

## *Documents on Canadian External Relations: The Arctic, 1874-1949*

### INTRODUCTION

This special volume in the series *Documents on Canadian External Relations (DCER)* covers a period of 75 years, from the earliest tentative beginnings of the Canadian government's engagement with the Far North to the brink of major new geopolitical developments. In 1874, politicians in Ottawa were unsure whether the Arctic islands were even part of their nation – although they quickly agreed that, if the archipelago lay outside Canada's northern boundary, the boundary should be amended to include it (doc. 6). At the same time, they showed a polite interest in recommendations for the administration and development of the Mackenzie River and Yukon regions, but took no action on the matter (doc. 2). Yet by 1949, as an outside legal expert hired by the Department of External Affairs confirmed, there could be no doubt that Canada's northern sovereignty was securely established (doc. 572).

The process that led up to the affirmation of Canada's clear title in 1949 has not been well covered in the regular *DCER* volumes, at least for the period before the Second World War. The reasons for this are many. Firstly, the *DCER* series begins with 1909, when the Department of External Affairs was created, and so foreign policy developments before that year are not part of the series at all. Secondly, even though the early volumes do cover such key issues as the 1929-1930 negotiations with Norway regarding the Sverdrup Islands, the rule when these volumes were being compiled was not to print the records of internal government discussions. Instead, the focus of the series was on official correspondence. Thirdly, many Arctic documents remained classified until recently, making truly comprehensive coverage impossible. Finally, documents from the Department of External Affairs and the Privy Council Office make up the great bulk of most *DCER* volumes. Among DEA records, the arrangement of pre-1940 files is irregular and often confusing. Among PCO records, the Cabinet Conclusions – the best source on government deliberations and decisions at the highest level – date only from 1944. The only private papers used in regular *DCER* volumes are those of prime ministers, members of the Cabinet, and senior civil servants, but for the pre-1949 period most of these contain little or nothing on the Arctic.

This volume, in contrast, draws heavily on the records of the Department of the Interior, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the Department of Marine and Fisheries, and other government bodies involved in sovereignty efforts, and on the private papers of mid-level civil servants and of explorers such as Joseph Bernier and Vilhjalmur Stefansson. Even minor External Affairs files have been searched, and useful documents have sometimes been found in unexpected places. In the absence of any formal records of Cabinet discussions, high-level decisions on Arctic matters have been traced through memos to Council (as the Cabinet was then generally called), Orders-in-Council, and the correspondence with the Colonial Office (CO) in the files of the Governor General's Office and in the