

**The work of Knud Rasmussen in the Canadian Arctic as described by RCMP Inspector Stuart Wood**  
**Le travail de Knud Rasmussen dans l'Arctique canadien tel que décrit par l'inspecteur de la gendarmerie royale Stuart Wood**

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Résumé de l'article

On reproduit ici textuellement le rapport détaillé que l'officier de la gendarmerie royale posté à l'île d'Herschel fit parvenir à ses supérieurs d'Edmonton suite au passage de Knud Rasmussen durant la cinquième expédition de Thulé. Bien que le texte ne soit pas de Rasmussen à proprement parler, il semble compléter et accroître d'une façon utile son image de chercheur. En même temps, il révèle d'indéniables failles.

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## The work of Knud Rasmussen in the Canadian Arctic as described by RCMP Inspector Stuart Wood

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Erhard Treude\*

**Résumé:** Le travail de Knud Rasmussen dans l'Arctique canadien tel que décrit par l'inspecteur de la gendarmerie royale Stuart Wood

On reproduit ici textuellement le rapport détaillé que l'officier de la gendarmerie royale posté à l'île d'Herschel fit parvenir à ses supérieurs d'Edmonton suite au passage de Knud Rasmussen durant la cinquième expédition de Thulé. Bien que le texte ne soit pas de Rasmussen à proprement parler, il semble compléter et accroître d'une façon utile son image de chercheur. En même temps, il révèle d'indéniables failles.

**Abstract:** The work of Knud Rasmussen in the Canadian Arctic as described by RCMP Inspector Stuart Wood

A detailed report which the RCMP officer at Herschel Island forwarded to his superiors in Edmonton after Knud Rasmussen had passed through, during the Fifth Thule Expedition, is reproduced here verbatim. Even though the text is not in Rasmussen's own words, it appears to usefully complement and expand the existing picture of him as a researcher. It, at the same time, also reveals some undeniable flaws.

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### Introduction

The "Fifth Thule Expedition – Danish Ethnographical Expedition to Arctic North America, 1921-24," under the leadership of Knud Rasmussen, started from

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Copenhagen in June 1921, proceeded to Thule, the northernmost post in Greenland, and arrived by mid September on Danish Island north of Southampton Island where a permanent base was established. The main aims of the expedition were to “attack the great primary problem of the origin of the Eskimo race” (Rasmussen 1927: ix) and to thereby “bring Danish ethnography closer into line with English, Canadian, and American research” (Rasmussen 1926: 126). With these objectives in mind, Rasmussen who “arguably ranks first among the hundreds of people who have written about Inuit life” (Kleivan and Burch 1988: 5), travelled across Arctic Canada and on 17 April 1924 reached the Royal Canadian Mounted Police detachment on Herschel Island, off the coast of the Yukon Territory (Figure 1). There he rendered a detailed account of the progress of the expedition thus far, and of the impressions and information he had gained, to Inspector Stuart Wood. One copy<sup>1</sup> of the confidential report which the police officer subsequently wrote and forwarded to his superiors in Edmonton, and which was then sent to the Department of Indian Affairs in Ottawa, has survived, and is reproduced here verbatim. It appears to usefully complement and expand the existing picture of Knud Rasmussen as a researcher, but at the same time, it reveals some flaws as has already been touched upon (*e.g.*, by Kleivan and Burch 1988: 5).

COPY

M.R. Confidential

Herschel Island, Y.T.,  
30th April, 1924.

The Officer Commanding,  
R.C. M. Police,  
Edmonton

Sir:            Re: Knud Rasmussen - Explorer  
                  Danish Fifth Thule Expedition.

I have the honour to report that Mr. Knud Rasmussen, in command of the above Expedition, in company with two Greenland Eskimo, man and woman, arrived here on the 17th instant from King William Island. A Mr. Hanson, photographer, who came in from Vancouver last summer by ship met the party at Kent Peninsula last December and is accompanying Mr. Rasmussen west to Nome and back to Denmark.

Mr. Rasmussen very kindly placed all the valuable information he had obtained at my disposal with the request that same should not be made public until such time as he had completed the expedition, returned to Denmark and made his report to his committee, the King of Denmark being a patron of the Expedition. The party left here this date for Kotzebue Sound via Point Barrow where they will spend the spring and during the summer visit the Eskimo along the east coast of Siberia returning to Denmark in December next. After returning to Denmark and making his report, Mr.

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<sup>1</sup> DIAND Northern Affairs Program, File 251-1: Eskimo Economy and Welfare (General and Policy), Vol. 1, 1924/47; today: National Archives of Canada, RG 85, Vol. 1069, File 251-1, Part 1.

Rasmussen would be pleased to communicate with the Government with a view to placing more detailed information at their disposal than he has been able to give me here or arranging a meeting in Ottawa.

