

Henry Toke Munn (1864-1952)

Henry Toke Munn was very much the English gentleman. Born in 1864, he came to Canada at the age of 22 and was nearly killed in a shoot-up in the streets of Montréal on the very day of his landing. He became a farmer and then a horse-breeder in Manitoba, and by 1894 he was hunting muskoxen and wood buffalo in the far northwest. He subsequently prospected around Kootenay, joined the Yukon gold-rush as a storekeeper, and acquired the title of "Captain" while serving in the South African war. While prospecting for gold in northern Ontario, he met George Bartlett, a Newfoundlander who possessed a map that had belonged to the dying cooper of a Dundee whaler, who had found "gold" on Baffin Island. In 1912 Munn and Bartlett chartered the former gunboat *Algerine* to seek the gold; they found none and had their ship crushed by ice for their trouble. The next year, Munn formed the Arctic Gold Exploration Syndicate, whose shareholders were mainly English gentry led by Lord Lascelles. They purchased the ketch *Albert*, built in 1889 as a hospital ship for the North Sea fishery and since engaged in whaling ventures off Baffin Island under various owners. In 1914 *Albert* dropped off Munn and another man to trade and to search for gold just north of Baffin; that year was enough to convince Munn that there was no gold.

Munn shifted his energies to trade. In 1916 he was left for a two-year stay on Southampton Island with six Eskimo families; in 1919 he visited his agents at several arctic posts but did not stay himself; and he spent the winter of 1920-21 at Button Point, his original station north of Baffin Island. At the end of that stay, he found the Hudson's Bay Company moving north from Hudson Strait in such force that he could not compete, and Munn's backers soon convinced him to sell out, adding the humiliating proviso that he should never trade in the Arctic again. In the summer of 1923 he sailed in the HBC steamer to turn his Syndicate's assets over to its new owners, and a series of incidents intensified his long-standing dislike of the Company to a deep resentment, mixed with remorse at having to commit "his" Eskimos to the mercy of those he could not trust.

Captain Munn lived in both Canada and England for the next ten years, but arthritis caused him to move to the Seychelles Islands in the Indian Ocean, where he died in 1952. His body was committed to the sea, drifted ashore, and had to be committed again.

In the early years of his retirement Munn not only encouraged others to break the monopoly of the Hudson's Bay Company, but he waged a constant propaganda war against it. In newspapers, magazines, and books he described the Eskimo as "a hunter by task and heredity" — a notion few would hold today — and he claimed that the HBC created previously unknown wants, thereby depleting wildlife and forcing the

Eskimos to grow dependent on trapping. He was milder against missionaries, who made the Eskimos "soft"; here he expressed a crude form of social Darwinism. Of course Munn distinguished between his own trading and that of the HBC; he argued that his own low overheads meant that he did not give credit, or could not give credit, and that he avoided "spoiling", by which he meant changing the only way of life for which he believed Eskimos to be genetically suited. He claimed that his party had left Southampton Island because he discovered that they were depleting caribou herds there.

Of Captain Munn's three books, the most interesting is the novel *Home Is the Hunter*, which is largely wish-fulfillment. The hero is a half-Eskimo reared in Scotland (as one of Munn's colleagues was said to have been) who, after besting several rivals (as Munn in real life did not), settles down to live the life of an Eskimo because his heredity fits him for that life (as Munn's did not). Modern thought, of course, would utterly reject such hereditary direction, but Munn did not know that. It is astonishing that despite his many years spent among Eskimos he never learned much of their language; perhaps he felt he was genetically constrained not to learn it.

One of Munn's lesser complaints against the Hudson's Bay Company was that when it acquired his beloved ketch *Albert*, she ran on the rocks off the Scottish coast, and he apparently thought that was the end of her. In fact, she was repaired and sold to the Faroes to begin a new career as mother-ship to fishing vessels off Greenland. After many adventures, including attack by German aircraft in World War II, she was finally abandoned after being damaged by ice in Baffin Bay as late as 1968. The ketch had outlived Munn.

FURTHER READINGS

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