

# Trading into the North-west Passage

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Photographs by the Author

The Company's ship "Nascopie" makes Arctic history this year as she noses into Prince Regent Inlet to allow the Fur Trade to establish Fort Ross on Bellot Strait. The schooner "Aklavik" comes from the Western Arctic and the North-west Passage is a reality. Arctic history moves slowly and the building of Fort Ross is another significant pin point on the most northerly mainland of this continent.

IN the summer of 1849 a seven-year-old girl had a cartographical vision, conjured up by the spirit of her dead four-year-old sister, which she carefully recorded; it was identified as a rough map of the north magnetic polar region but indicating a waterway between Prince Regent Inlet and Franklin Strait. None of the published charts of the time showed any such waterway. The child's father, Captain Coppin, a surveyor of the Board of Trade in Londonderry, gave Lady Jane Franklin the sketch. She was impressed, describing the revelation to Captain Charles Codrington Forsyth and his second-in-command, W. Parker Snow (himself a clairvoyant), on the eve in 1850 of their setting forth in the *Prince Albert* on a voyage in search of Sir John Franklin.\*

Ironically, the *Prince Albert* came within two hundred miles of the physically reported waterway when the captain turned the ship around and sailed for England, despite Mr. Snow's dismayed protestations.

Thus the waterway remained undiscovered (materially) until two years later, when Captain William

Kennedy and Lieutenant Joseph René Bellot, a French naval officer, explored it and it was named Bellot Strait.

It was now August 31, 1937, and the R.M.S. *Nascopie* was steaming serenely into Prince Regent Inlet—where no steel ship had ever been before and where probably no craft of any kind had sailed since 1859, when Captain Sir Leopold McClintock turned his *Fox* homeward after wintering in Port Kennedy, Bellot Strait, and discovering on a dog-team excursion the record and relics that disclosed the melancholy fate of Sir John Franklin and his one hundred odd officers and men.

Though the early explorers of Prince Regent Inlet, such as Sir John and Sir James Ross, Kennedy and Bellot, and McClintock, had doubtless taken soundings as they sailed, none appeared on modern charts; and their vessels, like the *Fox* of 177 tons and the *Prince Albert* of 89, were much less concerned with depths than was the 2500-ton *Nascopie*. But this sturdy quarter-century-old icebreaker was able to proceed at fair speed nevertheless, being equipped with an automatic echo-sounder, while a gyro compass

\*"Sir John Franklin; The True Secret of the Discovery of His Fate. A Revelation," by the Reverend J. Henry Skewes, Vicar of Holy Trinity, Liverpool; published by Bemrose and Son, 1889.

Ice in Prince Regent Inlet



Bellot Strait looking west from Port Kennedy



paid no heed to the magnetic pole lying to the south and west.

As the *Nascopie* entered Prince Regent Inlet from Lancaster Sound, there were scattered ice-floes frequented by thousands of harp seals. Onto a pan scrambled two mother murre, each with a young one, to escape the vessel's menacing prow, scolding loudly and waddling about for all the world like penguins, although ornithologically unrelated. Then the ice was left behind.

On deck mingled tourists and traders and Mounted Policemen and Government officials. Some had embarked at Churchill or at more northerly points, while others had been on board since the *Nascopie* left Montreal on July 10.

