

## PROLOGUE

### Pond's Bay, Baffin Island

**O**N A WARM summer day in 1823, the *Cumbrian*, a 360-ton British whaler, sailed into the waters off Pond's Bay (now Pond Inlet), northern Baffin Island, after a short excursion to the north. The waters of Lancaster Sound, where she had been, were supposed to be a promising "new water," but the *Cumbrian* hadn't struck a whale in two weeks of cruising. Worse, in her captain's view, the forty-odd ships that had chosen instead to dally at the mouth of Pond's Bay had met with spectacular success in her absence. "Several ships," lamented Captain Johnson in his log, "had captured upwards of 12, one or two [ships] 15 apiece, and one had got full. . . ."

But the *Cumbrian* did not have long to wait. The newly discovered waters of western Baffin Bay, the West Water, teemed with the men's special prey, the Greenland whale. On the very next day, July 28, they killed three. In the days that followed they took another twelve, for a total of twenty-three for the season. On August 20 the *Cumbrian* sailed for ice-free waters off the coast of Greenland and then doubled Cape Farewell for England. The whale blubber she carried would render 236 tons of oil to light the street lamps of Great Britain and process the coarse wool of its textile mills. Also in her hold were more than four and a half tons of whalebone (baleen), to be turned into umbrella staves and venetian blinds, portable sheep pens, window gratings, and furniture springing.

The *Cumbrian* made port at Hull on September 26, to dock-side cheers. Young boys from town swarmed her rigging in quest of the traditional garland of sun-bleached ribbons, halfway up the main-topgallant mast. The ship's owners beamed with pleasure. The year before the *Cumbrian* had taken but half this many whales, for no ship that year had been able to breach the ice in Davis Strait. And in 1821 the *Cumbrian* had returned with grim news—three ships from Hull, and at least four others from British ports, were lost, crushed in the ice.

The season of 1823 eased these awful memories. The West Water off Pond's Bay seemed most promising. And the *Cumbrian* had also brought back walrus hides and ivory, traded from the Eskimos of West Greenland and northern Baffin Island. And also several narwhal tusks. If the prices for oil and whalebone held, if there were a few good ice-years back to back, and if London didn't rescind the industry's price supports or abolish the protective trade tariffs. . . .

None of this had been much on the minds of the men of the *Cumbrian*. In the West Water, they had worked the odd hours of men who knew no night, who jumped for the whaleboat davits whenever a "fish" was sighted. They slept sprawled on the decks

and are irregularly. Their days in the ice were heady, the weather splendid. The distant landscapes of Bylot and Baffin islands at Pond's Bay were etched brilliantly before them by a high-tempered light in air clear as gin—an unearthly sight that filled them with a mixture of disbelief and pleasure. They felt exhilaration in the constant light; and a sense of satisfaction and worth, which came partly from their arduous work.

The summer of 1823 marked a high point in the halcyon days of British arctic whaling, which followed the close of the Napoleonic Wars. The discovery of the West Water came at a time when the market for whale products was resurgent, and it made the merchants and investors of Hull and Peterhead, of Dundee and Aberdeen and Whitby, a rich bounty between 1818 and 1824. In 1825 it would begin to unravel—technological advances and British economic policy would weaken the home and foreign markets for oil and whalebone, and the too-frequent and expensive loss of uninsured ships would dry up investment capital. With 2000 whales killed in 1823 alone, overfishing, too, would begin to be a problem.

The object of all this attention was a creature the British had been hunting commercially for 212 years, first in the bays of Spitsbergen and in the loose pack ice of the Greenland Sea, then in the southern reaches of Davis Strait, and finally in the North Water and West Water of Baffin Bay. Long slats of blue-black, plankton-straining baleen hung from the roof of its mouth in a U-shaped curtain, some of the blades nearly 15 feet long. The stout body, with a massive head one-third the animal's length, was wrapped in blubber as much as 20 inches thick—a higher ratio of blubber to weight than that for any other whale. The blubber of a good-size animal might yield 25 tons of oil; its 300 or more baleen plates might mean more than a ton of whalebone. The 45-foot carcass—minus baleen and its flukes (taken to make glue) and flensed of its blubber—was cut adrift as a "crang" underneath ever-present, mobbing clouds of seabirds.

Because it was a slow swimmer, because it floated when it was

killed, and because of the unusual quantity of bone and oil it yielded, it was the right whale to take—the Greenland right. The polar whale. *The* whale. Later, in the western Arctic, it would be called "bowhead," after the outline of its jaw.

