

COMPETING ARCTIC PATHS: COHORT ASSESSMENT OF THE FIFTH THULE EXPEDITION LEGACY

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In memory of Tiger Burch, 1938–2010

ABSTRACT

As a student of Inuit people, Knud Rasmussen built his ideas about their cultural history and diversity from a substantial body of ethnographic knowledge amassed by the late 1800s. Yet one segment of the Inuit land in the Central Canadian Arctic, between western Hudson Bay and the Mackenzie River Delta, remained almost unknown to the academic world. H. P. Steensby's dissertation (1905) was a sign that a new cohort of Rasmussen's peers born in the 1870s and early 1880s would soon target these "last unknown Eskimos" of the Central Arctic. Members of this cohort launched a series of audacious ventures between 1903 and 1921, so that by 1920 hardly any "unknown" Inuit group remained. The Fifth Thule Expedition of 1921–1924 was the last opportunity to investigate these groups "the old way" in terms of logistics and field methods, before the next generation of scholars replaced this mode of research with new approaches, techniques, and theories. Certain elements of the Fifth Thule Expedition and Rasmussen's legacy are destined to find welcoming new audiences in the twenty-first century.

INTRODUCTION

The Fifth Thule Expedition of 1921–1924 (FTE), led by Knud Rasmussen, was one of the largest enterprises in the history of studies of the Inuit (Eskimo)¹ people—measured by the area it covered, the volume of data it collected, the number and quality of publications it produced, and the impact it made on the field of Arctic anthropology. Among its dozen participants, only four were directly involved in scholarly research: Kaj Birket-Smith, Therkel Mathiassen, Peter Freuchen, and Rasmussen himself—assisted by Helge Bangsted, Jacob Olsen, and occasionally by the Inughuit team members (see Kleist, *this issue*). Nonetheless, the small expedition team produced an impressive record, including almost 20,000 ethnographic, archaeological, and natural history specimens for several Danish museums (Mathiassen 1945:110–111); over 2,000 photographs; many hours of film footage; numerous word

lists; a massive trove of folklore texts; and copious field notes. These were eventually converted into a stream of publications, notably the 10 volumes in 34 individual issues of the renowned *Report of the Fifth Thule Expedition* (1927–1952), but also numerous popular accounts produced by Rasmussen (1925–1926, 1932, [1927] 1999), Bangsted (1926), Freuchen, and Olsen (see Harper and Krupnik, *this issue*).

The expedition also marked the end of an era in studying the Inuit people and the rise of a new discipline soon to be called "Eskimology" (Krupnik 2016a; Thuesen 2016). In planning for the expedition, Rasmussen relied on a substantial body of nineteenth-century ethnographic knowledge, particularly about the Inuit people of West and East Greenland, North Alaska, and eastern Canada—as well as on the idea of their "cultural unity" from Greenland

to the Pacific that had been promoted by his predecessors, primarily Heinrich Rink (1875, 1886, 1887, 1888) (see Marquardt 2016:39) and Franz Boas (1888). Yet Rasmussen and several researchers of his age cohort were particularly looking for the then poorly known groups of the Central Canadian Arctic, between western Hudson Bay and the Mackenzie River Delta. They targeted these “last unknown Eskimos” in a series of ventures between 1903 and 1921, so that by the launch of the FTE hardly any “unknown” group remained. Under Rasmussen’s leadership, the FTE mostly continued the established patterns of research, logistics, and field methods of the time. It was left to the later scholarly ventures, including some launched by former FTE members, to develop new approaches, techniques, and theories that would dominate studies of the Inuit people during the latter portion of the twentieth century.

COMPETING ARCTIC PATHS

The title of this paper—“Competing Arctic Paths”—sends a pointed message. All too often, the history of Arctic research, and of early Arctic anthropology as its subset, is presented in neat chronological order with a focus on particular ventures, cultures, or individuals (see Collins 1984; Harp 1984; Holland 1994; Hughes 1984; Krupnik 2016b; McGhee 1996, 2007; Nurminen and Lainema 2010; Oswalt 1979; Riches 1990). This tends to downplay the contemporary relationships among the concurrent national traditions, schools, and individuals who shaped the research and the geopolitical contexts that facilitated and constrained their work.

More often than not, throughout the history of Arctic research, these relations were characterized by rivalry, sometimes hostility. Scholars competed for recognition, but scholarly expeditions were also underwritten by competing colonial powers, newspapers, and naval departments that took charge of polar voyages. Besides the well-known stories of rivalry between Robert Peary and Frederick Cook (and between Robert Scott and Roald Amundsen in Antarctica), there were perhaps more cases of competition in early Arctic research than of collaboration (Riffenburgh 1993). Broad international partnerships, epitomized by the First International Polar Year of 1882–1883, were rather unusual. Nationalist and imperial forces rushed to stake claims across the Arctic. The Russian and British empires contested each other’s expansion in the northern Bering and Chukchi Seas; the United States laid claim to Alaska

and encroached on northern Ellesmere Island and North Greenland, as did Denmark in West and East Greenland. Norway, Sweden, and Germany initiated their own polar ventures to put themselves on the geopolitical map.

