

**Sex, lies and northern explorations: Recent books on Peary, MacMillan, Stefansson, Wilkins and Flaherty**

CHRISTOPHER, Robert J., 2005 *Robert and Frances Flaherty: A documentary life, 1883-1922*, Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 453 pages.

JENNESS, Stuart E., 2004 *The making of an explorer. George Hubert Wilkins and the Canadian Arctic Expedition 1913-1916*, Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 417 pages.

MacMILLAN, Donald B., 2008 *How Peary reached the Pole. The personal story of his assistant*, introduction by Genevieve M. LeMoine, Susan A. Kaplan, and Anne Witty, Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 307 pages.

PÁLSSON, Gísli, 2005 *Travelling passions. The hidden life of Vilhjalmur Stefansson*, translated from the Icelandic by Keneva Kunz, Winnipeg, University of Manitoba Press, 374 pages.

Murielle Nagy

Volume 32, Number 2, 2008

Franz Boas et les Inuit  
Franz Boas and the Inuit

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/038221ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/038221ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Inuksiutiit Katimajit Inc.  
Centre interuniversitaire d'études et de recherches autochtones (CIÉRA)

ISSN

0701-1008 (print)  
1708-5268 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Nagy, M. (2008). Sex, lies and northern explorations: Recent books on Peary, MacMillan, Stefansson, Wilkins and Flaherty / CHRISTOPHER, Robert J., 2005 *Robert and Frances Flaherty: A documentary life, 1883-1922*, Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 453 pages. / JENNESS, Stuart E., 2004 *The making of an explorer. George Hubert Wilkins and the Canadian Arctic Expedition 1913-1916*, Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 417 pages. / MacMILLAN, Donald B., 2008 *How Peary reached the Pole. The personal story of his assistant*, introduction by Genevieve M. LeMoine, Susan A. Kaplan, and Anne Witty, Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 307 pages. / PÁLSSON, Gísli, 2005 *Travelling passions. The hidden life of Vilhjalmur Stefansson*, translated from the Icelandic by Keneva Kunz, Winnipeg, University of Manitoba Press, 374 pages. *Études/Inuit/Studies*, 32(2), 169–185. <https://doi.org/10.7202/038221ar>

Tous droits réservés © La revue Études/Inuit/Studies, 2008

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

# Essai bibliographique / Book review essay

---

## Sex, lies and northern explorations: Recent books on Peary, MacMillan, Stefansson, Wilkins and Flaherty

---

Murielle Nagy\*

CHRISTOPHER, Robert J.

2005 *Robert and Frances Flaherty: A documentary life, 1883-1922*, Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 453 pages.

JENNESS, Stuart E.

2004 *The making of an explorer. George Hubert Wilkins and the Canadian Arctic Expedition 1913-1916*, Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 417 pages.

MacMILLAN, Donald B.

2008 *How Peary reached the Pole. The personal story of his assistant*, introduction by Genevieve M. LeMoine, Susan A. Kaplan, and Anne Witty, Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 307 pages.

PÁLSSON, Gísli

2005 *Travelling passions. The hidden life of Vilhjalmur Stefansson*, translated from the Icelandic by Keneva Kunz, Winnipeg, University of Manitoba Press, 374 pages.

### Introduction

Arctic explorers carry with them an aura of braveness, stamina and tremendous determination. Stories about their travels to exotic places have always attracted the public's imagination. In the case of the Arctic, the explorers' description and images of

---

\* CIÉRA, Université Laval, Québec (Québec) G1V 0A6, Canada. [murielle.nagy@fss.ulaval.ca](mailto:murielle.nagy@fss.ulaval.ca)

the Inuit they met were also part of the appeal for their publications. However, the personal life of male explorers during their stay in the Arctic kept private if not completely hidden once they were back south. Although some had sexual relationships with Inuit women and even fathered children, neither were acknowledged by them.

In this essay, I will focus on four recent books on Arctic explorers from the same period, the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, who shared similar experiences. The explorers are Peary, MacMillan, Stefansson, Wilkins and Flaherty. Keeping in mind the possible influence of senior explorers on younger ones, I will present them in chronological order of their Arctic explorations, starting with MacMillan's book on Peary's final expedition to the North Pole in which he took part, then Pálsson's book on Stefansson, Jenness's book on Wilkins, and finally, Christopher's book on Flaherty. All authors use diaries and letters as their main sources of information.

### **Peary through MacMillan's eyes**

Donald B. MacMillan (1874-1970) wrote his book *How Peary reached the Pole* in 1928, almost 20 years after participating in Robert Peary's final trip to northwest Greenland, but published it only in 1934. Out of print for many years, Susan Kaplan and Genevieve LeMoine, both from the Peary-MacMillan Arctic Museum of Bowdoin College, decided to republish it with a new introduction and extra photographs (drawn from hand-tinted glass lantern slides) to commemorate the centennial of Peary's discovery of the North Pole.

Peary's 1908-1909 North Pole Expedition was the first Arctic journey that MacMillan participated in and it would change his life forever. After this trip, the high school teacher, an alumnus of Bowdoin College like Peary, undertook graduate studies in anthropology at Harvard and became an explorer himself. This first-hand account of difficult and dangerous travels in an exceedingly cold environment is definitely an homage to Robert Peary (1856-1920). MacMillan, who had lost his father at age 9, portrayed Peary as a paternal figure to whom he vowed a Scout-like loyalty: "We were to give him our best, perhaps our hands, our feet, or even our lives, as one did" (p. 160). "The Commander," as MacMillan often referred to him, is depicted as very concerned about the well-being of his men, who trusted him because his methods "were the results of his own experience over many years" combined with that of the "most efficient men" in the Arctic: the Inuit (p. 97). Unlike previous explorations, the "Peary system" used sled dogs and dispersed caches with precise amounts of food for humans and dogs.