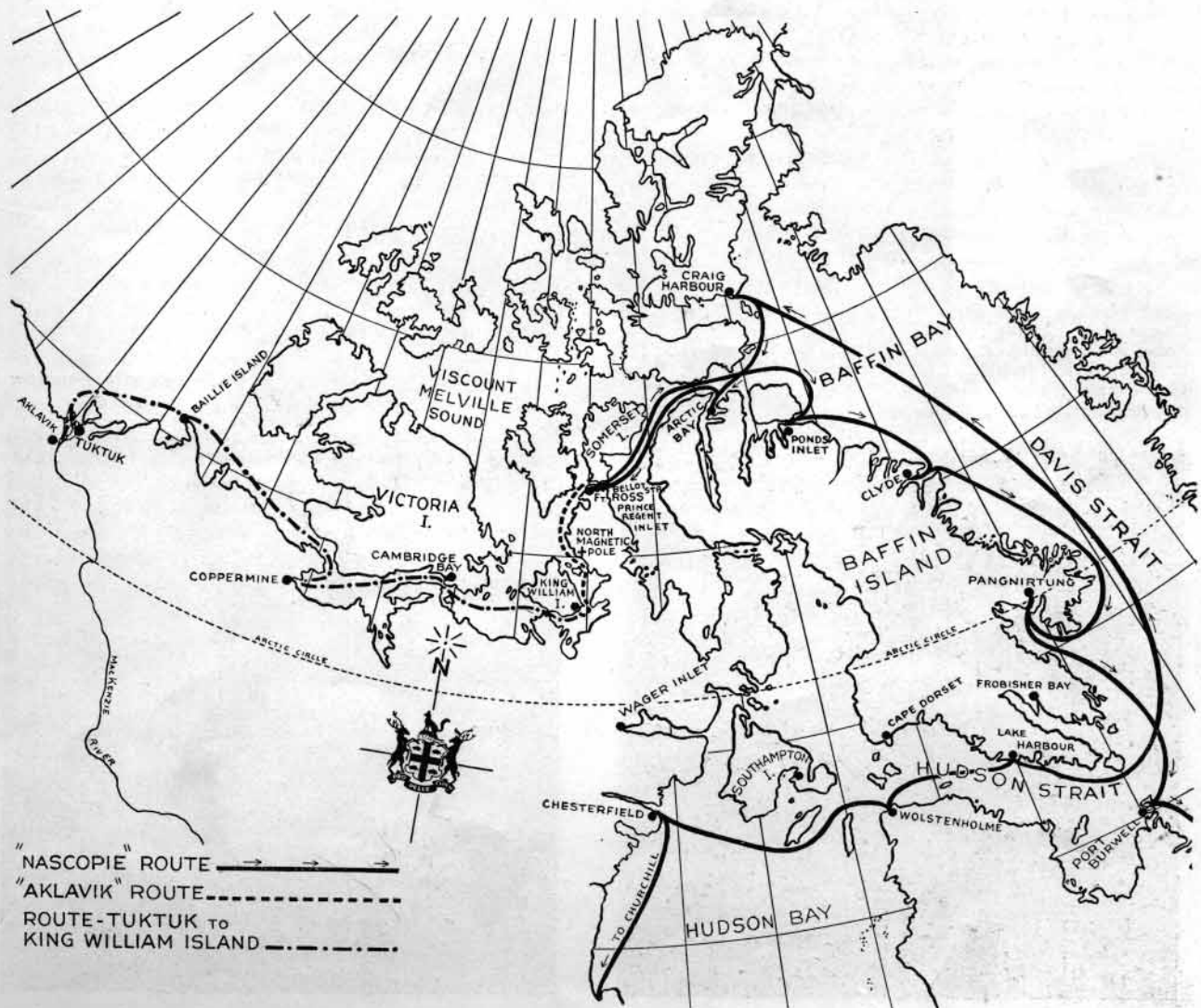
Some of the passengers may have been unaware of or indifferent to the historical associations of the waters through which they were passing until a speech at dinner so reminded them; but there were a few enthusiasts who had already steeped themselves in the complex and fascinating story of the search for the North-west Passage and of the tragedy of the Franklin expedition, part of the setting for which they were now viewing.†

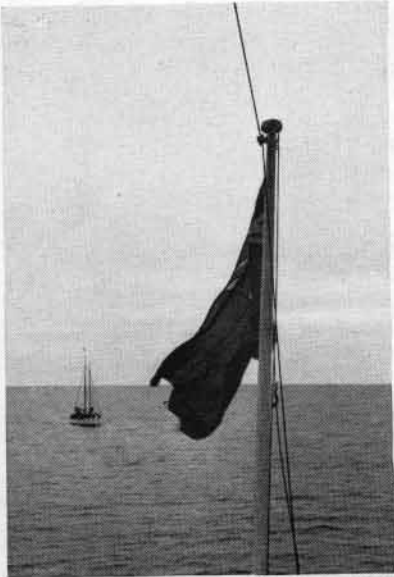
On the morning of September 1, we had passed Batty Bay, where Kennedy wintered in 1851-52; Fury

†See "Sir John Franklin's Last Voyage," by Chief Trader William Gibson, F.R.G.S., *The Beaver*, June 1, 1937.



