

NORTH OF SEVENTY-FOUR

(This is the first of two articles by a member of the Department of External Affairs who recently visited the Arctic.)

The Canadian Arctic, according to the popular phrase, is Canada's last frontier. It is a frontier in the sense that it is on the edge of the unknown. It is undeveloped. The men who go north, though living in a world of "gadgets" which the frontiersmen of the last century never knew, have something of the same spirit of dedication on which the western reaches of the continent were dependent for their development. Whether the Arctic is a frontier in the sense that its little communities are the forerunners of a new island of civilization may be a doubtful proposition, but the growing importance of the Arctic to life in the south is unquestionable.

The interest which the Arctic holds is almost entirely scientific, and a number of Canadian stations have been established throughout the north for scientific purposes. These communities are dotted lightly across the top of the map of Canada. In a sense, they start at Fort Churchill, for it is an important base of supply serving the scattered world of the Canadian Arctic.

To Canadians living in the comfortable latitudes of the main cities, Fort Churchill, at 58° N., seems a remote settlement. But Fort Churchill, which lies not far from where the northern boundary of Manitoba touches Hudson Bay, is an old established community with a history longer than Ottawa's. Two centuries ago Fort Churchill was an important trading post for the Hudson Bay Company and the centre of military power guarding the approaches to what is now central Canada. Today, Churchill is as cold and far away as ever, but it is 600 miles below the Arctic Circle; and to the men who live in the real Arctic, it looks like southern civilization.

The Real North

By any standard, Resolute Bay, on Cornwallis Island at 74° N., is certainly remote from settled Canadian life. It is a third of the way from the Arctic Circle to the Pole, north even of the land where the Eskimos dwell. Its climate is harsh. Yet even Resolute Bay with its well-equipped airfield, its good living quarters and its cluster of comfortably-furnished buildings seems like civilization to the men who live in the lonely isolation of the remote weather-stations 500 miles back in the empty Arctic wilderness.

Churchill has a scheduled air service, and even rail service, to the south. But it is only twice a year that aircraft provide a link between civilization and the remote weather stations on Mould Bay, Isachsen, Alert and Eureka. Each spring and each autumn, the RCAF flies its North Stars from Montreal through Churchill and Resolute, out to the farthest outposts of Canadian civilization; at about the same time planes of the USAF are flying from Thule in northern Greenland to bring men and supplies to two other Canadian weather stations at Alert and Eureka. Each summer, ships of the United States Navy and Coast Guard make their way to Resolute. If ice conditions are favourable, they may reach one or two of the smaller settlements, but no one can ever count on this. The air-lifts are the real life-line of the remote weather stations, and perhaps it is the spring air-lift which is psychologically the more important. The North Stars which fly to the distant Arctic stations in April, just a day out of Montreal, break the monotony of the long, dark winter. They bring in new men to replace the veterans; they carry food, supplies and equipment for the summer projects; they fly in the scientists—botanists, geodesists and astronomers—who have come to explore one of Canada's richest scientific frontiers.