

STEFANSSON, Vilhjalmur 2001 *Writing on Ice: The Ethnographic Notebooks of Vilhjalmur Stefansson*, edited and introduced by Gisli Palsson, Hanover, University Press of New England, 336 p.

David Morrison

Perspectives inuit et qallunaat : points de vue en interaction  
Inuit and Qallunaat perspectives: Interacting points of view  
Volume 26, numéro 1, 2002

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/009286ar>  
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/009286ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

---

Éditeur(s)

Association Inuksiutiit Katimajit Inc.

ISSN

0701-1008 (imprimé)  
1708-5268 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

---

Citer ce compte rendu

Morrison, D. (2002). Compte rendu de [STEFANSSON, Vilhjalmur 2001 *Writing on Ice: The Ethnographic Notebooks of Vilhjalmur Stefansson*, edited and introduced by Gisli Palsson, Hanover, University Press of New England, 336 p.] *Études/Inuit/Studies*, 26(1), 216–222. <https://doi.org/10.7202/009286ar>

Le lecteur familier des Inuit et de la chasse au phoque n'apprendra pas grand chose de nouveau à la lecture de ce petit livre dont le texte propre de l'auteur, en excluant les illustrations et les citations d'informateurs, constitue à peine la longueur d'un article de revue, mais il sera par contre ravi des nombreuses illustrations — toutes d'excellente qualité — qui l'accompagnent. Elles représentent pour beaucoup des scènes de chasse sculptées sur pierre ou ivoire ou encore gravées. Il est à regretter, cependant, que seulement deux illustrations montrent des objets techniques utilisés pour la chasse, la technologie n'étant pas un point fort des informations livrées par l'auteur. Pour ma part, moi qui ne suis pas un spécialiste des Inuit, j'ai particulièrement apprécié les huit photos en noir et blanc de groupes et des campements de chasse réalisées par Diamond Jenness.

Les spécialistes à la recherche de données détaillées et d'analyses approfondies sur la chasse au phoque ne trouveront donc pas leur compte dans ce volume, la plupart des informations rapportées demeurant relativement peu détaillées et superficielles. L'ouvrage a, par contre, le mérite d'accorder une place importante aux informateurs et informatrices rencontrés, pour lesquels de brèves informations biographiques sont fournies, et même une photo dans le cas de neuf d'entre eux. Je suis cependant d'avis qu'une publication fondée sur les connaissances traditionnelles des Autochtones — dans ce cas-ci des Inuit — devrait quand même aller plus loin dans l'exposition de ces connaissances.

Paul Charest  
Département d'anthropologie  
Université Laval  
Québec, Canada

STEFANSSON, Vilhjalmur

2001 *Writing on Ice: The Ethnographic Notebooks of Vilhjalmur Stefansson*, edited and introduced by Gisli Palsson, Hanover, University Press of New England, 336 p.

Vilhjalmur Stefansson is perhaps the most controversial and perennially fascinating of all arctic explorers and anthropologists. A vigorous, shameless, self-promoter in his own lifetime, in the forty years since his death he has continued to garner an extensive press, both good and bad, including numerous biographies (Le Bourdais 1963; Gregor 1977; Diubaldo 1978; Hunt 1986), and a key role in published accounts of the Karluk disaster (McKinlay 1976; Niven 2000). It might be thought that the well was now dry, and there was little new to be learned about (or from) even so multi-faceted a figure.

Not so, or at least not quite. The latest offering on the subject of Mr. Stefansson and his career comes from Gisli Palsson, *Writing on Ice: The Ethnographic Notebooks of Vilhjalmur Stefansson*. As Palsson points out, previous biographies and popular accounts have focused almost exclusively on Stefansson as an explorer and, later, as a

public figure and prophet of the North. It is time to re-assess Stefansson in his first if not his most important role, that of anthropologist.

The book consists of two parts; a collection of short introductory chapters written by Palsson (pp. 3-78), and a selection from Stefansson's ethnographic diaries (pp. 81-313), which in manuscript form are part of the Stefansson Collection at Dartmouth College. The diaries cover the first two of Stefansson's three arctic expeditions, the first between 1906 and 1908, when he was at least theoretically attached to the Anglo-American Polar Expedition (also known as the Mikkelson-Leffingwell Expedition), and the second from 1908 to 1912, with the Stefansson-Anderson Expedition. Diaries from his third and by far most ambitious expedition, the Canadian Arctic Expedition of 1913-1918, are omitted, since they contain, as Palsson notes (p. 3), "little of value on either Inuit society or native-white relations."

