

Acts of Occupation

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Canada and Arctic Sovereignty, 1918-25

Janice Cavell and Jeff Noakes



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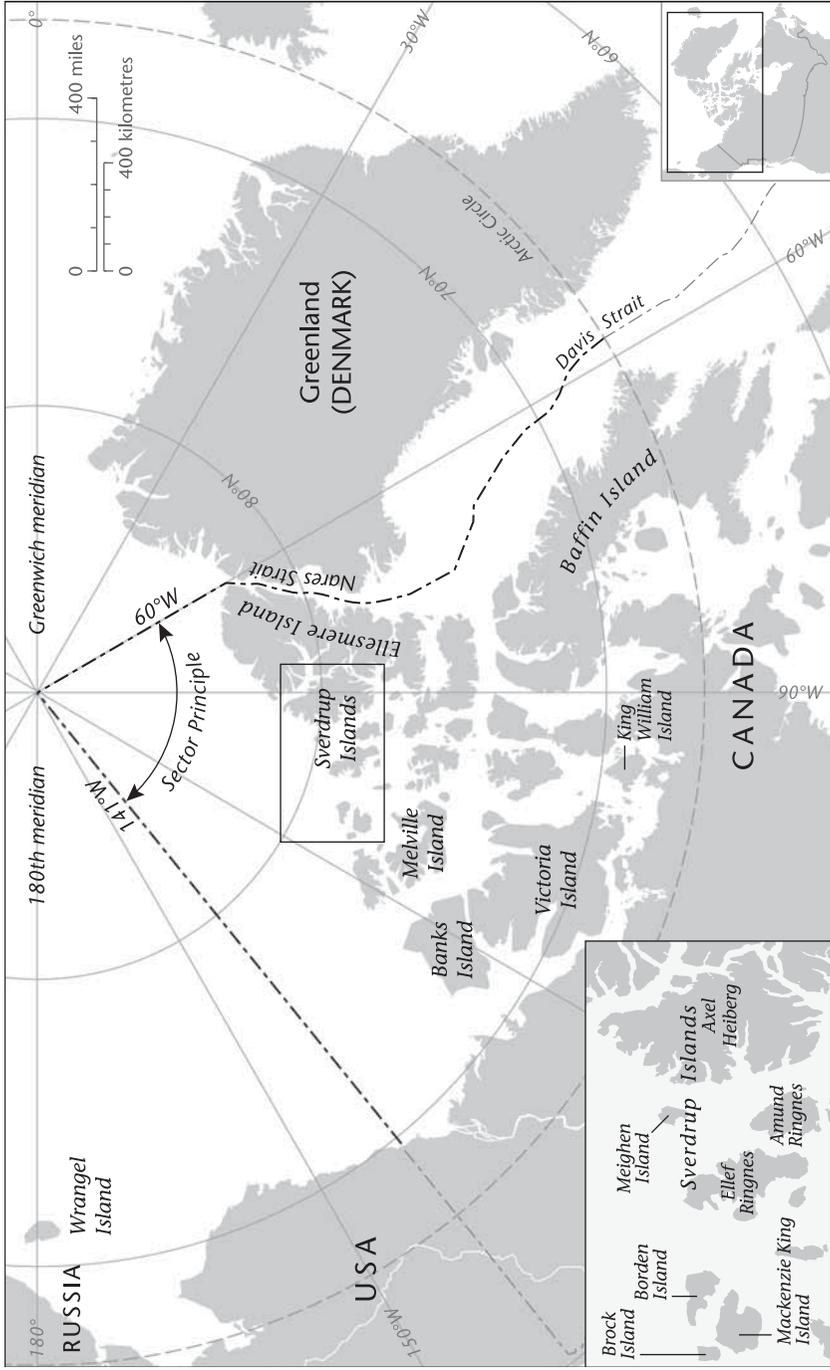
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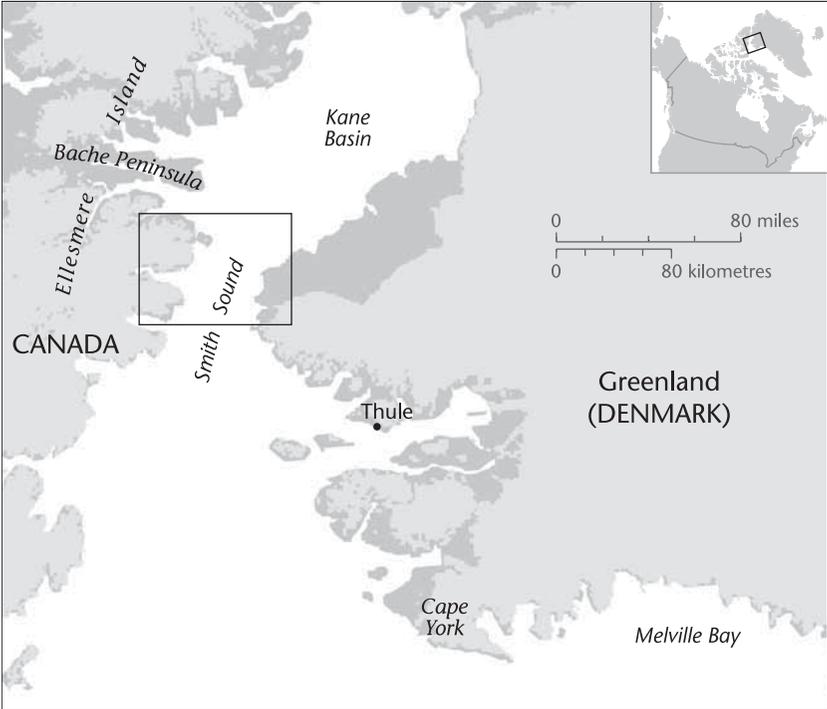
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MAP 1 The Arctic (western hemisphere) | Cartographer: Eric Leimberger



MAP 2 The eastern Canadian Arctic | Cartographer: Eric Leinberger



MAP 3 Smith Sound and Kane Basin | Cartographer: Eric Leinberger

Acts of Occupation

Introduction

A Policy of Secrecy

I feel positive that the national interest w[oul]d be best served by a continuance of the policy of secrecy.

– J.B. Harkin, 1950

THE OLD MAN'S HANDS may have trembled slightly, more from age and indignation than from fear, as he read the letters. Certainly, the handwriting of the draft reply he promptly began is more erratic than the firm, backward-slanting script of earlier years. There seem to be signs of mental agitation in the repetitive wording of the draft, which fills eleven large manuscript pages. But that had always been J.B. Harkin's way. Even at the height of his extremely successful civil service career in the 1920s, his interminable memos repeated details, arguments, and recommendations, with Harkin apparently being determined to impose his will through the sheer volume of paper he placed on the desks of his hapless superiors.

Now, on the first day of March 1950, the seventy-five-year-old Harkin sat in his comfortable home on Clemow Avenue in a quiet, affluent Ottawa residential neighbourhood. Since retiring from the civil service, he had occupied his time with volunteer work for the Rotary Club and the Boy Scouts and with plans to write a book about the history of Canada's national parks.¹ This pleasant existence had just been interrupted by a letter from Hugh Keenleyside, the deputy minister of resources and development. The letter was a request for information, prompted by a personal message to Keenleyside from Arctic explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson. A copy of Stefansson's letter was enclosed for Harkin to read. Stefansson wanted to know more about the secret history of Canada's policy on Arctic sovereignty after 1918, and in particular about the reasons why a planned expedition, to be led by Stefansson himself, was cancelled in the spring of 1921. It was not that Harkin was ashamed of the role he had played in

those years; on the contrary, he viewed it as the high point of his career. But he was convinced that the history of what he and others had done must remain shrouded in secrecy for many years yet, with full knowledge kept even from other civil servants. Harkin was immediately suspicious of the motives that had led Stefansson – an inveterate publicity-seeker – to inquire about the documents Harkin had in his keeping.

‘J.B. Harkin is, according to my belief and also according to what he has told me, in possession of a good deal of information that has a bearing on the history of sovereignty proposals and acts in Canada which is not available in any records, even secret ones,’ Stefansson had written to Keenleyside in 1944. Stefansson hinted that Harkin was a little deranged on the subject, holding ‘strongly to an idea that has baffled me, that it is his duty to let certain secrets die with him.’ It would, Stefansson argued, be ‘a disservice ... to history and maybe to Canada, in relation to its sovereignty problems, if Harkin does not place on record (in secret archives if you like) everything that he has in his memory or can dig up from memoranda which he perhaps intends to destroy.’ In late 1949 Stefansson renewed the subject, noting: ‘There were so many ramifications ... that I feel sure a study of the entire collection of documents will throw an interesting and perhaps an important light on the development of Canadian policy with regard to the Arctic.’² Keenleyside had confirmed that there was relatively little on the Arctic sovereignty questions of the early 1920s in the files of the Department of External Affairs. Now he was asking whether Harkin would send whatever papers he had to External Affairs, ‘so that that department could supplement its records and at the same time consider whether any part of the information should be made available to Dr. Stefansson.’³

