

# PLANS FOR THE FIFTH THULE EXPEDITION AND THE GREAT SLED JOURNEY ACROSS CANADA AND ALASKA

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## ABSTRACT

Knud Rasmussen first conceived of an expedition across the North American Arctic in 1905, although 16 years would pass before his idea materialized as the Fifth Thule Expedition of 1921–1924. In that time, six expeditionary plans were produced, reflecting Rasmussen’s changing scientific interests, opportunities for cooperation, and economic feasibilities. The original plan to trace “in reverse” the early Inuit migration route from Alaska to Greenland was first reduced to a narrow focus on western Hudson Bay. Due to the influence of H. P. Steensby, who served as a member of Rasmussen’s scientific committee, the next plan shifted toward the Inuit groups in the hinterland of Chesterfield Inlet and the question of the origin of the Inuit people. Throughout, folklore and ethnography were the primary research interests, but most plans also included geography, geology, meteorology, zoology, and cartography. Although never officially part of the plan, the “great sled journey” to Alaska and Siberia was always on Rasmussen’s mind. Yet it was not until the expedition had already departed Copenhagen in summer 1921 that Rasmussen wrote to the scientific committee about his intention to put it into action. The great journey from Greenland to the Pacific eventually became the most influential scholarly and public outcome of the entire Thule Expedition series.

## INTRODUCTION

In the first Danish edition of Knud Rasmussen’s popular book about the Fifth Thule Expedition, *Fra Grønland til Stillehavet* (From Greenland to the Pacific Ocean, 1925), he tells readers about the earliest plan for the expedition:

It’s hard to say when I got the idea for it, for it has grown up together with me. But the famous researcher H. Rink’s studies of the Eskimos and the lands which they inhabited awoke me; I became aware of my mission. (Rasmussen 1925:5; *translation mine*—KM)

Since the 1860s and until his death in 1893, Hinrich Johannes Rink had, in his many publications, some of them rather popular, presented his theory that the Inuit originated from Alaska’s forest-clad inland area (Rink

1887, 1888, 1890). From there they migrated down the rivers to the coast, where they adopted a maritime way of living. After that, they spread westward to Siberia and eastward to Canada and Greenland (Oldendow 1955:31).

Rasmussen did not say when he became acquainted with Rink’s writings, but it was probably in the years between 1896 and 1900, when he was a student at grammar school in Denmark. Having grown up in Greenland at Ilulissat (then Jakobshavn), the son of a Danish pastor and a partly Greenlandic mother, he came to Denmark with his family in 1891, when he was twelve, to attend a grammar school. He was intelligent and completely bilingual but was judged by his teachers to be lazy and overly fond of dogsledding. The strict regime of a Danish grammar

school was probably a rude awakening for the boy, and he encountered severe problems, the background for his growing self-identification as a Greenlander.

An early piece of evidence is a statement from one of Rasmussen's old school friends, as Kaj Birket-Smith reported in his book *Knud Rasmussen's Saga* (1936). As the friend recounted:

I remember as if it was yesterday that twilight in the rectory of Lynge [where Knud's parents lived] when our friendship had grown so strong that he initiated me into his great scheme of life. Walking up and down the floor... he presented me with an enormous panoramic view of all the Eskimo tribes in the world, starting in his own homeland and following their traces wherever they existed, straight back to their origin. (Birket-Smith 1936:18; *translation mine—KM*)

The reference to Rasmussen's "homeland" is, of course, to Greenland. Thus, it seems that Rasmussen's final years at grammar school might have been when the personal and intellectual interests that eventually materialized in the Fifth Thule Expedition (FTE) first began to form as a "big dream." There is most likely an element of mythology and post-rationalization in the above account. When Rasmussen's friend told his story to Birket-Smith, Rasmussen was already world famous, and the FTE had been completed. Nothing indicates that Rasmussen was aware of his life mission while still at high school; at that time, he had no idea of his future, let alone that it would be related to Greenland and the Arctic (cf. Michelsen 2011). The truth is rather that Rasmussen was fascinated by Rink's writings, which lay dormant in his mind like seeds and only later, under the right circumstances, sprouted into endeavor.

Another seminal influence was Rasmussen's experience as a participant in the Danish Literary Expedition of 1902–1904, under the leadership of Ludvig Mylius-Erichsen, which made contact with the Polar Inuit (Inughuit) at Cape York. His first vision for the future FTE might have developed during the expedition's prolonged sojourn on Saunders Island in North Star Bay, when Rasmussen was able to interview Merqusaq (modern spelling Meqqusaq), one of the last surviving members of a group of Canadian Inuit who had migrated from Baffin Island to North Greenland in the middle of the nineteenth century (Mary-Rousseliere 1991; Rasmussen 1908).

## PLAN I (1905): "AN EXPEDITION OF TEN YEARS"

Our first knowledge of Rasmussen's "great expedition" plan—or rather of its earliest precursor—comes from an anonymous article in the Danish newspaper *Politiken* in 1905, about a year after the Literary Expedition returned home. The paper reported that in the near future Knud Rasmussen intended to carry out an expedition of his own to North America:

It will be a journey that in distances and duration exceeds most previous polar expeditions. Knud Rasmussen will go north of America by sledge. He starts next spring in Greenland, crosses the Ellesmere Land in the summer and continues further over the islands in the polar sea to Alaska and crosses the Bering Strait to Siberia. In 1916 Mr. Rasmussen hopes to return via St. Petersburg to his point of departure, Copenhagen.... There will be only a few participants in the expedition, mostly Greenlanders. (Michelsen 2014:79; *translation mine—KM*)

