

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

SM-15

"True North" (Part I)

3 October 1990
Vancouver, B.C.

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Dear Peter,

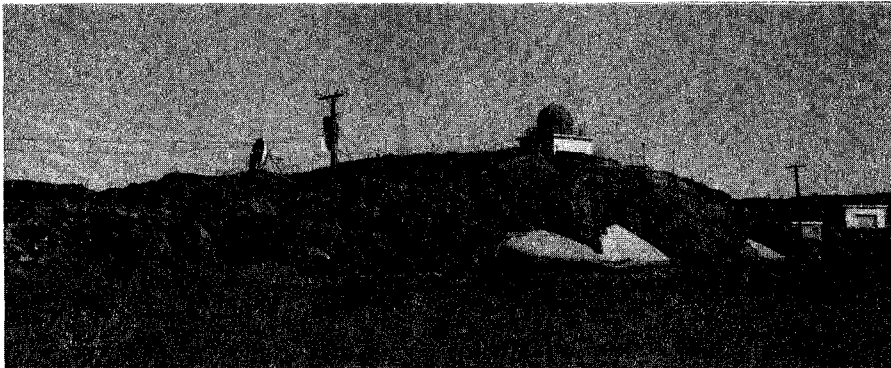
I have been to see the future and it was interestingly bleak. It came to me on a brief journey to the Far North, this arresting, desolate vision of what Canada, and the world, is destined to become: wild, polluted, alien, dangerous, and almost empty. I had been reading about plagues in history, about the environmental consequences of chemical and biological warfare, and about clandestine submarine activity under the polar ice, where the superpowers continue to play cat-and-mouse games under the runny noses of the Canadian Rangers, a mostly native militia armed with bolt-action rifles and assigned to guard Canada's sovereignty on the Arctic Rim. Somehow all this combined to create a mental image of some indeterminate phase of the 21st century.

I had also arrived on Baffin Island, a mountainous and glacier-ridden piece of the Canadian North twice the size of Great Britain and as far from Montreal as is Miami. From the spine of a treeless ridge I could see in one direction a shimmering silvery river pouring out through a seam in the tundra and sliding over a ledge to join the briney reaches of an ocean tide. The scene was pristine and primeval; it seemed as if I was staring into a landscape totally barren of human encroachments and utterly indifferent to human sentiment--it had the cold, sterile beauty of an unpeopled planet. In the opposite direction, looking out onto Frobisher Bay, the view was equally exotic, but even more melancholy. In the foreground was Iqaluit (Ee-kal-loo-it), the administrative and commercial center of Baffin Island, and a town of about 3,500 souls, 30 percent white, 70 percent Inuit (Eskimo). I could see dust rising, even from several miles away, as the battered, beige-colored taxis and bright blue pickup trucks raced aimlessly back and forth on dirt roads between the

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Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

bright yellow airport tower and the more distant hodgepodge of muted colors that signified a complex of houses, stores, hotels and various public buildings. I knew the taxis were empty of passengers nine times out of ten, and I hadn't the foggiest notion of where the trucks could be going all the time. I supposed the scattered clumps of satellite dishes and the old Distant Early Warning site on a nearby hillside might require occasional maintenance, but that wouldn't explain all the toing and froing. It was a mystery.



I could also see a plume of black smoke emerging from the town dump--it rose to a certain height, and then flattened out into a barely discernable haze. I was standing on the edge of the wilderness, but squarely downwind of this eyesore. The acrid smell of burning rubber and unidentifiable chemical compounds gave me a horrible headache, and I thought (crazily, without deference to the atmospheric effects of lunar gravity), "This could be the Moon."

I was not alone. Alice was putting up the tent. Large mosquitoes were making indecent headway against the poisoned breeze. At another campsite, a small group from Thunder Bay, Ontario were tearing up scraps of lumber and plywood for a fire. (There is no other kind of wood this far north.) They would be joined later on by an old Italian of aristocratic bearing and his well-dressed son--a walking advertisement for Giorgio Armani--who is studying international business and marketing in Boston. They had booked a room in town, and taken a taxi to the campground, having been advised of the splendid view. We would all eventually converge around the campfire to curse the perpetual menace of toxic waste, wonder aloud at the perpetual summer daylight in these latitudes, and keep going an easy, cheerful, directionless conversation among strangers. This was a chance to recount our recent unconnected experiences in this beautiful godforsaken forward base of earthly civilization called the Northwest Territories.

