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# Cultural Exchanges in the Far North: Twentieth-Century Contact in the Canadian Arctic

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**Cultural Exchanges in the Far North:  
Twentieth-Century Contact in the Canadian Arctic**

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Submitted in Partial Completion of the  
Requirements for Departmental Honors in History

Bridgewater State University

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### **Inuit in their traditional snow home**

Photograph 1980.37.177 taken by George Comer. Kept in Arctic # 4.C.  
COMER at the New Bedford Whaling Museum in Massachusetts.

Tuesday August 25

Have just found an old cooking soapstone kettle. It must have lain here many years. It is slightly broken. There was quite a depth of moss over some of the broken parts. I am walking over the same ground where we were a year ago and it creates a feeling of sadness as I recall how much I had hoped for and how little we got, then the death of one of our best natives whose life might have been saved had we not tried to do so much.

Since that time I have been home and stayed through the winter and am now here again. A number of natives who were living then are now gone.

I think what a hard life these people have to live. They do not know how much they suffer or are deprived of. I hope the time will come when the civilized part of the world will do something to help them, such as having a house of refuge once in every 200 miles where meat could be cached when game was plentiful. Then there would be no periods of starvation and the loss of life among children would be much less.<sup>1</sup>

- Captain George Comer, whaling schooner *Era*, 1903.

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<sup>1</sup> George Comer, *An Arctic Whaling Diary: The Journal of Captain George Comer In Hudson Bay 1903-1905*. Edited by W. Gillies Ross. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984) p. 56

George Comer was one of the many white men to enter the Arctic during the early twentieth century in search of both wealth and adventure. His journals and photographs, now housed at the New Bedford Massachusetts Whaling Museum, provide historians with a rare look into the interactions between white visitors and the native Inuit. For Comer, the initial justification for entering the Arctic was economic: his search for whales, seals, and fur-bearing animals. But, like many others, Comer found the cultural exchange equally important. In addition to experiencing the wilderness adventure that many white men searched for during the early twentieth century, Comer also engaged in cultural exchanges with the Inuit in his search for what he perceived to be “genuine” prehistoric artifacts that he could sell to museums and anthropologists. As such, Comer’s experience illustrates the complex and diverse ways in which white visitors and Inuit natives interacted in the Arctic during the early decades of the twentieth century.

In the 1900s and 1910s the Arctic represented to many the last wilderness frontier; vast and unexplored, the Arctic became a destination of discovery. European, Canadian, and American explorers saw the Arctic as romantic, the last place on Earth untouched by man and still enshrined with its mysteries unsolved. The mystery of the Arctic appealed to many because of this assumed state of being untouched. The late nineteenth and early twentieth century was an era in which wilderness became a central theme in western culture for a variety of reasons. Most predominant among them was a growing fascination with the wilderness as a place to escape to so as to erase the trappings of an over-civilized society and restore ancient, perhaps even pre-civilized, traditions of survivalism. This antimodernism was especially important to men in the United States, Canada, and Great Britain, and there were progressively fewer areas for these men

to test their own masculinity against the wilds.<sup>2</sup> The motivations and endeavors of these men varied widely, but the Arctic offered a variety of opportunities for explorers, whalers, fur traders, missionaries, and countless others who chose to journey north.

In truth, the Arctic was not an empty wilderness frontier. For the Inuit, the Arctic was simply home. The ventures of western explorers, whalers, fur traders, and missionaries led to contact between Euro-Americans and Inuit. Unlike previous generations, however, Europeans and Americans did not seek to just conquer the Arctic and vanquish the native inhabitants. The cultural assault upon the Inuit was far more complex than in previous western-native interactions. Increased contact created a new reason for Euro-Americans to go to the North in an effort to study Inuit as part of an emerging interest in anthropology. Inuit and Inuit culture intrigued Euro-Americans during the early twentieth century because they believed it to be pre-historic. This notion caused Euro-Americans to flock to the Arctic to study Inuit as if they were a “Stone Age” people. Overtime this continued contact created changes in the Inuit culture. Ironically, this contact with Euro-Americans disrupted traditional Inuit culture and introduced them to foreign western ideas and technology, even as those westerners sought out the Inuit because they believed the natives to be pre-civilized. In the end, even though Europeans, Canadians, and Americans entered the Arctic in search for economic resources such as whales and furs, it was cultural interests, both in the wilderness environment and the desire to study a perceived “Stone Age” people, that generated prolonged and continuous contact between westerners and native people.

### **Multiple Points of Contact**

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<sup>2</sup> John F. Reiger, *American Sportsmen and the Origins of Conservation*. Third Edition (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2000) p. 47.

The Canadian Arctic is comprised of northern Yukon Territory, the Northwest Territories and the Nunavut Territory. This vast expanse of land is where the nomadic Inuit lived before contact with the outside world. These areas, especially Nunavut, are where the periods of extended contact between native peoples and westerners occurred most frequently. Extended contact between westerners and native people in the Arctic began when interest in the polar region emerged during the era of exploration and accelerated in the late nineteenth century. Europeans began their search for the Northwest Passage during the sixteenth century as an alternative trade route to Asia. The English led the search for the passage believing that it was the key to their economic success in a changing global world, which was then dominated by Spain and Portugal. Many English explorers ventured into the Arctic's frigid waters to locate the passage. Martin Frobisher was one of the first, from 1576 to 1578, to search for a passage through the north in the sixteenth century. Though he was unsuccessful, Frobisher's search for the passage led to some of the first extended contact between westerners and Inuit. When he returned to England unsuccessful and his ship full of "fool's gold" (pyrite) Frobisher became an outcast and the search for the passage was put on hold.<sup>3</sup> In the seventeenth century, Henry Hudson (1609) picked up where Frobisher had left off in the pursuit of the Northwest Passage. His first venture, was unsuccessful and he orchestrated a subsequent attempt to locate the Northeast Passage. Eventually he turned westward in search of the Northwest Passage for England. Hudson failed in his first exploration for the Northwest Passage, locating only the Hudson Bay. Hudson's search for the passage came to an end during his final search for the passage when his crew

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<sup>3</sup> Robert McGhee, *The Last Imaginary Place: A Human History of the Arctic World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 160.

mutinied again and left Hudson and his young son adrift in the bay bearing his name.<sup>4</sup> Yet the search for the Northwest Passage did not end with Henry Hudson.

In 1819, a new explorer took up the search for the elusive passage. Edward Parry was an explorer who had served under Captain John Ross during his failed search for the Northwest Passage. In her book, *The Frozen Ship: The Histories and Tales of Polar Exploration*, Sarah Moss details Ross's folly, "sailing westwards through Lancaster Sound, insist[ing] that he saw 'a chain of mountains' blocking the way. ... Ross was unbending; he named his mountain range – the Croker Mountains - and turned for home." Parry and the other crewmembers believed Ross's mountains to be imagined and returned in search for the Northwest Passage on a later voyage. Yet the search for the Northwest Passage came to an end for Parry when his way forward became blocked by ice. His next attempts brought him no closer to a successful navigation of the passage and England became impatient with the search for the Northwest Passage as it became unprofitable. It was not until 1828, however, that the British government finally gave up its search for their passage, because the expense and death toll of the search had become too great.<sup>5</sup> Though they did not find the passage explorers such as Martin Frobisher were some of the first Euro-Americans to come into contact with Inuit.<sup>6</sup>

Although English explorers were often the first whites to enter the Arctic, it was New England whalers who had a more pronounced and lasting impact on the Inuit. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, whalers moved north from desperation to revive what had become a dying industry. The rapid decline of whale stock in the more utilized southern

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<sup>4</sup> Sarah Moss, *The Frozen Ship: The Histories and Tales of Polar Exploration* (New York: BlueBridge Books, 2006), p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Moss, *The Frozen Ship*, p. 16.

