Arctic Patrol

Canada's Fight for Arctic Sovereignty

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This book is dedicated to the young RCMP officers and their Inuit assistants who, despite isolation and adversity, persevered to protect Canada's far north.

Introduction

I refer to this book as my pandemic book because it was largely written during the Covid contagion that swept across the country. I feel a little guilty, however, as the lockdowns/restrictions that were imposed upon all of us were not so much an imposition to me as they were a kind of relief in that they offered the solitude that a writer/researcher needs to work.

The idea for the book came to me from a colleague at the bank where I worked. It was during the bank's Christmas retirement function in December 2019 that John Taggart approached me, not for the first time, to see if I was interested in writing about his father's adventures with the RCMP in the Arctic between the years 1928 and 1930. John and I made an appointment to meet for lunch to discuss the potential project. He brought along several books on the RCMP's involvement in the Arctic as well as a stack of his father's photos. He later emailed me a digital copy of his father's diary. The diary had me intrigued, but there was not enough material there to write a book, given that John's father, Reginald Andrew Taggart, had passed away some years earlier and I was therefore unable to complete the back story. One thing that John did tell me over lunch, however, was that his father had continually drummed into his family that the reason that the RCMP were in the Arctic was to protect Canada's sovereignty there.

I then began researching Canada's early sovereignty efforts in the Arctic and came across the title to an interesting academic paper written by Professor Janice Cavell that I wanted to read. She is an adjunct research professor at Carleton University in Ottawa. Unfortunately, my alma mater, the University of British Columbia, only offers access to online academic papers to faculty and students. I emailed Professor Cavell and she willingly offered to forward me a copy of the paper, but she also offered to send me a link to a digital copy of an immense book that she had a lead hand in compiling for the Canadian government. Cavell wrote the introduction and footnotes for this voluminous collection of Arctic correspondence for the years 1874 through 1949. I quickly discovered that this was the back story I was missing.

The publication, titled *Documents on Canadian External Relations: The Arctic, 1874–1949*, was one of a series of twenty-nine volumes on Canadian external relations, but the only one on the Arctic. Stéphane Dion, PC, MP, Minister of Foreign Affairs, prefaced the 2016 edition: "The subject of this special volume, the Arctic, has an ever-growing importance for Canada as we approach our federation's 150th anniversary. This volume illuminates how and why Canada asserted its sovereignty over the Far North between 1874 and 1949, and it demonstrates how much Canadians today owe to the nation builders of the past."*

According to Professor Cavell's introduction to the publication, the collection leaned heavily on documents from the "Department of the Interior, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the Department of Marine and Fisheries, and other government bodies involved in sovereignty efforts, and on the private papers of mid-level civil servants and of explorers such as Joseph Bernier and Vilhjalmur Stefansson."† Cavell and her team also accessed correspondence and documents from Council (Cabinet) and the governor general's office, and crossed the puddle to access files in the National Archives of the United Kingdom. Although Professor Cavell identified that there were gaps in the correspondence for the period before World War I, where documents had simply disappeared, I found that enough material was available to paint a vivid picture of Canada's early sovereignty efforts. And, given that Libraries and Archives Canada was shuttered during the early part of the pandemic, the book offered me unfettered and immediate access to critical Arctic correspondence.

Cavell's book was also the perfect pairing to Constable Taggart's diary, especially given that during Taggart's service in the Arctic, the Canadian government was negotiating with the Norwegian government and the Norwegian explorer, Otto Sverdrup, over sovereignty of the Sverdrup Islands. The diary therefore became immensely more relevant given that Constable Taggart was the RCMP member who accompanied the legendary Inspector Joy and the equally legendary Inughuit guide, Nukappiannguaq, on the long and arduous dogsled patrol to place a Canadian footprint on the very islands that were the subject of Canada's negotiations. The legend of this 1,800-mile (2,897-kilometre) patrol has grown to mythic proportions and has iconically been referred to as "The Longest Patrol."