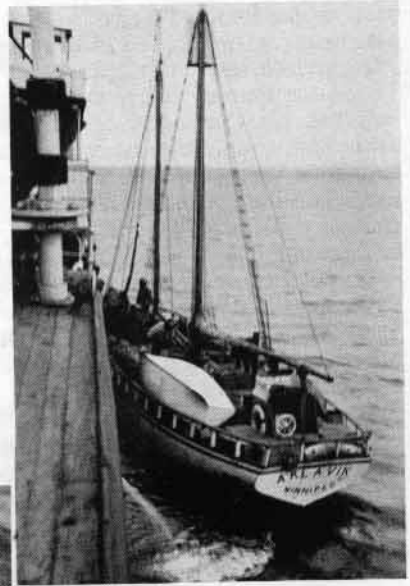
The R.M.S. "Nascopie" in Depot Bay, seen from Fort Ross





"Aklavik" from Western Arctic approaches the "Nascopie."

West meets East by North-west Passage.



Fort Ross "colonists" going ashore.



Crew of "Aklavik": Patsy Klengenber, J. R. Ford, E. J. (Scotty) Gall and Patsy's adopted son.

Patsy's wife, daughter and son.



Beach, where Parry's vessel was wrecked in 1824, and were well down into Creswell Bay approaching the upper part of Brentford Bay.

Chief Trader William (Paddy) Gibson studied the coast-line intently through his binoculars. A Western Arctic man, he had taken a more scholarly and active interest in polar history than had any other trader; and now he was to share with J. W. Anderson, H B C district manager, the responsibility of establishing a new post, to be appropriately named Fort Ross, at the very threshold of the North-west Passage.

The Company had felt that a post in the vicinity of the northernmost tip of Boothia Peninsula, besides unlocking a new chest of fur treasure, could be made a convenient depot for Eskimos scattered between King William Island and Repulse Bay, utilizing at long last the North-west Passage for bringing in supplies and sending out furs from either direction.

A few years ago a post was tried at Fort Leopold at the northeastern corner of Somerset Island but, too inaccessible for natives, it was soon abandoned.

At noon the *Nascopie* was steaming cautiously toward the coast: there lay Possession Point, where Sir John Ross had set up a cairn in 1829 and taken formal possession of the region for Great Britain. Nearby were Brown's Island and Long Island, shielding the eastern end of Bellot Strait. This was the goal. Passengers studied through their glasses every mound or projecting rock heap that might be a cairn.

Sailors scurried up the foremast, unlashd booms in preparation for the lowering of freighting scows stowed on deck. Down went the anchor. Warmly clad, over the side to a waiting scow went Captain Thomas Smellie, J. W. Anderson and Paddy Gibson. They headed shoreward with sailors casting lead to determine how much nearer the vessel might find safe anchorage. They selected a site for the new post and returned at 7 p.m.

In the morning the *Nascopie* ventured a mile closer to the land, which was yet at least that distance again beyond. The Company men once more went reconnoitering, Anderson and Gibson this time staying on shore. But thus far no others had been given an opportunity to leave the ship.

Breakfast table conversation featured "flares" which Watchman Jim Randall had reported to the first mate some time after midnight. Officers seemed reluctant to discuss them with passengers, so imagination was given free rein; some whose knowledge of Arctic geography and events was scanty suggested half humorously, half hopefully, "Wouldn't it be exciting if we were to find the lost Soviet fliers!" Historian R. K. (Andy) Carnegie of the Canadian Press felt constrained to do his duty; he radioed to Ottawa a story mentioning the flares, coupled with this tourist's conjecture. The story immediately sent up flares of its own in the world's press.

Meanwhile none of the experienced Northern travelers on board seriously entertained the "Russian fliers" explanation—not only because the lost plane's course lay many hundreds of miles to the west, but because a schooner was expected momentarily from King William Island through Bellot Strait.

The flares, if such they were, had been seen as if originating on the Boothia shore some miles to the south. True, the schooner was expected from the West but her crew or members of a land party might possibly have gone exploring to the south.

Why wasn't a boat dispatched immediately to inves-

tigate the signals? What if they came from people in dire distress? What if it actually was the Russians blown incredibly far off their route? Well, too much was happening at once. All hands and all boats seemingly were needed right here for the nonce. There was a post to be established, which would take time, and it would not do to delay the *Nascopie* unduly and risk having her frozen in for the winter.