<sup>6</sup> Robert McGhee, *The Last Imaginary Place: A Human History of the Arctic World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 107.

regions of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, along with the discovery of petroleum oil in the United States in 1854 and the invention of spring steel (used to replace baleen), had been detrimental to the industry and forced the remnants of the whaling industry northward. To close the gap of lost income, whalers became more interested in collecting other Arctic goods rather than just focusing on harvesting oil.<sup>7</sup> Whalers in the North attracted attention, and others arrived, such as missionaries with the objective of conversion and fur traders who had depleted the stocks in the south.

This increased activity in the Arctic during the late nineteenth century generated increased reporting of and knowledge about the region and its people. Anthropologists absorbed this material and became intrigued with the Inuit culture because they believed they represented a people of an age long lost to history.<sup>8</sup> Many anthropologists from Europe and the United States, unable to make the journey north, hired others, normally those same whalers and fur traders who first ventured into the Arctic region, to collect materials for them. It was the work of these amateur anthropologists that contributed most to the twisting of Inuit culture to fit Euro-American assumptions about northern people. This extended contact with these amateur anthropologists, and the marketing of Inuit culture in the south, ultimately caused a transformation of cultural identity among the Inuit themselves. This first contact with Euro-

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<sup>7</sup> McGhee, *The Last Imaginary Place*, p. 243

<sup>8</sup> “Many scholars argue that the study of modern anthropology developed during the Age of Enlightenment, a cultural movement of 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe that focused on the power of reason to advance society and knowledge.” During the 19<sup>th</sup> century anthropological focus turned to two major theories of studies evolutionism and diffusionism. Evolutionists believed that cultures developed in certain stages and looked for other primitive cultures to study their own “savage” origins. Anthropologists studying Inuit culture at the turn of the century were evolutionists attempting to find primitive cultures to study. See "Anthropology." *National Geographic Education*. 10 Feb. 2012. For more information on the history of anthropological study.

Americans in the Eastern Arctic at the turn of the twentieth century caused a substantial change of cultural identity amongst Inuit due to the swiftness of first contact and oppressive beliefs held by the invading amateur anthropologists.

### **A Collision of Cultures**

The coming of Euro-Americans to the North signified a major transformation in traditional Inuit culture. Western ideas forever changed Inuit beliefs. Even as late as the late nineteenth century, Inuit had not yet come into sustained contact with westernized ideas or technology. The coming of the whalers to the North signified the beginning of a new era for Inuit. Whalers, such as George Comer, unintentionally introduced the Inuit to new ways of thinking through newly established and extended contact. Historian and author Dorothy Harley Eber describes the beginning of this relationship, “In 1851 Americans who had joined the hunt - Americans were then the pre-eminent whalers of the world - introduced the practice of ‘wintering.’ In a bold move a crew from the whale ship *McLellan* wintered ashore in the sound in huts with timber roofs; the men lived off the land on native foods and emerged safe and sound in the spring. Soon both British and Americans began to extend the season by freezing in their vessels beneath the sound's craggy cliffs.”<sup>9</sup> Whalers represented only the beginning of extended contact between the Inuit and Euro-Americans.

Beyond these economic motivations, a cultural search for wilderness also spurred adventurers into the Arctic. This search for wilderness was directly related to the “closing” of the American western frontier in 1890, growth of urban and industrial landscapes, and a fear of “over-civilization.” As the world grew more complex due to increasing industrialization and

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<sup>9</sup> Dorothy Harley Eber, *When the Whalers Were Up North: Inuit Memories From the Eastern Arctic* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1989) p. 12.

urbanization westerners searched for a new untouched area of the world to explore. This phenomenon is best explained by historian Roderick Frazier Nash in his book, *Wilderness and the American Mind*. “The ending of the frontier prompted many Americans to seek ways of retaining the influence of wilderness in modern civilization.” Nash explains that this need for wilderness in the nineteenth century led to the development of several wilderness clubs including the Boy Scouts.<sup>10</sup> Others continued to search for traces of untouched wilderness leading them into places such as the Arctic. As the environment in countries such as the United States and England changed, westerners viewed untouched places such as the Arctic as the newest untouched frontier to explore and preserve. As more people began to learn of the Arctic and its peoples, interest for the region quickly grew.

Missionaries were latecomers to the Arctic with most of them arriving in the North during the early twentieth century. Missionaries were attracted to the Arctic when whalers and others began to report on populations of native Inuit. Unlike the whalers and fur traders who came before them, missionaries were not interested in turning a profit in the North, but rather turning Arctic people into Christians. Missionaries hoped that the Arctic would be filled with new followers for their various faiths. Dorothy Harley Eber recalls this time of change in her interview with Osoochiak Pudlat of Cape Dorset. “When I was a little boy Inuktakaub – the New Person [the missionary A.L. Fleming] – was already living at Lake Harbour. This was before we went to Coats Island and before he became a bishop. He would go to all the camps to spread the gospel. He never missed a camp.”<sup>11</sup> Osoochiak Pudlat recalls at time when missionaries first arrived in the Arctic and they found the Inuit unwilling to convert. Yet the

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<sup>10</sup> Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*. Fourth Edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001) p. 147.

<sup>11</sup> Dorothy Harley Eber, *When the Whalers Were Up North: Inuit Memories From the Eastern Arctic* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1989) p. 151.

missionaries stayed in the hope that an opportunity would present itself and they would be able to convert the peoples of the Arctic. The knowledge of “Stone Aged” peoples appealed to missionaries in particular and they flocked north to convert these new “savage” peoples. Missionaries caused the greatest change amongst the Inuit. At first the Inuit ignored the missionaries’ presence; they were a people strongly rooted in their own religious beliefs and not willing to convert.<sup>12</sup> Robert McGhee, a Canadian archaeologist and historian, states that the disease brought by the missionaries had a greater impact on the religious beliefs of the Inuit than the missionaries’ ability to present their theology. McGhee states that when the diseases “brought in by the missionaries themselves the Inuit lost faith in their own shaman when they could not cure these diseases and turned to the missionaries who had knowledge of them and helped cure them.” Inuit who had depended upon their shaman for so long quickly lost confidence in their own religious practices and shaman following events such as these. After this the Inuit became believers in Christianity and the religion spread quickly in the Arctic.<sup>13</sup> This downfall of Inuit religion led to momentous changes in their lifestyle as they took on Christianity as their new religion. Inuit began to disregard their old customs.

This transition, however, was not universally welcomed by all the whites interacting with Inuit in the Arctic. As the Inuit took on new Christian beliefs this affected not only them, but also the explorers and whalers who continued to visit the Arctic. Anthropologists headed north in search of what they perceived to be authentic “pre-historic” peoples and the conversion to Christianity upset their studies. These groups of people had come to depend on Inuit labor to support their endeavors and the newly Christian Inuit became troublesome for them. The Arctic

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<sup>12</sup> Daniel Francis, *Arctic Chase: A History of Whaling in Canada's North* (St. John's, Newfoundland: Breakwater Books Ltd, 1984) p. 99.

