

Greenland 1970

Two Accounts of a Recent Expedition by the Ladies Scottish Climbing Club

I ANNE CORDINER

As one grows older, there is some consolation in the fact that one becomes 'better off', one becomes more independent – or does one? It seems to me that if one is a reasonably mature citizen, one is also inclined to get bogged down under increasingly heavy commitments and responsibilities

So, it was with a light heart and spirit that on 24 July 1970 I took my seat along with five friends in a Boeing 727 at Glasgow airport. Half way to America and little more than five hours later, amid a cloud of dust and a hail of stones, we dropped in the glow of the midnight sun to a gentle touch down on the rudimentary landing strip at Mestersvig, and stepped out into the fresh nip of the Arctic air – we were in East Greenland at last.

Greenland is a country much written of in prose and verse, yet how little the average person knows of it. One of our expedition was asked if she was going hitch-hiking when there! The biggest island in the world, it is administered by Denmark, inhabited by Greenlanders (descendants of Erik the Red), Eskimos, and a few adventurous Danes. It has over 4,000 miles of mountains, and most of it, apart from the coastal fringes, lies under perpetual snow or ice. Then for a few brief summer weeks it becomes a veritable United Nations, a paradise for the adventurer who wants to get off the beaten track, who wants, like his forebears, to taste complete interdependence.

The Ladies Scottish East Greenland Expedition 1970 numbered twelve. Besides other British expeditions, there were also French, Germans, Italians, and Danes, and we all met at Mestersvig, the only point to fly to on the rather inhospitable east coast. After that, we could scatter – into hundreds of miles of barren, inhospitable tundra, along fjords liberally filled with ice, among hundreds of the most fantastic glaciers and mountains it has ever been my privilege to behold. The land had primeval beauty, and was truly awe-inspiring, on a scale which in the end we accepted, but never really became accustomed to. It was also raw and savage – geography in the making. At night, resting aching muscles in often uncomfortable camp sites, one lay listening to the creak and groan of the living ice below, the thump and clatter of boulders, as, toppled from their perch, they would come

bounding down glacier, cliff, or moraine, the grind and crunch of ice in the fjords or the splash as 'something' broke loose and fell in.

Cares dropped away as one welcomed the sun, all day and well into the night! In such a savage land, one marvelled at the finite beauty of nature. The delicate flowers growing amidst jumbled boulders, the almost tame white hares (what did they find to eat?) contemplating these strange top-heavy two-footed creatures, the tireless energy of our feathered friends as they picked delicately for insects – there must I suppose have been something other than mosquitos to live on!

Every day seemed fully occupied. As we split into groups, achieved our various ends and regrouped, the situation had its own special brand of humour. Some of us travelled during the day, some overnight and the resulting confusion as to whether one was due breakfast or supper was quite hilarious! We could still be confused when some, emerging sleepy eyed and befuddled, having just got up, met others who had just dropped by for lunch.

The food itself was quite a masterpiece – I could only admire the thoroughness of our commissariat, who saw to it that we had scarcely a tin in our many and varied boxes! The fresh invigorating air and the excitement of never quite knowing what one would find meant that one could go on for 15 and 20 hours at a stretch – equally one could sleep for the same length of time, if allowed to!

We had a 12 foot Avon Redshank with a small outboard engine. It was a necessity, not a luxury. In it the expedition were ferried past uncrossable river mouths, some indeed travelling over 60 miles back from Alpefjord to Mestersvig in her. At other times, she enabled us to have a rest from walking, and a grandstand from which to sit in crowded comfort and view the breath-taking scenery as we chugged along.

In this way, five of us travelled to the end of Alpefjord, through the narrows created by the junction of the Gully and Sefstrom glaciers. It was quite an exciting journey. The moraine, pushed out ahead of the ice, rose as an island in the middle of the passage, large boulders reared up, waiting to catch the propellor of the careless boatman. With ice cliffs several hundreds of feet high often casting a few tons of ice into the green waters of the fjord, we kept a respectable distance from them, choosing the landward passage. Here was comparatively plain sailing, providing one remembered the rocky walls on this side often disgorged large boulders, perhaps as the sun touched some higher part of the cliff. These would ricochet down the gullies with resounding crashes and bangs, usually ending on the scree slopes below. Opposite the incoming streams, one could feel the boat being pushed around by the force of



In Alpefjord, approaching the narrows, where the Gully and Sefstrom glacier meet the water



Base Camp: Schaffhauserdal

[photos by Esmé Speakman

the inrushing water, belying the volume which 'appeared' to enter the main fjord. Just to make certain that we did not 'gawk' overmuch at the intriguing scenery, there were patches of ice to be dodged – indeed once or twice one had to fend off miniature icebergs, or even cut and lift the engine and paddle with the oars, not as easy a task as it may sound with five people and all their gear for camping, climbing, and food for five or more days! Again and again we were fascinated by the bird-like shapes which the translucent green ice seemed to weather into.

