

**A HISTORICAL AND LEGAL STUDY OF SOVEREIGNTY
IN THE CANADIAN NORTH: TERRESTRIAL
SOVEREIGNTY, 1870-1939**

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*Vilhjalmur Stefansson and His
Plans for Northern Enterprise
after the First World War*

Vilhjalmur Stefansson returned from the Arctic in the autumn of 1918 a famous and even influential figure. In spite of the misfortunes and tragedies that had attended his expedition, and in spite of the antipathy and enmity of disaffected members of it, particularly in the southern party, his reputation as a brilliantly successful explorer was still essentially unimpaired. As seen earlier, the Canadian government had accepted his basic concept of the expedition without serious question, and he had been given virtually *carte blanche* in planning, organizing, and equipping it. When difficulties and disasters almost overwhelmed him, moreover, the government stuck with him, and he was thus able to carry out a good part of his own program. In spite of his isolation he was able to maintain periodic contact with Ottawa, and not the least remarkable feature of his performance was the series of detailed reports and communiqués on the expedition and his own experiences which he sent back to Prime Minister Borden and other officials, with incisive, perceptive comments and recommendations regarding government policy in the North. A letter to Borden from the Mackenzie River delta on 8 January 1914 advised protecting Inuit from white man's diseases by placing quarantine officers at Herschel Island and Fort Norman. It also advised conserving their food supply by establishing a partial closed season for caribou, with export of their hides forbidden, and a complete closed season for muskox.¹ In a similar letter to Clifford Sifton, at the time Chairman of the Commission of Conservation, which he wrote on 8 February 1914, at the RNWMP barracks at Fort McPherson, he made essentially the same recommendations.² The letter to Borden, which he wrote on newly discovered Brock Island on 21 June 1915, and in which he urged continued northern exploration by Canadians and offered himself for further service, has already been cited.³ Stefansson himself tells of a letter he wrote to Borden from Melville Island in 1916, in which he claims to have presented to the Prime Minister for the first time a comprehensive exposé of his plans for the North.⁴ He was also able, from time to time, to send to Ottawa details of the expedition, which were incorporated in the accounts about it published in the annual reports of the Department of the Naval Service.⁵ Thus, although Stefansson himself spent several years in the Arctic islands almost completely separated from all human beings except those in his own party,



FIGURE 9-1: VILHJALMUR STEFANSSON. RUDOLPH MARTIN ANDERSON / LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA / E002712840.

a good deal of information about his experiences reached the “civilized” world and attracted considerable interest and publicity.

Stefansson came back full of plans and projects for the North – and eager to take advantage of every opportunity to put these plans and projects into operation. At first he was interested primarily in bringing them to the attention of the Canadian government, but later he took his case to the public in a great publicity campaign of writing and lecturing.⁶ It

is no exaggeration to say that many of the ideas he expounded have become familiarly and universally associated with his name. In summary form, his thinking about the future role of the Arctic, and about northern development, was as follows.

He started from the premise that Arctic lands, and the Arctic region in general, were soon going to become much more important than hitherto and would play an expanding role in world affairs. In the air age, which was obviously approaching, the Arctic would no longer be looked upon as nothing more than a forbidding barrier and wasteland, but rather would become a principal (and perhaps the most important) thoroughfare for the world’s air commerce. In his own words, he “had come to the view that the earth was now at last a globe for practical purposes.”⁷ He pointed to the fact, well known but with implications not as yet fully appreciated, that the shortest air routes between the world’s largest cities and greatest concentrations of population and industry lay over the Arctic Ocean. In these circumstances it was inevitable that with technological development the Arctic would become a great, centrally located crossroads rather than remaining a sort of backwater or barrier on the periphery of civilization. Stefansson also asserted that in the natural evolution of history the main centres of civilization had been moving steadily northward, from the ancient empires of southern and southwestern Asia to those of Greece and Rome, and then to the modern states of northern Europe such as France, Great Britain, and Germany. He believed that this trend would continue, and, anticipating an increasing realization of the value of such northern lands as Alaska, Canada, Spitsbergen, and Siberia, insisted that there was no real latitudinal limit to northern development. Thus the leading states of the future, or at least a considerable number

of them, such as the United States, Canada, Great Britain, Russia, and Japan, would be those located at or near the edge of the Arctic sea, and the transpolar traffic and commerce between and among them would cause this sea to occupy a position comparable to that of the Mediterranean in ancient and medieval times. Planes flying the transpolar routes would require landing fields and refuelling bases, and for these purposes it would be logical to make use of the Arctic islands. The islands would also be valuable as sites for weather stations, and for radio and communications centres. Eventually, when technological development had advanced far enough, submarines would sail under the Arctic ice, not only for military but also for commercial purposes. Stefansson also envisaged the day when giant undersurface tankers and freighters would carry the world's commerce across the Arctic sea.