<sup>13</sup> McGhee, *Last Imaginary Place* p. 245.

explorer and anthropologist Vilhjalmur Stefansson observed some of these religious changes firsthand during his journey north. Stefansson encountered the newly Christianized Inuit in 1908, which surprised him as well as his partner, who had also journeyed North to investigate traditional Inuit life. They had not realized that by this time many of the Inuit living further south had already been influenced by white culture. Stefansson's excursion north was affected when Inuit would not begin the expedition on account of it being the Sabbath. In his autobiography, *Discovery*, he wrote, "They were now Christians, and knew what happened to Christians who broke the Sabbath." This is just one instance of the Inuit's religious conversion affecting life in the North.<sup>14</sup> Stefansson observed further religious change to Inuit culture in his book *The Friendly Arctic*, which detailed his third expedition north, in the years 1914-17:

During the very busy time of the early autumn while we were making things snug for winter, all hands used to work every day including Sundays except for Eskimos. Of these Palaiyak, who had been with me on a previous expedition and with white men a deal at Herschel Island, and Emiu, who had spent two years in Seattle and a good part of the rest of his life in Nome, Alaska, were the only ones who were willing to work with the white men on Sunday. The rest, after religious services spent their time mainly in card playing and in listening to the phonograph.<sup>15</sup>

Here, Stefansson's frustration over the introduction of religion among the Inuit were clear. These are not the untouched "Stone Age" people he had hoped to find in the Arctic.

The rapid spread of western religion throughout the Arctic made it difficult for anthropologists such as Stefansson to study traditional Inuit culture. The notes taken by Stefansson show an already changing culture in the early twentieth century, Inuit who had already conformed to western culture. Through Stefansson's account of the religious changes

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<sup>14</sup> Vilhjalmur Stefansson, *Discovery: The Autobiography of Vilhjalmur Stefansson* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1964), p. 102.

<sup>15</sup> Stefansson, *The Friendly Arctic* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1944), p. 407.

among the Inuit we are able to discern various changes occurring within Inuit culture during this time and how it began to affect them as a people.

### The Arctic Inuit



**Figure 1: Photograph 1980.37.219**

Photograph 1980.37.219 taken by George Comer. Kept in Arctic # 4.B. COMER at the New Bedford Whaling Museum in Massachusetts.

Before the coming of Euro-Americans to the Arctic, the Inuit had their own system of beliefs. These beliefs were deeply rooted in the Arctic environment and affected the way Inuit lived their day-to-day lives. Inuit depended on their system of beliefs passed down through generations for survival in the Arctic.

These beliefs or taboos held key strategies for thriving in the harsh Arctic environment such as how to take care of a young child as stated by George Comer in *The Eskimo of Baffin Land and Hudson Bay*. “A child’s head must not be washed” - good advice in nearly constant freezing temperatures.<sup>16</sup> Advice such as this constructed much of the Inuit’s religious beliefs and shaped the way that they lived in the Arctic. Captain George Comer recorded many of these cultural

<sup>16</sup> George Comer, *The Eskimo of Baffin Land and Hudson Bay*. Edited by Franz Boas. (New York: Published by the Trustees of the American Museum of Natural History, 1907) p. 160.

beliefs during his excursions to the Arctic. It is important to note Comer's bias as a nineteenth-century white American in his writings on Inuit culture. His analysis of Inuit religious beliefs occasionally labels Inuit culture as primitive or "Stone Age," as many of his counterparts during this time believed the Inuit to be. Though there are numerous accounts of the Inuit during the early twentieth century, many of them, such as Comer's, are of limited reliability due to the writers' bias, by weeding through Comer's bias, we are able to reveal what role Inuit religion played in their culture before conversion to Christianity.

Inuit religious beliefs molded their lives in the North before the arrival of Euro-Americans. Many of their beliefs were of key importance detailing how to survive in the harsh Arctic environment while others represented northern cultural taboos. For example, Comer records that Inuit believed salmon to be very powerful and because of this many rules surrounded the preparation of salmon. "Salmon must not be cooked in a pot that has been used for boiling other kinds of meat. It is always cooked at some distance from the hut. Boots that were used while hunting walrus must not be worn when fishing salmon, and no work on boot-legs is allowed until the first salmon has been caught and placed on a boot-leg."<sup>17</sup> The reasoning for this may not be clear to Comer, but for Inuit it was a crucial element to their religious ideals. Inuit religious beliefs appear to have varied across the North with all communities having different beliefs or taboos that varied with their locations, though all communities believed in multiple deities and not the presence of one god. Though some religious beliefs such as not washing a young child's head in the frigid Arctic seem like sound advice, other beliefs recorded by Comer made little sense to Euro-Americans. Some beliefs that may have made little sense to Comer were "adolescent girls must not eat eggs" or "A woman who has lost a child must not

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p. 123.

work on fresh skins, else she will die.” Though these beliefs made little sense to Euro-Americans, each were important to Inuit life in the Arctic. Beliefs may have stemmed from incidents of despair and learning in the North that Euro-Americans did not experience.<sup>18</sup> Another important element to Inuit religion in the Arctic involved religious leaders, shamans. Shamans were an essential element in Inuit religious beliefs; as religious leaders they brought the community together. Inuit relied on shamans for a multitude of reasons. In Comer’s journal, a note from editor W. Gillies Ross provides insight into the role of shamans in Inuit culture. “Eskimo shamans - sometimes called angakoks (variously spelled), medicine men, conjurors, or witch doctors – held meetings from time to time, during which they communicated with the spirit world in order to appease spirits for broken taboos or to obtain help in times of illness, hardship, lack of success in hunting, and so on.”<sup>19</sup> The role of a shaman was a critical one. Inuit depended on these men to assist them in times of need. Comer was able to view some of the rituals that shamans performed shown in Figure One, undated photograph (1980.37.219). Here a shaman performed a native ritual, in which his soul was temporarily released from his body, as other Inuit look on. Without this photographic and written evidence, many customs observed by Comer may have been lost during the hybridization of Inuit culture at the turn of the century. Another aspect of Inuit religion were their religious stories, which Comer also recorded at the turn of the century in the Arctic.

Like any other religion, the Inuit had stories about the creation of the world around them. Stories such as the Sedna myth explained how the Inuit’s Arctic world was created. Although

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<sup>18</sup> George Comer, *The Eskimo of Baffin Land and Hudson Bay*. Edited by Franz Boas. (New York: Published by the Trustees of the American Museum of Natural History, 1907) p. 162.