First of all the natives must be put ashore. Three families of Eskimos, eighteen men, women and children, had been picked up at Arctic Bay, Baffin Island, to start the ball rolling at Fort Ross. Eventually there would be lots of natives coming to trade or to serve at the post, but just now there might be none in the vicinity. So bag and baggage, with dogs, dozens of dogs, they boarded a scow and were the first passengers ashore.

"Schooner in sight!" . . . "There's the *Aklavik*!" From behind Brown's Island she came, so frail-looking in the immersivity of sea and rugged land, yet so resolute, a white barrel perched jauntily on her foremast.

At the same time, the *Nascopie* had raised her anchor and was moving into the shelter of the bay inside Possession Point. The *Aklavik* trailed her, puzzled by her apparent indifference.

At last the *Nascopie's* anchor dropped and the *Aklavik* circled her. *Nascopie* passengers were gripped by the romance of the occasion, waving and cheering as the schooner drew alongside. A vessel from the West had come through the Passage to meet a vessel from the East, via the corridor of Bellot Strait. (From this side seventy-nine years ago McClintock had made five attempts to sail through the strait, but his low-powered *Fox* was thwarted at the western end by a barrier of ice.)

On board came E. J. (Scotty) Gall, master; Patsy Klengenber, halfbreed son of the late famed trader Charlie Klengenber, as engineer and pilot; Trader J. R. Ford, and the "crew" of one Eskimo. Remaining on the *Aklavik* because of shyness were Patsy's wife, two daughters and his adopted son. The flaring wolverine trimmings of their ornamented parkas, their stroud-legged boots, contrasted sharply with the clothing of the Baffin Island people and added atmosphere to the meeting of the West with the East. In the privacy of his cabin Captain Smellie opened a pint of champagne to toast the adventurers.

But for Scotty Gall, staunch Arctic veteran, it was an empty triumph. His comely and capable wife was to accompany him through the Passage; together, after five years of happiness in the North, they had been looking forward to a trip "outside" on the *Nascopie*. Consummately feminine, a skilful seamstress, she was yet versatile enough to run a Diesel engine. As they were preparing to leave Cambridge Bay, Victoria Island, she was standing by in the engine room when the *Audrey B.* was sighted. This was a schooner bringing supplies from the Mackenzie delta which the *Aklavik* was to relay. Up came the anchor. They would go to meet the *Audrey B.* Scotty rang the bell for "slow ahead." There was an immediate response. A few minutes later he signaled again. There was no response. He went below and found her lying beside the engine—Anna—dead. She must have had a weak heart but had never been ill to his knowledge. He was dazed, stunned.

She was buried and the next day the freight was transferred from the *Audrey B.* The *Aklavik* sailed eastward.



McClintock's cairn, showing Corporal Dodgson at actual spot of finding canister.



McClintock's record, showing the tin canister, stone jam jar and document wrapped in oiled silk. Photos by R. K. Carnegie.



McClintock's cairn (after reconstruction) at west point of Depot Bay. Bellot Strait in background.



Provisions and furniture going ashore for Fort Ross. Brown's Island in background.



L. A. Learmonth and D. G. Sturrock after their strenuous journey.



Laying the foundation for Fort Ross.

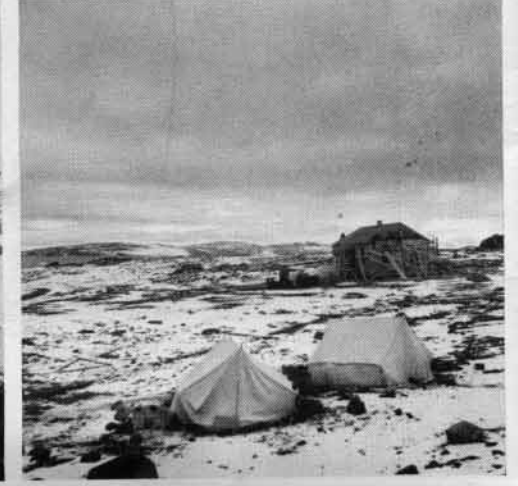
Trader Leo Manning, "the white man with the tongue of an Eskimo," turns carpenter.



Construction of Fort Ross; the warehouse. Every-body digs in.



Construction of Fort Ross; the dwelling, with cook and temporary storage tents in foreground.