The pattern of polar research and exploration shifted dramatically around or shortly after the First International Polar Year of 1882–1883 (Krupnik 2016a). The previous mode of “voyages of discovery” supported by the admiralities of competing nations, using large ships with uniformed crews, had been largely discredited in the U.S. following the tragic fate of George DeLong’s (1879–1881) and Adolphus Greeley’s (1881–1884) expeditions, and even more so in Britain after the earlier failure of Sir John Franklin’s lost expedition and the many costly follow-up search missions. Instead, the new research logistics relied on small boats, often Indigenous skin boats, and, increasingly, on dogsleds and local Inuit partners as sled drivers, guides, and support personnel.

This pattern was pioneered in the 1850s and 1860s by the likes of John Rae (1813–1893) and Charles Francis Hall (1821–1871), both in search of Franklin and his men. It became the established way of doing research in the Arctic in the latter part of the nineteenth century and was employed by scholars and explorers as diverse as Franz Boas on Baffin Island in 1883–1884, Fritjof Nansen in his crossing of Greenland in 1888, Gustav Holm along the coast of East Greenland in 1883–1885, Edward Nelson in Alaska in 1878–1881, Frederick Schwatka in the Canadian Arctic in 1878–1880, and many more. The practices of driving dogsleds, wearing Inuit clothing, eating Inuit food, and living with and “like an Eskimo” were soon considered the must-do strategy in Arctic explorations of the era between roughly 1880 and 1920. This way of working also helped personalize the rivalries among competing nations and national research traditions. Instead of naval vessels, it was often left to fur-clad, dog-driving scientists and explorers to show the national flag (Fig. 1).

THE FIFTH THULE NARRATIVE

The original narrative of how the plan for the FTE was developed was presented by Rasmussen (1909–1910) in a short paper in Danish, even if he had contemplated this idea in more general terms a few years earlier (Michelsen, *this issue*). The main points were repeated in English, first in 1910 (Rasmussen 1910), then in brief overviews of the planning and preliminary results of the expedition



Figure 1: Knud Rasmussen at Starvation Cove, Adelaide Peninsula, raising the Danish and Canadian flags near the burial site of members of the John Franklin Expedition, October 1923 (photographer unknown). SI Archives no. 2005-8639.

(Rasmussen 1921–1922, 1925, 1926), and finally almost verbatim in its summary report (Mathiassen 1945:7–9). Often quite detailed with respect to the routes, dates, and logistics, these accounts revealed but a fraction of the story. None fully explained what Rasmussen’s original motives had been, and how they changed over time (see Michelsen, *this issue*).

According to the “classical” narrative (Mathiassen 1945:9; see also Bravo 2002:259; Hastrup 2016:119), Rasmussen’s plan for the expedition (then called “The Danish Expedition to the Central Eskimo”) was inspired by his encounter with geographer Hans Peder Steensby (1875–1920) on board the Danish ship *SS Hans Egede*, en route to West Greenland in the late spring and early summer of 1909. Steensby, Rasmussen’s senior by four years, was an armchair man of science, fresh from defending and publishing his German-language dissertation on the origin of the “oldest Eskimo culture,” which he later called Paleo-Eskimo (Steensby 1905, 1916; see Gulløv 2016; Michelsen, *this issue*). Reportedly, he explained his theories at length to Rasmussen during the long ship voyage. Another influential person on board the same ship was Thomas Thomsen (1870–1941), then archaeology curator

at the National Museum of Denmark and later head of its ethnographic collections (Birket-Smith 1952). Rasmussen certainly had ample time for long conversations with both men on his way from Copenhagen to Greenland, where he was considering establishment of a trading outpost in the far north, the future Thule Station (built in 1910).

It is no accident that Rasmussen’s first published outline for the expedition to the Canadian Arctic (Rasmussen 1909–1910) was dated “June 10, 1909, Davis Strait, *S/S Hans Egede*.” The date and location strongly suggest that it was influenced by (if not a direct result of) his conversations with Steensby. Rasmussen most certainly could have consulted the Danish version of Steensby’s thesis (Steensby 1905), but he probably relied more on an oral summary from Steensby himself. The critical role that Steensby assigned to the poorly known groups of the Central Canadian Arctic in explaining the presumed inland origins of “oldest Eskimo culture” was accepted by Rasmussen even as he was already nurturing the idea of visiting the North American Inuit, or perhaps all groups of the Inuit (Eskimo) people (Michelsen, *this issue*). In any case, the encounter with Steensby provided a theoretical justification for this ambitious plan and an opening to

advertise it to prospective supporters, including the King of Denmark (Christian X, 1912–1947), who eventually became the official patron of the FTE.