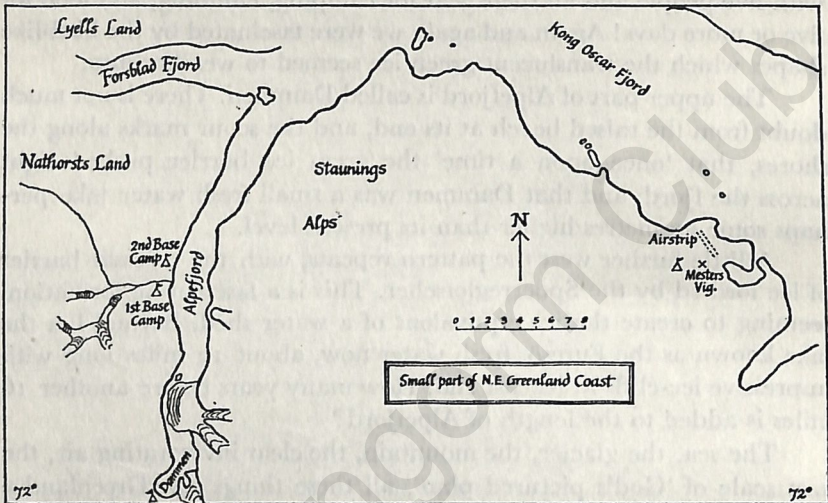
The upper part of Alpefjord is called Dammen. There is not much doubt from the raised beach at its end, and the scour marks along the shores, that 'once upon a time' the great ice barrier pushed right across the fjord, and that Dammen was a small fresh water lake perhaps some 20 metres higher than its present level.

A little further west the pattern repeats, with the colossal barrier of ice formed by the Spøerregletscher. This is a fascinating formation, seeming to create the ice equivalent of a water shed. Beyond lies the lake known as the Furesö, fresh water now, about 12 miles long with impressive ice-cliffs at its east end. How many years before another 16 miles is added to the length of Alpefjord?

The sea, the glacier, the mountain, the clear invigorating air, the vast scale of 'God's pictured plan', all these things give Greenland a unique attraction. In July and August, the mostly dry sunny climate with its 24 hours daylight give it a special appeal. Certainly Professor Blackie's words bear in upon one – 'In the big world, how small a thing is man!' One was very aware of how dependent on each other men are in these surroundings. Each member of the expedition had their own particular responsibilities. In addition, one had to know what everyone could do, and in emergency would do. Once embarked in an open boat, one was dependent on one's own skills to keep it going. Thus all expeditions with boats took a keen interest in each other's comings and goings. A camaraderie – rare except in times of major disasters – existed between all nations. One paid no attention to the minor quirks of colleagues, and hoped they paid none to yours! You slept, camped, walked, climbed, boated with anyone – the criterion being where you wanted to go, what you wanted to do, where you were needed, rather than who you would do it with.

In this day and age, it is refreshing to take part in a true adventure. By good planning, you hope to scale down the risks to acceptable proportions, by using your intelligence you can add to your comforts, by using your powers of observation you can add to the interest of the long forays inland over moraine and glacier. Camera and memory forever

record the views, the play of sun, cloud and shadow over mountain and sea. The hours of backpacking, the mosquitos, the often chilly hours spent in bivvy on a glacier, these fade and are forgotten; remembered is the new dignity of man, the new patience as taught by the elements, a renewal of faith, and the pull and lure of the Arctic.



II GRETA SUMMER

'Greenland? What is there to do there exactly?' was the reaction of a friend when I said where I was going last summer. Somehow it did not seem a very relevant question. The problem had always been how to get there, not what to do when I did. It was nearly nine years ago, one winter's night outside Aberdeen High School that, for me, the idea of an expedition to Greenland was born. For a long time it was no more than a dream, but when in July 1970, after months of planning and preparation, I boarded a plane at Glasgow airport bound for Iceland and thence to north-east Greenland, I finally believed that this particular dream was about to come true.

Greenland was so named by Erik the Red in 984, and the saga tells that 'he thought people would all the more desire to go there if the land had an attractive name'. But it was to the south-west corner that Erik's name referred, and certainly, as we flew north along the East coast to the landing strip at Mestersvig (Latitude 72° N), there was nothing green about the land we saw. In the distance, to the West, the ice-cap glistened white, and huge glaciers stretched out like tentacles towards