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* Stéphane Dion, PC, MP, Minister of Foreign Affairs, preface to Janice Cavell, *Documents on Canadian External Relations: The Arctic, 1874–1949* (Ottawa: Global Affairs Canada, 2016).

† Janice Cavell, ed., introduction to *Documents on Canadian External Relations*, x.

As you read *Arctic Patrol* you will come across many Inuit (including Inughuit and Inuvialuit) names and terms. Where these names are part of a quote, I have not changed them, although on occasion I have placed the current spelling of the name in brackets behind the quoted name. I have also endeavoured to use some Inuit spellings, such as qamutiik for sled, despite the historical literature using variations of the English translation, komatik. I have also stayed with the English word igloo, instead of the Inuit word, iglu, since the former appears so frequently in historical documents. Likewise, there were variants on proper names, especially place names, used throughout this period by explorers, RCMP officers, and government bureaucrats and officials. I have left these as used in the relevant historical sources.

Another topic that requires mentioning is the treatment of animals. History has not been kind to animals, especially in the Arctic. In the south we view dogs as pets, but in the north during the period I write about, dogs were working animals, and were they to become infirm or unproductive, they were summarily dispatched even though it was at times painful for their owners. Furthermore, I was startled at the amount of game that was taken, but the seals, caribou, polar bears, white whales and various bird species, etc., were the gas that fuelled both men and dogs, and as Inspector Joy wrote, no more than was required was harvested.

The long patrol, the concurrent negotiations with Norway, and Canada's efforts to fend off various other threats to its Arctic, is a story of strategy, political and diplomatic intrigue, and of course a demonstration of the incredible determination, fortitude and courage of the RCMP officers and their Inuit companions who persevered under the most adverse conditions imaginable to protect Canada's sovereignty over its most northerly region.

CHAPTER ONE

Vague Inheritance

The early morning was eerily silent except for the hiss of ice crystals sifting against the walls of a small igloo* perched on the wind-battered southern shore of Bathurst Island in the Eastern Canadian Arctic. It was April 3, 1929, and the trio that hunkered down within had been cautiously asleep when the sudden whine of a sled dog staked outside alerted them to possible danger. The three—Royal Canadian Mounted Police Inspector Alfred Herbert Joy, Constable Reginald Andrew Taggart, and an Inughuit† guide, Nukappiannguaq—were instantly awake. A polar bear had visited their camp early the previous morning and had been shot by Constable Taggart while it was approaching their igloo. Likely, another one was now close by. Bear meat was essential fuel for both men and dogs, but the sudden appearance of a bear so close to their camp while they were sleeping was alarming.

The three were twenty-three days into an eighty-one day, 1,800-mile (2,900-kilometre) dogsled patrol that would later be known iconically as "The Longest Patrol." The RCMP had never travelled such a distance by dogsled in the Canadian Eastern Arctic before. Inspector Joy was already a legend for his Arctic patrols by the time he received his orders and invited Constable Taggart and the northern Greenlander Nukappiannguaq to accompany him on his historic journey.

That the RCMP patrols were much more than they appeared to be was not so obvious. Enforcement was not the principal reason to conduct them, since most of the territory covered was uninhabited, barren and impossibly remote. The most pressing reason for the patrols—one that made them both highly significant nationally and internationally—was to protect Canada's sovereignty over its Arctic Archipelago, which the dogsled patrols and annual ship patrols, ice permitting, were attempting to accomplish.

As the trio continued their journey west, urging their dogs forward through biting cold, blizzard, heavily drifting snow and jagged ridges of almost

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* Iglu in Inuktitut.

† The Inughuit people are from the Thule district of northern Greenland.

impenetrable fields of pressure ice, alternately running beside or riding their qamutiit* toward Melville Island, the western terminus of their journey, Canada's sovereignty in the Arctic was still being challenged. Challenges that would be drawn out over many years, and challenges that were beyond the scope of mere diplomacy, but that would require a well-publicized display of boots on the ground.