Other intellectual influences on Rasmussen are not easy to identify without diving into his monumental archival correspondence (Nielsen, *this issue*). Being a writer but no scholar, he was not in the habit of citing his academic sources. His journal articles, including those presenting the expedition's plans and summaries (Rasmussen 1909–1910, 1921–1922, 1925), except when coauthored with his more academic partners (Rasmussen 1925:523), as well as individual FTE volumes he authored (Rasmussen 1929b, 1930, 1931, 1932) featured no citations whatsoever. We know that Rasmussen was actively communicating with Steensby until the latter's death in 1920 (Mathiassen 1945:9); yet even when he referred to Steensby's theory of the origin of the "Eskimo culture" (e.g., Rasmussen 1999:xxxvii; 1930:7), he did not bother to include a citation.

At this time, I have little grasp of whether any other academic readings stimulated his planning for the FTE. He had close relations with Roald Amundsen and was familiar with his popular account of the Northwest Passage journey of 1903–1907 (Amundsen 1907, 1908). Rasmussen's reference to the "Gjøa-type" boat for his own proposed voyage to the Central Arctic (Rasmussen 1909–1910:93), was clearly a nod to Amundsen's ship *Gjøa*, used on the route that Rasmussen later followed by dogsled. He had been an admirer of Fritjof Nansen since his childhood years, yet Nansen's life and writings influenced the "heroic" side of Rasmussen's persona rather than his specific scientific plans (Hastrup 2016:113–114). He hardly ever cited Franz Boas, except in publications coauthored with his more academic partners (e.g., Rasmussen 1925), and there are no letters from or to Rasmussen in Boas's massive correspondence. Rasmussen was too young to communicate with Heinrich Rink (1819–1893), the dean of Danish "Eskimology." He certainly had read Rink's numerous writings on the origin of the Eskimo culture and on the Inuit peoples' linguistic unity from Alaska to Greenland (Michelsen, *this issue*), yet he never cited them. Nor did he cite his other peers in Greenlandic studies, even though he dedicated one of his FTE volumes (Rasmussen 1929b) "to my friend," acclaimed linguist and ethnologist William Thalbitzer (1873–1958).

Rasmussen's academically trained young partners, Kaj Birket-Smith and Therkel Mathiassen, emulated his style in their first Danish reports on the outcomes of the

FTE (Birket-Smith 1924; Mathiassen 1924), soon to be reprinted in English (Rasmussen 1925), with scores of added references. Unlike Rasmussen, both cited works by Thalbitzer (e.g., 1904, 1911, 1914). Nevertheless, following Rasmussen's template, Mathiassen's most detailed overview of the expedition, published 21 years later (Mathiassen 1945), also featured no references—even though both Birket-Smith and Mathiassen attached extensive bibliographies to their contributions to the *Fifth Thule Expedition Report* series (Birket-Smith 1929; Mathiassen 1927, 1928, 1930). Birket-Smith in particular had demonstrated a superb command of the contemporary and early literature since the beginning of his career (Birket-Smith 1918, 1919–1920). Rasmussen and his younger partners clearly positioned themselves differently vis-à-vis the relevant scholarship of the era.

COHORT APPROACH TO THE FIFTH THULE EXPEDITION

Members of the small expedition science team—while all raised in the Scandinavian (Nordic) scholarly tradition of the late 1800s and early 1900s (see Bravo and Sörlin 2002; Nicolaisen 1980)—belonged to different age groups, or cohorts. Beyond being framed by national or regional traditions in polar research (Danish, Swedish, American, British, Russian), the period between roughly the 1850s and 1930s may be viewed in terms of successive cohorts of peers in polar exploration. Rasmussen's age group was comprised of people born between 1870 and the mid-1880s (Table 1). Most of them started their work in the Arctic in the first years of the twentieth century or shortly after, and their first substantial publications appeared in the first two decades of the new century. They were also products of certain political realities and popular ideologies of the era.

