

## **Knud Rasmussen as an Eskimologist.**

By Kaj Birket-Smith.

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„When once he had heard the rumour of the new people, he was no longer at peace“. Thus spoke old Merqussâq of the great shaman who had journeyed at the head of his tribesmen on the last Eskimo migration from Baffin Island to Greenland, and Knud Rasmussen placed his words as a motto over his first Greenland book, which in fact he called „New People“ (*Nye Mennesker*). To Knud Rasmussen they were more than the mere motto of a book; they were his life's motto, and that of his journeys in Greenland and of the long expedition when he drove his team of dogs across the north of America from Hudson Bay to Bering Strait. And all his books might bear the title of „New People“ with equal right.

New people? But were the Polar Eskimos not discovered almost a hundred years before Knud Rasmussen came to Thule? As far as that is concerned the name would seemingly be more justified for some of the Canadian tribes of Eskimos he visited; for although their existence was known beforehand, in some cases that was all that could be said about them. On the other hand, some of these American tribes had already provided the material for descriptions, not only the old, classical narratives from the journeys to find the Northwest Passage, but in some cases really important, scientific works such as those of Franz Boas, Jenness and others. Nevertheless, Knud Rasmussen made them „new people“ in the deepest sense of the word — even the West Greenlanders, who for two hundred years now have been associated with us by strong ties. Therein lies his greatness.

Others than he have gone to the Eskimos, imbued with the desire to understand them. In the best of cases the result has been honourable — honourable and flat; the deep, resounding undertone is lacking; but Knud Rasmussen had it.

In the first place, from early childhood he had that penetrating

understanding that a perfect knowledge of the language and all its nuances can give. Greenlanders have told me that his books in Greenlandic are just as great stilistic masterpieces as his Danish books. All the same, the language was only a trifling element in his ability to understand the Eskimos. Many Danes who like he were born and bred in Greenland speak the language just as well as he did. But as a boy, when he ran down from the rectory in Jacobs-havn to the Greenlander huts with half a loaf of Danish bread and a handful of coffee (this is his own story), he was obeying the call of the blood. That is why he never saw the Eskimos as we others do, no matter how we try, from the outside. *He* knew them from the inside.

No matter whether it was Greenlanders or Eskimos in Canada and Alaska, he came to them as one of themselves. They unfolded their soul to the greatness and warmth of his being, and in return he received their simple tales of life and its struggles with the mysterious powers, their wild legends and fine poetry, with the open and understanding mind that can only be explained in one way: in his heart they touched strings that vibrated in harmony with them. But it is no use attempting to describe this personal relation to the material, one that runs like a fundamental current through all his works; it must be lived, and, may be, it will only be understood to the full by one who, without owning his qualifications, nevertheless has endeavoured to delve into the mind and life of a primitive folk. Perhaps, indeed, one must have lived among Eskimos together with Knud Rasmussen in order to grasp the depth of the trust and respect he knew how to create around him.

Naturally, had the Greenland side of his nature been the only one, he would never have achieved what he did. Knud Rasmussen was *Danish* too, and an Eskimologist. He was equipped not merely with the education of the white man; he had his all-embracing view and mental force, and, when all comes to all, these were the qualities that formed the very core of his being. The Eskimo side was merely the instrument he used; but the Danish or European side was the force, both that which drove his dog team from tribe to tribe and that which enabled him to get deep down into the Eskimo mind and sound depths unattained by any before him.

And, garnering these ancient legends and tales, these traditions — threadbare at any rate in Greenland — he renewed them by making them accessible to the world, so that he might very well have written his own name under the little poem he heard at Søndre Upernivik:

I have a little song to sing,  
The little, worn song of another,  
But I sing it as were it mine,  
Mine own dear little song.  
And thus singing, I play  
With this worn little song,  
Renewing it.

Then what has Knud Rasmussen done as an Eskimologist?

The production of his pen is as wide-embracing and manifold as a reflection of his own rich soul, and at the same time carefully marked out, for he was great enough to know his limitations. It is enormous, not merely in terms of pages but also because it comprises literary sketches, travel descriptions, translations of Eskimo legends and songs, and strictly scientific narrations of Eskimo religion and mental life — and it is restricted, just because it never goes outside the field over which he held undisputed sway.

On two occasions only did he step outside the Eskimo world in his works, but even then he remained within the Polar region. It is merely chance that these were his very first and his very last books? The first, *Lapland*, is a young man's homage to winter, to life in the open air, brilliant in its freshness, but fumbling yet, because he has not found himself. The last is *Polarforskningens Saga* ("The Story of Polar Exploration"), a popular sketch, in which for once — otherwise it was he himself who performed the deeds he wrote about — he has delved into the past, has read and collected and, founded upon his own extensive experiences, has created a picture, as many-sided as it is full of understanding, of all that sacrifice of courage and will-power that went before and supplemented his own life work.