<sup>19</sup> George Comer, *An Arctic Whaling Diary: The Journal of Captain George Comer In Hudson Bay 1903-1905*. Edited by W. Gillies Ross. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984) p. 69

Sedna and Nuliayoq are two of the most frequently mentioned deities the Inuit believed in many gods that served many different purposes.<sup>20</sup> Though Comer collected information on these many different religions there is no complete record of Inuit beliefs, as they did not write down their religious traditions prior to their encounters with western culture. In her interview with eastern Inuit in the 1980s Dorothy Harley Eber was able to discover some of these religious ideas held by Inuit at the turn of the century, many of them centering around shamanism:

When the whalers came to the North, and for long after, shamanism was the heart and soul of the Inuit hunting culture. The shamans were intermediaries between man and the spirit world. They used their special powers to make hunting good, to make animals “easy catching.” They gained their powers sometimes by inheritance, through a “calling,” by apprenticeship. The shaman had powers to fly through the air, to see faraway places, to cure the sick. There were good and bad shamans, but the good shamans “were Gods to the people”.<sup>21</sup>

It was not until after the whalers arrived that Inuit began looking to other sources for religious beliefs. This was amplified when missionaries arrived in the North, able to heal with enhanced technology, Inuit began to abandon their shamans and take up Christianity. The abandonment of their religion was a conscious choice as Inuit saw how missionaries restored the health of others easily with western medicines when shamans could not.

### **The Whalers Arrive in the Arctic**

Beyond simple ventures in search of the Northwest Passage a more permanent presences in the Arctic for European exploration, was at first limited. Europeans believed the Arctic to be barren and fruitless. It was not until the nineteenth century that American whalers discovered a bountiful new source of whales that western nations once again turned their attention to the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p. 145.

<sup>21</sup> Eber, *When the Whalers Were Up North*, p. 36

Arctic. New Bedford whalers led much of this effort throughout the nineteenth century, but it was British whalers who first entered the Eastern Arctic and discovered the Arctic whaling grounds around Baffin Island in 1819.<sup>22</sup> The news of this new whaling ground spread and soon the Arctic became busy with whalers eager to make a profit. Whalers quickly established their presence in the North and by 1851 some of them wintered over for the first time in the Eastern Arctic. This new land-based operation that came after 1851 increased the whalers' contact with the local Inuit. Unlike earlier pelagic whaling operations, these new shore-based whaling stations actually relied mostly on the Inuit as their workforce, establishing a new and sustained relationship between the whalers and the Inuit.<sup>23</sup> George Comer was just one of many Arctic whaling captains who relied upon Inuit workers, but his presence there was far more influential than those of the other whaling captains. Unlike them, Comer took a deep interest in the Inuit and their culture and eventually became a major source of anthropological data. Comer's experiences in the Arctic illustrate the change that happened to Inuit culture during this time of extended contact with Euro-Americans.

George Comer was born in Quebec in 1858 to British parents.<sup>24</sup> Comer was only three when his father was lost at sea. His father's death uprooted the family, and Comer's mother moved them to the United States and later placed young Comer in an orphanage in Hartford, Connecticut. At ten, Comer was placed out of the orphanage with a family in East Haddam, Connecticut. There he worked on the farm of William H. Ayres until he began his ventures into whaling. This background was fairly typical for late-nineteenth-century whalers. Whaling was

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<sup>22</sup> Daniel Francis, *A History of World Whaling* (Toronto: Penguin Books Ltd, 1990) p. 11.

<sup>23</sup> Francis, *A History of World Whaling*, p. 139.

<sup>24</sup> *In Boas' Footsteps: 100 years of Inuit Anthropology*. Edited by Bernard Saladin d'Anglure and François Thériault (Québec: Université Laval Department of Anthropology Inuit Studies, 1984) p. 147.

considered a very dangerous occupation with few promotion possibilities and thus only those young men from less fortunate backgrounds typically ventured into whaling. Maritime historian Daniel Vickers argued that fatherlessness was a key characteristic of those who shipped out on whaling ventures in the nineteenth century. “Few colonists would choose the hardships and hierarchy of a maritime career if they could realistically entertain the prospect of economic independence on shore.”<sup>25</sup> It was a desperate gamble that few Yankees willingly took if economic opportunity presented itself elsewhere.

Comer’s first whaling excursion was aboard the New London bark *Nile* in 1875, when he was just 17. Comer remained aboard the *Nile*, whose journeys into the Arctic under the command of Captain J. O. Spicer captivated Comer, until 1879 when he joined the crew of the *Mary E. Higgins*. Unlike the *Nile*, the *Mary E. Higgins* went south to seal hunt around Cape Horn and the Magellan Strait. Over the next decade, Comer made numerous voyages on whaling ships bound for the Antarctic, building his experience in this part of the world, before returning once again to the Canadian Arctic under Captain Spicer. There is no doubt that Comer’s time in the Antarctic prepared him for his numerous excursions into the North under Captain Spicer and eventually on his own as a captain. Comer’s return to the Arctic in 1889 aboard the *Era* occurred 14 years after his first trip on the *Nile* under the same captain Spicer.<sup>26</sup> From this point on, Comer became enthralled with the and throughout his entire career (1875-1919) he spent only two years not at sea. It seems that this venture aboard the *Era* piqued Comer’s curiosity about the Arctic, its people, landscape, and wildlife, because throughout his career at sea, Comer

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<sup>25</sup> Daniel Vickers, “Nantucket Whalers in the Deep-Sea Fishery: The Changing Anatomy of an Early American Labor Force,” *The Journal of American History* 72, no. 2 (September 1985): 21.

<sup>26</sup> George Comer, *An Arctic Whaling Diary: The Journal of Captain George Comer In Hudson Bay 1903-1905*. Edited by W. Gillies Ross. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984) p. 25.

constantly returned to the Canadian Arctic. Eventually, he made six whaling voyages to the Hudson Bay area over his lifetime.<sup>27</sup> Comer's fondness of the Arctic can be seen throughout his journals, photographs, and interactions with the Inuit. Through Comer we can analyze the affects that Euro-Americans had on the Canadian Arctic and its inhabitants.

Comer became a whaling captain in 1895, during a unique period of time in whaling history. It was during this time that the price of whale oil dropped and other items such as the skins of musk-ox, polar bear, arctic fox, wolverine, and wolf became more profitable for Arctic whalers. Unlike whaling, which was largely conducted independently of the local native population, these new resources forced whalers to come into more direct contact with natives as trade partners.<sup>28</sup> Escalated contact caused significant changes within Inuit culture and traditional way of life. Comer's photographs and journals capture these changes of culture and depict how Euro-American contact was influential to Inuit culture. These sources can be utilized to analyze contact between Inuit and Euro-Americans throughout this narrative.

Comer's intense interest in the culture of the Inuit proved to be more than just a hobby when it attracted the attention of scholars within the emerging field of anthropology. In the nineteenth century, anthropologic study grew out of a combination of European discovery, colonialism and natural science. In addition anthropology stemmed from Darwinist ideas, anthropologists were interested in reconstructing the stages of evolution Darwin described through the study of people. Prominent figures such as Edward Tylor and Lewis Henry Morgan made anthropological study popular as they traced different groups' cultures from their most

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<sup>27</sup> Fred Calabretta, "Captain Comer and the Arctic," *The Log of Mystic Seaport* 35, no. 4 (Winter, 1984): 118.

