

Sverker Sörlin:

**THE HUMAN ARCTIC:  
VILHJÁLMUR STEFÁNSSON, HANS AHLMANN, AND THE QUEST FOR AN  
ARCTIC WITHIN HISTORY**

The 2004 Vilhjálmur Stefánsson Memorial Lecture  
[given with Swedish Foreign Minister Laila Freivalds]  
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Mister President and Mrs Moussaieff,  
Your Majesties and Your Royal Highness,  
Lady Foreign Minister,  
Ladies and Gentlemen!

I am proud of the honour that has been bestowed on me to speak on this occasion – in such a wonderful natural setting, and in this lively northern community. I would like to thank the Institute, Níels Einarsson and everyone else who has invited me.

Probably no one – not even Níels – could have known that (and I certainly smiled twice inside when I received the invitation), but in fact Vilhjalmur Stefansson and his ideas had intrigued me for a very long time. And I thought it a perfect fit for this occasion to talk both of Stefansson and of his Swedish colleague in Arctic studies, Hans W:son Ahlmann, who has also interested me in my work and who holds a significant role in Swedish North Atlantic diplomacy. Together these two, scientist-diplomats of sorts, shared ideas on the human aspects of the Arctic, ideas that may be worth remembering on a day like this, when new initiatives and policies are being carved out for this vast and important region.

I

Already as a student I became interested in the historical geography of the polar regions, and in my raids in the libraries I soon came across the name Stefansson and books by him such as *The Friendly Arctic* and *The Northward Course of Empire*, both published in the 1920's. These books, and the ideas that they contained, provided parallels in my own search at the time for a pattern in the speculations on Lapland as a chosen source of future wealth for Sweden.

Here was this son of émigré Icelander's in the prairies near Winnipeg, demonstrating, in a way that almost seemed scientific, that civilization may have been born in hot Babylon, may have grown around the tempered Mediterranean, and may have matured in cooler Paris, London and New York – but that would only reach its peak in the unlikely corner of the universe that was cold enough and in the continuation of this long northwesterly trajectory – that is Winnipeg.

Such was Stefansson's capability for vision and almost metaphysical extrapolation. It would come as no surprise then that he would also go far beyond Winnipeg, having proven that this small Icelandic community represented, after all, the supreme glory of human achievement, at least potentially.

He looked to the North. Not only in his personal and scientific career, conducting expeditions and anthropological fieldwork in the Arctic, but also as a geographical philosopher, claiming that the Arctic was in fact a very friendly place. That it could be inhabited by millions and millions of people, that the climate would become even better with human settlement and that wheat would soon grow along the Arctic coast, in the midst of bustling cities and busy airports.

Such was the evangelical mind of this traveler and entrepreneur, congenially fostered at Harvard's Divinity School. His life was in itself a geological layer of achievements in anything from newspaper journalism, to scientific leadership, to political strivings, and of conditions not conventionally shared among his Norse-Manitoban compatriots: he lived for a long time with an Inuit family, and he made a career in virtually any field he touched upon.

He knew that this was not the kind of Arctic everybody wanted. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the image of the explorer changed. Until then navigators and explorers had not written much of hardships and suffering in Arctic travel, nor had they talked of setting records and reaching the North Pole. Captain John Franklin's disappearing expedition was the symbol of this change. Franklin and his men could not have died unless the conditions were so unworldly harsh and exceptional.

And so was born an "Arctic exceptionalism," the prime beneficiaries of which were in fact the explorers themselves and the myth-making media machinery that surrounded them. Which was one of the reasons that *The Friendly Arctic* was met with such hostility. Roald Amundsen, the Norwegian explorer, said that if somebody went to the Arctic, and traveled as light, and as lightheartedly, as Stefansson claimed that one could, he would be "dead in eight days".

On deeper analysis what Stefansson did was to challenge an even bigger myth: that it takes force to conquer nature and make her yield. He questioned the basic Western attitude, and suggested that it was fully possible to live the way the Inuit do. There was plenty of game to hunt, and fish in the rivers and lakes. An explorer does not need an industry to support him, he just needs a gun and a pair of snow shoes. And a fountain pen; why I shall soon explain. Insights into geography and science would then come to him, almost naturally.

He advocated an Inuit world view. This was a dangerous man, a northern counterpart to the kind of opting out of Western life that Gauguin had just tried for Tahiti.