These two books like a frame set the boundaries to a production that is devoted entirely to the Eskimos. After *Lapland* was written, but before it had been published, the results appeared of his winter among the Polar Eskimos with the Greenland Literary Expedition, that dazzling little book *Nye Mennesker*. That book is Knud Rasmussen all through — and all Knud Rasmussen: the artist, the arctic traveller and the explorer. With it he has found his way back and in to the Eskimos — and into himself.

The line runs on in *Under Nordenvindens Svøbe* ("Under the Scourge of the North Wind"). Here his environment is different. It is not the rank, strange paganism of Cape York that for the first time is reflected in a youthfully clean mind. To both Knud Ras-

mussen and us there is a more homelike tone over the picture. The description is of West Greenland, the conflict between ancient and modern, Eskimo and Danish, familiar with it as he had been from infancy. It is „the Jugglery of Ancient Days“ meeting „the Great Revival on Evighed Fjord“, and, in the spiritual sense, midway between the Polar Eskimos and the West Greenlanders stand the sketches of the last inhabitants of Frederik VI Coast, who two or three years before had abandoned their native haunts to settle at Cape Farewell and be baptized.

In the last of his more literary works, *Foran Dagens Øje* (“Before the Eye of Day”), he goes back to the Polar Eskimos, with whom he had become more and more intimate as the years went by, and among whom he now stood with the authority of manhood and tribal fellowship. Since that book appeared he has now and then found time for short sketches of Eskimo life, but never for gathering them into one whole. It would be a pity if this were not done now.

This phase of Knud Rasmussen’s work as a writer overlaps the period of his travel descriptions, but on the whole is succeeded by it. *Min Rejsedagbog* (“My Travel Diary”) is the modest title of the report of the First Thule Expedition, a youthfull, devil-may-care canter across the ice cap of Greenland, accomplished with a boldness that in all others would have been foolhardiness. “Those who hope to find exiting entertainment will be disappointed“ he writes in the preface, but unjustly so, for the whole journey was one of continuous excitement.

In *Grønland langs Polhavet* (“Greenland along the Polar Sea“), the narrative of the Second Thule Expedition, much of the personal element retires into the background to give place to a retrospect of earlier expeditions. From the point of style this is a weak spot, but it is significant of his desire to mete out full justice to all sides. He wants to throw the limelight upon all who have done even the smallest share, and he expresses disapproval only in those cases where his predecessors have spoken disparagingly of the Eskimos. He never gives vent to personal criticism, nor will the reader find the faintest inclination for the false form of self-assertion which directly or indirectly endeavours to put self on a pedestal at the expense of fellow-members; on the contrary, the singling out of the work of his companions is the constantly resounding leading motif in these works.

Particularly is this so in the description of Knud Rasmussen’s great feat, the Fifth Thule Expedition *Fra Grønland til Stillehavet*

("From Greenland to the Pacific"). In his introduction he actually apologizes that "on account of the simpleness which ought to be the strength of a popular work", he is "obliged to leave out all too many details that would illustrate their (i. e. his companions') share"; but I do not think that any of us who had the good fortune to work with him on that expedition have ever had reason for feeling set aside. On the other hand, the Eskimos are justly brought into the foreground. It is the Eskimos who sustain the book, which consequently has for its sub-title "Journeys and People of the Fifth Thule Expedition".

Thus that work forms the natural stepping stone to the last phase of Knud Rasmussen's writings, the scientific phase.

In *Nye Mennesker*, which like a bursting seed encloses the germ of all his later activities, there is already a number of Polar Eskimo legends in Danish translation. Later came the large, unfortunately unfinished, three volume work *Myter og Sagn fra Grønland* ("Myths and Legends from Greenland"), dealing with Angmagssalik, Godthaab and North Greenland. As these works are, much of the material is already new to science — in fact all of it as far as the Polar Eskimos are concerned. In judging of the quality of these books, however, it must be remembered that they are popular editions. Many legends are given merely in the form of brief extracts, others have been passed over entirely, as otherwise they could not have been contained within the limits set for the books. In addition, there is the material collected during the last few years, especially from Frederik VI Coast, which of course could not be included. Knud Rasmussen hoped that the means might be secured for getting out a really scientific edition in one of the universal languages and for a presentation of the original texts, which now form part of the Danish Folklore Archives of the Royal Library.