As I am not aware of what information has been given by the Chesterfield Inlet Detachment concerning this Expedition therefore I will include all information as to conditions, routes of travel, etc., of the party from the time they arrived in Canada.

The party left Copenhagen, Denmark, in September, 1921, visited Greenland to obtain dogs and equipment and landed and erected their headquarters on a small island off Vansittart Island in Fox Channel on 18th September, 1921. The party consisted of Knud Rasmussen, explorer and ethnologist, in command. Born in Greenland, Mr. Rasmussen has the great advantage of being able to speak the Eskimo language very fluently and has had no difficulty with the many dialects he has met with on his trip. It will be remembered that other explorers such as Amundsen and J. B. Tyrrell<sup>2</sup> who have covered much of the territory that Mr. Rasmussen has just come through, could not speak the Eskimo language nor did they have an interpreter, therefore the notes taken and observations made by Mr. Rasmussen are particularly accurate. Other members of the party were Peter Freuchen, geographer and second in command, 15 years residence in Greenland. Dr. Therpel [*sic*] Mathiassen, archaeologist, Dr. Birket-Smith, ethnologist, Helge Bangsted, assistant ethnologist. Three families of Greenland Eskimo; one halfbreed Greenland interpreter and 75 Greenland dogs. The purpose of the expedition is purely scientific.

One of the many objects of the expedition was to endeavour to ascertain the original home of the Eskimo race.

### Work of the expedition<sup>3</sup>

During the winter of 1921-1922, Rasmussen, Birket-Smith and Bangsted went to Chesterfield Inlet to study the language, manners, customs and religious beliefs of the Eskimo in the vicinity of Baker and Yathkyed Lakes returning to their headquarters in summer of 1922. Freuchen and Mathiassen left headquarters in January 1922 and visited Eskimo in Fury and Hecla Strait. Freuchen continued up the west coast of

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<sup>2</sup> The Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen (1872-1928) aboard his vessel *Gjøa* in 1903-1906 first traversed the Northwest Passage with two winterings in today's Gjøa Haven/ King William Island and another on the Alaskan coast. The Canadian geologist Joseph B. Tyrrell (1858-1957) in 1893 and 1894 explored wide parts of Keewatin's barren grounds.

<sup>3</sup> The account contains a few mistakes: *e.g.*, Therkel Mathiassen, not Freuchen, spent the autumn and winter 1922 on Southampton Island and left for Fury and Hecla Strait in March 1923, to continue north to Pond Inlet via Steensby Inlet, Milne Inlet and Eclipse Sound, and went south from there on the Hudson's Bay Company supply vessel *Nascopie*. What Rasmussen could not know was that Freuchen had been unsuccessful in reaching northern Greenland via the "old Eskimo migration route." He started from headquarters on Danish Island outside Repulse Bay in January 1924 to Pond Inlet, following the same route Mathiassen had taken the year before. When breaking-up ice prevented him from crossing from northernmost Brodeur Peninsula to Devon Island, he returned to Pond Inlet and got picked up by the Danish vessel *Søkongen*. It had been arranged before that in case the party should not reach the Thule trading post in northern Greenland, the vessel would call in Pond Inlet; she even sailed to Arctic Bay to collect Freuchen's Inuit companions (Mathiassen 1933).

Baffin Island mapping the coast as far as Cape Kater while Mathiassen went up the Gifford River and overland to Admiralty Inlet. Both returned to headquarters in July 1922 and Freuchen spent the summer on Southampton Island.

In March 1923, Mathiassen left for Fury and Hecla Strait continued south along west coast of Baffin Island mapping the coast and crossed the Island to River Clyde, thence to Denmark.

In March 1923, Birket-Smith left headquarters for Chesterfield Inlet and Cape Eskimo, thence inland to Yathkyed Lake to continue study of Eskimo in that vicinity as the party of three the previous winter had found their investigations to be of greatest interest. The people around Yathkyed and Dubawnt Lakes were the most primitive of any they have met with. From Yathkyed Lake, Birket-Smith was to continue out via Reindeer Lake to Winnipeg and return to Denmark. News has been received of Birket-Smith's safe return to Denmark.

Freuchen spent summer of 1923 along the coast to Chesterfield Inlet excavating old Eskimo houses. In January 1924 he was to start from headquarters and follow the old Eskimo route of migration to Greenland which is along the east coast of Melville Peninsula, across Baffin Island via Gifford River to Admiralty Inlet, thence to Dundas Harbour on North Devon Island and across this island to Ellesmere Island, thence along the east coast of Ellesmere Island as far as Cape Sabine where he will cross to Mr. Rasmussen's trading post at Thule, near Etah in Greenland and return to Denmark.

The only Eskimo who could not be visited by members of the expedition were those along the coast of Labrador, so for this purpose, Mr. Harold Lindow, Inspector for North Greenland, accompanied the expedition's schooner on her return trip, after landing the party in 1921, and visited all the Eskimo along the coast of Labrador<sup>4</sup>.