The introductory chapters cover a variety of topics. Stefansson's expeditions and the diaries as documents are briefly described. More importantly, there is a discussion entitled "Reflections on Fieldwork" which sets out Palsson's primary interest with the Stefansson diaries; the revelations they contain on the "dilemma" of fieldwork and the making of ethnographic texts. Palsson compares the Stefansson diaries with other posthumously published private ethnographer's diaries, which contain intimate details, private thoughts and subjective elements never meant for publication. His interest is the light these diaries throw on the field-contact situation, on the ethnographer as an active participant in a dynamic social situation, and on the making of anthropological texts as a subjective, creative act. The Malinowski diaries (Malinowski 1989) have become anthropological classics. Palsson notes that major excerpts from the Stefansson diaries were published long ago (Stefansson 1914), but have never evoked the same response. In large part, he attributes this to the fact that they were edited by a colleague of Stefansson's, Clark Wissler, "who discarded precisely the kind of material that sparked the debate on Malinowski's diaries" (p. 22).

So what details did Wissler suppress? What is in the Stefansson diaries that hasn't already been published, and what does it tell us about the complexities of Stefansson's "doing" of anthropology?

Unfortunately for Palsson's purposes, by far the most important revelation in *Writing on Ice* is a fact about which the diaries are entirely silent; Stefansson's "country marriage" to his Inuit (Inuvialuit) seamstress Pannigabluk, which resulted in the birth of a son, Alex. Although it has been common knowledge in the western Arctic for 90 years, most previous biographers have been either ignorant of this important aspect of Stefansson's private life, or oddly reticent to divulge it. Hunt (1986: 120-121), for instance, treats the accusation (which he learned of from missionary Charles Whittaker) as unproved malicious gossip, prompted by "fear of Stefansson's genius for publicity." However Palsson is not the first to point an unambiguous finger. Nearly twenty-five years ago, Richard Finnie, a friend of Stefansson's, published an article entitled "Stefansson's Mystery" which clearly identifies Stefansson as the father of Alex and partner of Pannigabluk (Finnie 1978).

Many readers, however, will be unfamiliar with Finnie's account, and Palsson is to be praised for presenting the case squarely and in a manner likely to attract wider attention. Not only did Alex closely resemble his father, there is documentary evidence presented by Palsson from Anglican baptismal records, and of course the testimony of modern Inuvialuit (as the Inuit of the western Canadian Arctic are known), including numerous Stefansson grandchildren (Alex died in the late 1960s). Yet Stefansson never acknowledged his arctic family, either in public or even in his "private" diaries. After leaving the Arctic in 1918, he never — apparently — contacted or supported them in any way. Palsson is able to cite diary entries from the period when Stefansson and Pannigabluk were living together, and particularly from around the time of Alex's birth, which achieve a certain poignancy when one realizes what was actually happening. But at no point does Stefansson reveal himself; never is Pannigabluk mentioned in anything more than a casual or off-hand way, and Alex is never mentioned at all. A hand-tinted lantern slide in the Stefansson Collection reproduced by Palsson as the front cover of the book shows Pannigabluk and Alex, when the latter was about four years old. Stefansson's caption misnames the boy as Eric.

As his treatment of Pannigabluk and Alex makes clear, Stefansson could be a very unscrupulous man, more concerned about his public image than in decent behaviour. Early twentieth century audiences in Europe or North America might have been shocked to learn that he had fathered a child on a "native" woman (although such events were far from rare). Modern readers are much more likely to be offended by his abandonment and denial of them, as apparently were people in the Western Arctic at the time (see the Chipman letter cited in Hunt 1986: 120). His behaviour is difficult to forgive, particularly from a man who presented himself as a free thinker, a severe critic of missionary morality, and a tolerant and sincere admirer of all things Inuit.

The remainder of *Writing on Ice* is taken up by the diaries. They are not complete, but are a selection informed — at least in part — by Palsson's interests. Without doing a word count, one has the impression that it is slightly shorter than Wissler's selection, published over sixty years ago, but there is a great deal of overlap. The areas of non-overlap are interesting. Wissler's selection, according to Palsson, "is highly biased, focusing on 'stories' (oral tradition) and 'material culture' (hunting techniques, tools, clothing), rather than the living reality of the Arctic here and now" (p. 31, brackets his). What interests Palsson, instead, is "information on the making of ethnography and the relations between whites on the one hand and Inuit and Indians on the other" (p. 31). He is also interested in diary entries of a personal nature.

