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A Visit to the Eskimos

By Dr. I. M. Rabinowitch.

President Bishop:—Distinguished guests, fellow-members of the Canadian Club and all who may be listening over the radio: Our intellectual diet today is somewhat varied from what we have had in the past, dealing with treaties and economics of foreign countries, in that we have as our guest-speaker, Dr. I. M. Rabinowitch, of McGill University, who is going to talk on Eskimos. Dr. Rabinowitch is a Toronto boy, partly educated at the University of Toronto, which he later left for the wider learning offered by McGill, where he is now Assistant Professor of Medicine and Lecturer in Pathological Chemistry. He is also Director of the department of Metabolism, and Toxicologist of the Montreal General Hospital and Chief of the clinic for diabetics. His work has taken him among the Eskimos, and I understand he has written three or four hundred articles on diseases of various sorts, which have been published in various leading medical journals. That is sufficient warrant for him coming here today, and, on your behalf, I offer him a very hearty welcome.

Dr Rabinowitch:—Colonel Bishop, Honored Guests and members of the Canadian Club: My first word today is one of thanks, and I would like to add that I am not insensible to the honor, which the invitation to address you carries. I must say, that in spite of all the nice things you have done and said, I am not entirely certain of the purpose of this invitation. To the vast majority of the audience and to the chairman of the program committee this is the Lenten Season. Now I understand, that is a period of penitence and self-discipline, when you are supposed to deny

yourselves the nice things and inflict upon yourself mortification and perhaps mental torture. I may not altogether disappoint you.

I have been asked to speak of my experiences during the Eastern Arctic Patrol of 1935, but aside from the medical data there is probably nothing new in anything I shall have to say, because when the Royal Mail Steamer Naskapi returned with me, she had completed the two hundred and sixty-sixth annual expedition of the Hudson Bay Company into the Arctic, and most of the experiences of those expeditions must have been carefully preserved. In addition there are the records of the Canadian Government.

It is sixty years since the administration was transferred from the Hudson Bay Company, and as early as 1884 the Department of Marine and Fisheries sent an expedition to investigate the navigation and fisheries of the Arctic. In the archives of the department of the Interior there must be available full documents of their observations, and there are also records of explorers dating back to the sixteenth century when Frobisher first entered the Bay and discovered Baffin's land.

The Eastern Arctic Patrol of 1935 differed perhaps from previous explorations and expeditions because, in addition to the medical investigation, there were included meteorological, entomological and geodetic surveys, and also an investigation as to the philatelic possibilities by the postal services.

I should like to give a word of warning that anything I may have to say should be judged in the light of the very limited experience I have had. It is important to appreciate that, in order not to get caught in the ice, the ship which carries the comforts and supplies to the Hudson Bay Company, the Police, Missionaries and others, must travel approximately ten thousand miles, discharge cargo in twenty ports, the entrance to which is dependent on tides, and do all this in the very short period of two months.

In 1935 the period was two months almost to the day—from July 23rd to September 22nd. I emphasize these facts in order to show the limitations and it is failure to recognize these facts that has led to so much misinformation and

misunderstanding of the conditions under which the Police, The Hudson Bay Company and the Missionaries labor.

The voyage itself could form the subject matter of an interesting address, because it offers a striking example of what has been done in the exploration of the far north of Canada. It should be remembered that up to as late as the middle of the 19th century there was not even steam power available for the ships going north. Our vessel, the Naskapi, was specially built for Arctic waters, and in addition there is a better knowledge of the conditions likely to be encountered due to the Hydrography services of the Department of Marine.

In addition to that, through the Straits and Bay there are navigation lights, direction-finding stations and patrol boats. This, however, does not imply that the navigation of the Arctic waters compares in safety with the navigation of the North Atlantic, because what I have said of safety measures applies to the Straits and Bay only. Once we leave the Straits and Bay, with one or two exceptions, safety depends on the knowledge of local conditions on the part of the skipper of the ship, and one must wonder at the courage and success of the early explorers who lacked any of the facilities and equipment which are considered so essential today. All they had was the compass, and in these latitudes its variation is little short of miraculous. In St. James' Bay the variation is 17° west, in Hudson's Bay 45° west, and at Lismer Island the needle points to 102° west of north. In other words, if a mariner depended on the magnetic compass to take him north at this point he would be heading about 60° west of south.