Stefansson believed that the Arctic region had intrinsic values and potentialities of its own which had not been fully appreciated but would become more evident as time went on. He held that the climate of the Far North, although admittedly rigorous, was not nearly so forbidding as was popularly supposed. Indeed, he insisted that it was no more severe than the climate of much more southerly, subarctic regions that supported large populations. This suggested that the climate of the North would not in itself be a barrier to settlement, and that if and when settlement on a large scale became economically or otherwise desirable, it would take place as naturally as the settlement of the North American prairies. Known resources of value in the Arctic included furs, food from land and sea creatures, and, in some parts, metals and minerals (such as the coal of Spitsbergen). There were also attractive prospects for discovery and development of additional resources, and Stefansson was particularly

interested in such projects as the introduction of tame reindeer herds into the North American Arctic, the domestication of the muskox or *ovibos moschatus*, the exploitation of Arctic fisheries, and investigation of the numerous indications of mineral wealth in various parts of the North.

The political and international aspects of the north polar area especially intrigued him. He believed that although Arctic territory had not previously been highly valued, it soon would be; and this would become a region of intense international competition unless steps were taken to remove uncertainties about ownership of land. Although some state or other had claimed practically all known lands and islands, some of these claims were not well established and could easily be challenged. In addition, there were good prospects of discovering other islands as yet unknown, since there was still a large portion of the ice-covered Arctic sea that, so far as records showed, no human being had ever seen. Hence the likelihood that international competition would increase to secure possession of known lands or islands (wherever doubts might exist) and to discover and appropriate new ones. This was a matter of special importance for Canada for several reasons: its central and vulnerable position in the Arctic, her as yet rather dubious claim to a large portion of the known Arctic islands, and also the strong possibility that future discoveries might easily be of islands within or adjacent to the so-called Canadian sector.

Stefansson had given a great deal of thought to these matters, and in his own mind had worked out a program or at least various projects which he thought the Canadian government should undertake. Some of his ideas were already developed in considerable detail; others had as yet taken only vague form; but collectively they amounted to an ambitious

and far-reaching plan for Canadian enterprise and development in the North. He wanted to see a continuation of northern exploration, and particularly an expedition that (if possible) he himself would lead. This expedition would have several purposes, including continuing exploration of the little known islands, discovering and taking possession of new ones if any were left to be found, and cementing Canada's claim to the archipelago as a whole. He wanted to establish air bases, meteorological and radio stations, and police posts on the northern islands, to confirm Canadian sovereignty by occupation, and also to facilitate bringing the air age to the Arctic. He was anxious to see the introduction of reindeer herding on a large scale in suitable areas of the Canadian North, and also experimentation with the domestication of the muskox. He urged prospecting for minerals and more thorough investigation of the known indications of them, including the tar sands and oil outcroppings along the Mackenzie River, the copper deposits in the Coppermine region and Victoria Island, and the coal deposits in some of the islands such as Ellesmere and Melville. Already he was forming plans to establish Canadian possession of Wrangel Island, which he did not regard as Russian and thought that Canada could claim on the basis of the temporary occupation of the island by the *Karluk* party in 1914.⁸

These were the most important plans that Stefansson put before the Canadian government upon his return from the North and that he continued to promote, with great determination and persistence, over the following years. Practically all of them quickly became major issues and, regardless of what fate befell them, Canadian government activity in the North for at least the next decade was to a large extent a response – either positive or negative – to them.

Unfortunately for Stefansson, he and his projects had already acquired many enemies and much opposition. Among the leaders were members of the southern party of the returned expedition, especially his former associate and friend Dr. Rudolph Martin Anderson, who found growing support among doubtful and disenchanted senior officials in government. The quarrels that destroyed the harmony of the expedition, especially those between the leaders, were continued after the return to Ottawa, and inevitably came to involve many others. A major dispute broke out over the task of preparing and getting ready for publication the voluminous reports that were to be made about the expedition, especially the scientific aspects of it. There was a move to keep Stefansson out of proceedings, but some of the officials who had been prominently associated with the expedition, notably Deputy Minister G. J. Desbarats of the Department of the Naval Service, insisted that since Stefansson had been placed in full command he could not be denied his rightful place on the publishing committee.⁹ It was in these confused and unpleasant circumstances that Stefansson undertook to sell his views on northern enterprise and development to the Canadian government.

Reindeer and Muskox Projects in the North

The importance of the postwar reindeer and muskox projects in northern Canada in relation to problems of Arctic sovereignty should not be overestimated, since there was at most only an uncertain connection between them. Nevertheless, these projects came to the fore at a time when there was renewed concern among Canadian authorities about the security of

their northern territories, and to some extent were a manifestation of their desire to occupy these regions and put them to use. Hence a brief summary of the subject is in order. As was so often the case with major plans and problems in the North during and after the First World War, the central figure in these projects was Vilhjalmur Stefansson. There was a background of some importance, however, before he entered upon the scene.

