Canadian Arctic and Alaska 1986

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Plates 84–85

In the eastern arctic, the best mountains for climbing are in Baffin Island. There are two principal ranges, those around the settlement of Clyde River, which is at about the centre of the E coast, in latitude 70°, and those on the Cumberland Peninsula, which is also on the E coast and straddles the Arctic Circle. The first recorded sighting of these mountains by Europeans was made by John Davis in 1585 on his voyage for the discovery of the North-West Passage, with the barks Sunneshine, of 50 tons capacity (a ton or tun being roughly $1m^3$), and Mooneshine, of 35 tons. His ships were the first to reach this area after the Norsemen's of several hundred years previously, which had been long forgotten. He reached as far north as Cape Dyer, which he named, using the spelling Dier, and he sighted and named Mount Raleigh when he anchored in what he called Totnes Road. John Janes, who recorded the voyage, wrote, after crossing from Greenland, 'The sixt of August we discovered land in 66 degrees 40 minutes of latitude, altogether void of the pester of ice: we ankered in a very faire rode under a brave mount, the cliffes whereof were as orient as golde. This mount was named Mount Raleigh. The rode where our ships lay at anker was called Totnes rode. The sound which did compass the mount was named Exeter sound. The foreland towards the north was named Diers cape. The foreland towards the south was named Cape Walsingham'.[1] Mount Raleigh was the first glaciated mountain in what is now Canada that was named by Europeans. However, the Spaniards were in Arizona half a century earlier, and Marcos de Niza named the San Francisco Mountains, which are about 20km north of Flagstaff, in about 1539.[2]

It seems that, in Davis's time, explorations were much more readily done by sea than by land, and so it was to be about another quarter-century before a European recorded ascending the Ottawa River as far as the site of present-day Ottawa. Davis's discoveries were extended by William Baffin in 1615 who, as navigator, sailed into what he called Smith Sound and on the way discovered Bylot Island, which was named after the master of the ship, and Lancaster Sound, Devon Island, Jones Sound, and Ellesmere Island. The only large mountainous island that remained to be discovered in the Canadian arctic was Axel Heiberg Island, and that had to wait almost three centuries until Otto Sverdrup spent four years in the area in 1897–1901.[3]

Most of the mountain climbing in the area has been done on Baffin Island, particularly around Pangnirtung Pass, which is now in Auyuittuq National Park. The earliest, however, was done on the eastern side of Baffin Island in 1934, when Pat Baird and M H W Ritchie climbed what they aptly called Pioneer Peak, and Tom Longstaff and John Hanham climbed Eglinton Tower on 21 August.[4] They were the first mountains to be climbed in that enormous range of mountains that covers the eastern half of Baffin Island and Bylot, Devon, Ellesmere, and Axel Heiberg Islands. The climbers were on J M Wor-

Photo: Ted Whalley

84 Unnamed 1500m mountains extending NE from Pioneer Peak, as seen from Revoir Pass.

Photo: Ted Whalley

85 Unnamed 1470m mountain seen from Belvedere Ridge, looking N across Walker Arm.

die's expedition, whose principal objective was to traverse the North-West Passage. Unfortunately, the ice conditions were so bad that they had to change their objective. So little was known about the area in those days that the map-makers did not know whether Eglinton Fiord (which was named by Wordie's party) was a fiord or a channel that split Baffin Island into two parts. Even an official Canadian map at 10 miles to 1 inch (633,600:1), published in 1945, which I bought in 1950 when I first came to Canada, showed Sam Ford Fiord, which is the next N of Eglinton Fiord, as having an uncertain ending. It was a great pleasure to all of us on our 1973 expedition to the mountains around Eglinton and Sam Ford Fiords when Pat Baird and Barry James made the second ascent of Pioneer Peak, 39 years after the first ascent. Baird reported seeing, from Pioneer Peak in 1934, the Barnes Ice-Cap, which was not known to Europeans and which occupies a large area of the central part of Baffin Island. It is a true remnant of the Pleistocene glaciations, in particular the Wisconsin, because its base, which is at about 600m, is well below the firn line, but its summit, which is at about 1100m, is well above. The ice-cap, therefore, renews itself every winter, but if it were removed it would not reform in the present climate.

