

A CARIBOU HUNT ON PEARY'S 1898-1902 EXPEDITION

Clarence F. Wyckoff

Introduction

During the four years 1898-1902 of the first Peary north polar expedition, the Peary Arctic Club sent a ship north each summer to visit and resupply the expedition. In the summer of 1901 Clarence F. Wyckoff accompanied the *Erik*, an auxiliary steam whaler chartered by the club because Peary's ship, the *Windward*, had not returned the previous summer as expected. The *Windward*, with Mrs. Peary and her daughter aboard, had been forced to winter at Payer Harbour, Ellesmere Island, but had broken out by the time the *Erik* reached Etah on August 4. Peary records¹ that "both ships pressed into the work of hunting walrus, until August 24th, when the *Windward* proceeded southward, and the *Erik* steamed away to land me and my party and the catch of walrus at Payer Harbour." Heavy ice prevented their reaching Payer Harbour, and the party was landed some 12 to 15 miles south of Cape Sabine. On August 29 the *Erik* sailed for Sydney, N.S.

The following account of a caribou hunt in west Greenland by Clarence Wyckoff has been sent to us by his widow. The hunt described probably took place about 13 August 1901 when he had transferred to the *Windward*.

[*Editor Arctic*]

PEARLY had sent us into the Ulrick's Bay² country for reindeer. Our boat, the *Windward*, had worked well up to the head of the bay where a stream tumbled down from the high interior. Here we knew we could make our way inland as this side of the bay was a favourite hunting ground for the Eskimo. The other shore of the bay rose straight up and on that side the Eskimo had never hunted.

In this section as we learned from the Eskimo, there were many deer. The hills were indented with valleys where the sun, shining twenty-four hours a day, warmed the meagre soil, permitting moss and grass, and even some flowers, to mature. This made a splendid feeding ground for the deer.

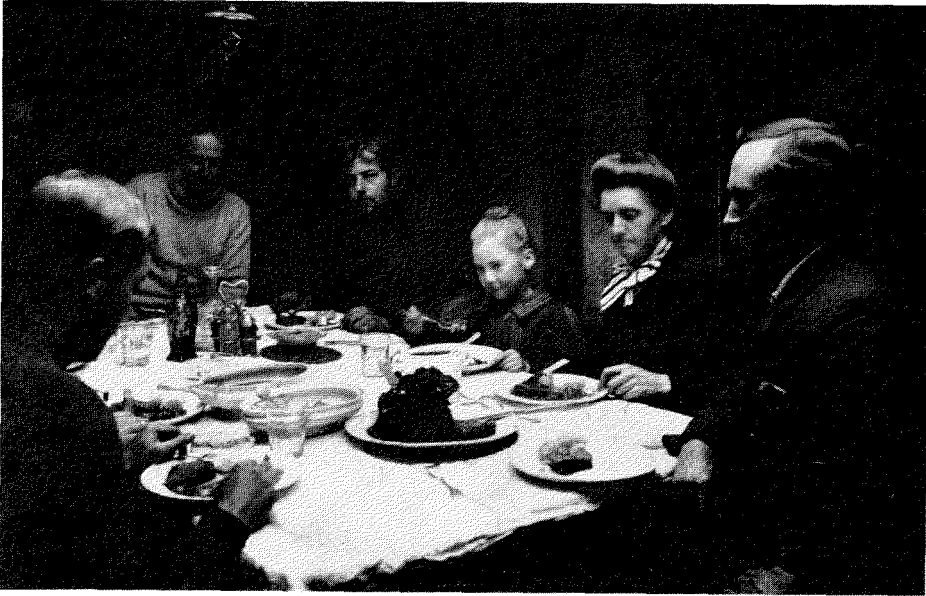
As our first objective was to become familiar with the country we planned a twelve-hour hunt. We landed and found the going fairly easy. After working up into the hills, we branched out, each of the six white men going in different directions. A few Eskimo had been loaned guns and they also scattered.

My companion was a young Eskimo named Cawingwa. Unfortunately for me he had never before hunted deer and was not of much help. And help was what I needed.