The two books *Festens Gave* ("The Gift of Festival") and *Snehytens Sange* ("The Songs of the Snowhut") are directly associated with the *Myter og Sagn*. The latter is "an Arctic greeting to Danish poets", that is to say a collection of the finest Eskimo poems from Greenland and the Northwest Passage, the former a collection of tales from the Alaska Eskimos. It takes its name from the legend of how the eagle brought the sacred gift of festival to man, and the spirit of festival runs high throughout the book, coupled with humility. It was Knud Rasmussen's gift to his friends on his own fiftieth birthday; then the eagle himself brought the festival gift, but in such a form that in the deepest sense it came not from him, but from the people who were so near to his heart.

His principal scientific work, however, is the publications which occupy no less than three thick volumes of the great "Report of the Fifth Thule Expedition". Their subjects are sufficiently clear from the titles: "Intellectual Culture of the Iglulik Eskimos", "Observations on the Intellectual Culture of the Caribou Eskimos", "Iglulik and Caribou Eskimo Texts", "The Netsilik Eskimos: Social Life and Spiritual Culture", "Intellectual Culture of the Copper Eskimos". In these he presents a profound study of intellectual life among the various tribal groups of the Central Eskimos, a description so penetrating that nothing like it exists from any other Eskimos and on the whole from very few aboriginal peoples.

He accounts for all the complicated taboos, the training of the shamans and their methods, magic formulae and amulets — going more profoundly into them than any before him —, and the various divinities, especially the Mother of the Sea Beasts, the Moon Man, and the strange Spirit of the Weather, which is a being half impersonal, half a kind of supreme power. Then come the legends, of course. Not only are they inserted wherever they could serve to throw light upon the subject under discussion; some of the longest chapters are devoted to them exclusively, some translated, some in the original texts. The latter are printed phonetically with a literal, interlineal translation. That this is important material for philologists also appears from the fact that of this kind there are 128 texts from different tribes: 23 from the Iglulik, 5 from the Caribou, 50 from the Netsilik and 50 from the Copper Eskimos. Supplementing them is a rich collection of songs in the original texts, comprising vocabularies (the one from the Copper Eskimos alone fills 55 pages), as well as collections of words and phrases peculiar to the shamans, etc. Indeed, in the general descriptive chapters particularly characteristic statements by the Eskimos are reproduced in their own language.

There is also a quantity of invaluable information as to social and material culture; to put it briefly, a material of such overwhelming dimensions that to go into details here would be impossible. Only one thing more need be added: just as indispensable as these works are to all who occupy themselves with Eskimo culture and philology, they are equally so to those who take an interest in the psychology of primitive peoples on the whole. Knud Rasmussen has known how to draw a number of profiles of Eskimo men and women in such a manner that they stand living before our eyes: Ivaluarjuk, the white-bearded storyteller; his lovable old sister-in-law Orulo; the skeptic Oqûtaq; the impressionable, emotional sha-

man Anarqâq, whose hysterical hallucinations were crystallized artistically in a number of fantastic spirit drawings; Igjugârjuk, from the wide tundra in the interior, a shaman too, but a remarkable, forceful figure, a man-killer on a large scale and the head-man of the tribe .. and so we might go on.

Often the life-story of these people is told in their own words, and many of their sayings throw a sharp ray of light into the innermost recesses of the primitive mind. It is sometimes said that primitive races lack the ability to think logically. The Eskimos, however, can quite well set up a logical sequence of thought within the boundaries of what knowledge they have. Quite another question is their credulity towards what others tell them: they are reluctant to believe that their fellow-men handle the truth lightly, and their entire range of ideas permits of their going much farther in this direction than we can go. Still another question is it, that where the ancient traditions are concerned the inconsistencies in them do not affect them in the least. But want of logic is not the cause by any means. When Knud Rasmussen drew old Orulo's attention to various contradictory passages in the legends, she knew quite well what he meant and in fact was able to add other examples of the same thing; but nevertheless she continued: "You are always wanting sense in these supernatural things, but they don't worry us. We are satisfied not to understand."

This being so, everyone will be able to grasp the extent of Knud Rasmussen's works on these Eskimos; what is more, it must not be overlooked that all this material is not only entirely new to science, but that in the course of very few years, if not already, it would be impossible to secure it. It was therefore with every justification that the University of Copenhagen and St. Andrews University in Scotland awarded him the highest scientific honour, the honorary degree of doctor, and the gap in the series of his works caused by the nonappearance of his studies of the Mackenzie and the Alaska Eskimos, which he did not complete for publication in time, will be felt acutely.