The Inughuit, or Polar Eskimos of earlier literature, are indeed very present in the book, although predominantly referred to anonymously as "my Eskimos." Given that after 1909 the author pursued explorations and research in the North for over 30 years, it is surprising that even in 1928 he did not moderate his initial racist comments about

them. Despite the note in the introduction by LeMoine et al. that “[...] although a condescending tone, born of deeply ingrained characteristic of the time<sup>1</sup>, creeps into the prose sometimes, for the most part MacMillan writes of the Inughuit as equals [...]” (p. xli), one is not always convinced. Rather, he seems to follow Peary’s paternalistic tone about the Inughuit (*e.g.*, Peary 1898). Even when praising their physical qualities (*e.g.*, p. 177), MacMillan used the terms “savage” and “primitive” to depict them.

The weakness of this new edition of the 1934 book is the absence of annotations from the literature that has since been published about Peary’s expeditions, that would have provided useful context. Dick’s (2001) book is only mentioned in passing in the introduction as presenting an “insightful analysis of Peary and interactions between the explorer’s men and the Inughuit” (p. xxii), while it also touches upon the abusive sexual relations with Inughuit women by Peary and the other American members of his party. Despite mentions of Bloom (1993), Counter (1991) and Henderson (2005), this edition too is silent about both Peary and his assistant Matthew Henson having relationships with Inughuit women and fathering children, facts well known to their Inughuit descendants and included in earlier publications (*e.g.*, Malaurie 1989[1955])<sup>2</sup>.

Accounts of Peary’s private life during his expeditions cast doubt on the strict accuracy of MacMillan’s insistence that “[...] Commander Peary’s leaves of absence from the United States Navy for a long period of years were not for the purpose of ‘having a good time up North’” (p. 175). Even if Peary lost his toes to the terrible cold during one of his expeditions, his long sojourns in the Arctic were not entirely hardships. Indeed, Peary’s wife since 1888, Josephine Diebitsch (1863-1955) accompanied him on four of his expeditions, travelled to meet him twice in the Arctic, and wrote books to promote his work, while Peary maintained a relationship in Greenland with Aleqasina<sup>3</sup> who was herself married with Piugaattoq<sup>4</sup> (Harper 2000[1986]: 29). Even the so-called “traditional” practice of exchange of wives between Inuit partners does not adequately explain Peary’s behaviour since he certainly did not include his own wife in the arrangement. The inequality of power between Aleqasina, Piugaattoq on one hand and Peary on the other, undoubtedly played an important part in his actions. Yet, in 1900 when Josephine went to Greenland and met

---

1 When Peary came back to New York, one of the first questions regarding his reaching of the North Pole was that his main assistant, Matthew Henson (1866-1955), was a Black man (see Henson 1912). MacMillan himself was asked the same question repeatedly and even in his book justified Henson’s presence because he was the “most effective man” (p. 275).

2 Although Bloom (1993: 104) claims that Peary “publicly made it known that he had sexual relations with a very young Inuit girl” by including a photo of her nude in his 1898 book, he did it implicitly and left the conclusions to his readers.

3 In the new introduction to MacMillan’s book, there is no mention of Aleqasina nor of the fact that she was only about 14 years old when Peary had a relationship with her (*e.g.*, Harper 2000[1986]; Henderson 2005; Malaurie et al. 2003).

4 Piugaattoq was killed by Fitzhugh Green, one of the members of the 1913 Crocker Land Expedition under the command of MacMillan. Green was never prosecuted for the murder, and according to Kenn Harper (cited in Franch 2008), a later generation of Inuit suspected that he killed Piugaattoq out of desire for his wife Aleqasina.

Aleqasina, who told her Peary had fathered her infant son, Peary was unapologetic about his liaison (Henderson 2005: 135). Peary's ethic with regard to Inughuit women was revealed by his advice for successful expeditions in 1885: "the presence of women an absolute necessity to render men contended" (Dick 2001: 382). This said, a late comer to the Peary Arctic Club, MacMillan might not have realised that during all his expeditions, "Peary assumed the role of patriarch, dispensing Inughuit women to his employees as if they were his property. [...] Peary's 'philanthropy' extended to offering women in pre-existing conjugal relationships to other Inughuit men [...]" (*ibid.*).

Peary's employment of many Inughuit "had wide-ranging effects on the material and psychological well-being of this group" and the "stresses of early contact with Euro-Americans contributed to many of the reported episodes of hysteria among the Inughuit" (*ibid.*: 395). MacMillan made various comments on "piblokto," and although he understood it as "a form of Arctic hysteria, not caused by fright or joy or sorrow, but possibly by jealousy, abuse by the husband or a craving for affection" (p. 100), his humorous description of one particular case, that of Ahl-nay-ah, suggests he did not consider the condition serious. It is an unconcerned, heartless portrayal of a woman's dismay and abuse at the hands of Peary's men: "she was wrapped in a blanket, arms pinioned to her sides, flat on her back on a two-inch plank, and hoisted up to the fore boom where she remained, swinging to and fro in the wind [...]" (p. 101-102)<sup>5</sup>. Ahl-nay-ah had no husband, as MacMillan informs us, which may have rendered her more vulnerable to abuse<sup>6</sup>. As Dick (2001: 396) pointed out, "what seems common to many episodes of "pibloktoq" is not merely the presence of stress but the lack of power of people placed in these difficult situations." For women, "some cases of 'pibloktoq' probably also represented expression of resistance to patriarchy and sexual coercion" (*ibid.*: 380).

In the last chapter of his book, MacMillan dismisses any pretension from Dr. Frederick Cook to have reached the North Pole before Peary, and also mentions seeing "Mene" (Minik) Wallace arriving on the *Jeanie* to Greenland in August 1909. At age 7, Minik, his father Qisuk and four other Inughuit had been brought by Peary to New York's American Museum of Natural History in 1897, at the request of anthropologist Franz Boas (see Pöhl in this issue). Since no mention is made of Kenn Harper's (2000[1986]) book on Minik Wallace in the introduction, the reader might not even know how the latter ended up staying in New York even after his father and the other Inughuit had died there of sickness, while the only adult survivor was sent back to Greenland. Curiously, MacMillan also fails to mention that Minik Wallace was the guide and interpreter on his own ill-fated 1913 Crocker Land Expedition which was

---

<sup>5</sup> The photo taken by MacMillan of her in this position on the *Roosevelt* is not included in the book, although published in Dick (2001: 385, fig. 78). Incidentally, the figures in MacMillan's book are not labelled nor listed which makes the identification of their photographer (listed before the index) difficult to corroborate.

