

White Eskimo: Knud Rasmussen's Fearless Journey into the Heart of the Arctic

Stephen R. Bown

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Those enthralled by tales of Polar expeditions will find much to celebrate in this thrilling and well-paced biography.

Unlike more famous Polar explorers like Robert Peary, Robert Falcon Scott, and Roald Amundsen, there's been no full-length, English-language biography of the adventurer Knud Rasmussen until now. Stephen Bown, a Canadian scholar and author of *The Last Viking: The Life of Roald Amundsen*, has crafted a life story that succeeds both as a well-researched account and a loving, humanizing portrait of this uniquely gifted writer and pioneer.

Rasmussen (1879-1933) was the son of a Danish missionary father and part-Inuit mother, born in a region of Greenland that Bown describes as “a land of growling ice and fog in the low hills.” In his relatively short lifetime, Rasmussen undertook seven groundbreaking journeys through Iceland, Lapland, and the vast Greenland ice cap, as well as a 20,000-mile dogsled expedition from Hudson Bay to Nome, Alaska.

Again unlike some of his pioneering contemporaries, Rasmussen was “an explorer of people rather than geography,” drawn to “meeting new and unusual people and sharing in their ideas.” Where more notable explorers sought to lay a claim on uncharted territories simply because they were there, the “shaggy-haired and handsome” Rasmussen genuinely loved the people he encountered and made it his life's work to record and help preserve their various indigenous cultures. He and his principal expeditionary companion Peter Freuchen documented native legends, songs, oral traditions, and customs—resulting in significant ethnographic studies that have endured to the present day.

Bown's enthusiasm for his subject is infectious, and his research efforts are truly impressive. The vast majority of Danish source material concerning Rasmussen's personal and professional lives—biographies, collections of letters, etc.—has never been translated into English. In an interview, Bown recounts having to purchase Danish books, “then cut the pages out of them, scan them, and convert them into digital format before I could translate them.”

This labor of love shines through the pages of the biography, with its thrilling accounts of treacherous icebergs, jagged cliffs, freezing ice storms—even a near-fatal encounter with a walrus. Those enthralled by tales of Polar expeditions will find much to celebrate in this lucidly written and well-paced biography.

LEE POLEVOI (Winter 2016)

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