Now as to the reasons for our voyage. It was the purpose of the Canadian Government to try to determine if contact with civilization was causing the Eskimos to deteriorate, and if so what were the specific causes. Quite frankly, when I received the invitation to join the expedition, I was not particularly interested, but there was also the prospect of being able to study certain diseases and their possible relation to diet. That did interest me, and as the methods of investigation were the same, I was able to collect data that proved beneficial.

The question may be asked: What are the benefits which may be derived from the survival of the Eskimos, and will those benefits offset the effort to maintain that survival? As to that there is, first, the humane factor and that requires no comment. Secondly, there is the scientific aspect, and that requires very little comment either. More important is the political factor, and that is important because Canada's Eastern Arctic territory must inevitably change into an international highway with the development of the Aeroplane. Montreal to Shanghai is 9,000 miles by aeroplane, following the Great Circle, but via the Arctic it is 7,000 miles only.

Aside from the political factor there is the economic factor, and that is largely concerned with the potential mineral wealth and with the fur industry. No one yet can even estimate the mineral wealth of the Arctic. Much has been done, but what has been done has been confined to the shore lines. Only in recent years have geologists attempted any research, and they too have been more or less confined to the shores.

Proof that the Dominion Government desires to keep the Eskimo alive is the 500,000 square miles that have been set aside for his sole use as a game preserve to provide him with food. The game laws that govern the land are not only indispensable to the Eskimo, but also to the fur industry, and I am told that the fur of the White fox is of more importance than all the other furs of the Arctic combined.

It has been argued that white men could replace Eskimos in these directions. It may be true, but I wonder how many white men would agree to live in the Arctic, year in and year out, and it would be essential for them to do that, if the fur trade is to be maintained in the Eastern Arctic. That is one reason why it is important that the Eskimos should be kept alive and healthy. There is another reason that the health of the Eskimos should be maintained.

It is not generally known, perhaps, but it is the fact, that the care of the Eskimos falls on the fur traders, inasmuch as they must look after the sick and indigent trappers. In other words a sick Eskimo means that the traders must support his family till he is well, and a dead trapper means that they must support his family indefinitely.

It is of interest, therefore, to know what steps are taken to keep them alive and healthy. It is the policy of the Hudson Bay Company to encourage them to live under conditions as near to their natural state as possible. They are encouraged to live on the food they can hunt for themselves, and as far as possible to get their clothes in the same way. And our data show that to be a very wise policy.

Most of our work was dependent for its success on the co-operation we received from traders, officials and natives, and I am glad to say that without exception the co-operation we received from these people was perfect, and such a condition reflects the admirable relations which are maintained between whites and natives.

To get back to our subject, we made our first acquaintance with the Eskimos at Chesterfield Inlet, where we met Anluti, an Aristocrat of the Eskimos. And from him we learnt that the word Eskimo is a term of contempt and means "Raw-meat-eater." Their name for themselves is Anawik, which means THE People, and they believe that white men visit them to learn something about their manners, and that might not be such a bad idea either.

The origin of the Eskimo might well form the subject of an address. You probably all know that the Supreme Court has been asked to decide if the Eskimo is Indian. That is, of course, for economic reasons only. Ethnologically there is very little similarity. Their features are quite different. From their general appearance it would appear that they are of Mongolian origin, and another piece of evidence that points that way is in their word Kayak, which, to the Eskimo, means a skin-covered canoe. In Mongolian it means a birch-covered canoe.

In our travels through the Straits and Bay we saw widely differing conditions of life. Toward the south we found the natives eating cereals, using blankets for bedding, guns instead of harpoons, and motor boats instead of kayaks. But as we got farther North, we saw a race of people who were not so very far ahead of the stone age,—a primitive people with a very primitive culture, leading a nomadic existence in a barren land where life is one long-continued struggle for survival. Just how primitive is their state can be seen from their method of counting. They can only

count up to five—the number of the fingers of one hand. If an Eskimo wishes to say six he says two times three. Twenty is known as a man—that is ten fingers and ten toes. Thus, if he wishes to express seventy-seven, he does so by saying three men plus two times five plus two times three plus one.