I call this group the "Heroic" cohort, invoking the so-called "Heroic Age in Antarctic exploration," commonly dated to the years 1897–1922 (Clancy et al. 2014). The term is deliberately put here in quotation marks, since—unlike in Antarctica—successful "heroism" in Arctic explorations was possible only with the assistance of local aboriginal partners (see Kleist, *this issue*) or by progressively mastering their modes of travel and survival in the North, such as dogsleds, warm skin clothing, active hunting for fresh food, etc. This group included a wide range of colorful characters: adventurous field ethnographers like Rasmussen himself, and Vilhjálmur Stefansson,

Table 1: Cohort transitions in Eskimology/Polar research

Cohorts	Life, years	First main fieldwork	First major publications
FOUNDERS COHORT			
Patrick Henry Ray	1842–1911	1881–1883	1885
Adolphus Greely	1844–1905	1881–1884	1886
William H. Dall	1845–1927	1865–1880	1870, 1873, 1877
Adolf Erik Nordenskiöld	1849–1892	1858–1879	1865, 1867, 1879, 1881
Lucien Turner	1848–1901	1876–1884	1886, 1888
Gustav Holm	1849–1940	1876–1885	1888
Frederick Schwatka	1849–1892	1878–1887	1884
John Murdoch	1852–1925	1881–1883	1884, 1885, 1892
Otto Sverdrup	1854–1930	1888–1902	1897, 1903
Edward W. Nelson	1855–1934	1878–1881	1899
Robert Peary	1856–1920	1891–	1898, 1907
Franz Boas	1858–1944	1883–1884	1884, 1885, 1888
Fritjof Nansen	1861–1930	1888–1898	1891
'HEROIC' COHORT			
Knud Rasmussen	1879–1933	1902–	1905, 1906, 1908
Roald Amundsen	1872–1928	1903–	1908, 1921
Ludvig Mylius-Erichsen	1872–1907	1902–	1906
William Thalbitzer	1873–1958	1900–	1914
Donald MacMillan	1874–1970	1908–	1918
Hans P. Steensby	1875–1920	1909–	1905, 1910
Ernest de Koven Leffingwell	1875–1971	1901–	1919
Vilhjálmur Stefansson	1879–1962	1908–	1908, 1913, 1914
Ejnar Mikkelsen	1880–1971	1900–	1934, 1944
Frank Speck	1881–1950	1914–	1918, 1927
Christian Leden	1882–1957	1909–	1914, 1916
Ernest W. Hawkes	1883–1954	1911–	1914
Gudmund Hatt	1884–1960	1912–	1911, 1913, 1915
Peter Freuchen	1886–1957	1906–	1935
Diamond Jenness	1886–1969	1913–	1922, 1923, 1924, 1928
SCIENCE MODERNIZERS			
Kaj Birket-Smith	1893–1977	1918–	1918, 1924, 1929
Therkel Mathiassen	1892–1967	1921–	1927, 1928
Lauge Koch	1892–1964	1913–	1920, 1921, 1933
Hans Ahlmann	1889–1974	1931–	1931, 1936
Harald Sverdrup	1888–1957	1918–	1926, 1927–33
Henry Collins	1899–1987	1928–	1928, 1930
Frederica deLaguna	1906–2004	1929–	1932, 1933, 1934
Margaret Lantis	1906–2006	1937–	1938, 1939
Eric Holtved	1899–1981	1931–	1943, 1944, 1945
Helge Larsen	1905–1984	1930–	1934, 1938
Froelich Rainey	1907–1992	1936–	1940
Eigil Knuth	1903–1996	1932–	1951
Gutorm Gjessing	1906–1979	?	1944
Edward Weyer	1904–1998	1928–	1930, 1932

born in the same year (1879); explorers-cum-folklorists Ernest Hawkes (1883–1957) and Ludvig Mylius-Erichsen (1872–1907), Rasmussen’s chief on the Danish Literary Expedition to Greenland in 1902; a musicologist, Christian Leden (1882–1957); and Peter Freuchen (1886–1957), Rasmussen’s most trusted partner in charge of geological and cartographic surveys during the FTE. Some audacious polar explorers belonged to the same age group, men like Roald Amundsen (1872–1928), Ejnar Mikkelsen (1880–1971), and Donald MacMillan (1874–1970). So did armchair anthropologists like Steensby, Thomsen, and Gudmund Hatt (1884–1960), as well as more field-oriented men of science including William Thalbitzer (1873–1958) and Diamond Jenness (1886–1969), alongside American biologist Rudolph Anderson (1876–1961), German geologist Alfred Wegener (1880–1930), and Russian geologist Innokentii Tolmachoff (1872–1950).

Though highly diverse in their personalities, training, and interests, many members of this cohort shared two common anxieties. First, they operated in the shadow of the giants of the preceding cohort, scholars and explorers born in the 1840s–early 1860s, whose prime field time was in the 1870s and 1880s (for some extending into the 1890s, and for Peary even the 1900s). This “founders” cohort in Arctic explorations included Fritjof Nansen (1861–1930), Robert Peary (1856–1920), Otto Sverdrup (1854–1930), Adolf Niels Nordenskjöld (1849–1892), and—in the area of Eskimo/Inuit studies—Franz Boas (1858–1942), Gustav Holm (1849–1940), Edward Nelson (1855–1934), John Murdoch (1852–1925), and Lucien Turner (1848–1901) (see Krupnik 2016a). Their achievements were monumental, and their stature as pioneers was indisputable.

