

Her Excellency the Right Honourable Adrienne Clarkson Address at the Stefánsson Memorial Lecture

Akureyri, Iceland, Monday, October 13, 2003

It is a great honour to give the 2003 Stefánsson Memorial Lecture in Akureyri, the home of the Stefánsson Arctic Institute, on the occasion of the Institute's fifth anniversary.

I feel that the honour given to me as Governor General of Canada to address this Institute with the Lecture named for Vilhjalmur Stefánsson is a tribute paid to all Canadians who believe in the North, who love the North, and who see our future together in the circumpolar regions as people of the North.

We can identify with what Wayne Johnston has written in his magnificent novel, *The Navigator of New York*:

"The city-dweller imagines the polar night to be a misery, but the unbroken darkness has its charms. The pleasure of feeling on one's face a drought of warmth when one goes indoors. The sight, from outside the ship, of the lights within. The sight, from outside an igloo, of the light within, which makes the dome of ice translucent, opalescent. The moonlight silver on the seas of ice, the clarity of stars. There is a naked fierceness in the scenes, a wildness in the storms, a sublimity of silence in the night that one appreciates despite the gloom. The attractions of the polar night are not to be written in the language of a people who live in a land of sunshine and flowers. In the polar night, one occupies a world where animal sentiments take over and those of the timid human are forgotten."

These thoughts about the North and its reality have been worked into brilliant fiction by one of Canada's finest writers. But I feel it could have been written by Vilhjalmur Stefánsson himself – a man whose natural abilities as an anthropologist gave him a deep understanding of the people and ways of the Arctic unmatched in his day.

It is quite understandable that he drove bureaucrats, some of whom were in the Canadian Geological Survey, into fury and that waves of resistance often met his most creative moves. He was a man of great psychological complexities, but his readiness to proclaim the reality of the peoples and way of life in the barren regions of the North fascinated the readers of his many works about his explorations: *The Friendly Arctic*, *My Life with the Eskimo*, *Wrangel Island*. All of these eminently readable books infuriated his critics and delighted his admirers. I will use "Eskimo" as it was used in Stefánsson's period by him and his contemporaries.

Today, we're honoured with the presence of Madame Evelyn Stefánsson Nef, Stefánsson's widow, who is the living link to this great explorer born in 1879. Madame Nef, we cannot help but feel in your presence that we are tangibly linked to Vilhjalmur Stefánsson and that we can feel today the excitement that he felt and communicated to his public because you are among us.

The more one reads about Stefánsson, the more one has to admire him, the more one has to understand that, although he attracted controversy, he radically changed the image of the Arctic – especially in the minds of those who never had set foot there. He was an enemy of everyone who thought that they could impose their will on our Arctic – those who sought to fight the North, conquer it, impose their ideas on it. And today, we have not yet cleared that barrier. It is something that we are all struggling with; something that we are trying to overcome and change through visits like ours, with the people who are sensitive to the northern-ness that Canadians, Icelanders and other countries of the circumpolar regions share.

Stefánsson was called the "Prophet of the North" and, like many prophets, was sometimes without honour in his own country. He had a number of extraordinary and lengthy explorations in the Arctic, none more harrowing or in many ways more desperate than the one from 1913 to 1918, which he recounts in *The Friendly Arctic*.

In 1921, our Prime Minister, Sir Robert Borden, wrote an introduction to the book. In it, he said that, for anyone who read Stefánsson's *My Life with the Eskimo*: "Many preconceived ideas of these great northern territories must disappear forever."

He added: "There seems to be much truth in Stefánsson's observation that the cold of the Arctic deprives no one of either health or comfort if he understands conditions, realizes necessary precautions and, making good use of his common sense, governs himself accordingly."

Borden also spoke about the deprivation experienced in Europe at the end of the Great War, when heating fuel was scarce, even in London, England. The cold was such that he had to seek firewood from the Canadian Corps

stationed nearby. He compared this to Stefánsson and his party who, at that very same time, were "sitting in their shirt sleeves hundreds of miles within the Arctic Circle comfortably housed in an edifice which was constructed of snow blocks in less than three hours."