The peoples of northern Europe and Asia, especially the Saami (Laplanders) of northern Scandinavia and the Chukchi of northeastern Siberia, have kept the reindeer in a domestic state for centuries. On the other hand the North American caribou, which is of the same family and is practically identical except that it is a little larger, has never been domesticated (except perhaps in isolated instances). Domestication of reindeer in North America began when Alaska General Agent of Education Dr. Sheldon Jackson, observing first hand the large herds in northeastern Siberia and becoming impressed with the possibilities that the industry might offer for poverty-stricken natives of Alaska, took the initiative in 1891 by having sixteen Siberian reindeer purchased and brought over to the American side. Since Congress had not yet voted an appropriation for this purpose, the initial purchase had to be made with funds contributed privately. This was also the case with the second, larger purchase of 171 reindeer in 1892. The reindeer obtained at this point were taken to Port Clarence Bay, just across the Bering Strait from Siberia, and here the Teller Reindeer Station, the first in Alaska, was established. Congress voted a series of grants starting in 1893, further purchases of Siberian reindeer were made almost annually for about a decade, and trained herders and dogs were imported from Lapland. In due course, herds were established in other parts of

Alaska, for the most part in regions adjacent to the Teller Range but also, in an experimental way, in the Aleutians and the Panhandle. Between 1891 and 1915, about 1300 animals were imported. Even though large members were killed for food and skins, natural increase meant that the herds had grown to more than 70,000 animals in 1915, generating great optimism over the future of the reindeer industry in Alaska.¹⁰

In the meantime another reindeer experiment was being attempted, under considerably less auspicious circumstances, on the other side of the continent. Here the promoter was Wilfred Grenfell, the famous pioneer doctor of Labrador and Newfoundland. Convinced that the vast moss-covered barren lands of these territories would be as suitable for domestic reindeer as for the wild caribou that had inhabited them for centuries, Grenfell consulted with Sheldon Jackson in Washington and then raised sufficient funds to purchase 300 reindeer in Lapland. The animals, accompanied by Saami herders, were transported in 1908 to St. Anthony, near the northernmost tip of Newfoundland, where in five years they increased to approximately 1,500. This fortuitous beginning did not last for various reasons: the absence of Dr. Grenfell during the war, the departure of the Saami herders, a disease which attacked the reindeer, and (perhaps most serious) the indifference and even enmity of the local Newfoundlanders who depleted the numbers through illegal poaching and shooting. By 1917 only about 250 were left. With the consent and co-operation of the Canadian government, as many as could be caught were transferred to Rocky Bay on the north shore of the Gulf of St. Lawrence, later to be transferred again to Anticosti Island. Although his own experiment had ended in failure, Grenfell himself was fully convinced that the feasibility of the idea had

been completely vindicated, if the necessary elements of interest and support by the local population were present.¹¹

Even less successful was an attempt to start a herd in the vicinity of Fort Smith in the Northwest Territories. In the summer of 1911, fifty reindeer were obtained from Grenfell's herd and transported successively by ship, train, and wagon to Fort Smith. By the time the herd arrived about one-third of them had died and, because of various mischances, only three were left by the autumn of 1913.¹²

No comparable attempts had been made at this time to domesticate the muskox and raise it in captivity. On a much smaller scale, muskox had been kept in at least one zoo (in New York City) with some success, except that they had not reproduced under these conditions.¹³ Various explorers had testified as to the docility of the muskox, and Captain Bernier had kept a young calf as a pet during his sojourn on Melville Island in 1908–9.¹⁴

This was approximately the situation that had been reached when Stefansson returned from the Arctic late in 1918 and embarked on his campaign to interest the Canadian government in his projects to domesticate and raise large herds of reindeer and muskox in the North. Stefansson's own interest in such enterprises had developed during this expedition, as the following entry in his diary indicates. It was written on 29 May 1916, at the northwestern tip of Ellef Ringnes Island, while he was in a mood of deep depression because of a badly injured foot and other frustrations. More optimistically, he wrote:

A New Domestic Animal seems to me to be placed here ready to our hand in the muskox. I have thought much of this lately, and hope to try to get either the Government or a

semi-patriotic commercial company under Government charter to experiment in the matter. It seems to me that the muskox is easier to handle than reindeer, besides producing more meat and the wool in addition. They could undoubtedly flourish wherever they formerly did, if only they will "breed in captivity", of which I have no doubt. The wild oxen of Melville Island act more "tame" than any domestic reindeer in Alaska ... and are easily broken to sleds, as shown by experience with them of Illun, who now works for us and once handled two calves on the mainland and used them there for sled work occasionally.¹⁵