The purpose of the expedition was ethnological, especially folkloristic, rather than aimed at geographical discoveries. Regarding its duration, Rasmussen mentioned that it might take 10 years or perhaps as many as 12 or 14, for as he said, "the fact is that we shall visit all districts inhabited by Eskimos, and after all, in this lies, so to speak, the greatness of our expedition." The entire journey would follow the Inuit form of travel, that is, by dogsled because, as he explained: "We must come to the Eskimos by the same means that they themselves use, to meet them as comrades. If we arrive in another way, they will look at us, if not as enemies, then as strangers" (Michelsen 2014:80). In another interview some months later, the newspaper asked if it was really his intention to be away for 10 years, and Rasmussen explained:

Yes, I have thought to carry out an expedition from Greenland across the ice to North America. I should specifically like to make the acquaintance of the Kinipetu Eskimos.... Since 1879 no [white] man has been in touch with the Kinipetues. Now I'll try to find them in the hinterland behind Chesterfield Inlet. (Michelsen 2014:81)

The importance of visiting the "Kinipetu" (then a common term used by Euroamerican whalers for the

Qaernermiut, later called the Inland or Caribou Eskimo), was evidently a late addition, due to an event that happened after the first interview. In 1905, anthropologist and geographer Hans Peter Steensby (1875–1920) (Fig. 1) received a doctorate for his anthropogeographical study of the origin of Inuit culture and published it as a book in Danish (Steensby 1905). In Steensby's thesis, the so-called Kinipetu played a vital role as a group that might represent the original "Eskimo culture" from which all later Inuit peoples developed.

Steensby's study obviously left its stamp on Rasmussen's ambitious plans for ethnological exploration of the Arctic. It is also possible at this early stage to discern the two different strands that would define the future organization of the FTE. On the one hand, there was Rasmussen's original vision of a sled journey through Canada and Alaska to Siberia to visit all of the Inuit groups, with the principal aim of recording their folklore and culture. On the other hand, the more specific quest for the origins of the Inuit revealed a project that mirrored the dominant current of ethnographical science of the time.

## **PLAN 2 (1909): "AN EXPEDITION TO THE CENTRAL ESKIMO"**

Rasmussen did not set off immediately. Other tasks made demands on him, but the idea of the expedition was in no way forgotten when in May 1909 he left Copenhagen on his way to Greenland on board the *Hans Egede*. The list of ship's passengers included two people with whom it would be very useful to discuss the matter. One was Steensby; the other was Thomas Thomsen of the National Museum of Denmark in Copenhagen (Fig. 2). The duration of the passage was two or three weeks, so there was plenty of opportunity for professional discussion. We also know that these talks influenced a new plan that Rasmussen drew up during the journey and which resulted in the first well-formulated concept for the expedition (see also Krupnik, *this issue*).

The proposal, which bore the title "Project of a Danish Ethnographic Expedition to the Central Eskimo," was first published in Danish in *Geografisk Tidsskrift* (Rasmussen 1909; reprinted in English in 1910) and began as follows:

It is, I think, universally acknowledged that the study of the Eskimo is a natural task for Danish men of science. For more than two centuries Denmark has held the fate of the West Greenland

Eskimo in her hands, and literary and scientific work done by Danish men has resulted in modifying the views held by the civilized world regarding the culture of the Eskimo. (Rasmussen 1910:295)

Rasmussen enumerated his qualifications, professional as well as private (his double identity as a Dane with Inuit ancestry) for leading such an expedition. He concluded: "In consideration of all this, I look upon it as a sort of vocation to try to find a solution to the above-mentioned problems as to the immigration of the Eskimo into Greenland in connection with the general study of the American Eskimo tribes" (Rasmussen 1910:296).

These tribes included, among others, the inhabitants of northwestern Baffin Island, who lived along the presumed route from the American continent to Greenland but were practically unknown at that time. From there, Rasmussen intended to travel to the rather unknown groups at Fury and Hecla Strait, and further to groups living at Lyon Inlet and Repulse Bay, ending in the territory of the "Kinipetu" in the interior west of Chesterfield Inlet. The latter were still viewed as especially important to investigate, not least because their means of livelihood "leads to the problem of the Eskimo culture itself" (Rasmussen 1910:297). Here Rasmussen referred to Steensby's theory of how inland dwellers of the Canadian Central Arctic had become Inuit along the coast by adopting methods of seal hunting on the sea ice:

According to this supposition, the Eskimo culture was to have its seat near the hemmed-in seas towards the Arctic Archipelago, north of the ice-sea shore of the continent, or, in other words, the districts round Coronation Gulf and further east, near King William's Land and the Boothia spit [Peninsula]... We have, perhaps, here in Coronation Gulf, one of the points of departure of the immigration of the Eskimo who at last reached the Danish possession, Greenland. And therefore, as for many other reasons, the tribes at Coronation Gulf must be included in the researches [*sic*], the starting-point of which was the problem of the origin and the routes of the immigration of the Greenland Eskimo. (Rasmussen 1910:297)

Rasmussen emphasized that he intended not only to study the culture and livelihood of these Inuit groups but also to collect their legends and to record social and religious traditions. The expedition would take three years and be





*Figure 1. Hans Peder Steensby (1875–1920). Courtesy of the Royal Danish Geographical Society.*



*Figure 2. The head of the Ethnographic Department of the National Museum of Denmark, Thomas Thomsen (center) flanked by upcoming curators Kaj Birket-Smith (left) and Therkel Mathiassen (right), outside the NMD in Copenhagen in about 1930. Photographer unknown. Image NMD ES-351994.*

supported by its own ship based in Hudson Bay. In addition to the ship's crew and captain, Rasmussen would be assisted by a small scientific staff to undertake cartographical and meteorological work, adding:

Seeing that the route followed by the ship expedition, also in other respects, will offer very interesting, hitherto unsolved scientific problems, the staff will further include a geologist and a physician who, together with the geologist, will be able to undertake the botanical and zoological studies as necessary, also to do the work of an anthropologist and archaeologist. (Rasmussen 1910:299)

This proposal diverged significantly from the 1905 plan. The duration was greatly reduced; the participants, apart from a few local Inuit, would all be white people; and the folkloristic research was now just one project among others. A crucial point was the idea of using a ship as headquarters. With that, the design moved much closer to a traditional expedition scheme, precisely the kind of scenario that Rasmussen avoided in his earlier plan based on travel by dogsled, Greenlandic Inuit participation, and dependence on hunting for provisions. Rather than a variation on the original, Plan 2 was a total transformation that no longer included the crucial element of studying Inuit in both the eastern and western Arctic and visiting all Inuit groups, up to Alaska and Siberia, as envisioned in Plan 1.