Unfortunately, as the Pannigabluk story makes clear, Stefansson as diarist is a hard nut to crack. He evidently did not see expedition diaries as private documents, as members of the Canadian Arctic Expedition would later discover (Jenness 1991: xxviii). The author of this review has worked closely with the Wissler diaries for years. Reading the new Palsson selection I learned very little I did not already know, or could not have easily guessed. That Stefansson was sometimes ill, sometimes discouraged, sometimes frustrated with his companions, and frankly motivated (in part) by ambition will come as no surprise to anyone. That he refers to Inuit as *skraelingi* when writing in Icelandic is no more remarkable than his use of the equally derogatory term "Husky"

when writing in English. There is too little which is both new and of interest here to justify Palsson's pretenses about the "here and now" and "the making of ethnographic texts." Stefansson is a very disappointing Malinowski.

It is difficult to criticize a work for not being other than what it intends to be. Yet in my opinion Palsson not only fails in his appointed task — deconstructing Stefansson — but also focuses his interests far too narrowly. By concentrating on the subjective and inter-personal, Palsson tends to trivialize Stefansson's contribution. Stefansson's shortcomings as an anthropologist are not due to the difficulties he presents to deconstructive analysis. Instead they derive from his failure to do the actual hard work of writing up his observations.

And here they are, a hodge-podge of unsystematic diary entries, taking up two-thirds of the book and still crammed full of information available nowhere else (except of course in Wissler). Palsson does not even try to make them intelligible. In 1906, Stefansson walked into a hugely complex and dynamic cultural situation in the western Canadian Arctic, as he himself came to appreciate. The local Inuit population, who now call themselves Inuvialuit, had collapsed from about 2500 to about 150 people in just two generations. At the same time they were being swamped by Western civilization — in the form of police, missionaries, and commercial whalers — and also by the immigration of large numbers of Alaskan Inupiat ("Nuntama"). It is little wonder Stefansson was interested in "stories" of the past; he was almost writing a requiem. Without Stefansson, many aspects of the traditional culture would never have been recorded. To make sense of the diaries, one needs to know a great many things which one is never told. The diaries are presented without notes or references, and with almost nothing in the way of contextual information.

What little contextual information Palsson does supply is often flawed. There are only two maps in the book, both almost illegible and both woefully inadequate. Plate 1 shows Stefansson's travel routes, but at a scale of 1:15 million, so that even major topographic features which play a prominent role in Stefansson's text — for example places like Langton Bay — remain unidentified. The map shown in Plate 2 presents the only contextual ethnographic information given, and insofar as it is legible (the scale is again 1:15 million) it is full of errors. It indicates, quite incorrectly, that the Inuit inhabitants of the western Canadian Arctic are called, or call themselves, Inupiat, a word which should apply only to Alaska (the correct term, "Inuvialuit," does not appear anywhere in the book). It names the sub-group occupying the Cape Bathurst Peninsula as "Kitegareutmiut" (*i.e.* Kitigaryumiut), where it should be Avaqmiut. To south are placed the mysterious "Itkillikmiut," a group unknown to this reviewer, and etymologically something of an oxymoron ("Indian-Inuit"?). And so on. As if to underline his ignorance of arctic ethnography, Palsson illustrates a photograph from the Stefansson Collection which he attributes to the Anglo-American Polar Expedition (Fig. 30), and suggests it depicts a scene from "Tuktoyaktuk (?)." It clearly depicts eastern Arctic Inuit, and in fact was taken by A.P. Low at Cape Fullerton (see Low 1906: plate opposite page 144).

The absence of contextual information extends to the kinds of footnotes and cross-references that one would expect in a book of this nature. Palsson makes no attempt to systematically compare diary accounts of events with later published descriptions, either by Stefansson's or other eye-witnesses. The diary account of Klengenberg's first voyage to Victoria Island (p. 93), for instance, would be much more informative if contrasted with Stefansson's later published account (Stefansson 1990: 47-56), as well as the descriptions of Klengenberg himself (Klengenberg 1932) and of his Inuvialuit crew members (Nuligak 1966: 44). Copper Inuit testimony about Stefansson's first visit in 1910 (Condon 1996: 49-52) adds perspective and information to both Stefansson's diary (pp. 196-152) and published accounts (1971: 173ff), which again are not identical (not surprisingly, the published version is the more detailed). Even internal cross-referencing is ignored. The "process" of ethnography, for example, is well illustrated by instances where Stefansson corrects himself as he comes to better understand his informants and what they are saying (see pp. 114 and 116, for instance, on *kijigi* doors). Yet not even these arouse comment.

So what does this book add to our understanding either of Stefansson as an anthropologist, or the people which he was studying? Not a great deal. We get all that can probably be learned at this late date on Stefansson's relationship with Pannigabluk and Alex. We get a new and somewhat different selection from the Stefansson diaries, but without the kind of contextual information which would make them easily intelligible to the non-specialist. We get a diary index, which is most welcome, and a few photographs and line-drawings which have never before been published. But this is not a book to recommend to anyone save the most dedicated student of Stefansson and his work.

