



McKinlay in the Canadian Arctic, 1976

WILLIAM LAIRD MCKINLAY
1889-1983

William Laird McKinlay, one of the scientific staff of the Canadian Arctic Expedition of 1913-18, died at Glasgow on 9 May 1983 at the age of 94.

The son of a factory moulder in the industrial town of Clydebank downriver from Glasgow, he became a pupil-teacher at the age of 14 and subsequently studied at the University of Glasgow where he graduated both M.A. and B.Sc. in 1910. It was during his student days that his aid was enlisted by Dr. W.S. Bruce in classifying specimens brought home by the Scottish Antarctic Expedition, and this was to change his life.

In 1913 he was teaching mathematics in a Glasgow school when Bruce recommended him to Viljhalmar Stefansson for appointment as meteorologist and magnetologist. McKinlay travelled to Esquimalt, B.C., where he joined the main party aboard *Karluk*, commanded by the veteran Newfoundlander Bob Bartlett, with Stefansson himself in overall charge.

Discord made itself felt at an early stage. When *Karluk* was trapped in the ice off the north shore of Alaska, Stefansson and his companions went hunting ashore; weather separated them from the ship which drifted to the west while Stefansson occupied himself with the sledge travel, at which he was adept, and discovered new lands to the far north. *Karluk* turned out to be less than ideal for work in ice, while her crew had only been hired for a round trip and were largely unprepared for privations. After drifting with the ice for over six months, the ship was crushed and sank. Four men made their way to Herald

Island where they died. Four others struck out on their own and were never seen again. The others, eleven crewmen and scientists with two Eskimo men, one Eskimo woman, and two Eskimo children, took what supplies they could to Wrangel Island 80 miles away. Then Bartlett and the Eskimo Kataktovik made an epic journey across the ice to the Siberian mainland in search of help.

Those who remained on Wrangel Island divided into small groups and eked out a miserable existence in which two died, probably from excessive protein in their pemmican; one seemingly shot himself. The remainder were rescued, thanks to Bartlett, in September of 1914. And McKinlay went to war as an officer in the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders.

Seriously wounded at Cambrai in 1917, he endured a long period of recuperation and limped for the rest of his life. It was while he was still in hospital that Sir Hubert Watkins, as he later became, came to ask for his participation in another polar venture, but McKinlay knew that his infirmity would never permit it. He returned to teaching. It was only long after his retirement and the death of his wife, when he was moving with his daughter and her family to a new home in Glasgow, that his Arctic diaries and mementos aroused the curiosity of his granddaughters. He promised to write the story which turned into the book *Karluk: The Great Untold Story of Arctic Exploration*, published in 1976 when he was 87.

Readers of that work, which was translated into many languages, will be aware that McKinlay was somewhat critical of Viljhalmar Stefansson. As controversy flared over various

aspects of the expedition, McKinlay was first isolated by his war service. He then decided to keep quiet and to keep his diaries lest they be used as ammunition. After the war he did write a formal note to Stefansson congratulating him on a publication, but was subsequently incensed to find that Stefansson had argued that McKinlay's failure to mention his lost colleagues in the Arctic was taken to mean that McKinlay, who had seen so many die in France, was not disturbed by a few deaths in the cause of arctic exploration. Of course McKinlay was disturbed by those deaths, which he felt could have been avoided. But his extensive researches into the subject were never published, and are now in the Public Archives of Canada. Perhaps his disappointment with Stefansson was heightened by McKinlay's being a scientist working in which he considered a scientific and thus a noble cause, with standards to which he felt Stefansson did not adhere. Yet it was not only in Stefansson that he was disappointed, for when he experienced comradeship in the army he "realized that this was what had been entirely missing up north; it was the lack of real comradeship that had left the scars, not the physical rigours and hazards of the ice pack, nor the deprivations on Wrangel Island."

In fact Stefansson may have been as much a victim as anyone. He was quite inexperienced in leadership and in administration, and the wonder is that the Canadian government took on him and his half-planned American venture with such uncritical enthusiasm. Part of it was due to suspicion of Americans who might find land in areas claimed by Canada, but it is significant that the expedition was placed under the new and administratively weak Department of Naval Service. This was at a time when Winston Churchill's plea for the Dominions to support Britain with Dreadnaughts had led to intense political controversy, and what little navy Canada had

created in 1910 needed public acclaim — which in those days went to a peacetime navy more because of polar exploration than for any other reason. Once war broke out in 1914 the Canadian Arctic Expedition was unnecessary, but in its outfitting reasons of high policy may well have overcome prudence. But after that venture Stefansson never returned to the north. He never developed his anthropological skills in other areas. He never held a normal academic post. At a comparatively young age he retold the events of his youth in virtual retirement, and if much of this was due to his own actions the result was nevertheless tragic.

There was nothing tragic about McKinlay's return to teaching. He took to it with characteristic enjoyment. He ended his career as headmaster in Greenock, but he had also been engaged in various forms of youth work and in his last years his conversation was more of the joys and sorrows of the classroom than of his Arctic experience. And when *Karluk* had been published, McKinlay turned to the writing of his autobiography, a story which is frequently hilarious and utterly gripping, with the emphasis being placed upon teaching. But it would be wrong to suggest that in old age he slaved over his typewriter. He delayed the revision of *Karluk* for his publishers for most of a glorious summer in which he felt priority must go to his roses. And when he wrote his autobiography, in his nineties, he still did enough in his garden to win a neighbourhood prize.

At his funeral in Clydebank, looking out over the river as it stretches to the sea, it was right that the congregation should sing, in the words of his contemporary Sir Harry Lauder, "Keep Right on to the End of the Road". It was appropriate in more ways than one, but particularly as this was the end of the road for an era in arctic history.

Gavin White