<sup>6</sup> Curiously, neither her name nor that of In-a-loo, who suffered similarly, are listed in the index which would have benefited by including the names of the Inughuit.

stranded in Greenland for four years. In fact, MacMillan diminishes the importance of Minik Wallace's life trauma<sup>7</sup> and struggles: "The Eskimo is inherently a nomad. This predominating trait asserted itself with Mene again and again. To Montreal; where he slept under a freight car; to Maine, to California, to State after State and back again to the primitive (p. 256)." Unfortunately, MacMillan's comments reflect what seems a general lack of empathy towards some of the few Inughuit described in a book mainly aimed at praising Peary during his last expedition to the North Pole.

### Stefansson's women

In contrast to MacMillan's book which included no comments or annotations about the private lives of Peary and Henson while they were in the Arctic, *Travelling passions* is all about the hidden life of Vilhjalmur Stefansson (1879-1962), who—like them—did not acknowledge his relationship with an Inupiaq woman and the son he had with her. Author Gísli Pálsson provides an explanation for why the private lives of explorers and scientists in the course of their work is significant by quoting Stoler (2002: 12): "Unused to pushing the affective against the political, we leave sentiments to literature, dismiss references to them as the emotive fluff rather than the real stuff of official archives." Pálsson suggests drawing the link between the personal lives of authors and their writing, which can also explain their views of the people they were with.

Pálsson has had a long term interest in Stefansson, editing his ethnographic notebooks in 2001, and writing articles about his private life (e.g., Pálsson 1998, 2004, 2008). *Travelling Passions* is a translation of the 2003 Icelandic original. The book starts with letters exchanged between Stefansson and his fiancée, Cecil Smith (1884-1959). She and Stefansson were apparently deeply in love although he seemed to have thought that the life of an anthropologist doing fieldwork—and later that of an explorer—was not compatible with that of a married man. Early in the summer of 1909, while Stefansson was on his second expedition to the western Canadian Arctic, Cecil broke off their engagement (p. 96). Although she married in 1910 and later had children, she continued corresponding with him until 1935 (p. 299).

The originality of the book resides in this recently discovered correspondence between Cecil Smith and Stefansson, as well as interviews by Pálsson with Cecil's daughter and with Stefansson's Inuvialuit<sup>8</sup> descendants. The chapters on Stefansson's formative years and his first trip to Iceland present an intimate portrait of the future anthropologist-explorer. Most of the subsequent chapters follow Stefansson's career with a main emphasis on the women in his life. The focus on Pannigabluk, an Inupiaq

---

<sup>7</sup> Nine years after the death of his father, Minik realised that his father's skeleton was displayed at the American Museum of Natural History (Harper 2000[1986]). MacMillan was likely aware of Minik's tragic story from newspaper reports or from Minik himself when he hired him for his expedition.

<sup>8</sup> Curiously, in his book Pálsson never employs the term "Inuvialuit" (sing. Inuvialuk) which is the contemporary ethnonym used by the Inuit of the western Canadian Arctic to identify themselves.

widow in her late 30s whom Stefansson hired as a seamstress in 1909<sup>9</sup>, sometimes overshadows other Inuit who lived and worked with him. Hence, although Stefansson hired Natkusiak (1885-1947) at about the same time and hunted and travelled extensively with him, the reader will get the impression that he spent most of his time with Pannigabluk.

Although Pannigabluk “was on his journeys almost continuously” from 1909 until the end of 1911 (p. 93), working as a seamstress for his expeditions, and then on and off from 1914 to 1918, Stefansson did not acknowledge their relationship privately or publicly, nor that they had a son together<sup>10</sup>. Pálsson’s labelling of Pannigabluk as “his wife from Alaska” (p. 128) likely reflects what people who knew her thought and still think<sup>11</sup>. Indeed when she and her child got baptised in 1915 in Aklavik, Pannigabluk was registered as the wife of Stefansson, and Alex as his son (p. 16). However, this should also be taken with caution since Stefansson himself never referred to Pannigabluk as his wife or girlfriend. Furthermore, in December 1911 Pannigabluk left Stefansson<sup>12</sup>. At the end of July 1912 he went south to prepare his next expedition, and she did not hear from him until he came back in the fall of 1913 (p. 139).

Then, during the first half of the 1913-1918<sup>13</sup> Canadian Arctic Expedition (CAE), it is difficult to assess if Pannigabluk and Stefansson lived together for extended periods of time since his journal’s entries start only from March 22, 1914 (p. 137). Furthermore, during the previous three months Stefansson travelled from Collinson Point to Herschel Island and Fort MacPherson to get mail and send news about the expedition (Jenness 2004: 83-84), and he was on two long ice trips which did not include women: from March to September, 1914 (*ibid.*: 95, fig. 20) and from April to August, 1915 (*ibid.*: 196, fig. 41). This shift of focus from his own anthropological research to exploration of unmapped territories in the High Arctic was due to the objectives of the sponsor of the CAE, the Canadian Government, which wanted to assert its sovereignty over the Arctic<sup>14</sup>.

Starting in September 1915 and for the next two years, Stefansson mentioned Pannigabluk in his diaries (p. 143). It is also during this third expedition that photos

---

<sup>9</sup> Page 323 indicates that Pannigabluk was hired in 1908 by Stefansson. But although she was first mentioned by Stefansson on July 22, 1908, it is not clear whether she was hired then. According to Stefansson’s diaries, this is more likely to have occurred in late March or early April 1909 (pp. 92-93).

<sup>10</sup> Alex Stefansson was born on March 10, 1910 (p. 98).

<sup>11</sup> *E.g.*, Alex’s daughter Georgina Stefansson published a short article in 1961 entitled “My Grandfather, Dr. Stefansson.”

