PHILIP BARTLETT

Undiscovered Mountains of the Kronprins Frederiks Bjerge

The Northern Group Greenland Expedition 1990

When I first visited the Arctic on a University expedition to Baffin Island in 1976 I knew I would want to return. I can remember quite clearly sitting with Steve Parr on the summit of a modest rock peak we had just climbed a few miles from Mt Asgard and gazing eastwards to an indistinct horizon which already seemed magical. It was late afternoon and a typical Arctic landscape of modest snow peaks rose in shades of black and grey from flat colourless glaciers. It shouldn't have been particularly inspiring, but somehow it was. And part of the reason was the knowledge that somewhere beyond that horizon lay Greenland.

The only people I knew who had climbed in Greenland were Lindsay Griffin (but is there anywhere that Lindsay has not climbed?) and Robin Illingworth. Robin had never been to the Himalaya, but had three expeditions to Greenland under his belt and moved within a group who seemed to operate completely outside the relatively well-publicised world of 'big mountains'. The moving force of those Greenland trips was Stan Woolley, a Stowe schoolmaster who, over the years, had led a series of expeditions involving scientific work, exploration and climbing in various combinations, but all of them 'traditional' in style. Arctic expeditions seemed to be like that; gear was decidedly sixties and no one was impressed with news value.

In the autumn of 1989 I was invited along to a discussion of Stan's latest notion – and ended up wondering, not for the first time, why I had not returned to the Arctic before. Projected onto the wall was a slide showing a view north-east into the Kronprins Frederiks Bjerge just north of the 68th parallel on Greenland's E coast. Deer and Fountaine had sledged downhill through the area as part of their circumnavigation of Kangerdlugssuaq fjord in 1936 (*Geographical Journal*, November 1937) but otherwise, so far as we knew, it was unexplored. Most of it looked absolutely flat, but out of those endless glaciers and snowfields the occasional snowy bump was rising. Far away, larger bumps, perhaps large enough to be called mountains, rose against the sky. Some of them had pointed summits and blank rock faces, half hidden. They might prove disappointing of course; then again, they might not. And if they were easy, all the more chance of getting up. I couldn't help reflecting on the amount of time I had spent in the Karakoram attempting ambitious objectives and not getting up them. Like the Karakoram the Arctic is a desert, and even in a photograph you could sense the silence and the emptiness of the place. The only difference seemed to be that there was no

altitude problem, no Asian tummy, 24 hours' daylight, and a reputation for stable weather.

The problem with mountaineering in East Greenland has always been access. The peaks rise in a relatively narrow strip between the coast and the inland ice and much of the coastline is not very friendly. Glaciers calve directly into the sea, and sea ice, coming south from the Arctic ocean on the East Greenland current, clogs the fjords and may make the coast totally inaccessible to small vessels. It is possible to sail in, as Robin Knox-Johnston and party demonstrated in the Kangerdlugssuaq area in 1991, but this is an uncertain business. 1991 may have been a good year; 1990 was also fairly ice free. But from what one could see from the air, only a very substantial steel vessel would have made it through to the coast in 1992.

A fundamental change in the situation came in the mid-eighties when a gravel airstrip on the coast just north of Kangerdlugssuaq was opened up for geological purposes. Three years later, and very much at the behest of Stan, the Icelandic aircraft company which serviced the strip agreed to try ski landings. In 1987 Stan and Robin, with Rob Ferguson and Steve McCabe, made the third and what will almost certainly be the last 'traditional' ascent of Gunnbjørns Fjeld, the highest mountain in the Watkins range and thus in Greenland, 60 miles east of Kangerdlugssuaq. They arrived by plane, but only as far as the coast; thereafter it was a question of sledge-hauling for a fortnight, climbing the mountain, and sledge-hauling back again. On the strength of their photographs the pilot Sigurdur Adalsteinsson agreed, the following year, to attempt ski-equipped landings of his de Havilland Twin Otter in the heart of the mountains, and that sort of effort, little changed from the original ascent by Wager's party in 1936, passed into history. During their 1987 expedition Stan's party were tantalised by the sight of the steep granite peaks of the Lemon mountains crowding the E side of Kangerdlugssuaq fjord and of the highest peak in particular, already named by Wager 'The Cathedral'. Stan had known of the Cathedral's existence since 1972 when he led a predominantly scientific expedition to the Lemons and, though there was no time to attempt it either then or in 1987, Stan, Robin and Rob all nursed a strong desire to return; of which more anon.