Although the papers Harkin held were government documents, which he had had no right to remove from the official files, his answer was an uncompromising no. His long draft reply suggests a number of reasons for the refusal. First, Harkin considered Stefansson untrustworthy and self-serving. ‘There is only one issue & that is whether certain information should be made available to Dr Stef,’ Harkin noted. The plea for general information on the development of Canadian Arctic policy ‘winds up in a plea for information re an incident concerning himself.’ Stefansson was clearly on ‘a fishing expedition.’ Harkin denied that his secrecy was unreasonable or that he intended his knowledge to die with him. When everyone concerned was dead, the information would be made available in the Public Archives. For unspecified reasons, this delay was in the

national interest. 'I am convinced that it w[oul]d not be in the best interests of Canada for me to concur in your suggestions,' Harkin wrote at the top of the fifth page, which is filled with variations on this statement: 'I feel positive that it w[oul]d not be in the national interest for any action to be taken on the lines suggested'; 'The national interest must be the dominant consideration; and I feel positive that the national interest w[oul]d best be served by a continuance of the policy of secrecy.' Besides, unless a minute had been made of the cabinet's decision, Harkin did not think anyone had a record of exactly why Stefansson's expedition was cancelled. On the last page, Harkin revealed that he had 'fought vigorously against the cancellation.' Then, at the very end, he obstinately and almost defiantly asserted once again: 'It is information that Stefansson wants & only he. Let him say what he wants to establish.'⁴

Harkin was right to suspect that Stefansson was on a fishing expedition and that self-interest rather than the cause of historical knowledge was his motive. The explorer's quest for access to Harkin's documents had started just over a decade earlier. In March 1939 Stefansson wrote to former prime minister Arthur Meighen (who had been closely involved in Arctic sovereignty matters during his years in power), observing that there were 'civil servants still at Ottawa' who had invaluable information locked away in their memories, and perhaps in their personal files as well. 'If you think the secrecy is no longer needed, can you take some steps that the prohibitions shall be lifted?' Stefansson asked.⁵

Meighen's reply was prompt, brief, and chilly. The question of confidentiality was 'entirely a matter for those in charge of Canadian affairs today'; therefore, Stefansson should write to the prime minister, William Lyon Mackenzie King, 'stating to him what the confidential matters were and asking, if you so desire, permission for their publication.'⁶ This suggestion was an extremely effective brush-off, since relations between King and Stefansson had been distant at best for many years. Stefansson, who was careful never to seem to feel a snub, replied in amiable terms. He presented himself as disinterested and altruistic, concerned only that the material should be 'thrown open for study by anyone who is interested.' He insisted that he 'had no plan of benefiting personally' from the opening of the records.⁷

The claim was only partly true. A few years later, in 1943, Stefansson published a revised edition of his book *The Friendly Arctic*, with a new chapter containing his own account of events in 1918-21. He would no doubt have been pleased to be able to cite official documents on the

subject, thus adding credibility to what was in fact a highly misleading narrative. But, failing that, Stefansson had another plan on which to fall back. After his rebuff by Meighen, he promptly forwarded their correspondence to his journalist friend Richard Finnie (the son of one of Harkin's civil service colleagues), along with the suggestion that 'someone like you might want to get after this formerly secret correspondence. You could make out of it, I feel sure, a saleable article – and I think one of some value to the history of Canada.'⁸ Stefansson had already sounded Finnie on the subject of Harkin's private papers. Finnie mistakenly thought that Harkin had died, and he promised to make inquiries about the files. He also suggested other possible contacts in Ottawa. Stefansson, in return, continued to push Finnie towards research on 'the history of the secret expedition,' which would make a 'most salable [sic]' article and perhaps even 'a chapter in an eventual history of Canadian exploration.' It seems that Stefansson also had his sights on the private papers of Finnie's father, Oswald Sterling Finnie, who though not 'in on the plotting,' might well have 'heard the inside story' or seen confidential documents.⁹

ALL STEFANSSON'S EFFORTS WERE in vain. Oswald Finnie's papers were destroyed in a fire.¹⁰ Harkin died in 1955 and, as he had promised, his collection of documents was placed in the Public Archives of Canada (now Library and Archives Canada), but not until the year of Stefansson's own death, 1962. To anyone who has read them and the other archival records relating to the so-called secret expedition in full, it is at first extremely difficult to see either why Harkin was so determined to protect the documents or why Stefansson was bent on having them released. By that time, the secrets they contained were in no way detrimental to Canada's Arctic sovereignty claims. Harkin's concern therefore appears exaggerated and even irrational.

As for Stefansson, during the 1930s and the war years he was preoccupied with demonstrating his own prescience about the great future of northern air transport, and he accordingly claimed in the 1943 edition of *The Friendly Arctic* that the development of aviation had been among the most important aims of the cancelled expedition. In his first March 1939 letter to Meighen, Stefansson brazenly wrote that the expedition's purposes were 'to discover any lands that might be undiscovered in the Arctic, strengthen Canadian rights to the lands already discovered, and take other steps against the time when trans-Arctic commerce by air would develop.' Stefansson suggested that Meighen had an interest in furthering the release

of 'documents relating to those plans which were made under your direction and which have been shown farsighted' by the events of recent years. But, as Harkin's papers would have demonstrated if Stefansson had succeeded in having them released, aviation played no role in the 1920-21 plans.¹¹ The documents did, however, show with painful clarity just how little the Canadian government trusted Stefansson: Harkin and others, including the deputy minister of the interior, William Wallace Cory, were firmly of the opinion that the explorer was motivated above all by selfishness and vanity. Had Stefansson known exactly what the papers contained, he would surely have been as eager as Harkin to avoid their publication.

The struggle between the two men over the records is of great interest for what it reveals about their stubborn, complex characters, with Harkin's tending to paranoia and Stefansson's to relentless self-aggrandizement and publicity-seeking. Both men seem to have been incapable, not merely of admitting to others, but even of privately believing, that they had ever been wrong. Over the decades each had evolved his own idiosyncratic narrative of past events. Harkin cast himself as the beleaguered defender of Canada's northern claims against foreign threats. To Harkin, Stefansson was an adventurer who, at any time during the early 1920s, might have disclosed confidential information to either Denmark or his adopted country, the United States, with disastrous consequences for Canada. Stefansson, in contrast, saw himself as a prophet thwarted by circumstances and an unimaginative bureaucracy. He had returned from his 1913-18 Canadian Arctic Expedition determined to bring about the creation of a new, greater Canada, wealthy from the development of its far northern resources. For reasons Stefansson never fully understood, this vision was ultimately rejected by Ottawa. To Stefansson, Harkin was an enigmatic figure who could have vindicated him to the world, but refused to do so out of a misguided sense of duty.

Both men deceived themselves. The Harkin papers and other related documents in Canadian and British government files do indeed preserve important events in the history of Canada's Arctic policy from oblivion. However, neither Harkin nor Stefansson emerges as an unsung hero. The most admirable figure in the saga is Danish explorer Knud Rasmussen, who was the object of Harkin's profound suspicion. Unwarranted suspicion of Rasmussen as the possible agent of Danish territorial ambitions in the North was, indeed, the unlikely stimulus for Ottawa's heightened interest in the Arctic archipelago after the First World War. In 1919 Harkin initiated a series of diplomatic exchanges with the Danish government

about hunting on Ellesmere Island by Native people from northwestern Greenland. A letter from Rasmussen suggested that the Native hunters should be allowed to continue the practice for the time being.¹² This reply was construed by Harkin as an assertion that the archipelago was a no man's land or *terra nullius*, not subject to the authority of Canada or any other state.

Stefansson, eager to go north again with government sponsorship, did all he could to rouse and heighten Canadian fears. He informed Harkin that Rasmussen planned to lead a Danish invasion of the archipelago and to colonize the islands with Greenlanders. To meet this challenge, Stefansson suggested that a government ship should be sent to patrol the islands and to establish Royal Canadian Mounted Police posts. There should also be a five-year exploring expedition to the archipelago, under his own command. Harkin's apprehension was initially shared by many others, including Prime Minister Meighen and Loring Christie of the Department of External Affairs. It seemed that Stefansson's hopes of leading a new Canadian expedition would soon be fulfilled. However, the famous Antarctic explorer Sir Ernest Shackleton proposed an alternate plan that quickly won over many Ottawa officials. Then came news from London that cast doubt on the existence of a threat from Denmark. Meighen and Christie adopted a more realistic view of the matter, cancelling both the planned 1921 patrol and Stefansson's expedition, but Harkin was unyielding in his conviction that Canada's northern sovereignty was under imminent threat. Indeed, he apparently believed in the Danish plan until his dying day.

After the defeat of Meighen's government in December 1921, Harkin and his allies were able to persuade the new prime minister, Mackenzie King, to send the CGS *Arctic* north in the summer of 1922. This voyage was the first of the annual Eastern Arctic Patrols. The patrols established police posts, customs houses, post offices, hospitals, and other visible signs of Canadian authority on Ellesmere and other northern islands. They were of enormous significance because they brought permanent, continuous government administration to the archipelago. The perception of a threat from Denmark, then, played a key role in the transformation of Canada's earlier Arctic policy – in which proclamations and other purely formal 'acts of possession' were deemed sufficient – into a more active and sustained postwar program that emphasized the need for 'acts of occupation' even on remote and uninhabited northern islands like Ellesmere.

Before the first patrol set out in the summer of 1922, the government sought to keep its plans secret, fearing that early publicity might provoke pre-emptive action by the Danish or American governments. From 1922 until 1925, the patrols had a fairly low public profile, apparently because the civil servants involved believed that too much public attention might lead to awkward questions in Parliament about the amounts being spent on an empty and apparently useless region. As the *Ottawa Journal* shrewdly observed, there were few votes to be gained in the Arctic.¹³ After 1925, however, stories and photographs in newspapers and magazines were used to establish the fact of Canada's northern sovereignty in the public mind. But because of Harkin and his policy of secrecy, the general movement towards public awareness did not include an accurate account of events behind the scenes. Historians have long recognized the Rasmussen episode as a catalyst for change, but the full story behind the first patrol remained obscure and poorly understood. A belief still prevails that there was in fact a threat from Denmark.