### PLAN 3 (1915): A REVISION TO THE 1909 VERSION

Rasmussen submitted the proposal for the expedition that had an estimated cost of 75,000 Danish kroner to the Carlsberg Foundation, which responded in January 1910. The answer was negative, and Rasmussen realized that if he was to carry out his expedition, he had to play a part in its financing. Therefore, he came up with the idea of establishing a trading post in the North Greenlandic district of Cape York, which he had known from his earlier fieldwork on the Literary Expedition. The American explorer Robert Peary had just announced that, after succeeding in his quest to reach the North Pole (in April 1909), he would no longer maintain a base

in North Greenland, thus cutting off the flow of trade goods that his expedition had provided to the local people, the Inughuit. There were other reasons why Rasmussen was anxious to step in, including the abundance of game in the area and a strong potential for profitable fur trading. In addition, Norwegian polar explorer Captain Otto Sverdrup (1854–1930) had made it known that he would establish a whaling station in the area, which Rasmussen was eager to forestall.

Rasmussen estimated it would take two or three years to establish the post, make it functional, and bring in a profit. Together with his friend Peter Freuchen he left Copenhagen in 1910 and began operations at the post, named the Thule Station. Using the station as a base, he undertook the First Thule Expedition in 1912 across the interior ice cap to Independence Fjord. On returning to Denmark in 1913, Rasmussen was convinced he would be able to begin his American expedition in 1914. For various reasons, however, the trading post needed his presence in 1913–1914, and one month after his return to Denmark in May 1914, the shots were fired in Sarajevo: World War I had begun, and for the time being all ideas of Inuit research in North America had to be abandoned (Michelsen 2018).

While waiting, Rasmussen made some corrections to Plan 2, taking advantage of Thule Station as a base and starting point. A new undated and unofficial plan, "Project for a Danish Ethnographic Expedition to the American

Eskimos,”<sup>1</sup> to begin in October or November 1915, no longer included the idea of anchoring a ship in Hudson Bay over a summer and two winters. Instead, Rasmussen would “make the expedition a journey through all the areas that Eskimo migrations over the ages passed through” (Knud Rasmussen Archive [KRA] B.37, F.34). That meant starting from the Thule station and traveling across Ellesmere Island (Rasmussen’s “Ellesmere Land”), Jones Sound, and Lancaster Sound to the most northern Inuit groups on Baffin Island and from there via Pond Inlet to Iglood. The next year he would continue to Repulse Bay, where a ship would bring material for a small house and goods to trade for ethnographic collections with the Igloodmiut. Another winter would be spent “partly among the tribes from Repulse Bay to Chesterfield Inlet, partly among the tribes in the North-West Passage, especially in the surroundings of Coronation Gulf.” During the last year, Rasmussen would leave Hudson Bay and travel by the most practical route to the Mackenzie River, Point Barrow, and northwest Alaska, and from there to the small Inuit groups living on the Siberian shore across Bering Strait.

Compared to Plan 2 of 1909, there were two crucial changes. First, the expedition no longer would have a ship as its headquarters, and second, the great sled journey was back in its full scope. Obviously, Rasmussen had not abandoned his original vision.

From documents in the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) archives in Winnipeg, it appears that during a visit to London in early 1916 Rasmussen presented parts of his plan to the HBC top management. The company’s cooperation, or at least approval, was critical, since the HBC maintained a trading post at Chesterfield Inlet. In a letter from the HBC governor and committee in London to the fur trade commissioner’s office in Montreal, the committee asked for the office’s approval of Rasmussen’s plans before they would consider the matter further. According to the letter, Rasmussen’s purpose was “to explore the region between Hudson Bay and the McKenzie River in 1917, provided the War is over by that date.” The letter continues:

He intends staying three years in the country, studying the habits and folklore of the Esquimaux and comparing the various tribes. His proposition is to go in his own schooner to Repulse Bay, at which point he will winter; [then] to travel overland to Chesterfield and remain there for the second winter and from there to go to Coronation Bay and the McKenzie River.<sup>2</sup>

Here was another expedition proposal, according to which Rasmussen would arrive on his own ship and not by dog-sled from Greenland. The fact that the great sled journey was not mentioned in its full extent (that is, no reference to either Alaska or Russia) was probably because the latter would take place outside the company’s area of interest.

At the same time, Rasmussen in Plan 3 sought to satisfy new geographical objectives proposed by Steensby. According to Steensby, who was now a member of the Thule Station Scientific Committee, it would be “of great significance for Danish-Arctic research also to attach a geographical mission to such a comprehensive expedition” (KRA B.37, F.34). It would also lend luster to the expedition. What he had especially in mind was the possibility of new geographical discoveries in areas northwest of Axel Heiberg Island, that is, in the high Arctic. To fulfill this task, five Inughuit (Polar Inuit) and a multidisciplinary scientific staff would be engaged: a cartographer/zoologist, hydrographer, geologist, botanist, and ethnographer. The special mission of the latter would be to determine the northwest extent of Inuit habitation. Later, they all would return south, and the natural scientists would return home by ship. The expedition would from then on be purely ethnographical, with the same duties as before.