<sup>12</sup> According to Vanast (2008: 93) Pannigabluk left Stefansson because he had sexual relations with other women. Vanast includes among them one of the seamstresses of the expedition and her 12 year old daughter but his evidence for these allegations is highly speculative and circumstantial at best.

<sup>13</sup> The CAE was to last from 1913 to 1916 but Stefansson stayed for two more years.

<sup>14</sup> Stefansson hoped to discover the Crocker Land that Peary had named in 1906 after seeing mountain tops in the northwest, and which MacMillan was himself trying to find during his own 1913 expedition (Jenness 2004: 90, 381). Unfortunately for the explorers, that land was a mirage.

were taken of Pannigabluk and Alex. Regarding the first photo of them (p. 122) taken in 1913 “around the time Stefansson renewed his relationship with his family” (p. 144), Pálsson describes Pannigabluk as looking “rather shy, as she is out of place avoiding the gaze of the photographer, G.H. Wilkins, perhaps observing Inupiat manners requiring that a woman look down, not directly at another adult, especially a man” (*ibid.*)<sup>15</sup>. Pálsson contrasts that photo with two taken the next year where Pannigabluk is with Alex “standing straight and full of pride, as she had earned a legitimate status among the expedition team” (p. 145), alluding to her recognition as the “wife” of Stefansson (contra Jenness 2004: 73)<sup>16</sup>.

One can only speculate why Stefansson was silent about his relationship with Pannigabluk. He might have been reluctant to admit he had fathered a child with a woman he had no intention of marrying. Although Cecil got married the very year Alex was born, Stefansson, who was “still emotionally attached” to her, did not mention his existence nor that of Pannigabluk (p. 174). Alex’s children told Pálsson that Stefansson wanted to take his son to Boston or New York and that Pannigabluk refused (p. 172). We will never know what place Pannigabluk really occupied in Stefansson’s heart, but he certainly learned a lot from her as she was one his main informants on Inupiat culture and language. Unfortunately, “like most of his contemporaries, anthropologists and others, he was incapable of recognizing those Aboriginal people who collaborated with him, not least women, as fully fledged participants in gathering data in the field” (p. 95).

As for Alex, Pálsson thinks that Stefansson was well aware of the racism of his time, and was probably afraid of the treatment his son would get if he lived with him in Euro-American society (p. 174). Pálsson draws an analogy with the sad story of Minik (Harper 2000[1986]) which was likely known by Stefansson (p. 177). But even if Stefansson did not decide to bring Alex south, the question arises of why did he not recognise him publicly as his son. One possibility could have been concern for his public image and access to funding, particularly after the tragedies of the *Karluk*<sup>17</sup> in 1914 and of Wrangel Island in 1923<sup>18</sup>. In any event, Stefansson never returned to the Mackenzie Delta.

---

<sup>15</sup> Incidentally, the photographer was not Wilkins, who met Pannigabluk and Alex only in late January 1914 (Jenness 2004: 72). According to the archives section of the Canadian Museum of Civilization’s web site, this photo (# 38378) was taken by geologist John O’Neill of the Southern Party on 18 October 1913, near Martin Point, Alaska.

<sup>16</sup> One of the rare citations of a member of the CAE commenting about Stefansson’s son Alex in the book is from Wilkins and includes a comment from Dr. Anderson (p. 143) which is cited in Jenness (2004: 73) as reported by Prof. Johansen.

<sup>17</sup> The *Karluk* was the main ship of Stefansson’s Canadian Arctic Expedition. It was icebound at the start of the expedition, and later crushed by ice in January 1914. Eleven men perished trying to reach the mainland.

<sup>18</sup> Stefansson’s 1921 experiment of sending five people to colonise Wrangel Island (north of Siberia) and live off the land was another disaster, ending with the deaths of four men, only the Inupiaq cook-seamstress Ada Blackjack survived and was rescued two years later.



Although Stefansson never came back to visit Pannigabluk and Alex, Pálsson is convinced that he was concerned about their welfare and “apparently he paid their bills at the Hudson’s Bay store in Aklavik” (p. 169). Unfortunately, there are no reference to support this statement, and it is not clear whether payments were made only while Stefansson was still in the Arctic, thus until 1918, or until Pannigabluk died from tuberculosis in 1940—the year before Stefansson got married. As for Pálsson’s impression that Stefansson enquired about their fate, it stems from a letter that Stefansson received from Captain George Comer (1858-1937) in September 1927 which mentioned children fathered by white whalers “who were the first to be allowed to starve or perish” (p. 169-170). However, the allusion was probably to Comer’s own children with Inuit women (Eber 1989: 178, note 25). Although Pálsson thinks that “Comer’s letter may have been a response to Stefansson’s queries about Alex” (p. 170), this is unlikely since Comer worked exclusively in the Hudson Bay area of the eastern Arctic, not in the western Arctic. From accounts presented in Pálsson (2001: 49) and on pages 282 and 283 of his book, it sadly seems that Stefansson was in denial about Alex being his son.

Pálsson must be praised for unveiling an intimate side of Stefansson from his correspondence with his first love, Cecil Smith, and through excerpts about raising children and fatherhood from his writings, but also for giving a voice to Pannigabluk and their son Alex through interviews with their descendants. Although full of information, the book is nevertheless repetitive at times, and there are a few errors and omissions. Hence, “Inuktitut, the Inupiat language used by his companions” (p. 11) should be corrected since Inupiaq and Inuktitut are two different dialectal groupings belonging to the Inuit language. On the same page, the First Nations living in Inuvik should be qualified as being Dene with a majority of Gwich’in. Also, not to offend any Cree reader, the map in page 125 should have “Innu lands” replaced by “Cree and Innu lands” since both their territories are included in it. Finally, on pages 241 and 363, Ishmael’s last name should be mentioned: it is Alunik.