Mr. Rasmussen left headquarters on 11th March, 1923, travelling via Committee Bay with sled across Simpson Peninsula to Pelly Bay where he met about 125 Eskimo of the Nacherlik band many of whom had never seen a whiteman before. These people were still living on and all their implements were made from material gathered from the ship "Victoria" abandoned by Sir John Ross at Boothia Peninsula in 1832. Continuing overland to Shepherd Bay, where he again met Eskimo, Rasmussen travelled up the west coast of Boothia Peninsula arriving at the Magnetic Pole on the 17th May, 1923. There were people here also. The people at Magnetic Pole and Shepherd Bay had never seen Amundsen and the younger people had never seen a whiteman before. They belonged to the Nacherlik band also whose headquarters is on Boothia (Isthmus). From the Magnetic Pole Mr. Rasmussen travelled to Great Fish or Back River where he met more Eskimo, all very primitive and few of whom had come in contact with a whiteman. Continuing up through Simpson Strait to King William Island where he met a large number of natives and spent the summer of 1923 on King William Island examining and excavating old Eskimo houses of which there were over seventy dating back before the memory of the present inhabitants; studying the people and obtaining folk-tales of a most complete variety. Mr. Rasmussen believes that King William Island

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<sup>4</sup> See Lindow (1924).

was the headquarters for the Eskimo at the time of their migration to Greenland. Here Rasmussen found relics of Sir John Franklin's ill-fated expedition of 1846-48 such as boot soles and blue cloth such as used in the Navy at that period; here also at two places he found human bones which he buried. Running out of ammunition Rasmussen sent his native boy to H.B.C. post at Kent Peninsula in spring of 1923 but the boy did not get back until the 5th September by canoe as the ice did not move off until that date. The boy returned without ammunition as the H.B.C. post was out of supplies due to the ship not getting east in 1922 owing to bad ice conditions. On the 26th September the H.B.C. schooner in charge of Pete Norberg and Henry Bjorn arrived at King William Island with a trade outfit. A trading post was established in McClintock Bay opposite Cape Geddes (on Adelaide Peninsula)<sup>5</sup>. Leaving King William Island in October Rasmussen arrived at H.B.C. post at Kent Peninsula on 12th November where he remained until 15th January studying the people. During this time he made a trip down Bathurst Inlet. Continuing his journey he visited all natives along the coast at Tree River, Bernard Harbour, Cape Parry, Baillie Island, Kittigaruit and Shingle Point arriving at Herschel Island on 17th April. The party left Herschel Island for Point Barrow on 30th April intending to spend the spring until ship time in Kotzebue Sound excavating old native mounds and houses. Crossing to East Cape in Siberia in July and returning to the mouth of the Yukon to study natives in that vicinity during the fall before taking the last boat out from Nome.

## **Distribution and census**

Mr. Rasmussen has very accurate notes as to numbers and location of the Eskimo he encountered as his diary contains the names of every native he met or could get in touch with. For obvious reasons the numbers given to me are approximate for a certain part of journey as time did not permit a thorough perusal of all his diaries while here. Mr. Rasmussen will, however, be glad to furnish the Government with accurate and more detailed information on these points after his return to Denmark.

Mr. Rasmussen and Birket-Smith found the Eskimo in vicinity of Yathkyed and Dubawnt Lakes in a deplorable condition, many starving and all suffering untold hardship through lack of any kind of fuel during the winter months. These people were the most primitive of any encountered. It is believed from the evidence gathered that this vicinity was the home of the original Eskimo, where Mr. J. B. Tyrrell reports some four to five hundred Eskimo at the time of his visit there in 1893-95, there are but 50 families in one place and 3 in another now, the remainder having died from starvation. Rasmussen met with many cases of actual starvation in this locality and Backs River. Absence of the caribou appears to be the prime reason. At Garry Lake, headwaters of Backs River, there were about 30 natives, many starving. There were no natives between Bernard Harbour and Pierce Point.

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<sup>5</sup> A Hudson's Bay Company trading post was established by the Swede Peter Norberg and the Dane Henry Bjørn in 1923 on a small bay north of Peabody Point on King William Island; it was moved to Gjoa Haven in 1927 (Usher 1971: 117).