The skin of this animal is slightly furrowed to the touch, like coarse-laid paper, and is a velvet-black color softened by gray. Under the chin and on the belly the skin turns white. Its dark brown eyes, the size of an ox's, are nearly lost in the huge head. Its blowhole rises prominently, with the shape of a volcano, allowing the whale to surface in narrow cracks in the sea ice to breathe. It is so sensitive to touch that at a bird's footfall a whale asleep at the surface will start wildly. The fiery pain of a harpoon strike can hardly be imagined. (In 1856 a harpooner aboard the *Truelove* reported striking a whale that dived so furiously it took out 1200 yards of line in three and a half minutes before crashing into the ocean floor, breaking its neck and burying its head eight feet deep in blue-black mud.)

Its strength is prodigious. A bowhead harpooned in the Greenland Sea took out 10,440 yards (7000 pounds) of line, snapping two 2¼-inch hemp lines (one of 1560 yards, the other 3360 yards) and pulling an entangled 28-foot whaleboat down with it before it was subdued. On May 27, 1817, thirty hours after it had been harpooned, another Greenland right whale was still towing a fully rigged ship at two knots into a "moderate brisk breeze."

The pursuit of this animal was without restraint. A month before she entered Lancaster Sound in 1823, the *Cumbrian* killed a huge Greenland right, a 57-foot female, in Davis Strait. They came upon her while she was asleep in light ice. Awakened by their approach, she swam slowly once around the ship and then put her head calmly to its bow and began to push. She pushed the ship backward for two minutes before the transfixed crew reacted with harpoons. The incident left the men unsettled. They flinched against such occasional eeriness in their work.

Precisely where they then stood in Davis Strait, off the north-

ern west coast of Greenland, an odd whistling sound was sometimes heard by whalers in calm weather like this—a high note that eventually faded away to a very low note. It was the sign of a gale coming, from the direction most feared in that quarter, the southwest. The louder the whistle, the harder the winds would blow. They heard no whistling that year as they worked their way through the ice streams—but they had not liked the whale pushing against them, as though urging them to go back.

Many were ill at ease with arctic whaling, because of the threat to their lives presented by the unpredictable sea ice; but also in the regions where they hunted they found a beauty more penetrating and sublime than any they had ever known—so they said in their journals. Glaciers collapsed into the dark green sea before them like cliffs of marble as high as the Cliffs of Dover. Winds tore water from melt ponds atop icebergs, to trail off in sheets of rain-bowing mists. Pods of white belukha whales glided ghostlike beneath their keels. A thousand auklets roared through the ship's rigging in a wildshower of sound. Walruses with their gleaming tusks and luminous whiskers swam slowly across calm bays in water burning like manganese in the evening sun. Men wrote in earnest, humble prose that they were overwhelmed by the "loveliness and grandeur."

What they saw made the killing seem inappropriate; but it was work, too, security for their families, and they could quickly put compassion and regret aside. "The object of the adventure," wrote one captain, "the value of the prize, the joy of the capture, cannot be sacrificed to feelings of compassion."

On the 27th of July, still lamenting the wasted days cruising in Lancaster Sound, the *Cumbrian* was bearing south along landfast ice east of Bylot Island, past the gruesome evidence of other ships' successes. "Here and there," the log reads, "along the floe edge lay the dead bodies of hundreds of flenched whales . . . the air for miles around was tainted with the foetor which arose from such masses of putridity. Towards evening, the numbers come across were ever

increasing, and the effluvia which then assailed our olfactories became almost intolerable."

The northern fulmars and glaucous gulls wheeled and screeched over the crangs. It was the carnage of wealth.

At the southeast tip of Bylot Island that year the local Eskimo, the Tununirmiut, had established a narwhal hunting camp. They traded informally with the British whalers, whom they called *upirnaagiiit*, "the men of springtime"—offering polar bear skins, walrus hides and ivory, and sealskin mitts for tin pots, needles, steel knives, and other useful or decorative items. In later years this trading would become a hedge for shipowners, a commercial necessity when the whaling alone no longer paid. Ships' captains would turn to furs, hides, ivory, and the collection of zoo animals to make ends meet. But those years, years of exploitation and social change for the Eskimo, lay ahead. For the moment the Tununirmiut were still aboriginal hunters, their habits largely unchanged by an availability of trade goods. They moved nomadically over the sea ice and the land, according to the itineraries of the animals they pursued for food, clothing, tools, and utensils.