The harshness of the life of the Eskimos is seen in their clothing and their homes. Even in the summer they wear sealskins. We did see them sometimes in cottons and woollens, but only on special festival occasions such as the arrival of a ship. In winter they wear caribou skins. In winter their houses are snow igloos, and in summer light structures covered with skin, and held down by rocks.

There are suggestions, however, that the Eskimo did not always lead such a nomadic life, and once in a while you will come across a stone igloo, that gives some evidence of a more settled form of existence. But whether nomadic or settled, the dominating thought of the Eskimo is of food, and one can trace this in his naming of the months of the year. He calls them "It is cold," "Sun is rising," "Baby seals arrive," "Seal takes to water," "Seals shed their coats," "Cariboo young are born," and so on.

Their primitive nature is also shown in the matter of eating. An animal always gorges itself with food, and the same thing applies to the more primitive among the Eskimos. Meat is their one food and they do not always have enough. When there is plenty available, an adult will eat from five to fifteen pounds at one meal, and he has little craving for variety.

There is an impression abroad that the Eskimos live entirely on meat and fat, but that is not the case. He does obtain a very fair amount of starches. He is very fond of liver, and the liver of every animal is rich in animal starches. He also relishes the stomach contents of the caribou, and when he catches a walrus he always opens up the stomach and eats the contents. He relishes, too, the skin of the whale and the narwhal and this is excessively rich in glycogen.

When food is plentiful during the short summer, he must prepare for the long winter and for that reason he caches his food in among the rocks. In due course of time it put-

refies, and one can easily tell if there is a food cache within a mile or so. This sounds fairly horrible, but we must not forget that we like our cheese in pretty much the same condition.

One very interesting point with regard to the health of the Eskimos is the complete absence of ricketts among the children, and we were able to verify this observation by X-ray examinations. To those of you who are not familiar with the cause of ricketts I would explain that the disease results from deficiency of Vitamin D, and we obtain this from certain rays of the sun. Now it just so happens that as we go farther north the effect of these rays becomes less and less and less. Further the Eskimo is somewhat highly pigmented, and so protected from their action and unable to absorb them fully. Why, therefore, are there no ricketts? The reason is that the mothers have recognized the importance of milk in the diet of their children, and the children may be breast-fed up to the age of four years. The reason for this is that the mothers are the only source of milk supply. There is some available from the reindeer but the quantity is negligible. Another reason is that when a child is taken from the breast, whale oil forms a considerable portion of its diet, and whale oil is equally as good as the best cod liver oil.

There is another myth I should like to dispel, when I speak of the Eskimos, (I mean, of course, of the pure Eskimos). They are not a lazy people, for laziness is not compatible with survival in the conditions under which they live. Early in life they begin to train to meet these conditions. A favorite game of the boys is to go off into some strange part of the country, with only one day's food supplies, for a journey or two or three days. The object of the game is to get back without being hungry. It is only a game, but it is intimately connected with the food problem that will face them when they are grown up.

With regard to culture it is important to recognize that they are a very primitive people whose life is one long bitter struggle for existence. Culture is the product of leisure and the Eskimo has no leisure. But he has brains, and it is remarkable what he can do with the very primitive resources at his disposal.

They are a very happy people when food is plentiful, and I think their happiness is very largely due to their contentedness with things which we regard as very trivial. Amongst the Eskimos themselves there is perfect co-operation. They must co-operate if they are to exist. If an Eskimo catches a whale or a seal, the meat is divided up among the whole community.

Until very recently, I was told, there was no such word as "Thanks" among the Eskimos. And for a very good reason. No man is always lucky, and some men are seldom lucky. And the man who is not lucky shares, as a right, with those who are. Some day, they realize, the position is likely to be reversed. Therefore there is no need for thanks, since the sharing is a right, and so the language has hitherto not contained any word that expressed that meaning.