As the window for new discoveries in the Arctic was closing by the early 1900s, members of Rasmussen’s cohort were forced to contemplate unconventional, often daring ventures of their own. Examples of this generation’s audacity included Amundsen’s three-year trip through the Northwest Passage on a tiny fishing boat (1903–1906) and his famous ambivalence about going after either the North or South Pole in 1911 (and choosing the latter), followed by the three-year navigation of the Northeast Passage (1918–1921); and Stefansson’s trek across the polar ice (1914) with one sled and a rifle to live on hunted seals and polar bears. Rasmussen’s own plan of crossing the North American Arctic and visiting “all Eskimo groups” by dogsled was a similarly daring plan, but not far off some of his peers’ ventures.

Another source of anxiety among Rasmussen’s peers had to do with a shared perception of shrinking opportunities on the polar frontiers. Simply speaking, they had to look further and further afield to find exciting subjects and materials. The more accessible Inuit groups living in Alaska, West Greenland, Baffin Island, northern Quebec, and Labrador had already been studied and described by their predecessors (e.g., Boas 1888, 1901, 1907; Dall 1870; Hawkes 1916; Hutton 1912; Murdoch 1892; Nelson 1899; Turner 1894). These groups had also been in contact with whalers, traders, and missionaries, often for a long time. That is why, in the early decades of the twentieth century, the coming men in Inuit studies looked to the last frontier, the “untouched” groups, such as the recently discovered Ammassalimmiut of East Greenland (Thalbitzer 1914; Rasmussen’s Fourth Thule Expedition) and, particularly, the remote Polar Inuit (Inughuit) of North Greenland studied by the Danish Literary Greenland Expedition of 1903–1904 (Rasmussen 1905, 1908; also, Steensby 1910). It explains similar fascination with the three mysterious Inuit groups of the Central Canadian Arctic, later called the Copper, Caribou, and Netsilik Eskimos (Inuit), who reportedly lived as “Stone Age tribes.” Steensby’s theory that the earliest Eskimo culture originated in the Central Canadian Arctic would therefore tantalize Rasmussen, who had enjoyed an emotionally and professionally fruitful engagement with the “pristine” and friendly Inughuit (Polar Inuit) for almost two decades (Hastrup 2016:115–117).

Rasmussen’s younger partners on the FTE—Birket-Smith and Mathiasen, as well as Helge Bangsted (1898–1974), who later became a professional journalist—were 15 to 20 years his junior and thus members of a new generation. This cohort may be called “science modernizers” for the role they later played in changing the nature of research in the Arctic (Krupnik 2016a). Aspiring young scholars fresh from graduation, they did not suffer from the pressure of working under the shadow of the giants of the founders cohort. To them, Boas, Holm, Rink, Nelson, and even Peary were figures from the distant past. Their true mentor was Steensby, their university professor, even if they were working for Rasmussen (Gulløv 2016). They had read Hatt and Thalbitzer, but, as evident from the citations in their papers, they were influenced by the new writings of the Kulturkreise School and by archaeological literature on the recently discovered Mesolithic cultures of northern Europe.

Their professional future aligned with peers from the same generation, including Americans Henry Collins (1899–1987) and Frederica de Laguna (1906–2004) and, more immediately, the Danes Erik Holtved (1899–1901), Eigel Knuth (1903–1996), and Lauge Koch (1892–1964) and a Swede, Hans Ahlmann (1889–1974). Upon their return from Fifth Thule fieldwork, they would pioneer a new, more systematic Arctic scholarship that, they hoped, would transform the studies of Eskimo culture into a true scientific endeavor (Krupnik 2016a).

THE COMPETITION

The competition within Rasmussen's peer group was known to be open and often fierce, as many of its members increasingly focused on the same shrinking research

area. They also passed through the same entry/exit points to the Arctic (Nome, Barrow/Utqiagvik, Baillie Island, and Herschel Island (Fig. 2), relied on the same Hudson's Bay Company trade posts for supply in the field, took pictures at the same local photo studios (Fig. 3), and even hired or considered hiring the same experienced Arctic captains and their boats for their ventures (Capt. George Comer for Rasmussen and Leden; Capt. Robert Bartlett for Peary, MacMillan, and Stefansson; Capt. Joe Bernard for Amundsen and Rasmussen; see Bockstoce 2018).