If one were to generalize about this early trading relationship, it would be to say that the Eskimo were trying to accommodate themselves—in carefully limited ways—to an unfamiliar culture that could produce whale meat with ease, in astonishing quantities in little time, and that also made available a number of extremely useful items, such as canvas and saws. The Europeans, looking largely to their own ends, enjoyed the primitive and exotic aspects of these encounters. They were eager for souvenirs and sexual contact with the women, and hoped to trade for a profit. On those salubrious summer afternoons off Pond's Bay, then, young native women returned from the whaling ships to tell their husbands that the white men lived in tiers of hammocks like *appaliarsuit*—dovekies on a sea cliff. The husband wiped seal grease from his fingers with a ptarmigan wing and waited to see if she had brought, perhaps, some tobacco. The Eskimo put a great value on the basic

fact of their own long survival. They were not nearly as taken with the men and their ships as Europeans liked to believe.

The sophistication the whalers felt next to the Eskimo was a false sophistication, and presumptuous. The European didn't value the Eskimo's grasp of the world. And, however clever Eskimos might be with ivory implements and waterproof garments, he thought their techniques dated or simply quaint next to his own. A ship's officer of the time wrote summarily that the Eskimo was "dwindled in his form, his intellect, and his passions." They were people to be taken mild but harmless advantage of, to be chastised like children, but not to be taken seriously. The Europeans called them yaks.

As for the Eskimo, they thought the whalers strange for trying to get on without the skills and companionship of women. They gave them full credit for producing "valuable and convenient articles and implements," but laughed at their inability to clothe, feed, and protect themselves. They regarded the whalers with a mixture of *ilira* and *kappia*, the same emotions a visitor to the modern village of Pond Inlet encounters today. *Ilira* is the fear that accompanies awe; *kappia* is fear in the face of unpredictable violence. Watching a polar bear—*ilira*. Having to cross thin sea ice—*kappia*.

By the summer of 1832, after only a few years of commerce in the region, the whalers were already beginning to find the silent villages of spring—places where everyone had died during the winter of European diphtheria and smallpox. The apparently timeless Arctic, they saw, was in fact changeable. And the vast and particular knowledge of the Eskimo, garnered from hundreds of years of their patient interrogation of the landscape, was starting to slip away.

FAR to the northeast of Pond's Bay, west of Cape York on the Greenland coast, was a remarkable phenomenon whalers at the time called the Crimson Cliffs, red-tinged snow they variously explained as due to fungal growth or to the red mute of guillemots

feeding on shrimp.\* At an unknown spot to the east of those cliffs, a place the local Eskimos called Savissivik, was a collection of meteorites that the British heard about for the first time in 1818. (The Polar Eskimo chipped bits of iron-nickel from them for harpoon tips and knife blades, and for use in trade with other Eskimos. Among them *savik* meant both "knife" and "iron.") In 1823 even officers of the British whaling fleet had little idea where a meteorite might come from. They couldn't say, either, whether Greenland was actually an island. Nor at that time had anyone been within 500 miles of the North Pole. For all they knew, it was what Henry Hudson believed it was when he sailed for it in 1607, a massive boulder of black basalt sitting in the middle of a warm, calm sea. They were unaware that the Greenland right actually "sang," like the humpback whales they heard in the North Atlantic en route to the arctic fishery. The life history of the Greenland shark, an "unwholesome and lethargic brute" upon which the Danes would build Greenland's first commercial fishery (for the oil from its liver), was unknown to them. The existence of a culture that had preceded the Eskimo's in the Arctic was unsuspected, though they traded, unawares, for its artifacts.

In 1823 the North American Arctic was still as distant as fable, inhabited by remarkable animals and uncontacted peoples, the last undiscovered complex ecosystem on the planet. A landscape of numinous events, of a forgiving benediction of light, and a darkness so dunning it precipitated madness; of a cold that froze vinegar, that fractured whatever it penetrated, including the stones. It was uncharted, unclaimed territory, and Europeans had perished miserably in it since the time of the Norse—gangrenous with frostbite, poisoned by polar bear liver, rotted by scurvy, dead of exposure on the ice beside the wreckage of a ship burned to the water line for the last bit of its warmth.

\* The tint is from blood-red pigments in the cell walls of species of freshwater algae present on the snow.

The confidence and élan of the whalers at Pond's Bay was tempered with this macabre knowledge; and they suspected that their own ignorance of the place, even the ignorance of those among them who made such erudite notes about the biology of whales or the colors of plankton in the current, was extensive. They were overcome, however, by neither fear nor ignorance. Their vessels, for the moment, were "safe as a life boat and tight as a bottle." In two months they would be home to their families, with a year's pay and perhaps a pair of polar bear trousers to show, or a flint-blade knife for a son. And with stories to hold a neighbor enthralled, stories of a breathtaking escape from drowning, or of having collected 6000 eider eggs on a coastal flat one morning. Or of sleeping with an Eskimo woman.