The first explicit published reference to the supposed threat came as early as 1925, in a *Foreign Affairs* article by American legal expert David Hunter Miller. Perhaps through contacts in Ottawa, Miller had gained the erroneous impression that in 1921 the Canadian government had 'formally notified' both Rasmussen and the Danish government that any discoveries made by Rasmussen during his Fifth Thule Expedition (1921-24) 'would not affect Canadian claims.'¹⁴ Eight years later, further details were provided by V. Kenneth Johnston in the *Canadian Historical Review*. Johnston had seen a few documents from 1920 – that is, from the time when the fears roused by Stefansson were shared by almost everyone concerned in Ottawa. Other documents relating to later developments were not available to him.¹⁵ The Harkin papers, which have been consulted by many Arctic historians over the years, reflect Harkin's own stubborn conviction that he had helped to forestall a Danish invasion of the archipelago. The 1919-25 volume of the series *Documents on Canadian External Relations* (published in 1970) also contributes to the impression that the Danish threat was at least potentially a serious one. It contains only one document on the subject, an October 1920 memo by Loring Christie.¹⁶ Like the papers cited by Johnston, Christie's memo on its own gives an incomplete and misleading picture of the situation. The material required for a full understanding of events is widely scattered in government files and private papers. Historians have therefore almost unanimously accepted the idea that the Danes at one time made a 'flat denial' of Canadian

sovereignty over Ellesmere and contemplated a claim to parts of the archipelago.¹⁷ If no such claim was ever actually advanced, this, most writers assume, was because the Eastern Arctic Patrols securely established effective occupation by Canada before Denmark could take action. This book sets the record straight on Rasmussen and the ‘Danish challenge’ and demonstrates that Stefansson deliberately played on Canadian fears in order to advance his own ambitions.

The story that *Acts of Occupation* has to tell, then, is not same as either the story Stefansson sought or the story Harkin guarded. Instead, so far as the history of the ‘secret expedition’ is concerned, it is an at times almost farcical tale of misunderstandings, confusions, and deceptions. But it is momentous in a number of ways. The changes in Arctic policy between 1918 and 1925 extended beyond the establishment of effective occupation in the islands lying directly north of Canada. The story of the Danish threat and the cancelled expedition merges with the tale of Stefansson’s ill-advised attempt to claim Wrangel Island for Canada.¹⁸ This episode is well known in its outlines, having been told by historian Richard Diubaldo in his 1967 article ‘Wrangling over Wrangel Island’ and in his book *Stefansson and the Canadian Arctic*, published in 1978.

The occupation of Wrangel Island was Stefansson’s hidden goal throughout the years after 1918, even while he was ostensibly urging action on Ellesmere and other eastern Arctic islands. Stefansson hoped to turn his ‘secret expedition’ towards the western Arctic and the vast unexplored region between the Beaufort Sea and the North Pole. He believed that Wrangel Island could be used as a base for extensive explorations in this area, perhaps leading to the discovery of an unknown Arctic continent. When the expedition was cancelled, Stefansson resolved to act on his own. Without the knowledge of anyone in Ottawa, he sent a party to claim Wrangel for Canada and the British Empire. When the truth was made public in the spring of 1922, Stefansson’s daring plan initially appealed to the new and relatively inexperienced prime minister, Mackenzie King.

However, Wrangel Island was situated far beyond the 141st meridian, which Canadians had always vaguely considered to be the western boundary of their Arctic possessions. If Canada did not want Denmark or other nations to make incursions into the archipelago, would it be safe to claim an island that lay outside the traditionally accepted boundary and was much closer to the Soviet Union than to the mainland of Canada? All the civil servants involved were certain that the answer to this question should

be no. King, too, eventually decided that no such claim ought to be made. To make matters worse for Stefansson, the four men he had sent to Wrangel Island all died. As a result of this tragedy, Stefansson lost whatever official favour he still retained. He played no further part in Canadian decision making.

Nevertheless, his actions had indirectly brought about much that was positive. By 1925 Canada's haphazard Arctic policy had been transformed into something much more clearly thought out. Canadian officials knew exactly what they wished to claim and how, and they had defined the boundaries within which they intended to work. Senator Pascal Poirier's well-known assertion of the sector principle in 1907 was made on his own initiative, in the form of a resolution that was not adopted. In June 1925, however, Minister of the Interior Charles Stewart stated, as the official policy of King's government, that Canada claimed all lands in the triangular sector between its northern continental coastline and the North Pole. The sector theory never won widespread support among theorists of international law but, combined as it was from the beginning with Ottawa's new focus on effective occupation, it provided an extremely useful framework for government action in the North over the ensuing decades.¹⁹ As David Hunter Miller wrote later in 1925, 'With her claim to sovereignty before the world, Canada is gradually extending her actual rule and occupation over the entire area in question ... while it cannot be asserted that Canada's title to *all* these islands is legally perfect under international law, we may say that as to almost all of them it is not now questioned and that it seems in a fair way to become complete and admitted.'²⁰ By 1930 Canada's sovereignty over the islands within the sector was firmly established in the eyes of the world.

STEFANSSON'S SWEEPING VISION OF Canada as a northern empire had immense appeal, and there have always been claims that his ideas were rejected because the Ottawa bureaucracy was dominated by narrow, uncomprehending men, motivated by petty jealousy of a great explorer. Richard Finnie, for example, was convinced that 'Ottawa was not ready for Stefansson in his heyday.' Finnie remembered Meighen, King, Harkin, and the rest as 'conservative, cautious and relatively inconspicuous,' while Stefansson 'was a star. He outclassed them in almost every way.'²¹ A great explorer and a media star Stefansson undoubtedly was, but he was also immensely ambitious, dogmatic, and devious. Stefansson was willing to

use whatever deceptions were necessary to get his way. Both his sincere enthusiasm for northern development and his flagrant misrepresentations of the motives and actions of others knew no bounds.

In *Stefansson and the Canadian Arctic*, Richard Diubaldo concludes that Stefansson's tactless approach to the officials who could have helped him was the main cause of his fall from favour in Ottawa, and that his downfall retarded the development of a satisfactory Arctic policy. With Stefansson gone, Canadian plans for the North were 'meagre' and 'stultif[ied]'.²² This book offers an alternate way of understanding Stefansson's impact on official Ottawa. While Canadian politicians and civil servants grew justifiably suspicious of Stefansson's grandiose plans, his love of newspaper publicity, and his smoothly plausible explanations of his own self-serving behaviour, many of them (in part because of his influence) were genuinely interested in the Far North. Throughout the period covered by *Acts of Occupation*, they were groping towards their own, more pragmatic, vision of the Canadian Arctic and its future. Their concerns link together what formerly seemed to be a jumble of only loosely related events.

The connections between the perceived Danish threat, Stefansson's failed attempt to annex Wrangel Island, and the 1925 sector claim have never previously been examined. The strongly negative official response to Rasmussen's letter – which Stefansson did so much to exacerbate – was only the first in a series of developments that transformed Canada's Arctic policy. The story Harkin was so determined to keep secret is interesting and significant not only in itself, but also because it provides the clue to an even more important drama. By following the sequence of events beyond the cancellation of Stefansson's expedition in 1921, and even beyond the Wrangel Island controversy and his final rejection by Ottawa officialdom in 1924, we can see a formerly obscure period in the history of the Canadian north from a new and illuminating angle.

The story also touches on broader issues in Canadian state formation.²³ By the end of the First World War, Canada had achieved a new level of autonomy within the British Empire. However, in the immediate postwar era the Department of External Affairs remained a small body of civil servants, lacking any significant expertise in the area of international law. Canada, in other words, did not yet possess the necessary political machinery to formulate and implement a truly independent foreign policy. These shortcomings were largely to blame for Ottawa's blundering response to the supposed Danish threat. Stefansson found it a comparatively

easy matter to dupe Canadian officials, at least for a time; Harkin, a member of the Department of the Interior with no qualifications whatever for meddling in matters of external policy, was able to take advantage of the confusion and poor communication that often prevailed in Ottawa to push forward with his own plans in defiance of his more sophisticated and better informed superiors. Only the intervention of the British Foreign Office finally resolved the situation, permitting Rasmussen's Fifth Thule Expedition to carry on its groundbreaking ethnographic work. During the Wrangel Island episode, the government again turned to the experts in London for help. But by 1925 Canadian civil servants felt ready to meet a potential threat from American explorers Donald MacMillan and Richard Byrd largely on their own. Unlike Rasmussen, the two Americans did in fact hope to seize parts of the archipelago. The firm Canadian response forced them to abandon their plans.

In the Canadian government's relationships with Great Britain, with other states, and with its own northern hinterland, the years from 1918 to 1925 were a time of important changes, many of them hidden at first beneath the surface of established government routines and therefore imperceptible to members of the public. By the late 1920s, these changes would be made manifest in the far stronger Department of External Affairs created by Mackenzie King and his under-secretary of state for external affairs, O.D. Skelton, and in a greatly expanded northern administration, including a program of scientific and other work related to the annual Eastern Arctic Patrols. Besides a narrative of the events behind the first Eastern Arctic Patrol and the Wrangel Island affair, government documents from the period 1918-25 offer a detailed record of why and how the Canadian government evolved the bureaucratic procedures and other mechanisms that would ensure its control of the Far North. The letters and personal papers of Stefansson, Shackleton, and Rasmussen open up another perspective by showing how ambitious, dynamic explorers interacted with civil servants and politicians. *Acts of Occupation*, therefore, combines episodes of high drama from the closing years of what has been called the heroic age of polar exploration with the quieter, but no less fascinating, story of the Ottawa men who secured Canada's title to the northern archipelago.

1

Taking Hold of the North

Surely ... we know that the reserve and strength of character that is in our northern blood has meant victory in this War. We ought to be proud of the fact that we are a northern people, and we ought not to be afraid to breast the wave. We should take hold of the north.