Rasmussen was certainly familiar with Amundsen's account of his encounters with the "Nechilli Eskimo" (Nattilingmiut) of King William Island during his trip through the Northwest Passage (Amundsen 1907:291–335; 1908:1–51). That group had already been "discovered" by the time of Rasmussen's first outline for his Central



Figure 2: Local men in Nome-built dogsleds for the members of the Canadian Arctic Expedition, summer 1913. Photo: Lomen Brothers. Wikimedia Commons ("Dog sleds of the Stefansson-Anderson Canadian-Arctic expedition. Built in Nome, Alaska, 1913." Library of Congress. LCCN91732318). Open access: <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/91732318/>



Figure 3: Studio photo of Knud Rasmussen's Fifth Thule Expedition party in Nome in their travel clothing, fall 1924. Left to right: Leo Hansen (left), Qâvigarsuaq (also called Miteq), Arnarulunnguaq (seated), Knud Rasmussen. University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections, Ralph E. MacKay Alaska Photograph Albums. PH Coll 413.

Arctic Expedition, and even described to the public, albeit in a nonscientific way. Amundsen also brought massive ethnographic collections from the Central Arctic, now housed in the Oslo Kulturhistorisk Museum (Museum of Cultural History; see Engelstad, *this issue*).

Stefansson's claim of his discovery of yet another reportedly "untouched" group, the Inuinnait or Copper Inuit, during the Stefansson–Anderson Arctic expedition of 1908–1912 (Stefansson 1913, 1914; see Engelstad, *this issue*), put these Central Arctic people on the researchers' map, even though information about them had been available well before Stefansson's work (Damas 1988; Jenness 1916, 1917). When Rasmussen visited the Nattilingmiut and the Inuinnait in 1923–1924, he was aware that he was not the first person to study them, although he had not yet seen more detailed anthropological accounts of the Inuinnait that appeared when he was on his way to Canada or already in the field (Jenness 1921, 1922,

1923). Knowledge of this earlier work by Stefansson and Jenness did not prevent Rasmussen from largely ignoring it in his own publications (Damas 1988). Perhaps the reason was Rasmussen's strained relations with Stefansson, often bordering on open rivalry (Cavell and Noakes 2010). It is known that Stefansson did his best to inflame suspicions among the Canadian and British authorities about the scientific motives of Rasmussen's ventures, including specifically the FTE (Cavell and Noakes 2010:114; Sowards 2012).

All this left a single reportedly "untouched" group, the interior "Kinipetu" (Qaernermiut, later to be called "Caribou Eskimo") to the west of Hudson Bay for Rasmussen to corroborate Steensby's theory (but cf. Burch 1988b). Enter another competitive figure from the same cohort, German-trained Danish-Norwegian musicologist Christian Leden (1882–1957) (Fig. 4). He was well-known to Rasmussen, as he had sailed on the same boat, the *Hans Egede*, to Greenland with Rasmussen, Steensby, and Thomsen in the summer of 1909. This trip launched Leden's own adventurous career in Inuit musicology that included several later field trips to North and East



Figure 4: Christian Leden, 1882–1957. Photo: Norwegian Bibliotek, Oslo. <https://www.nb.no/items/4acb63ce5046e371103b5299f160471d?page=0&search=>

Greenland and to Arctic Canada, where he made almost 1,000 recordings of Inuit music on wax cylinders. He was also an avid collector of Inuit arts and crafts, and an accomplished photographer. His many popular writings (e.g., Leden 1918a, 1918b, 1919, 1990) describing his adventures among the igloo-dwelling interior Inuit of the Barren Grounds attracted media attention, and this may have pushed Rasmussen to finally bring forward his long-nurtured plans for the FTE (see Michelsen, *this issue*).

There was also the urgent pressure of political events. The Great War of 1914–1918 had put a stop to polar explorations, even in the neutral Scandinavian nations of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. With the end of the war, all polar nations—including the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Russia—resumed their Arctic activities, so that most of Rasmussen’s peers and competitors were once again crisscrossing the polar regions. Any further delay could have jeopardized Rasmussen’s ambition to be the first to reach the last “untouched” and reportedly unknown interior groups west of Hudson Bay in what Burch (1988a) called “southern Keewatin.” That area had been at the heart of Rasmussen’s original plan for the expedition to the “Central Eskimo” as early as 1909–1910. Now, a full decade later, he could at last put his plan into action (Mathiassen 1945; Rasmussen 1921–1922; see Michelsen, *this issue*).

However, there was a new complication. In 1916, Gudmund Hatt (1916) had challenged Steensby’s theory,

reversing his proposed sequence of ancient Eskimo cultures in the Arctic. Hatt proposed that the inland complex was in fact a *later* development (his theory was eventually proven by Burch [1978, 1988a] some 60 years later). But Rasmussen simply went ahead, ignoring Hatt’s challenge, as did his younger collaborators, Birket-Smith and Mathiassen, who had to grapple with this problem for decades after their FTE research.