Elsewhere Stefansson recorded that it was in January 1916, while wintering in Banks Island, that his ideas on domestication of the muskox had taken clear enough form to be presented to influential people, including former President Roosevelt, Prime Minister Borden, Canadian High Commissioner in London Sir Richard McBride, and Canadian Bank of Commerce President Sir Edmund Walker.¹⁶ He reproduced a letter of 23 March 1918 from Roosevelt giving at least moral support, and another letter dated 28 October 1918, in which the former president said he would do what he could to influence favourably both Prince Axel of Denmark and the Canadian government with respect to the muskox project.¹⁷

On 11 November 1918, shortly after his return from the North, Stefansson spoke to the Empire Club in Toronto, and the distinguished audience, overwhelmed with joy at the armistice which had been signed that morning, gave him an enthusiastic reception. He summarized the story of his expedition in a general way,



FIGURE 9-2: MUSKOX ON DEVON ISLAND IN A DEFENSIVE CIRCLE. *PERCY TAVERNER / LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA / PA-048029.*

but placed particular emphasis on the projects he wanted to initiate. After describing the development of the reindeer industry in Alaska, he went on:

I now want to mention an even more valuable animal – the muskox. Imagine that you had a cow with a coat of wool that could be shorn once a year and sold. Would that not be a more valuable cow than any you ever saw? Or imagine that your sheep were three or four times as large as they are, and gave milk like the cows, then they would be much more valuable than any sheep you ever saw. And you have a wild animal that

meets identically those conditions – with beef identical in taste with your beef and milk with difficulty distinguishable from Jersey milk and wool like the domestic sheep. That animal needs no barn to shelter it, no hay to food it for the winter, for in the farthest islands of the north they now live untended, and fat in any season of the year....

I now propose to go to the Government, and I want the backing of your good-will, as I had it five years ago, to get the Government to undertake this broad-minded thing for the benefit of Canada.... I shall emphasize, by repetition, the fact that ... this

is about the most important project, in my opinion, that is now before Canada in our period of reconstruction after the war.¹⁸

In his attempt to win the support of the Canadian government, Stefansson dealt chiefly with Arthur Meighen, at the time Minister of the Interior and thus directly responsible for most aspects of northern administration and development. Meighen was interested and arranged an opportunity for Stefansson to address a joint meeting of the Senate and the House of Commons. This took place on 6 May 1919, in the railway committee room, and Stefansson, as usual on such occasions, made a strong impression.¹⁹ Three days afterwards Meighen wrote a letter to James Stanley McLean, a manager with the Harris Abattoir Company in Toronto, whose services he wanted to secure for the project that was forming in his mind. The letter began as follows:

I am thinking of recommending to Council, the appointment of a commission to study and report upon the possibilities of developing the muskox and reindeer industry in Northern Canada. Attached hereto, you will find copy of a memorandum furnished me by the Explorer, Stefansson. Recently I had him address the Members of the Commons and Senate, and his speech made a pronounced impression.²⁰

On a recommendation from Mr. Meighen, also dated 9 May, an order in council was issued on 20 May appointing a royal commission to investigate the possibilities of raising large reindeer and muskox herds in the Canadian north.²¹ The members of the commission, were

McLean, John Gunion Rutherford (Ottawa, Railway Commissioner), James B. Harkin (Ottawa, Commissioner of Dominion Parks), and Stefansson. Rutherford, a veterinarian by profession, was appointed chairman. This commission, and the investigation it carried on afterwards, helped to focus public attention upon the North and the problems of conserving and augmenting the resources in animal life there, precisely at the time when the government was becoming increasingly preoccupied with questions of northern administration and jurisdiction.

Although the commission was appointed immediately, it did not meet until the following year. Once it was convened, however, it went about its task with great thoroughness, and lengthy sessions were held in January, February, April, and May of 1920. Testimony was taken from thirty-five witnesses, practically all of them well-known personalities with lengthy experience of one kind or another in the North.²² Among them were the Anglican missionary W.H.B. Hoare, Bishop Isaac O. Stringer, Captain J.-E. Bernier, Joseph Burr Tyrrell, the American explorer Donald B. MacMillan, and Stefansson's former associate Dr. R. M. Anderson. Almost without exception the witnesses expressed great interest in the project under investigation, and varying degrees of optimism about it. One influential figure who took a rather restrained view was the chairman, Dr. Rutherford, who believed that the reports of enormous herds of caribou in the North were "palpable exaggerations," feared that large numbers of reindeer kept by herders would become wild, and advanced his own more modest idea that "a small herd of reindeer ... could be kept within a given area provided there is sufficient feed" and raised domestically.²³

In the course of the hearings, some interesting statements were made of relevance to

past or future events relating to sovereignty problems. For example, Captain George Comer, whose activities in Hudson Bay had caused so much concern at the time when A. P. Low and Bernier were initiating patrol voyages and who had been regarded as an American interloper, now identified himself as being Canadian-born (although brought up in the United States).²⁴ Whatever his earlier attitude may have been regarding Canadian claims and interference with his whaling enterprise, Comer now declared himself completely sympathetic with Canadian interests and anxious to eliminate whaling altogether:

To go back a little farther, there is a little argument between [the] United States and Canada about the right of the Americans to go through and whale in Hudson Bay, keeping outside the three mile limit. We should go ahead and make our docks, occupy the place and clinch the whole thing, and the Americans would not make any claim at all....

