

NORTHERN NEWS

The Kayakers of Igdlorssuit*

"Dr. H. I. Drever, of the University, will spend a lonely summer in an open boat with an outboard motor in the waters around northern Greenland."

From this statement in a local paper it would certainly seem that I went this time to Greenland alone. Alone I was indeed, if not in the sense implied, and I travelled far in knowledge of the profoundly interesting geology of Ubekendt Ejland. I travelled further, I think, in understanding the people who stay here in a village called Igdlorssuit.† It is of them I should like to try to write on this occasion.

From the villagers' point of view I arrived last summer right out of the blue. I was welcomed as a sort of beneficent uncle who was known (like the men who came with me) to have a special talent for doing incomprehensible and sometimes difficult things, and getting away with it. No doubt it was a surprise to find I was alone this time, but the sight of the usual supply of strong scotch ale immediately dispelled the initial impression that I must have come down in the world.

In circumstances such as those in which I found myself, a European has many advantages — in background, experience, much higher living standards, comparative wealth, and so on. Willingly or unwillingly he inevitably becomes

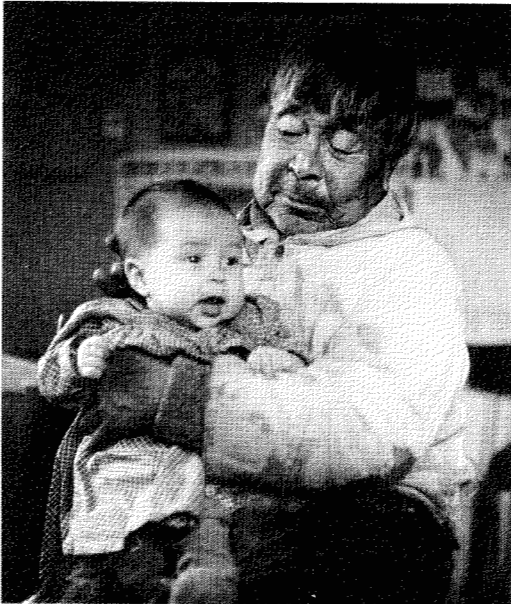
* Reprinted by permission from the *Alumnus Chronicle*, University of St. Andrews, St. Andrews, Fife, Scotland.

† Eskimo settlement on Ubekendt Ejland (Unknown Island), a small island in Umanak Fjord, north of Disko Island, on the west coast of Greenland, where the author worked intermittently from 1938 to 1957.

a big fish in a little pool. If he realises this, and also that the little fish are more than a little sensitive about what appears to be their relative stature, he will enjoy their abundant sociability and discover in time that some of them on any reckoning are men and women of very real calibre.

As soon as possible I think he should make it quite clear that he respects native integrity both in the Greenlanders and in himself and that he is unimpressed by cheap imitations. The loss of native integrity that one meets so often in many parts of Greenland is perhaps, as it is in our colonies, the saddest feature. It is just as pathetic to see a Greenlander trying to be a European as it would be to see a European try to be a Greenlander. There is doubtless nothing new about this attitude toward ethnological and cultural realities. I can at least confirm from my own experience that once my attitude was clearly defined, it was understood and appreciated.

During two summer months only a fraction of an inch of rain fell and the sky was full of colour day and night. The sun swung round and round and never set, successively burnishing all sides of the mountains, glaciers and icebergs, and continuously illuminating the sea. Toward this sea all houses are turned and over it many eyes are constantly scanning and watching. Its life at one time fully sustained the life of the village in natural rhythm and equilibrium. Now the villagers partly depend for their welfare on Danish social and economic services and could neither continue to exist without these nor would wish to if they could. Their economy is still to a very large extent based on seal-hunting in kayaks during the summer



Young Greenlanders and their Eskimo grandfather; who, at 79, was the oldest villager in Igdlorssuit when the pictures were taken in 1957.

and dog-sledges in spring. The art of kayaking has been mastered by very few Europeans, the most notable being the British explorer, Gino Watkins.

When I was a student, Watkins represented to me a far more significant figure than any professor, apart from my father. There seemed to be many professors but only one Watkins. Although later on I found that I was a curable romantic my respect for him remained. It is now twenty years since an Eskimo from Thule first lent me his kayak and jammed me into it, and all I can remember of this ordeal is that I was very much relieved that I did not overturn and very glad to get out. The next summer, having spent some of my time in Igdlorssuit practising the management of a kayak, I discovered among other things that it could be used quite effectively for geological reconnaissance work on coastal cliffs. After a foolhardy journey of eighteen miles alone had nearly cost me my life, I decided to learn how to right myself after overturning. This I was able to do the following winter in St. Andrews harbour in a kayak I had brought home from Igdlorssuit. But I



have never mastered the technique of seal-hunting.