ASSESSMENT

The results of Rasmussen’s work on the FTE may perhaps be better assessed when put in context of what his peers had been doing in the same period across the polar region. In terms of *logistics*, Rasmussen, as noted, used the well-established and proven practices of polar fieldwork of his time. He and his team traveled almost constantly, in small groups, using dogsleds in winter and small boats in summer. They established a base camp supported by a supply boat; traveled with and “like Eskimos” in terms of their routes, transportation, food, shelter, clothing, and dog food, particularly during the winter months (Fig. 5); and they relied on Inuit hospitality (or means of subsistence) and small local trade posts rather than on large supply vessels, food depots, or rescue missions. This is what almost everybody did in the early 1900s (see above). Stefansson, Jenness, Leden, Amundsen, and most other members of Rasmussen’s cohort followed the same field and logistical



Figure 5: Rasmussen’s team staying in a winter ice camp of the Copper Inuit (winter 1924). Photo by Leo Hansen. SI Archives no. 2005-8633.

practices as those used by Boas, Nelson, and Dall some 40 or even 50 years earlier. Though commonly credited to Charles Hall and John Rae in the 1850s–1860s, this fieldwork pattern of “living and traveling like Eskimo” was well-known by that time. Russian explorer Ferdinand von Wrangell had worked that way in northeast Siberia in 1820–1824, and so did Lt. William H. Hooper during the HMS *Plover* wintering in Emma Harbour on the Chukchi Peninsula in 1848–1849 (Hooper [1853] 1976).

If Rasmussen deployed established practices, it was in fulfillment of his grand plan, a survey “from Greenland to the Pacific” of almost all groups of Inuit people across Arctic North America. He pulled it off, and it was a unique achievement. His record was never beaten, except decades later by journalists and photographers using planes and snowmobiles, and a few dedicated mushers (e.g., Flowers 2001), including two Greenlanders, Jens Jørgen Fleisher and Jens Danielsen in 1993 (Anonymous 1993)—but not for any scholarly goal.

From a more strictly scholarly point of view, Rasmussen’s legacy was mixed. The two key ideas behind the FTE were the vision of “Eskimo cultural unity” from Greenland to the Pacific and the hypothesis that the homeland of the “original Eskimo culture” was to be found in the Central Canadian Arctic. These were not Rasmussen’s own ideas. Nor were they any longer cutting-edge scholarship of the day. Rasmussen believed he had found strong evidence to prove that all Inuit groups shared a common culture (which Rink had argued some 50 years prior); and his younger partners, Mathiassen and Birket-Smith, claimed they discovered new data to support the theory of the Inuit original homeland in the Central Arctic. Whether that homeland was once located on the coast (Mathiassen 1924) or in the interior (Birket-Smith 1924) was the point of fierce debate prior to and immediately after the FTE. But within the next two decades these claims were challenged and disproved (see Gulløv 2016). The zoological, geological, and cartographic outcomes of the FTE were never of prime scientific importance.

The expedition did amass monumental ethnographic and archaeological collections from the Central Arctic that seemed to support the idea of “Eskimo cultural unity.” Yet Rasmussen himself neither assessed nor presented this idea for scholarly analysis, according to the formats of the era, that is, in what we now call “classical ethnography” (e.g., Boas 1888; Bogoras 1904–1909; Nelson 1899). In any case, he did not live long after the FTE. It took decades before his materials were revisited (Burch 1988a,

1988b; Fortescue 1988; Saladin d’Anglure 1988; Sonne 1988b) and almost a century until they were claimed as a source of inspiration for the pan-Inuit movement and by local Inuit heritage projects (see Griebel et al., *this issue*).

Many of the field methods practiced by the FTE were common ethnographic research tools of the time, like thorough documentation of material culture and folklore; the collection of cultural and natural history specimens for museums; the use of standard word lists and text recording for language work; taking censuses of Indigenous groups and communities—in addition to certain ancillary efforts in cartography, meteorology, and geological surveying. Nelson in West Alaska, Boas on Baffin Island, and Bogoras in Chukotka combined many of the same research tools some 20–40 years earlier. Mathiassen and Birket-Smith did pioneer genuinely new methods in their FTE fieldwork, most importantly systematic archaeological excavations (de Laguna 1979; McCartney 1979) and comparative study of the distribution of “cultural elements.” Both approaches transformed the scholarship about Inuit cultures and people, from the 1920s onward (Krupnik 2016a); but while archaeology continues to thrive, culture element distribution analysis went out of fashion by the 1950s.

