

Canadian Arctic and Alaska — 1984

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Mountains occur in the arctic of North America in two principal areas. The E arctic mountains of Canada extend from the Torngats of N Labrador in 58°N latitude to N Ellesmere in 83°N, a distance of about 2500km, and from about 60°W to 95°W longitude. They are said to have been formed, along with the W Greenland Mountains, when Greenland and North America split apart and formed Baffin Bay and Nares Strait about 50 million years ago. The original peneplane was raised and split and weathered, principally by the Pleistocene glaciers. The Pleistocene glaciations seem to have started in our region, and the Barnes Icecap, in central Baffin, is a true remnant of the last glaciation. Its base is well below snowline, but its summit, at about 1000m, is well above, so it thrives at present, but would not reform if it were removed. The mountains are nowhere high, the highest being Barbeau Peak in the United States Range of N Ellesmere Island at 2670m. It is really a bulge in the ice cap, and snowmobiles have been driven to the summit. However, glaciers flow down to sea level, and in other parts the mountains are very rugged and require 1550m or more of climbing to ascend them.

The W arctic mountains extend from about 59°N latitude to near the N coast at about 70°N, but the principal glaciated mountains are south of 64°N. In longitude they extend from about 134°W to 187°W at the end of the Aleutian Islands and merge into the related mountains of Kamchatka, the Kuril Islands, Japan, the Marianas, *etc.* They were formed principally by subduction of the oceanic crust under the continents, in processes resembling those that caused the Rocky Mountains.

Eastern Arctic of Canada

The eastern arctic mountains of Canada occupy N Labrador and Baffin, Devon, Ellesmere, and Axel Heiberg Islands. By all standards, they form one of the major mountain ranges in the world, but nevertheless they have no formally accepted name. They cover an area about three times the area of Great Britain. In eastern parts, the precambrian rocks are exposed, but they are covered with paleozoic sedimentary rocks in the west and north-west. Convection in the earth's upper mantle about fifty million years ago raised an ancient peneplane and split Greenland from the rest of the North American continent. Gently undulating highlands were formed on both parts, and the glaciations of the last several million years have attacked cracks in the rocks and formed the present-day landscape of mountains and fiords. Because of the rebound of the land after the ice melted, some of the fiords now have their entrances above sea-level.

A detailed history of climbing in these mountains would form a long article, but the pioneers deserve mentioning. The Inuit or Eskimo have lived in our area for perhaps 10,000 years. At the climatic optimum some hundreds of years

ago they extended into the high arctic, north of the line between Lancaster Sound and McClure Strait, but abandoned it when the weather cooled. Recently, the Canadian Government has encouraged settlement in the village of Grise Fiord on the south coast of Ellesmere Island. So little is known in detail about the area that in 1976 we could find ancient Inuit camp sites on the shores of Makinson Inlet that were unknown to the anthropologists. The first Europeans to see our mountains were the Greenland Norsemen, who called Baffin Island, or perhaps Labrador, Markland, and they settled for two or three decades at l'Anse aux Meadows in NE Newfoundland. Martin Frobisher saw the foothills around Frobisher Bay in 1576 and John Davis saw the mountains when he penetrated Baffin Bay as far as Davis Strait in 1585 and named one of them Mount Raleigh. Robert Bylot, with William Baffin as navigator, sailed around Baffin Bay, and discovered Bylot, Devon, and Ellesmere Islands, but they were not believed (many false 'discoveries' in these parts had been reported by others) until their report was confirmed by John Ross in 1818. The last major discoveries were made by Otto Sverdrup on sledge trips around Axel Heiberg Island and along the W coast of Ellesmere Island and across it in 1899-1902.

Bylot Island is a mountainous island off the NE corner of Baffin Island and separated from it by Navy Board Inlet, Eclipse Sound, and Pond Inlet. It is a substantial size, its area being about half the area of Wales. Its exploration, however, is very recent. The interior was not seen by Europeans until Patrick Baird, who was part of the British Expedition to North Baffin Island 1938-39, spent the spring and summer of 1939 encircling the island and traversing it with a dog team. He found that it is not covered by an ice-cap, as the map then showed, but contains large valley glaciers separated by mountain ridges. He climbed an 1850m mountain. The Inuit of Pond Inlet have recently had a mountain and a glacier named with Baird's Inuit name of Inukssualuk.