....If I had the making of the laws I would not allow a whale to be killed. I have made my money out of the whaling business, and have seen them killed. Last year two were killed, one got away. Stop that entirely, do not let even our own people kill them. Do not bring up the question at all, as to whether that is a closed sea or not. You will very soon close it, once you put the Wireless on. Do not have any arguments, just go on and take possession.²⁵

McMillan, who was to become a problem for the Canadian government later on, also declared his support for Canadian administrative

authority and efforts towards conservation in the North, especially in Ellesmere Island:

I think all expeditions should be prohibited from going into that country, unless on permission obtained from the Dominion of Canada

....If I were coming into Canada, as I had hoped to, I would expect to get permission from the Canadian Government and if they said No, I could not expect to come

....It is the explorer that kills, and he should, as I said before, get into touch with the Canadian Government and get permission to go and get food for himself.²⁶

Although the commission's hearings concluded in May 1920, its report was not published until 1922. The hearings themselves apparently attracted little attention, at least in the House of Commons,²⁷ and the report was available to Parliament long before it was published. On 14 June 1921, Unionist member John Archibald observed that it had been "laid on the Table" some time earlier, and asked if the government proposed to carry out its recommendations. Meighen, now Prime Minister, replied:

The report, with the evidence supporting it, forms a very voluminous and very valuable document, highly creditable to the chairman and members of the commission and indicating that the utmost possible care and the highest possible thought have been exercised by them in the investigation. On account of its size, however, and the fact that it has only been in our hands for a few days, the

Government has not come to any conclusion as to whether those recommendations will be followed, and if so, when.²⁸

In the meantime, during the period when the commission was still conducting its hearings, Stefansson had severed his formal connection with it and embarked on a project of his own. Having come to the conclusion that the government-sponsored reindeer industry he had originally envisaged would proceed too slowly and on too modest a scale, he decided that he would try to initiate the enterprise himself with private financial backing. He applied to the government for an exclusive lease of a large area in southern Baffin island for grazing purposes and, since his position as promoter of this project was evidently incompatible with his membership in the Reindeer-Musk-Ox Commission, he resigned from the commission on 12 March 1920.²⁹ Having already approached the Hudson's Bay Company through the company's New York representative, he went to England later in March and succeeded in attracting the interest and support of its directors. After the lease had been granted, the Hudson's Bay Reindeer Company was organized as a subsidiary of the HBC, with headquarters in Winnipeg, and the lease assigned to it. Stefansson himself was to be a director of the new company and its technical adviser.³⁰

The lease was granted to Stefansson by order in council on 29 May 1920.³¹ It gave him exclusive grazing rights for thirty years on all of Baffin Island south of the 68th parallel: an area of approximately 113,900 square miles. The grazing right was free for the first fifteen years, with an annual rental fee thereafter; and the lease was to be renewable for a further twenty years after the first thirty had expired. In return Stefansson was to see that

1,000 imported reindeer were on the leasehold by 1924 and 6,000 by 1932, at which time the herd was to total at least 10,000. The indenture or contract which formalized the agreement between Stefansson and the Government, and which incorporated the above terms, contained a good deal of additional detail, including provisions for safeguarding the interests of Aboriginal people, incorporating wild caribou into the herds, permitting purchase of reindeer by the government as the herd increased, and restricting the freedom of the lessee to sell or transfer his rights.

The project was undertaken with optimism but soon ended in disaster. Storker Storkeson of Stefansson's 1913-18 expedition was hired as manager and field director at an early stage, and a number of Saami (Lapps) were engaged to serve as herders. Approximately 700 reindeer were purchased in Norway in 1921 and the HBC ship *Nascopie* was used to transport them to Baffin Island in the autumn of that year. Almost everything went wrong from the start. Storkerson resigned before the reindeer had even been purchased, when other people were given the responsibility in his stead of obtaining them and getting them to Baffin Island. Some of the animals did not reach the ship and others died during the sea voyage, so that only about 500 actually reached their destination. The Saami herders, completely unfamiliar with the severe climate of treeless Baffin Island, soon showed themselves to be unadaptable, uninterested, and dissatisfied. The herd scattered far and wide after its arrival, while the Saami built homes and shelters which should have been provided in advance. Only a limited number of reindeer were recovered, and losses continued through absorption by caribou herds and for other reasons. Stefansson himself was occupied with a variety of other projects, and either neglected this one or encountered so many