It is not clear how this plan, which would greatly expand the geographic scope of the expedition, was to be coordinated with its other components, but Rasmussen imagined that the ship would bring supplies and instruments needed for the ethnographic work, such as photographic equipment and a movie camera. The following year, the ship would retrieve the ethnographic collections, whereupon Rasmussen and two Inughuit companions would start the journey toward Siberia. As in Plan 1, the Inughuit were critical contributors to the great traverse.

The underlying foundation for Plan 3 seems to have been the continuing strategic importance of Arctic research to the Danish Crown. A purely ethnographical expedition was not enough; instead, a multipronged strategy and research effort was needed, in which the making of a film was a significant new element (see MacKenzie and Stenport, *this issue*).

#### PLAN 4 (1920): “A NORDIC PROJECT”

At the time of his visit to London, Rasmussen anticipated that his North American expedition would begin in 1917. During the interim he led the Second Thule Expedition to map the northernmost part of Greenland. Peter Freuchen



had been expected to accomplish this task in 1914 or 1915, but for various reasons it was not done, and in 1916 Rasmussen took over the project himself. He expected to complete it in August or September 1916, but extreme weather conditions and other problems delayed the expedition for an entire year, so that Rasmussen did not return to Denmark until 1918.

In the meantime, other urgent tasks had accumulated, so it was not until 1920 that Rasmussen started to prepare the expedition that he still regarded as his life's central mission. The new plan was again made in cooperation with the two persons who contributed to Plan 2, H. P. Steensby and Thomas Thomsen. The latter had in the meantime become inspector at the National Museum of Denmark and, together with Steensby, was a member of the Thule Station Committee. In 1909, while aboard the ship bound for Greenland, a third person had entered Rasmussen's orbit: the Swedish Arctic explorer Otto Nordenskjöld (1869–1928). Years later this had a concrete effect, for in Rasmussen's fourth plan,<sup>3</sup> now called the Fifth Thule Expedition,<sup>4</sup> he added the participation of scientists from Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. Nordenskjöld was drawn into the process at an early stage.

The earliest evidence of a new plan was a meeting of the Thule Committee in January 1920 that included the participation of P. M. Pedersen, captain of the ship *Søkongen* (Sea King) supplying the Thule station. It was important for Rasmussen to know how to get his expedition landed in Hudson Bay, and the idea of sailing there with his own ship was again on his mind.

Immediately after this, Rasmussen came down with the Spanish influenza and his convalescence required several months. As a result, little happened until May 1920, when he produced a more detailed itinerary for the expedition. In the meantime, he had been in Norway for the sake of his health, staying with a friend, consul Axel Heiberg, who had earlier sponsored Nansen's and Sverdrup's polar voyages. They discussed Rasmussen's upcoming project, and the idea arose of making a joint effort with Norwegian and Swedish scientists. In addition to Nordenskjöld, contact was made with botanist Gunnar Andersson, secretary of the Swedish Society for Anthropology and Geography. In the beginning of June 1920, Rasmussen sent a letter to Nordenskjöld and Andersson with a provisional outline for the expedition.

If we are to guess the motive for the Nordic connection, it had, among other things, to do with money. The idea was also in line with the spirit of the time. After

World War I, cooperation among nations became an important consideration, not least for the Nordic countries, which very early sought to create alliances. In April 1919, *Foreningen Norden* (the Norden Association) was established, and in his plan, Rasmussen advanced the idea in a similar way. He wrote:

The historical situation in recent years has resulted in more intimate cooperation between the Nordic countries, and I am therefore happy to open also the possibility of a cooperation in the field of arctic research, in which the three Nordic countries have within their respective spheres played parts that have been scientifically decisive. (KRA B.37, F.29; *translation mine—KM*)

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the participation of Norwegian and Swedish scientists would fulfill Steensby's strict scholarly requirements and solve the problem of accomplishing tasks outside of Rasmussen's own field. These included geographical, biological, geophysical, and geological research, as well as the exploration of areas far from the proposed Danish project headquarters in Foxe Basin. Consequently, while the Swedes aimed at either a geophysical station at the magnetic North Pole or natural science research on Baffin Island, the Norwegians with a station at Jones Sound were to explore the district from there to Axel Heiberg Island and Grant's Land (the northwest portion of Ellesmere Island), areas in which Otto Sverdrup had previously traveled and which therefore might be regarded as a Norwegian prerogative.

For unknown reasons, the Nordic collaboration did not materialize. One of the problems might have been that the planned Swedish and Norwegian contributions did not connect with Rasmussen's main priorities. Yet Rasmussen's plan was increasingly settled. From then on, there was no doubt that the expedition would start in 1921, and in the lead-up every ounce of energy was being applied. In addition to communications with the potential Nordic partners, Rasmussen summoned expert opinions from authorities among the scientific disciplines involved. In this correspondence we find the first list with the names and/or functions of the participants in the Danish portion of the expedition. These were:

1. Therkel Mathiassen, ethnographer and archaeologist, to assist the geologist and biologist;
2. Capt. George Comer, American whaler, ice pilot, and amateur ethnographer with knowledge of

Inuit inhabitants around Hudson Bay; Rasmussen had known Comer from the latter's stay in north-west Greenland in 1916–1917;<sup>5</sup>

3. Peter Freuchen, cartographer and ethnographer;
4. Helge Bangsted, ethnographical and archaeological assistant;
5. A film director and a photographer/cinematographer, to be determined;
6. A Danish Greenlander as interpreter and secretary;
7. Three Polar Eskimo [Inughuit—ed.] sealers;
8. Knud Rasmussen, leader, ethnographer, and folklorist (KRA B.37, F.29).