*– Sir Edmund Walker, after a speech by Vilhjalmur Stefansson to the Empire Club of Canada,
11 November 1918*

VILHJALMUR STEFANSSON RETURNED TO the south from his five-year Canadian Arctic Expedition in September 1918. He left the North reluctantly: in 1915 the government had ordered him to return in 1916, but Stefansson evaded the order. In 1917 Inspector J.M. Tupper, the officer in charge of the Royal North West Mounted Police post at Herschel Island, informed him that Ottawa was urgently attempting to communicate with the expedition. Tupper suggested a quick journey to the nearest telegraph station at Fort Yukon. But, as Tupper indignantly reported to his superiors, Stefansson answered that he ‘was not going out of his way’ to receive unwanted instructions.¹ Rumours about Stefansson’s recalcitrant attitude reached southern Canada, where they sparked unfavourable press commentary. ‘While war is on and the public are engrossed in the one big thing, Mr. Stefansson apparently thinks the story he will have to tell on his return will under the circumstances not compel universal attention,’ the *Toronto Globe* observed acidly in March 1918.² Stefansson stayed in the Arctic as long as he remained confident that he could coax funds from the politicians in Ottawa. He was determined to do work that would establish his credentials as one of the most successful polar explorers of the day. This ambition he certainly accomplished (though at the cost of roughly \$535,000 instead of his original estimate, \$75,000).³ But Stefansson had

also laid the foundation for years, even decades, of acrimonious controversy about his character and actions.

The controversy centred on two dramatic episodes in the history of the Canadian Arctic Expedition: the deaths of eleven men on or near Wrangel Island and a so-called mutiny by members of the scientific staff. The expedition's ship, the *Karluk*, was caught in the pack ice off the coast of Alaska in the late summer of 1913. Stefansson was away from the ship on a hunting expedition when a strong wind blew the ice and the trapped *Karluk* far to the west. Stefansson proceeded to Collinson Point, where the scientific section of the expedition was working under the supervision of zoologist Dr. Rudolph Anderson. Stefansson (whose supplies had gone with the *Karluk*) wanted to appropriate some of the scientific party's resources in order to make a prolonged journey of exploration over the ice of the Beaufort Sea. Anderson was already angry with Stefansson. Before the expedition began, Stefansson had agreed that Anderson could publish newspaper and magazine articles about his experiences. He later went back on his word, informing Anderson in June 1913 that he had sold exclusive press rights to the *New York Times* and the *London Daily Chronicle*. At Stefansson's request, the government forbade the scientists to lecture or publish until one year after the end of the expedition. 'He admitted to me that what he had done was ethically wrong, that he had lied to me repeatedly, but said that he felt justified in using any means to get my help and get the expedition started,' Anderson later recounted.⁴

The expedition's orders, drafted by the Department of the Naval Service, were poorly thought out. Stefansson was described as the leader of the entire expedition, but only the exploring party was placed under his 'personal direction and control.' The scientific work was 'under the direction of Dr. Anderson.' The orders placed great emphasis on the government's wish that the work done by the scientists 'should be of a high order ... and should mark a distinct advance over previous work.'⁵ Arguing that Stefansson's authority as leader did not extend to a complete revision of the priorities set by the government, Anderson refused to let Stefansson take everything he wanted. Stefansson saw this, and later publicly described it, as mutiny, but at the time he could do nothing, since Anderson had the wholehearted support of the other scientists.⁶

The *Karluk* was crushed by ice pressure in January 1914 (Stefansson had been warned before the expedition's departure that the ship was not built to withstand heavy pack). The crew escaped to nearby Wrangel Island.

Eight men were lost on the journey over the treacherous pack ice and three more died on the island, two from a mysterious sickness apparently connected to bad food and one by suicide – or possibly murder. Stefansson was confident that explorers could live off the land, but he had chosen mostly men who lacked any experience in Arctic survival techniques. And, despite Stefansson's theories about the bountiful food resources of the 'friendly Arctic,' Wrangel Island proved to be a poor hunting ground. To make matters worse, the expedition's pemmican was deficient in quality, containing an insufficient amount of fat.⁷

To save his crew, the *Karluk*'s commander, Arctic veteran Robert ('Bob') Bartlett, made a daring and dangerous journey over the sea ice to Siberia. Bartlett's story caused headlines around the world in June 1914. By the time the group on Wrangel Island was rescued, war had broken out. One survivor, William Laird McKinlay, joined the army soon after his return to his native Scotland. 'Not all the horrors of the Western Front, not the rubble of Arras, nor the hell of Ypres, nor all the mud of Flanders leading to Passchendale, could blot out the memories of that year in the Arctic,' he later wrote.⁸ McKinlay retained a lifelong bitterness against Stefansson, who in his opinion had not taken the elementary precautions that would have given the men on the *Karluk* a better chance of survival.

Rudolph Anderson and the expedition's other scientists returned to Ottawa in 1916 as ordered, full of anger about Stefansson's high-handed attitude, which they felt showed a selfish disregard for the program of work they were expected by the government to carry out. They had also repeatedly been dismayed by evidence that Stefansson 'ever had his eye on his news reading public' and that, under the cloak of science, the expedition 'was really, at the bottom, a newspaper and magazine exploiting scheme' for Stefansson's personal benefit.⁹ Anderson, too, would remain Stefansson's enemy for life. He usually referred to his former colleague as 'Windjammer,' a derisive nickname intended to convey Stefansson's unreliability and boastfulness.¹⁰ (Decades later, when Stefansson's young wife, Evelyn, playfully called him Windjammer, Stefansson 'wasn't amused.')¹¹ Anderson was American-born. He and Stefansson were old acquaintances, having met – if only briefly – when they were both students at the University of Iowa. Anderson did solid scientific work during Stefansson's 1908-12 expedition, and he joined the Canadian Arctic Expedition on Stefansson's urgent invitation. Once the expedition was over, Anderson and his wife, Belle, settled in Canada. For the rest of his long career, Anderson worked at the Victoria Memorial Museum in Ottawa.

Mrs. Anderson was an intelligent, energetic woman: she too had studied at the University of Iowa, and she had then gone on to earn a master's degree from the University of Wisconsin. She took a keen interest in Arctic matters, and her attitude to Stefansson, like her husband's, was full of distaste and resentment. Belle Anderson was present at the June 1913 encounter between her husband and Stefansson. She was deeply shocked to hear Stefansson say 'with the utmost unconcern that he would lie or do anything to achieve an end he had in view and feel himself justified in doing so.'¹² Five months later Mrs. Anderson gave birth to her first child, a son who died within a few days. In her grief and loneliness, she turned to correspondence with the mothers, sisters, and wives of the men on the missing *Karluuk*. The experience left her with a lasting sense of the emotional devastation caused to families by Stefansson's ambitious nature and his careless planning.

After the scientists' return, a few critical newspaper articles appeared, alleging that Stefansson was a publicity hound who cared nothing for careful, systematic investigation of the Arctic. The *Ottawa Citizen*, for example, declared that he had sold himself 'body and soul to the American newspapers and magazines for whom he has written, or plans writing, accounts of his explorations.'¹³ But, as with the return of the *Karluuk* survivors, the world was too busy with far weightier concerns to take much notice. Rudolph Anderson (who denied responsibility for the *Citizen* article and similar press items) wrote resignedly, 'The government let a certain explorer go at large with a little too much rope, and has to stand for the consequences, and loyal servants of the same do not like to stir up official investigations and scandal, to embarrass a wartime government.' Besides, there was 'no use starting a vague newspaper row with the slippery cuss, as that is just what he wants, anything in the papers favorable or unfavorable is merely playing his game.'¹⁴

Stefansson explored to the north of the Parry Islands from the spring of 1914 until the autumn of 1915. No members of the expedition were willing to accompany him beyond the early stages of the journey, so he set off with two adventurous Norwegians, Storker Stokerson and Ole Andreason, who had come to the Arctic as trappers and traders. With their help, Stefansson discovered Brock, Borden, Loughheed, and Meighen Islands – some of the last remaining unknown bits of land in the Arctic (later irreverently known in Ottawa as the 'Tory Archipelago'). Additional journeys over the sea ice were made in 1916 and 1917. His travels took Stefansson from the continental coastline in 70° north latitude across the

shifting sea ice almost to the eighty-first parallel. In 1914-15 he spent so long out of communication with the world that some gave him up for dead. Even the Inuit declared it was impossible to live for so long on the sea ice, where there was no game. But Stefansson found game. Here were dramatic and solid achievements that he could set against the carping of his detractors.

Next, Stefansson planned to make another long journey across the ice towards Wrangel Island and the coast of Siberia. 'I have never been so eager to do anything,' he later wrote.¹⁵ However, a severe bout with typhoid put an end to this plan as far as Stefansson himself was concerned. A party was sent out, but it was led by Storkerson. For four months Stefansson remained in the hospital at Herschel Island. From there, he began the journey south in April 1918. Stefansson arrived in Vancouver on 16 September and told curious reporters that he would 'rather be up in the Arctic. I hope to return north some day.'¹⁶ He then spent a few weeks in Seattle, on the plea that his poor health obliged him to consult specialists there. Stefansson requested a further leave of absence from his official duties for medical treatment at the University of Iowa hospital. The request was granted, but in early October he decided to omit his stay in Iowa and return to Ottawa at once.

