

KUUGJUAQ: MEMORIES OF INUIT LIFE AT CHURCHILL

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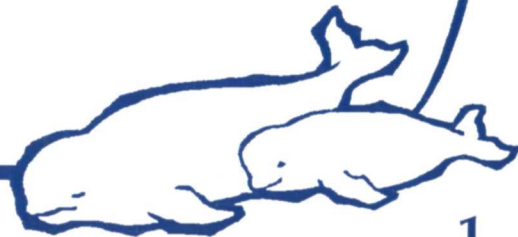
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BY

DARREN KEITH AND ANDREW STEWART

MERIDIAN GEOGRAPHIC CONSULTING

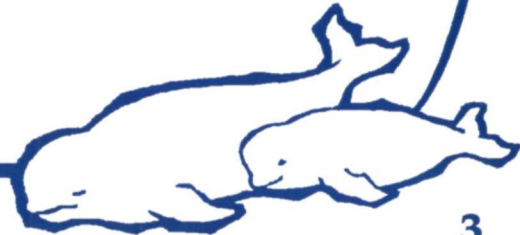


PREFACE



John Arnalukjuaq (left) being interviewed by David Ukutaq (centre) and Daren Keith (right)

Inuit Elder John Arnalukjuaq of Arviat, Nunavut was interviewed during July 1998 in and around the town of Churchill where he lived and worked as a whaler in the 1950's. These interviews were conducted by Parks Canada and the Arviat Historical Society to record Inuit oral traditions and place names in the Churchill area. Memories of elders like John, including traditions passed down through generations of people who have lived as hunters and trappers on the land, form a vital part of the history and geographical knowledge of Inuit and other Native peoples in Canada's north. This oral history, together with archival documents (journals, letters, photographs), provided the sources from which this booklet was written.





John Arnalukjuaq was first in Churchill before 1940. In the early 1950's, John spent three summers working with the Adanac Whale and Fish Products Company at Churchill hunting beluga whales.

JOHN ARNALUKJUAQ

"My name is John Arnalukjuaq...I was born at the foot of Nauhaaq [a hill on the south side of Baker Lake]. My natural mother died giving birth to me and my natural father's name was Qalliruat. Uqaujaq and her husband Qiquat adopted me. I consider Qiquat my father and Uqaujaq my mother.

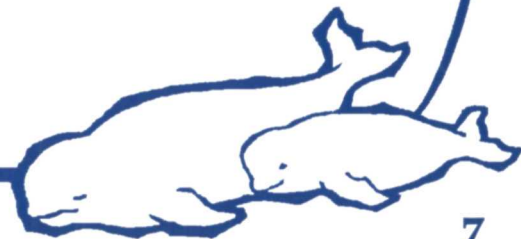
When I was able to go out hunting on my own, I acquired a dog team. When I had a wife, we would go to Qamanirjuaq [lake] and down to the Whale Cove area, Kaminak Lake. These are my travels...I was becoming a mature hunter at this time. Learning from the older people, people that I spent time with, I learned the ways of men and how they hunted. I sort of know some land and sea hunting skills.

...when I became older, a fully grown man, long before I was an elder, we moved to Nunaalaaq because we heard that Nunaalaaq was rich in game. We heard that it had a lot of caribou, bearded seal, whale, wolves, foxes. When my stepfather died, my older brother and I moved to Arviat. My father used to say that when he passed away, he wanted me and my brother to move on to Arviat where there were good beaches for boats....Since that time I have been living in Arviat...."



INUIT ON HUDSON BAY

Inuit living in arctic Canada and Greenland are descendants of people who migrated from northern Alaska about 1,000 years ago. Archaeological remains of their culture, known as Thule, are found in northwest Hudson Bay where the earliest settlements contain semi-subterranean winter houses. After about A.D. 1200, responding to a colder climate, Inuit abandoned these shore-based dwellings and were living in snow houses on the ice while hunting seals at breathing holes. In spring, families returned to shore, living in boulder-walled tents, to hunt basking seals and caribou in the interior during the summer. Evidence for this “modified” Thule way of life, similar to that of the Aivlingmiut and Qairnirmiut of the 19th and 20th centuries, is found as far south as Rankin Inlet. Inuit may have populated the coast by gradually expanding south from Rankin. Or they may have arrived suddenly, travelling overland from the central arctic coast sometime after 1600 to escape the harsh conditions that prevailed there during the Little Ice Age. Whatever their precise origin, these people were living along the coast between Rankin and Arviat by the time the HBC first contacted them in 1718. Some Inuit took up permanent residence in the interior to hunt caribou and muskox. Inuit and Chipewyan Dene may have frequently met on the tundra; relations between the two people probably worsened during the 1700’s over competition for trade with the HBC.



