

HEROINES OF GREENLAND: ROBIN ACLAND

With a large audience once again for the U3A monthly meeting, Robin Acland gave an informative and engaging talk on a range of intriguing women who had found Greenland a fascinating country and spent much of their lives visiting the cold arctic island. Its dimensions are huge but there are still only about 57,000 residents, all living on or near the steep, rocky coastline. A large proportion of today's population are Inuit, indigenous people who also inhabit the northern parts of Canada and Scandinavia. There is a long history of poor relations between the Inuit and invaders.

A renowned place in Greenland is Brattahlid, Erik the Red's Viking colony established in south-western Greenland toward the end of the 10th century. Ummannaq, about 400 miles north of the Arctic Circle, is the site where in 1972 a family of eight Inuit from about 1450 were found frozen in time. They were three sisters with their three daughters and their young sons, four and six months old.

In 1721 Hans Egede, a Norwegian clergyman, founded a trading company and established a Lutheran mission near present-day Nuuk. Hans married Gertrude Rask in 1707. She supported her husband's missionary work among the Inuit, particularly nursing those who contracted smallpox, a disease brought in by the immigrants and of which she died in 1735.

A particularly intrepid female explorer was Josephine Peary, an American author and arctic explorer. She married Robert Peary who claimed to be the first to have reached the geographic North Pole. With him, she ventured over the ice fields to reach further North than any white woman had previously and accompanied her husband on his renowned Arctic expeditions.

Another 'Heroine of Greenland' was Ruth Bryan Owen who served as the American ambassador to Greenland in the 1930s, as the first American woman in such a role. She wrote 'Leaves from a Greenland Diary', a fascinating account of her tour of Greenland's coastal settlements.

Isobel Hutchison was an independent Scottish Arctic traveller who wrote poetry, books and gave talks describing her travels to Greenland enhanced by her films, photographs and paintings. She wore the traditional kamiks, sealskin thigh length boots, to protect against the cold and also biting insects. Her acclaimed 'On Greenland's Closed Shore' earned her this accolade from 'The Scotsman' in 1939: 'Miss Hutchison is, you feel, much too fragile and gentle for the rigours of Arctic exploration. Dispensing tea in her sunlit sitting room, or sketching the glowing colours of her garden, she seems far more in her correct setting than battling against cold and hardship in half-civilised lands.'

Sir Walter William Herbert was again a British polar explorer, writer and artist. In 1969 he became the first man to walk undisputed to the North Pole. He married Marie Herbert who accompanied him in living with the Inuit and Saami in Greenland, Norway and Sweden.

A rather different 'heroine of Greenland' was an Inuit housekeeper, Salamina, with whom the famed American artist, Rockwell Kent, shared his life in Greenland for a year in the 1930s, as described in his collection of vignettes. Rockwell's Greenland paintings are still much sought after.

Louise Arner Boyd (1887 to 1972) wrote 'Polar Adventures of a rich American dame' and was the first American woman to lead Arctic expeditions. She was a self-taught polar

scientist, cartographer and photographer. Using the wealth inherited from her parents, she funded a hunting and filming trip to the Arctic and led scientific expeditions to Greenland in the 1930s, collecting hundreds of botanical specimens. Her book 'The Coast of Northeast Greenland' was published in 1948.

Frederika de Laguna 1906 to 2004 was an American anthropologist who sailed to Greenland as Therkel Matthiasen's assistant on an archaeological excavation. This convinced her of her role as an anthropologist, writing 'Voyage to Greenland: A Personal Initiation into Anthropology'. She was a gifted writer and photographer as evidenced in her numerous professional publications between 1934 and 2004. Dr. de Laguna wrote in "Voyage to Greenland", a memoir of her first field trip, made when she was 22, 'The sun shines warmly over my back, the rich, sweet smell of rotted blubber rises from the saturated earth.' She travelled thousands of miles by boat, leading expeditions to very remote villages. She endured the bitter cold, frozen ground, ravenous mosquitoes and anyone who questioned her ability.

Leni Riefenstahl was involved in the film 'S.O.S. Eisberg' based on a polar expedition of 1929-30. She hugely enjoyed the experience of Greenland, finding the land 'magical' as she 'glided through gates of ice, past glittering and towering icebergs, through shimmering grottoes, whose walls were reflected all the way down into the water — green, pink, blue, and violet.'

The Danish photographer and film maker, Jette Bang, photographed and made films of Greenland Inuit, depicting the country and its ways of life in the 1930s. She travelled to Greenland six times portraying its changes over the period up to the 1960s. Altogether, Robin discovered for us a wonderful array of women fascinated by Greenland and was warmly applauded.

The Trapper Rockwell Kent