|   |             |          |
|---|-------------|----------|
| Pelly Bay and Simpson Peninsula (Netsilik band) | 125         | approx.  |
| Bellot Strait                                   | 40          | "        |
| King William Land                               | 175         | "        |
| Adelaide Peninsula                              | 60          | "        |
| Back or Great Fish River                        | 125         | "        |
| From Ogden Bay to and including                 |             |          |
| Kent Peninsula                                  | 116         | accurate |
| Kent Pen. to mouth of Bathurst Inlet            | 50          | "        |
| Backs Western Rive                              | 40          | "        |
| Hepburn Island                                  | 30          | "        |
| Tree River                                      | 3           | "        |
| Cape Krusenstern                                | 43          | "        |
| Bear Lake and Coppermine River                  | 88          | "        |
| On islands in the Gulf                          | 30          | "        |
| Inland from Hepburn Island                      | 0           | "        |
| Cambridge and Wellington Bays                   | 70          | "        |
| On ice off Bernard Harbour                      | 83          | "        |
| Prince Albert Sound                             | 122         | "        |
| <b>Approximate total</b>                        | <b>1345</b> |          |

The headquarters of the Netsilik (Nacherlik) band is in Boothia Isthmus.

## Distribution of game

### *Muskox*

The Eskimo believe these animals are increasing. Only in the interior from Baker Lake do the Eskimo understand that they are not permitted to hunt muskox, everywhere else the Eskimo are killing these animals where ever they meet them and know of no restrictions<sup>6</sup>.

Between Wager Bay and Hayes River muskox are very numerous as they have not been hunted for years. Eskimo from Pelly Bay go inland to Simpson Lake where muskox are numerous on the hills in that section. These people killed over 100 the winter of 1922-23. Muskox are plentiful on the islands of North Somerset and Prince of Wales. These are hunted by the 40 odd Eskimo living at Bellot Strait but only with bows and arrows. There are also muskox in the interior of Boothia Peninsula. The country south of Boothia Pen. to Chesterfield Inlet is ideal for all game and for the natives. There are no muskox on King William Island or Adelaide Peninsula. They are

<sup>6</sup> In order to protect the declining muskox population, as early as 1894, under the terms of the Unorganized Territories Game Preservation Act, a closed season from 20 March to 15 October was initiated. When this measure turned out to be inadequate to stop the trading of muskoxen hides, the Northwest Game Act of 1917 provided that only "Indians, Eskimo and half-breeds" were allowed to kill muskoxen when they were actually in need of the meat or to prevent starvation. In 1924, the killing of muskoxen became totally prohibited (Barr 1991).

very numerous along the coast and inland from Adelaide Pen. to Ellice River also inland from Bathurst Inlet and Hood River. Some 20 or 30 muskox killed by Eskimo inland between Cape Barrow and Tree River saved these people from starving this winter owing to the absence of caribou. There are about 30 muskox up Coppermine and Rae Rivers. They are numerous inland from Stapleton Bay to Inman River. Mr. Rasmussen is of the opinion that there are more muskox in this part of northern Canada than the people outside believe. Mr. Rasmussen is of the opinion that these muskox will be most useful to the natives in a bad year when there are no caribou but that they should be prohibited from killing them at other times. Up to this year the Eskimo east of Kent Peninsula hunted the muskox with only bows and arrows, now they have rifles and ammunition supplied by the H.B.C. post at King William Island. He states further that it is hard to prohibit the killing of muskox entirely as the natives require the skins and horns for bedding and implements.

### *Caribou*

Rasmussen does not believe that the caribou will be materially affected by the rifles in hands of natives as they are too plentiful and the country too big. In places Rasmussen saw deer in mass as far as he could see and taking four days to pass a given point. In places where the deer have encountered trading posts and hunters at same place every year, they have changed their route of migration. Believes the Government should consider carefully before allowing posts to be established anywhere in the area south of Boothia Pen. such as Boothia Isthmus, Pelly and Shepherd Bays and Backs River. This is an ideal country for the caribou and it is into this area that they are now being crowded since they have had to change their usual route of migration to and from Victoria and King William Island. Since there is no fuel of any description in this country, the smell of coal the year round from a permanent post extends for many miles and scares the deer away. On account of the establishing of the H.B.C. post at McClintock Bay on King William Isl. in September last, Mr. Rasmussen says he will guarantee that there will not be a caribou on that island in less than two years from now. The natives using seal oil and heather for fuel in their shelters leave no smell after a limited period, besides which they never remain permanently in any one place.

There were no deer anywhere in south on Victoria Island last year so that the Eskimo ordinarily resident in that area had to move to the mainland. That the H.B.C. posts at Prince Albert Sound and Cambridge Bay<sup>7</sup> are in the direct route of the bi-annual migration of the caribou on this Island. There is a noticeable increase in caribou toward Darnley Bay and Cape Bathurst, evidently on account of having to change their route of migration to the Northern Islands (Victoria Isl.) That no people should be permitted to locate in bottom of bays such as Darnley and Langton Bays also Boothia Isthmus as this prevents the deer going out on the headlands and to northern islands.