### **Wilkins: From photographer to explorer**

Thirteen years after his monumental editing of his father’s diaries during the Canadian Arctic Expedition in 1913-1916, Stuart Jenness produced a detailed and well annotated book on the diaries of George Hubert Wilkins (1888-1958) who was initially hired as the photographer of the same expedition. Appropriately entitled *The making of an explorer*, the book demonstrates how Wilkins’s first journey with Stefansson to the Arctic changed his life, very much like MacMillan was affected by the experience of joining Peary on his last North Pole expedition. Evidently, these formative experiences made a tremendous impression on both men, who for the rest of their lives tried to emulate their mentors. Jenness’s presentation of Wilkins’s diaries with maps and photos present a detailed account of his journey on an almost daily basis.

The book starts with a brief prologue on Wilkins's youth in Australia and his interest in photography and moving pictures from age 17. In 1908, while Stefansson was starting his second Arctic expedition and MacMillan his first, Wilkins was invited to England to work as a newspaper and documentary newsreel reporter for the Gaumont Company. During the next five years he was sent on various international assignments and in April 1913 was invited to join the Canadian Arctic Expedition (CAE). He accepted and during the summer sailed to the Beaufort Sea on the *Karluk* with the other members of the expedition. The captain of the *Karluk* was Robert Bartlett, who had sailed Peary's ship the *Roosevelt* to Greenland five years earlier. Jenness notes that "Bartlett had no experience whatsoever in the western Arctic where the ice conditions were quite different" (p. 6). Two small schooners, the *Alaska* and the *Mary Sachs*, were bought for Dr. R.M. Anderson's Southern Party of the expedition. Stefansson was in charge of the Northern Party which was to explore and map new lands.

On September 19, 1913, while the *Karluk* was icebound, Wilkins was lucky to be chosen by Stefansson to accompany him, Diamond Jenness, his secretary Burt McConnell and two Inupiat named Jimmy and Jerry, to the mainland to hunt caribou. This trip saved their lives as the *Karluk* was crushed by ice in January 1914. Although Stefansson was later accused of deserting the ship and his men, the evidence is that the ship started to drift while he and the hunting party were on the land, preventing them from returning. They spent the next four months along the Alaska North Slope as far west as Barrow. Fortunately for posterity, Wilkins had brought his camera on the hunting trip. Additional photographic equipment and a camera were given to him by an American geologist on Flaxman Island in December 1913 (p. 54) and he would later replace the movie camera that was lost with the *Karluk* so that he could continue to document his journey with the CAE.

The months spent by Stefansson's party along the Alaska coast were frustrating since there were few caribou, and Stefansson would change his plans at the last minute or be gone hunting for weeks. As Jenness indicates, "Stefansson evidently lacked any comprehension of obtaining employee performance through team work, preferring instead to issue instructions (in reality orders) to his employees using his official role of expedition commander" (p. 85). Stefansson followed Peary's method by giving written instructions to his collaborators (see MacMillan 2008[1934]), and this was a way of keeping track of the expedition's activities. Also, Stefansson probably wanted to reinforce his role as "commander" of the CAE, which must have been somewhat discredited after the disappearance of the *Karluk*.

In light of Pálsson's (2005) book on Stefansson's hidden life, it is conceivable that he might have visited Pannigabluk and their son Alex periodically. Having not started his journal until mid-March 1914, at the beginning of his first ice trip, it is difficult to verify if he saw them before Wilkins did in late January 1914 at the camp where the schooner *Polar Bear* was wintering. Wilkins wrote "[...] I believe there is some truth in the common report along the coast that it is his child [...] very few members of the

Expedition had heard about it anyway before meeting the whalers up here” (p. 72-73). He also noted, “Prof [Johansen] seems awfully indignant that V.S. had spoken so much about keeping the white men from intermingling with the Eskimos, while himself had a child up there” (p. 73). Jenness adds that the relationship between Stefansson, Pannigabluk and Alex was “merely whispered along the Alaska coast at the time, and not even mentioned in the diaries or field notes of most of the members of the Southern Party” (p. 73). Wilkins also took photos of Pannigabluk and Alex<sup>19</sup> at Storker Storkerson’s camp at Martin Point on March 18, 1914 where Pannigabluk had been hired by Stefansson to sew clothing for the men going on his first ice trip.

Wilkins was initially part of this trip but a week after their departure, Stefansson decided to send back a sled with a load of unnecessary equipment. Wilkins was on that short journey but upon his return he could not locate Stefansson and his men, and returned to Martin Point. Wilkins received a letter from Stefansson in June<sup>20</sup> instructing him to take command of a schooner with its equipment and supplies and rendezvous on Banks Island. From there he would also be able to photograph and film the Kangiryuarmit, the “Blondest of all the Eskimo”<sup>21</sup>. Attempting to meet Stefansson’s party, Wilkins travelled on the schooner *Mary Sachs*, and in April-August 1915 he joined the support party on Stefansson’s second ice trip. On this trip, Stefansson asked Wilkins to give the Inupiaq expedition hunter Natkusiak an opportunity to find a wife among the Inuinait (Copper Inuit). According to Jenness, Stefansson’s reason was pragmatic as he needed more seamstresses for his Northern Party (p. 205).

Wilkins’ journey to Bernard Harbour from late April to May 1915 was followed by a 10 day journey to the Inuinait during which Wilkins took photos and did some filming while Natkusiak thought he found a wife. However, the young widow, about 25 years old (p. 296), was so upset by the arrangement made by her brother that it was cancelled and the brother returned the rifle he had obtained in exchange for his sister (p. 257). Wilkins was either playing naïve or was actually oblivious to her dramatic situation when he wrote: “She had tried to divert her loving husband so many times, always being overtaken after a short pursuit and coming back smiling through tears that I began to look upon this as a custom of the country [...]” (p. 241).

From February to April 1916, Wilkins was part of Stefansson’s trips to Mercy Bay and Melville Island on his way to the two new islands discovered during the second ice trip. In April and June, he finally visited the Kangiryuarmit at Minto Inlet on Victoria Island. After that trip, Wilkins decided to return home to see his mother who had written that his father had passed away. He left the Arctic in September, but this would

---

<sup>19</sup> Two photos are the same that Pálsson (2005: 144) discussed in his book.

