

A Soper Record Cairn from Baffin Island, N.W.T.

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(Received 2 January 1985; accepted in revised form 7 May 1985)

ABSTRACT. Two documents were recovered from a cairn located at the northern extremity of Nettilling Lake, Baffin Island. They record the details of J. Dewey Soper's winter expedition to Foxe Basin in 1926 and the travel itinerary of an Inuit hunting party.

Key words: arctic exploration, Baffin Island, archaeology, cairns, Dewey Soper, Nettilling Lake

RÉSUMÉ. Il a été retrouvé deux documents dans un cairn situé à l'extrémité nord du Lac Nettilling, sur l'île de Baffin. Ceux-ci font le rapport détaillé de l'expédition d'hiver menée par J. Dewey Soper au Bassin Foxe en 1926, ainsi que celui du voyage itinérant d'un groupe de chasseurs Inuits.

Mots clés: exploration de l'Arctique, île de Baffin, archaéologie, cairns, Dewey Soper, Lac Nettilling

Traduit pour le journal par Isabelle Douvisi.

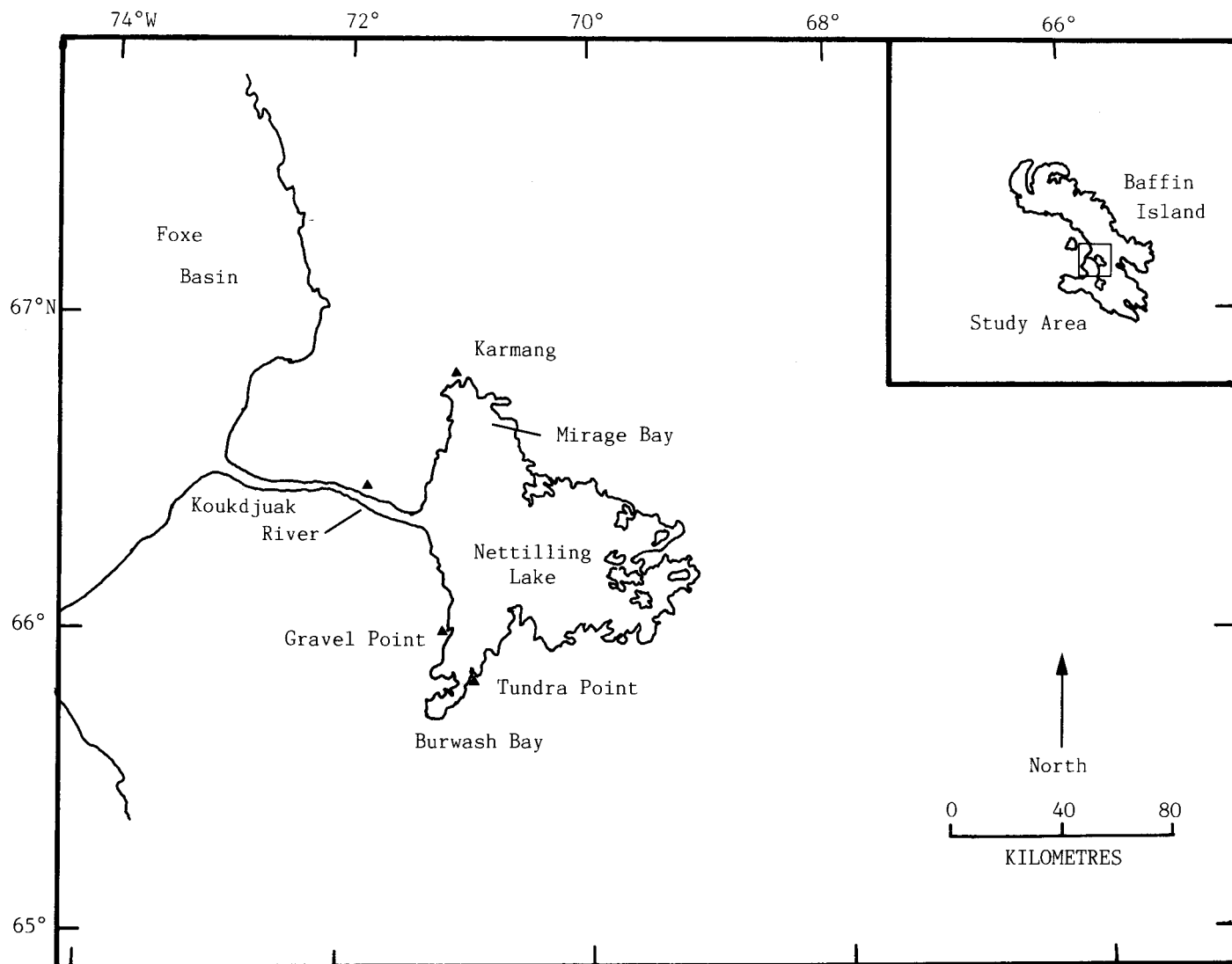


FIG. 1. Locations of record cairns mentioned in text.

While conducting archaeological surveys along the northwest shore of Nettilling Lake in south-central Baffin Island, a record cairn erected by J. Dewey Soper in the winter of 1926 was located. The discovery was made by chance late in the evening of 6 August 1984 during a brief stop to plot a course through the maze of islands encountered in Mirage Bay, at the northern extremity of the lake (Fig. 1).

The cairn is approximately 1 m high and built on a small promontory at an elevation of about 15 m above lake level. It bears obvious signs of disturbance, with several stones removed from near the base. The record, which was folded and placed into a small metal container (Sterno can), was not found in the cairn but 10 m to the southwest, against a narrow rock ledge. The container is covered with surface rust but fortunately was well sealed, leaving the contents dry and in excellent condition. Many cairns and Inuksuit were located in our survey of Mirage Bay; however, the proximity of the record to this particular feature, together with the evidence of disturbance, suggests that it is the one built by Soper and his Inuit companions in 1926. The text of the note is reproduced in Figure 2.