As a Canadian, I find it wonderful to think that the Prime Minister of the time understood, through Stefánsson's writing, more than we might think about life in the higher reaches of the Arctic. As Borden explained, the Eskimo's "social organization, their conception of life, their ideas respecting the phenomena of nature and their practical adaptability to a difficult environment were probably similar to those which prevailed among our ancestors. They spoke several dialects of a remarkably complex language and in everyday life they used a vocabulary far exceeding that which we ordinarily employed. Through the accumulated experience of successive generations they had acquired habits of life admirably suited to their surrounding. For them the age of magic still existed and without difficulty they accounted for the most miraculous or impossible events. Kindness, hospitality and many social virtues adorned their lives. But contact with the white races has been seldom beneficial to any such type. When a primeval civilization comes into contact with ours, the new wine is too strong for the old bottle."

Stefánsson himself tested the common sense even of the indigenous people by undertaking expeditions to prove his theories about the availability of food under the polar ice. Some of them refused to follow him, because, as Borden said, "no Eskimo could be induced to embark upon a venture that he regarded as suicidal." Nevertheless, such remarkable and wilful confidence enabled Stefánsson to give proof to his theories. And, as a result, many more pieces of land and thousands of square miles were added under Canada's sovereignty.

But Borden's most important conclusion about Stefánsson's expeditions was that "many illusions with respect to Arctic conditions have been dissipated." And Borden had it right, even as few of his contemporaries did not. The real novelty, the real contribution of Stefánsson, lay in what he did to dissipate illusions about the Arctic.

It's interesting to compare Stefánsson with his predecessor Leif Eriksson, who was sent off as a missionary and earned his nickname "Lucky" by discovering Greenland and aiding some shipwrecked sailors. Stefánsson perhaps had, just as much, been fortunate in his life. Certainly those two essentials, luck and timing, which cannot be anticipated by planning or education, helped him a great deal. For everything that he did, there was some significant praise and much criticism and jealousy. He did indeed run into difficulties during his lengthy, dangerous explorations into uncharted realms. And he was indeed tested by an Arctic that seemed capable of defeating even the most intrepid and skilful of men.

But through it all, he carried a personal and unshakable conviction to undertake whatever ordeal to support his own ideas, his own vision; and he had that rare gift of being able to convince others to do that as well. His life was lived like a novel – and other people came to play their roles in his creation.

Stefánsson recognized four stages in exploration of the North through the ages. And it is interesting that he developed this schema from the perspective of anthropology, the field in which he was primarily trained. According to him, when Scandinavian Eskimos and other Mongoloid people spread northward into Europe, North America and Asia, they went there in order to occupy richer hunting grounds and thus were not explorers in the true sense. Stefánsson believed that exploration was the linking of adventure and heroic endeavour, not the slow moving from one place to another, with adaptations occurring over generations.

The second stage, of which Edward Parry was typical, was indeed exploration. But, as Stefánsson said: "The battle with frost and storm ... was a form of trench warfare." In this period, everyone was afraid of winter and explorers sat in their ships and waited for winter to end. They were surprisingly inept and lacking in polar technique. Stefánsson points out: "It seems extraordinary that no explorer thought of going directly to the Eskimos and borrowing their system of life and travel ... instead of learning native methods they found it necessary to discover for themselves the same principles of living and travelling which the Eskimos had discovered centuries before."

In the third stage, dread of winter was starting to be conquered. Explorers like Parry saw that the best expeditions could be made in winter, beginning in January and February, and that any properly managed expedition could be done before April, before the first thaw.

Stefánsson's fourth stage of exploration was what he hoped to demonstrate in his 1913-18 journey. In particular, he wanted to show that food could be obtained anywhere on the Polar Sea. Therefore, any journeys would be

unlimited because you could hunt as you went. If you lived as indigenous peoples did, living exclusively on meat and blubber and remaining separated from other human beings, then the exploration and survival could be achieved. He concluded: "When the polar regions are once understood to be friendly and fruitful, men will quickly and easily penetrate their deepest recesses." Why? Because "the northern people do not abhor the North."

Stefánsson's achievements were not limited to his work as an anthropologist and to the study of how people survived and evolved in societies. Over the course of some twelve years in the Arctic, he discovered some of the world's last major land masses – for example, Brock, Borden, Meighen and Loughheed Islands. He redefined for mapmakers many of the coastlines in the west central Arctic. His hydrographic soundings outlined for the first time the continental shelf from Alaska to Prince Patrick Island, revealing the mountains and valleys beneath the Beaufort Sea. It has been estimated that he travelled 32,000 kilometres by sled and dog team, exploring roughly 160,000 square kilometres of Arctic territory.