The Greenland kayak, although very manoeuvrable and efficient, is at the same time so absurdly small and frail that to chase a seal in it seems almost an impertinence. The contempt that no doubt the seal must feel on seeing a kayak usually coincides with the swift arrival of a harpoon thrown with unerring accuracy at the base of its neck. But that is not always the end of the hunt; it is sometimes the end of the hunter. Very few families in Igdlorssuit have not lost a father, a brother or a son by drowning during a seal's last frantic fight for its life.

Were you to imagine yourself sitting beside my camp about nine o'clock one morning you would see first one kayaker (Enoch) move out from the far end of the village over the clear bluish-green sea. Then quickly in succession two from the centre (Otto and Algot) and another near you (Tobias). Five minutes later the minister carries down to the shore the new kayak he completed last night. They all fan out and diminish rapidly to distant dots and disappear in the direction of the mountains, glaciers and great masses of ice at the entrance to one of the fiords that lead to the ice cap. Two other hunters have set off earlier.

The rest of the village activities continue throughout the day. The shark lines have to be visited in the small home-made dories or in larger boats up to 16 or 17 feet long bought from the Danish Trading Company. The children catch cod in the bay. The geologist roars off in a 14-foot long, outboard-powered, dinghy with two assistants. They are happy to be with him so long as it is reasonably remunerative and adventurous. Seals are very scarce within twelve miles from the village on most summer days and the surer income is attractive.

About five o'clock one kayaker is located through a telescope and the way he is paddling interpreted without hesitation. He has a seal, but fully half an hour will elapse before his identity can be established. Then another is seen with no seal. By the time he reaches home he may have travelled between

thirty and forty miles. Suddenly two kayaks are spotted near the shore north of the bay, moving very slowly. This means no more or less than a big bladder-nose seal as long as the kayak, heavy and dangerous, but with a £5 skin and plenty of good meat. Luckily another kayaker has been near enough to help bring it back. Four huskies are despatched along the two miles of sandy beach. They know their job and soon come trotting back gaily dragging the two kayaks and the seal behind them. The successful kayaker — it is Ludwig — strolls nonchalantly, with hands in his pockets, alongside; the other, still in his kayak, steers. This is a grandstand finish with the villagers watching at their doors, silently acclaiming it. Not until nine o'clock is the minister seen moving slowly homeward in the slanting sunlight. By this time the villagers have eaten as much as they want of seal meat: some of it raw, as they have no other source of vitamin A. The geologist and his two assistants have eaten their share and will get more from the minister tomorrow. There is no payment.

The minister, a Greenlander and one of the ablest translators of Danish into Eskimo in north-west Greenland, helped me organise a Sunday afternoon sports meeting. Among items on the agenda there were beauty competitions (women and men) and shooting at empty beer bottles, but the two kayaking events were, I think, the highlights. I decided to try to inaugurate an aquatic sports meeting later on when all the crack seal-hunters were in the village, and it is more appropriate to describe this second occasion though kayak-rolling had then to be excluded.

Eight fully equipped kayaks lined up at the starting point opposite the village store. Abraham, the headman, fired the starting gun and off they went on a two-mile course, at a speed of about 5½ knots across the bay beyond my camp and back again. The minister was umpire. Ludwig, a thickset tough teetotaler, came in first — his prize a hurricane lamp bought in St. Andrews. Enoch was second, two lengths behind, with his elder brother the same distance behind him.

At the end of a rope behind my dinghy I had attached a sack tightly packed with straw. I now set out with this homespun seal, lined the kayakers up and at full-throttle roared past them at about 6½ knots. My seal reached the end of the line with all eight harpoons buried deeply in its flanks. This item went down very well — so well, in fact, that I decided there and then to offer a trophy for annual competition to the kayakers of Igdlorssuit.

Perhaps it would not be amiss to add here one or two of my reflections on the Greenlanders and their future. Before doing so I must hasten to admit that I am only a “summer man” — an expression coined needless to say by “winter men” — and with them my opinion may not, almost literally, cut any ice. And I have a pitifully inadequate knowledge of the Eskimo language, a deficiency I share incidentally with most “winter men.” Any advantage I possess lies in the fact that since 1938 I have stayed in the same village four times, constituting in all a period of almost one year over a span of nineteen. Not many people have had such a privilege. No one else has had it in Igdlorssuit.

