente, sur la côte peu fréquentée du nord du Groënland, de neuf documents historiques et de vestiges qui leur sont associés. Le matériel provient de cinq expéditions arctiques de la fin du 19<sup>e</sup> siècle et du début du 20<sup>e</sup>, dans la région du chenal de Robeson. On a reproduit en facsimilé des pages de deux de ces documents.

**РЕЗЮМЕ.** *Исторические отчеты и предметы с берега Северной Гренландии.* Сообщение о девяти исторических отчетах и относящихся к ним предметах, найденных недавно на редко посещаемом северном берегу Гренландии. Материалы принадлежат пяти арктическим экспедициям, конца 19-го и начала 20-го века, к району канала Робсона. Страницы двух отчетов воспроизведены в факсимиле.

## INTRODUCTION

During geological reconnaissance mapping for the Geological Survey of Greenland in the summer of 1966, the author, accompanied by Steen Skytte, recovered historical records and relics on the rarely visited northern coast of Greenland. The investigations formed the Danish part of "Operation Grant Land," organized by the Geological Survey of Canada and led by Dr. R. L. Christie.

In all, nine records were recovered from six localities. The oldest is an 1876 copy of a record from 1871, the youngest dates from 1921. Seven were immediately readable in the field. The remaining two, both dating from 1917, are fragile and have been unrolled by the Arnamagnæansk Institut, Copenhagen. They are now partly readable. Interesting among the relics recovered are the leather belt and knife belonging to Lieut. L. A. Beaumont of the British Arctic Expedition of 1875-76. These were abandoned by Beaumont during the heroic retreat along the coast of North Greenland in the summer of 1876.

## EXPLORATION HISTORY

The Robeson Channel, known also as Nares Strait, was the scene in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries of expeditions whose aims were both scientific and geographical discovery, as well as the conquest of the North Pole. First to enter the Channel was the United States North

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Polar Expedition of 1871-73 in the U.S.S. *Polaris*, under the command of Captain C. F. Hall. Hall named the Channel after G. M. Robeson, Secretary of the United States Navy, who had despatched the expedition. Hall was followed by the British Arctic Expedition of 1875-76, under the command of Captain George S. Nares in H.M.S. *Discovery* and H.M.S. *Alert*; the United States Lady Franklin Bay Expedition 1881-84, under Lieut. A. W. Greely; R. E. Peary's Arctic Expeditions 1898-1902, 1905-6, and 1908-9; the Danish 2nd Thule Expedition 1916-18, under the leadership of Knud Rasmussen; and the Danish Bicentenary Jubilee Expedition 1920-23, led by Lauge Koch. Sledge parties from all these expeditions travelled along parts of the North Greenland coast.

#### RECORDS AND RELICS FROM FIVE EXPEDITIONS

##### *United States North Polar Expedition 1871-73*

A copy of a report dated "October 20th, 1871" written by Capt. C. F. Hall was recovered in fair condition from a cairn site near Cape Brevoort, northwest Nyeboe Land (Fig. 1). The report, addressed to Geo. M. Robeson, Secretary of the United States Navy, was copied by Dr. R. W. Copping in May 1876.

Hall left the original report after a sledge journey across Hall Land to mark the position of his northernmost camp after failing to discover a suitable overland route to the North Pole. The cairn marks the northern-

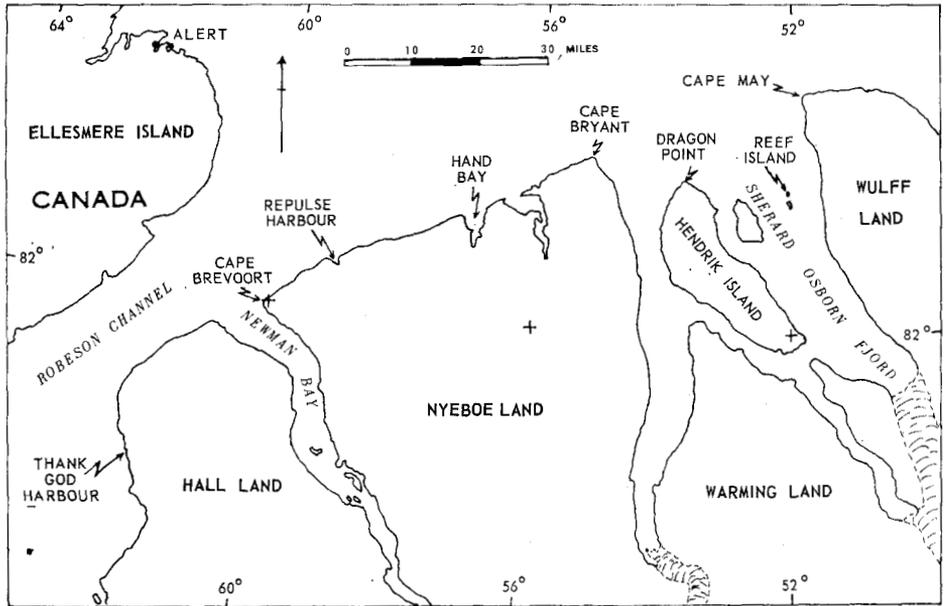


FIG. 1. Toponymic map of the part of North Greenland where historical records were recovered in 1966.