Like many creative and responsible citizens, Stefansson moved gradually into the tempting but diffuse domain of politics. *The Northward Course of Empire* was an attempt to turn the attention of Canadians, and their government, to the riches of the North. It would be an exaggeration to say that he succeeded, the book only sold a few hundred copies there. Canada's love affair with the North came later.

Born to a protestant, liberal background, with his cosmopolitan heart always open for the poor and oppressed, he engaged in civil rights and in minority issues. When he also started talking, during the war years in particular, of the need to build bridges across the Arctic with the Soviet Union, he became the subject of an increasing interest from the FBI, who suspected that Stefansson was a national security risk.

Accusations may seem exaggerated. He was reported to have said that "there is no reason to fear Soviet invasion through Alaska." And he helped a friend, who was accused by Senator McCarthy to be a Moscow spy, to sell some property to somebody who just happened to be a person who had run for the post as governor of Alabama on a Communist Party ticket. These were too many coincidences for the FBI, and Stefansson was summoned to the Attorney General of New Hampshire to be interviewed of all he knew about "Communism".

FBI's interest had in fact aroused earlier, already in the 1930's, when Stefansson was a member of virtually dozens of progressive groups such as the Committee of Fair Play for Puerto Rico, and the Committee for the Protection of the Foreign Born. In the McCarthy years no suspicion was small enough to warrant action.

The FBI files have recently been researched by David Price (2004) and it is apparent that the fact that Stefansson's views were cited by the *Daily Worker*, a communist paper, spoke to his disadvantage, despite the fact that he seems to have had no direct links with communist organizations. What he did do was that he lectured, generously, to organizations such as the National Institute of American Soviet Friendship in Ottawa, and the American Russian Institute in New York. He opened his farm in Vermont to the boy scouts, which caused the patriotic *Journal American* to express their concern that the "Red Fascist", as he was called, would indoctrinate innocent American youth. His wife, Evelyn, whose family background was Hungarian and who struggled to learn to speak Russian when they first met in New York in the late 1930's, was considered a ruthless Communist spy, "indoctrinating Dartmouth students and misleading [Stefansson] while masquerading as a teacher of the Russian language".

The more serious background to this was the fact that the Arctic was becoming increasingly important geopolitically during the war and the ensuing Cold War. Knowledge of the Arctic was of strategic importance, and Stefansson's poor sense of political tactics certainly did not help. In 1949 he published an essay, "The Soviet Union Moves North," where he compared what he saw as an ambitious, therefore good, Arctic policy in the Soviet Union with the sluggish performance in the US and Canada.

Stefansson himself did not suffer deeply from the interest that McCarthyism showed in him. Economically independent from his book sales, and after selling off his huge private Arctic library to Dartmouth College, he could rather amuse himself with the quite silly accusations.

Except on one point, sad in the memory of academic internationalism. In 1946 he signed a contract with the US Navy to become the editor in chief of a major *Encyclopaedia Arctica* to be published in 20 volumes. Like he always did he went around the circumpolar world to find the best contributors he could think of, including ones in the Soviet Union. At precisely the same time the FBI files on him grew, and somehow the Navy was informed. It is still to this day not clear what happened, but the effect was that the Navy terminated the contract after only two years without giving any substantial explanation. By then two volumes were ready for print, but they never came out, nor did the remaining eighteen.

What stands out in Stefansson's career, is his everlasting conviction that the Arctic is not a desolate and barren place, a reserve for caribou and scientists. The opposite: he knew from his own experience that the Arctic is a place for humans. He insisted that the North was part of history, and would be so even more in the future.

So, if in one sense it might be tempting to lump Stefansson together with climate determinists like the infamous Yale meteorologist Ellsworth Huntington, who around the same time in the 1910s and 1920s claimed that it was the harsh climate that had fostered the so called "high civilizations," it would nevertheless be completely wrong. Stefansson was, ultimately, of a different kind of mentality altogether. He was not in the business of demonstrating that the Norse breed was in any way superior.

He just wanted to say that the entire world is a human enterprise. He would underwrite Charles Darwin's words from his Beagle diary: "We may be all netted together in one gigantic mode of experience".

The Arctic was no exception.

## II

Now, what about Ahlmann? How does he enter the story?