Canada's sovereignty over this remote and barren landscape had its genesis 259 years before Joy, Taggart and Nukappiannguaq began their strategic journey, when a generous charter was granted by the English king, King Charles II, to a new enterprise, "The Governor and Company of Adventurers of England trading into Hudson Bay"—now known as the Hudson's Bay Company, or simply, the HBC—on May 2, 1670. That charter granted the company a trading monopoly over an immense tract of land known as Rupert's Land,† vaguely described as "all those Seas, Streights, Bays, Rivers, Lakes, Creeks, and Sounds, in whatsoever Latitude they shall be, that lie within the entrance of the Streights commonly called Hudson's Streights, together with all the Lands, Countries and Territories, upon the Coasts and Confines of the Seas, Streights, Bays, Lakes, Rivers, Creeks and Sounds, aforesaid, which are not now actually possessed by any of our Subjects, or by the Subjects of any other Christian Prince or State."[1]

The HBC could brag that this vast tract of land, in the parlance of today's Canada, extended from the Rocky Mountains in southern Alberta, east to northern Quebec, south to below the Canada/US border and north to the southern portion of Nunavut, representing about a third of the size of Canada. However, no one really knew how large the territory was, given inconsistent estimates from the HBC, which were just as often disputed.[2] In reality, the charter granted the company no more than the Hudson Bay watershed, which was nevertheless considerable.

The company populated its empire with a myriad of trading posts on sea coasts and waterways, taking control of the area both physically and economically. It bartered western-style goods such as the iconic Hudson's Bay point

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* A qamutiik (previously spelled komatik) is a sled pulled by a dog team. The plural for two or more sleds is qamutiit.

† Rupert's Land was named after Prince Rupert of the Rhine, a nephew of King Charles I and the first governor of the Hudson's Bay Company.

blanket—which at one point represented about 60 per cent[3] of its trade goods volume—for furs, which were shipped to Europe to feed the burgeoning fashion industry. To facilitate its trade, the HBC introduced a system of currency, or token, known as the "Made Beaver," the largest of which was equivalent to one prime adult male beaver skin in good condition.

A company of this size, however, was bound to have issues administering and supporting such a vast empire, and when its North American governor, Sir George Simpson, died at Montreal on September 7, 1860, the discipline exacted during his tenure evaporated. The company, after approximately 190 years in service, was tendered for sale. Although the Americans were interested in purchasing it, Britain exerted pressure on the company to sell to Canada. It wasn't for another decade, however, that the charter was transferred to the Dominion of Canada when the Hudson's Bay Company signed the deed of surrender on November 19, 1869. On July 15, 1870, the transfer of Rupert's Land came into effect, and simultaneously, Britain transferred to the Dominion another huge tract of land lying to the north of central Canada, the North-Western Territories. In 1870, the North-Western Territories "covered a vast area, stretching west from a disputed boundary with Labrador, across the northern portions of present-day Quebec and Ontario, through the prairies to British Columbia, and north from the 49th parallel to the Arctic Ocean."[4] A clause (section 146) in the British North America Act of 1867 had made provision for both Rupert's Land and the North-Western Territories to be folded into the confederation of Canada at some future date.

A decade later, after conferring with the Hudson's Bay Company, the British Admiralty, and the Canadian government to establish an accurate description of its Arctic assets, Great Britain transferred the Arctic Archipelago to the Dominion as well. That the Arctic still held an irresistible allure for Britain, given that it had yet to reveal all of its secrets and was the graveyard of so many stalwart English sailors, must have preyed upon the minds of those in power, but the romantic period of discovery and conquest was coming to a close. It was time to part with it: let it be Canada's problem. After a bit of wrangling between Canada and Britain over whether the transfer should be enacted by an imperial act of Parliament or by an order-in-council, at Osborne House, Isle of Wight, on July 31, 1880, Her Majesty Queen Victoria signed an order-in-council, thus transferring to the Dominion of Canada the frozen north. The transaction was published in the *Canada Gazette* on October 9, 1880.[5]