

Vilhjalmur Stefansson (1879-1962)



Photograph of Vilhjalmur and Evelyn Stefansson by Richard S. Finnie

One of the last great arctic explorers of the era of boats, dogs, and sledges, Vilhjalmur Stefansson was also a highly articulate and innovative spokesman for the North. He is best known for his field work in anthropology and for his outspoken defence of the North as a rich and habitable land.

On the 3rd of November, 1879, Stefansson — or “Stef” as he was known to friends — was born in Arnes, Manitoba, to Icelandic parents. They took him in early childhood to North Dakota, where he grew up. Successfully racing through a four-year arts course at the State University of Iowa in a single year, he proceeded to study anthropology and theology at Harvard. There he became a teaching

fellow after two summers of field work in Iceland, and left the university in 1906 to engage in arctic exploration. His not waiting to take postgraduate degrees was to militate against him among certain academics, although honorary doctorates were bestowed on him in later years by eight universities.

He turned toward the Canadian Arctic and spent eighteen months with the Eskimos of the Mackenzie River delta, learning their language and folkways. From 1908 to 1912, under the auspices of the American Museum of Natural History and the Canadian Government, he explored the area from the Colville River in Alaska to Cape Parry, Coronation Gulf, and Victoria Island in Canada’s western

Arctic, where he observed "blond" types among the Copper Eskimos.

His finale as an active arctic explorer was leadership of the Canadian Government expedition of 1913-18 to the Alaskan and Canadian Arctic. It was marred by eleven fatalities when ice crushed its base ship, *Karluk*. Stefansson and others, who had gone ashore to hunt, were unable to help the twenty-five people left on board. With small parties of whites and Eskimos he subsequently ventured over floating ice much farther than anyone before him had deliberately driven dog-teams without ample provisions. He supported himself and his companions by hunting and fishing, exploding the myth of a lifeless polar sea. He filled in coastline gaps and found and mapped the last sizable unknown islands in the Canadian Arctic.

Having completed his last arctic journey at age 39, Stefansson entered the second half of his life, that of a researcher and writer, preaching the gospel of the North — its livability and potentialities. This man of imposing stature and leonine head, who had once out-travelled and out-hunted many of his native companions, now turned to the lecture-tour circuit and the writing of more than two dozen books and innumerable pamphlets and articles. In sharp contrast to the athletic life he had led in the North, his New York life was remarkably sedentary: short walks to and from taxis and subways were the only exercise he took.

He became almost wholly a man of ideas. He promoted a scheme to introduce domestic reindeer to Baffin Island, and although it failed miserably, the mismanagement that brought about the failure was beyond Stefansson's control. He also devised an ambitious scheme to send four white volunteers with an Eskimo cook-seamstress to Wrangel Island, off the coast of Siberia. Disregarding the sector principle of Arctic Island ownership, they were to take possession of it for Canada. The volunteers perished. The Eskimo woman was rescued, and soon the island was permanently occupied by the Soviets. Along with the *Karluk* disaster, these two ill-starred ventures damaged Stefansson's reputation.

But that innovative mind also inspired several far more successful undertakings. Along with Richard Finnie, he was one of the first to suggest a crude-oil pipeline between Norman Wells and a refinery in the Yukon, a project realized years later in the construction of the CANOL pipeline. Similarly, he was an early proponent of a road to Alaska, an idea that ultimately led to the Alaska Highway of today. Significantly, Stefansson seriously disagreed with the final routes chosen for both pipeline and road, arguing

that the highway should follow the Mackenzie River to a point below Norman Wells, before crossing over a relatively low divide to Dawson City and down the Yukon River.

Nevertheless, conflicting opinions were nothing new to Stefansson, who was always too busy writing and lecturing, promulgating his ideas, to be discouraged by skepticism or hostility. In fact, he thrived on opposition. He also practiced what he preached, whether it was supporting himself by hunting amid the ice floes of the Arctic Ocean, or being the subject of an experiment to determine the physiological effects of an all-meat diet. The seeming arrogance and aggressiveness of which he was sometimes accused in earlier years — fellow explorer Roald Amundsen denounced him as a charlatan, one-time friend Dr. R.M. Anderson unflatteringly referred to him as "Windjammer" — may have arisen from his being a man with a mission, impatient with the conservatism of politicians, administrators, and scientists with whom he had to deal.

In 1941, at the age of 62, Stefansson married Evelyn Baird, a 27-year-old staff member in charge of his library. Over the next decade, they divided their time between New York and an old farm they had bought near Bethel, Vermont. In 1951 the Stefanssons moved from New York with their immense polar library to Dartmouth College at Hanover, New Hampshire. The explorer and anthropologist was installed there as a living legend-in-residence, as it were, available to students and visitors for consultation, with Evelyn as the first librarian of what became known as the Stefansson Collection. On 26 August 1962, shortly after completing the manuscript of his autobiography, *Discovery*, he died of a stroke.

FURTHER READINGS

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