

PREFACE: A WESTERN ARCTIC PERSPECTIVE ON THE FIFTH THULE EXPEDITION

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This special issue of the *Alaska Journal of Anthropology* commemorates the 100-year anniversary of the Fifth Thule Expedition (1921–1924), an ethnographic survey of Inuit cultures from Hudson Bay to Alaska led by Greenlandic-Danish folklorist Knud Rasmussen. Papers by Danish, Canadian, American, and Russian scholars evaluate the expedition's intellectual foundations, planning, conduct, and scientific achievements, the latter represented by encyclopedic museum collections and a 10-volume final report. The Fifth Thule Expedition (FTE) was also one of the most photographed and filmed Arctic explorations of any era, generating an extensive visual record that includes many portraits of Inuit individuals and communities. No comparable retrospective on the FTE has been published since 1988, when *Études/Inuit/Studies* presented a collection of papers edited by Inge Kleivan and Ernest S. Burch Jr. ("L'Oeuvre de Knud Rasmussen/The Work of Knud Rasmussen") to mark the 55th anniversary of Rasmussen's passing in 1933 (Kleivan and Burch 1988).

The essays included here offer condign recognition for the contributions made by Greenlandic, Canadian, and Alaskan Inuit to the success of the FTE, including the superb oral scholarship they shared with Rasmussen and the critical life support—food, shelter, skin boots and clothing, knowledge of the land, and expertise in Arctic travel—that they provided to the Danish team. Today, collections and knowledge gathered during FTE fieldwork among diverse Inuit peoples—the Iglulingmiut (Iglulik), Natsilingmiut (Netsilik), Qairnirmiut, Paadlermiut, and other inland groups (Caribou), Inuinnaït (Copper), Inuvialuit (Mackenzie), Inūpiat, and Yupiit—are invaluable resources for heritage education and postcolonial cultural restoration in northern communities.

While the first two and a half years of the FTE were spent in the Central Arctic region between Baffin Island and Victoria Island, during a breakaway finale in 1924 Rasmussen and two Greenlandic Inuit colleagues—Qaavigarsuaq (Miteq) and Arnarulunnguaq—traveled west by dogsled to the Mackenzie River delta, then on to Utqiāgvik, Wainwright, Icy Cape, Point Hope, Kotzebue, Noorvik, and Nome. During these Yukon and Alaska travels, Rasmussen made notes on Inuvialuit and Inūpiaq

lifeways, hunting, spiritual beliefs, ceremonies, and oral traditions. He undertook a brief trip to Chukotka in an unsuccessful attempt to conduct similar studies among the Siberian Yupiit, and when in Nome he interviewed Cup'ig-speaking visitors from Nunivak Island. A fluent speaker of West Greenlandic Kalaallisut, Rasmussen was able to converse with almost every person of Inuit heritage he met, although the Cup'ig dialect and the Naukanski Yupik spoken in Chukotka eluded him. Rasmussen employed his linguistic facility to elicit traditional narratives and knowledge as he sought to demonstrate the essential unity of Inuit cultures from Greenland to the Bering Sea.

The impact and value of the FTE for residents and researchers in the Western Arctic may be of special interest to readers of this journal. Some shortcomings in Rasmussen's work are understandable, given that the ambitious final leg of the expedition was packed into less than eight months (March–October 1924) and was conducted on the fly without an expeditionary base, research colleagues, or a planned itinerary. The ad hoc agenda seems to have diminished Rasmussen's ability to record oral narratives to the same high standard as in the Central Arctic, where he and Jacob Olsen, the FTE's Greenlandic

Inuit secretary, listened to myths and legends as told by multiple speakers, then worked together to produce authoritative Inuktitut texts. For the Western Arctic, where Rasmussen had to work solo and in greater haste, we have only Danish (translated to English) synopses for most narratives rather than interlinear transcriptions as in the best earlier work, with the exception of a few Inuvialuit tales (Ostermann 1942).

Overall, the published FTE record for the Western Arctic is meager compared to the fulsome output for the central Inuit groups, principally because the work was cut off by Rasmussen's premature death. We have his posthumously edited Mackenzie and Alaska field notes (Ostermann 1942; Ostermann and Holtved 1952), a catalog of archaeological collections (Mathiassen 1930), the explorer's popular account of the sled journey, *Across Arctic America* (Rasmussen 1927), and an illustrated collection of Inupiaq oral traditions published in Danish and later English as *The Eagle's Gift* (Rasmussen 1932). Rasmussen did not have the time or opportunity to analyze his Alaska data or compare them to results from more eastern regions, although he planned these writings for FTE volumes that were never completed. Nonetheless, Burch (1988) saw enduring and largely overlooked value in Rasmussen's Western Arctic records, and several papers in this special issue follow his lead, providing an apt sequel to the primarily Central Arctic-focused papers published in the *Études/Inuit/Studies* collection.