frustrations that he was able to do little to save it. The Saami herders returned to Norway in the fall of 1923, Inuit who replaced them were unable to arrest the decline of the herd, and the company soon became disillusioned and refused to provide either more money or more reindeer. In about two more seasons the herd had disappeared completely, and eventually the lease was cancelled. In this unhappy manner ended the first Canadian attempt at reindeer herding in the Arctic, although Stefansson himself maintained afterwards that the project was sound in principle but had been ruined in execution. This may well have been so, but it does not dispose entirely of the question as to how much responsibility for the failure was Stefansson's own.³²

In due course the Canadian government undertook officially to establish a reindeer herd in another part of the North, with better success. The *Reindeer-Musk-Ox Commission Report* in 1922 had recommended the establishment of small experimental reindeer herds, in line with Chairman Rutherford's own views, using localities deemed most suitable by government experts. A system should be worked out similar to that so successfully developed in Alaska, including reliance upon missionary bodies for co-operation and help, use of experienced Saami herders, and encouragement of Inuit to participate and also become herders themselves. The commissioners added that, although they had approved the grazing lease granted to Stefansson in 1920, they felt unable to recommend any definite policy regarding such leases, except that henceforth great caution should be exercised in granting them.³³

After the Baffin Island project had been pronounced a failure, officials with the Department of the Interior contacted Carl Lomen, one of the famous brothers who were known as "The Reindeer Kings of Alaska" who presided over

the Lomen Reindeer Corporation. Lomen suggested that reindeer should be obtained from Alaska rather than Norway and driven overland to the area to be stocked. He then followed up this suggestion with the offer that his own company would look after the drive.³⁴ The Canadian officials were interested but were inclined to proceed very slowly and cautiously. In April 1926, they appointed the Danish-born botanist Alf Erling Porsild and his brother Robert, who had lived in the Arctic for many years and had a sophisticated and scientific knowledge of it, to make a detailed investigation of all aspects of the plan. They first visited Alaska and studied conditions where all the major herds were kept, then travelled over the planned route for the drive from Nome to the Mackenzie delta, and then spent two years examining the large area between the Alaska-Yukon boundary and Coronation Gulf. Altogether they spent May 1926 to November 1928 in the field and travelled a total of 15,000 miles by dog team, canoe, motor boat, pack dogs, and snowshoes. They concluded that the area was well suited to reindeer herding, and they particularly recommended two sections of it: one to the east of the Mackenzie delta and the other north and east of Great Bear Lake.³⁵ In the summer of 1930, A. E. Porsild surveyed another large area west of the Hudson Bay coast in central Keewatin and also found it suitable for reindeer grazing, although the establishment of reindeer herds would be difficult because of the distance between summer and winter pasture.³⁶

After the Porsild brothers had completed their investigation, and acting upon a favourable report of 18 April 1929 by Minister of the Interior Charles Stewart, the Canadian government issued an order in council in May authorizing the minister to contract with the Lomen brothers for the purchase and delivery of 3,000 reindeer at a total price of \$195,000.00.³⁷

