

Christmas Day in the Canadian Arctic, 1906 – something to remember

An article in Transport Canada (Christmas '74 issue) tells of a Christmas spent in the grip of an Arctic winter nearly 70 years ago. It was a memorable day for the crew of a Canadian Government ship on a 15-month voyage, with no direct communication with the outside world. It brought together seamen from the southern part of Canada and the men, women and children who lived – as their ancestors had lived for generations – in isolation on its northern fringe.

Passages from the article, which was written by Thomas E. Appleton, follow:

...The ship was the CGS *Arctic*.^{*} The captain was Joseph-Elzéar Bernier, leader of an expedition to show the flag as a sign of Canadian sovereignty throughout the entire Arctic archipelago. Among 40 officers and crew, the *Arctic* carried a medical officer whose duties included service to the people living there, a Customs official to assist Bernier in licensing foreign whale-ships, and a photographer – George Lancefield – whose work adds atmosphere to the dusty records of the Department of Marine and Fisheries.

In September 1906 Captain Bernier anchored in Albert Harbour, a favourite pocket on the north coast of Baffin Island. Here he could snug down for the ensuing winter, within easy reach of Lancaster Sound, to await the following year which would unlock the front door to the high Arctic. Albert Harbour is a narrow strait between Baffin and a small adjacent island, a mere hole in the wall surrounded by brooding cliffs of sheer barren rock which rise in places to almost three thousand feet. A few Eskimos lived there – there are not many even today – and at the time of Bernier's visit the only habitation other than sealskin tents was a wooden hut, rejoicing in the title of whaling station, where Captain Mutch of Dundee looked after the affairs of the occasional Scottish whaler which was otherwise the only visitor.

The arrival of the government ship was a notable event for the entire district of Pond Inlet. Some Eskimos travelled 20 or 30 miles a day by dog sledge to meet Bernier, with whom there was always a warm relationship....

Meanwhile, as November cold set in, everyone was hard at work preparing for the siege of winter. Snow was banked along the sides of the ship as insulation, emergency food and

clothing was placed in igloos in case the *Arctic* had to be abandoned because of fire, and the carpenter covered in the upper deck with a wooden roof. The engineers shut down the boilers, the funnel was lowered and all hands settled down to a routine in which oil lamps and stoves – fired largely by small coal sifted from the boiler room ashes – provided a bare sufficiency of light and heat in the waning mid-day glimmer of Arctic daylight....

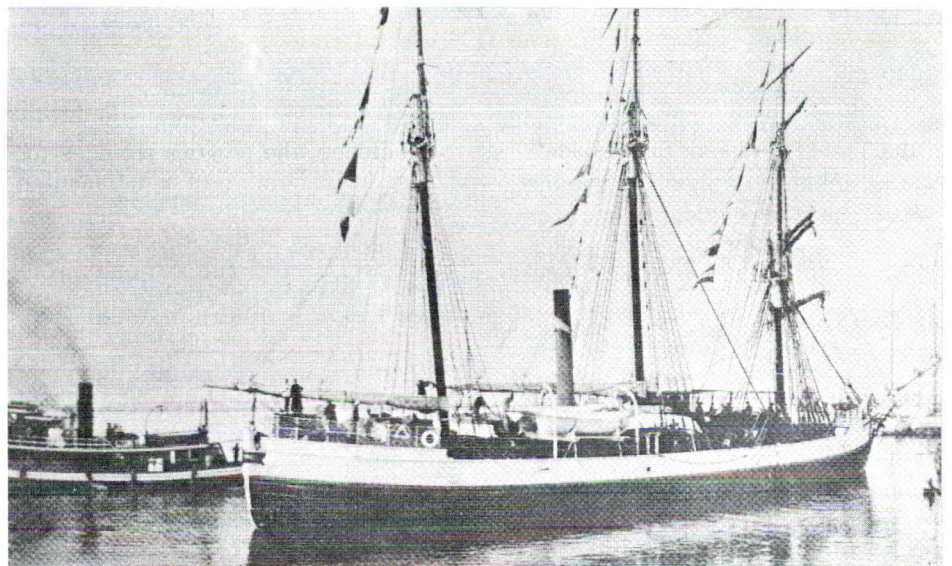
With the approach of Christmas, Captain Bernier determined to mark the occasion with every possible tradition which circumstances would permit. An open invitation was sent for all Eskimo families to spend Christmas Day on board. Bernier instructed the chief steward to prepare “a good Canadian dinner” for 100 guests. As it turned out, this was an underestimate and Christmas Day 1906 was something to remember.

It fell on a Sunday that year. In the forenoon, as the captain followed his usual observance of Divine Service, early visitors joined most of the offi-

cers and crew in their simple litany. To the Eskimos, who were accustomed to a nomadic hunting life, Albert Harbour was as much home as anywhere. But for the men of the *Arctic*, with their thoughts far away in all parts of Canada, there must have been a poignant awareness in the familiar prayer that “...we may return in safety to enjoy the blessings of the land with the fruits of our labours”.

The *Arctic* was a small ship. Below decks there was little space where every corner was cluttered with gear of some kind and men had only the privacy of their cramped berths. By one o'clock 120 Eskimos had arrived.... There is no record of what they had for dinner. The resources of the ship would have been quite unable to produce the kind of fare which would appear today in a Canadian Coast Guard icebreaker, and probably seal meat was on the menu, a dish greatly to be preferred by most of the guests. Afterwards there was lashings of strong, sweet ship's tea and coffee, black as the Arctic night, and for the children twists of toffee made in the galley.

By this time the party was in full swing. Following a short speech by Captain Bernier, in which all on board were addressed as Canadian, there was much goodwill and the crew produced the pride of the ship – their pianola and the gramophone. There were songs and juggling, acrobatic turns and wrestling, and before long everybody was dancing to the scratchy strains of the music. The dim light of deck lanterns flickered on flags decorating the



The CGS Arctic leaves Sorel, Quebec, for a 15-month voyage, July 1906.

^{*}See article on P. 6