FIG. 2. Marker stone of Capt. C. F. Hall's "farthest north" cairn near Cape Brevoort. "10 FEET E," engraved in October 1871, indicates the position of the buried metal cylinder containing the 90-year-old copy of Hall's report. Note the lichen growth over figure "1". 23 June 1966.

most point in the world attained on land at that time. The engraved stone (Fig. 2) and wooden board indicating the position of the buried metal cylinder containing the report are still in position. The cairn report proved to be Capt. Hall's last, since he died on returning to the winter quarters of the U.S.S. *Polaris* at Thank God Harbour (Davis 1876).

Hall's grave at Thank God Harbour is in good condition. The brass tablet placed on the grave by the British Arctic Expedition of 1875-76 in memory of Capt. Hall stands erect at the foot of the grave. The original headboard of pine wood engraved in July 1872 by Mr. Chester, first mate of the *Polaris*, was discovered half-buried face down in the vicinity of the grave. A cairn adjoining the grave has collapsed. The observatory built in 1871 by the crew of the *Polaris* is in ruins.

#### *British Arctic Expedition 1875-76*

In addition to Coppinger's copy of Hall's report referred to above, two cairn records from the British Arctic Expedition were recovered. A report

Reef Island May 22<sup>nd</sup> 1876

Lat 82. 15' N Long 49° 20' W  
(atp)

The Sledge "Sir Edward Parry" and party, commanded by Lieut Beaumont of HMS "Discovery" forming part of the Arctic Expedition of 1875; visited this island on the above date, for the purpose of leaving this record. The party passed the islands on 18<sup>th</sup> inst. on their way to the east shore of these straits, intending to round the North point of that land, but owing to the depth and softness of the snow, they were unable to reach the shore, before the time had arrived for turning back. They waited for two days in hopes of being able to ascend the mountain above the glacier, but thick and foggy weather, has prevailed for the last 4 days. According to orders ~~the skeleton~~ this record is left at the furthest land reached, but the skeleton chart, and another record is left at Dragon Point, bearing from this cairn.

The "Alert" and "Discovery" forming the Expedition, arrived at Bellot Harbour in Grant's Land Lat 81. 44' N Long 65. 3' W where the latter ship wintered. The Alert proceeded to the Northward, and went into winter quarters, off the coast of Grant's Land inside a barrier of

\* on the 26<sup>th</sup> August 1875

FIG. 3. The first page of Lieut. L. A. Beaumont's cairn report of 1876, recovered from Reef Island.

dated "10th May 1876" written by Dr. R. W. Coppinger, a surgeon of the expedition, was found in the same metal cylinder as the copy of Hall's report. It describes a journey from northern Nyeboe Land overland to Newman Bay with "H.M. Sledges 'Stephenson' and 'Alert'" after supporting Lieut. L. A. Beaumont on his north coast journey. The report is in good condition, written in pencil on blue paper.

The second record, written by Lieut. L. A. Beaumont and dated "May 22nd 1876," was recovered from a tall, well-built cairn on the northern point of Reef Island in Sherard Osborn Fjord. The record, found in a strong metal cylinder, is in excellent condition showing little effect from its ninety years in the Arctic. The first page of the report is reproduced in Fig. 3.

Beaumont deposited the record, in accordance with orders, on the farthest land reached northeastwards along the coast of North Greenland. The return to H.M.S. *Discovery*, anchored across the Robeson Channel in Discovery Harbour, Ellesmere Island, was a retreat of sick men reduced by scurvy to a "wretched cluster" crawling in the snow. At Repulse Harbour on 13 June, only Beaumont himself and a seaman named Gray

