

JAN WELZL (1868–1948)

In the 1930s and 1940s, a man named Jan Welzl lived in the Yukon Territory's Dawson City, a town more or less surrounded by goldfields. Unlike other Dawsonites, however, Welzl did not prospect for gold. Instead, he occupied himself with the construction of a perpetual motion machine. This contraption seems to have been composed of various pipe fittings, axles, and counterweights, with the occasional beer bottle and tin can thrown in for good measure; it also had a cavorting ball, to which Welzl—called "John Inventor" by his neighbours—would point and, in his typically broken English, say: "She go up, she go down, she go 'yah, yah, yah.'"

Welzl is remembered in Dawson as a harmless eccentric, a man who hurt no one but himself, since his invention blocked access to his stove and thus prevented him from eating. No doubt his Dawson neighbors would have been surprised to learn that the unconventional Czech had recently been at the center of a literary controversy.

The book that inspired this controversy, *Thirty Years in the Golden North*, first appeared in English in 1932. As a selection of the prestigious Book-of-the-Month Club, it sold more than 150,000 copies in only a few months. Welzl's rollicking tales of life in the frigid North delighted even readers who preferred less adventurous fare, perhaps because the book's narrative style has a conversational, "you are there" quality. Macmillan, the original publisher of the book, marketed it as nonfiction, but some of its reviewers thought it might be a bit more fancy than fact.

Arctic explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson, in a letter (entitled "Hakluyt or Hoax?") to the *Saturday Review of Literature* (9 July 1932), went one step further. He proposed that *Thirty Years in the Golden North* should be considered a parody of exploration literature—possibly written by Czech satirist Karel Capek, author of the introduction to the English-language edition—or, if not a parody, a complete fabrication. For no one had recently lived in the New Siberian Islands, the remote archipelago that Welzl claimed had been his Arctic home, and which he populated with numerous "polar settlers" and Inuit inhabitants.

As for Welzl's knowledge of Inuit, Stefansson wondered how anyone could take seriously statements like the following: "On our islands, Eskimo girls are mature as a rule at the age of six ... [An Eskimo girl] generally has her first child between six and eight ... After the child is born the mother's breasts swell, and from that time onward, the Eskimo woman has milk all her life. That is why she will nurse at any time and anybody..." (Welzl, 1932:221).

Stefansson, a somewhat humourless man, did not find this sort of thing amusing. Nor did he bother to catalogue the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of other apparent inaccuracies in the book. So I'll list just a few:

1. One creature that inhabits Welzl's Siberia is the jackal, an animal whose northern boundary is considerably farther south than Siberia.



Jan Welzl.

2. Welzl's Arctic mailmen typically attach 24 sledges together and harness 350 dogs to these sledges, with the lead dog half a mile ahead of its 349 companions.
3. His Eskimos worship monkey idols 25 feet tall and engage in boxing matches in their kayaks.
4. People who have toothaches in the Golden North purposefully get scurvy, because with scurvy their gums become so spongy that the offending tooth simply falls out.

And then there is the question of Welzl's descriptions of his own Arctic travels. From his purported base in the New Siberian Islands, he journeys now to San Francisco, now to Nome, now to Novaya Zemlya, and now to the Mackenzie River Delta with such casualness that he could be sauntering down the street to the local convenience store. You can almost imagine him saying that he discovered the North Pole on a weekend getaway.

I'll let you in on a little secret: Jan Welzl did not write *Thirty Years in the Golden North*. Rather, he dictated it.

In the mid-1920s, Welzl returned to Czechoslovakia from wherever he'd been in the Arctic and, more or less indigent, began giving lectures on his travels. In one of these lectures, he advanced the theory that kangaroos would make better sled animals than dogs; in another, he claimed to have found a race of pygmy Eskimos who'd arrived on a meteor from Mars. On and on he would ramble, pointing to a hand-drawn map on which he'd situated the North Pole cheek by jowl with the South Pole. He would put salt on this map to indicate the presence of a glacier, only to have his glacier licked clean by the village dogs (Kári Pálsson, pers. comm. 1982).

Lecturing did not bring in much money, so Welzl started sending articles to newspapers. There was one problem with this idea: the man who signed his articles "An Arctic Bismarck" or "Bear Eater" was a terrible writer. In fact, a first book, called *The Hard Times of an*

Eskimo Chieftain in Europe (Czech title: *Trampoty eskymáckého náčelníka v Evropě: Nejtěžší léta Jana Welzla*; Golombek and Valenta, 1932), had been almost totally rewritten from letters that he'd sent to the Czech poet Rudolf Tesnohlídek. But because the articles about his Siberian adventures seemed to contain some good stories, they were passed on to two legitimate writers, a pair of journalists named Bedřich Golombek and Edvard Valenta. The two men paid Welzl a visit and decided that their garrulous countryman had a book in him...as long as he didn't write it himself.