<sup>20</sup> The letter was brought back by McConnell of the support party (p.120).

<sup>21</sup> In 1906 Christian Klengenber, a Danish whaler turned trader, claimed to have seen Inuit with light-coloured hair and blue eyes on Victoria Island (Condon 1996: 46-47). With Natkusiak, Stefansson went to meet these Inuinait (Copper Inuit) in 1910. The CAE also had among its main goals visiting the “Blond Eskimos” who Stefansson thought were the descendants of an early Viking colony. CAE anthropologist Diamond Jenness undertook ethnographic work among them.

not be his last trip there. Inspired by his conversations with Stefansson while on the CAE, he tried to fly from Alaska to Europe between 1926 to 1928. On the last attempt he finally made it and was later knighted for his achievements.

### **Flaherty: From explorer to filmmaker**

Robert J. Flaherty (1884-1951) is famous for his film *Nanook of the North* but it is less well known that before becoming a documentary filmmaker, he worked as a prospector and explorer in the North. Although entitled *Robert and Frances Flaherty. A documentary life, 1883-1922*, Robert Christopher's book is predominantly about Robert Flaherty. The diaries and letters of Frances Hubbard Flaherty (1883-1972) are used to provide insights into her husband's personality and her own contributions to his professional life as a photographer, filmmaker and writer. Indeed, as with Josephine Peary before her, Frances Flaherty devoted most of her own talents to promote her husband's projects and achievements. She also inspired the subject of this book, having written in 1957 that a definitive biography of her husband had to begin with his "experience in the North, his explorations before he made film at all" (p. xv). Christopher went beyond her wish and treated Robert and Frances as partners in life and work from the beginning of their relationship, incorporating the diaries they wrote between 1906 and 1921.

The son of a prospector from Michigan who relocated his family to Port Arthur (now Thunder Bay) in northern Ontario in 1901, Flaherty started an apprenticeship as surveyor and geological prospector the next year. As he wrote in the first chapter of his unfinished autobiography, "[...] the country that had the most lure for me was the region north [...] where the rivers run down to Hudson Bay—the fabulous land where Indians were still Indians" (p. 22). This ideal to meet "pristine" Aboriginal people unsullied by western material culture influenced his later quest to live with the Inuit.

Flaherty met Frances Hubbard in 1903 while she was completing her second year at Bryn Mawr College. After graduating in 1905, she studied music in Boston, then in New York and Paris from 1908 to 1913. Music was central in their courtship, since Frances played piano and Robert, violin. In 1910, Flaherty was hired by railway entrepreneur William Mackenzie to conduct the first of four iron ore surveys to Hudson Bay and Baffin Island. Christopher's book contains four chapters that cover Flaherty's diaries from all four Mackenzie expeditions (1910-1916). These experiences were crucial to his evolution from prospector-explorer to photographer-filmmaker (p. 49).

During the 1910-1911 expedition, Flaherty met Inuit for the first time and visited the Nastapoka Islands, along the east coast of Hudson Bay. Comparing the Cree and Inuit, Flaherty showed his bias: "The 'Huskie'<sup>22</sup> is all that the Indian isn't, and then

---

<sup>22</sup> Contrary to his use of "Indian bucks" (e.g., p. 32, 34) to refer to Indian men in his 1906 diary of a one-month prospecting expedition in the Lake Nipigon region intended to be read by Frances Hubbard, Flaherty's use of "Huskie" does not seem to be derogatory.

some. [...] [He is] grateful for kindness shown (not so the Indian)” (p. 56). He was impressed by the Inuit he visited in the Richmond Golf, thinking they were the “original” Inuit as he saw “no sign of white man’s cloth in their costume” (p. 60). An avid photographer since his late teenage years, Flaherty brought a camera with him. According to Christopher, although the Indians ranked lower than the Inuit in Flaherty’s social hierarchy, in his “visual imagination, Indians and Inuit alike were the figures of dignity and though they show the mark of different cultural influences, the eye of Flaherty’s stills camera was democratic, free of prejudiced judgments” (p. 65). In his 1911 *Through Canada’s Northland* album, Flaherty’s photos were similar in style to those of expeditionary-field photography practised by geologists Robert Bell and Albert P. Low (p. 65)<sup>23</sup>. Photographs he took of Cree people depicted “a culture of polarities, part indigenous, part western” [...] (p. 66). But as Christopher acutely remarks, the Inuit were not immune to western influences, “so the disparity of images that Flaherty constructed of them was even greater than the more mixed, blended, and westernized identity of the Indian” (*ibid.*). Thirteen of these photographs were published in a 1911 edition of the weekly *Canadian Courier* in an article by Augustus Birdle that was “the first significant public debut of Flaherty as explorer-photographer” (p. 70).

While on Charlton Island in the fall of 1910, Flaherty met an Inuk man named Wetalltok (Uitaaluttuq) who showed him a map he had drawn of the Belcher Islands (p. 73). The size of these islands and the possibility that they contained iron ore deposits attracted Flaherty and he convinced his sponsor to fund an expedition to explore them. He was thus back at James Bay in June 1911. With Inuit men, Flaherty travelled by boat to Great Whale River (Kuujjuaraapik/Whapmagoostui) and then spent the winter in the Fort George (Chisasibi) area. Unable to make the ice crossing to the Belcher Islands, the expedition rather journeyed inland, arriving at Fort Chimo (Kuujjuaq), south of Ungava Bay, in May 1912. Among the Inuit he travelled with to Payne Lake on his way back to the Hudson Bay was Palliack (Paaliaq) who had a gramophone (p. 110), likely a source of inspiration for his film *Nanook of the North*. In recognition of his inland crossing, Flaherty was elected a fellow of the Royal Geographical Society in 1913, and hence given full status as an explorer (p. 128). Flaherty also brought back a “curio” collection he had acquired on behalf of Mackenzie which he donated in 1913 to the Royal Ontario Museum (p. 127).