On top of that, he probably did the most of anyone hitherto – and maybe even since – to create great interest among Canadians in the North by his writings, his undoubted bravery, his wide-ranging interests and theories, and his abilities as a publicist. Interestingly, he also was a recognized authority on diet, especially the high protein, low carbohydrate diet that is very popular today.

For Stefánsson, the Far North was not a wasteland, but destined to be peopled as another frontier, similar to the way the west had been for the United States. For him, the North was a place where people could live and thrive, and this belief was underpinned by his own life experience. For instance, he was certain that grazing animals like the muskoxen could become a supply of meat for the rest of Canada; and the Arctic thus part of a larger system of food production and transport to distant markets. He would be pleased today to see that *Kiviuk*, the underfur of the muskoxen, is being woven into wool finer than cashmere. Stefánsson the visionary also anticipated the "great Circle route" of today's airliners passing between North America and Europe; he foresaw the possibility of submarine travel under the polar ice cap; he even posited the importance of using drifting ice floes for scientific platforms.

A member of our delegation, Dr. Arthur Collin, who is President of the Royal Geographic Society of Canada, worked in the 1950s for the Canadian Defence Research Board in the high Arctic. In May 1959, during a journey in the Arctic, Art recalled that, in *The Friendly Arctic*, Stefánsson mentioned leaving a message in a cairn in Satellite Bay, on northern Prince Patrick Island. When Art and his pilot set down in their single-engined plane in –50 degree temperatures, he found the cairn and located the message, sealed in an empty cocoa tin.

Dr. Collin did what is the custom: he copied the message. The original was dated late May 1911. It had never been read before. In it, Stefánsson mentioned that he was travelling with his Canadian assistant, Rudolf Anderson, and noted: "We have supplies for four days. All well. He then specified the latitude and approximate longitude and went on: "Radio broken. Plan is to proceed north for four to five days then return south."

In fact, Stefánsson did return south to Loughheed Island, where he recovered from snow blindness. Dr. Collin, again as is the custom, put his copy of the message back in the cairn and took the original to the National Archives of Canada, where it is stored. A few years later, Dr. Collin went to Dartmouth, New Hampshire, to meet Stefánsson and told him of finding the cairn and the message of almost fifty years earlier. Here is another living link with this remarkable man.

So what have we learned about Vilhjalmur Stefánsson that helps us with our northern vision today?

First of all, he already gave us the guidelines to reconfigure how we think about this area. We do not think of it as inhospitable and uninhabitable. It has been lived in by people, the Inuit, who knew how to adapt to it and who were perfectly healthy with a strong social structure and a belief in the environment around them.

We must do away with the idea of the North as a frontier and a barrier and something that must be crossed, penetrated, overcome, managed or subdued. We have to finish with that logic which leads to the marginalization of the North and our pushing of the North to the periphery of our imaginations. As Dr. Jim McDonald, the anthropologist from the University of Northern British Columbia, and Arthur Erickson, our pre-eminent architect – both members of our Delegation – have said, we must live by latitude and be joined to the people who are on the same latitude as we are.

This east-west pull along the latitudes should be compelling for us as circumpolar people. Over the last two-and-a-half weeks, we have explored with indigenous peoples of Russia and Finland and with environmentalists, artists, architects and educators of these countries the possibility that we can stretch our imaginations beyond the limitations that we have had for so long. Limitations imposed by a cavalier and, at times, contemptuous attitude of some towards the north and its meaning.

The need for revised and refreshed thinking is apparent. For instance, while remaining people of northern latitudes, we in Canada have developed a fine wine industry in our southernmost areas in Niagara peninsula and in microclimates in the Okanagan area of British Columbia. The Finns and the Icelanders can grow hay at their latitudes because of the effects of the Gulf Stream. So our countries are northern in different ways. Nevertheless, we share the North. We all end up in the Arctic. As Karen Kraft-Sloan, a member of our Parliamentary Delegation, puts it, the Arctic is our neighbourhood.

There are other realities that we are encountering as northern countries. We know that there is the phenomenon of climate change that is starting to deeply affect the north. We know that there are natural resources in the north – gas, oil, precious gems like diamonds – that are becoming more and more accessible to industry. And we know that our indigenous peoples have had their traditional ways of life uprooted by the changes that are occurring in the north.

So we have to take seriously what Víljalmur Stefánsson knew nearly a hundred years ago – that the North needs not only to be respected, but also to be a part of our total imagination as people.

