

GREENLAND AT THE CROSSROADS

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AGAINST the background of events in colonial and mandated areas throughout the world it is interesting to observe current trends of development and thought in the large, but thinly populated Danish arctic Colony, Greenland where Danes for 227 years with little or no outside interference have guided and administered the affairs of a once aboriginal and primitive race of people. Comments on recent developments in Greenland have been lucidly presented in a series of talks given at two meetings held in 1947 by the Danish-Greenland Society (*Det Grønlandske Selskab*) of Copenhagen, as printed in the Society's Yearbook (*Det Grønlandske Selskabs Aarskrift*, 1947).

The Greenland Society was founded in Copenhagen, in 1906, and is a non-political organization which aims to foster and promote interest in Greenland, to maintain and establish social and cultural relations between Greenland and Denmark, and to provide a forum where matters related to the welfare and development of the island and its people may be voiced. The present membership is 931 and consists largely of Danes and Greenlanders who, as Government administrators, topographers and explorers, scientists, educators, civil engineers, and artists, or merely as past visitors, are actively interested in Greenland, or who have lived or worked in the island. Meetings are held in Copenhagen during the winter, when lectures followed by discussions and by informal social functions are held. The lectures, together with other original articles dealing with the history, archaeology, folklore, sociology, physiography or natural history of Greenland, are published in the yearbook, together with reports on the society's activities. Besides the yearbook the society publishes book-length monographs on Greenland, in a series entitled *Det Grønlandske Selskabs Skrifter* of which, to date, 15 volumes have appeared.

Because the society is entirely non-political and because its membership is composed of outstanding specialists and authorities in many fields, important problems related to Greenland have frequently been brought into open discussion at meetings of the Greenland Society, and the Danish Government has often been responsive to and interested in the opinions expressed.

The 1947 yearbook of the Greenland Society is of unusual interest because it is almost entirely devoted to the reporting of a series of papers read during meetings held in December 1946 and January 1947, when the report of a Parliamentary Commission on Greenland published the previous June formed the topic of discussion.

Before analysing these reports, a summary of the history of the Danish administration of Greenland may be helpful.

For more than 200 years, or until Nazi occupation of Denmark, in April 1940, Denmark's last and only colony has been governed from Denmark by a paternalistic and benevolent, if also somewhat bureaucratic, Danish Government Department. If the Greenlanders themselves have had little or no influence on the policy by which their island has been administered, there can, at least, be no question that the motives dictating the Danish policy in Greenland during the last century, have been entirely altruistic. With its small population of 22,000 people of predominantly Eskimo blood, Greenland provides no important markets

for Danish exports. Although the largest island in the world, Greenland, is an arctic country, poor in natural resources, and far from being revenue-producing, its administration each year has led to a deficit which has been met by the Danish Government.

Denmark has always maintained a closed-door policy in Greenland, which permits of no trading or outside interference with the native population; not even Danish citizens are allowed to go to Greenland except in the service of the State or for specially authorized visits. Through monopolistic trading establishments in Greenland the Administration provides the Greenlanders with such trade goods as are considered needful and beneficial, in return for Greenland produce which largely consists of cryolite, seal and whale oil, salt fish and fur. The Administration also operates a shipping service, maintains free hospitals and medical services, schools and educational facilities, and even provides religious education through the Lutheran State Church.

In Greenland a small number of Danes in key positions, aided by a host of native clerks, shopkeepers, school teachers, clergymen, nurses and artisans, for over 200 years have carried out the autocratic policy of the Greenland Administration with a high degree of success which is reflected in the steady and rapid increase in the Greenland population and in the general standard of living which, by comparison with that of Denmark is low but, nevertheless, commensurate with the economic possibilities of a country extraordinarily poor in natural resources. It has been the purpose of the Danish policy to maintain Greenland for the Greenlanders and to protect them against exploitation by free traders as well as against possibly "unhealthy" or undesirable influences from the outside world. Also, to the Danes, Greenland for many years has been an arctic laboratory where Danish scientists and explorers have found a fruitful field. The results of their unselfish and important work, of which they are justly proud, is reflected in the unique scientific series *Meddelelser om Grönland* in which 145 large volumes have been published to date. Thanks to the work of Danish scientists, Greenland today is by far the most completely explored arctic land in the world.

