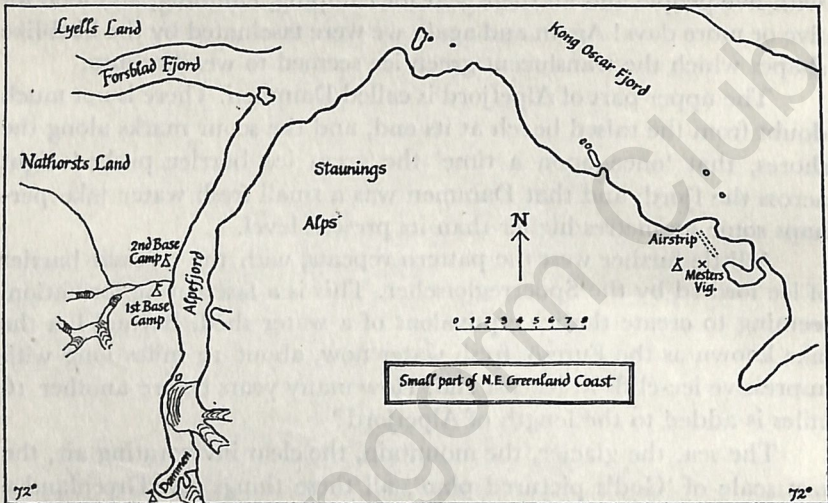


record the views, the play of sun, cloud and shadow over mountain and sea. The hours of backpacking, the mosquitos, the often chilly hours spent in bivvy on a glacier, these fade and are forgotten; remembered is the new dignity of man, the new patience as taught by the elements, a renewal of faith, and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

the coast. Beneath us broad barren valleys had been gouged out, and they glowed reddish brown in the evening sunlight. Easier, perhaps, to understand how the Englishman John Davis, in 1586, came to name this continent the Land of Desolation.

Yet in the few days we spent in the vicinity of Mestersvig there were countless finds to give the lie even to this name. An early source of delight was the variety of alpine flowers. Within minutes of starting to take stock of our surroundings we had found clumps of mountain avens, Arctic poppies, a dwarf relation of the rose-bay willow-herb, several varieties of saxifrage, purple, yellow and white – and this was only the beginning. Another day, on the rocky coast to the north of Mestersvig, I was startled to find myself being inspected by a pair of bright eyes set in a sharp pointed face. It was a silver-grey Arctic fox, head poking over a rock rib no more than a few yards away. Seconds later a ptarmigan appeared from among the grey rocks, very similar to the Scottish variety except for noticeably hairier legs – no doubt a useful extra protection against the winter snow! In the bay, a gaggle of barnacle geese were sedately making their way through the water. No, the land may not be particularly green, but neither is it wholly desolate.

The days around Mestersvig were but an interlude. The main scene of our activities was to be in Nathorstland on the west side of Alpefjord. To get there involved a boat journey north along Kong Oscar's Sound. After a welcome brew-up at the tiny hunter's hut at Cap Petersen, we turned west into an arm of the Sound called Segelsällskapet, and then bearing South, into Alpefjord itself. The whole of this part of the fjord system was first explored and mapped by the Swedish explorer A. G. Nathorst in 1899.

Our base camp was established on a pleasant site (except for the ubiquitous mosquitos) by the Schaffhauserdal delta. As well as providing a grandstand view of the Staunings Alps across the fjord, it was a great place for birds. A pair of skuas dive-bombed all intruders on their patch to the south of the camp, while down on the shoreline, turnstones, ringed plovers, sandpipers, long-tailed duck and barnacle geese were to be seen. Of land birds, snow buntings were common, and in the valley above base camp we sometimes saw a Greenland wheatear, rather larger and rosier than the European variety. Higher up, a second camp was placed in the angle between the Sudvestgletscher and the moraine of the Sandgletscher. From this camp it was possible to explore both glaciers, and also to climb the long ridge leading to the summit of Ardvseck, so named by Donald Bennett.