I am going to save telling you the best parts of the story about our trip to Baffin Island for another time. Instead, I will mention several reasons for going to a part of present-day Canada that Queen Elizabeth I dubbed "Meta Incognita," the edge of the unknown.

A Northern Nation

To begin to understand the dogma of Canadian nationalism one has sooner or later to go north; that's where most of the country's visionaries and mythmakers project their psyches, and that's where you will find damning evidence of a manifest destiny, the very thing that Canada is supposed not to have. You will also find Americanization at its best and worst in the North: everything from Boeing aircraft to Sarah Lee and soda pop to satellite-beamed newscasts from Detroit.

What you will not find in the Canadian North is a great number of Canadians. It is the most sparsely populated section of the circumpolar region, which includes most of Alaska, Greenland, and northern Siberia. There are fewer people in the whole of the Northwest Territories, an area of 3.3 million square kilometers (one-third of Canada) than in any one of the major suburbs of Vancouver. The large majority of Canadian travelers to the North visit the Western Arctic area and the Yukon. You can drive to these places; the only special requirements in the summer months, I am told, are metal mesh covers to protect your headlights from gravel chips and more than one spare tire. Getting to the Eastern Arctic (of which Baffin Island is a major portion) is much more costly and difficult, requiring long-distance air travel to Iqaluit or Rankin Inlet (on Hudson Bay), subsequent shorter hops to the outlying settlements, and the hiring of boats or float planes to penetrate the interior. Most visitors to the region are foreign tourists who come to climb mountains or catch fish. (We met up with Germans, Swiss, the aforementioned Italians, and a couple from Minnesota as well as groups from Quebec and Ontario.)

But being in the North is not so important to Canadians generally as speaking about it with a mixture of reverence, awe, pride-of-ownership, and the requisite amount of guilt for having imposed a competitive, technological and materialist culture upon an ancient society based on hunting, fishing, and sharing. The North is to 20th century Canadians what the West was to 19th century Americans; it's their modern frontier in much the same way the Moon (and now Mars) have become our own. The conceit of such thinking wherever it occurs goes without saying. What is remarkable is the extent to which some Canadians take their "northernness" to be the crux of an indomitable cultural distinction. "Everything that's not American comes from the North-- that's where the white space is," novelist Don DeLillo wrote for *Weekend* magazine in 1979. "Whatever's mysterious, it comes from the North. We don't need outer space. We have the North."

The best-known proponent and progenitor of this idea is Margaret Atwood, another novelist. In a landmark analysis of Canadian literary themes (*Survival*, 1974), Atwood asserts that national cultures are built around central, unifying symbols, like the frontier (for Americans) or "this Island England" for the British. The core of Canadian identity is survival against all odds. Atwood's beautifully written thesis goes well beyond matters of sheer physical survival in a beastly climate to

include ruminations about Canada's cultural survival in the face of the American behemoth.

The notion that the Canadian soul is imbued with a northern spirit is pretty much taken for gospel in the southern parts of the country. "As others might go into the desert on a spiritual journey, a Canadian would go north," is how Berkeley historian Tom Barnes sums up the standard sermon. Barnes cocked a critical and discerning eye at what he calls "literary borealism" in a recent issue of *The American Review of Canadian Studies*. "The North that the anglophone literati see and describe really is a boreal myth," he says, and the real Northerners "remain hostage to the 'Our North' ideology fashioned in and asserted from Toronto and Ottawa." He goes on to cite demographic factors to underscore the mythical character of most Canadians' relation to and association with the North. The vast majority of Canadians live within 200 miles of the U.S. border, most of them in large cities. Moreover, there are seven times as many Americans living in the Arctic and sub-Arctic climate zone as there are Canadians: 525,000 Alaskans compared to 74,000 Canadians in the Northwest Territories and the Yukon. "Canada has plenty of North but few northerners," says Barnes.