Finally, it is again intriguing to see the special role the great sled journey played in the plan. In his first sketch of the Nordic proposal (dated May 30, 1920) Rasmussen wrote:

Eventually it is the leader's intention to do a quick and concluding sledge journey to the Eskimos in Alaska and from there to the arctic tribes, the Yuit-people in the neighbourhood of East Cape. (KRA B.37, F.25)

After the presentation of this outline, evidently someone told Rasmussen that such a concluding element, the trip to Alaska and Siberia, was not a good idea for a Nordic venture. He quickly corrected the proposed expedition route in the plan itself (undated, probably from late June):

After...having concluded his work in the Central Eskimo area, he breaks up via Pond's Bay to the Norwegian quarter [at Jones Sound] and goes with them to Thule. (KRA B.37, F.29)

## PLANS 5 AND 6 (1920): THE EXPENSIVE AND LOW-BUDGET MODELS

Like the preceding Plan 4, Plan 5 of summer 1920 was titled "The Fifth Thule Expedition to the Central Eskimo and America's Arctic Archipelago." Although the joint Nordic component was dropped, it was obviously important to Rasmussen that an expansive geographic scope be maintained and highlighted. Plan 5 produced during fall 1920<sup>6</sup> described an entirely Danish effort focused primarily on ethnography and archaeology with ancillary cartographical, geological, and biological goals.

It deserves mention that the archaeological objective played a rather small role in Plan 2 and was nearly absent in Plan 3 but became very important in the later versions. Undoubtedly, this was due to Thomas Thomsen's opinion that:

Finds made in North-East Greenland and on Southampton Island show that a close relationship exists between the earlier culture of these two places. Scientific excavations at the latter spot, which could further elucidate the question, would be of great importance. (KRA B.37, F.29)

As is well known, in this way Thomsen anticipated some of the most valuable scientific results from the FTE.

According to Plan 5 (and similarly to Plan 4), after landing at Fury and Hecla Strait, the expedition was to make contact with various Inuit groups, primarily the Caribou Inuit ("Kinipetu" of the original text). During the first two years, the expedition would work as far west as the Coppermine River in Coronation Gulf. The plan anticipated two additional years, although there was little detail on how these would be employed. In the third year Rasmussen imagined himself being in the neighborhood of the magnetic North Pole, and in the fourth year going by dogsled to Baffin Island, and from there following the Inuit migration route via Ellesmere Island back to Thule. There was, again, no hint of a sled journey to Bering Strait.

In November 1920, the new plan, with estimated expenses of 450,000 Danish kroner, was sent to the Danish Ministry of Education, with an application for financial support. However, before the answer was known, Rasmussen made a drastic reduction, probably after receiving a confidential recommendation from the minister, and in January 1921 he submitted a revised version (Plan 6) with the following comment:

Feeling that in these days it would involve great difficulties raising money for an expedition such as seen in Plan I [5]...I have after careful consideration revised the plan and reduced the participants and the duration of the expedition itself, so it will now be possible to carry out the expedition for a sum of 200,000 kroner.<sup>7</sup>

The expedition was now proposed as a purely ethnographic venture without commitments to geological, zoological, botanical, meteorological, or geophysical investigations. Comer was no longer included; neither was a boat and captain, an expensive winter headquarters building,



nor a voyage to Fury and Hecla Strait. Instead (as in Plan 3), the expedition would be ferried from Thule to Baffin Island, where the winter would be spent in investigations of the Inuit. Later, the party would advance to Iglulik and Repulse Bay. In the same round of cuts, the filmmaker disappeared and the duration of the expedition was reduced to two years.

While Plan 4 was the full extension with many scientists from three Nordic countries, and Plan 5 was slightly smaller but still ambitious, in Plan 6 the project was slimmed to an absolute minimum. Of Danish participants, only Freuchen, Mathiassen, and Rasmussen himself remained. Bangsted was eliminated, although a Danish-Greenlandic interpreter was still a possibility. Nevertheless, Rasmussen remained optimistic that the reductions would not impair the critical ethnographic objectives. In fact, he seemed rather content with the revised plan, which Steensby would never have approved; but the latter died in October 1920 and had no chance to intervene. In his cover letter to the minister, Rasmussen explicitly mentioned that the previous plan (no. 5) had so many items on its wish list “because these tasks were wanted by the scientific members of my committee” (see endnote 7), but not apparently by Rasmussen himself.

There was a reason why Rasmussen was confident about Plan 6, which he did not conceal in a February 1, 1921, letter to the chairman of the Thule Committee, Marius Nyeboe:

Now we say *pro forma*, that the saving is due to the halving of *the time*—the duration of the expedition. But I’m rather sure that this reduction will not apply to myself. Probably the other participants, but not me. But when we get so far, I shall not cost very much nor need much money where I am. (KRA B.18, F.34)

Rasmussen later had to retract the last words, but apart from that, it was clear that the ethnographical expedition was now to be organized in two parts, one including all other participants and Rasmussen, and one concerning Rasmussen alone.

The letter to Nyeboe contained another interesting piece of information regarding the role of Peter Freuchen. Rasmussen wrote that the new plan, despite its greatly reduced roster, nonetheless needed one more researcher to assist Freuchen in the field:

It is no use of Freuchen being left alone in Baffin Land. He will not be able to get any real work done when Mathiassen and I visit all the tribes in Hudson Bay and the North-West Passage. He must have a man with him who can take care of the purely ethnographical aspects with all the many and extremely interesting tribes in the region.

Rasmussen calculated that such added researcher would cost 20,000 kroner, and this money would be well spent. In this way a trained ethnographer, Kaj Birket-Smith, entered the expedition team. In other words, the budget expanded again, in part because of Rasmussen’s visit to London in March 1921 to make appointments with the Canadian authorities and Hudson’s Bay Company, when it turned out that the pared-down model could not stand up on its own. On March 19, Rasmussen wrote to Nyeboe that the costs and itinerary had to be changed yet again; it was, for example, now required that the *Søkongen* go to Hudson Bay and that the expedition have a winter headquarters. With surprising speed, two years in the field had grown back to three, and in the meantime, a first installment of 100,000 kroner was received from the Danish state.