Welzl talked and the journalists took notes. He talked some more, spitting gobs of tobacco in all directions, and they took more notes, often in shorthand, while attempting to dodge the tobacco. A month passed, then two months. Sometimes Welzl would ask for rum, in his words, "to get my memory back" (Káři Pálsson, pers. comm. 1982). And the journalists would be only too happy to oblige him, because his stories got even better when fueled by drink. Take the story about the Inuit shaman who provides Laplander Pitt with a new nose. Pitt had sneezed, and his previous nose, which was badly frostbitten, had launched itself from his face and gone rattling across the floor. Golombek and Valenta must have been particularly generous with their allotments of rum while Welzl was telling them this outlandish yarn.

And so *Thirty Years in the Golden North* (Czech title: *Třicet Let Na Zlatém Severu*) was born. Welzl relinquished all rights to the book for 2000 crowns, slightly less than one hundred dollars. At the time, this may not have seemed like such a paltry sum, especially when local sales turned out to be rather paltry themselves. But then the noted author Karel Capek used his influence to get the book published in the United States, where—with the endorsement of the Book-of-the-Month Club—sales took off. (Capek subsequently wrote a letter of his own to the *Saturday Review* [27 July 1932] saying that—with all due respect to Stefansson—he wasn't Jan Welzl, and likewise that he couldn't care less about the age at which Eskimo girls "attain maturity.")

Meanwhile, Welzl himself had traveled north again. He wanted to go back to Siberia, but because of ice on the Yukon River and also because he had run out of money, he got only as far as Dawson City. Dawson, which in many respects was as eccentric as he was, appealed to Welzl, so he decided to settle there.

The availability of junk appealed to him as well. At places like the Yukon Sheet Metal Works, he began collecting scrap materials for his new obsession—a perpetual motion machine. By trying to build something that would always be on the move, he may have been compensating for the fact that his own travels were now virtually at an end.

In 1933, Welzl learned that *Thirty Years in the Golden North* had become a best seller. You can easily imagine the old man's consternation. Actually, it wasn't consternation so much as confusion. On the one hand, he had signed away his rights to the book, so he couldn't cash in on its

success. On the other hand, the book contained a certain amount of material that he didn't recognize as his own. So he took a middle road, simultaneously denying that the book was his and demanding royalties for it. Welzl even denied that he had an actual contract. In a letter to Stefansson (quoted in Stefansson, 1964:306) he said Golombek had pointed a loaded revolver at him and announced that this revolver was his book contract.

Of course, Golombek had done no such thing. But Stefansson, perhaps feeling guilty that he'd earlier doubted Welzl's existence, looked into the matter. He discovered that there was, in fact, a legitimate contract, and that Welzl had even signed a statement testifying to the book's veracity. Thus he was powerless to act on Welzl's behalf. But he did write a chapter in his autobiography entitled "Arctic Fantasy" about the person whom he had originally thought was a nonperson (Stefansson, 1964:303–308).

In his letter to Stefansson, Welzl claimed he was a pauper. But his habits were so frugal that he hardly needed much money. All he seemed to need were parts for his perpetual motion machine, and these he could gather free of charge in his walks around town. He was a familiar figure in Dawson, an inveterate collector of whatever no one else wanted, from discarded tires to rusty tin cans. Almost everything he found became part of his invention, which, by the end of his life, had grown so large that it stuck out the windows of his Fifth Avenue cabin.

On September 19, 1948, Jan Welzl died at the age of 80. He died, I should say, after a fashion, for he was reborn in Communist Czechoslovakia a few years later. In his new incarnation, "Eskimo Welzl" (as he was affectionately called) became a symbol of unfettered individualism. He had lived the life of his choice, without any rules imposed on him by officialdom. True, it was a rather eccentric life, but at least it was his life. And in passages like the following, from *Thirty Years in the Golden North* (Welzl, 1932:305), he seemed to be attacking Communism well before his country became Communist: "There is true liberty up North. Nobody is limited in his freedom... Whatever you see, you can go after, everything is yours, there is nothing to stop you." A Prague astronomer later named an asteroid (#15425) after this doughty celebrant of freedom.

In the early 1950s, Czechs began making pilgrimages to Welzl's grave in the Catholic Cemetery above Dawson. When I visited the grave myself in 1992, someone had placed a boot on it, a tribute to Welzl's erstwhile wandering habit, and the cross was so laden with wreaths that it seemed in danger of toppling over. Truth to tell, this cross did not mark Welzl's grave. It seems that an early Czech visitor had simply gone to the cemetery, picked out a convenient cross, and tacked Welzl's name onto it. In all probability, Welzl's admirers were laying their wreaths on the grave of an itinerant Italian labourer named Peter Fagetti. Welzl's own final resting place is unknown, a fate somehow appropriate for a man around whom questions hover like mosquitoes on a warm Yukon day.

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