He does on the 15<sup>th</sup> day of February, 1937. On that day Stefansson writes a letter in his Morton Street apartment in New York. The addressee is Ahlmann. A Norwegian friend of the Swede, Helge Ingstad, had informed Stefansson that the Stockholm geographer could help him with interpretations of the diaries kept by Nils Strindberg during the fatal 1897 Arctic balloon expedition with "The Eagle" (Swedish: "Örnen") that was led by engineer Salomon August Andrée. The letter started a correspondence that continued for three years. As always, Stefansson was also on the lookout for books, and begged and bought at the same time.

The big issue was whether Strindberg had written an entry – with a fountain pen – for the 17<sup>th</sup> October 1897 stating: "home at 7.05 am," on or before the date, a date when the other two on the expedition team, Andrée and Knut Fraenkel, were already dead, and probably Strindberg too.

Ahlmann was positive: the entry was written even before the party had left Stockholm. This was the regular arrival time to Stockholm's Central station of the overnight train from the North, the date and time when young Strindberg was to return to see his loved one. That was also the reason Strindberg had used a fountain pen, in the field he wrote with a pencil.

But Stefansson was persistent and kept asking new questions, on possibilities of carbon monoxide poisoning as a cause of Andrée's and Fraenkel's death, on possibilities of getting tests done on the remains of the bodies. Impossible, says Ahlmann. Always an optimist, Stefansson does not give up. Would it not have been possible for Strindberg to use a fountain pen in the field? Of course. But how to keep the ink from freezing? Have I not written volumes in the Arctic using a fountain pen? Never fill the pen more than three quarters full. Allow the ink to freeze. But always remember: freeze the ink with the pen standing upwards. Then thaw it at night. Then write.

As you may know, I have kept in the field more voluminous diaries than perhaps any other explorer usually writing hundreds of words for each day's entry, and sometimes thousands. Practically all that writing was done with a fountain pen, the ink in which froze every day – but, as said, always with the pen in a vertical position. (Stefansson to Ahlmann, 27 September 1938)

Ahlmann, himself an avid field worker, must have mused in his old Stockholm observatory, dating from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, where he lived with his Norwegian wife Lillemor and met students at drinking parties in the cellar, when he was not in the field.

Ahlmann had for a long time worked with Scandinavian glaciers and had visited Spitsbergen in 1910, but his Arctic career really did not take off until the early 1930's. The launching event was when the corpses of the Andrée expedition were found on White Island in August 1930 and returned to Sweden in October the same year. Ahlmann became a member of the commission that was responsible for the event and the ensuing exhibition of the remnants of the expedition and also with the publishing of the expedition's papers. The following year Ahlmann made his first Arctic expedition to Svalbard.

The return of the corpses to Stockholm was the symbolic event of an already gone patriotic, grandiose epoch of Swedish Polar science. The ceremony took place only weeks after the Stockholm exhibition had closed with its emphasis on social engineering, welfare,

technology, functionalist architecture, and egalitarian ideas. There had been no royalty, no empire, no glaciers. It had been white, light, future – whereas the October procession of the corpses was all rain and darkness, all solemn tragedy, all past.

Ahlmann's program for Arctic research had two features. First, it was an obligation to try and find the still hidden truths of our planet. Especially it was the mission of the Scandinavian countries to find out as much as possible about the Arctic, that was so close and that they knew better than many others. Second, knowledge about the Arctic was "a necessity" for Scandinavia, since the Arctic present was the key to the understanding of the Scandinavian past. Moreover, the Arctic regulated Scandinavia's climate. The Nordic countries belonged to the same part of the world as the Arctic Sea.

Ahlmann's programme for polar research was a conscious and deliberate departure from the earlier punch-stained, royal version. It was fully congenial with the modernist spirit of the Stockholm exhibition. He stressed science, he stressed international cooperation, he wanted usefulness of results. He stressed disciplinary specialization. There is no such thing, he said, as a "polar scientist." There is only "the modern polar expedition, the mission of which is to examine only a certain group of phenomena."

One of the major results from his own glaciological studies was that the glaciers retreated rapidly in the 1930's and early 1940's. His early observations in Spitsbergen indicated this, and in 1936 he set up a field station on the Vatnajökull glacier in Iceland where he worked with his Icelandic colleagues and in particular with his own student Sigurdur Thórarinsson. Together they found further evidence of remarkable changes in weather conditions in northern areas.