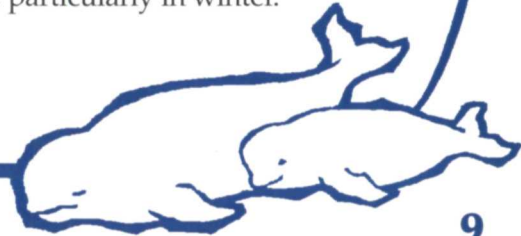
KUUGJUAQ “BIG RIVER”



Cache on West Peninsula

Since first contact between Europeans and the Inuit of the western Hudson Bay in 1717, the mouth of the Churchill River has been known and used by Inuit. In Inuktitut, the Inuit language, the Churchill River is called Kuugjuaq, meaning 'big river'. The West peninsula at the mouth of the Churchill River is densely covered in archaeological features dating back 3000 years. They include the remains of Inuit structures (tent rings, kayak stands, hearths, caches) and the remains of earlier arctic peoples, the Paleoeskimos.

Concentrations of beluga whales in the Churchill River mouth, as well as other sea mammals, fish and caribou, must have made this area attractive to people for millennia. During cold periods, however, when landfast ice expanded and leads narrowed or disappeared, the southern part of Hudson Bay, including Churchill, was an unfriendly environment for sea mammal hunters, particularly in winter.

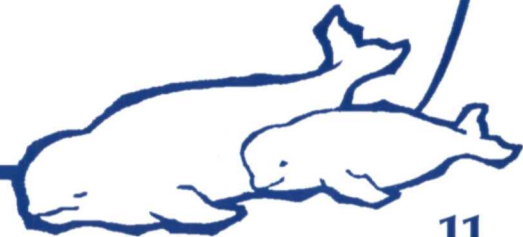


FIRST CONTACT

James Knight, overseas governor of the HBC, claims to have seen evidence of a huge gathering of Inuit (“...could not be less that 3 or 400 of them by their tents and warehouses...”) on the outer point of the Churchill River in early July of 1717. This large “town” may have been the archaeological remains of settlements which had been described by Jens Munk, who overwintered at the mouth of the Churchill River a century earlier. Neither Munk nor Knight saw any people, however. These descriptions provide tantalizing clues but leave open the question of who was living at Churchill–Inuit, Dene, Cree, or all three during different years or seasons? One of the first recorded contacts between Europeans and Inuit in west Hudson Bay occurred in 1719 when Henry Kelsey traded northwards along the coast and brought two Inuit boys back to Churchill.

This trade between Inuit and the HBC along the coast continued through the 18th century. In 1737, Richard Norton, governor at Churchill, sent a sloop north to Whale Cove. It returned with “100 lbs whalebone, 20 lbs of ivory, some unicorns’ horns, and three

barrels of blubber...” The HBC employees at the Fort were not keen to start trading with Inuit, whom they considered the enemy of their trusted trading partners, the Chipewyan and Cree Indians. London ordered the voyages to continue, however, and regular trade was carried out at Whale Cove by the sloop until 1790. Caribou and wolf hides supplemented the sea mammal products. Guns were not traded to Inuit until about 1770, after which time Inuit were on a more equal footing with Chipewyan and Cree peoples.



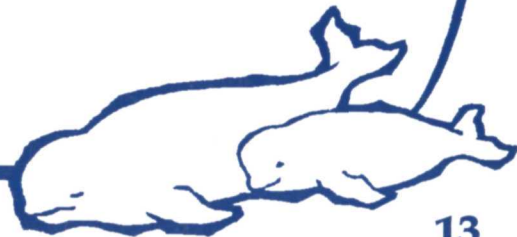
UNATARVIVINI'JUAQ - PRINCE OF WALES FORT



HBCA, PAM

Inuit women work on skins with the ruins of Prince of Wales Fort in the background.

After the sloop trade ended in 1790, Inuit travelled south to the mouth of the Churchill River more often. At the ruins of Prince of Wales Fort they salvaged the metal that was valuable to them – iron, also roofing lead to make shot. Upriver, at the new Fort Churchill post, they traded seal and whale oil for the European goods they had come to rely on during the preceding fifty years. The Inuktitut name for Prince of Wales Fort is Unatarvivini'juaq. The name means the 'place where a battle was fought', preserving in Inuit oral tradition the memory of the 1782 French attack on the fort.