The material has not been subjected to any comparative treatment, and in this Knud Rasmussen acted rightly. He did what no other could do: he collected this enormous pile of material, arranged it and made it ready. For of course the material is the first condition of scientific work, and in this case its procuring was of tenfold importance, for something is lost with every year that passes. Moreover, the material is the truth, which lasts eternally when once it has been secured. Its treatment can always come afterwards,

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and we scientists by the way know all too well that the results of *that* stage are rarely imperishable.

This limitation made by Knud Rasmussen himself was a conservation of strength, but was in no way the result of short-sightedness. On the contrary, the connection between the Eskimos themselves and between them and other races was ever present before him. That is why a few years ago in a article entitled "Eskimos and Stone-Age Peoples" he drew up his plan of a great international collaboration for the purpose of clearing up the questions connected with the history of the culture of the polar nations. Explaining that the basis of his ideas was the oft-mentioned similarity between palaeolithic and Eskimo culture, and having comprehended the common lines in the development of the circumpolar forms of culture, he advocated the rallying of believers as well as skeptics all over the world to a cooperation, whose task it would be, briefly, to make a systematic investigation of the northern races, with especial reference to their relation to palaeolithic culture. "I am quite well aware", he wrote, "that a task like this cannot be brought to realisation in the twinkling of an eye"; but, he added, it is natural that the initiative in an international Stone Age investigation comes from Denmark, where archaeology has such proud traditions, and where the foundations of the scientific study of the Eskimos were laid. Nothing would have pleased him more than if that plan could have been made a reality, for it had not its roots in fantasy or predisposed opinions, but in what to him was the most important for the moment: the collection of material.

From this same angle we must view his ever warm affection for the National Museum, an affection which sprang into flame when the rebuilding of the museum and the great national collection of funds were on the programme. For the Museum, too, he secured new material, both indirectly and in hard cash as during the collection, and directly by the specimens from his own expeditions. From the first of his journeys in Greenland to the last he contributed towards its completion, not least by means of specimens from the Thule District, of course. The collections of the Fifth Thule Expedition, which total about 15,000 ethnological and archaeological objects, meant a colossal increase which will always make Copenhagen an international centre of Eskimo research. They include practically complete ethnographical collections from the Iglulik, Caribou, Netsilik and Copper Eskimos as well as less comprehensive but still extremely important collections from the west coast of the Labrador peninsula, the Mackenzie delta, northern Ala-



ska, and Nunivak Island. Connected with these is an immense archaeological harvest, first and foremost from the excavations at Ponds Inlet, Repulse Bay, Southampton Island, and King William Island, but also from many other parts right over to Cape Dezhnev in Siberia.

And this is not all. In order to create the right background for the Eskimo culture he made generous contributions of large collections from different Siberian polar peoples (Gilyaks, Yakuts and Samoyedes) and was essentially helpful in procuring a collection from the Naskapi Indians in Labrador which has not its equal in Europe. What he has meant to the National Museum appears more clearly than anything else from the fact that no less than *ten* large rooms have been planned to hold his gifts in the new building.

Nor must it be forgotten that other Danish museums have profited from his munificence, as all the results of the geological, botanical, and zoological collections on his expeditions have gone to the various natural history museums in Copenhagen. Without doubt the most famous is the large meteorite weighing more than 4,4 tons which he found near Cape York in 1913, and ten years later with an enormous amount of trouble succeeded in getting conveyed to Copenhagen.

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The Greenlander and the Dane were merged in Knud Rasmussen to that great, gifted man. No warmer or more sensitive heart than him as he could, and no one could be carried away by things to his friends, always ready to help by word or deed, foremost in the work and foremost at the feast. No one could create joy around him as he could, and no one could be varried away by things great and fine as he could. What we read in a little shaman song from distant Iglulik, one that he translated, applies to him:

The great sea has set me in motion  
Has caused me to drift,  
Moves me like weed in a stream.  
The vault of the skies and the great weather move me,  
Move me inside,  
Have carried me along with them  
Trembling with joy.

He had the good fortune to live in a time whose poetic science — as Vilhelm Andersen once put it — is geography, whereas before it was botany, and he himself helped to create that time. The inner

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tension, the result of his so to say spanning time from the Stone Age to the era of the aeroplane and wireless, did not make him restive, but was condensed into a flame that made an artist of him. In his person the Greenlander and the Dane become the *Greenland-Dane* who stands as a flaming sign to both nations, and the scientist and the artist become united in the *hero* who makes the dream of the people come true -- the hero, to whom all doors are unlocked and all hearts open.

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