There certainly have been Arctic travellers who have lived and worked in this way, who have seen the polar region for its impact on our senses and our imagination. People like James Houston and George Swinton, who saw the works of art created by the Inuit and understood that they came out of a deep, visual and spatial understanding.

I vividly recall James Houston telling me a story about being a young officer with the Department of Northern Affairs after the Second World War. One day, while he was sketching – Jim was an art school graduate, but the only job he was able to get with Northern Affairs – a young Inuit asked what he was doing. Jim told him he was sketching. The young Inuit said, "Let me try that," and proceeded to do the most beautiful sketch in a completely natural way.

The light went on for Houston when he beheld this. And today we know what an important role Jim played over the years in encouraging and helping to develop the innate artistry of the Inuit. He taught them techniques of working with larger pieces of stone and using carved stone to make prints and engravings. As a result, we have been fortunate in being able to experience over the past forty years or so the range and the power, the expressiveness and the voice, of Inuit art – in its carvings, its paintings, symbols and stories.

Our encounter with Inuit art, it seems to me, has broadened our own understanding as people of northern countries – especially in one very powerful and important way. It has allowed us to grasp what space means to us. Space and light come together and are so uniquely expressed by the outlook, the life, the natural artistic temperament and skills of the Inuit people.

Moreover, for the Inuit, as for other indigenous peoples of Canada, there is no separation between art and artists. And that reflects the integration, the holistic living of life, in which the huge expanses of land and sky, the special colours and light of the Arctic are part of the very being of people. No radical division exists between artists and non-artists. People know they can take up a tool and create an art object without thinking that, by doing so, they are somehow being "artists" and thus separate from the main life of their society. They are very fortunate to have such holism and integration of living and artistic creation.

There are lessons to be learned from this non-separation of art and life. For example, if we are to make higher education in the north a real, viable and meaningful part of northern life, it should take into account this very important factor of artistic creation and being. It is one of the things that differentiates northern indigenous peoples from the non-indigenous people living in the south. We must be sure that our education for the north does not destroy or marginalize the innate artistic talent of indigenous peoples.

Again, in a way, Víljalmur Stefánsson anticipated this. In *The Friendly Arctic*, the great explorer tells of how he was the first white man ever seen by the Copper Eskimos of the western Arctic. As Stefánsson made his way across the ice and snow, he saw figures in the distance approaching him. Not wanting to frighten them or invite hostility, Stefánsson demonstrably set down his rifle and his pack on the ice and stretched his empty arms open

wide towards them. They responded in kind, putting down their staves and harpoons. And thus the two worlds met, with arms open in peace, in respect, in a true willingness to embrace and learn about the other.

We could also approach the north with our rifles, our staves and packs put down and our arms outstretched, wanting to know more and to understand more. We've closed our arms and held our weapons for too long. This, the people who sincerely understand the North know. But it is up to all of us to make this a part of our attitude, our approach, our way of thinking about, imaging and accepting the north.

This is really the message at the heart of our Circumpolar State Visits to Russia, to Finland, to Iceland. Let us follow again Vilhjamur Stefánsson's example. Let us make the possibility of the North into a reality – through higher education, such as the University of the Arctic and here at the University of Akureyri; through the use of new technologies; through the preservation of language and culture; and through the conscious – and conscientious – learning from traditional knowledge and culture. And, most importantly, through helping to dissolve barriers between what we have conceived of always as the centre and the periphery.

This is the new stage of exploration that we can add to Stefánsson's four stages – but it is an exploration more of the mind and the imagination. It is time again to dissipate the many illusions with respect to the Arctic, just as a Canadian Prime Minister wrote more than eighty years ago.

Thus we still have much work to do. And we know that the Stefánsson Arctic Institute is very active in pursuing such work, including through your connections with the Northern Research Forum, the Circumpolar Agricultural Association and the Arctic Human Development Report – to name just a few. It shows how strongly you are upholding the spirit of exploration that we associate so closely with Vilhjamur Stefánsson, his life and his work.

The highest respect that we can ever pay anybody is that we take their teaching, their experience and guidance to heart. We must understand that what they did is not just of a particular time and place and thus limited to a certain experience. We must take their thoughts, their sense of exploration into an experience of the mind, the imagination, the heart.

This means being able to continue to rethink our approach to the Arctic and the polar regions, as Stefánsson would want us to do. It means continuing to "discover" – in that unique and powerful human Stefánsson way – what the North is and what it means to each of our countries and to each and every one of us.