## PLAN 7: FINAL, BUT WITH A SURPRISE ADDITION

All this was set in stone in a final official plan (no. 7) by the time the Danish members of the expedition, including Rasmussen, left Copenhagen for Greenland in May and June 1921.<sup>8</sup> According to this version, expedition headquarters would be established at Lyon Inlet in Foxe Basin and work was to follow the broad program already outlined. No special emphasis was placed on ancillary investigations in geology, biology, meteorology, and geophysics, although these were represented to about the same extent as in Plan 5. Undoubtedly this was done to retain the impression of an expedition with a broad scientific agenda. More remarkable is the fact that even though the film crew had been eliminated, it was still the stated intention “to take cinematographic pictures from the regions traversed” (Smithsonian Institution Archives [SIA], Record Unit 7091, B.1, F.1).

As for the expedition conclusion, Rasmussen imagined that the *Søkongen* would return in 1923 to pick up the collections and return Mathiassen and Birket-Smith to Denmark. He and the others would stay on:

In the course of winter 1923–24 the leader, together with Peter Freuchen and the Eskimos, will follow the old migration route of the Eskimos across Baffin Land, Lancaster Sound, Ellesmere Land and possibly Heiberg's Land and back to Greenland, where the Thule-station will be reached in the spring of 1924. (SIA, Record Unit 7091, B.1, F.1)

The great sled journey to the west had again disappeared (Fig. 3), but as Rasmussen hinted in his letter to Nyeboe, his true intentions were yet to be revealed. And quite so! More than two months after the expedition left

Copenhagen, Rasmussen wrote to the Thule Committee from Greenland on July 29, a month before sailing for Hudson Bay. He expressed "a strong wish to reach as far as possible all the most important areas in Alaska, inhabited by Eskimos, and—of course—in addition, a trip across the Bering Strait to the Yuits [Siberian Yupik], who partially are still completely unknown."<sup>9</sup> Rasmussen continued:

The fact that I haven't wished to include this plan in the present survey of the expedition's various tasks is due to the fact that this journey covers such long distances that you dare [not] be bound

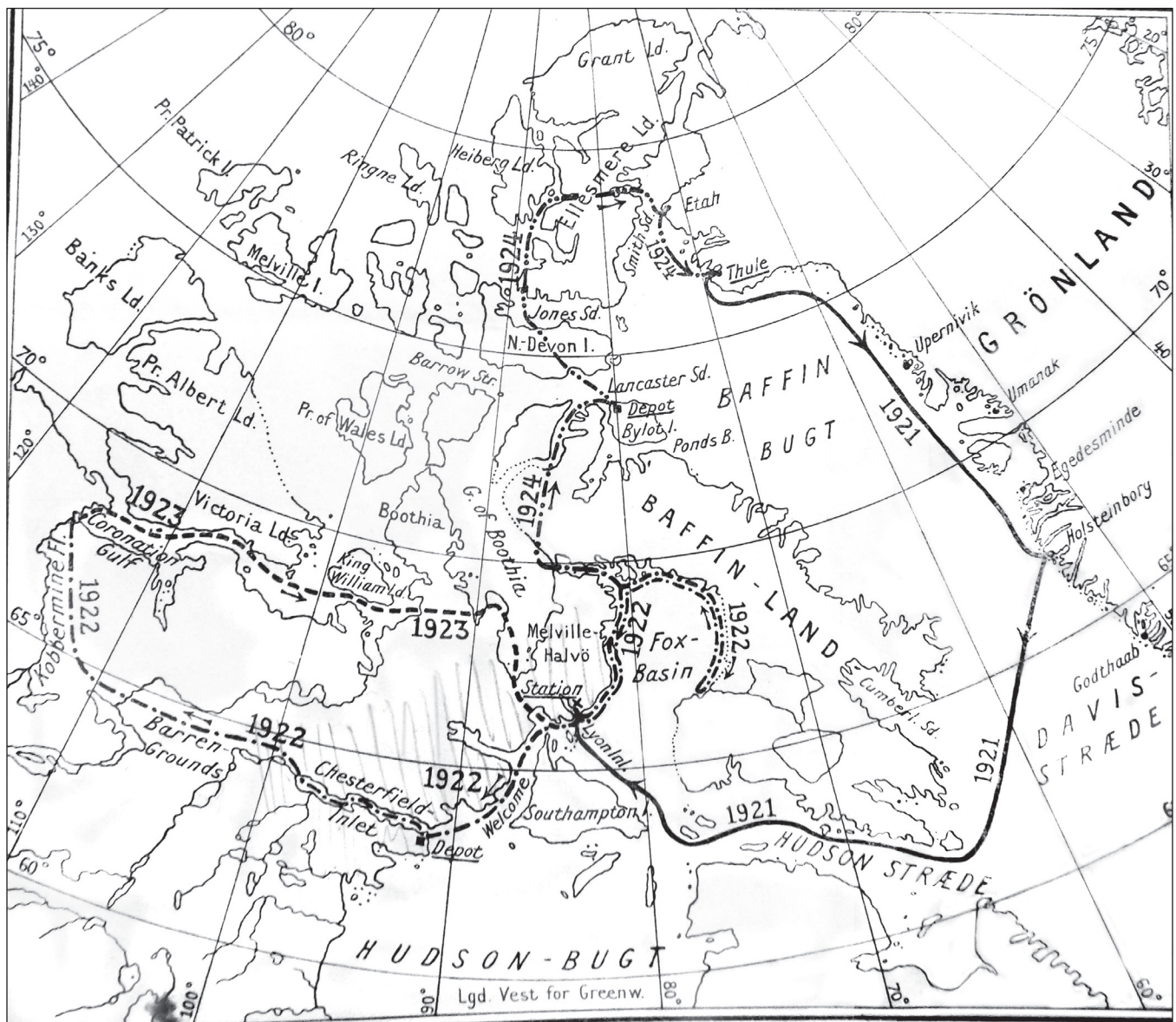


Figure 3. Map of the Fifth Thule Expedition route proposed for Plan 7 (1921, in Danish). It was originally published in an offprint from *Geografisk Tidsskrift*, vol. 26, part II, 1921 (released in June 1921). The copy belonged to Rasmussen's secretary Emmy Langberg and has her name and the date 18 June 1921 on it (KRA Box 39, file 4).