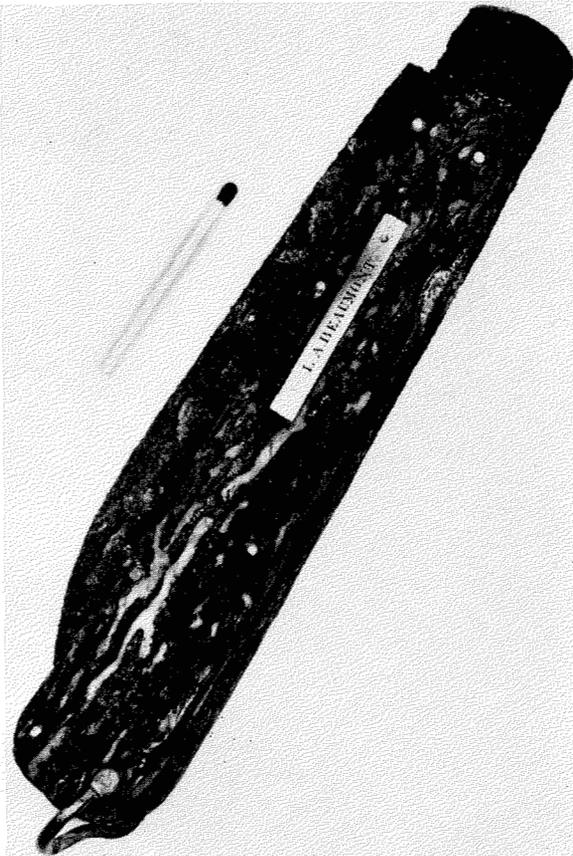


FIG. 4. Lieut. L. A. Beaumont's knife found at Repulse Harbour. Beaumont abandoned this during the heroic retreat along the Greenland coast in 1876. Length of knife is  $7\frac{1}{2}$  inches.

were able to pull the sledge, and since the helpless had to be hauled on the sledge everything except the absolutely essential was abandoned (Nares 1878). The party were saved from certain death by the arrival of relief sledges. However, two of the original party, seamen J. J. Hand and C. W. Paul, died and were buried at Thank God Harbour. These graves were found to be in good condition. The engraved slates on the graves are broken but partly readable.

Some of the equipment abandoned by Beaumont was recovered at Repulse Harbour. This includes a brass stove, Beaumont's leather belt (by J. Starkey and Co., 23, Conduit Street, Regent Street, London), his knife, inscribed "L. A. Beaumont" (Fig. 4), measuring scales, an ice saw, pieces of clothing, nails, parts of a sledge, and an astronomical almanac for use in the years 1865-75. The abandonment of this material accentuates the desperate plight of the party — Beaumont considered his own belt a hazardous weight to carry.

#### *United States Lady Franklin Bay Expedition 1881-84*

Two records were recovered from this expedition, both from the "attainment of the farthest north" in 1882 by Lieut. J. B. Lockwood, Sergt. D. L. Brainard, and the Eskimo, Frederick Christianson. The better preserved of the two records was recovered from a collapsed cairn at Cape Bryant, northeast Nyeboe Land. This record, written in ink on thick white paper and contained in a metal cylinder, relates the progress of the Lady Franklin Bay Expedition up to the time of Lockwood's departure from the winter quarters of Fort Conger in Canada on 3 April 1882. The report is signed by Lieut. A. W. Greely, leader of the expedition. On arriving at Cape Bryant on 27 April, Lockwood added a small report to that of Greely's, relating the progress of his sledge party up to Cape Bryant. Lockwood then left Cape Bryant accompanied by Brainard and Christianson for "lands unknown" northeastwards along the Greenland coast and reached a new farthest point north at  $83^{\circ}24'N$ . He returned to Cape Bryant on 24 May and added on the reverse side of the report a brief description of the coast between Cape Bryant and Cape Washington, remarking that during the journey the party were troubled by snow blindness. Parts of sledges, provision boxes, and rifle shells were scattered in the vicinity of the collapsed cairn.

The second record was recovered from a tall cairn on the west coast of Nyeboe Land, four miles southeast of Cape Brevoort. It was deposited by Lieut. Lockwood after he had left Cape Bryant and had travelled overland from Repulse Harbour following the route taken by Beaumont six years earlier. The record was situated between two slabs of sandstone and is in poor condition. The date, 1882, and part of the message are decipherable.

Lockwood and Christianson were two of the nineteen men who perished during the expedition's disastrous retreat southward in 1883-84 after relief ships had failed to arrive. Brainard, the third member of the party to attain

the "farthest north," and Greely were two of the six who survived (Greely 1886).