PADDLING ON THE BAY

Inuit who worked at Churchill in spring and early summer would return to the tundra, travelling north along the coast and inland to hunt caribou in August. They often travelled by kayak (qajaq). The west Hudson Bay kayak was first described in 1775 when Andrew Graham interviewed Inuit wintering at Churchill. This craft was used for maritime hunting, being strengthened with baleen lashings and waterproofed with a sealskin covering. Sometimes kayaks were tied together and sailed in parallel. Squalls and tides on the Bay always made this trip risky, as this entry in the Churchill post journal for 28 August 1873 shows:

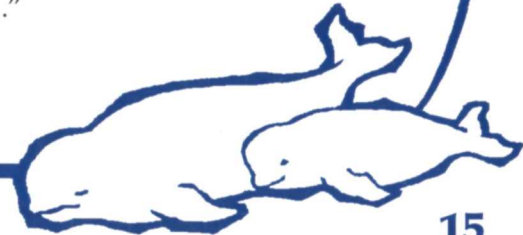
“William Ouligbuck arrived this evening...with eight other Esquimaux: all left their summer hunting grounds and their families some 10 days ago—in canoes for this place—when off Egg Island..their eight canoes were all lashed together sailing with a large and heavy Parchment Sail, some distance out from high water mark they were overtaken by a sudden squall and heavy sea, the canoes were upset and totally wrecked and all eight of these unfortunate creatures drowned!



Inuit men working on kayak frames with the ruins of Prince of Wales Fort in the background.

HBCA, PAM

[Oulig] buck...was nearer inshore some distance ahead hunting wild fowl along the ebb in his canoe; when the squall came on he saw that they could not get the sail down quick enough...”



BELUGA WHALING

The beluga or white whale was one of the main attractions for both Native and European people coming to the mouth of the Churchill River. Hundreds, even thousands, of whales feed at the Churchill and Seal River estuaries in summer, providing a rich source of blubber and oil. Inuit began trading seal and whale oil to sloops in the early 1700s. By 1800, Inuit were coming down the coast to Churchill every year. They were encouraged by the HBC to hunt at the mouth of the Seal River. The shallow, rocky estuary favoured the Inuit method of taking whales using kayaks and harpoons with attached lines and floats. The carcasses were towed to the nearest rock and flensed and the blubber boiled at the post, some 70 km south.

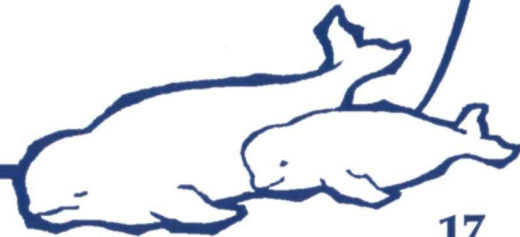


Seal oil and whale blubber caches can be found today all along the coast.

By the 1880s, a new method made use of barrier nets to trap whales. Whaling declined between 1906 and 1930 but Inuit continued to be involved in the hunt, trading the whales that they caught while camping at Nuvuhiviq. The HBC ended its whaling practice in 1929 after some 200 years.

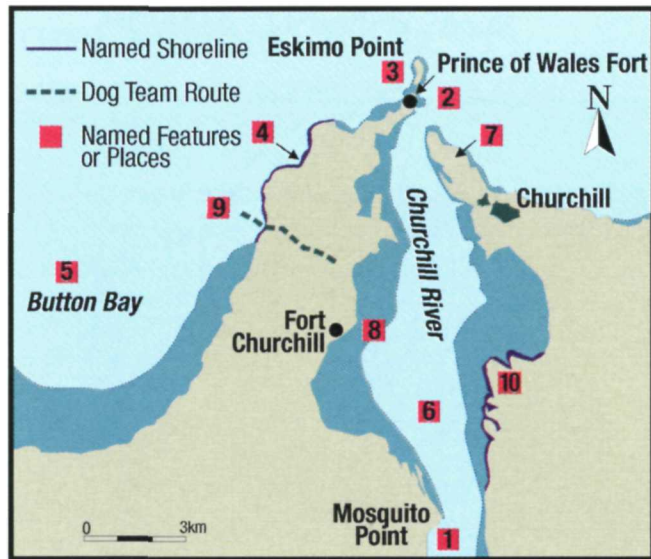
Commercial whaling was, however, taken up by other companies and continued into the 1960s. In the late 1940s and 1950s, the Adanac Whale and Fish Products Company continued the tradition of employing Inuit, among them John Arnalukjuaq, to catch whales. John relates how whales were spotted and tracked in the murky water of the river's mouth:

"...it is hard to get a beluga whale right a way, because the waters of the bay are murky. But we would follow the ripples on the water from the whale's tail. You couldn't see [the whales] when they were in deeper water—only when they came up for air. They are barely visible when they are in deep water. Sometimes the whales would end up in deep water and in the murky waters we would lose them. Sometimes trying to follow them was confusing and you would lose them. When they came up for air and were close, we watched which way they were swimming. Sometimes it was hard to catch them. The whales we caught we would bring to the whaling station where they were hauled in by the Qablunaat."