<sup>28</sup> Daniel Francis *Discovery of the North: The Exploration of Canada's Arctic* (Alberta: Hurtig Publisher Ltd, 1986) pg. 195.

primitive beginnings to their modern state. John Monaghan and Peter Just, authors and anthropologists, describe anthropology's shift of focus in their book *Social & Cultural*

*Anthropology:*

In the early part of the twentieth century anthropology was typically concerned with small-scale, technologically simple societies. In part this was out of a desire to record ways of life that were rapidly changing with the advent of colonialism (although it would be a mistake to assume that these societies were somehow unchanging, or even truly isolated, before their contact with the West) and in part it was out of a desire to get at the “essential” or “elementary” forms of human institutions.<sup>29</sup>

At the turn of the century, Franz Boas was one of the anthropologists who turned to studying isolated societies, to discover more about the evolution of people. Boas became an influential anthropologist in the United States during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries through his studies of smaller groups of people. Franz Boas was born in Germany in 1858 and was trained in ‘psychophysics’ at several universities, which focuses in on how the characteristics of the observer change the perception of a culture. This made Boas quite aware of his own bias when studying a culture, just one of the reasons he was so influential in shaping the field of modern anthropology.<sup>30</sup> Boas became intrigued with the Arctic and its people after taking a trip to the Arctic. Afterward, Boas was unable to secure the funds for a subsequent expedition and began enlisting the help of others.<sup>31</sup>

At the direction of Boas, Comer began in 1897 to keep a systematic record of Inuit life, writing down their traditions in a collection of extensive notes later published by Boas. During

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<sup>29</sup> Edward Tylor and Lewis Henry Morgan, *Social & Cultural Anthropology: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pg. 2

<sup>30</sup> Tylor and Morgan, *Social & Cultural Anthropology*, 36.

<sup>31</sup> *In Boas' Footsteps: 100 years of Inuit Anthropology*. Edited by Bernard Saladin d'Anglure and Francois Therein. (Quebec: Universite Laval Department of Anthropology Inuit Studies, 1984) pg. 61.

this time Franz Boas worked for the American Museum of Natural History. He is known to some as the father of American anthropology, because of his work in ethnography, or the collection of information about a society. Boas and his colleagues insisted on the first-hand collection of this data by trained observers. John Monaghan and Peter Just note that “It was their hope that training would suffice to compensate for the prejudice of the observer.”<sup>32</sup> This was not always the case, but Boas had no other option available to him, as he was unable to raise the fund necessary to travel to the Arctic. Boas desired items from the Arctic that he believed to be least polluted by white influence, yet, ironically enough, in coveting these items he further spread white influence to isolated Inuit groups.<sup>33</sup> It is through the items that Comer collected for Boas and his notes that we are able to analyze how Euro-American influences transformed Inuit culture.

### **Technology**

In addition to religion Inuit became introduced to new technology through the visiting westerners. Before the late nineteenth century the Inuit had survived by creating their own tools from the bones of the animals they hunted; this was one of the details of Inuit life that led Euro-Americans to believe they were a “Stone Age” people. Yet the Inuit had just adapted to living above the tree line, which meant that wood was scarce. When it was found it was highly valued. If it could be found, driftwood pieces would be attached together to form tools. The first time that the Inuit had access to large amounts of wood was when the *Polar Star* wrecked in 1897. Dorothy Harley Eber describes this culturally changing event in her book *When the Whalers Were Up North: Inuit Memories From the Eastern Arctic*. “[O]ne of the first time[s] that the

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<sup>32</sup> Tylor and Morgan, *Social & Cultural Anthropology*, 27.

<sup>33</sup> *In Boas' Footsteps: 100 years of Inuit Anthropology*. Edited by Bernard Saladin d'Anglure and Francois Therein. (Quebec: Universite Laval Department of Anthropology Inuit Studies, 1984) p. 151.



**Figure 2: Photograph 1980.37.82.a**

Photograph 1980.37.82.a taken by George Comer. Kept in Arctic # 4.A. COMER at the New Bedford Whaling Museum in Massachusetts.

Inuit had wood at their disposal they used the wood for sleds, kayaks, and tent poles. Before this they had to use other materials to make the tools they commonly used such as bone because there is no wood in the Arctic.” This small wreck allowed the Inuit to form new tools from wood to which they had not previously had access.<sup>34</sup> Inuit began utilizing these new materials made available to them and adapted them to their culture. By doing this Inuit contact with Euro-Americans created a hybrid culture. The Inuit kept many of their beliefs and other notions

while adapting the new tools to their Arctic environment.

Though Inuit had previously had contact with other Euro-Americans such as Martin Frobisher, it was not until the whalers’ practice of wintering over became popular that extended contact between the two became common. This extended contact introduced the Inuit to much more valuable commodities than wood. Daniel Francis notes the trade of goods between the two parties in his book, *A History of World Whaling* (1990): “The Inuit supplied the newcomers with food, trade goods and labour. They were employees now as well as trading partners, interpreting

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<sup>34</sup> Eber, *When the Whalers Were Up North*, 74.

their own annual routines to help the whaler survive and hunt. This new arrangement brought many benefits, chief among them the guns and metal goods that previously were unknown to the Inuit.” This new partnership between the two affected the Inuit traditions in tremendous ways.<sup>35</sup> Inuit who had lived a certain way for hundreds of years now changed their patterns to earn goods they had never had access to before. New technologies brought by the whalers enticed Inuit to alter their previous way of life and join the whalers with their astounding the technology. Whalers brought to the Inuit an abundance of southern goods such as metal pots and pans, stoves, kerosene lamps, sewing machines, and even portable phonographs. These new commodities altered the way in which Inuit lived in the North. No longer did the Inuit have to make tools of bone or scrounge for driftwood, they now had at their disposal sophisticated tools of metal.<sup>36</sup> Explorers such as Vilhjalmur Stefansson and whalers like George Comer were able to record the changes happening in Inuit communities with technology first hand during their excursions in the Arctic.

As a whaling captain and amateur anthropologist during the early twentieth century, George Comer recorded firsthand the changes taking place in the Inuit communities. Comer frequented the eastern Arctic throughout his whaling career, and his personal journals and photographs record his experiences among the Inuit and their encounters with technology. The whaling captain’s photographs provide valuable insight into Inuit lifestyle and cultural changes during the early twentieth century. In Figure 2, taken on January 12, 1902, Comer’s picture illustrates one of the changes occurring in Inuit society at the turn of the century. Before the coming of westerners to the Arctic the Inuit, as previously stated, had no access to tools other

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<sup>35</sup> Francis, *A History of World Whaling*, 142.

<sup>36</sup> Robert McGhee, *The Last Imaginary Place: A Human History of the Arctic World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) p. 242.

than bone. Here we can clearly see an Inuit man holding a gun and signaling to his companions “deer in sight.” Though here Comer’s photograph highlights Inuit use of western technology, it also depicts something more important. The Inuit in the photograph may have been utilizing a gun, but he was using traditional Inuit hand signals for hunting. The gun was a less significant change to the Inuit. It was just an easier means to an end. Inuit adopted western technology, such as guns, into their existing cultural structure, such as hand signals providing information on game. Euro-Americans such as Comer may have viewed these changes to Inuit culture as extreme or harmful, but in actuality the Inuit were just utilizing the tools available to them.

The introduction of these new technologies, although integrated into existing cultures, were certainly not benign. Guns became available to Inuit in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as they continued to come into contact with Euro-Americans. Guns were a coveted item amongst the Inuit because of their usefulness in hunting. Whalers such as Comer traded guns and ammunition for Inuit goods or services rendered. The popularity of guns and other metal tools caused other Inuit traditions, such as carving tools from bone, to fall by the wayside as they were introduced to increasingly advanced technology by the whalers and others in the Arctic.