beforehand to carrying them out. Only when we from the headquarters have more definitely investigated the conditions for such a journey will it be the time to incorporate this part into the other duties of the expedition. (KRA B.37, F.33)

Rasmussen imagined at this point that the arduous round-trip to Bering Strait and back to the Central Arctic might consume an entire year; thus, his argument for not mentioning it beforehand, even as a *possibility*, does not carry conviction.

Below, we will return to the question of why Rasmussen did not initially reveal his plan for a sled journey from central Arctic Canada all the way to Siberia, but the track itself may first be considered. There were two possible routes, depending on how Bering Strait was to be traversed. If he foresaw being able to cross the strait from Cape Prince of Wales by sledding over the sea ice, he would leave expedition headquarters at Foxe Basin in the autumn of 1922, travel by sled via Coronation Gulf to the Mackenzie River, inland to Fort McPherson and Fort Yukon, then down the Yukon River to Norton Sound, thence to Bering Strait. If he anticipated having to sail across the strait, he would instead leave Foxe Basin in spring 1922, stay on the coast all the way to Point Barrow, continue by mail boat to Cape Prince of Wales in summer 1922, and from there proceed by skin boat (*umiak*) to East Cape, Chukotka. In the latter case, the route would follow the coast of Alaska; in the former, the rivers and land routes. If he took the inland route, Rasmussen hoped to meet another Arctic traveler and author at Fort Yukon—British-born priest Hudson Stuck (1863–1920). Stuck could share information about the country and potentially serve as his guide down the Yukon River, but as Rasmussen later learned, Stuck died in October 1920. Yet the most obvious element of this latest plan was that Rasmussen wanted to make the journey to the Bering Strait and back to Canada.

### THE GREAT SLED JOURNEY IN PLAN AND IN REALITY

This is not the place to examine in detail how the entire FTE (1921–1924) scored against its final plan. All in all, the expedition was carried out as it had been drawn up by Rasmussen but, of course, often in unanticipated ways. When it comes to the relation between plan and execution, however, one aspect cannot be left unaddressed, namely, the “great sled journey” across North America. From the very beginning in 1905, this epic undertaking had been

at the heart of Rasmussen’s vision but, as described above, it had a rough-and-tumble life over 16 years of evolving expedition plans. It was out and back in again, in several different guises. In the end, how and why did it happen?

The original idea was to retrace the Inuit migration to Greenland, traveling back along this pan-Arctic route by dogsled to their place of origin. But just as important were the means to this end, as Rasmussen stated in 1905: “The fact is that we shall visit all districts inhabited by Eskimos, and after all, in this lies, so to speak, the greatness of our expedition.” The expedition was to be about scientific discovery, but it was also about personal and cultural connections. How did the different Inuit groups relate to each other? Did they share a common language, traditions, and history? Did they constitute one people, or many different peoples?

However, as we have seen, these original broad questions had largely faded by 1909. The project narrowed to a study of the inland Inuit and the little-known groups north and west of Repulse Bay. It is as if Rasmussen’s original motivating ideas were eclipsed by the necessity to accommodate other people’s priorities, yet he found them difficult to abandon. It is striking in this regard that the great sled journey, representing the dream of his youth, resurfaced in the unofficial plan of 1915 (Plan 3) and the sketch for Plan 4, but was again absent in the official versions of these and in later versions. Rasmussen sent out feelers but was asked repeatedly to withdraw them.

The problem, of course, was that there was a certain incompatibility between the two projects. One was a highly coordinated, multidisciplinary expedition of scientific discovery, the second a more personal and cultural adventure, attached to Rasmussen’s great desire to understand the relationships among the different Inuit groups. As a folklorist and ethnographer (admittedly nonprofessional), he fully recognized the significance and legitimacy of the first strategy; but with his double ethnic identity and as a spokesman for Greenlandic Inuit interests, he also engaged strongly with the second. Therefore, as we have seen, the (more or less) concealed plan for the “great sled journey” was made known only once the expedition was already heading to the field and no one from the scientific committee could interfere.

If we now turn to what actually happened, it is obvious that the journey to Alaska with Arnarlunguaq and Miteq had little resemblance to the plan that Rasmussen belatedly outlined in his letter from Greenland to the scientific committee; it was instead exactly the one that he



had dreamed of in 1905! Over the years and throughout many plans, it was this journey and the vision it represented that remained paramount, and it was carried out in the way he anticipated—with a few Inughuit companions, using Inuit forms of travel, and arriving among the different groups as “comrades” (Fig. 4).

Interestingly, it is this journey that stands in posterity as the main legacy of the FTE, not only because of the unique folkloristic material that was collected but also because the journey itself established the connection between the many Inuit groups and their cultural unity as of a common nation. Rasmussen’s personal, cultural, and scientific projects formed a synthesis and background for the later political organization of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference in 1980. Just as Rasmussen became a bridge builder between Denmark and Greenland, the great sled journey made him a bridge builder between the Inuit of Greenland, Canada, Alaska, and Russia.