Rasmussen’s own favorite field approach during the FTE years, which he named “intellectual culture,” was a combination of mythology, religion, texts, and songs in Indigenous languages. Franz Boas had advocated for this sort of research 40 years prior, but Rasmussen was a true genius in using it, thanks to his intimate knowledge of Greenlandic folklore, his personal skill as a storyteller, and his proficiency in the Greenlandic language (Fig. 6). It took decades for later researchers to follow in his footsteps (Lowenstein 1982, 1990, 1993; Saladin d’Anglure 1980, 1986; Sonne 1988a, 1988b, 2018). In recent years, Inuit heritage specialists have articulated the lasting value of Rasmussen’s records to today’s audiences (see Griebel et al., *this issue*).

The most significant achievement of Rasmussen’s expedition was the fulfillment of his lifelong aspiration to contact “all groups of the Eskimo people,” from Greenland to the Pacific Ocean, and, via personal encounters, to provide evidence of their cultural unity. Though the outcome was perhaps closer to “all speakers of Inuit languages” (Kalaallisut, Inuktitut, Iñupiaq, etc., and even this narrower definition misses several groups, in both the east and the west), he did more than anyone, before or after him, to accomplish this dream. It continues to be viewed



Figure 6: A group of Inuit in Utqiagvik (Barrow) dance for Rasmussen's team, June 1924. Photo by Leo Hansen. SI Archives, no. 2005-8632.

as an unparalleled success, and more than anything else, it played a critical role in stimulating the Fifth Thule centennial program and this publication.

CODA

When Rasmussen and his partners returned from their fieldwork in 1923–1924, they encountered a rapidly changing landscape of polar research. The Arctic had been transformed into a field of open territorial disputes—around Norway's sovereignty over Svalbard (the Spitsbergen Treaty of 1920), between Denmark and Norway in Northeast Greenland (which lasted for 14 years, 1919–1933), between Soviet Russia and the UK/Canada regarding Wrangel Island (1921–1924 [Dukes 2018; Webb 1992]), and more. The nascent Soviet government was solidifying its grip over the Russian Arctic and forcing out foreign explorers and traders, which Rasmussen experienced first-hand on his aborted trip to Chukotka in 1924 (Rasmussen 1999:361–370; see also Mathiassen 1945; Schwalbe et al., *this issue*; Shokarev, *this issue*). Shackleton died on his last Antarctic mission in 1922; with his passing, the Heroic Age in Antarctic explorations was over. Six years later, the tragic loss of Amundsen in a plane crash on a rescue mission to the Arctic Ocean was a harbinger of a new era coming to the North, as some of Rasmussen's peers

and competitors were increasingly looking for new ways of traveling the Arctic by air after 1924, like Amundsen, Stefansson, and later Lauge Koch (Ries 2002).

Others, particularly Stefansson, were actively shifting to political advocacy in polar geopolitics, commercial navigation, and the use of polar resources (Stefansson 1928). Rasmussen's partners from the FTE days, Mathiassen and Birket-Smith, were soon to promote approaches of their own, and also engaged in a bitter dispute on the origin of "early Eskimo" culture and its elements (Birket-Smith 1930; Mathiassen 1930). In this new world, there was little room for Rasmussen's intellectual philosophy, while his unique field skills and methods were hard to replicate.

Rasmussen struggled to find his personal path in this rapidly changing world—in his popular writings, international acclaim, new fieldwork in East Greenland, interest in ethnographic filming, his own forays into Eskimo prehistory, and speculations about similarities between the Inuit people and Stone Age hunters (Rasmussen 1928a, 1928b, 1929a, 1934). Yet even his masterful contributions to the *Report of the Fifth Thule Expedition* series lack a guiding vision to bring coherence to his voluminous data. His trademark "intellectual culture," a combination of mythology, religion, and personal stories, was gradually sidelined by new professionalized Arctic scholarship and, specifically, by new approaches in Arctic anthropology epitomized

by the writings of Jenness and Sapir in Canada; Collins, Lantis, and de Laguna in the United States; Bogoras's students in Russia; and Thalbitzer, Birket-Smith, and Mathiassen in Rasmussen's native Denmark (Gulløv 2016; Krupnik 2016a).

Rasmussen's trajectory from the anointed "father of Eskimology" to decades of polite obscurity and muted criticism (Kleivan and Burch 1988a, 1988b), to the subject of a new international spotlight, took almost a full century to unfold. The centennial of the FTE serves as a critical opportunity to revisit his legacy and bring it to contemporary audiences, especially to make this unique historical record accessible to the Inuit people themselves.

NOTES

1. Since the 1970s, the earlier ethnonym "Eskimo" common in Rasmussen's era has been generally replaced by the term "Inuit," which is the most general word for "people" in the Inuktitut/Inupiat languages. In this paper, the old term is used in quotations, paper titles, and where it is appropriate to avoid inserting modern terminology in the 100-year-old context.

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