Others have made similar observations for the opposite end, not to debunk the myth but to give it substance. Louis-Edmond Hamelin is concerned about his fellow Canadians' lack of knowledge about the North. This is the eminent geographer from Quebec who coined the term "nordicity" [see SM-8], and his is an outstanding voice in the chorus of policy-oriented scientists, strategists, scholars and artists who sing praises of the North and issue occasional admonishments to the masses who seem unwilling to grasp its importance. In a paper entitled "The Canadian North and its Conceptual Referents," Professor Hamelin states that

opinion makers who know nothing about the North are much more numerous than those with direct knowledge of it (residents, temporary workers, administrators, researchers, and faithful tourists). These groups of people who have gained experience in the North, even if only sectorial and regional, represent no more than about five percent of the Canadian population.

This is a proportion, Hamelin warns, that is still too low not to pose a problem in the formulation of sound and sufficiently integrated policies to manage such a vast area. (Using an ingenious index of "polar values" that include climatic as well as population-related factors along with latitude, Hamelin has determined that almost 70 percent of Canada's territorial space exhibits high degrees of nordicity, thus his assertion that the North should become the focus of a "national" effort.) Steven Roberts, publisher of *Arctic Circle* magazine, is another strong voice carrying the same tune: "Decision-making by myth is likely to be a careless exercise that can cause grievous harm to the people who make the North their home."

Before the Second World War provoked a sense of territorial imperative and before the realization that Canada lay directly in the flight path of intercontinental bombers and missiles during the Cold War, the North was a region of profound neglect. R. Quinn Duffy has catalogued the many sins of omission of the Canadian government in its approaches to the North in a book called *The Road to Nunavut*. [The word Nunavut means "our land" in Inuktitut, the Inuit language; it is the name given to a pending proposal to allow the Inuit in the Eastern Arctic self-government and a degree of control over land and sea resources.] Duffy characterizes the 1945-85 period as "40 years of cultural near-extinction during which the Inuit have sunk as low as any people could in dirt, degradation, disease and dependence." From his point of view, the federal government has slunked into the role of reluctant guardian, and its performance has been less than impressive. What makes the fate of the Inuit so important to Canada, in Duffy's estimation, starts with the fact that they occupy roughly one third of the country's land area, but more importantly reaches deep into the heart of what it means to be Canadian:

Threatened physically by hostile elements, threatened culturally, linguistically, and spiritually by a people and a government alien to their land, they have hung on, stayed alive, survived, a vestige of a vanished order. They are the Canadian survivors par excellence. This is why a small minority like the Inuit should be of concern to the rest of Canada.

Despite widespread ignorance about and apathy toward the social, economic, environmental, and political realities of "their" North, the place (and its attendant conceptualizations) has a firm grip on a surface of Canadians' thinking about the nature of their nationality. *Up Here*, a magazine about outdoor life and northern cultures published in Yellowknife (the Territorial capital), has 20,000 paying subscribers, according to Tom Barnes, and 85 percent of them live in the South. Go into any bookstore in Canada and you will find that at least half the shelf items under the rubric "Canadiana" will have something to do with the North: the Inuit, caribou, polar bear, the Klondike, etc. In one of the better recent books, entitled *Arctic Twilight*, author Kevin McMahon acknowledges there are "reports, manuals, proceedings, studies, meditations and memoirs galore," but he too contends that the North remains an obscurity in the public mind. The weak myth of Canada as a Northern Nation is going strong.

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North as South

The North is Canada's own Third World. This is where the often-stated "fact" that Canada has been a colony, but never a colonizer, can be quickly laid out in the open and gutted like a fish. Like most colonialist endeavors, the Canadian occupation of its northern regions has brought with it many substantive

blessings as well as the cursed inexorable pressures and maladies of misplaced modernity, like joblessness, homelessness, boredom, malnutrition, drug abuse, and engine noise. In the 1950s, the government undertook to move the traditionally nomadic Inuit into permanent settlements. It was for their own good, in some respects (disease had decimated the natives' sled dogs, for example), but it also had to do with a need for workers to build the DEW line for the Americans and to begin to demonstrate Canadian sovereignty in a visible and responsible manner.