For 1990, however, Stan's sights were set firmly on the unexplored northern section of the Kronprins Frederiks Bjerge and a circular sledging tour which would return his expedition, after some four weeks, to its landing point on the edge of the ice cap and a pre-arranged pick-up. For this he assembled a team of nine comprising himself, Ted Courtney, Dr Iain Campbell and John Richardson in one group and Rob Ferguson, Jim Lowther, myself, Dave Woolley (no relation) and Mike Parsons in another. The former group, who with the exception of John were old Arctic hands to whom a crossing of the ice cap was a mere nothing, would take a high northerly line close to the nunataks on the edge of the inland ice. The latter would take a southerly line closer to the coast where the mountains would probably be more challenging.

The Northern Group Greenland expedition flew in during unsettled weather in mid-July, with layers of angry cloud covering the Denmark strait

both above and below us. I expected Sigurdur to bank the plane and head back for Iceland at any moment, but instead there suddenly appeared, suspended impossibly high in the sky, a vision of bright, almost luminous mountains. And instead of disappearing this extraordinary sight slowly resolved itself into the reality of the Greenland coast, mile upon mile of unknown peaks glinting in the sun. The clouds were left behind as we flew over the coast and ten minutes later we landed on flat snow to a blue sky and hot sun.

There followed 28 days of glorious mountaineering in which the pure joy of being alone in virgin territory overwhelmed all other joys. Jim had put together a master plan for the 'youngsters' team which involved a good deal of sledging in the early stages and then a slow return past the highest peaks in the area, climbing what we could as the fancy took us. The potential hazards became apparent only on the second day when a strong and bitter wind began gusting off the ice cap and Dave developed hypothermia. We got the tents up with difficulty and retired inside. The following day the gale had eased, Dave was fully recovered, and, as we plodded up easy glacier terrain towards Panoramanunatakker, a fine group of bulky, flat-topped mountains, a superb Matterhorn-like peak appeared to the south, dominating the view, and we all agreed that it looked a delectable objective for the return journey.

Pulling one-man sledges, or pulks, was an entirely new experience for some of us; so too was trying to execute turns on cross-country skis. Mike and Jim were the only good skiers and were streets ahead of the rest of us. They spent endless hours discussing the relative merits of different ski waxes – an arcane branch of knowledge entirely lost on Rob, Dave and me who made do with fish scales and skins. Mike and Jim executed perfect telemark turns; we managed half a snow-plough each before falling over, cursing.

So it was a relief sometimes to get off the skis and onto some climbing. The rock was granitic, much of it as good as Chamonix, and there was some superb mixed climbing in ice runnels and along ridges. We climbed something like a dozen peaks; many were minor, but that hardly seemed to detract from the pleasure. Of the better peaks two in particular summed up between them the character of the area and the good fortune we felt in being there. Point 2600m at 67°57'W, 33°57'W was one of the two highest mountains in the range, and as we approached from the north in a cold dawn it presented a formidable 2000ft face of richly striated and coloured rock like something out of a wild west canyon. It was not particularly attractive and it looked very hard. But gradually the glacier fell away in front of us and after negotiating a steep slope and some crevasses, telemark-turning, falling and sliding as appropriate, we found ourselves skiing round the base of those huge cliffs and picking up another glacier on the other side. As we pulled slowly back uphill, now sweating in the morning sun, the south side of the mountain gradually came into view and revealed itself as a long glacier slope apparently without problems and leading straight to the summit. We climbed it easily the next morning. This, I thought, must be what the Alps felt like in the eighteenth century: we were actually living in the pre-Mummery era, when all that was required for total satisfaction was a way to the top. There was no loss because

it turned out to be easy. This was exploration, and the easier the better. The mountain's N face fell away vertically at our feet and the view was magnificent. The Matterhorn peak, now only five miles away and rising unmistakably above the intervening ridge, looked superb. Unlike anything else we had done it was pure rock and would clearly involve some hard technical climbing.