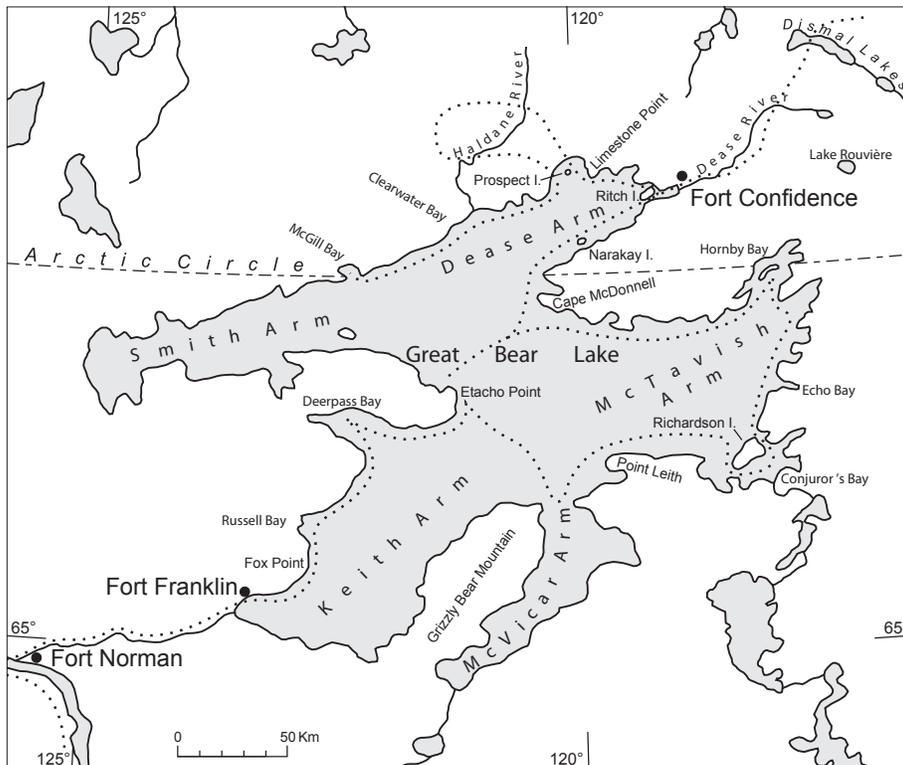
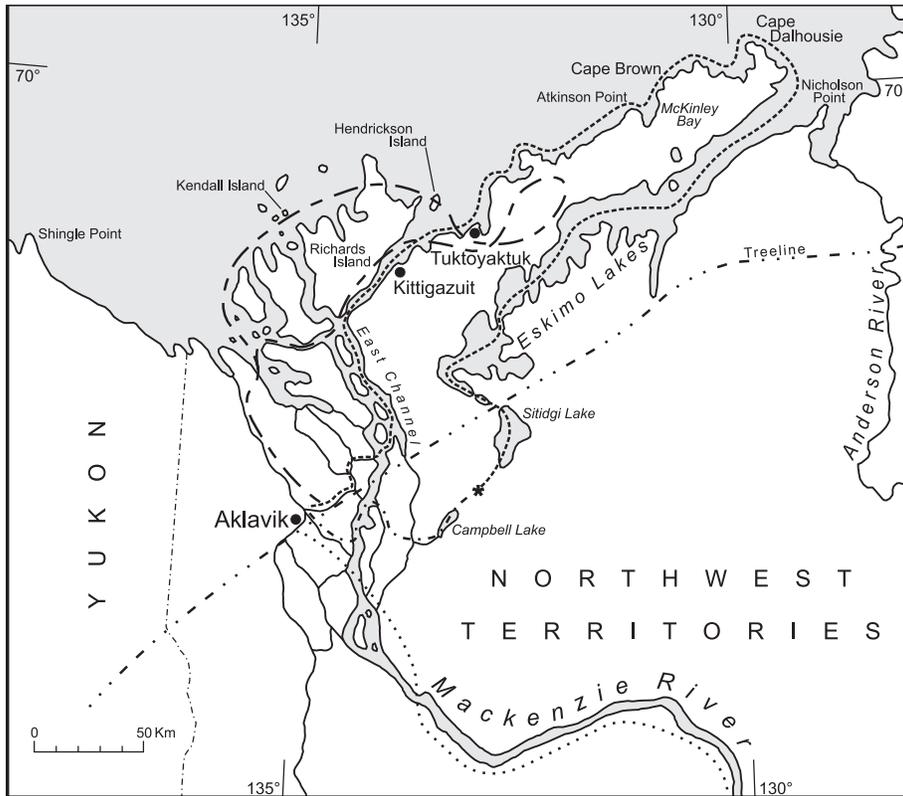


FIGURE 9-3A, 9-3B: CANADIAN REINDEER PROJECT INVESTIGATION ROUTES IN THE MACKENZIE DELTA, NWT, 1927 (ABOVE) AND AROUND GREAT BEAR LAKE, NWT, 1928 (BELOW). MAPS BY RAGNAR MÜLLER-WILLE IN WENDY DATHAN, *THE REINDEER BOTANIST*, 96, 152. WITH PERMISSION OF UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY PRESS

According to the agreement, the Lomens would take complete responsibility for the drive, and deliver the reindeer on the east side of the Mackenzie delta in 1931. The drive turned out to be a much more difficult and time-consuming task than had been anticipated. The veteran Saami herder Andrew Bahr, who had worked for the Lomens for many years, was placed in charge of the operation; about a dozen Saami and Inuit were hired as his crew; and in the late stages of the drive, when reports were received that Bahr's health was failing, the Lomens' former field superintendent Dan Crowley rushed to the scene to help him. The unbelievably difficult route traced a path from Nabachtoolik near Kotzebue Sound across the interior coast of Alaska to the vicinity of the Arctic coast, and thence eastward to the mouth of the Mackenzie. Owing to the problems encountered, the herd was not driven into the newly constructed corral at Kittigazuit until March 1935. The number of reindeer actually delivered was 2,382, but most of these were young animals born en route, and only about 10 or 20 per cent had begun the drive at Nabachtoolik. Within a few weeks of arrival the herd was increased by over 800 newly-born fawns.³⁸

In 1931, A. E. Porsild, who had been sent to Norway to hire experienced Saami herders, returned with three, who helped in the late stages of the drive and then remained with the herd (two for a limited number of years and the third permanently). In line with the original concept that one of the principal purposes of the project would be to provide local Inuit with a self-sustaining industry in which they could participate significantly themselves, young Inuit were from the beginning trained in reindeer handling under the supervision of the Saami; in due course some of them became capable herders. Anticipation that many of them would acquire herds of their own and adopt reindeer

“ranching” as a permanent way of life were not realized, however, partly because of Inuit fears respecting economic and other uncertainties which seemed to be inherent in trying to make a living with small reindeer herds, and partly because of their reluctance to abandon their traditional way of life. A few independent Inuit-controlled herds were set up, starting with one on the Anderson River in 1938, but it cannot be said that they were a great success.