It is easy to imagine their sense of wild adventure, that on one of those July afternoons off Pond's Bay, on a Sunday when a strict Christian captain would permit no whaling, that the crew might be lounging on the sunlit decks comparing exotic arctic souvenirs: the perplexing skull of a muskox, with its massive horn bosses and protruding eye orbitals—"from a kind of polar cattle," as they understood it from the Eskimo, which lived way off to the west and the north. Or a bit of chain mail, which, someone argued, was certain proof that Viking explorers had sailed far north of the Greenland settlements, hundreds of years before. Or a small ivory carving of a human face, twisted in psychotic anguish, an artifact from the vanished Dorset culture. They likely felt a tension between the unfamiliar quality of these objects and the commonplaces of their own daily lives—the boot-worn deck on which they sat, or the intricate but familiar rigging of sails and spars overhead.

Perhaps someone recalled having seen a polar bear once, far offshore in a storm, swimming with measured strokes through great dark seas—and, with that, introduced yet another tension peculiar to the place, that between beauty and violence. Or perhaps they spoke of the Eskimos, how astonishing they were to be able to survive here, how energetic and friendly; and yet how unnerving with their primitive habits: a mother wiping away a child's feces

with her hair, a man pinching the heart of a snared bird to kill it, so as not to ruin the feathers.

In their own separate, spare quarters, the ship's officers might have been reading William Scoresby's *Account of the Arctic Regions* or the recently published discovery narrative of William Parry, who had opened the way to the West Water in 1818 with John Ross. They admired Parry; overall, however, they viewed the British discovery expeditions—in ships that were ice-strengthened to a fare-thee-well, manned by inexperienced crews and commanded by officers seeking “imperishable renown”—as a pompous exercise in state politics, of little or no practical value.

Men and officers alike would have mused more on the blubber and bone below decks, for *that* was tangible wealth. These two parts of just a single whale would sell on the docks at Hull for ten to fifteen times what a man could expect to make in a year's work ashore.

The men on the decks, dozing in the sun on their day off, likely had no thought at all of how utterly devastating their way of life would prove to the Eskimo and the bowhead. They felt, instead, a sense of fortune. And they yearned for home.

THE Canadian historian W. Gillies Ross cautiously suggests that as many as 38,000 Greenland right whales may have been killed in the Davis Strait fishery, largely by the British fleet. A sound estimate of the size of that population today is 200. There are no similar figures for the number of native people in the region who fell to diphtheria, smallpox, tuberculosis, poliomyelitis, and other diseases—historians have suggested that 90 percent of the indigenous population of North America is not an unreasonable figure. The Eskimos are still trying, as it were, to recover.\*

\* “Eskimo” is an inclusive term, referring to descendants of the Thule cultural tradition in present-day Canada and the Punuk and Birnirk cultural traditions in modern-day Alaska. See note 2.

What happened around Pond's Bay in the heyday of arctic whaling represents in microcosm the large-scale advance of Western culture into the Arctic. It is a disquieting reminder that the modern industries—oil, gas, and mineral extraction—might be embarked on a course as disastrously short-lived as was that of the whaling industry. And as naive—our natural histories of this region 150 years later are still cursory and unintegrated. This time around, however, the element in the ecosystem at greatest risk is not the bowhead but the coherent vision of an indigenous people. We have no alternative, long-lived narrative to theirs, no story of human relationships with that landscape independent of Western science and any desire to control or possess. Our intimacy lacks historical depth, and is still largely innocent of what is obscure and subtle there.

And our conceptions of its ultimate value vary markedly. The future disposition of the Arctic is not viewed in the same way by a Montreal attorney working on the settlement of Inuit land claims and by a naval architect in Sweden designing an ice-breaking tanker capable of plying the polar route from Rotterdam to Yokohama. And the life history of the Arctic—the pollination of its flowers by the bumblebee, the origins and thoughts of the Dorset people, the habits of the wolverine—means one thing to an *imuk* pulling on his fishnets at the mouth of the Hayes River, another to a biologist watching a caribou herd encounter the trans-Alaska pipeline, and yet something else to the modern tourist, bound for a caviar-and-champagne luncheon at the North Pole.

Such a variety of human views and interests in an emerging land is not new; what is new for us, and troubling, is a difference in the land itself, which changes the very nature of these considerations. In the Temperate Zone, we are accustomed to dealing with landscapes that can easily accommodate opposing views. Their long growing seasons, mild temperatures, great variety of creatures, and moderate rainfall make up for much human abuse. The biological nature of arctic ecosystems is different—they are far

more vulnerable ecologically to attempts to "accommodate both sides." Of concern in the North, then, is the impatience with which reconciliation and compromise are now being sought.