Ahlmann drew the conclusion that more data were needed and he intensified his efforts to establish networks with colleagues around the circumpolar North in order to found field stations to secure a better understanding of the phenomena. He continued research in Northeast Greenland in 1939 and 1940 and after the war he founded a field station at the Tarfala glacier in Lapland which is still in operation.

The results of his glaciological work left no doubt: the weather was getting warmer. Indeed, they were so stunning that he was invited to lecture tours in Norway, and in England, where his ideas received a particular popularity: Ahlmann's "climate embetterment" would finally rid the British of their cool summers, and newspapers ran cartoons of pale Britons with bare legs. In the United States Ahlmann made it to the *TIME Magazine* in 1952, which is rare for scientists.

To us this may seem ordinary. Was it not just global warming? At the time it was far from ordinary. It was sensational. Not even the concept was there.

Ahlmann's interpretation was meteorological, he believed change in weather systems near the equator could explain high precipitation on Iceland glaciers and warmer summers that melted them off more quickly. He disregarded the theory, advanced half a century earlier by Svante Arrhenius, another Swedish scientist, that warmer atmosphere is caused by the greenhouse effect which may be caused by the burning of fossil fuels.

In other words, the Arrhenius explanation, which has been the obvious favorite among scientists for the last 25 years, was not easily at hand in the 1940's – I think principally

because that was before the environment had been established as a social and political issue. Only when the environment became, so to speak, a man made problem, human climate forcing became a valid hypothesis.

Ahlmann had created many reasons for himself to go abroad for further contacts. He organized a Norwegian-British-Swedish Antarctic expedition in the late 1940's, a pioneering effort in the establishing of Antarctica as a continent by and for science.

He traveled to the Soviet Union after the war and was quite impressed with the way the Soviets worked, although there was no McCarthy to question him on his return. Rather, he was met by the foreign minister of Sweden, Östen Undén, who called upon him to serve as ambassador to Oslo, in his beloved Norway.

After the Second World War he emerged as something of a science diplomat. Not only did he serve as ambassador, he was chair of the international society of glaciologists, and on the board of the International Union of Geographers. His great vision was to establish a "glaciological research network around the earth." He believed strongly in science as a means of establishing better international relations, even as an instrument to achieve peace. And when we come into the 1960's and early 1970's he would express concerns over global injustices and help out in the planning of development aid.

### III

Stefansson and Ahlmann were men of different character – but they shared a lot in common. They were devoted researchers in and of the Arctic, and they did their research not just for the sake of science itself. They both believed strongly that there was a future in the North. Science was a means, one of many, to foster international cooperation and to understand northern conditions in order to establish the North as a place to live and to be.

In the half century or so that has passed since they left the stage a lot has happened in Arctic research. Perhaps the most remarkable development is the increase in work not only on but with Arctic peoples. If the Arctic once was a region which used to function as a laboratory for the production of scientific knowledge, it is now much more than that, or rather, the production of knowledge is done differently.

Yet this emerging image still has some way to go to gain full understanding. Not least are there still some of the established scientific associations and professional organizations that, perhaps through old inertia have some difficulties taking a new and wider, more human, agenda on board. But this is increasingly becoming a minority position.

Soon, in 2007 and 2008, there will be a new International Polar Year. Such polar years have been organized since 1882-83 with 25 or 50 years interval. The last occasion was 1957/58. That year achieved the establishment of the Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research, SCAR, and laid the groundstones of the Antarctic Treaty. No small results. These institutions have formed an infrastructure on which we have based our activities in Antarctica for decades.

What will be the legacy of the upcoming IPY 2007-08? My assumption – and my hope – is that this will be, finally, the major breakthrough for a true social science and humanities

polar science agenda. In fact, I may tell you that I have traveled to Reykjavik directly from a meeting in Cambridge where several of the leading Arctic social scientists and scholars had assembled together with funding organizations to discuss a major European research initiative.

Over the last few months there have been intense activities among us social scientists to try and pursue the meeting of the International Council of Scientific Unions, ICSU, to take a stronger program for the social sciences and humanities on board the IPY. And there were trustworthy signals at the Cambridge meeting that this stands a good chance of happening at the ICSU meeting in Paris next week.

Things do change. Things can be changed. This is the lasting legacy of Stefansson's and Ahlmann's attempts to explain to us that we all live in or with an Arctic that is not an exception from the rest of the world, but part of it. Part of the common history that we go on making, every day. "Netted together, in one gigantic mode of experience."

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