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<sup>7</sup> The Hudson's Bay Company post at Prince Albert Sound was opened in 1923, moved to Walker Bay in 1928 and finally to Holman in 1939. The HBC post on Kent Peninsula started in 1920 and was closed in 1927 in favour of Cambridge Bay. The HBC post at Cambridge Bay, established in 1923, had been operated by an Inuk as a small outpost of the HBC post on Kent Peninsula from 1920 to 1923 (Usher 1971).



Permanent residents located on the Eskimo Lakes back of Atkinson Point and Kittigaruit have prevented the deer coming down to the coast in that section.

### **General remarks**

Mr. Rasmussen is of the opinion that the Eskimo and more particularly the Indian should be educated not to kill caribou indiscriminately. White trappers he says, kill only for their own requirements and obey the law. In east, he states (Coronation Gulf and King William Is.) there can be no distinction made between the white trader and trapper in that the trader is not in there for the salary alone but particularly for what he can make on the side trapping. Further that the posts at Prince Albert Sound and Cambridge Bay were not established to facilitate trade but to forestall opposition since these two posts have only cut off fur which usually went to Bernard Harbour and Kent Peninsula respectively, that there are not enough natives at P.A. Sound or Cambridge Bay to warrant posts being established there. These two posts and the one at Kent Peninsula have most to do with diverting the migration of the caribou, to Victoria Island.

Regarding the starving people of Yathkyed and Dubawnt and Ennadai Lakes and Backs River, these people and those at Baker Lake, Kazan River have no fuel; they depend entirely on the caribou for food and clothing. Having no sealskin boots their caribou skin boots easily become damp and have to be discarded as they have no way of drying them. These people live under deplorable conditions of the greatest hardship and there are many deaths every winter from starvation. Rasmussen's party while in this section had an exceedingly close escape from starvation. Cannibalism is practiced to some extent on this account by the natives. Rasmussen suggests that fish nets should be introduced also shot guns with which the natives can hunt Ptarmigan. Coal oil cans with which to make stoves and thus induce them to store up heather for fuel for winter use. These should also be introduced among the natives at Bathurst Inlet. The natives in Coronation Gulf should be instructed in up to date methods of fishing with nets and for this purpose fish netting should be sent in by the Government. The traders do not stock fish nets probably because there is not sufficient profit in it. As it is under present conditions the natives have made weirs of stones at the mouths of nearly all small creeks in order to spear fish in spring when migrating up the rivers to the lakes and again in the fall. With the aid of nets the natives could put up a supply of dry fish which when dried would help out the food question considerably, on the other hand it would in no way help to supply the clothing, bedding and implements which only the caribou can furnish.

Mr. Rasmussen has made many interesting discoveries. He states that fifty per cent of the folk tales implements and words of the Eskimo language known or used by the Eskimo throughout the whole of northern Canada and Alaska (he has met many Alaskan Eskimo here from as far south as Kotzebue Sound and Point Hope) are known or used by the Greenland Eskimo. Mr. Rasmussen says that the further west he goes the easier it is for him to understand the people.

He found the coast of King William Isl. strewn with the carcasses of bowhead whales and as far as thirty miles inland on that island he found skeletons of these whales in great number<sup>8</sup>. Mr. Rasmussen volunteered the statement that the Game Preserves<sup>9</sup> of Victoria Isl. and Backs River do not serve the purpose for which they are intended owing to the fact that they do not exclude the establishment of trading posts.

From Pelly Bay through to Kent Peninsula and Bathurst Inlet, Mr. Rasmussen states that 75% of the male population are murderers in fact it is the exception, where a man is a weakling or has something wrong with him, that a man has not at least one killing to his credit. These people are always on the offensive. This is particularly the case among the Netsilik band. While at Pelly Bay he offered a reward to his native Greenland Boy if he could find one man who was not a murderer. These people hold life very cheaply and as Mr. Rasmussen says it is a very easy matter to get killed. An attempt was made on his life at the H.B.C. post at Kent Peninsula. Now that these people know that the Police from Chesterfield Inlet and Kent Peninsula Detachments have arrested and taken out natives for committing murder, they immediately prepare for a fight on observing the approach of a strange sled or outfit. They are prepared to die fighting and have absolutely no fear of death yet they have the greatest fear of being taken away from their own country. Here I would like to say that this latter is the reason Alicomiak gave for killing Cpl. Doak and O. Binder at Tree River<sup>10</sup> and lends truth to Mr. Rasmussen's statement also judging from the absolute fearlessness with which Alicomiak and Tatamigans met their death here on the scaffold in February last would further corroborate it. In his travels from Pelly Bay through to Ellice River, Rasmussen says that on approaching a native camp of a number of natives, they, on noticing his strange outfit, at once made preparations for a fight thinking he was a policeman and on such occasions the first thing he had to do was to inform them that he was not a policeman, where upon they were most friendly and hospitable and would talk openly of murders they had committed when questioned about it.