In his capacity as naturalist for the Geological Survey of Canada, Soper led a remarkably active career in northern

exploration and research through the 1920s, particularly on southern Baffin Island, where he initiated 11 expeditions between 1924 and 1931. Several of these involved travel through the Nettilling Lake region, where he deposited written records in at least three locations: at Gravel Point along the southwestern shore of the lake, on the north shore of the Koukdjuak River, and at *Qarmang* in Mirage Bay (Soper, 1928, 1981; Millward, 1930). An inscription was also painted on bedrock near Burwash Bay by Constable T.H. Tredgold, R.C.M.P., who accompanied Soper on his 1925 journey to Nettilling Lake, and Inuit informants in Frobisher Bay report the existence of a cairn near Tundra Point (also in the southwest section of the lake) that they attribute to Soper, but whose record was apparently removed many years ago.

The message we recovered was left on Soper's fourth Baffin expedition and his second to Nettilling Lake. It contains a few, albeit minor, differences in detail from his published accounts of the trip (i.e., names and travel itineraries of some participants), but of greater interest are the circumstances under which it was written. The note was deposited on the return leg of a 1046 km sled journey from Pangnirtung across Baffin Island to Foxe Basin, undertaken to determine the longitude of the Baffin

Record deposited by J. Dewey Soper,
Naturalist, of the Geological
Survey of Canada, February
6th, 1926. Left Pangnirtung
Fiord, Cumberland Gulf, with
four natives, Ahatoga,
Newkega, Pasjoon and Koon-
alood on January 9th
to make a traverse to Fox
Channel via Nettilling Lake.
The two latter natives were en-
gaged as extras to freight dog-
sled to the east side of Nettil-
ling Lake, from which point
they were sent back on the
morning of January 28. I
successfully reached Fox
Channel at a point approxi-
mately north from the spit
of the Koukdjuak, on the forenoon
of February 2nd. The coast
here is many miles farther
east than is shown on the
latest maps. Leaving Fox
Channel the following day
I adopted a course southeast,
then east, then, onto Nettil-

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ling Lake was reached, after
which its west coast was
followed and mapped to
this point.

Today I start back for
Pangnirtung, following
and mapping the north coast
of Nettilling Lake enroute.

Dogfeed low and no
game. All well.

J. Dewey Soper

Northern extremity of
Nettilling Lake, Baffin Land
February 6, 1926.

FIG. 2. Text of record left by Dewey Soper, February 1926.

coast there, which Soper felt had erroneously been mapped at about 75°W. The investigation supported his hypothesis, and by completing the crossing Soper became only the second white man to successfully traverse Baffin Island from east to west, being preceded in this achievement by the German scientist Bernard Hantzsch, who perished on the island's west coast in 1911.

This venture was also one of Soper's most arduous, during which his party endured the debilitating effects of temperatures that fell to a piercing -70°F. It was an occasion he recalled vividly:

Two personal experiences especially stand out in my memory with regard to the hell of suffering caused by extreme temperatures and winds. The first occurred en route while we were surveying Pangnirtung Pass, and the other, in bucking the extraordinary cold on Lake Nettilling and the Plain of the Koukdjuak during the crossing of Baffin Island from Cumberland Sound. [Soper, 1981:37.]

Included with the Soper message was a brief note written in syllabic (Fig. 3). Based on translations obtained in Frobisher

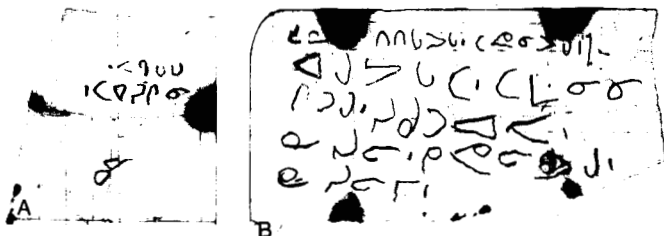


FIG. 3. Copy of Inuit cairn record. A: Signature of author Nungusuittuq. B: Syllabic text of note describing travel plans.

Bay and Edmonton, it appears to have been written in the month of July by an individual named Nungusuittuq who states his intention of moving to "Netsilik" once the lake had frozen.

These travel plans are difficult to interpret, however, as "Netsilik" (referring to a place where seals may be found) is the proper Inuit name for Nettilling Lake. Presumably it was Nungusuittuq who removed the original record from the cairn, but there is no indication of the year when this might have occurred. The container and both notes have been deposited with the National Museum of Man in Ottawa.

Cairn documents have several attributes that make them unique elements of Canada's northern heritage. In addition to revealing information of potential scientific and historical importance, nineteenth and early twentieth century records offer the modern investigator a glimpse of the pioneer days of arctic exploration. Although just 60 years old, this particular example nevertheless dates from a vastly different era of study, the conditions of which few of today's researchers could relate to.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author is grateful for the field assistance of Tony Jacobs, Branka Malesevic and Eric Scott. Special thanks are extended to Dr. John D. Jacobs, who contributed a great deal to the success of the project. I would also like to thank Nick Arnatsiaq, of Frobisher Bay, and Minnie Aodla Freeman, of Edmonton, for translating the Inuktitut note.

Support of the Nettilling Lake survey by the Boreal Institute for Northern Studies, the Arctic Institute of North America (Firestone Fund) and the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development is gratefully acknowledged.

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