Comer himself was responsible for the introduction of new technologies to the Inuit through his studying and recording of their culture. Many of the instruments that Comer brought with him to study the Inuit objects such as a camera, phonograph, and a graphophone inadvertently affected Inuit culture. Though Comer did not give these items to the Inuit, they amazed and astounded the Arctic peoples causing them to rethink their beliefs. In her 1985 interviews with Inuit, Dorothy Harley Eber recalls Inuits’ memories of Captain Comer in the bay: ““We used to call him Angakok [the shaman] because he was able to take photographs.

They would appear just like that, out of a piece of paper.”<sup>37</sup> Eber’s interviews depict Comer’s influence over Inuit in Repulse Bay in the early twentieth century. The Inuit believed Comer to be equivalent to or perhaps even more powerful than one of their own shamans because of the new technology to which he introduced them.

### **Time And Other Concepts**

New technology introduced the Inuit to western ideas and concepts such as time during the early twentieth century. Before the coming of the whalers to the North the Inuit had never operated on any sort of set day-to-day schedule. Becoming partners with the whalers changed this for the Inuit. The whalers needed the Inuit to follow the same schedule as Euro-Americans in order to get work done, this introduced Inuit to the concept of time. Inuit had utilized their own system of months, but never before had different days of the week. Whalers found it critical to introduce ideas such as days of the week to the Inuit so their businesses could operate on a set schedule. During her interviews with the Inuit of the eastern Arctic, Dorothy Harley Eber discovered that the whalers had introduced concepts such as time to the Inuit. “The whalers brought time, or, more exactly, new gauges of time. They divided their days by lunchtime and dinnertime; they brought clocks and watches. And they introduced a revolutionary new concept the seven-day week. ‘My parents had their own names for months but they had never known days – Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday,’ [said] the old Lake Harbour hunter Kowjakuluk.” By giving Inuit clocks and watches they began to adapt to western notions of time, utilizing this new technology to plan their days and assist their new business partners.<sup>38</sup> Inuit who desired western goods adopted the

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<sup>37</sup> Dorothy Harley Eber, “Bringing the Captain Back to the Bay: Photographs Taken by a Nineteenth-century Whaling Captain Evoke Memories Among Present Day Inuit,” *Natural History* 94, no. 1 (January 1985): 67.

<sup>38</sup> Eber, *When the Whalers Were Up North*, p. 28.

whalers' concept of time and willingly changed some aspects of their culture. Euro-Americans goods gave Inuit to an opportunity to modify areas of their culture while keeping others. The Inuit were mostly willing to adapt to the whalers' concept of time to obtain these goods that made their lives easier.



**Figure 3: Photograph 1980.37.37.A**

Photograph 1980.37.37.A taken by George Comer. Kept in Arctic # 4.B. COMER at the New Bedford Whaling Museum in Massachusetts.

Americans had on the Inuit throughout this time period. Figure 3, a photograph taken on January 6, 1901, displays an Inuit household teeming with western artifacts. These artifacts illustrate the extent of Euro-American influence the Inuit experienced at the turn of the century. In this single photograph one is able to see the combined effects of technology and other western concepts altering Inuit culture in the early twentieth century. Seen pictured in the photograph are metal tools - pots, pans, and a stove. Before contact with western civilization Inuit had no access to tools such as these. Yet in this photograph taken by Comer we are able to see how much Inuit culture has changed during the early twentieth century as they adapted to using these new technologies and abandoned their old tool making ways. Besides technology other western concepts can be seen in the photograph. In the upper right hand corner of the photograph hangs a clock, illustrating the influence time held over Inuit. Yet it is important to note that in Figure 3 it

Concepts such as modern time can be seen affecting Inuit life in Comer's journal entries as well as his photographs taken during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In his photographs, taken during

one of Comer's numerous whaling excursions, one can see the influence that Euro-



**Figure 4: Photograph 1980.37.41**

Photograph 1980.37.41 taken by George Comer. Kept in Arctic # 4.B. COMER at the New Bedford Whaling Museum in Massachusetts.

is obvious that the Inuit have not abandoned their culture. The Inuit are still living in the traditional snow houses that they lived in for hundreds of years. Though they accepted some of the western technologies in order to make their lives easier they did not abandon many of their valued northern customs.



**Figure 5: Photograph 1980.37.180**

Eskimo Children at Hudson Bay. Photograph 1980.37.180 taken by George Comer. Kept in Arctic # 4.B. COMER at the New Bedford Whaling Museum in Massachusetts.

daily time and ran their daily lives in accordance with their needs and the limits and possibilities of nature. The Inuit's partnership with whalers forced a reevaluation of this tradition and they adopted the western idea of time and began to adjust their days according to the whalers' schedules. Comer managed to record this phenomenon of changing culture through his pictures of Inuit life in the Arctic during the early twentieth century. Yet though the Inuit accepted some of the new technologies and ideas that the whalers and others brought they kept pieces of their traditional culture. They did not abandon their old ways, but added these new ideas into their culture. This cultural transformation led many to believe, including Comer, that the Inuit were losing their culture. In reality the Inuit adapt to new western ideas while continuing many of their

Figure 4, an undated photograph is another image of an Inuit snow house taken by Comer displaying the prevalence of western technology, especially time. Towards the center left of the photograph hangs a clock, beside a kettle illustrating that Inuit now frequently utilized time as a way of scheduling their days. Previously Inuit held no concept of a structured

old customs such as dress. Inuit traditional dress is displayed here in Figure 5. Here Comer depicts Inuit children from the Hudson Bay area in traditional clothing. This clothing was made out of sealskin or other animal skins, such as caribou, and insulated Inuit from the harsh Arctic environment. In addition the whalers also used these clothes. Dorothy Harley Eber recorded this finding in her interviews with Inuit, Leah Arnaujaq, from the Repulse Bay area. ““The quallunaat [white men] wintering here needed outer garments, so the women made them for them. They had no measuring tapes, so the Inuit women measured with their hands. They’d use their hands on a person to measure how many hands long he was. When the garment was finished, it would fit that particular person exactly.””<sup>39</sup> W. Gillies Ross affirms this fact in *An Arctic Whaling Diary*, the journal of Captain Comer. “Comer always hired Eskimo woman to make up caribou skin clothing for the crew. Without it they would be ill-equipped to work, travel, hunt, or play outside in the winter.<sup>40</sup>” This exchange of goods depicts how the Inuit and westerners took on bits of each other’s cultures while still maintaining aspects of their original culture. A new diet altered yet another cornerstone of their culture as interactions between the two groups continued.

Before the coming of the Euro-Americans the Inuit were a self-sufficient culture relying on the resources available in the Arctic. The coming of whalers, fur traders, missionaries and others to the North altered the Inuit’s culture of self-sufficiency and made them dependent on Euro-Americans for survival. Before Euro-Americans invaded the Arctic, the Inuit hunted for food and were a nomadic people. It was necessary for them to be nomadic, as they had to move to find their food sources throughout the year. Inuit hunted animals such as seal year-round but

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<sup>39</sup> Eber, *When the Whalers Were Up North*, 99.

