

TIMOTHY IDLOUT (1916-92)

On 28 November 1992, at age 77, Timothy Idlout died at home in Resolute, Northwest Territories. Born in the spring of 1916 near Pond Inlet, as a young man he traveled extensively in the area of Baffin and Somerset islands. He lost his first wife and six children to disease in the early 1940s. In 1946 he married Naomi Nangat, who was born near Repulse Bay and grew up in the Igloodik area. The couple lived in the Fort Ross/Creswell Bay/Aston Bay area of Somerset Island, along with a handful of other Inuit. The last of their camp partners moved away in 1967, leaving them as the only residents of Somerset Island.

Idlout and Nangat had 12 children of their own, of whom 7 are still living, and adopted several more from relatives. Nangat recalls that Idlout always worked very hard to support his family. Virtually all their food was game and fish, and what little income they had was derived from fox trapping and the sale of polar bear skins and narwhal tusks. Idlout was extremely self-reliant, able to travel and survive no matter what the weather. In mid-winter, sometimes before the polar dawn, he and his family traveled by dog team in a circuitous route from Somerset to Resolute to trade. The trip took up to a week each way, often over shifting ice, which did not consolidate until February or March.

Idlout passed on his hardy self-reliance to each of his children, boys and girls alike being able to handle their own dog team, build an iglu, or flense a narwhal. They remember that he rarely instructed by voice, but instead patiently repeated procedures until it became second nature for the child. Idlout never overtly expressed fear when he faced the elements on his own terms, but I recall one time when he had come by to watch his son Andrew (the first Inuk SCUBA diver) make a dive. When Andrew disappeared beneath the ice on his dive line, Idlout was visibly agitated, and he was obviously relieved when his son finally reappeared!

Idlout preferred camp life to the hustle and bustle of town, so when virtually all other Inuit surrendered to the enticements of the new settlements in the fifties and sixties, Idlout stayed on the land. With the exception of the winter of 1974-75, he and Nangat remained on Somerset until the fall of 1991, when age and illness forced him to move to Resolute. He and Nangat were the last Inuit who had never left the land, and 1991 was therefore an historic year, the end of a chain of continuous Inuit occupancy that lasted for some 4000 years.

Idlout was well known among the scientific community. Ethnographically he was of great interest as an example of traditional Inuit living. Geologists, geographers, biologists, and archaeologists all passed through his camp and sought his extensive knowledge. Occupying the narrow waist of Somerset where Stanwell Fletcher Lake and Creswell Bay pinch the island, he represented Inuit land claims in an area critical to the proposed Arctic Islands Pipeline Project. Idlout was a gentle man who was never known to have raised his voice in anger to another person. He welcomed all people graciously, be they royalty, clergy, or just plain folks, exhibiting a generosity that we *qadlunaq* rarely find in our own society.

Idlout and Nangat were well known among the Inuit community too and widely respected as "real people" who lived the old way. After HF radios came into common use in the early



Idlout at his home at Aston Bay in February 1970.

1970s, all camps and communities were closely linked, even when communicants had never seen each other. Idlout himself rarely used the radio, but Nangat conversed for hours with her scattered family, other communities, and camps on the land. A striking example of this occurred in 1977 when I visited the only family still living on the land out of Chesterfield Inlet. They "knew" the Idlout family very well and asked if I wanted to say hello to my old friends via the radio, which in due course I did. Each family knew what daily events occurred in the other's camp, but it was another decade before a single member of one family finally met a member of the other.

Idlout was a remarkable man, remnant of a traditional Inuit society not far removed from the Stone Age, yet his children have bridged the gap and are outstanding citizens in their own right. With his passing goes a certain knowledge of the land and sea that the rest of us will never know. It is a humbling thought.

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