Mr. Rasmussen reports on abduction of wife of Eskimo Inorajuk of King William Island by Eskimos from Lind Island gives an instance of how his native boy was met by this latter band evidently expecting trouble. This matter is dealt with in a Crime Report by Constable Gibson. At Pelly Bay and Kent Peninsula, Rasmussen met Eskimo who openly boasted that they were not afraid of the Police and who had their rifles and knives laid out in readiness for such an emergency, further stating that they were not

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<sup>8</sup> Rasmussen (1927: 222-223) found a considerable number of bowhead bones used for building material in the Thule Culture houses he excavated at Malerualik on King William Island (the highest being 25 m above sea level, at a distance of some 400 m from the coast), and a great majority of the implements found were made of the same material.

<sup>9</sup> Game preserves were set aside by the North West Territories Council in Ottawa (a body consisting of a commissioner and four civil servants) to provide for the subsistence needs of the native population through exclusive hunting rights and to protect wildlife from unrestrained killing by hunters, traders and others. This meant that traders could uphold their operations within these areas, but were themselves no longer allowed to hunt or trap. The Victoria Island Preserve was created in 1918, Banks Island Preserve in 1920 and Back River Preserve in 1923. In 1928, these preserves were greatly expanded and became the Arctic Islands Game Preserve (Scace 1975: 88-89).

<sup>10</sup> RCM Police Corporal Doak, HBC trader Otto Binder and an Inuk interpreter were shot at Tree River in 1922 when they tried to arrest two young Inuit, Alekamiaq and Tatamerana, who had been involved in a wife-stealing action during which two people had been killed. Both young men were sentenced to death by a court brought in from the south and were hanged at Herschel Island (Godsell 1934).

afraid to die fighting but that they would not leave their country. Rasmussen states that there are some particularly bad characters among them. The Eskimo at Kent Peninsula who was one of those to make the above statement had a habit of kicking his two wives out of the snowhouse without any clothes in mid-winter. On remonstrating with him, he was indignant and made the statement quoted above. Most of the trouble among these people is over women owing to the preponderance of males over females. Murder is usually avenged by the relations of the deceased. The band of 12 families, about 40 souls, living at Bellot Strait are composed entirely of murderers who have had to move away to escape punishment by their own people.

Polyandry is more common than polygamy and few cases at that. The common belief that there are very few children in the average Eskimo family is not so according to Mr. Rasmussen's experiences as he saw many families with seven children and some with up to 20 children<sup>11</sup>. Infanticide<sup>12</sup> is however common and many of the women have killed three, four and sometimes more of their infants, usually females, at childbirth by digging a hole in the side of the snowhouse, placing the infant in it and suffocating it by placing the afterbirth over the face and mouth.

There are cases where aged or crippled people have been abandoned to die but they are not common. There is usually some reason for this and for some cases of infanticide as when faced with starvation the people have to travel continuously and far and often in severe weather. From Kent Peninsula west, Mr. Rasmussen states that the influence of the Missionaries is evident, not so much from a religious standpoint, as from the fact that the natives have been instructed as to the manners and customs of the whiteman and therefore know it is wrong to commit murder or infanticide. Regarding the prevalence of murder and infanticide among the eastern people, Mr. Rasmussen expresses the opinion that more will be accomplished in a shorter time by educating these natives as [...] manners and customs of whitemen than by taking out and punishing them for their crimes. Mr. Rasmussen anticipates much trouble for the Police in attempting to deal with the present situation among the eastern natives. Mr. Rasmussen believes that the Backs River Preserve should be extended to the east coast as far south as Chesterfield Inlet and that no trading posts should be permitted therein for reasons already mentioned; that this is the ideal country for all game and for the natives.

Rasmussen states that the natives in Coronation Gulf are in a precarious position owing to the absence of deer the past two years and in some cases had and were suffering much hardship on this account. He intimated that the traders were exploiting the natives to the limit. He informed me that he would not make public the starving condition of the natives he met with in vicinity of Yathkyed Lake and Backs River. The

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<sup>11</sup> This unbelievable figure can only be the result of some kind of misunderstanding or misinterpretation of information Rasmussen had provided.

<sup>12</sup> For female infanticide, obviously widely practiced by the Netsilik Inuit, see Remie (1985).

names of all places mentioned in this report are taken from the British Admiralty Chart No. 2118.

I have the honour to be

Sir

Your obedient servant,

(sgd) Stuart T. Wood,

Inspector

Comd'g Arctic Sub-District.

## Discussion

Even though it should be kept in mind that the preceding text is not in Rasmussen's own words but rather represents a summary done by a police officer in an official report to his supervisors, there is no reason to believe that the information provided by Rasmussen was in a way interpreted in order to be in line with police positions. The relatively detailed account of the "Work of the expedition" has to be seen against the background of the 1920s. At a time when the Canadian government started guarding the inroads into its arctic territory while upholding and enforcing its sovereignty by establishing police posts (cf. Jenness 1964), the whereabouts of foreigners seemed to have been of special interest for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

The rest of the text to some extent anticipates the format of annual reports submitted some years later by a slowly increasing number of police posts to the government, dealing with census taking, game surveys and living conditions amongst the Inuit in general.