The interior seems to have been reached only another three times. H W Tilman crossed from Cape Liverpool to the S coast in July-August 1962 thinking he was the first. Rob Kelly, Laurie Dexter, Greg Good, Jim Savage, and James Lamont crossed from Tay Bay on the NW coast to Button Point on the SE coast on skis in July-August 1977 and climbed 20 peaks including the highest, 2062m, and Baird's peak of 1939, all but two being first ascents. Another traverse from NW to SE on skis was made by Mike and Ulrike Schmidt, Dave Clay, Mike Wingham, and Fred Bushnell in May-June 1984 and many first ascents were made. Ferris and Ames in 1954 climbed Mt Thule, near the S coast, Van Cochran and seven companions in 1974 climbed a peak near the coast west of Narsarsuk Glacier, and Laurie Dexter has climbed another four.

The Chief Warden of Auyuittuq National Park on Baffin Island reports only two climbing expeditions to the Park in 1984. Yukio Tarashima, Teruji Yoivel, and Ivorio Hoshino made the first ascent of the W face of Mt Thor. Unfortunately, their base camp manager, Kazue Kumakura was swept into Pangnirtung Fiord while crossing a river and was drowned. Andre Fillion, Louis Bareite, Guy Gilbert, and Jacques Trancia climbed secondary peaks of Asgard and Thor and a snow gully on the SE face of Freya.

Dave McAdam has continued his lone wanderings in Baffin Island and spent

seven weeks in the S Cumberland Peninsula. Swollen rivers in Kangeetulujuk Valley prevented travel, but he climbed over 15 mountains up to 1820m in height.

The western Canadian Arctic and Alaska

In Kluane National Park, one group climbed Mts Wood, McCauley, and Steele, another climbed the S ridge of Steele, two climbed Mt Logan by the E ridge, and two by the King Trench. Jamie Moffat and Bill Maurer attempted the first winter ascent of Mt Logan and, in cloud, reached one of the several summits on the ridge NW of the W peak. The E ridge of Mt St Elias, Mt Alverstone, and Mt Kennedy were climbed by different parties. The 1:125,000 map of the Centennial Range, map no. MCR 7 (1967) marks the 1925 route up Mt Logan by the King Trench as going north of Queen Peak instead of south of it. This error still leads parties astray occasionally.

Mt McKinley was attempted by 695 climbers in 133 expeditions in 1984. The success rate was about 47% for both guided and unguided parties. Seventy-seven climbers had symptoms of acute mountain sickness, of whom three were hospitalized. Most climbers were on the standard W buttress route, but the Cassin and the S buttress were each climbed by seven persons, four succeeded on the NW buttress, and the Muldrow glacier, W rib, and S face had ascents. Frances Randall, who was also known as the Kahiltina Queen, has died of cancer. She had acted as the radio operator at the base camp at 2200m on the Kahiltina Glacier for nine summers. Her help and cheerful hospitality will be greatly missed. Naomi Uemura, who made the first summer solo ascent of the W buttress some years ago, died in a solo winter attempt, apparently after reaching the summit. The only other death in the mountains occurred when a Swiss guide skied unroped into a crevasse. The Park Service Rangers with volunteer medical doctors and mountaineers operated an emergency camp at 4410m on the W buttress which seems to have greatly helped to detect acute mountain sickness and coordinate rescues, and to encourage sanitation and removal of garbage. One party was given a citation for persistently leaving garbage and abandoning food caches. When six hundred climbers try one route on the mountain in the short summer season, waste and excreta must be properly disposed of.

A difficult new route on the S buttress — the Ridge of No Return — was soloed by Renato Casarotto; and Adam Blazej, Korl Frantisek, and Krizo Anton climbed a direct and difficult route on the south face exposed to severe ice falls. A well conditioned and acclimatized French Army team traversed the mountain from base camp to Wonder Lake in five days. New routes were climbed on the E face of Mt Foraker by Vachon, Decy, Gagnon, and Sanders, on the N buttress of Mt Hunter by Tedeschi and Grison, and on Mt Huntingdon and Rooster's Comb by Haberl and Rohn.

The first transit of the NW passage by a passenger ship — the Lindblad Explorer — marks a further stage in the opening of the arctic to travellers, and may eventually have some implications for climbers.

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