

George Comer (1858-1937)

While explorers from several nations were seeking sea routes to the Indies around the polar margins of Eurasia and North America, thereby constructing a geographical picture of the Arctic, whalers were busily exploiting the marine resources of the circumpolar North, in particular the Greenland or bowhead whale. Arctic whaling began around Spitsbergen shortly after 1600, spread to west Greenland before 1700, reached the coast of Baffin Island by 1820, and penetrated into Hudson Bay in 1860. In the Pacific sector it expanded through Bering Strait in 1848 and extended to the Canadian waters of the Beaufort Sea in 1889. Yet by World War I the arctic whaling industry had all but faded away.

George Comer was a professional whaler whose career spanned the final decades of whaling in Hudson Bay. Success in whaling alone would probably justify his inclusion in this series of biographical sketches, but Comer's achievements went far beyond the sufficiently challenging tasks of pursuing whales, navigating small sailing vessels among pack ice, and

wintering in the Arctic. He was a friend to the Inuit and a dedicated student of their culture, an amateur archaeologist, a scientific collector in the fields of ethnography and natural history, and a recognized arctic authority to whom a number of prominent scientists and writers owed much.

Born in Québec, of an English father and an Irish mother, George Comer soon moved with his mother to Connecticut. At 17 he responded to the lure of the sea and shipped out on the New London whaler *Nile* for Cumberland Sound, Baffin Island. This initiation into the excitements and rigours of arctic whaling was followed by some voyages in the American coastal trade and a series of Antarctic sealing voyages. From 1889 to 1891 he served as mate of the schooner *Era* on three cruises to southeastern Baffin Island, and his introduction to Hudson Bay came in 1893-94 during a wintering voyage of almost 15 months' duration on board the *Canton*.

On the six Hudson Bay whaling voyages that Comer made between 1895 and 1912 he sailed as master of the *Era* and later of the *A.T. Gifford*. The first of these cruises included a winter spent frozen into harbour ice near the whaling ground of Roes Welcome Sound, and on each of the subsequent five voyages, he and his crew remained two successive winters in Hudson Bay.

Wintering was a common practise in Hudson Bay. Ships and whaleboats could cruise late in the autumn and take up whaling again early in the spring, thus significantly extending the whaling season and vastly improving the chances of securing whales. The disadvantage was that wintering often imposed severe hardship on the crews. Cold and scurvy were formidable adversaries. Comer's men, in contrast to many, usually wintered in relative security and good health (although it would be an exaggeration to say comfort), owing partly to his experience and leadership but largely to the close association that he maintained with the Inuit. Comer provided trade goods and provisions to many men and women of the Aivilingmiut, Netsilingmiut, and Qaernermiut in return for their services. The native men assisted in whaling and provided a steady supply of fresh caribou meat to combat scurvy, and the women made the fur clothing so vital for outdoor activities in winter. To alleviate boredom during the long ten-month period immobilized in winter harbour, Comer arranged dances, concerts, dinners, and sports events for the amusement of sailors and natives alike. During his spare time he systematically recorded details of Inuit life and collected samples of their material culture. Much of his information was used by the anthropologist Franz Boas in his well-known book *The Central Eskimo* and in two subsequent reports on the Eskimos of Baffin Island and Hudson Bay; Comer's collections of clothing, implements, and weapons found their way into museums in the United States and Germany. With equipment provided by the American Museum of Natural History, Comer photographed the Inuit, made hundreds of plaster casts of their faces and hands, and took sound recordings of their dances, songs, and



Photo courtesy of Comer's grandson, George Comer, East Haddam, Connecticut.

stories. The wax cylinders he made during the voyage of the *Era* in 1903-05 were the first ever made among Canadian Inuit.

Comer's journals reveal that he felt genuine affection and concern for the Inuit — comforting a widow in mourning, respectfully placing objects on a grave, making heroic attempts after departing from Hudson Bay to fulfill an oral agreement to deliver a whaleboat to an Inuk, sympathizing



with their harsh way of life, helping them out in times of hunger or sickness, pondering the possibilities of government establishment of scattered relief food caches for times of famine, and protecting them against the boorish behaviour of his own crew. His attitude was by no means typical of his fellow whaling captains, some of whom considered him "native crazy".

As a navigator George Comer was conscious of deficiencies in the published charts of Hudson Bay. In two papers published in the prestigious *Bulletin of the American Geographical Society of New York*, he presented an improved map of Southampton Island and vicinity, showing the narrow strait at its northern extremity that now bears his name. He also published information on the Inuit of northwestern Hudson Bay, including the isolated inhabitants of Southampton Island, the Sadlermiut, who were doomed to extinction in 1902.

Comer's arctic contributions were not solely in the whaling trade. In 1915 he served as ice master of the *George B. Cluett*, a ship chartered by the American Museum of Natural History to collect the men of MacMillan's Crocker Land Expedition in northwestern Greenland. When the relief vessel was itself trapped in the ice for two years, Comer carried out valuable archaeological excavations at Umanaq, unearthing evidence of what we now know as the Thule Eskimo Culture. Another expedition secured his services in 1919 but with less fortunate results. Comer sailed as master of the *Finback*, a yacht chartered by an ethnographer, Christian Leden, to carry out trade and scientific work among the Inuit of western Hudson Bay. The *Finback* went aground in Fullerton Harbour, Hudson Bay, where Comer had often wintered, and was lost.

During the last years of World War I, George Comer served as a lieutenant in the U.S. Navy. He later retired to East Had-dam, Connecticut, and kept active in community and state affairs until his death in 1937 at age 79.

Here was a man skillful and successful in his own profession but capable of rising above it to make significant contributions in other fields, a man who ran a tight ship but preserved a tolerant, friendly, and cheerful attitude towards his fellow men both at home and in the Arctic.

FURTHER READINGS

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