Up to the first world war, which did not touch Greenland at all, the island's economy has been largely based on primitive Eskimo sealing and hunting, but during the last three decades, due to the diminishing numbers of seals, the sealing industry has declined and is gradually being replaced by cod fishing and sheep farming which, with cryolite mining, are the principal industries. In line with the conservative Danish policy the change-over has been deliberately slow. Time did not matter very much in Greenland where no one ever did things in a hurry, and where the Greenlanders lived a sheltered but happy and contented life. No one ever went hungry for long, nor did any one ever become very prosperous, for all trading and trafficking, all industry, as well as the price of labour and native produce, were controlled by the State. In this completely nationalized economy prices never changed. Completely sealed off from the outside world, the economy, so to speak, operated in a total vacuum. Visitors to Greenland found life in the island idyllic and carefree, a solace from the hectic, striving competition and foolish rush of other lands. But it has long been realized by most responsible Danes that some day Greenland would have to be opened; but

whenever the matter came up for discussion, it was easy to "prove" that the Greenlanders were not yet sufficiently advanced and the economy and resources of the country of such a nature to preclude introduction of free trade and enterprise.

During the same period the slowly awakening desire amongst the Greenlanders for political self expression was allowed to develop through the establishment of native village and county councils and of two provincial, advisory native assemblies (*Landsraad*), one in North Greenland and one in South Greenland. Whenever legislation was proposed by these native councils which, by the Greenland Administration was considered too precocious, the matter could always be referred back and forth between the two provincial assemblies who could seldom reach an unanimous decision.

This, then was the general situation in Greenland when the German occupation of Denmark, in April, 1940, rudely cast Greenland adrift from the motherland. Fortunately, the foresighted Danish Administration had provided fairly substantial stocks in Greenland of the most needed supplies, sufficient to tide the country over for the first difficult period until contacts could be established with Canada and with the United States. Likewise, constitutional powers had been vested in the local Greenland administration for the formation of an emergency Government which, under the wise and able direction of Governor Eske Brun, conducted the affairs of Greenland until the liberation of Denmark.

During the four years of Governor Brun's energetic one-man Government, unhampered by apron strings of the impotent Greenland Administration in Nazi-controlled Copenhagen, Greenland experienced a period of unparalleled prosperity and unheard of improvements, made possible by the unprecedented demands for Greenland cryolite, indispensable to the Canadian and American aluminium industries, and to the equally great demand for Greenland salt cod.

Greenland possessed no industries, no timber and no raw materials and produced no food other than meat and fish. But ample dollar credits from the exports of cryolite and salt cod made Greenland economically independent and provided adequate means for the chartering of ships to bring supplies of food, oil, clothing and materials to expand the fishing industry in addition to building materials indispensable to a country entirely lacking in forests.

During the four years of separation from Denmark the loyalty of the Greenlanders never wavered; but with the approaching re-union many Greenlanders began to wonder if they would be permitted to retain their many newly-won improvements, and particularly the simplification and unification of administration, or if the former Greenland Administration would wish to resume its unprogressive pre-war policy. The Greenlanders, therefore, entertained high hopes when, in 1946, the Danish Government appointed a Parliamentary Commission to which six representatives of the combined Greenland Councils were called. To aid this Commission was called, also, the head of the Greenland Administration in Copenhagen but, strangely enough, no representatives of Greenland's wartime Government. The Commission was to study and recommend changes in the administration of Greenland. Its report to the Danish Parliament which was published June 12, 1946, was disappointing to most

Greenlanders and Danes in Greenland alike. Criticisms were that the Commission had dealt almost entirely in generalities and with small and unimportant matters related to local administration and that it had deliberately chosen to ignore the important and very real changes which had taken place in Greenland during the four years of separation. It was felt, moreover, that the Commission had studiously avoided considering the demand for a shift from Copenhagen to Greenland of the executive offices of the Administration. Other matters to which it was felt that the Commission had not given sufficient thought were the urgent needs of the Greenland fishing industry where, in spite of many improvements introduced during the last few years, fishing methods were still antiquated and facilities for handling the increased production entirely inadequate to meet strong competition from foreign fishermen.