Our conceptual problems with these things, with commercial and industrial development in the North and with the proprieties of an imposed economics there, can be traced to a fundamental strangeness in the landscape itself, to something as subtle as our own temperate-zone predilection toward a certain duration and kind of light. Or for the particular shape that time takes in a temperate land, where the sun actually sets on a summer evening, where cicadas give way in the twilight to crickets, and people sit on porches—none of which happens in the Arctic.

Difficulty in evaluating, or even discerning, a particular landscape is related to the distance a culture has traveled from its own ancestral landscape. As temperate-zone people, we have long been ill-disposed toward deserts and expanses of tundra and ice. They have been wastelands for us; historically we have not cared at all what happened in them or to them. I am inclined to think, however, that their value will one day prove to be inestimable to us. It is precisely because the regimes of light and time in the Arctic are so different that this landscape is able to expose in startling ways the complacency of our thoughts about land in general. Its unfamiliar rhythms point up the narrow impetuosity of Western schedules, by simply changing the basis of the length of the day. And the periodically frozen Arctic Ocean is at present an insurmountable impediment to timely shipping. This land, for some, is irritatingly and uncharacteristically uncooperative.

If we are to devise an enlightened plan for human activity in the Arctic, we need a more particularized understanding of the land itself—not a more refined mathematical knowledge but a deeper understanding of its nature, as if it were, itself, another sort of civilization we had to reach some agreement with. I would draw you, therefore, back to the concrete dimensions of the land and to what they precipitate; simply to walk across the tundra; to watch the wind stirring a little in the leaves of dwarf birch and

willows; to hear the hoof-clacket of migrating caribou. Imagine your ear against the loom of a kayak paddle in the Beaufort Sea, hearing the long, quivering tremolo voice of the bearded seal. Or feeling the surgical sharpness of an Eskimo's obsidian tool under the stroke of your finger.

Once in winter I was far out on the sea ice north of Melville Island in the high Arctic with a drilling crew. I saw a seal surface at some hourless moment in the day in a moon pool, the open water directly underneath the drilling platform that lets the drill string pass through the ice on its way to the ocean floor. The seal and I regarded each other in absolute stillness, I in my parka, arrested in the middle of an errand, the seal in the motionless water, its dark brown eyes glistening in its gray, catlike head. Curiosity held it. What held me was: how far out on the edge of the world I am. A movement of my head shifted the hood of my parka slightly, and the seal was gone in an explosion of water. Its eyes had been enormous. I walked to the edge of the moon pool and stared into the dark ocean. I could not have been more surprised by the seal's appearance if it had fallen out of the winter sky overhead, into the spheres of light that embraced the drill rig and our isolated camp.

To contemplate what people are doing out here and ignore the universe of the seal, to consider human quest and plight and not know the land, I thought, to not listen to it, seemed fatal. Not perhaps for tomorrow, or next year, but fatal if you looked down the long road of our determined evolution and wondered at the considerations that had got us this far.

At the heart of this narrative, then, are three themes: the influence of the arctic landscape on the human imagination. How a desire to put a landscape to use shapes our evaluation of it. And, confronted by an unknown landscape, what happens to our sense of wealth. What does it mean to grow rich? Is it to have red-blooded adventures and to make a fortune, which is what brought the whalers and other entrepreneurs north? Or is it, rather, to have a good family life and to be imbued with a far-reaching and intimate knowledge of one's homeland, which is what the Tununirmiut told

the whalers at Pond's Bay wealth was? Is it to retain a capacity for awe and astonishment in our lives, to continue to hunger after what is genuine and worthy? Is it to live at moral peace with the universe?

It is impossible to know, clearly, the answer to this question; but by coming to know a place where the common elements of life are understood differently one has the advantage of an altered perspective. With that shift, it is possible to imagine afresh the way to a lasting security of the soul and heart, and toward an accommodation in the flow of time we call history, ours and the world's.

That dream, as it unfolds in the following chapters, is the dream of great and common people alike.

*One*  
ARKTIKÓS

**O**N A WINTER AFTERNOON—a day without a sunrise, under a moon that had not set for six days—I stand on the frozen ocean 20 miles off Cape Mamen, Mackenzie King Island. The sea ice of Hazen Strait is not completely featureless, but its surface does not show, either, any evidence of severe torture, such as one would find, for example, in the Lincoln Sea. The currents are relatively calm here. During the nine or ten months the water is frozen, this platform hardly moves.

To the south I can see a thin streak of violet and cobalt sky stretching across 80° of the horizon. But the ice and snow barely