There were deer aplenty. My first sight of them was as we climbed up over a rim rock on to a fairly wide plateau. There they were over against a low hill—a dozen of them. For at least five minutes we stood and stared while the deer looked us over. Finally I remembered that I was out to get

¹Peary, R. E. 'Nearest the pole'. London: 1907, p. 335.

²Presumably Olrik Fjord, Inglefield Bredning, called Olriks Bay by Peary. [*Editor Arctic*]



A meal on board the *Windward*. Admiral and Mrs. Peary and daughter Marie to the right; Clarence Wyckoff at the extreme left.

food for Peary on his dash for the pole. Estimating the distance at about eight hundred yards I adjusted the sights of my gun accordingly; then took aim and fired. The deer came to life and one and all galloped away, disappearing into a pass in the hills.

After my shot I had noticed what looked to be flying fragments of rock at a point less than half-way to where the deer had been. I decided to investigate. I paced off the distance to the rock and found it to be nearly a thousand yards. And the spot where the deer had been seemed as far away as ever. When I reached the place where the deer had stood I had covered more than three thousand yards.

I thought of the story of the man in the Rockies who had started to jump a brook and found he was swimming a river. It was apparent that I would have to revise my ideas of distance. The air was so rare and pure that far-away objects seemed to be in the immediate foreground.

Though before returning to the ship I saw many more deer I was never able to get within range. It seemed impossible to stalk them. The only cover was an occasional boulder and the deer were sure to see a movement as you dodged from one stone to the next. If they happened to be down wind they did not wait for the movement. And how they could run! With their large antlers covered with velvet they looked awkward and top-heavy—until they got under way.

I returned to the ship a very disappointed hunter only to find the others not much better off. The only white man who had made a kill brought in but two deer. The Eskimo had had better luck, bringing in nine. We had to have forty or fifty head for Peary's party.

Our next move was to establish a camp about ten miles inland. Toting in a tent and supplies we prepared for a three-day hunt. It was a wonderful country. We were close to the edge of the ice cap, but with the sun shining for a few hours flowers were blossoming, the yellow poppy being most common. Lakes were frozen over, stream water was ice cold, yet in the sunshine you could sleep in the open with a light sweater for cover. When the sun went behind a cloud you woke up.

The hunting proved not as successful as we had hoped. Mine in fact was a complete failure. The deer were as wild as Adirondack deer the second day of the open season. The Eskimo were fairly successful, but the white men could not learn the native technique. Toward the end of the second day I grew desperate and decided to keep at it until I had at least one deer to my credit. After hunting for thirty hours on end I returned to camp exhausted and still without my deer. I saw plenty of them, but in the three days I had never fired my gun. I just could not get within range. The open country and constant sunlight where you could be seen for miles were too much for me.

After a six-hour sleep I awoke to find everyone in and making ready to return to the ship. There was nothing to do but admit failure and go back with the rest. When we got to the ship we discovered to our surprise that it was early morning. We had unconsciously lengthened our day until we were twelve hours ahead of ship's time. With the sun always looking as if it had just risen it required the ship's routine to keep track of the time of day.

On arrival we were told that Koolatingwa, one of the more experienced hunters of the tribe, had been ashore on the opposite side of the bay and had found many deer. He had been loaned a gun and twelve cartridges and when he returned he was very apologetic. He had wasted two cartridges—he had killed only ten deer. Dr. Cook was arranging to send out six Eskimo to bring them in.

Here was a last chance to get a head and I immediately joined the party. I offered Koolatingwa a hunting knife if he would show me how it was done. He was delighted and said the knife was his if I would follow him and do exactly as he did.

Koolatingwa had found a deer trail up the mountain side which we followed. According to the captain's calculations the climb was about three thousand feet and I judge he was under rather than over. The Eskimo climbed like goats. When they would get three or four hundred feet ahead of me they would all sit down and watch with much amusement my attempts to reach them. It was all loose shale and at every step I was as liable to slide back as to go forward. When we finally made the top we found a large lake, frozen over, in the immediate foreground. We crossed this and made for a high point of land beyond.