While the total number of 820 Copper Inuit, cited here under "Distribution and census," corresponds almost exactly to that identified by Rasmussen in his later publication (Rasmussen 1932: 69-70, 76-77), namely 816, the data for the Netsilik Inuit raise some questions. In his official report, Rasmussen (1931: 84, 473) quoted a number of 259: 54 around Pelly Bay, 66 on Boothia Isthmus, 37 at Murchison River, 18 at Bellot Strait, 84 at Adelaide Peninsula and 164 inland-oriented at Back River, as compared to the "approx." 525 Netsilik Inuit listed in the RCMP report. While according to this report Rasmussen mentioned "approx." 175 Inuit as living on King William Island, he does not provide any figure for such a group in his publication even though under the "main groups" he names the Qeqertarmiut ("the island dwellers," or the people on King William's Land) (Rasmussen 1931: 91). Frequent comments on caribou and fish caches on the island point in the same direction; the figures given to the RCM Police on Herschel Island therefore seem to come closer to reality than the ones in his later publication.



Figure 1. Central and Western Canadian Arctic, showing localities mentioned in the text (• = trading posts operating north of the tree line in 1924 [see Usher 1971]).

As far as the “Distribution of game” is concerned, we know today that Rasmussen’s remarks concerning the overall abundance of game fell short of the actual situation. In the 1920s muskoxen as well as caribou were undergoing a rapid decline due to excessive and wasteful slaughter after the introduction of firearms (Barr 1991, Kelsall 1968). According to Kelsall (1968: 220), most authors believe that excessive caribou killing by the Inuit also caused the destruction of the herds which used to migrate to and from Victoria and King William islands. Banfield (1954: 31) is of the opinion that the advent of firearms and the fur trade would seem to be a more probable cause of the decimation of the caribou herds than the effect of coal smoke from the newly established trading posts. And finally, the decline and in some cases the virtual disappearance of the caribou contributed to an increasing reliance on fishing in the Copper Inuit and Netsilik Inuit areas. This was obviously after Rasmussen had passed through, and the fact that nets became available from the newly established HBC post on King William Island even allowed “virtual year-round settlement at chief fishing sites” (Damas 2002: 22-23).

Rasmussen’s critical attitude towards “the traders”—he had only met with HBC employees—is quite intelligible because various complaints about extortion of the Inuit reached Ottawa in those years, until in 1924 the Commissioner of the Northwest Territories and Yukon Branch, residing in Ottawa, felt obliged to threaten the HBC that the government itself would take over operating trading posts (Damas 2002: 29). What is surprising is the fact that the same HBC is praised by Rasmussen in a lecture given before the Royal Society in London: “The Hudson’s Bay Company stands for civilization, and its outposts in those desolate lands represent the life and work of men who bear the white man’s burden, the white man’s great responsibility” (Rasmussen 1926: 126); exactly the same words were used in the narrative of his expedition, only to add “Throughout the North-west Passage I invariably found the traders on the best of terms with the Eskimos near” (Rasmussen 1927: 299).

The penultimate sentence, in which Inspector Wood wrote: “He informed me that he would not make public the starving condition of the natives he met with in vicinity of Yathkyed Lake and Backs River,” is even more difficult to understand. Why would Rasmussen want to remain silent as to the scale of this tragedy involving the Caribou Inuit—and why did he do so? For the period 1855-1926, Csonka (1995: 156-158) listed a total of 25 years during which the Caribou Inuit were struck by starvation due to the absence of caribou, and he believes that their number between 1890 and 1923 was reduced by more than half. Even though most of his sources for the earlier years were HBC records, there is every reason to believe that “starving” in the traders’ language was literally used and stood for unavailability of food and subsequent starving to death (Black-Rogers 1987); the number of deaths often cited leaves no room for any other interpretation. Burch (1988: 91) points out that between about 1916 and 1925 a whole series of famines struck the southern Keewatin: “The available evidence indicates that the Caribou Inuit population was cut by much more than half in the six years just prior to the arrival of the Fifth Thule Expedition. Indeed, people were starving and dying in the spring of 1922, when Rasmussen and Birket-Smith were there. These important facts were noted by these authors, but essentially ignored by them.” He considers it “one of the great ironies of Arctic ethnography that Kaj Birket-Smith and Knud

Rasmussen should visit southern Keewatin during the latter stages of this catastrophe and, either not understanding or deliberately ignoring its effects, proceed to write the most comprehensive account we have of *the* Caribou Inuit way of life<sup>13</sup>. What they actually saw were people on the verge of extinction” (Burch 1986: 129).