From any scholarly perspective, Stefansson was a poor anthropologist. He had the right instincts and a magpie mind, and he was certainly in the right place at the right time. But he chose to be a famous explorer instead. He chose easy and sometimes self-glorifying narrative over the hard slog of scholarly publication. This does not mean that his diaries are without value. Far from it; their value is increased by the fact that they did not form the basis of sustained scholarly publication, and remain almost our only window on a now vanished past. Stefansson is too guarded a diarist to be taken on anything other than his own terms. To appreciate him best as an anthropologist, or at least as an ethnographer, one must appreciate the content of what he records, and not merely the subjective act of recording.

## References

- CONDON, Richard  
1996 *The Northern Copper Inuit: A History*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press.
- DIUBALDO, Richard  
1978 *Stefansson and the Canadian Arctic*, Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press.

- FINNIE, Richard  
1978      *Stefansson's Mystery, North Nord*, December: 2-7.
- GREGOR, Alexander  
1977      *Vilhjalmur Stefansson and the Arctic*, Agincourt (Ontario), Book Society of Canada.
- HUNT, William  
1986      *Stef: A Biography of Vilhjalmur Stefansson, Canadian Arctic Explorer*, Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press.
- JENNESS, Stuart  
1991      *Arctic Odyssey: The Diary of Diamond Jenness 1913-1916*, Hull (Quebec), Canadian Museum of Civilization.
- KLENGENBERG, Christian  
1932      *Klengenberg of the Arctic*, London, J. Cape.
- LE BOURDAIS, Donat Marc  
1963      *Stefansson, Ambassador of the North*, Montreal, Harvest House.
- LOW, Albert P.  
1906      *Report on the Dominion Government Expedition to Hudson Bay and the Arctic Islands on Board the D.G.S. Neptune 1903-1906*, Ottawa, Government Printing Bureau.
- MALINOWSKI, Bronislaw  
1989      *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term*, New York, Harcourt, Brace and World.
- MCKINLAY, William Laird  
1976      *Karluk: The Great Untold Story of Arctic Exploration*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- NIVEN, Jennifer  
2000      *The Ice Master: The Doomed 1913 Voyage of the Karluk*, New York, Hyperion.
- NULIGAK  
1966      *I, Nuligak*, edited and translated by Maurice Metayer, Toronto, Peter Martin.
- STEFANSSON, Vilhjalmur  
1914      *The Stefansson-Anderson Arctic Expedition: Preliminary Ethnographic Results*, Clark Wissler, ed., New York, Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History, 14(1).

- 1971 *My Life with the Eskimo*, New York, Collier.
- 1990 *Hunters of the Great North*, New York, Paragon House.

David Morrison  
Canadian Museum of Civilization  
Hull, Canada

- TERSIS, Nicole et Michèle THERRIEN (dir.)  
2000 *Les langues eskaléoutes, Sibérie, Alaska, Canada, Groënland*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 365 p.

There are fourteen articles in this collection, a selective survey of the state of the art in Eskaleut linguistics at the turn of the century. Such a broad project must have demanded much thought in its conception and development. For the reviewer, restricted to two pages, it presents a daunting task if he is to avoid a series of disjointed summaries. One way out of the dilemma is to target a particular audience. I think I can disregard those who are active in the field. One look at the contributors (a Casablancian list of the usual suspects) and you know what to expect. Instead, I intend to aim at younger students at the beginning of their careers, challenged by the hints they have heard of these intriguing languages in their general courses, and keen to find out a little more at a greater depth.

Start with the introduction. Stop skimming and start your serious reading at the section headed *Tendances générales des langues eskaléoutes*. That will give you an overview of the topics that will be dealt with in detail later. But be cautious of the word *fluidité* in the heading *fluidité des catégories et des niveaux syntactiques*. The glide from noun to verb or vice versa in mid stride may seem liquidly chameleon when you first encounter it, but such changes are handled with the precision that is the hallmark of this language. It is linguists who have trouble with the "imprecise frontiers between morphology and syntax," not the speakers of the language.

From there go straight to the first article, Louis-Jacques Dorais's *Présentation géolinguistique et sociolinguistique de la famille eskaléoute*. If you don't get the geography straight from the start then you will get lost in the superficial differences between dialects. From there I would move to Michael Fortescue's *Parenté génétique des langues eskaléoutes*. Now you have a broad picture of the whole language family in space and time.

In the detailed articles that follow, four contain excellent preliminary overviews of specific language systems. Lawrence Kaplan's contribution, *L'inupiaq et les contacts linguistiques en Alaska*, for example, has two introductory sub-sections: *Systèmes phonologiques* (This sub-title appears in the list of contents, but not in the actual text) and *Caractéristiques de la grammaire inupiaq*. The remainder of his article deals with