From the top of a small hill I saw spread out before me a large plain, fairly level and dotted all over with caribou. There were literally thousands of them. It looked as populated as an old Texas cattle range. The animals were fairly tame. Those nearby ran but soon stopped and began grazing.

Clarence
Wyckoff
on a
hunting
trip in
Greenland.
Muskox
skin
in the
background.



Koolatingwa told me to pick out the head I wanted and we would get it. I selected the nearest one. He again cautioned me to do as he did and started out to circle the deer so that we would have it to windward. The remaining Eskimo hid in a pile of rocks.

We advanced for perhaps half a mile in plain sight of the deer before he noticed us. When he looked up Koolatingwa, who was just ahead of me, stopped but remained standing—not moving a muscle. I also became a statue. The deer looked us over for a minute or two, evidently decided we were a part of the scenery, and went back to grazing. As soon as his back was turned, Koolatingwa started on again and I followed. Every time the deer looked up we froze in our tracks and the deer would always go back to grazing. In this way we walked up to within a hundred feet of the animal and I decided I was near enough. I stepped to one side and fired. Koolatingwa looked around and I could see he was disgusted with me. I think he had planned to get near enough so that if necessary he could have killed the deer with an axe. Of course the Eskimo had been accustomed to get their deer with a spear and I have no doubt that Koolatingwa had been within a few feet of the ten deer he had shot. My wonder now was why he had wasted the two cartridges.

I had hit my deer in the fore shoulder and he dropped in his tracks. As we walked toward him he managed to get up on three legs and started to run. I brought my gun to my shoulder to put him out of his misery, but

Koolatingwa knocked it aside, yelling, "Naga, naga", ("No, no"), and started running for the deer. On went the deer on three legs and I started after the two. As I caught up with and passed Koolatingwa I again attempted to use my gun, but with another "Naga, naga", he sprang in front of me, still chasing after the deer. Finally it dropped and when we got up to it it was stone dead. Then Koolatingwa explained: "The deer was going toward the big boat".

I had not been paying much attention to direction but when I looked around I found we were back near the pile of rocks where the five Eskimo were hiding. At a word from Koolatingwa the five began tossing the stones from the pile and it developed that this was one of Koolatingwa's caches. Three deer had been covered with stones to keep the foxes away from them. When the deer were uncovered the five gathered around one of the carcasses, cut slices from it, and began eating the raw meat. Koolatingwa who had been helping me skin my deer soon joined them.

There were still many deer in sight peacefully feeding. They had all run at the sound of my gun, but not far. Probably never before had they seen a human being. We were not far from the ice cap and a cold wind was coming from it. Dressed in light hunting clothes I had not noticed the temperature while I was active, but now I suddenly discovered I was cold. I picked up the warm deer skin and wrapped it around me. Its warmth was welcome and I soon realized that I was hungry. The three ship's biscuits I had put in my pocket before I left the ship were long since gone. I looked at the Eskimo. They seemed to be enjoying their cold deer. Finally I sat down with them, cut a strip of meat from the deer's hind quarter, and gingerly tasted it. It was delicious. That was one of the best meals I ever had. As a wind-up an Eskimo would cut out a bone, crack it between two stones, and with a thumb extract the marrow. I tried that also and it proved a fitting dessert to a wonderful meal.

When an Eskimo has plenty of food he gorges, and after eating, sleeps. After their feast my Eskimo arranged themselves on the ground in a closely knit bunch, lying on their sides in a circle, the head of each man on the thigh of the one ahead. In this way they slept, huddled together for warmth. I was tired and could have slept, but decided instead to return to the ship. We had all the deer the men could carry and with Koolatingwa's bag a total of forty-six deer—quite enough for Peary's wants. I cut off my deer's head and started with it for the frozen lake, leaving the Eskimo still asleep.

I was a long time getting down to the shore. When I arrived the antlers were no longer in velvet. What with the heavy head on my back and the loose shale I fell many times in working down the mountain. When I arrived at the ship I had been travelling constantly, except for six hours sleep, for seventy-two hours. I got one of the other men to care for the head and dropped into my bunk for a twenty-eight-hour sleep. My deer hunting was over.