I came face to face with a lingering case of colonial mentality at the airport in Iqualuit. I had a logistical problem to deal with. I solicited the help of an airline official. He turned out to be Chief of Security, an ex-Mountie, somewhat helpful, and very patronizing. He gave me some phone numbers, and told me what questions to ask. I followed his recommendations, and I thought I had things straightened out, but then he asked me: "Who did you talk to? Was it an Inuk? [the singular form of Inuit] You never know with them...I'll check on it." He checked on it. Then he came out from behind the ticket counter and ushered me aside, coach-like, with an arm around my shoulder, so that we could talk in private. "I did some checking," he said, and went on about his 30 years of experience in the North and how much he loved the people up here but "they're not always competent" and things of that nature. I was grateful for his assistance, but almost ashamed for having taken it, because it quickly dawned on me that this man with a white shirt and pressed trousers and a definite scent of aftershave was just the sort of subtle racist I had read about in books. Here is a passage from an earlier time, quoted in Hugh Brody's *The People's Land: Whites and the Eastern Arctic*:

They have power, comparative luxury, feel superior in their technological knowledge, and, if all else fails, they are 'white men' who by self-definition are always right. Behavior towards ethnic persons is prompted no doubt by attempts to appear friendly but it is often only recognizable as facetiousness and favoritism.

One of the more pressing problems that Canadian authorities and the Inuit people have to face together is overcrowding, an ironic happenstance in a spatial area of such colossal dimensions. We met a young doctor hiking alone through the sand dunes and scree slopes in Auyuittuq (I-you-we-took) National Park. He told us he delivered 400 babies last year in Iqualuit. He looked tired, but undaunted. The Baffin Region of the Eastern Arctic has a birth rate of nearly 4 percent per annum, higher than any country in the Western hemisphere. At this pace, the population will double in 18 years. There are only about 17,000 Inuit living in the Far North, roughly half of them in the Baffin region, so the numbers pale in comparison with places like Mexico. But half of the population are under the age of 15; 30 percent of their elders are unemployed; half of all Inuit families (90 percent in some communities) are on social assistance at least part of the year. The teenage suicide rate among the Inuit is 7 times greater than the Canadian average, and while drinking seems to under some degree of control (alcohol is

prohibited in most Inuit-dominated villages, but available in Iqualuit), glue-sniffing and what the authorities call "solvent abuse" remains unchecked. "Most of the Inuit living in the Arctic in the year 2025 will probably be second-generation wards of the state, living out their lives in 'arctic ghettos' plagued by increasing rates of crime." That's the assessment of Colin Irwin, a Dalhousie University sociologist who has written a report for Health and Welfare Canada.

Jobs are scarce in the North. There is a single lead/zinc mine on Baffin, at Nanisivik--the only settlement in the Eastern Arctic with sewers--but it is almost played out. (Kevin McMahon says it is destined to become Canada's first arctic warfare training base.) Government services provide the almost the only stable economic base. For the foreseeable future, managerial-level positions will be held by whites, not natives. A Nunavut proposal for subdividing the federally-administered Northwest Territories has been held up for years, and one of the reasons is a shortage of sufficiently trained and educated Inuit to fill the jobs that political autonomy would create overnight.

Tourism-related employment is seasonal, and its development potential quite limited: How many European alpinists will pick Baffin Island to test their mettle, with the Alps so near and the Himalayas so much in vogue? How many rich Americans will fly to fish camps on Cumberland Sound when they can catch lunkers in Manitoba? And there is no going back to living off the land. Most of the large mammals are long gone. ("Everything is dead here," complained the elder Italian.) The Inuit Elders lead their people into the wilderness for several weeks each summer, to ensure they will maintain their spiritual connection to nature and basic survival skills. It is the most they can do, and they know it, I was told by a young Inuit leader. "Like water eroding the bank of a stream," as British journalist Sam Hall puts it in yet another book about the North, "the qallunaat (whites) have trickled through the Arctic, and worn away a culture."



The real North, little that I've seen of it, is a captivating, distressing mixture of tourism, racism, militarization, poverty, powerful myths and truly awesome scenery. How could there be so much going on in such a desolate place as this, with so few people? I left Baffin Island feeling overwhelmed, knowing that I had merely touched down on the tip of an iceberg.

Cheers,

Stephen Maly

P.S. Alice found this entry in the Visitor's logbook at Thor cabin, an emergency shelter above the Arctic Circle in Auyuittuq National Park.

There are strange things done
'neath the midnight sun
By the folks that hike Baffin Isle
They carry their packs upon their backs
'til they've travelled many a mile
They know it's cold and they're much too old
And it's awfully hard on their knees
But they stick to the trail
'til they're cold and pale
Like the mold that sticks to their cheese.

Received in Hanover 10/12/90