

Ernest William Hawkes (1881 – 1957)

Over a career of more than four decades, Ernest William Hawkes was at times a schoolteacher, an anthropologist, a professor of biology and anatomy, and a poet. But he merits recognition in these pages for the pioneering work that engaged him from 1909 through 1915, at the outset of his professional life: documenting Inuit culture on the Alaskan side of the Bering Strait and in Labrador.

Hawkes was born in Ashfield, Massachusetts, a farming village in the shadow of the Berkshires. He was the youngest of five children in a family of limited means; his father Enos, a wounded Civil War veteran, hunted and raised dogs to supplement a meagre pension. When Ernest was a toddler, Clarence, his eldest sibling, was blinded in an accident. In an ironic twist to an otherwise tragic story, Clarence overcame his misfortune to become a renowned naturalist and a prolific and popular author of adult and children's books. Most had nature themes, and some were influenced by his brother's Arctic experiences. The two brothers shared a penchant for learning and for the outdoors from the time Ernest was eight. In a memoir, *Hitting the Dark Trail* (1915), Clarence recalled how they would spend hour after hour together reading in a meadow behind the family home, devouring everything from books for young boys to works of serious scholarship, including the political economy of John Stuart Mill.

Apart from rare snippets such as this, little is known about Hawkes's formative years. However, his emergence from anonymity began in 1907 with his enrolment at Dakota Wesleyan University in Mitchell, South Dakota. Having studied previously (1903–05) at the University of Denver, he was able to earn a BA and qualify as a teacher in two years. Credentials freshly in hand, he accepted a position in Alaska with the Bureau of Education, the federal agency charged with schooling the territory's indigenous peoples. This position was no ordinary teaching job: the Bureau expected its employees to combine classroom duties with responsibilities in the areas of public health and welfare, and in general, improvement of living standards, all for relatively little pay, and sometimes, as in Hawkes's case, under conditions of considerable isolation. By his own admission, the 28-year-old knew precious little about Alaska or its Native inhabitants beforehand. "Not being content with my own ignorance," he later confessed in a reminiscence appearing in the popular press, "I went and got married [to Florence Case, then 18] ... for I fondly imagined that a trip North would make a fine honeymoon" (1913a:377). In a period when most teachers lasted no more than a year, and despite losing their first-born child in a measles epidemic in autumn 1910, the couple remained in Alaska for three years, spending two winters on Little Diomedes Island, among the least accessible places in the Bering Strait, and the third at Saint Michael, an island village in the mouth of the Yukon River.



Ernest William Hawkes, Glendale Community College, ca. 1945.

The absence of resident missionaries and comparatively late (1908) appearance of a permanent government presence in their midst had left Little Diomedes's people largely undisturbed in their subsistence economy and in the practice of shamanism and other customs, though they were hardly untouched by Western influences. With official duties that put him in daily contact with adults and youngsters alike, Hawkes soon developed a serious interest in local culture, and with it, a modest facility in the local Inupiaq dialect. Relying on Charles Menadelook, the school's Native assistant, as interpreter, he donned an unofficial hat as ethnographer, recording stories, photographing sundry facets of daily life, and most importantly, documenting ceremonial activities associated with the communal *kashim*, or dance house. These activities became the subject of two monographs published before the Great War, his first scholarly contributions, which recorded eyewitness accounts of winter rituals on Little Diomedes and St. Michael (Hawkes, 1913b, 1914).

Energized by the experience, Hawkes left Alaska for the University of Pennsylvania, where he earned an MA in anthropology in 1913. Awarded a fellowship at Columbia, he then studied Eskimoan linguistics with Franz Boas and began preparing to undertake fresh northern fieldwork.

When a chance to accompany Vilhjalmur Stefansson's expedition to the western Canadian Arctic fell through, he turned to Boas's protégé, Edward Sapir, for help. Sapir, who had been chief of the Geological Survey's Anthropological Division in Ottawa since its founding in 1910, proposed two projects: an archaeological investigation along the western shores of Hudson Bay or ethnological and linguistic researches among the Labrador Inuit, with an emphasis on traditional religion and social organization. Opting for the latter, Hawkes hoped to spend a year in their territory, time enough for "digging back into the past" with elders in order to reconstruct elements of culture eroded by Moravian mission activity dating to the 1770s (Hawkes, 1913c). He considered Nain aptly suited to the purpose because of its sizable population. By virtue of its location, moreover, the village also made a convenient starting point for sledding up the coast or overland to Ungava Bay. As it happened, Sapir's budget could support only a six-month trip. An estimate of \$1500 was earmarked for the expedition, which included a standard monthly stipend of \$100 and \$400 for obtaining a representative collection of ethnographic artefacts for the Victoria Memorial Museum, forerunner of the National Museum of Canada.