The next climbing in the area was done by four Swiss climbers in 1950.[5] They joined a scientific expedition organized under the auspices of the Arctic Institute of North America and led by Pat Baird. 17 mountains were climbed, including the spectacular Cockscomb. Almost 25 years passed before the next climbing was done in the area, and that was by an expedition of the Ottawa Section of the Alpine Club of Canada in July–August 1973.[6] 33 first ascents were made as well as several new routes and second and third ascents. A major advantage of the arctic over temperate mountains is the continuous daylight in the summer. Benightments and dawn starts are unknown.

The next climbing in the area was by a joint expedition of the Ottawa and Montreal Sections of the Alpine Club of Canada in May 1977 in Stewart Valley.[7] The principal achievement was the first and second ascent of the spectacular spire known as Mt Longstaff. A similar expedition, also under the auspices of the Alpine Club of Canada, went to Ayr Lake in May 1979.[8] Snowmobiles and large wooden sleds, called komatics by the Inuit, were used to get there from Clyde River and for transport on the low ground, and the mountains were climbed mostly on skis. About 17 first ascents were made. Mt Wordie, which was named after J M Wordie, was climbed on this trip. Only a small fraction of the mountains in this whole area has been climbed. Perhaps the Alpine Club should have an expedition there. The best time may be in May, near the end of the winter, so that the climbing areas may be reached either by snowmobile or by chartered Twin Otter or DC3 on ski-wheels.

Little climbing seems to have been done in the eastern arctic this year, perhaps because the weather has been particularly bad. Dave MacAdam reports that he made his usual solo trip to eastern Baffin Island and made a few easy first ascents. Jim Ellsworth reports that in Auyuittuq National Park Reserve the south-east face of Freya Peak and a secondary peak of Mount Asgard were climbed by snow gullies, and a secondary peak near Thor Peak was climbed on grade 5.5 rock.

Lloyd Freese reports that 15 groups of climbers or skiers were in the St Elias Mountains in Kluane National Park this summer. A group of four from Colorado climbed Mts Hubbard and Kennedy by the standard route, in spite of having only three good days out of 20 on the mountain. Several groups were on the King Trench or the ridge of Mt Logan, but only two reached the summit. A party of six that included John Bowman made the first winter ascent, by the King Trench. Their first attempt at the summit was turned back by strong cold winds with an estimated wind-chill of −73°C. They used snow-shelters instead of tents whilst on the mountain because the shelters were easier to build in the strong winds and were warmer. A party of six, including Bert Middeburg, climbed the E ridge but Keith Flavelle was killed on the descent. A party of five led by Gerry Holdsworth spent six weeks climbing, surveying, and mapping the peak and col of Mt Logan.

A party from The Eagle Ski Club, comprising Mike Browne, Rob Collister, Richard Cooper and David Williams, made a ski traverse of the Hayes Range during Spring 1986, climbing six minor peaks on the way.

The number of climbers attempting Mt McKinley increased to 755, of whom about 190 reached the top. About 86 per cent were on the W buttress, which must seem at times quite crowded. Two French climbers died when they fell into the same crevasse, and two Swiss died of carbon monoxide poisoning after they had sealed their tent too tightly.

The American Alpine Club and the Alpine Club of Canada continue to publish jointly 'Accidents in North American Mountaineering'. The current (December 1986) edition is dated 1986, but covers the year 1985. The only accident reported in the Canadian part of our area was to a man who was hiking alone in Auyuittuq National Park. He arrived at the Overlord campground in the evening, wet, shivering, and walking with difficulty. A group of campers took him to the cabin, removed his wet clothing, put him into a dry sleeping bag, and heated the cabin. His temperature rose from 35.5 to 38°C. He was apparently sleeping comfortably at 9am the following morning, but was dead by 10am. A post-mortem attributed his death to heart failure caused by systemic hypothermia. The same issue contains 11 pages describing accidents on Mt McKinley; they should be read very carefully by anyone planning to go there.

References

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