Patsy Klengenber took Anna's place at the engine. He too had lost his wife, in February, but with Eskimo mindfulness of domestic necessity had sufficiently assuaged his grief to acquire a new wife just before leaving.

Several times the *Aklavik* was in danger of being nipped, but the most tense moment of the voyage was at the western entrance of Bellot Strait when the engine failed. There was a swift current and destruction seemed imminent as the schooner swept toward the rocky shore. In the nick of time a faulty strainer was replaced. The whole trip had been made at half speed with a mechanical improvisation due to stripped gears, but this was not considered remarkable in a country where ingenious makeshifts are commonplace.

"The appearance of Bellot Strait is precisely that of a Greenland fiord; it is about 20 miles long and scarcely a mile wide in the narrowest part, and there, within a quarter of a mile of the north shore, the depth was ascertained to be 400 feet. Its granite shores are bold and lofty, with a very respectable sprinkling of vegetation for lat. 72°. Some of the hill-ranges rise to about 1500 or 1600 feet above the sea. . . The strait runs very nearly east and west, but its eastern entrance is well masked by Long Island; when half way through both seas are visible. . . the flood tide comes from the west. . . The rise and fall is much less upon the western side of the Isthmus of Boothia than upon the east. . ." Thus did McClintock speak of Bellot Strait. Prophetically, he said also: "Perhaps some future voyager, profiting by the experience so fearfully and fatally acquired by the Franklin expedition, and the observations of Rae, Collinson and myself, may succeed in carrying his ship through from sea to sea. . ." Amundsen's *Gjoa* remains the first and only vessel ever to have sailed right through from Atlantic to Pacific (1903-06), though the Company's *Fort James* went as far as King William Island (1928) and might have proceeded the rest of the way had there been occasion to do so; but neither of them utilized Bellot Strait. And no vessel has yet navigated the Northwest Passage all the way from sea to sea in one season.

L. A. Learmonth, King William Island post manager, was not on board the *Aklavik*. With his assistant, D. G. Sturrock, he had left Gjoa Haven on July 30 in a whaleboat, towing a sixteen-foot canoe, his object being to reach Bellot Strait ahead of the *Aklavik* and pick out a suitable site for the new post. This explained the flares. Learmonth was undoubtedly down there on the mainland now.

All day, ceaselessly, scow-loads of lumber and building supplies were being landed. In the afternoon the foundation was laid for the dwelling.

Going ashore in the ship's launch a student of historical remains pointed to a nearby promontory where several people were inspecting a cairn. "See that!" he exclaimed. "Already unauthorized persons are desecrating historical landmarks and will probably appropriate any records there are."

Encountering Paddy Gibson, who was wrestling with a tent in the wind, I pointed to the cairn and asked, "What do you know about that?"

"Funny," he replied; "I hadn't noticed it before. It wasn't there yesterday!"

Sure enough, several of the passengers, undaunted at not finding expected cairns of early explorers (which had long since been dismantled by Eskimos or

topped over by wind and frost), had promptly set up one of their own. Later, however, a Mounted Policeman stumbled on a canister among the rocks a hundred feet or so below the fresh cairn, which was constructed on the site of an old one. The canister contained a small crock within which was a sodden pellet that he wisely did not try to open out, leaving that delicate task to the Dominion Archives, to which it would be presented. It was in all probability the record of McClintock's sojourn at adjacent Port Kennedy.‡

That night at 10.30 Learmonth arrived. Bearded, tousle-haired, he and Sturrock had made a dash to the *Nascopie* in their sixteen-foot canoe with an outboard motor from a look-out station from which, windbound, they had frantically been signalling since the vessel's arrival, using precious gasoline at night and moss-fed smudges during the day.

It had been a hard trip. After leaving Gjoa Haven, King William Island, they were forced by ice to camp in Schwatka Bay for a week, then continued northward through Wellington Strait to Boothia Peninsula. Passing Cape Adelaide and the magnetic pole, in Wrottesley Inlet they were held another ten days until, watching from a hill, Learmonth saw a lead which they followed to a portage on the north side of the inlet. Unknown to white men, it had long been used by Eskimos. They cached their whaleboat, proceeded with the canoe. It was a twenty-mile crossing, with several portages, only two of which were considerable, totalling three miles, and they traversed a big, long lake flanked by spectacular, high overhanging cliffs on which great rocks were menacingly poised.