The Sandgletscher, once we had worked out how to get on to it by

veering to one side of its spectacular snout, provided an easy walk on dry ice. The prospect ahead was tempting indeed, and we had great hopes of finding a route up a peak at the head of it. From a distance it looked as though there was a rock ridge which might 'go', or alternatively, there might be a route up a steepish snow slope on to the plateau, which would enable us to approach the peak from the other side. Ideas on what was feasible were steadily modified the nearer we got to the snow slope, which proved to be split by vast vertical crevasses half concealed in soft snow. The rock ridge also looked more intimidating from near to, and the rock all seemed horribly loose. A shaft of sunlight falling on the side glacier to the north lured us further in search of a possible snow route in behind the rock buttresses, but once again it was not to be. And on the other bank of the side glacier a semi-circle of rock rose sheer – and shattered – for some three or four thousand feet. The message was inescapable: if we wanted to climb a peak at the head of the Sandgletscher, we did not start from here! Still, it was a great day for photography, if not for climbing.

At this point perhaps it should be explained that when one talks about 'a day' in Greenland, one does not necessarily mean a day in the ordinary sense. The term might mean a night, or a day and a night, or a day and a night and a day. People writing up their diaries were quite often to be heard asking 'How many days is it since yesterday?' A day might be defined as the interval between wriggling out of one's sleeping bag and snuggling back into it – but that could imply some very short days indeed. Probably the best working definition is to say that a day is a period of time in which something noteworthy happens.

One such day started after supper, when we chugged away in the boat to visit the upper reaches of Alpefjord. It was usual for the wind, which during the day would whip up white horses on the water of the fjord, to drop in the evening, so conditions were best for boating then. An hour or so brought us to the narrow strait between towering rock on one side, and the ice cliffs where the Gully and Sefstrom glaciers abut the water on the other. From time to time hunks of ice calve off the glaciers, and some of the larger ones proceed like stately ships along the fjord. Steering through the litter of smaller lumps of ice we had to cut the engine and take to paddling, fending off the sharp-edged pieces from our inflatable rubber boat. After the narrows the fjord broadens again into what was probably once a lake at Dammen.

Only a few hours after beaching the boat on the sand at Dammen, we learned that one of the French expedition had met with a mishap. Thus it was that my first glimpse of the mysteriously beautiful inner

lake, the Furesö, came after stumbling across the tumbled ice and moraine of the lower Spoerregletscher carrying an awkward load of assorted sections of a collapsible canoe. The glacier here spills across the fjord, damming it completely, but the canoe was needed on the inner lake. As luck would have it, within twenty-four hours I was to relive that glimpse of the Furesö in the early morning, but it lost none of its magic. After helping to bring the injured man across to the outer fjord, thus ending a long day even for Greenland, we had one of the few spells of bad weather. Hemmed in by dark peaks, in stormy weather this waste of sand and stone at Dammen did indeed look the part of a Land of Desolation. Yet even here, the white Arctic hare was managing to find enough to live on.

Back at Schaffhauserdal we had a second foray up the Sudvestgletscher before evacuating the higher camp, and transferring base camp by boat to the other bank of the delta. Around the new camp we found many handfuls of the soft inner wool of the musk ox, and hoofprints too, but no sign of the beast himself. The summer is short in these latitudes, and already the flowers were fading. The blaeberrries ripened and their leaves turned red. As winter approaches the tundra turns woolly, and to capture the diffuse glimmer of sunlight seen through the fluffy grey cloak of the dwarf willow became a challenge to the photographers.

There was time for one more climb before the boat trip out to Mestersvig. After a lazy start, with a snooze in the sun in a sheltered corner with a patch of blaeberrries to hand, we scrambled up the moraine and on to a glacier which led, like a broad highway, to the peaks beyond. After a while we left the glacier, and cramponned up a steepish couloir to gain a rock rib, which in turn gave us access to the ridge. Sights were set on two protruding rock fingers which, from below, looked like the highest point. The snow on the ridge was deep and soft, and the ridge went on and on. By this time we were used to distances being deceptive in the very clear air, but were scarcely any better at estimating them. Eventually we reached the rock fingers, to find that the ridge went on, impressively corniced on one side, and soon curving steeply away on the other. But at last, just after midnight, the ground no longer rose in front of us. There, with the sun low in the red-streaked sky to the north, the frozen peaks of the Staunings Alps etched sharply in the shadows to the South, and far below, the still waters of the fjord an eerie ice-green, it seemed that time stood still. I thought of the friend who had asked, 'Greenland? what is there to do there?' That night there was no need *to do*, it was enough simply *to be*.