Hawkes departed his New Jersey home for the field in mid May 1914. The final leg of his journey, from St. John's to Labrador aboard the steamer *Kyle*, was delayed by ice-clogged waters and contrary weather. It was mid June before the newly commissioned ship made port at Indian Harbour, in the Hamilton Inlet-Sandwich Bay area, still hundreds of kilometres distant from Nain. Stranded there until early August, Hawkes made the best of the situation by working with the region's few Inuit inhabitants, a remnant population of mixed descent whose Aboriginal forebears had mounted annual expeditions to the peninsula's more southerly precincts to trade with Europeans in centuries past. In addition to recording their stories, he obtained several hundred artefacts, including samples of clothing and basketry, and made preliminary observations on the local subdialect, a variant of Labrador (now Nunatsiavut) Inuktitut, which was verging on extinction.

By good fortune, Hawkes finally managed to get away by hitching a ride with a Carnegie Institution of Washington magnetic survey party bound for Hudson Bay. Their navigation of Labrador's Atlantic coast to Hudson Strait took nearly a fortnight, as late season floes repeatedly forced the expedition ship *Cluett* into ice-free inlets for safety. These forced stops gave the anthropologist a chance to visit, if only briefly, about a half-dozen localities—among them Hopedale, Saglek Bay, and Nachvak Fjord, but not Nain—where he gathered a miscellany of ethnographic details and collected what artefacts he could. The ship's inshore route also provided opportunity to survey the coastline from Makkovik Bay to Port Burwell for archaeological sites, a reconnaissance that turned up numerous house ruins and graves. Some of these, Hawkes believed, belonged to the Tunnit, a people known to Inuit as the semi-mythical first inhabitants of their lands, and to many Arctic

archaeologists as bearers of the ancient Dorset culture. His investigations continued in this manner for the duration of *Cluett's* outward journey, a Cook's tour that took the party along the southern shores of Baffin Island, across the Strait to Cape Wolstenholme, at the eastern entrance to Hudson Bay, then down the Bay's east side and up the west from Eskimo Point to Chesterfield Inlet before heading home-ward via Coats and Mansel Islands.

Despite the failure to realize his original plan, Hawkes deemed the fieldwork a success. In addition to his compilation of sundry ethnographic details and a corpus of myths and tales, the effort yielded 364 artefacts from Labrador and Ungava and 39 more from the western precincts of Hudson Bay and culminated in a richly illustrated report issued under the Geological Survey imprint (1916a). Equally important, Hawkes also gleaned practical intelligence for what he hoped would be a follow-up trip to northern Labrador the next year. But with Sapir's department already feeling the effects of wartime financial stringency, Hawkes elected to return to the University of Pennsylvania to complete a PhD, receiving the degree in 1915. His dissertation, an anthropometric analysis of Point Barrow skeletal material held in Philadelphia's Wistar Institute of Anatomy and Biology, was published a year later (1916b). This study turned out to be his last contribution to Arctic anthropology, but not to the discipline itself. Before the decade was out, he had conducted archaeological research for Penn's University Museum, excavating an Archaic (pre-Lenape) Indian site in New Jersey (the first site dating to the era located outside of New England), as well as for the Public Museum of Milwaukee, excavating an Indian mound complex at Kratz Creek, Wisconsin. In that same decade, he was commissioned first lieutenant in the U.S. Army and assigned to the Anthropology Section of the Surgeon General's office in Washington; and finally, in 1919, he became adjunct professor of anthropology at the University of Texas in Austin.

A career that started with promise took an unexpected turn in 1920, when Florence Case Hawkes, then separated from her husband and living in Milwaukee with their three children, arrived on his Austin doorstep and accused him of bigamy. Newspaper reports claimed she found him "secretly living with wife No. 2" (Anon, 1920), presumably Anita Anderson, with whom he subsequently had two children and adopted a third. Hawkes was arrested, but the outcome of the case is uncertain. What is certain is that days before the story broke, he resigned his professorship and slipped back into anonymity. When he resurfaced seven years later, it was as a newly appointed professor (and later head) of biology at Glendale Junior College near Los Angeles, a position he held until 1948. Unable to make ends meet on his retirement allowance, Hawkes returned to the classroom, lecturing in biology at Salt Lake City's Westminster College, then in anatomy at the Lanton School in Beverly Hills. He died on 13 March 1957, three months shy of his 74th birthday, and was buried in a military cemetery in Los Angeles.

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