Ever since Stefansson had reached Fort Yukon and read the latest news bulletins from Europe, he had been concerned about the impact of the current international situation on his own fortunes. Eager to link his story with the patriotic fervour roused by the war effort (and perhaps fearful that if he was not seen to be doing some sort of war work, public opinion might oblige him to enlist), Stefansson came up with the idea of lecturing for the benefit of the Red Cross. His shattered health, he explained, made him unfit for any other type of work. But from Ottawa came the blunt answer that although he was free to lecture if he wished, he must first submit a written report for publication by the government. In reply, Stefansson wrote to George Desbarats (the deputy minister of the Naval Service, who was the official mainly responsible for the expedition), arguing in injured tones that he could not understand the government's failure to support him in his eagerness to assist the war effort. Besides, he claimed, by the time a report was written and published, popular interest in the expedition would have died away; his lectures could increase the interest and secure a wider audience for the eventual publication. Desbarats replied coldly that the war effort was indeed of paramount importance and

that Stefansson could have made a much greater contribution to it if he had followed instructions and returned home in 1916.

As he travelled across the continent by rail, pausing only for a short visit with his elderly mother (then living in Wynyard, Saskatchewan), Stefansson had much to consider: not only how the story of his exploits would be received by the Canadian government and the public, but also what his responsibilities were to the family he had left behind in the Arctic – his common-law Inupiaq wife, Fanny Pannigabluk, and their nine-year-old son, Alex. In the end, Stefansson decided to forget them both. After leaving the North, he never again acknowledged that Alex was his son. During his stay in Seattle, he began a romance with an attractive local woman, Betty Brainerd. Marriage was later discussed between them, but yet another relationship, this time with married novelist Fannie Hurst, intervened.¹⁷ Despite these other love affairs, Stefansson may initially have intended to return to Pannigabluk and Alex. He was almost thirty-nine years old – an age when many polar explorers felt they were ready to retire. Stefansson, however, did not. ‘I am afraid that by now my Arctic work is the only work I am good for, or at least I am less fit for any other work. It is my desire and my dream to continue it,’ he had written in 1917. ‘I have several alternate plans, one or another of which I hope to put through.’¹⁸ But for any of his plans to become reality, he would need fame and the money it could bring.

Stefansson could certainly hope to make a significant amount of money by writing and lecturing in the immediate aftermath of his return. Despite his nasal voice, Stefansson was a memorable lecturer, with a knack for vivid, humourous stories and an imposing physical presence. He was on the tall side of average height, with strong features, a dimpled cleft chin, and a thick mass of unruly fair hair. His bearing seemed confident to his admirers and cocky to his detractors. A modern Viking, some called him. But after a year or so of notoriety, what would he do? And what if even a short period of fame eluded him? At first, the autumn of 1918 seemed to Stefansson like one of the worst possible times for his return.¹⁹ It would be difficult to get the publicity usually accorded to polar exploits in times of peace. Stefansson liked and needed headlines, but now more than ever the headlines were taken up by events in Europe, where, after four years of deadlock and attrition on the western front, the war had at last turned into a war of movement. Beginning with the surprise attack at Amiens on 8 August (later known as the ‘Black Day of the German Army’), the Allied

forces swept steadily forward. Canadian troops played a prominent role in the victories at the Drocourt-Quéant Line, the Canal du Nord, Bourlon Wood, Cambrai, and Valenciennes. The rapid succession of Allied triumphs was of all-engrossing interest to readers in both Canada and the United States.

Stefansson went first to Ottawa and made his report to the authorities. He arrived early on 29 October and spent the morning of that day in Desbarats' office. According to Stefansson's later account, the two men agreed that the Red Cross lectures would be cancelled. Stefansson assured Desbarats that after a month's leave for medical care in the United States, he would set to work on his report. In the afternoon, Desbarats informed the press that he was 'highly pleased' with Stefansson's results. Stefansson, in turn, told the assembled reporters with a smile: 'Hardships and sickness [are] largely a matter of the mind. If one thinks or imagines that he is suffering terrible privations and worries about imaginary illness, then he will worry himself into the real thing. But the spirit of optimism is the right spirit. I made up my mind that I was comfortable, and that I had a work to accomplish, and with that thought uppermost I got through.'²⁰

Stefansson did not linger in Ottawa. Immediately after his meeting with Desbarats, he hurried to New York. From there, he wrote a letter informing Desbarats that the first lectures in the series (to be given in New York, Brooklyn, Philadelphia, Washington, and Toronto) could not be cancelled after all, because seats had already been sold.²¹ Clearly, it was important to Stefansson that he have the chance to publicize the expedition, and he was especially eager to appear in the major American cities. Although he had been born in Manitoba, Stefansson regarded the United States as his home. His Icelandic parents had moved from Canada to the Dakota Territory when Stefansson was only a year and a half old. Stefansson initially became an Arctic explorer through contacts in the American academic world. He valued these contacts both for their practical uses and because they represented a real achievement for an unconventional, impecunious outsider from the West.

Like most Icelanders, Stefansson's parents promoted a love of literature and of learning generally. As a young man, Stefansson aspired to earn a university degree, but his progress was hampered by an arrogant conviction that he already knew more than his teachers. After being expelled from the University of North Dakota for poor attendance and a generally insubordinate attitude to authority, he graduated from the University of Iowa in 1903. Stefansson then went on to graduate work in anthropology

at Harvard, funded by a scholarship from the Unitarian Church. He first travelled to the Canadian Arctic as a member of the Leffingwell-Mikkelsen Expedition in 1906-7. In 1908-12 Stefansson led his own ethnographic expedition, sponsored by the American Museum of Natural History. The 1913-18 expedition originally had the backing of the American Museum of Natural History and the National Geographic Society, but when Stefansson approached the Canadian government for an additional grant, Prime Minister Robert Borden decided that Canada would take over the entire venture. It was, then, almost inadvertently that Stefansson became the leader of an official Canadian expedition.

It was a condition of Borden's offer that Stefansson must be naturalized as a Canadian. When his father became an American citizen in 1887, young Vilhjalmur had lost the status of British subject conferred by his Canadian birth. Stefansson took some of the steps that were necessary to recover his former nationality, but he did not complete the process. Nevertheless, he frequently claimed to be Canadian.²² Whether Stefansson privately considered himself Canadian or American in 1913-18, he unquestionably relied on the strong connections he had built up with American institutions and publishers to make his exploits known to the world. When the Canadian government took over the sponsorship of the expedition, it was agreed that the press contracts and other agreements already made by Stefansson would be honoured. Over the years since 1913, news of the Canadian Arctic Expedition had been released mainly through American publications like the *New York Times*, the *Bulletin of the American Geographical Society*, and the *Geographical Review*, and it was in New York, not Ottawa, that Stefansson made the first extensive public statements after his return.

Stefansson gave a press conference on 30 October and a lecture (sponsored by the American Museum of Natural History and the American Geographical Society) at Carnegie Hall on the 31st. According to Stefansson, the lecture went extremely well despite some 'minor heckling'.²³ When it was over, he got a taste of the feminine admiration fame could bring: an attractive Canadian-born writer, Constance Lindsay Skinner, who had found reading the newspaper reports of his expedition a solace during a time of emotional turmoil, came up to introduce herself. She was not disappointed in her hero. Skinner found in Stefansson a 'blend of daring, self-confidence, energy, genius, and imagination' which reminded her of the early Norsemen.²⁴ Although the love affair she clearly hoped for never occurred, the two remained good friends until Skinner's death in 1939.²⁵

The press conference was reported on page 5 of the *New York Times* and the lecture on page 13.²⁶ In other years, the *Times* had placed news from Stefansson in a prominent position on the front page. ‘Stefansson Discovers New Arctic Land’ was the banner headline on 18 September 1915. This story was among the items that had caught and held Constance Skinner’s attention. But in the last week of October 1918 and the early days of November, the front pages were dedicated to Turkey’s surrender and the collapse of Austria.

Despite the optimistic news arriving daily from Europe, Stefansson evidently feared that the Germans might reject the Allies’ terms and fight on to the bitter end, with the result that the war would last for many more months, perhaps even for another year. In 1913 he had signed a contract with lecture manager Lee Keedick of New York. Keedick now informed him that, because of the war, the earlier contract could not be carried out. A successful lecture tour was still possible, but only on terms less favourable to Stefansson. Stefansson duly signed a new two-year contract on 5 November before leaving New York to give his lectures in Philadelphia (6 November) and Washington (8 November).²⁷ He soon had cause to regret his action: on 9 November came the news that Kaiser Wilhelm II had abdicated, making a speedy end to the conflict almost inevitable.

When the news broke, Stefansson was again in Ottawa. In the course of another long conversation, Desbarats insisted that Stefansson must return to Esquimalt, British Columbia, to wind up the expedition’s business there.²⁸ The two men also discussed the grievances put forward by Rudolph Anderson and the other members of the scientific staff. Stefansson took the attitude that only Anderson’s behaviour required examination, and not his own. ‘Seeing ... that the Expedition has achieved both a scientific and a popular success ... I feel it would be petty of me were I not to discourage any public humiliation of Dr. Anderson ... the affairs of the Expedition are going so well now that it would probably be best to drop all questions of discipline connected with its past ... I would rather forget them, I think, than receive a public vindication on any point that may seem doubtful or discreditable to those not fully informed,’ he wrote after the meeting.²⁹ But according to Anderson, Desbarats was not convinced that Stefansson had been entirely in the right. Although ‘minor difficulties and differences of opinion had arisen,’ the deputy minister believed that the ‘solutions arrived at [were] the best possible under the difficult circumstances.’ Desbarats had never so much as considered any ‘public

humiliation' of the scientists. Instead, he hoped there would be no public controversy to mar the expedition's record and embarrass the government.³⁰ Anderson was willing to go along with the policy of silence as long as Stefansson did the same.