## NOTES

1. KRA B.37, F.34. The title and the text is in Danish, the translation is by the author. In the registration of Knud Rasmussen’s papers (Tiemroth 1996), the plan is wrongly dated to 1916.
2. HBC Archives, Winnipeg: Correspondence with Fur Commissioners, A.12/FT Misc./275.
3. The plan came into being in three steps: a temporary disposition, dated May 30 (KRA B.37, F.25), expert opinions (KRA B.37, F.29), and the plan itself, which is undated but is probably from the end of June (KRA B.37, F.29).
4. The Third Thule Expedition (1919), which did not involve Rasmussen’s participation, was aimed at establishing a depot for Roald Amundsen’s *Maud* Expedition, and the Fourth Thule Expedition was a folkloristic expedition to East Greenland.

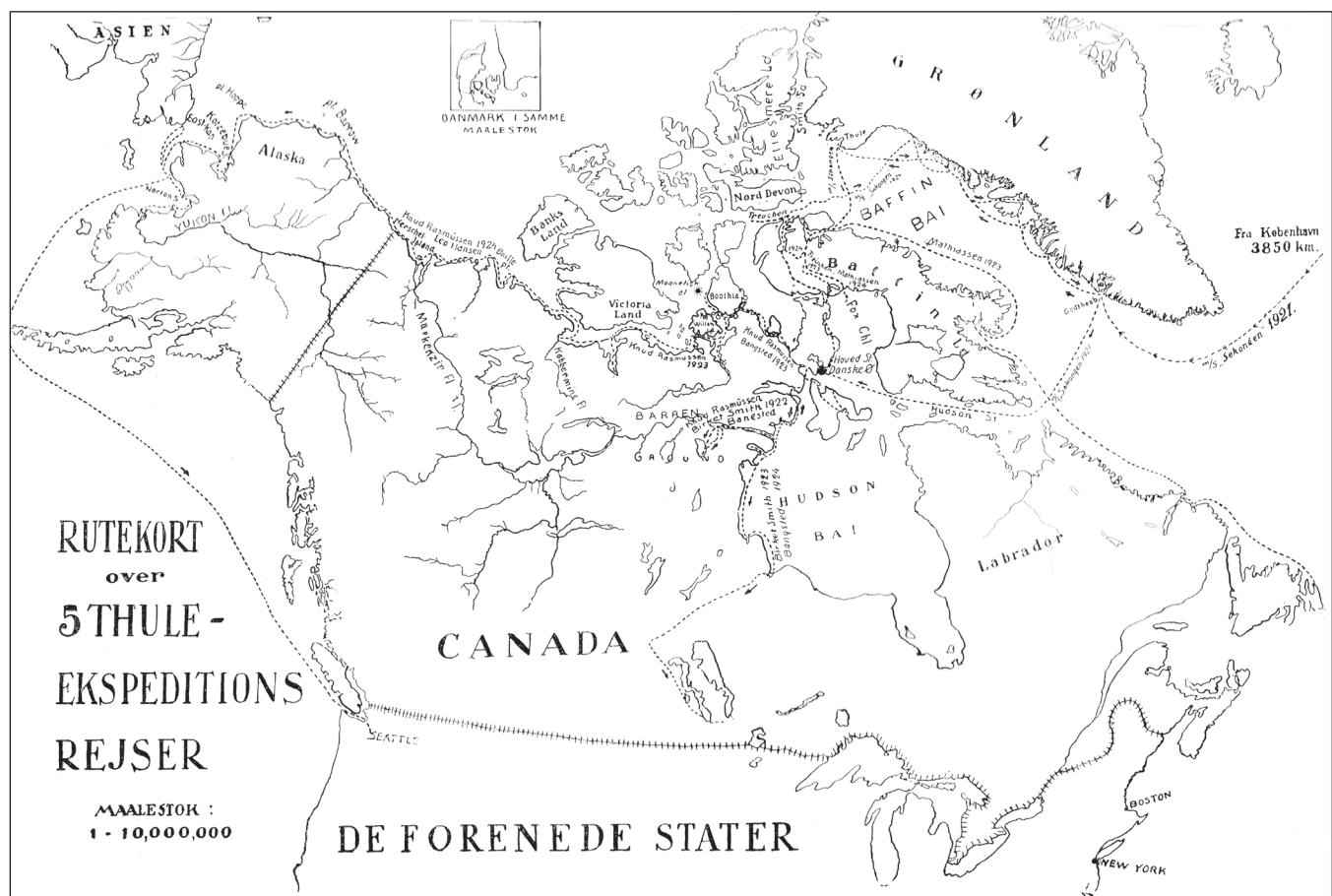


Figure 4. Map of the final route of the Fifth Thule Expedition, 1921–24 (in Danish). It has been preserved as a loose sheet or print and was probably produced in connection with Rasmussen’s lecture on the Fifth Thule Expedition in December 1924 or January 1925 (KRA Box 39, file 13).

5. Rasmussen invited George Comer in a letter dated May 12, 1920 (KRA B.18, F. 37.7).
6. Both of these plans can be found in the Danish State Archive, "Rigsarkivet," Copenhagen: Undervisningsministeriet 2. departement, 1. Kontor: Journalsager (1916–1962) 1258: 1951. They are both undated, but no. 5 was sent to the Ministry of Education in November 1920 and no. 6 in January 1921.
7. Letter from Rasmussen to the minister, Jacob Appel, January 28, 1921 (KRA B.37, F.3).
8. This plan had come into being around the beginning of April 1921. It is undated. Here cited from the unchanged English version in SIA, Record Unit 7091, B.1, F.1.
9. Letter from Knud Rasmussen to the Thule Committee, July 29, 1921. KRA B.37, F.33.

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