On August 31 they reached the river mouth of Nadluktak on the east coast of Boothia, finding an encampment of about thirty Eskimos.

One of the most serious, most conscientious of the Hudson's Bay Company traders, and the fondest of the Eskimos, Learmonth was a bitterly disappointed man as he sat in the *Nascopie's* saloon at midnight, munching the first civilized food he had tasted for weeks. The Fort Ross post was the realization of an ambition of his, long cherished, painstakingly planned. Thus it was that he had deliberately endured severe hardships in anticipation of reaching Brentford Bay in advance of the *Aklavik*, and ahead of the *Nascopie*, which was not due, he had thought, until September 5.

His chagrin was boundless when, at nearly the end of his gruelling journey, from his look-out camp he saw the *Nascopie* already at the eastern end of Bellot Strait. He was ahead of schedule, yet too late. There she was, but he couldn't get to her in his little canoe while the sea was choppy, and his signals were apparently being ignored. Once fed and rested, however, he entered into the spirit of the building of Fort Ross, even though fate had left the actual determining of the site to others.

On September 3 the framework of the post dwelling was up and the sheeting was being put on. Sailors, officers, traders, Mounted Policemen and even tourists were pinch-hitting as carpenters and laborers.

Two men went exploring and found that the post was located on a near-island—Hazard Inlet, to the north of it, leading practically to Port Kennedy to the west of it. "It misses being an island," they said, "by about thirty inches." The post faced McClintock's Depot Bay, in which the *Nascopie* lay at anchor. §

‡McClintock, "In Arctic Seas," page 301: "Of the traces which we have left behind us . . . There is our record in a conspicuous cairn at the west point of Depot or Transition Bay . . ."



The author "shoots" a white fox.



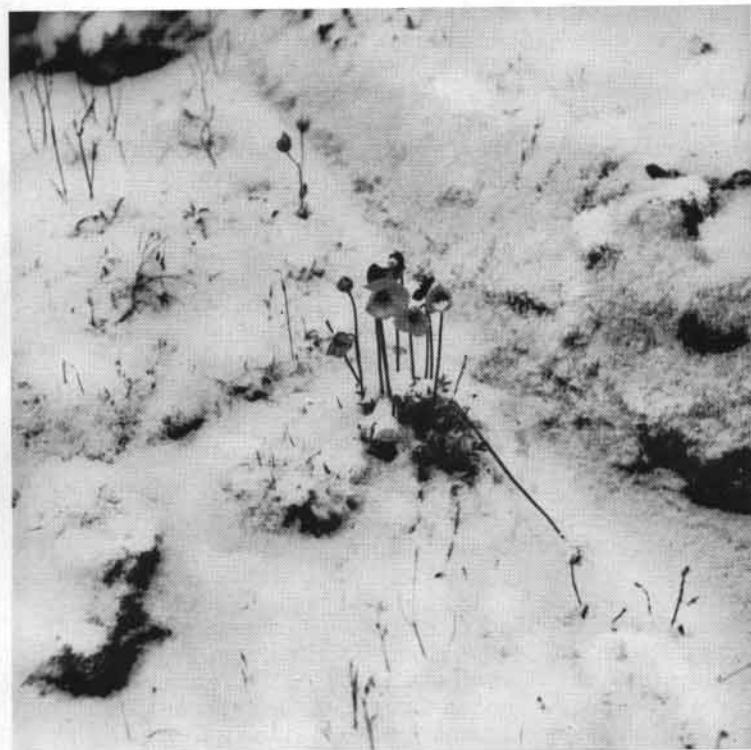
White Foxes on a cliff at Port Kennedy.