For a few years the number of reindeer increased in encouraging fashion, but then the increase ground to a halt. Starting with the 2,382 delivered at Kittigazuit in 1935, the number increased steadily to a total of 6,635 in 1940, including 1,559 in the native herd at Anderson River. However, for various reasons, including inadequate attention, enterprise, and leadership; disregard of scientific selection, culling, and breeding; and the ravages of pests and predators, the three herds that remained in 1963 totalled only 7,000 animals.³⁹

The tract of land east of the Mackenzie delta was set up as the Reindeer Grazing Reserve by a federal order in council of 14 December 1933.⁴⁰ It comprised about 6,600 square miles, including the Eskimo Lakes region and Richards Island.⁴¹ The pasture resources of the reserve turned out to be both suitable and abundant, and Richards Island proved to be particularly well adapted for summer grazing purposes, both as the locale for the annual roundup and a place where, because of its high winds and proximity to the seacoast, the depredations of insect pests could be reduced. The reindeer were given protection by the Northwest Territories Reindeer Protection Ordinance, promulgated on 18 October 1933, which regulated activities within the reserve and limited the killing of both reindeer and caribou.⁴²

As time went on, a mood of pessimism and disillusionment set in, particularly among



FIGURE 9-4: PART OF A FEMALE REINDEER HERD, KITTIGAZUIT, NWT, MAY 1935. AEP / LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA / PA-130436.

some of the government personnel involved with the project, and there were suggestions that the entire operation should be terminated. Eventually it was decided to bring about a fundamental change in policy, with a view to maintaining the industry and improving it. The idea of a government-sponsored and government-supported industry, primarily concerned with training native herders and supplying reindeer meat and by-products, was eventually abandoned in the 1960s.⁴³

Reflecting back from the perspective of the early 1970s, it is apparent that even after almost forty years of effort and experiment, the future of the reindeer industry in northern Canada remained uncertain. It survived but did not fulfill the expectations of its founders. In sum, its lack of success can be attributed to:

- (1) the absence of constructive policy and firm leadership throughout most of the period;
- (2) the disinclination of the local people to abandon their traditional way of life and adopt this one;
- (3) failure to maintain and improve the quality of the animals; and
- (4) natural limiting factors such as pests and predators.

There is also a great deal that can be said on the plus side. It has been proved conclusively that the industry is viable in a technical way, so far as the relevant natural conditions or terrain, climate, and pasturage are concerned, and that reindeer can maintain themselves in the region and reproduce in numbers. It is also clear that there is local need and demand for reindeer products, principally meat and hides, but also, in a lesser way, certain subsidiary products

such as antlers. The industry has already demonstrated its importance as one of the few renewable resource industries which are possible in the North. It employs people and yields produce, and puts terrain to use which otherwise would remain unproductive. This is particularly important in an area where caribou and other edible creatures of both land and sea are declining in numbers, leaving the local peoples without their traditional means of sustenance. What is needed to make the industry thrive is apparently not yet clear, but the answer may lie largely in the fundamental philosophy or approach that is taken towards it, and the means or methods adopted to carry it forward.⁴⁴

So far as issues of sovereignty are concerned, it is rather difficult to establish any important direct connection between them and the reindeer-muskox projects in the Canadian North. On the other hand it is unlikely that they were completely unrelated. As pointed out, these projects came to the fore largely because of the publicity given to them by

Stefansson, at a time when Canadian authorities were extremely worried about the status and security of the northern territories and looked for means to establish undeniable rights of sovereignty over them through genuine occupation and use. Coincidentally, some of the principal figures connected with sovereignty problems, including Borden, Meighen, Harkin, and Stefansson, were also among those most concerned with the postwar reindeer-muskox projects. It is likely that they hoped to find in the establishment of reindeer and muskox herds (especially in any suitable island territories in the North) a further demonstration and manifestation of Canadian sovereignty. As events unfolded, these hopes were not realized. Stefansson's dreams of enormous domesticated herds of these animals came crashing to earth with the failure of his Baffin Island experiment, and the modest and confined project at the Mackenzie delta had very little significance to sovereignty considerations. In the 1920s, however, the idea surely had appeal.