Much has been said at one time or another about the custom of adopting children. It seems an excellent practice, for there is no orphan problem amongst the Eskimos. Of 74 families we investigated seventeen had adopted children, and of 114 children, 25 had been adopted. To some extent selfish motives enter into this adopting of children, in that through them the Eskimo seeks to make some provision for support in his old age. But that selfishness is not the only motive is apparent, for some prosperous families, with three or four children of their own already, had adopted others.

Amongst the Eskimos there is no quarrelling. If they cannot agree they move away from each other.

Their practice of interchange of wives is not to be set down to moral depravity. It is based on economic necessity, and this also applies to child marriage. I recall that when we landed at Halifax on our return, I made one or two observations about their marriage customs, and the man I spoke to was horrified at their practices, and he roundly condemned similar practices in India. So I quoted him some statistics.

As late as 1932, there were still in the United States of America no less than fourteen states that permitted the marriage of girls at the age of twelve and of boys at the age

of fourteen, and 667,000 marriages in that enlightened country were of children of fifteen years and under. That ended that argument.

In Eskimo marriages there is no ceremony, and polygamy is permitted if the Eskimo can afford it. From what I have seen of religion, there are more converts to ceremony than to belief. The tragedy of their religion comes in the burial of the dead, for according to their beliefs, they have no souls. When, therefore, they die, everything is at an end.

As to the scientific data we gathered, I shall only attempt to give a very brief outline. The purpose of our investigations was to determine, if possible, whether contact with civilization was causing deteriorization among the Eskimos. To arrive at this careful histories have been kept and careful investigations made. By combining all the data a very fair picture has been obtained. I have already said that in the Straits and Bay the Eskimos are in close contact with civilization, while in the north they are in their primitive state. In the Straits and Bay there was a great deal of tuberculosis. The natives have much cleaner habits in these parts, but health is generally not so good. Caries was very common in their teeth. The further north we went the dirtier we found the natives, but they were also healthier. It is a curious fact that amongst the Eskimos filth seems to be quite compatible with good health. They have a high resistance to organisms that would be more or less fatal to us, and they can stand extreme temperatures, but they have no resistance to the organisms that we bring in. The white man is a carrier of bacteria, and while no member of a ship's company may have a cold, an epidemic of that disease among the natives invariably follows the arrival of every ship.

On the whole I would say that the conditions we found amongst the pure Eskimos showed that they were not only healthy but almost too healthy. Their haemoglobin was from 50 to 100 per cent. higher than ours and they suffer from polycythemia.* They use the same treatment as we do. When the blood pressure is raised too high we remove

*Excess of red corpuscles in the blood.

a certain amount of blood, and the Eskimo has learned to do that for himself.

About dogs. In the winter they form the only means of transportation in the Arctic. The preservation of the dog is just as much a problem as the preservation of the Eskimo and there is the same relationship between food and health. Walrus meat is the best food and gives the dog the greatest pulling power and the most growth. Whale meat, on the other hand, gives them very fine coats, but they remain small and weedy on that diet. Fish is bad food for dogs, and caribou meat is the worst of all. They grow lean and weedy on caribou and become irritable and almost unmanageable. The places we found the best dogs, were the places where the biggest supplies of walrus meat were available. Salisbury has long been known as producing the best dogs.

One question that might be asked is: "Is the Eskimo disappearing?"

Again, in order to answer that, one must separate the Eskimo of the Straits and Bay from the pure Eskimo of the northern lands. In the Straits and Bay he is disappearing from degenerative diseases and diseases of the heart, but in the north the population is growing. When we allow for infant mortality and the number of natives who have left the district, we find that the far north means healthy Eskimos, and a population that is not only not decreasing, but actually increasing.

Now, gentlemen, my time is up, and I can only say that if mental torture is what you were after, I imagine you have found it.

COLONEL BISHOP:—Dr. Rabinowitch, I think I can disillusion you on the question of torture. The rapt attention with which the members have listened to what you had to say is proof there was nothing of that in your speech. You provided a most interesting forty-five minutes, and we are most grateful to you for coming here today and telling us about these Canadians, for *they are* Canadians. This is the first talk on Eskimos we have had in the history of the club, and it gives me great pleasure to thank you most sincerely for it.