<sup>40</sup> George Comer, *An Arctic Whaling Diary: The Journal of Captain George Comer In Hudson Bay 1903-1905*. Edited by W. Gillies Ross. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984) p. 71.

went inland during the summer to hunt caribou for their winter clothing supply.<sup>41</sup> Whalers along with others provided the Inuit with food and other goods that they could not obtain before. Inuit started depending on these Euro-Americans to provide them with food as they worked for them all day and no longer had time to hunt.

Anthropologist Vilhjalmur Stefansson recorded these changes in diet that he and others in the Arctic perpetuated during the later nineteenth and early twentieth century. One such instance that Stefansson recorded occurred during his first Arctic expedition, “It was not long before meat and fish were to a large extent replaced in the Eskimo diet by sugar, bread, canned fruit, bacon, and other things, when such commodities could be had. In my years among the Eskimos I learned how serious this change in diet, and dependence upon processed foodstuffs, might become in years in which storms or bad ice conditions prevailed.”<sup>42</sup> Stefansson’s recordings of these changes in diet depict a hybridization of Inuit culture in the North.

### **Anthropologists in Search of the Stone Age**

Anthropology was a relatively new study that emerged during the first half of the nineteenth century. Yet it did not become popular until the later part of the century. Edward Tylor and Lewis Henry Morgan describe how early anthropologists began to develop field research projects, “By the beginning of the last century anthropologists had developed other intellectual projects and, most importantly, were no longer content to rely on the accounts of colonial officials, missionaries, travellers, and other non-specialists for their primary data. They began to go into the ‘field’ as ethnographers to gather their own information first hand.”<sup>43</sup> During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, anthropology attracted the attention of many people due to its

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<sup>41</sup> Eber, *When the Whalers Were Up North*, p. 17.

<sup>42</sup> Stefansson, *Discovery*, p. 72.

<sup>43</sup> Tylor and Morgan, *Social & Cultural Anthropology*, p. 2

novelty and first-hand contact with interesting cultures and people. This novelty would eventually attract the attention of many young scholars.

One of these anthropologists was Vilhjalmur Stefansson, who during the early twentieth century studied Inuit culture in Northern Canada. His accounts of Inuit life during this time are instrumental into understanding the changes that occurred in Inuit culture during the turn of the century. Vilhjalmur Stefansson's parents immigrated to Canada in 1877, two years before his birth, at the encouragement of his uncle. It was because of this uncle that the family settled in Manitoba, Canada and not in Brazil as they had originally planned. This pivotal change gave Stefansson the opportunity to become an anthropologist during the early twentieth century. A large portion of firsthand accounts of Inuit life and culture may not have existed without this uncle's intervening.

Stefansson was born in 1879 to Icelandic parents in Manitoba. Tragedy struck in Manitoba when a flood destroyed much of the province and killed two of the Stefansson siblings. Subsequently, the family relocated to the Dakota Territory where Stefansson spent his childhood growing up in a log cabin in the still underdeveloped northern plains. At the age of 26 Stefansson attended graduate school at Harvard University for theology. His interest in anthropology grew after taking a class with a history of religion professor, George Foot Moore. In his autobiography, Stefansson expressed his fondness of Moore: "George Foot Moore, Frothingham Professor of History of Religion, was in my day looked upon as the most learned member of the Harvard faculty, and my impression was that large majority of his fellow professors would have voted him the university's greatest man, not merely its greatest scholar." Moore's utilization of anthropology in his classes piqued Stefansson's interest in the subject and affected his way of thinking about different cultures. Eventually, Moore influenced the way in which Stefansson

conducted his studies in the Arctic. Subsequently Stefansson left the Harvard Divinity School in order to pursue his newly discovered passion for anthropological study by joining Harvard's Peabody Museum, the anthropology wing of the Natural History Museum. For two years, Stefansson studied anthropology at the museum as a graduate student before beginning his first anthropological expedition.<sup>44</sup> Here, Stefansson gained anthropological skills that he would later use to study Arctic culture.

Stefansson's first Northern adventure was in 1904 when he returned to his parents' home in Iceland to investigate his roots. During this trip to Iceland Stefansson was able to hone his skills as an anthropologist and educate himself on his own Icelandic history. After this trip, Stefansson became more actively involved in the Canadian Club at Harvard and became the university's authority on all things polar due to his Canadian and Icelandic connections. In April 1906, Stefansson received a telegram, from the University of Chicago offering him a job as a polar explorer, which changed his focus yet again. Stefansson eventually made numerous expeditions to the North. His position in these expeditions allowed Stefansson to observe the northwestern Canadian Inuit way of life during the early twentieth century, as two distinct cultures collided in a rapid course.<sup>45</sup> Throughout his time in the Arctic Stefansson took numerous notes that eventually became his books. *Discovery: The Autobiography of Vilhjalmur* and *The Friendly Arctic* are just some of the many invaluable resources depicting northern life at the turn of the century. By analyzing two sets of primary sources, those provided by George Comer and Vilhjalmur Stefansson, we can develop a clearer picture of what happened in the Arctic in the early twentieth century.

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<sup>44</sup> Stefansson, *Discovery*, p. 43.

<sup>45</sup> Stefansson, *Discovery*, p. 65.

### **Technology and Stefansson's Search for "Stone Age" People**

Like Comer, Vilhjalmur Stefansson, an explorer and amateur anthropologist, similarly documented the changes occurring in the Arctic in the early twentieth century. Stefansson traveled to the western Arctic during the early twentieth century and captured valuable insights on how western culture and technology affected the Inuit in the region. In his book, *Discovery: The Autobiography of Vilhjalmur* (1964), Stefansson discussed some of the visible changes that technology has caused amongst the Inuit during his journey North in 1906. "The house was built of sod and earth heaped against and over a frame of driftwood. It was heated, not in the old Eskimo fashion by seal- or whale-oil lamps, but by a much less tractable, though powerful, sheet-iron stove."<sup>46</sup> Here, Stefansson observed a significant transformation of traditional Inuit culture, as the Inuit changed the heating source they had relied upon for centuries to more modern technology. When Stefansson journeyed to the Arctic in the early twentieth century to study Inuit, he believed would have been untouched by westernized concepts and technology and was therefore disappointed to discover them utilizing technology such as steel-iron stoves provided by whalers and fur traders. The anthropologists' hope to discover an untouched "Stone Age" people ran into the reality of a people's ability to adopt technology that they found more efficient or suitable within their own culture.

In search of "Stone Age" peoples untouched by Euro-Americans, Stefansson journeyed even further north toward the area of Shingle Point in the Yukon Territory. Yet even in these distant lands Stefansson failed to discover Inuit untouched by the influence of Euro-Americans. Stefansson was hardly the first to encounter the Inuit even this far north. Fur traders from Hudson's Bay Company traveled deep into the Arctic to trade with the Inuit bringing with them a

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<sup>46</sup> Stefansson, *Discovery*, p. 79.

wide variety of western technology. Stefansson records this partnership in his autobiography: “When the fur sellers returned to the fishing grounds with their silks, phonographs, chewing gum, and whatever else they had bought from the traders, Ovayuak<sup>47</sup> would already have accumulated tons of fish.” The partnership that the Inuit maintained with the fur traders allowed them access to western goods during the early twentieth century.<sup>48</sup> Yet it was also this partnership that altered the Inuit’s traditional cultural practices. With technology such as metal pots, pans and other tools, the Inuit had no need to continue their practice of making tools from bone or stone. Stefansson wished to observe a mythical primitive “Stone Age” society untouched by western ideals, however he struggled to find a group of Arctic people left untouched by the influence of Euro-Americans. Stefansson was frustrated by his inability to discover an untouched “Stone Age” people. Stefansson failed to realize that the Inuit were active agents in their own history. Though the two accounts, Comer’s and Stefansson’s, provided invaluable insights into occurrences in the Arctic at the turn of the century, the two men also introduced new technology to the Inuit by being in such close contact with them. It is through amateur anthropologists such as Comer and Stefansson that subsequent change was brought to the Inuit. Over time, others became interested in the welfare of the Arctic people. Large groups of foreigners on Canadian soil caused concern to groups such as the Royal Northwest Mounted Police (RNWMP) who were dispatched to the North to provide a Canadian government presence.