Two days later we skied past its W face and climbed to a broad col at the foot of the mountain's SW ridge. The first section of ridge was horizontal and knife-edged and turned out to be classic climbing of astonishing quality. Each side dropped steeply to a glacier system, the granite was perfect, and at a distance the whole thing looked formidable. Watching Rob picking his way methodically along it I just couldn't believe he was making such rapid progress. Yet when you got there the climbing was spectacular but easy, little more than scrambling, with all the blank sections conveniently by-passed by ledges reminiscent of the *vire à bicyclettes* on the Grépon. Above, the ridge steepened and got gradually harder, forcing us onto the face where we eventually fetched up in a little bay, 100ft below the summit. Here Rob pulled out all the stops and led an evil off-width crack which the rest of us struggled to follow on a tight rope. The mountain more or less admitted defeat after that and we clambered, one at a time, onto the summit rock, an airy perch commanding yet another magnificent view. To the north the ice cap formed an unbroken horizon and to the east we could see most of the summits we had climbed. To the south two great glaciers joined and swept down to the sea, where random icebergs broke the dull blue surface.

We returned to base to find that the senior party had also enjoyed a successful trip though, being closer to the ice cap, they had experienced considerably colder conditions. After mutual congratulations there was just time for two more peaks before the clatter of turbo-prop engines broke our isolation and announced the arrival of the Twin Otter, which came down steeply and impossibly slowly a hundred yards from Stan's Union Jack.

When the plane finally got off the ground again two hours later (it was overloaded, the afternoon snow sticky, and it needed several attempts), we followed the coast north-eastwards. It was a beautifully clear day and anonymous mountains stretched in all directions. Finally the unmistakable basalt tiers of the Watkins' mountains reared up ahead. I glued my face to the window and tried to identify the Lemon mountains to their west and the peak which was to have been our objective if a ski landing in the Kronprins Frederiks Bjerge had proved impossible – the Cathedral. It ought to be possible to see it ... but I couldn't pick it out, though the dark trench of Kangerdlugssuaq fjord was there all right. Then, as we turned from the coast and headed out to sea, I saw more mountains high on the horizon – big, snow-covered peaks, glinting in the sun just as they had done when we arrived four weeks before. I asked Ted if he recognised them. He didn't, but thought we were probably looking at the Lindbergs, basalt mountains like the Watkins' and therefore likely to offer only poor climbing, but nevertheless high and unvisited. Full of enthusiasm, I decided there and then to try and organise an expedition to visit both the Lindbergs and the Lemon mountains

together and to finish at the coastal airstrip which Stan had used when climbing Gunnbjørns Fjeld in 1987. Stan and Ted would both come; indeed it might be possible to return with exactly the same team. In the event, both Stan and Ted had to decline for health reasons and no one else could make it either. But when the British Expedition to East Greenland flew into the Lindbergs on 18 July 1992 a link with 'the old firm' was there in the form of Robin Illingworth. Robin had not forgotten his appointment with the Cathedral.

Summary: The Northern Group Greenland Expedition 1990 climbed in the Kronprins Frederiks Bjerge and had been preceded first by L R Wager's expedition to the Kangerdlugssuaq region in 1937 and subsequently by a party in 1978 organised by W S L Woolley who also organised the 1990 expedition. Participants in 1990 were W S L Woolley (leader), Philip Bartlett, Dr Iain Campbell, Ted Courtney, Rob Ferguson, Jim Lowther, Mike Parsons, John Richardson and Dave Woolley (no relation). Some 20 peaks were climbed, the area being reached from Iceland by ski-plane.

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