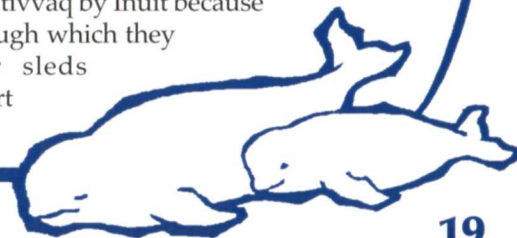


INUIT PLACE NAMES OF THE CHURCHILL AREA

1. Kikturiaqtuuq “place of many mosquitoes” This point is named ‘mosquito point’ in English and suggests that either the Inuktitut name preceded the English, or the experience of the insects at the point made its name obvious to both groups.
2. Unatarvivini’juaq “abandoned site of battle” This site is Prince of Wales Fort and the Inuit name for the site suggests that Inuit oral tradition preserves a memory of the attack on the Fort by the French over 200 years ago.
3. Nuvuguhiq “point”
4. Adgu&iniq “exposed to the wind” This shoreline area is exposed to the prevailing northwest wind of the region. Inuit often located their camps in this area. One advantage of camping in an area exposed to the wind was that it kept the mosquitoes down.
5. Qi’ngu’juag “big bay”
6. Kuugjuaq “big river”
7. Inukkugjua’naaq “big little inukshuk” This inukshuk can no longer be found at Battery Point.
8. Qupilruqtuuq “place of many maggots” This is the name Inuit gave to the Fort Churchill area. Interestingly, efforts by Europeans to grow vegetables in the soil around the fort in the first twenty years of the 19th century were hampered by worm infestation. The Inuktitut name for the area may contain a memory of this infestation - or it may simply reflect the presence of maggots more generally in the area.



9. Itivvaq “portage” The low lying area called Seahorse Gully in English formed the natural passage for travelling through the high land of the west peninsula. This area was called Itivvaq by Inuit because it was the route through which they would haul their sleds when arriving at Fort Churchill to trade.

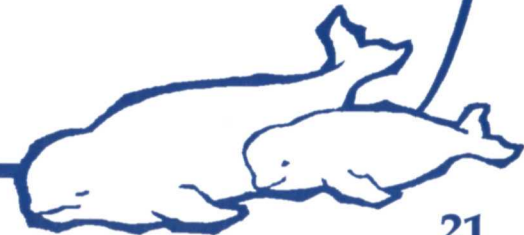


INUIT AT THE MOUTH OF THE CHURCHILL RIVER

Inuit may have been visiting the Churchill River estuary to hunt beluga and to collect wood well before European contact here in 1718. Since the 1780s, when Prince of Wales Fort was abandoned and the trading post moved upriver, Inuit camped on the point of land known to them as Nuvuguhiq, around the abandoned stone fort at the tip of the west peninsula. Remains of many archaeological features here (kayak stands, hearths, caches) are distinctively Inuit in origin. After 1827, they also camped in Sea Horse Gully, Itivvaq (the portage). This low passage through the peninsula is where the dog teams headed after crossing the ice of Button Bay. Company servants often came from the post to help Inuit haul their sleds through this passage. Many Inuit families arrived in spring, in time to hunt seals at their breathing holes on the landfast ice off the Button Bay coast. The seal oil was traded at the post for tobacco, ammunition and other household goods.



John Arnalukjuaq tells researchers about Inuit life on the West Peninsula sitting inside an old tent ring.



INUIT WORKING FOR THE HBC

Through the 1800s, Inuit assumed an increasingly important role as providers of oil and blubber to the HBC whaling industry and as support for arctic exploration and search expeditions. During the years that the post was expanding, between about 1800 and 1820, Inuit, Cree and Chipewyan were employed to cut and haul wood. By midcentury, the HBC men distinguished between a Homeguard group of Inuit, who travelled to the post from south of Rankin Inlet and who regularly hunted seals for the post, and a more distant group of Inuit from the Chesterfield Inlet area, who brought in white fox when the price was sufficiently high.

Inuit post servants were recruited as interpreters, boatmen and hunters by British arctic expeditions, beginning with Augustus, who accompanied Franklin on his first (1819-21) and second (1825-27) overland expeditions. Oulibuck travelled with Franklin (1825), Dease and Simpson (1836) and Rae (1846). Oulibuck's son William, who succeeded his father at the post, acquired a reputation, while with Rae, as a skilled interpreter in many languages including Inuktitut, Cree, English and French. By the 1840s, more than 600 Inuit



Inuit and post servants at Fort Churchill

HBCA, PAM

were visiting Churchill annually, far outnumbering Cree and Chipewyan. Fuelling this activity was the oil trade, and for the oil trade the prosperity of the HBC Churchill post depended upon the skills of Inuit hunters.



Drawing of Oulibuck by George Back (National Archives of Canada C-93039)

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