

# The Smith Sound Eskimos, Tuberculosis and the Sun

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WHEN the word Eskimo is used to designate a people it is necessarily with some qualification, as the range of this people extends from the Behring Strait, eastward to Labrador and the west coast of Greenland. This is an extensive domain, yet it contains only 35,000 Eskimos, about 7000 of whom are under the jurisdiction of the Dominion of Canada. My remarks will refer particularly to the Smith Sound or Polar Eskimos, who live on the shores of North Greenland between Cape York and Etah.

We do not usually associate the thought of wild flowers with Greenland, the largest Island in the world, the interior of which is covered with a huge sheet of ice. Yet there are, all around the coast, beautiful green fiords and there is a flora of 390 species. The only trees in Greenland are to be found at Kinguadal, half way up Tasermuit Fiord in the southern part of the island and they are very few in number. How then do they build their houses? The type of house found among the Eskimos is governed by its geographical situation. In East Greenland there is an abundance of driftwood and a glance at a map of the Arctic Regions will explain this readily, for the rivers draining the wooded areas of the Canadian Northwest, Alaska and Siberia empty into the Polar Basin. There is a strong current sweeping out of the Polar Basin between Greenland and Spitzbergen and continuing southward along the east coast of Greenland. Very little of the driftwood carried by this current rounds Cape Farewell and travels up the west coast of Greenland to be of any service to the Smith Sound Eskimos. As a result the dwellings of this region in their mutual form, are low sod huts, in which stones and the bones of animals are used for reinforcement.

The roof is made of long flat stones sloping from the back, an independent invention by the Eskimos of the modern principle of cantilever construction used in engineering. The house is about 12 feet in depth and about 10 feet wide at the front, narrowing back toward the back wall. The height is not greater than just to permit the inhabitants to stand upright. It is entered by a low narrow house passage about 9 feet long. The whole of the background is filled by a low stone platform, first covered by a layer of grass and afterwards with soft bear or deer skins. On the platform the family spends most of its time, it being table and chair in daytime and bed at night. In the front wall of the house above the house passage is a window pane consisting of strips of gutskin sewn vertically, through which a soft light enters the room. The roof is perforated in front by a hole, about the size of a man's arm. This is the only ventilator and in storms even this is closed by a sod. This is the typical winter house of the Smith Sound Eskimos. They use the snow house only for winter travel, unlike the natives of Igloodik and adjoining regions of Foxe Basin, among whom

the snow house is the true winter dwelling, the summer dwelling being a skin tupik (tent).

In temperate and tropical regions, daylight and darkness alternate diurnally with relatively slight seasonal variations. In the Polar Regions the variations are extreme. The Smith Sound Eskimos experience four months of continual sunlight during the summer, followed by two months of alternating sunlight and twilight ushering in the darkness of winter. For three and one half months they do not see the sun at all, though during this time the darkness is relieved by twilight when the sun is just beneath the horizon. The darkness of winter is then followed by lingering dusk, with growing periods of sunlight, until the sun once more circles the sky during the twenty-four hours. In spite of the continual sunshine in summer, the low angle at which its rays are shed is such as to make it quite cool. The annual winter snowfall is only moderate, but the cold is extreme and its physiological effects are almost proportional to the wind velocity and humidity. Withal; seasons arrive overnight, there is no spring as we know it; the sun returns, the thaw sets in, the flowers bloom before the snow is off the ground and with the same suddenness come the migratory birds of which a hundred or more species nest north of the Arctic Circle.

It is probable that the Eskimo is no more suited to stand exposure to extreme cold than the people of more temperate climes. His adaptation to his environment consists in his ability to provide suitable clothing from the skins of arctic animals, rather than in any physiological adjustment. What is perhaps even more remarkable is the extreme heat which he can stand in his house, heat which is almost unbearable to us, but which in itself would not be so formidable, were it not for the variety of smells, of which he is quite unconscious. This heat is provided for the most part by seal oil lamps, which are usually flat soap stone vessels, with a slight hollow. A wick of moss extends along one side which may be 18 inches long. The seal oil burns with a hot white flame; it does not smoke when properly tended and, with one of these burning, the temperature soon reaches a tropical level.

Economically then the winter house is ideal: it is one room, it is small, it is low and easily heated, but hygienically it is bad. Coupled with crowded conditions where swapping the secretions of the nose and throat is inevitable, the opportunities for food contamination by human excreta are legion, for the only logical reasons in the mind of the Eskimo for removing food from the floor are, that it is in the way, or the dogs may get it. When tuberculosis is introduced into this community it is readily seen why few escape, and the same is true for all the infections and contagious diseases.

In the old days, there being no wood used in the construction of the houses, they became very damp in the spring and it was the custom to remove the roof and throw the house open to the winds and sun for the summer months, during which time the family lived in skin tupiks which were large and airy. With the advent of the white explorer, trader and missionary, wood was introduced into the construction of the house which

in general appearance changed very little, except that the floors, roof and walls were lined with wood. This gave the house the status of a permanent habitation and the family began to live in it all the year round; low squalid and dirty, with only one small window and with the louse reigning supreme in the fur coverings of the sleeping platform and on the bodies of its occupants. It is absolutely impossible to impress on the Eskimo the relationship between human excreta and disease and this is understandable when we realize that urine plays an important part in their economy as it is collected and used for curing the skins which will be worn for clothing and boots.

The Danish Government sees this situation very clearly and it has closed Greenland to all visitors from the rest of the world, with the exception of reputable scientific expeditions, but irreparable harm has already been done. The doctor at the little cottage hospital of Thule in North Star Bay finds that he is faced by the most incurable of diseases when he has to treat tuberculosis. In the summer with twenty-four hours of sunlight the patients progress splendidly and all is well. Then comes the darkness of winter and few patients see the spring. The only thing that has saved them from extermination is that they are hunters and population density is regulated by food resources. As a result they live in smaller or larger groups of three or four families where good hunting is to be found. This is about the only bright spot in the dark sky which faces those who turn their eyes towards ameliorating the conditions which the white man in his thoughtlessness or out of mistaken generosity has forced upon these fine people.

Before the white man came the Eskimo had reached the peak of his development. With his primitive weapons no bird or beast was beyond the reach of his hunting skill, but the introduction of firearms led to the decimation of the herds of game. Hunting declined with the resultant development of a tendency, in many places, to a more communal type of existence, often centering about a mission station. Initiative, virility, and morale were shattered by this change and hygienic conditions were made infinitely worse; the legacy of civilization to the Eskimo is quite obviously degradation and too often death. History is replete with examples of fine peoples who have been exterminated, sometimes "by the edge of the sword" as in the case of the aboriginal Beothucks of Newfoundland, sometimes, as is in progress in this case, by the more subtle disruption of natural habits of life. In the former case the crime of it was considered too late; they had all gone; in the latter the crime is still being committed and something should be done about it.

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