From Ottawa Stefansson travelled to Toronto, where he was scheduled to speak on 'My Five Years in the Arctic' at Massey Hall on 11 November, under the auspices of the Empire Club of Canada. He later described the lecture as one of the most important of his career.³¹ At noon that day, Torontonians were informed by their mayor that the war was finally over. According to Stefansson, the city then 'went off like a skyrocket' and 'delirious excitement' prevailed.³² A parade already having been arranged in aid of the Victory Loan program, the atmosphere of jubilation was intensified when wounded veterans and men in training marched through the downtown area to the music of nine pipe and brass bands, including the band of the 48th Highlanders of Canada and the United States Navy Band, led by John Philip Sousa himself. '[A] unique feature of the celebrations,' recorded the *Globe*, 'was the presence of a fleet of airplanes in battle formation which accompanied the troops along the line of march, performing "stunts" amid the skyscrapers and church steeples.'³³ The crowds were estimated at between one hundred thousand and two hundred thousand people. Late in the afternoon, there was a thanksgiving service outside the Ontario provincial legislature at Queen's Park. Some who had intended to hear Stefansson's lecture chose instead to take part in the impromptu celebrations that went on well into the night, or were simply unable to make their way to Massey Hall. Others arrived in a mood of patriotic fervour. Stefansson himself was half an hour late because of the crowds that still thronged the streets and blocked traffic. The proceedings began with the hearty singing of *Rule Britannia*.

Speaking over the noise of whistles, automobile horns, and cheers from the street outside, Stefansson offered this elated crowd much more than an account of his Arctic adventures: he offered a new vision of Canada. The expedition itself was, indeed, given rather short shrift. Stefansson devoted the early portion of the lecture to it, but his emphasis was on his method of living off the land rather than on the actual events. Then he turned to another theme. 'But more interesting to me than the things we have done on the Expedition,' he explained, 'are certain things which our experience on it has led me to see ought to be done, and I am going to tell you of some, which I think the Government of Canada ought to

do.’³⁴ The things Stefansson believed ought to be done would ensure the development of the Far North as an integral part of the nation. The only obstacles to such development were ignorance and prejudice.

Stefansson argued that for millennia, people had considered the lands to the north of their own homes as regions of desolation; nevertheless, new civilizations had sprung up there, and these had invariably been of a higher nature than the old cultures in the south. ‘Trench by trench,’ he declared, in an obvious attempt to link his theme with the military victory being celebrated, ‘the ramparts of ignorance have had to be conquered, as civilization has spread north.’ Simple logic and the patterns of human history pointed to one conclusion: the final stage in the evolution of the human race could take place in Canada – if Canadians were not afraid of their destiny. Southern lands were ‘suited to the beginnings of high culture,’ but ‘the test of experience shows that the south is not suitable for civilization’s highest development.’ Stefansson told his audience: ‘We have not come to the ultimate northward movement of the centres of civilization when we have come to London or New York, nor have we at length discovered the ultimate northern frontier ... at the Peace River.’ A northern empire for Canada was not a visionary ideal. Instead, there were solid, practical ways to develop the North. Chief among them were the domestication of the reindeer and ‘an even more valuable animal – the musk-ox.’

A muskox was like a cow with wool, or a huge sheep that provided meat ‘identical in taste’ with beef and milk ‘with difficulty distinguishable from Jersey milk.’ It needed ‘no barn to shelter it, no hay to feed it for the winter, for in the farthest islands of the north they live untended, and they are fat in any season of the year.’ The Canadian government ought to get ‘a thousand or so’ muskoxen from the northern islands, which would be ‘easy to do’; once the scientists had studied them and pronounced on the best way of proceeding with commercial development, ‘we can turn the whole northern half of Canada into grazing lands that shall produce to the square mile as much meat, tallow, milk and wool as do the grazing lands of the Argentine and Australia.’ Stefansson concluded by asking for the Empire Club’s support in his endeavour to convince the government that his plans were viable.³⁵

Sir Edmund Walker, the president of the Bank of Commerce, thanked Stefansson for his speech on behalf of the Empire Club, and he warmly endorsed the explorer’s plans. Walker, who had been an advocate of northern development for many years, was clearly overjoyed to have found

such a persuasive ally.³⁶ ‘It is one of the most difficult things to make Canadians believe in the value of their own country,’ he now remarked. Canada could never take its rightful position in the world ‘until we take hold of the resources of this country.’ The war had proved the value of Canadians’ northern blood, so heroic and so far removed from the ‘hysterical quality’ of the southern races. ‘Surely,’ Walker argued, ‘we know that the reserve and strength of character that is in our northern blood has meant victory in this War. We ought to be proud of the fact that we are a northern people, and we ought not to be afraid to breast the wave. We should take hold of the north.’ Canada must stand behind Stefansson. ‘On this great day, when we are celebrating the peace of the world, it does not seem to me a minor event that we are also able to celebrate the return of a man who has risked so much and done so much for this country,’ Walker concluded. The audience responded with loud applause and cries of ‘hear, hear.’³⁷

None of Stefansson’s audience on this occasion seem to have recorded their response, but an American university student, Earl Hanson, retained a lifelong memory of another Stefansson lecture in the early 1920s. ‘There was nothing of the stirring tale we had expected, about heroic men pitting themselves against tremendous hardships and dangers; instead, Stefansson took us on a voyage of discovery of our own. He opened the gates for us of a new North,’ Hanson recalled. ‘To me it would have been thrilling to have had a glimpse of some terrible land at one of the “ends of the earth” where only the boldest heroes could go; but it was a hundred times more thrilling to see my own world of everyday affairs suddenly enlarged by thousands of square miles where pioneers would some day stake claims, build homes, and carry the banner of ... civilization.’³⁸ Much of Stefansson’s appeal lay in this ability to inspire belief in a future domesticated Arctic. For his enthralled listeners, the Far North was much more than a realm of adventure and excitement. It became all the more appealing when Stefansson proclaimed that it was destined soon to become part of Canadians’ everyday life.

In the heady atmosphere of victory and of hope for a reinvigorated, prosperous peacetime Canada, such visions were welcomed even by normally staid civil servants. The new centre block of the parliament buildings, with its lofty Peace Tower, was then rising on the site of the old building gutted by fire in 1916. It formed a fitting symbol for the spirit of the times. Matters at first moved forward rapidly in Ottawa.

Stefansson himself made his home in New York, living in messy bachelor comfort at the Harvard Club and later in a Greenwich Village apartment

(he did not marry until 1941, after the end of his long affair with Fannie Hurst). However, for a time Stefansson also maintained a residence at 109 Metcalfe Street in Ottawa, and he was frequently in the Canadian capital. Stefansson enjoyed the full support of Sir Robert Borden. In 1918 Borden had been prime minister for seven years. As the man who successfully led Canada through the war, he retained considerable prestige despite the lingering controversies over some of his decisions (most notably the conscription policy of 1917). Himself the epitome of integrity in both his political career and his personal life, Borden was a powerful protector. The prime minister saw Stefansson as ‘a man of remarkable personality and strength of character as well as of unusual ability’ who had ‘accomplished marvellous results’ in the Far North.³⁹ Anderson and the expedition’s other scientists – most of them employed in civil service jobs – were therefore silent, at least in public. Not until after the publication of Stefansson’s narrative, *The Friendly Arctic*, in late 1921 did the scientists’ resentment explode into print. Between 1918 and 1920, when Borden retired, Stefansson’s influence in Canada was at its height.

Stefansson’s aims during this period were to foster the economic development of the Far North (and he was not at all averse to gaining financially himself by the process) and to urge a more aggressive stand by the government on sovereignty matters. Where economic goals were concerned, he believed that ‘the logical way’ was ‘to convince a few “captains of industry” and to induce the governments concerned to give these leaders a fair opportunity.’ If a thousand individuals went north to make their fortunes, they would all have to be educated to meet the unfamiliar conditions. But if they were the employees of a large company, they would simply follow the directions of their more knowledgeable superiors. ‘An ordinary colony may fail through the conservatism of its members, but a commercial enterprise on a large scale will succeed,’ Stefansson declared.⁴⁰

The government could not grant the required concessions unless its sovereignty was secure, and in Stefansson’s view, that sovereignty should extend over as large an area as possible. Stefansson was particularly interested in the Beaufort Sea, where a million-square-mile expanse stretching north to the pole remained unexplored. He wanted the government to lay claim to Wrangel Island, which could then be used as a base for exploration into the unknown area. If new land were found there – as Stefansson believed was highly likely – it must be claimed for Canada.⁴¹ Stefansson had all the more reason to push these plans in view of the disappointing financial returns from the 1913-18 expedition. His contract

to publish photographs and stories in the London *Daily Chronicle* had produced almost nothing in the way of income. As H.V. Claude-Sussex of the *Chronicle*'s staff explained in January 1919, 'When we entered into the agreement ... we were confident of doing very big things for you with the pictures and other material.' At first there had been 'a very lively public interest' in the expedition. But after August 1914, 'nothing but the war mattered.' The *Chronicle* therefore cancelled the agreement and returned all rights to Stefansson, with the friendly warning that editors, 'whilst open now to consider stories of the kind you have for disposal, are not prepared to pay such big prices for them as before the war.'⁴² Moreover, Stefansson was quickly coming to realize that the new lecture contract he had unwisely signed just before the armistice would not bring him much profit. A new and dramatic venture, paid for with government money, could change this bleak outlook.

WRANGEL ISLAND WAS LOCATED far from the Canadian archipelago, closer to the coast of Russia than to any other major land mass. It lay well beyond the 141st meridian, which had been set as the boundary between British North America and Alaska by the Anglo-Russian Treaty of 1825, and which was also traditionally considered by Canadians to mark the western limit of their possessions in the Arctic archipelago.⁴³ The island was first seen by Henry Kellett, an English naval officer, in 1849.⁴⁴ The first landing was made in 1866 by a German, Eduard Dallmann, who did not record any territorial claim.⁴⁵ Further landings were made from two American ships, *Thomas Corwin* and *Rodgers*, in 1881. The captain of the *Thomas Corwin* raised the flag and took possession in the name of the United States.⁴⁶ The British government did not protest; however, Washington took no action to back up the claim. In 1911 a party from the Russian icebreaker *Vaygach* landed and erected a navigational beacon.⁴⁷ Five years later, the imperial government informed the other powers that it considered Wrangel Island Russian territory.