#### *Danish 2nd Thule Expedition 1916-18*

Three records written by Knud Rasmussen were recovered at Dragon Point, the northern point of Hendrik Island. Two of the records are in fragile condition, but the third, a report of five pages, is excellently preserved. This latter report, enclosed in a metal cylinder, was recovered from a cairn built by Lieut. Beaumont in 1876. The report is written in pencil on white ruled and paginated paper and is dated 24 May 1917. The report describes the progress and condition of the expedition up to this date and was written on returning from the investigation of Sherard Osborn Fjord before the journey northeastwards to Peary Land. In a postscript to the report, Knud Rasmussen pays tribute to Beaumont, who forty years earlier had travelled over the same difficult terrain without the help of skis and dogs. The last page of the report is reproduced in Fig. 5.

The other two records have been unrolled and conserved by the Arnsmagnæansk Institut and are now partly readable. One report, dated 15 July 1917, was found between two stones of a tent ring at the campsite of the expedition at Dragon Point. The report is in pencil on a single page of white ruled paper; it was written at Cape May two days before the expedition arrived at Dragon Point. The other report, dated 20 July 1917, was recovered from a badly rusted metal cylinder in the same cairn as the excellently preserved report. This report is four pages in length and is written in pencil on white paper. It contains a description of the journey to western Peary Land with brief mention of the ethnographical, cartographical, geological, botanical, and zoological investigations. It was written by Knud Rasmussen just before the expedition left Dragon Point to begin the return journey to Thule across the Inland Ice. At the campsite were found remains of sledges, wooden boxes, petroleum cans, a saw, pieces of rope, and an Eskimo lamp hammered from a brass plate.

During the return journey to Thule, the expedition lost two of its seven members; the Danish Greenlander, Hendrik Olsen, disappeared on a hunting excursion on the island which now bears his name, whereas the Swedish botanist, Dr. Thorild Wulff, became exhausted during the crossing of the Inland Ice (Rasmussen 1928).

#### *Danish Bicentenary Jubilee Expedition 1920-23*

This expedition, named to commemorate Hans Egede's recolonization of Greenland, completed the mapping of the north coast; and the only portion of the Greenland coast not travelled by a Dane at that time, i.e., the northern coast of Peary Land, was traversed (Koch 1927).

One record written by Lauge Koch was recovered from a green bottle in Beaumont's massive cairn at Repulse Harbour (Fig. 6). The cairn was visited in 1882 by Lockwood, who removed Beaumont's reports, in 1900