The villagers of Igdlorssuit no doubt have much in common with isolated village communities in other parts of the world. Many of their problems are thus universal; but some are more strictly attributable to their arctic environment, to which they are either tending to lose or have actually lost their traditional adaptation.¹

How much of their cultural heritage will remain as they become more and more Europeanised? Will they flourish or decline? How can they achieve, without loss of indigenous values and integrity, a higher culture and a living standard equal to that of villagers in Europe? Frankly, I do not know; and I have yet to meet someone who does. What an academic geologist like myself can contribute is only a few facts which

have attracted — or perhaps distracted — his attention, and an opinion based on these facts. I now know enough about West Greenland to be convinced that the Danes, in spite of special difficulties, hardships and hazards, have done and are doing a very fine job. It might even be said that they have done too much for Greenland. This means among other things that they can afford to be critical of their own administrative policies and are unlikely to resent criticism from any outsider. These policies may result in a rising export trade but it is salutary to recall that this from a philosophical standpoint “does not always prove a colony is making progress; it may also mean that it is on the way to ruin.”²

I do not wish to undervalue the importance of my own subject, and I am not unaware of practical economic realities in Greenland. But if anyone asserted that social anthropologists were more important than geologists to the future of Greenland I must confess I should be inclined to agree. I am unable to subscribe to a concept of progress simply in terms of economic expediency, ballot boxes or mass assimilation of most of the Greenland population that may eventually lead to a complete evacuation of such villages as Igdlorssuit. As a remedy for Greenland’s growing pains it is as ancient as alchemy and a counsel of despair. Danes I have met who have an intimate knowledge of the traditional way of life would welcome a clearly defined, step-by-step, policy of sociological adjustment empirically and imaginatively conceived and directed on a purely cultural level. An experiment of this kind is still possible in the few backwaters which the flood of Europeanisation has flowed mercifully past. Igdlorssuit is one of these and I left it convinced that here, and in places like it, there is fertile soil from which the growth of mutual understanding between individuals of vastly different background would be only a matter of thought, language and time.

¹ The status of seal-hunting in kayaks is rapidly declining in West Greenland, but the Danish administration has in some places sponsored training in kayaking for native children.

² Albert Schweitzer: *My Life and Thought*. Greenland is now no longer a colony; it was integrated in Denmark in 1953.

In addition to qualified anthropologists there are many people who have insight and interest enough to detect true values in the indigenous cultural patterns of primitive communities. Their cultural and economic advancement almost invariably is accompanied by the loss of these values, by disruption rather than adjustment. And the results of ethnographical surveys among primitive communities may exercise but little influence on major administrative pol-

icies. If there is a solution to this problem in West Greenland it will demand more than authoritative advice from specialists operating ineffectually on the side-lines of the administration.

Of all my summers in Greenland, I think this "lonely summer in an open boat" was my happiest. For if loneliness is to be surrounded by indifference, distrust or illwill I could count myself about the least lonely geologist who has ever set out to do his field work alone.

H. I. DREVER

GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES IN THE CANADIAN NORTH

The Canadian Board on Geographical Names has adopted the following names and name changes for official use in the Northwest Territories and Yukon Territory. For convenience of reference the names are listed according to the maps on which they appear. The latitudes and longitudes given are approximate only.

Abitau Lake, 75B

(Adopted June 6, 1957)

Bouvier Bay	60°06'N	106°17'W
Glass Lake	60°07'	106°45'
Carleton Lake	60°17'	106°57'
Tite Lake	60°32'	107°18'
Geeves Lake	60°52'	107°15'

Dahadinni, 95N

(Adopted June 6, 1957)

Canyon Ranges	63°35'N	125°30'W
Mackenzie Plain	63°30'	124°30'

Wholdaia Lake, 75 SE

(Adopted June 6, 1957)

Knobovitch Lake	61°07'N	106°50'W
Mansfield Lake	61°06'	107°17'
Cronyn Lake	61°28'	107°02'
Burpee Lake	61°28'	106°40'
Donnelly Lake	61°34'	106°24'
McArthur Lake	61°35'	106°50'
Miller Lake	61°38'	107°13'
Lamarre Lake	61°55'	107°08'
Moss Lake	60°23'	106°10'

Borden Island, 89 NE and 79 N ½

(Adopted June 6, 1957)

Altered application

Deer Bay	78°45'N	104°15'W
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Chart 6374, Approaches to Tuktoyaktuk Harbour

(Adopted June 6, 1957)

Whitefish (locality)	69°23'N	133°37'W
Canyanek (locality)	69°24'	133°21'
Peninsula Point	69°24'	133°12'
Lousy Point	69°14'	134°13'
Triple Summit (hill)	69°32'	132°54'
Shore Summit (hill)	69°32'	132°58'
Whitefish Summit (hill)	69°24'	133°32'
Stick Summit (hill)	69°30'	132°58'