The crew of the *Karluk* raised the Canadian flag on 1 July 1914 as part of their Dominion Day celebration (the sort of ceremony never omitted on any polar expedition, no matter how feeble the condition of its members). Stefansson would later insist that their act constituted a Canadian claim, forestalling the Russian statement by two years. He may genuinely have seen it in this way at the time: to his young son, Alex, he explained that he was in the North to protect Canadian territory from the Russians.⁴⁸ However, the men on Wrangel certainly did not intend their flag-raising

as a Canadian claim. In 1922 William McKinlay angrily called Stefansson's version a 'cock-and-bull story ... in keeping with much other stuff from the same source.'⁴⁹ On his return to the south, Stefansson gave alluring descriptions of Wrangel Island as a northern paradise, abounding with game, and he emphasized its potential strategic value in the future, when major air routes would pass over the Arctic.⁵⁰ Privately, he is said to have remarked that the chaotic state of Russia in 1919 presented Canadians with the perfect opportunity to seize the island.⁵¹

Despite Stefansson's strong position in Ottawa, these arguments were not likely to evoke action from the Canadian government. A claim to Wrangel Island was simply too far removed from any of Canada's past nation-building activities. But to develop the northern areas Canada already possessed as a huge grazing range would fit neatly into established paradigms. Many prominent Canadians were willing to believe that just as the Prairie West had been transformed from a wilderness to a garden by settlement and farming, so the 'Arctic prairies' (as Stefansson called them) could become a pastoral, domesticated landscape. The North would be twentieth-century Canada's new West.⁵²

Stefansson therefore moved slowly on Wrangel Island, concentrating instead on the commercial potential of the muskox. Proposals on this matter were already beginning to make their way through the bureaucratic maze even before Stefansson's return, and his presence accelerated the process. As early as 1914, Stefansson had warned Ottawa that the killing of muskoxen by Hudson's Bay Company traders and others might result in the extinction of a species which was essential to the survival of the Inuit.⁵³ As he observed the animals more closely on his travels through the northern islands, the idea of muskox herding for profit took hold of his imagination.⁵⁴

In February 1917 Stefansson wrote to Sir Robert Borden, Sir Edmund Walker, former American president Theodore Roosevelt, and the premier of British Columbia, Sir Richard McBride, enclosing samples of muskox wool. McBride died before the letter reached him, and his copy was referred to C. Gordon Hewitt, a senior zoologist with the federal Department of Agriculture and a member of the Advisory Board on Wildlife Protection. Hewitt, already a keen conservationist, took up the idea with enthusiasm.⁵⁵ On 28 November 1918, Hewitt wrote to Desbarats, expressing his eagerness to discuss the muskox project. Desbarats too became an advocate of Stefansson's plan. In January 1919 Stefansson attended a meeting of the Advisory Board on Wildlife Protection. J.B. Harkin was a member of

the board, and it was likely on this occasion that the two men met for the first time. At age forty-four, Harkin was five years older than Stefansson, a vigorous, highly successful, and relatively young bureaucrat. Like Hewitt, he responded to Stefansson's ideas with enthusiasm. He promptly sent samples of muskox wool to several Canadian textile firms, asking for opinions as to its possible commercial value.⁵⁶

In the following month, Stefansson returned to Ottawa, accompanied by a senior official of the US Department of Agriculture. It was decided that the two countries would cooperate in scientific research on the muskox and that the Canadian government would obtain animals from Ellesmere Island. Ellesmere was chosen because it was reportedly the home to large herds of muskoxen and because it was easier to reach by ship than the islands of the western Arctic, where (as Stefansson knew from personal experience) the animals were also abundant. The Canadians would establish an experimental station on the shores of Hudson Bay; the Americans would do the same in Alaska. Soon plans were under way to acquire a ship for an expedition to Ellesmere. There was talk of refitting Joseph Bernier's old vessel, the *Arctic*. This was the situation when Arthur Meighen, then the minister of the interior, came into the picture.⁵⁷

Meighen, a lawyer with a degree in mathematics from the University of Toronto, had entered politics in 1908. He quickly attracted Borden's notice by his outstanding skill as a debater. Meighen became solicitor general in 1913 and minister of the interior in 1917. Relentless in his logic and merciless in his ridicule of his political opponents, he showed the warmer side of his personality only to his family and a few close friends. Meighen was certainly interested in the muskox project; as he himself wrote, common sense indicated that 'the proper method of utilizing the northland, is by taking possession of, and cultivating the animals native thereto, rather than by forcing the cultivation there, of animals native to milder climates.'⁵⁸ However, his cautious, rational style put a serious crimp in Stefansson's plans. Stefansson had brought this on himself: not content with the support of Desbarats, Hewitt, and Harkin, who could have quietly guided the project to completion, he sent a long memo directly to Meighen.⁵⁹ Meighen, described by a journalist who knew him well as a 'masterful authoritarian' with a 'passion for efficiency,' was not about to go ahead blindly with such a potentially expensive enterprise.⁶⁰ Because it was 'in essence ... a business project,' Meighen wanted a report 'from a body of business men in whose personnel an element of the imaginative will have a place.'⁶¹ Meighen arranged for Stefansson to address a joint

session of the House of Commons and the Senate on 6 May 1919; he then set about establishing a royal commission to inquire fully into the subject.

The chairman of the commission, appointed on 20 May, was John Gunion Rutherford of the Canadian Board of Railway Commissioners. The other members were Stefansson, Harkin, and John Stanley McLean, president of the Harris meat-packing company and a personal friend of Meighen. Stefansson considered Rutherford a poor choice, with little enthusiasm for the project.⁶² The hearings did not start until January 1920. Just as it seemed that Stefansson's plans were about to be translated into action, they had been thwarted, or at least seriously delayed, by Meighen's cautious attitude. It was a portent for the future: Meighen – austere, almost puritanical, with an incisive, dry intelligence – simply was not the type of man to be sufficiently impressed by Stefansson's flamboyant self-promotion.

Stefansson, who had never visited the eastern Arctic, began to gather information about Ellesmere Island and its muskox herds. He sent a letter to George Comer, a New England whaling captain who knew Ellesmere and northwestern Greenland well. In 1916 Comer had sailed up Smith Sound to bring relief to American explorer Donald MacMillan's expedition, based at the Native settlement of Etah on the coast of Greenland. Comer had remained at Etah during the winter of 1916-17, observing the local people and their ways.

Ellesmere Island and most of northern Greenland were uninhabited, but the Cape York or Thule district, where Etah was located, was the home of the world's most northerly people, the Inughuit. Like all the Aboriginal inhabitants of the eastern Arctic, the Inughuit were originally migrants from the west. The ancestors of the Thule people left Alaska in about 1,000 CE. Most of the migrants settled on Baffin Island, but within two hundred years of the initial migration some were established on northern Ellesmere Island. They remained there until the fifteenth century, when worsening climactic conditions caused by the Little Ice Age drove them to the south. They settled on the Greenland side of Smith Sound. Their descendants, the Inughuit, rarely visited Ellesmere after about 1700, but its rich hunting grounds remained part of their collective memory.⁶³ So remote was their location that their very existence remained unknown to Europeans until 1818, when the British explorer John Ross 'discovered' Cape York and named it after King George III's second son, Frederick Augustus, Duke of York. Ross (a Scot) dubbed the local inhabitants the

'Arctic Highlanders.' Despite occasional visits from British and American exploring expeditions and more regular calls by Scottish whalers, the Inughuit retained their traditional way of life almost unchanged until the American explorer Robert Peary arrived at Etah in the 1890s.

Peary was a man driven, even more than most explorers, by a relentless need for success and fame. Between 1891 and 1909, he spent a total of nine winters in the Arctic. His first objective was the exploration of northern Greenland, which he completed in 1900, naming the northernmost point Cape Morris Jesup after one of his wealthy supporters. From 1900 to 1909, Peary's goal was the attainment of the North Pole. Whether he actually did succeed in reaching the pole is now considered very doubtful, but he unquestionably made impressive sledge journeys, first across the interior ice cap of Greenland and then across the polar pack.⁶⁴

The Inughuit were essential to Peary's success. He adopted their diet, clothing, and travel techniques to a greater extent than any previous explorer. More than this, he was able to make use of the Inughuit themselves. 'For eighteen years I had been training them in my methods; or, to put it another way, teaching them how to modify and concentrate their wonderful ice technic and endurance, so as to make them useful for my purposes ... It has been my fortune to utilize the Eskimos for the purposes of discovery to a degree equaled by no other explorer ... no more effective instruments for arctic work could be imagined,' he wrote after his last expedition.⁶⁵ Peary usually referred to the Smith Sound tribe as 'my Eskimos.'

In the process of making the Inughuit useful for his purposes, Peary changed their way of life profoundly. 'There was not a rifle in the tribe when I first went there,' he noted. Formerly 'dependent on the most primitive hunting weapons,' the Inughuit were now supplied with 'repeating rifles, breech-loading shotguns, and an abundance of ammunition.' Peary also provided 'the best material for their weapons, their harpoons and lances, the best of wood for their sledges, the best of cutlery, knives, hatchets and saws for their work, and the cooking utensils of civilization.'⁶⁶

With their new weapons, and encouraged by the rewards Peary offered to the most successful hunters, the Inughuit exterminated the caribou, which had formerly been abundant in their traditional hunting grounds between Cape York and the Humboldt Glacier. At the same time, Peary introduced (or re-introduced) them to Ellesmere Island. On his expeditions, the Inughuit sledged or were transported by ship to the Bache

Peninsula (which lay almost directly across Smith Sound from Etah) and to Grant Land, as the northernmost part of Ellesmere was then known. There they zealously hunted muskoxen on Peary's behalf and their own.