For his 1913-1914 expedition, Flaherty convinced Mackenzie to pay for a schooner, the *Laddie*, a professional skipper and a small crew. Flaherty brought a gramophone and, most importantly, a movie camera. While Flaherty wintered on southwest Baffin Island with his crew, he took portraits of Inuit which seem evocative of their personalities, and was helped on his laboratory work by an Inuk woman named Allego (Aliguq) (p. 164). Although clearly dependent on the Inuit for his survival and

---

<sup>23</sup> Christopher mentions in a footnote (p. 428) one photograph taken by Hudson’s Bay trader A.A. Chesterfield (1877-1959) between 1901-1904 in the same Great Whale River area visited by Flaherty, yet it would have been interesting to compare their photographs, especially since those of the former have been published in James (1985).

his work, Flaherty was sometimes condescending when depicting them: “But after all they are children, mentally in particular and should always be treated as such [...] demanding much patience and consideration from their Kabloona” (p. 170). Yet, seven months later, while leaving with the *Laddie* to explore the Belcher Islands, he wrote, “With more reluctance than I can describe we bade farewell to the Eskimo, for whom we really learned to care” (p. 191).

A month after his return south, Flaherty married Frances in New York. “Frances joined the ranks of other twentieth-century women whose more acclaimed spouses overshadowed their own contributive and creative roles in the work of their husbands” (p. 202). Indeed, “Faced with the large and growing body of Flaherty’s photographic work and his diaries, Frances eagerly took the combined duties of archivist, secretary, copy editor, publishing agent and literary provocateur” (p. 205). In the fall of 1914, Flaherty edited the footage he had shot and his Baffin Island film was shown in Toronto in 1915, New York in 1915 and 1916, and New Haven in 1916 (p. 216). The first screening in New York occurred right after *In the land of the Headhunters*<sup>24</sup> directed by photographer Edward Curtis with Kwakiutl actors (p. 217). Curtis advised Flaherty to take more footage “with real human punch in it” during his next expedition (p. 218).

Frances’s diaries from December 1914 to February 1915 reveal that she read articles on Arctic and Antarctic explorations, including “notices of the Stefansson expeditions as they came out to the final rescue of the survivors of the ill-fated *Karluuk* [...]. All with a view, of course, to getting a perspective on Robert’s work, its relative importance, and its original and unique features” (p. 228). In the early part of 1915, Frances promoted the Baffin film and Flaherty’s photos in New York. Describing her husband’s “irresponsibility about money matters” and that William Mackenzie was often late in paying him or providing the supplies for his expeditions (p. 224, 250), she was preoccupied with finding revenues for his work. She thus met editors as well as anthropologist Carl Wissler at the American Museum of Natural History, who had edited Stefansson’s notebooks from his 1910-1912 expedition to the western Arctic the year before, and Franz Boas, then a professor at Columbia University. With Flaherty she saw photographer Albert Stieglitz and also tried to meet Lee Keedick, the agent of high profile clients such as explorers Amundsen and Stefansson (p. 420, note 70).

In August 1915, Flaherty started his fourth Mackenzie expedition. Frances was pregnant and accompanied him only to Moose Factory. By October, Flaherty and his crew were on the Belcher Islands. More filming was done and in his diary, Flaherty listed the themes of the scenes. He returned to Toronto in the fall of 1916 where he saw his first daughter born in March (two more would be born; in 1917 and 1920). While working on a newly combined Baffin-Belcher Islands film in Toronto in the spring of 1918, Flaherty accidentally destroyed it with his cigarette. In 1920, he was able to convince Thierry Mallet of the fur trade company Revillon Frères to produce two films

---

<sup>24</sup> Christopher does not use this original 1914 title of Curtis’s first film, but the one it was given when rereleased in 1974: *In the land of the War Canoes*.

he would direct: one about a trader's life among the Inuit and another with no fur propaganda (p. 325). In August, Flaherty was in Port Harrison (Inukjuak) filming *Nanook of the North* with the Inuk Allakariallak (Alakkariallak) in the lead role of Nanook.

Upon his return in September 1921, Flaherty was paid only for three months to prepare a negative of his footage. He took *Nanook of the North* to five distributors; all refused it. Finally, Pathé agreed to support what was to become a classic of the genre. (p. 382). Flaherty made little money on the film but he wrote articles with Frances about his explorations which were published in their 1924 book *My Eskimo friends* (p. 386). For decades, *Nanook of the North* was described as one of the first ethnographic documentary films although it was actually a drama staged by Flaherty, its realism achieved because the actors were Inuit. Much has been written about this film and Christopher cites many sources, but he omits Rony (1996) who is critical of Flaherty's work and relationships with Inuit. Although Christopher mentions Claude Massot's 1988 documentary *Nanook revisited*<sup>25</sup> (p. 220) which included interviews with Inuit about Flaherty, he does not elaborate about the latter's relationships with Inuit women discussed in the documentary.

Flaherty wrote little about Inuit women he met. In his 1910-1911 diary, he described "One fine type of woman amongst them. Really fine looking." (p. 56). But as if embarrassed by his admission, he added, "An Indian-Husky diet of six months may alter viewpoints of beauty in natives' favor" (*ibid.*). During a visit to Cape Dorset in 1913, he noted the "good looking girl" who was the wife of a paralysed man, and "had been Captain Murray's concubine on the last two whaling cruises of the whaler *Active*" (p. 160). He did, however, criticise the fact that one Inuk had two wives, calling the idea an outrage for his elder wife (p. 163). On that same expedition, he was frustrated by the presence of women, writing that they were "a bother, which even their sewing and lamp candling cannot offset" (p. 167). He revealed some annoyance that "their votes on the affairs of men in Eskimo 'noona' (land) is a mighty power" (p. 171). He nevertheless expressed shock at a case of rape and wife beating among the Inuit (p. 182). In October 1915, Flaherty fired a non-Inuit member of his expedition who wanted "to live in the house with an Eskimo concubine whom he secured from one of the Charlton Eskimo by promise of marriage" (p. 426, note 12). Yet, Flaherty himself had relationships with Inuit women. In his epilogue, Christopher implies that Frances was aware of her husband's affairs and adds, "The children fathered by Flaherty during his years of relations with Inuit women were never spoken of publicly, but in the North their identity was absorbed into the embrace of the Eskimo adoptive culture" (p. 387). The son he fathered with "Maggie" Nevalinga (Nuvalinngaq)<sup>26</sup>, the Nyla of *Nanook*, was named Josephie Flaherty<sup>27</sup> by her, and his descendants live in Inukjuak and Grise Fiord (p. 371, 387).