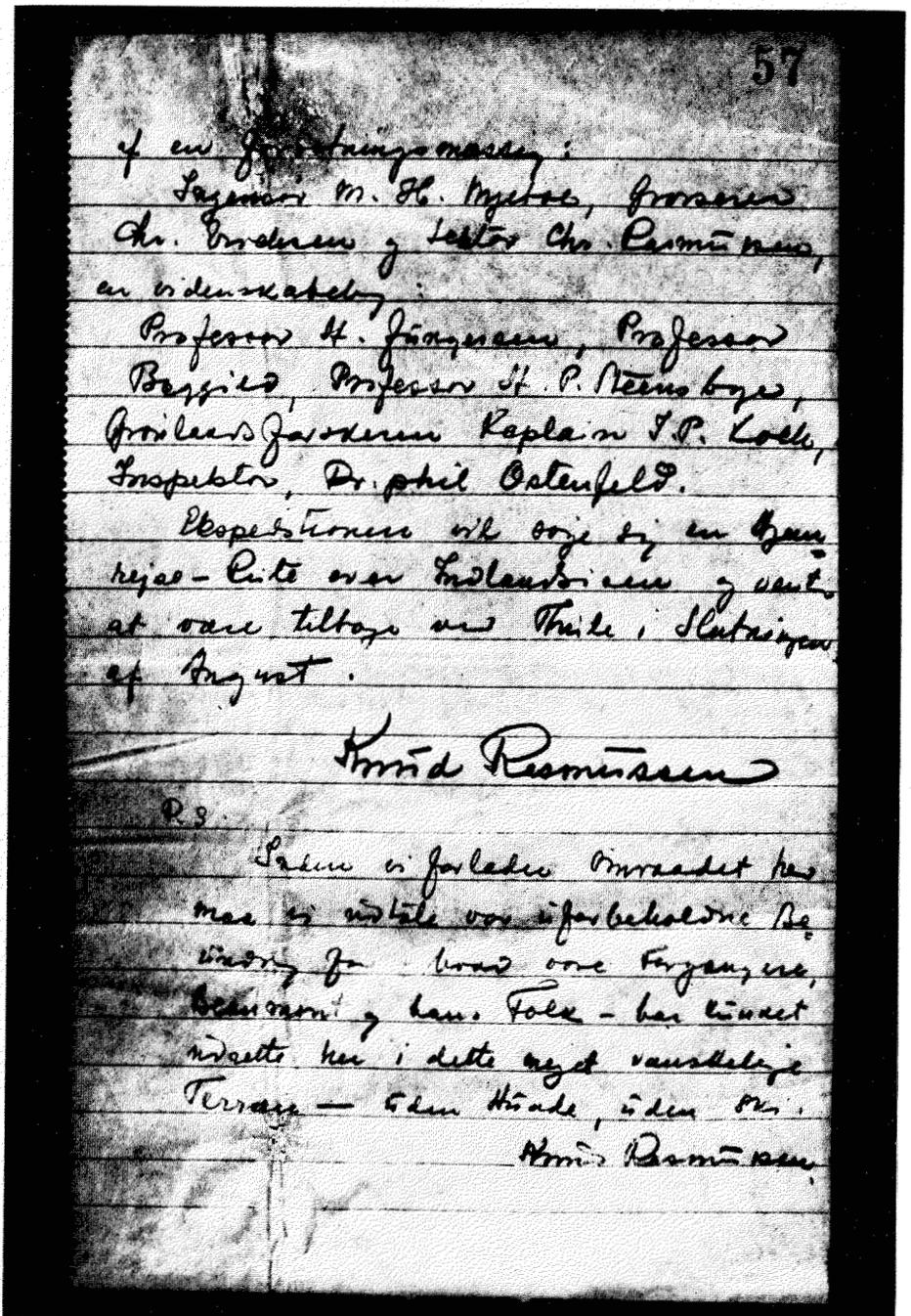


FIG. 5. The last page of Knud Rasmussen's 1917 report, recovered from Beaumont's cairn at Dragon Point, Hendrik Island.



FIG. 6. The massive cairn at Repulse Harbour from which Lauge Koch's 1921 report was recovered. Ellesmere Island is visible in the distance. 11 August 1966.

by Peary, who removed Lockwood's reports, in 1917 by Knud Rasmussen, who removed Peary's report, and then four years later by Lauge Koch. Koch's record from 21 April 1921, written in pencil on white paper, is in good condition. It records the events of the expedition from headquarters at Robertson Bay in Inglefield Land via Fort Conger in Canada to Nyeboe Land, as the first part of Koch's journey around the northern part of Greenland into Independence Fjord and back over the Inland Ice.

#### FINAL COMMENTS

All the records recovered refer to journeys carried out by sledge parties which, in part, were travelling in unknown terrain. In chronological order, the records depict stages in the mapping and exploration of this part of North Greenland.

Hall's 1871 report was written at a new world's farthest north position on land at 82°N. His expedition mapped Hall Land, parts of Washington Land, and a part of western Nyeboe Land. Beaumont's and Coppinger's reports from 1876 refer to the journey past Hall's position during which the outer coastline from western Nyeboe Land to Wulff Land was mapped. Lockwood's and Greely's reports from 1882 refer to the attainment of the world's "farthest north," passing Beaumont's farthest position along the Greenland coast. Lockwood mapped the main features of the outer coastline from Wulff Land to 83°24'N. Lockwood's "farthest north" was passed by Peary in 1900 during his journey to Cape Wyckoff in northeast Peary Land — a journey which determined the most northerly land in the world at Cape Morris Jesup, the northern point of Greenland. Knud Rasmussen's reports from 1917 refer to the investigations of the inner parts of the fjords passed by Beaumont, by Lockwood, and also by Peary in their quests for the "farthest north." Lauge Koch's report from 1921 comes from his historic journey around the north of Greenland which surpassed in distance the earlier expeditions and which resulted in the investigations of the fjords of northern and southern Peary Land.

The finding of such records and relics is of general and historic interest as this portion of Greenland is the only stretch of coast of the world's largest island not traversed in recent years. The last Danish visitors were the sledge expeditions led by Knud Rasmussen and Lauge Koch over forty-five years ago. In the last two decades, travel and associated scientific surveys in this part of the high Arctic have evolved from man's sole reliance on sledge transport equipped in the old style to airplane and helicopter support. As the remaining parts of North Greenland are opened up by modern air transport, it is fitting to acknowledge the courage and efforts of the earlier arctic travellers, and as the last cairn reports of a past epoch of exploration are discovered in their arctic caches, the physical exertion and drive that carried the sledges so far should not be forgotten. Beumont's cairn from 1876 marking his farthest point along the North Greenland coast stands proudly erect on the northern point of Reef Island facing the North Pole; his message, written when he realized the exacting task of reaching safety with his party, has lain undisturbed for ninety years — his cairn should stand to outlive the aircraft that break the silence round it.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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