Across Arctic America offers several important insights into the explorer's outlook and intentions during encounters with the Inuvialuit and Inupiat. Arriving at Herschel Island, a former center of the commercial bowhead whaling fleet and location of the Hudson's Bay Company's main trading post for the Mackenzie Delta, Rasmussen was dismayed at the extent of acculturation and social change that had occurred among the Inuvialuit (Ostermann 1942:51–53). Across the U.S. border at Utqiagvik (Barrow), where Western whaling, commerce, missions, and schools had likewise influenced the community for decades, Rasmussen had a similar impression and at first saw few prospects for productive research:

I had not expected to find anything of interest on this part of my journey, and really considered my collections at an end on leaving Canada: I soon found, however, that this was not the case. Men and women here were less sophisticated than those of the Mackenzie Delta, and there was a store of

folklore and mythology ready to hand. (Rasmussen 1927:305)

Rasmussen's energetic efforts to record Inupiaq intellectual culture during the subsequent months were both timely and new, since only a few observers and collectors had preceded him, most notably John Murdoch and Patrick Ray during the First International Polar Year in 1882–1883, and these earlier investigations focused almost entirely on economic life and material culture. Rasmussen's research, although conducted in relative haste, laid the foundation for later, more thorough studies, as did his work with the Nuniwarmiut of Nunivak Island. We also should not overlook the considerable value of his well-observed and sympathetic accounts of the sociocultural stresses that Alaska Natives were experiencing in the early twentieth century, as well as his admiration for their resilience (Rasmussen 1927, 1933).

Rasmussen's encounter with the Western Arctic also influenced his views about Inuit origins and culture history, which were driving questions behind the FTE. Along the Beaufort, Arctic, and Bering Sea coasts he encountered a mode of life that was quite different from what he had seen in the Central Arctic, yet familiar to him as a native Greenlandic:

Now we are among people who, in a language astonishingly like our Greenlandic, talk of seals and bearded seals, whales and white whales, which are hunted at sea in umiaks and kayaks, the latter of exactly the same type as those in Greenland, and the snow-hut settlements have given way to villages of wooden and turfed houses, which also recall Greenland. (Ostermann 1942:31)

There was indeed a striking contrast between the Inuvialuit and Inupiaq way of life in coastal communities of the Western Arctic and that of the Iglulingmiut, Natsilingmiut, and Inuinait in the Central Arctic. The latter groups were small and seasonally nomadic, lived in snow houses and tents instead of coastal villages, and subsisted primarily on caribou, muskoxen, fish, and seals taken at their breathing holes in the sea ice rather than on large sea mammals hunted in open water. It already appeared from Mathiassen's FTE archaeological investigations that all living Inuit peoples had descended from the Neoeskimo Thule culture, following its great migration from Bering Strait to Greenland some eight centuries earlier; yet the whaling-based Thule economy had been subsequently abandoned in the Central Arctic while

continuing in the Western Arctic and in the eastern regions including Baffin Island, Labrador, and Greenland. Rasmussen was struck by the problem of accounting for this shift but never resolved it beyond an unsupported suggestion that there had been a late and final wave of Inuit migration from the Canadian interior to the Central Arctic coast (Rasmussen 1926). This question aside, it is evident that one of the most important scholarly results of the continent-spanning FTE was a new understanding of *diversity* among Inuit cultures as well as of the common inherited features that unite them, giving rise to a dynamic view of post-Thule adaptation and change.

A small story of the FTE in Northwest Alaska provides an example of east-west connection that prefigures the exciting potential of the present moment. Kusiq (Waldo Bodfish), a young Inupiaq man at Qayaiqsuġvik (Icy Cape), got to know Rasmussen and his companions when they stayed at the village in the spring of 1924 (Bodfish 1991:43–44). Kusiq became close friends with Qaavigarsuaq (Miteq), who taught him the Greenlandic Inuit method of stalking and shooting seals from a small sled with a white screen mounted in front to conceal the hunter. The incident hints at how the Inughuit members of the FTE interacted with their Inupiaq peers along the expedition route, serving in effect as cultural ambassadors from the eastern Inuit world.

It also inspires the realization that the collections, images, and records gathered by the FTE and other Arctic expeditions, preserved for generations in museums and archives, now provide the potential for new pan-Arctic exchanges of Inuit knowledge. For Inuit scholars, educators, and students, this means opportunities to study the arts, languages, and cultural histories of their own regions but also to discover and compare the heritage of related Inuit peoples in Greenland, Canada, Alaska, and Russia. Initiatives to make the FTE and other Inuit collections accessible online are rapidly expanding to support collaborative learning and exchanges of this kind, and we hope that this issue of *Alaska Journal of Anthropology* helps to open these avenues of discovery.

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