---

<sup>25</sup> Christopher dates *Nanook revisited* to 1998 (p. 220) though it had come out 10 years earlier.

<sup>26</sup> She is identified as Maggie Nujarluktuk in McGrath (2007).

<sup>27</sup> Christopher refers to him as Joseph but his first name was Josephie (see McGrath 2007). He and his family were among the Inuit who endured terrible hardships in Grise Fiord where the Canadian

## Conclusion

Peary, MacMillan, Stefansson, Wilkins and Flaherty lived with the Inuit and survived in the Arctic because of what they learned from them. With the probable exception of MacMillan and Wilkins, they also had relationships with Inuit women and fathered children, although they never acknowledged their Inuit families publicly and cut all ties with them once they returned to the south. However, one century later, their Inuit descendants still talk about them and their hidden lives in the Arctic is of interest to scholars exploring how their secret relationships might have affected their work, and taking a critical look at their personal and professional ethics. Such research sheds welcome light not only on the women who supported these men in the Arctic by taking care of them, teaching them their culture, and bearing and raising their progeny, but on the women back at home who promoted their work and organised their archives. In fact, if it were not for the assistance of Josephine Peary, Frances Flaherty, Evelyn Stefansson and Miriam MacMillan, we would probably have little left beside their publications.

## References

- BLOOM, Lisa  
1993 *Gender on ice: American ideologies of polar expeditions*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.
- CONDON, Richard G. (with Julia OGINA and the HOLMAN ELDERS)  
1996 *The northern Copper Inuit. A history*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press.
- COUNTER, S. Allen  
1991 *North Pole legacy: Black, White, and Eskimo*, Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press.
- DICK, Lyle  
2001 *Muskox Land. Ellesmere Island in the age of contact*, Calgary, University of Calgary Press.
- EBER, Dorothy Harley  
1989 *When the whalers were up North. Inuit memories from the eastern Arctic*, Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press.
- FINNIE, Richard S.  
1978 Stefansson's Mystery, *North*, November-December: 2-7.

---

Government relocated them in the 1950s to assert Canadian sovereignty in the High Arctic (*ibid.*). Josephie's daughter Martha Flaherty is a translator and served as the President of Pauktuutit (Inuit Women's Association of Canada) from 1991 to 1998. In her website, she proudly identifies herself as the granddaughter of filmmaker Robert Flaherty.



FLAHERTY, Robert (with Frances FLAHERTY)

1924 *My Eskimo friends*, New York, Doubleday.

FRANCH, John

2008 Grand illusion: The search for Crocker Land, *Illinois Alumni*, Jan./Feb.,  
online version at [www.uiaa.org/urbana/illinoisalumni/0801b.html](http://www.uiaa.org/urbana/illinoisalumni/0801b.html).

HARPER, Kenn

2000[1986] *Give me my father's body: The life of Minik, the New York Eskimo*, South  
Royalton, Steerforth Press.

HENDERSON, Bruce

2005 *True North. Peary, Cook, and the race to the Pole*, New York, W.W.  
Norton and Company.

HENSON, Matthew

1912 *A Negro explorer at the North Pole*, New York, Frederick A. Stokes.

JAMES, William C. (ed.)

1985 *A fur trader's photographs: A.A. Chesterfield in the district of Ungava,  
1901-1904*, Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press.

JENNESS, Stuart E. (ed.)

1991 *Arctic odyssey: The diaries of Diamond Jenness 1913-1916*, Montreal and  
Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press.

MALAURIE, Jean

1989[1955] *Les derniers rois de Thulé. Avec les Esquimaux polaires face à leur destin*,  
Paris, Plon.

MALAURIE, Jean, Willard WOOD and Anthony ROBERTS

2003 *Ultima Thule: Explorers and Natives in the Polar North*, New York, W.W.  
Norton and Company.

McGRATH, Melanie

2007 *The long exile. A tale of Inuit betrayal and survival in the High Arctic*, New  
York, Knopf.

PÁLSSON, Gísli (ed.)

2001 *Writing on Ice: The ethnographic notebooks of Vilhjalmur Stefansson*,  
Hanover and London, University Press of New England.

PÁLSSON, Gísli

1998 The intimate Arctic: An early anthropologist's diary in the strict sense of the  
term, *Ethnos*, 63(3): 413-440.

- 2004 Race and the intimate in Arctic Exploration, *Ethnos*, 69(3): 363-386.
- 2008 Hot bodies in cold zones: Arctic exploration, *The Scholar and Feminist Online*, 7(1), online at [www.barnard.edu/sfonline/ice/print\\_palsson.htm](http://www.barnard.edu/sfonline/ice/print_palsson.htm).
- PEARY, Robert E.  
1898 *Northward over the "Great Ice": A narrative of life and work along the shores and upon the interior ice-cap of Northern Greenland in the years 1886 and 1891-1897*, 2 volumes, London, Methuen and Co.
- RONY, Fatimah Tobing  
1996 *The third eye. Race, cinema and the ethnographic spectacle*, Durham, Duke University Press.
- STEFANSSON, Georgina  
1961 My Grandfather, Dr. Stefansson, *North*, 4: 25.
- STOLER, Ann Laura  
2002 *Carnal knowledge and imperial power: Race and the intimate in colonial rule*, Berkeley, University of California Press.
- VANAST, Walter  
2007 The bad side to the good story: Vilhjalmur Stefansson and Christian conversion in the Mackenzie Delta 1906-1925, *Religious Studies and Theology*, 26(1): 77-116.