This was the report which was brought under discussion at the two meetings reported in the Greenland Society Yearbook of 1947. With strict impartiality the society had invited speakers representing the Danish Parliament, the head of the Greenland Administration in Copenhagen as well as the war-time Government of Greenland; also Greenland educationists, members of the Greenland clergy, representatives of native Greenlanders, and of science and health organizations. It is interesting to note that the opening speeches of both meetings were made by native Greenlanders who most ably expressed the views of their countrymen. It speaks very well for the 200 years of Danish administration of Greenland that the demands of the Greenlanders, as voiced by these men, included nothing more revolutionary than a strong demand to have the seat of the Greenland Administration removed from Copenhagen to Greenland where it should be directly responsible to a Danish Government Department. These men made no demands for independence for Greenland, nor even for Greenland representation to the Danish Parliament; but they did make a strongly voiced representation for the opening of Greenland to free Danish and Greenlandic enterprise and for the establishment in Greenland of a modern fishing industry, a better health service, better schools and, most significantly, demands for the introduction of the Danish language in the Greenland schools where, heretofore, the Greenland Eskimo dialect had been taught almost exclusively.

The most important contribution to the discussion of Greenland's future was made by Governor Brun, now Vice-Director in the Greenland Administration in Copenhagen who, in his address, realistically outlined the situation in post-war Greenland. His opening remarks aptly sum up the problems: "The year and a half that has elapsed since Greenland was again united with Denmark has, perhaps, been the most momentous in the modern history of Greenland because the relation between Greenland and Denmark now has to be scrutinized and carefully tested in the light of recent world developments; the course of the future must now be chartered along lines that will justify the confidence which the Greenlanders have placed in Denmark. One false step, or the omission of a necessary one, may have far-reaching consequences."

Governor Brun fully realizes that the time has come when realities rather than tradition must be the yardstick and that half-measures and compromises will no longer suffice; that in view of the needs for global transportation and

defence Denmark no longer can hope to maintain Greenland as a purely Dano-Greenlandic sphere of interest and that the days of a firmly closed-door policy with its corollary of state monopoly of trade and enterprise were irrevocably over when, during the war, American defence bases were established in Greenland; that the law of supply and demand must henceforth determine the price of labour and of cod fish and that means must be found whereby the Greenlanders may take a more active part in the development of their country.

Governor Brun does not say how he proposes to bring about these changes; that must be left to the Danish Parliament. But he points out that due to historical causes the Greenland economy in the past has been closely geared to traditional and primitive Eskimo economy based primarily on sealing and the life habit of seals, and that the present principal Greenland townsites were selected primarily from the point of view of natural harbours easily approachable by sailing vessels and with regard to the location of ancient Eskimo villages that were again selected with an eye to seal migration and not at all with regard to climate, water power, cod fishing or sheep farming.

Subsidiary to the present Greenland towns are a large number of trading posts and villages so that the present population of 22,000 Greenlanders today live in 175 widely scattered municipalities and settlements. This naturally creates great difficulties; transportation and distribution become inefficient and costly in requirements of manpower and ships because of the excessive handling and reshipping. The present scattered population makes proper health and educational facilities needlessly costly. Many of the small villages and towns will have to be abandoned as permanent settlements and trading posts, and the population centralized in fewer and larger towns. The Greenland fishery has developed, with slight modification, from the ancient Eskimo kayak sealing methods, and even today much fishing is done from one-man kayaks or from small rowboats. For the same reasons the shore installations, where codfish is cleaned, salted and packed for export are all located in the towns, and the fishermen are but rarely able to venture more than a few miles out to sea and thus cannot reach the best fishing grounds. Although the cod fisheries of Greenland are among the richest in the world, although climate and other conditions ideally suited, and labour cheap, Greenland today produces no more salt cod yearly than do a few of the sea-going foreign fishing schooners that in large numbers each summer fish off the Greenland shores which are closed to them.

Therefore, one of the most important problems in Greenland today is the centralization and relocation of population. In regard to the present economy few if any of the towns are well located. Naturally, it will not be possible to build twenty new towns in Greenland, complete with modern harbour installations, power plants, shops, sanitation facilities and so forth, but because most buildings and installations in present Greenland towns are hopelessly inadequate and antiquated now is the time when serious thought should be given to the relocation of a few key supply and administration centres where fully modern towns should be built.