Peary recorded that prior to 1898 the Inughuit had 'killed one or two musk oxen' on the Bache Peninsula, but the more northerly parts of Ellesmere had not been visited by them within living memory.⁶⁷ In 1918 Donald MacMillan added the information that since the year when Peary first took them to the Bache Peninsula, 'the Eskimos have journeyed almost annually to these musk oxen grounds.' Moreover, they had begun to hunt on the west coast of the island as well, finding their way to Bay Fjord and Eureka Sound, 'from which region hundreds of musk oxen were taken out last year.'⁶⁸ Now, in the spring of 1919, Comer confirmed MacMillan's account, and he suggested that these hunting forays might eventually result in the extermination of the muskox on Ellesmere.

Comer informed Stefansson that in 1916-17 the Inughuit had brought back about 150 muskox skins from Ellesmere. 'This they never used to do but now having found out it is not so dangerous crossing Smith Sound they no doubt will continue to do this until the Musk ox will become scarce,' Comer wrote.⁶⁹ Extinction was certainly not beyond the bounds of possibility. Muskoxen were exceptionally vulnerable to hunters with firearms. When threatened, they did not flee; instead, a herd would form itself into a circle. In this way, the animals could successfully defend themselves with their massive horns against any natural predators. But men with guns could quickly slaughter an entire herd. Stefansson immediately forwarded Comer's letter to Harkin.

In this act lay the unlikely genesis of the Eastern Arctic Patrols. Any Canadian official with an interest in Stefansson's muskox project would naturally have been somewhat alarmed by the report, but only in Harkin's hands would it have had such far-reaching consequences. It would be easy to characterize Harkin – the author of so many long-winded memos – as an unimaginative, plodding bureaucrat, but the truth perhaps is that he was too imaginative. In his mind, Harkin could easily picture the broad, magnificent stretches of Canada's wilderness territories, and he was equally adept at envisioning threats to that pristine national heritage.

In 1911 Harkin had been appointed commissioner of Dominion parks, a role he filled with energy and distinction. He is remembered today mainly as the father of Canada's national parks system. Harkin himself wrote in the rough notes for a book on the history of the parks that, when offered the job, the prospect 'intrigued and stirred my imagination.' But

the responsibility weighed heavily on him: 'Eight thousand square miles of the sublimest scenery in Canada had been placed under my protection and I lay awake at nights thinking of the damage one bad fire might do.' Then there were the threats from rapacious business interests. Harkin was determined that there should be no commercial development or exploitation of natural resources on park land. The Canadian people, he defiantly wrote, would always have 'free access to vast areas ... in which the beauty of the landscape is protected from profanation, the natural wild animals[,] plants and forests preserved, and the peace and solitude of primeval nature retained.'⁷⁰

Of course, these threats were not mere figments of Harkin's imagination. But he seems to have had the type of imagination that dwells on and magnifies any potential encroachment. Added to this tendency towards mild paranoia was a remarkable degree of self-confidence, almost the equal of Stefansson's own. Harkin was to a large extent a self-made and self-taught man, and by 1919 he had enough successes behind him to make him believe that he could quickly master any new field. The grandson of Irish immigrants from Donegal, Harkin was born in the rural eastern Ontario community of Vankleek Hill in 1875. (This pleasant village is known today mainly for the number of red brick Victorian homes that still retain their original gingerbread trim.) He was the youngest of the five children of William and Eliza Harkin. His father was Protestant and his mother Catholic; the children were brought up in their mother's faith, and one of the sons became a priest. At the time of J.B. Harkin's birth, the family was a prosperous one. His father, a talented and ambitious graduate of McGill Medical School, was elected to the Ontario legislature in 1875 and re-elected in 1880.⁷¹ However, the family had not accumulated enough financial resources to comfortably withstand the loss of its breadwinner. Dr. Harkin's early death in 1881 meant that his son would not be able to attend university. Instead, young James Harkin became a journalist at the age of only seventeen.

Harkin spent nine years as a newspaperman, first with the *Montreal Herald* and then with the *Ottawa Journal*. A dutiful son and brother, he brought his widowed mother and his unmarried sister, Minnie, to live with him in Ottawa. (His mother remained with him until her death in September 1920.) Despite his success in journalism, Harkin apparently yearned for a job with greater stability and prestige. In 1901 he joined the federal civil service as a second-class clerk in the Department of Indian Affairs; he was also appointed private secretary to Clifford Sifton in his

capacity as superintendent of Indian affairs. (Sifton was then serving in the Liberal cabinet as the minister responsible for both Indian Affairs and the Department of the Interior.) Harkin quickly obtained promotion to first-class clerk, and his salary rose steadily with each passing year. In 1904 he was seconded to the Department of the Interior, where he again worked as Sifton's secretary – a much more demanding and prestigious job, for which he received \$600 per year in addition to his clerk's salary rather than the \$300 per year he had been paid at Indian Affairs.⁷²

Harkin continued in this post under Sifton's successor, Frank Oliver. Oliver evidently thought very highly of his abilities: in 1907 he had Harkin officially transferred to the Department of the Interior and immediately named him chief clerk as well as private secretary. Four years later, Oliver offered him the parks appointment. Harkin's first impulse was to refuse, since he 'knew nothing about the parks or what would be expected of me.' Oliver countered his argument by pointing out that Harkin would not be 'hampered by preconceived ideas' and that he could quickly learn the facts and skills he needed to fulfill his new duties.⁷³ Harkin accepted this reasoning and took the job.

The Liberal government was defeated not long afterwards, and so Harkin began his new task under discouraging circumstances: viewed with suspicion by the Conservatives because of his close association with Sifton and Oliver, he was initially given very little in the way of resources. One of his subordinates, Mabel Williams, later evoked those early days in her popular book *Guardians of the Wild*. From his office on Sparks Street, a drab room with 'bare distempered walls ... ill-assorted furniture, [and a] cheerless bookcase empty of books,' Harkin could look 'through ... rather grimy window-panes at the rather depressing back premises of the Rideau Club.' He had no sources of information other than a few government bulletins and dreary files full of complaints about the condition of the park roads. Nevertheless, he set to work with what Williams admiringly described as 'creative imagination and executive energy.'⁷⁴ After eight years as parks commissioner, Harkin had evidently come to believe that Oliver was right, and that he was more than equal to any challenge. Indeed, his immense self-confidence was among Harkin's most striking traits. To some observers, it seemed that he believed he was infallible. As one acquaintance wryly noted, 'King Henry 8, J.B. Harkin, God and the Pope will have a great time some day when they all meet.'⁷⁵ Not content with his success as parks commissioner, Harkin was always in search of new ways to prove himself. In March 1919 he took on the task of persuading the government to

preserve the nation's historic sites. As a result of his efforts, the Historic Sites and Monuments Board was formed in October of that year, with Harkin as one of the members.⁷⁶

Harkin may have been spurred on to distinguish himself in new areas by the sense that, for all his success, he was still something of an outsider in Ottawa society. He was not a member of the exclusive Rideau Club. When Mabel Williams described the 'rather depressing' view of the club building's back wall from Harkin's office window, she may have intended to convey his sense of exclusion and frustration to former colleagues who could read between the lines. Instead of socializing with the city's elite, Harkin had to content himself with the less prestigious Laurentian Club. This slight ostracism was most likely caused by his rural Irish Catholic background and his lack of the useful social connections a university education could provide. A photograph of Harkin, taken around 1915, shows a good-looking, well-dressed, and very neatly groomed man who stares into the camera with a supercilious, slightly challenging expression. He appears successful and confident, yet somehow there is a tinge of uneasiness about the picture. In early middle age, Harkin remained unmarried, perhaps from a combination of financial caution, family obligations, and social insecurity. (He finally married in December 1924, at the age of nearly forty-nine. His bride, Jean McCuaig, was a former clerk in the Department of the Interior.)

In one of his areas of official responsibility, Harkin was not yet as successful as he would have liked to be. In 1917 the government had passed the Northwest Game Act, which forbade the killing of muskoxen, buffalo, elk, white pelicans, swans, and eider ducks (with the proviso that Aboriginal hunters could kill muskoxen for food when in extreme need); set seasons for the hunting of other species; and banned the use of poisoned bait. The commercial sale of muskox meat and skins was prohibited. It was not considered worthwhile to establish government administration in the Northwest Territories until 1921, following the discovery of oil near Fort Norman. The responsibility for enforcing the new Act in the NWT was therefore initially given to Harkin and the Dominion Parks Branch.⁷⁷ Harkin had no possible way of doing this except to work through the Mounted Police, who operated only in certain parts of Canada's north and were usually preoccupied with other tasks.⁷⁸ The failure to carry out the job assigned to him must have weighed heavily on Harkin's mind. Now here was proof that strict enforcement of the Game Act was required in even the remotest areas of the Arctic, and that failure to take action

might result in the depletion of an economically important national resource.

To Harkin, the solution to the new problem was simple. Greenland, he assumed, belonged to Denmark, so the Danes must stop the Inughuit from encroaching on Canadian territory. After consulting with the other members of the Advisory Board on Wildlife Protection, he turned to the Department of External Affairs. (It is an indication of Harkin's degree of knowledge about foreign policy that he almost invariably referred to External Affairs as the 'State Department,' a mistake which persisted to the end of his life.) Taking hold of the North was about to become one of Canada's first foreign policy challenges in the postwar world.