

A Short Essay on Inukshooks



Pillars of stone encrusted with lichen—so many loose stones laid one upon another, yet in all probability standing as solidly today as when Pliny was writing his letters. Such are the cairns called by the Eskimos “Inukshooks,” a word that means “like a person” for at a distance they are just that, forlorn figures silhouetted against the horizon, standing in a vast, treeless and timeless land, monuments to people and to a way of life that is now gone.

[If you have been a regular reader of Canada Today/D’Aujourd’hui you’ve seen the word Inukshook from time to time. Inukshooks—structures as impressive in their environment as the stones of the Druids, the Virgin Islanders, or the medieval cathedral builders. Here is more, from an essay by E. H. Mitchell.]*

Inukshooks are one of the salient features of the North, and they give to their place an air of serenity, at times of mystery, as if all that had transpired in the past were embodied in their silent forms.

* Mr. Mitchell is director of Canadian Arctic Producers, Ltd., agents for most of the Eskimo cooperatives that make clothing, art, and artifacts for the other people.

Their age is probably the age of man in the Arctic, for the Eskimos say they were there before they came. They say they were made by the Tunrit, the people who prepared the land, built the cairns and the fish weirs.

Inukshooks served many purposes: as landmarks to identify one place from another; to give bearings to a person coming from sea to a flat, featureless coast; and for hunting.

As the name suggests, they complemented in stone the small bands of hunters and their families. Long rows of Inukshooks were placed in a way to herd the caribou to a place of ambush. While the women followed at the animals’ rear, men and boys ran in and out between the pillars to convince the shortsighted caribou that they were people. Usually this was done at crossing places by lakes, where the caribou were driven