One cannot help feeling that perhaps Rasmussen was really not aware of the full magnitude of the catastrophe; one cannot explain otherwise his naivety in his dealings with the problem. In general he ascribed the non-appearance of the caribou herds to changes in their migration routes<sup>14</sup>. In a tent on the Kazan River, he encountered a half-dozen Caribou Inuit who could no longer run due to hunger and exhaustion, and then he found a herd of 14 animals in the same vicinity. From this he concluded: “It is difficult for a Greenlander to understand how these natives here can give up and lie down to die in a country so rich in game. But it is not laziness. I fancy the wretched footwear they use in summer has a great deal to do with it. They have not the thick stout sealskin or walrus hide, but only light caribou skin, pleasant enough in winter on the cold dry snow, but miserably inadequate in the swampy tundra during summer, and with no sort of wear in it over rocky ground; a couple of days will wear through perfectly new soles” (Rasmussen 1927: 105-106).

The director of the newly established Northwest Territories Branch of the Dept. of the Interior in Ottawa, allegedly knew that Rasmussen “had been shocked by the deplorable conditions of the Eskimos along the [Hudson Bay’s] western shores and in the hinterland; and that only international courtesy, and the feeling that they had been guests on Canadian soil, prevented him and his colleagues from exposing the situation at that time” (Jenness 1964: 30). The director was well aware that “territorial rights carry obligations; that it was the duty of the federal government to civilize the Eskimos and to safeguard their health and welfare; and that it was shamefully evading its responsibilities when it shuffled off those tasks on the traders and the missionaries, neither of whom possessed the means to carry them out” (Jenness 1964: 30). But the only certain thing is that he contended himself with this knowledge and introduced no concrete steps to improve the situation whether through the traders, the missionaries or the police.

This represented a continuation of a tradition which extended back at least seven years. In a letter of 21 June 1915, the manager of the Hudson’s Bay Company post in Churchill informed its district office in Nelson River that the preceding winter had been the hardest that many Indians and Eskimo had ever experienced: “In some cases death by starvation has been reported.” “One Eskimo came in from the North the other day—the first and only one so far—and reported that when he saw some of the other Eskimo in the middle of winter, they were so weak with starvation, they could no longer go out to look for deer; so it is concluded that bunch must all be dead, as they intended being in here for the seal hunt in the beginning of June, and we have seen nor heard nothing of them so far.” An extract from this letter was sent from the Commissioner’s Office, Royal North-West Mounted Police, in Regina to the

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<sup>13</sup> See Birket-Smith (1929a, b); Rasmussen (1930a, b).

<sup>14</sup> For a short summary of all the natural and anthropogenic factors that may have lead to an actual decline of the caribou population, see Csonka (1995: 162-163).

Comptroller, R.N.W.M. Police in Ottawa, who in turn forwarded it to the Secretary, Dept. of Indian Affairs. On 7 August 1915, *i.e.* seven weeks after the report was written, the Office of the Deputy Superintendent General, Dept. of Indian Affairs, Ottawa, acknowledged its receipt: “This report has been read with regret”<sup>15</sup>. But no concrete measures of any kind were taken.

Rasmussen and Birket-Smith, in their research among the Caribou Inuit, were followed by the Swiss ethnographer Jean Gabus in 1938-39 who in a letter of 12 July 1939<sup>16</sup> to the N.W.T. Deputy Commissioner in the Dept. of Mines and Resources in Ottawa wrote about starvation among the Inuit due to a lack of caribou in the fall and about the 17 deaths he had witnessed. He even offered to provide “all details and precise information” on the “destitution of the Eskimos, their unattended diseases,” but, again, with no reaction from the government.

It is idle to speculate whether it would have been possible or necessary in the early 1920s to inform the general public, both national and international, and thereby to trigger a storm of indignation which would have roused the Canadian government and forced it to take action. A lecture which Rasmussen presented in 1925 to the Royal Geographical Society, *i.e.* on “neutral” English ground, would have offered him this opportunity but he let it slip by (Rasmussen 1926). It was probably Rasmussen’s lack of insight or—more probably—his lack of courage, rather than international courtesy which prevented him from doing so. To what extent the behaviour he displayed ultimately could be reconciled with his scientific and moral claims—“we recognize them as brothers” (Rasmussen 1927: xii)—remains to be seen. However, the further fate of the Caribou Inuit might have taken a different course!

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<sup>15</sup> National Archives of Canada, RG 18, Vol. 493, File 521-15. Ms. Tina Lloyd, Archivist in the Government Records Branch, National Archives of Canada, Ottawa, kindly supplied me with copies of this correspondence.

<sup>16</sup> National Archives of Canada, RG 85, Vol. 888, File 9287.



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