### **A New System of Law and Order**

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<sup>47</sup> Ovayuak was an Inuit man who traveled with Stefansson during one his journeys north. Though not much is said about him it can be inferred that Ovayuak and his knowledge of the Arctic played a critical role in the survival of Stefansson’s excursion.

<sup>48</sup> Stefansson, *Discovery*, p. 89.

As numerous groups of foreigners continued to invade the North, Canadian authorities took an increased interest in Arctic activity. This interest resulted in the dispatch of the RNWMP (later become the Royal Canadian Mounted Police) to the Arctic in the early twentieth century. The RNWMP introduced new western ideas of law and order to the North. Previously the Inuit had their own views of law and order that dictated their lives in the North. Dorothy Harley Eber recounts these distinct northern laws best in her book *When the Whalers Were Up North* while recalling the life of an Inuit man, Johnnibo. Johnnibo lived during the late nineteenth century amongst whalers in the eastern Arctic at Spicer's Harbour. He became famous when he traveled to New London, Connecticut to appear in a court case concerning disputed goods between two whaling captains. Yet when he returned to the Arctic Johnnibo was not revered as he had been in the south. His fellow Inuit detested the favoritism he received from whaling captains and a decision was made within his community to kill Johnnibo. In the late nineteenth century, the RNWMP had yet to arrive to the Arctic and Inuit were still living by their own code of laws. As tradition dictated the tribe discussed Johnnibo's fate and decided he was a danger to the tribe. An officer aboard the whaling ship *Era* in 1889 reported the facts of Johnnibo's death:

Two weeks before the tragedy his wife was notified according to the custom, of his coming death at the hands of his countrymen, but on pain of death could not acquaint him with the information. When the day arrived he was decoyed out of the village by two companions and arriving at the place designated he was prostrated on his back; then the leader delivered a short speech and called on the man sleeved to advance and stab him through the heart...<sup>49</sup>

Johnnibo's death appeared violent and unnecessary to whalers and other Euro-Americans during the late nineteenth century, yet it was relatively common practice that members of the tribe who were viewed as a threat were killed in order to sustain the survival of the rest. This was just

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid. p. 57

another harsh reality the Inuit faced living in the Arctic. This law was further evidenced by Stefansson in his book *The Friendly Arctic*. “An expected piece of news was that a murder charge had been laid against me by the Eskimos of Prince Albert Sound. Kullak’s wife, Neriyoq, who according to her husband was expected to have a child before the middle of August, 1915, had had the child in January, 1916.<sup>50</sup> A few weeks after that she had died, probably, as I interpret it, from the bursting of an internal tumor.”<sup>51</sup> Stefansson was expected to pay with his life after an Inuit woman he had given his blessing to died abruptly. (Giving a blessing to an expecting mother or others was common among the Inuit it was a wish for good health. Stefansson may have been asked to give one because he was perceived to be important in the community. Though he had gone to Harvard originally for theology Stefansson was not a minister.) Though this seems extreme, this was just one of the rules of law Inuit had in place in their culture. They viewed Stefansson as responsible for the death of the young mother for breaking his blessing. Laws such as these dictated Inuit’s northern lifestyle. Yet when the RNWMP arrived in the Arctic they thrust their notions of law and order upon Inuit, ignoring Inuit traditional laws and imposing their own. The RNWMP’s ideas about law and order altered Inuit culture forever.

The RNWMP made law and order in the North their priority, changing the way Inuit could lead their lives in the Arctic. Inuit, as well as Euro-Americans such as George Comer and Vilhjalmur Stefansson, felt the presence of the RNWMP in the North. Whalers such as Comer bemoaned the presence of law enforcement in the North at the turn of the century. The RNWMP

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<sup>50</sup> Kullak and his family were part of an Inuit community residing near the Minto Inlet in the Northwest Territories. Stefansson encountered the family on his Arctic expedition. The family spent the summer living with Stefansson and came to believe he had powers equivalent to that of a shaman. This was possibly due to the technology that Stefansson and his counterparts had brought along with them.

<sup>51</sup> Stefansson, *The Friendly Arctic*. p. 566

imposed new regulations on whalers and fur traders in the Arctic during this time. In a 1903 report by A.P. Low, commander of the Dominion expedition 1903-4 that led to Canada's authority over the Arctic, he stated: "The Dominion Government, in the spring of 1903, decided to send a cruiser to patrol the waters of Hudson Bay and those adjacent to the eastern Arctic islands; also to aid in the establishment, on the adjoining shores, of permanent stations for the collection of customs, the administration of justice and the enforcement of the law in other parts of the Dominion."<sup>52</sup> The presence of the RNWMP in the Arctic brought western ideas of law and order to the Arctic. Men who had viewed the Arctic as the last wilderness frontier, now witnessed the closing of that frontier. The establishment of law and order in the Arctic would change not only Inuit lives, but also the endeavors of Euro-Americans in search of untouched wilderness. The Arctic was no longer the pristine wilderness many imagined it to be, as the RNWMP moved in to create law and order in the harsh Arctic environment. Anthropologists, explorers and whalers such as Vilhjalmur Stefansson and George Comer left the Arctic at the outbreak of World War I when it became clear that the Arctic no longer held economic or anthropological opportunities leaving the Inuit a changed people.

The first era of Inuit contact with Euro-Americans came to a sudden end. At the outbreak of World War I, westerners abandoned the Arctic and for a time forgot its people. Yet the Inuit whose culture had been altered forever did not forget the changes that Canadians and Americans had brought. An intense period of contact between Euro-Americans and Inuit had brought about much change in their culture, yet Inuit still maintained some of their old traditions. In a sense they had become a hybrid culture. Their contact with the western world gave them exposure to important new tools, concepts and beliefs and still some of their traditional culture remained the

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<sup>52</sup> George Comer, *An Arctic Whaling Diary: The Journal of Captain George Comer In Hudson Bay 1903-1905*. Edited by W. Gillies Ross. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984) p. 252.

same. Though the Inuit took the tools of Euro-Americans they made them their own. They utilized guns to hunt, but still spoke their own language and used their customary hunting signals. Euro-Americans may have given Inuit new tools and ideas, but the Inuit chose how they used them. Many integrated these new tools into their lifestyle, modifying it, but not completely erasing the culture they once had. It is important to realize that the coming of Euro-Americans to the Arctic did have a significant impact on Inuit culture, but that it did not destroy their culture. Inuit were active agents in this cultural exchange at the turn of the century.

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