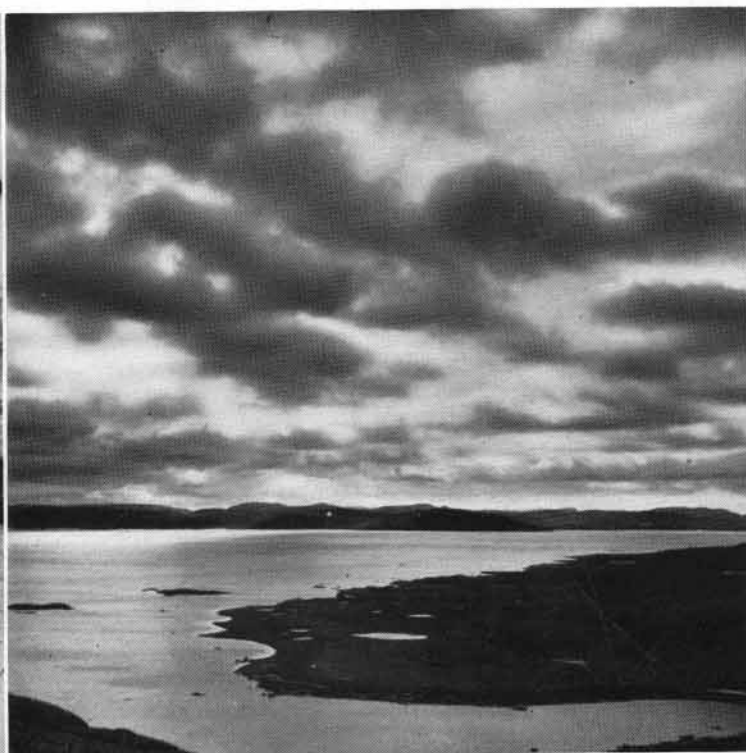
White Fox tracks in the snow near Fort Ross.



White Fox, quite wild, being photographed at four feet, dining on a bearded seal.



Arctic poppies brave September snows at Fort Ross.

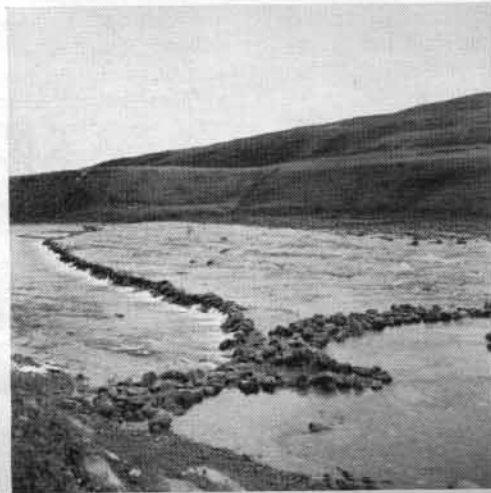


The Northernmost tip of the North American Continent (Boothia Peninsula), seen from Fort Ross, with Bellot Strait between.

Netsilik fishermen of Nadluktak with poised tridents wait signal of Medicine man.

Large stone fish trap at mouth of River Nadluktak, where Arctic char and salmon trout running up-stream corral themselves.

The Eskimos dash into the river to impale the corralled fish.



Early the next morning the little schooner *Seal*, which had been brought from Hudson Bay to serve at Fort Ross, started off on a jaunt of inspection to Nadluktak, twelve or fifteen miles southward. Rail, wind, and fog spoiled visibility, rendered navigation difficult and kept the crew uncomfortable. Some members of the Government party on board had a notion that they were about to see a band of primitive Eskimos untouched by civilization, never even photographed. They encountered instead six or eight families who were living in canvas as well as skin tents, using Peterborough canoes, modern rifles and utensils; whose parka covers were of calico—some opening with zippers—and who well knew what a camera was for. Accustomed to trade either at Gjoa Haven or at Repulse Bay, they were all professed Christians and in every tent was a prayer book.

Though hardly unmarked by civilization, these Netsilingmiut were less trammelled by it than their Baffin Island cousins, being happier, more energetic, more provident, and prouder-looking.

While Major D. L. McKeand, Superintendent of the Eastern Arctic, Department of Mines and Resources, bestowed souvenir pocket-knives on the adults and popped candies into the mouths of the children, I made motion pictures of the life of the camp, including the spearing of salmon. Morning and evening the men would line up on the river bank, their tridents poised and at the signal of their shaman rush knee-deep into the water, impaling hapless fish right and left. On the shore were scores of stone caches already well stocked with delicious Arctic char or salmon-trout.

That was a delightful, unforgettable visit. These were the people who, along with others of their tribe and neighbouring ones, would be trading this season at Fort Ross. I only hoped that the questionable "benefits" of civilization would not reach them too quickly. But, alas, it is futile now to wax sentimental over civilization's intrusion among primitive Eskimos. For, strictly speaking, it is unlikely that there is a really primitive Eskimo left in the world.

Buying a dory-load of salmon from our cheery hosts, we returned to the *Nascopie* with three outstanding citizens of the camp who were anxious to see the big boat. All at Nadluktak had heard about the ill-fated western supply ship *Baychimo*, none had ever been aboard her. Our three men grinned and exclaimed the while they were shown from engine-room to wheelhouse by Learmonth. They even had tea with the captain. They enjoyed themselves, certainly, but they were not overawed—Eskimos seldom are.

The men told us about the game resources of the area. There were a few musk-oxen (protected, of course), on Boothia Peninsula, on Somerset Island and on Prince of Wales Island. One had seen walrus in Creswell Bay; they sometimes even came to Nadluktak and to Wrottesley Inlet on the opposite side. There was a large river to the north of Bellot Strait, not marked on the map, teeming with salmon. There were barren-land caribou on Boothia, too, and a "white" or island, non-migrating type on Somerset and Prince of Wales. There were narwhal and white whales—though the local people were hunters of neither—and many seals and foxes. We had seen innumerable seals; and

§McClintock, "In Arctic Seas," page 163: ". . . the ship was anchored in a convenient bay three or four miles within Possession Point. Here our depot is to be landed, therefore we shall name this for the present *Depot Bay*: a very narrow isthmus between its head and Hazard Inlet unites the low limestone peninsula of which Possession Point is the extreme, to the mainland."

where no Europeans had been for almost eighty years, and few Eskimos, white foxes were scampering about the land quite indifferent to humans. I took motion pictures and still photographs of some of them as close as three feet. I had never had an experience like it before and never expect to again.

There had been snow flurries two days after the *Nascopie's* arrival and by September 6, the land was blanketed. Boat decks and rigging were slippery. Thus it was that Learmonth, attempting to climb from the ratline of the *Aklavik* to the rail of the *Nascopie*, fell fifteen feet and sustained four rib fractures. Loyal Company man that he was, he kept the extent of his injuries secret so as not to risk being obliged to go "outside." Fort Ross was his brainchild and he was bound to stay to see it safely weaned.

Day and night Chief Engineer Thomas of the *Nascopie* had been fashioning new gears for the *Aklavik* so that she might return with much needed provisions to King William Island. At last the thirty-ton schooner was in running order. Scotty Gall with other Company men decided to take her on an unofficial, unannounced trial run into Bellot Strait. Just back from Port Kennedy photographing foxes, ducks and seals, I missed her, and the only Government party members to catch her were R. K. Carnegie and Major McKeand.

The physiographer was left behind. Indignant, he declared, "That trip would have meant more to me than anything else on this voyage—a unique opportunity to observe geologically a cross-section of the northernmost tip of the continent!"

When the *Aklavik* came back, having been halted by milling ice a mile or two from the western end, a fruitless attempt to placate him was made with: "You didn't miss much. You wouldn't have seen anything but rocks."

By the morning of September 8, the Fort Ross dwelling was weatherproof and habitable and all freight was safely stowed in an adjacent warehouse. Learmonth, well bandaged by the doctor, had got ashore, walking to and from the ship's launch, and was fairly comfortable.

At 6.30 p.m. a tiny rowboat shoved away from the *Nascopie*. In it was a young man anachronistically clad in business suit, overcoat and fedora hat. He rowed briskly for shore in the gathering gloom. This was Donald Goodyear, who, though due to go outside after several years at a post in Hudson Bay, had agreed to stay to help Learmonth and finish the carpentry work during his convalescence. In front of the dwelling stood Ernie Lysle, interpreter and trader, vigorously waving a dishcloth.

The snow-covered land looked bleak, inhospitable, and the synthetic cairn was silhouetted against a leaden sky.

Passengers began waving. The *Nascopie's* whistle blew. A flag was dipped on the *Aklavik*, where Paddy Gibson, D. G. Sturrock and Patsy Klengenber were getting ready to sail to the West.

Goodyear stood up in his ridiculous boat and flourished his fedora.

"Gjoa Haven, King William Island (Special to the *Nascopie* by private wireless)—The schooner *Aklavik* arrived safely here on the fourteenth of September, thus completing the successful freighting of goods via the North-west Passage. Chief Inspector W. Gibson sends his best regards to all the passengers on board the *Nascopie* and wishes them all the best of luck."