

# **INUIT LITERATURE IN ENGLISH: A CHRONOLOGICAL SURVEY**

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## **Abstract/Resume**

Inuit myths and songs are largely unknown to southern readers. The breadth of Inuit literature in English can be appreciated only through the investigation of a variety of sources. This article surveys and evaluates over thirty-five volumes of both traditional and contemporary Inuit literature in English.

Les mythes et chansons inuits sont en grande mesure inconnus aux lecteurs du sud. On peut apprécier la largeur de la littérature inuite en anglais seulement par l'étude d'une variété de sources. Cet article étudie et évalue plus de trente-cinq volumes de littérature inuite en anglais, non seulement traditionnelle mais aussi contemporaine.

For a thousand years or more, in a long history that has no certain beginning, Canada's Inuit have been transmitting the wisdom and truth of their ancestors in stories and songs.

The above words were written by Penny Petrone in the Preface to *Northern Voices: Inuit Writing in English*. Her 1988 volume provides readers with an opportunity to sample some of the rich Inuit creative tradition. Yet for too long the myths and songs of the Inuit have remained largely unknown to readers in the south. The full breadth of arctic Aboriginal literature in English can be appreciated only through the investigation of a variety of sources, ranging from decades-old anthropological reports to anthologies of contemporary authors published within recent years.

As early as 1745, Inuit literary expression found an English voice with the appearance of a "Greenland Ode" in Samuel Johnson's *Gentleman's Magazine*. This is purportedly the first original work of literature by an Inuit to have been published in English (McGrath, 1984:3). Despite its publication in the Inuit language, with interlinear English translation, it was more of a European poem written in Greenlandic than an expression of the Indigenous people of the North. "Greenland Ode" was written to celebrate the birthday of King Christian of Denmark.

Although some Indigenous northern orature was recorded in intervening years by missionaries, whalers, and traders, the authentic voice of the Inuit people was not heard to any great degree until traditional tales and songs were recorded during cultural and ethnological expeditions in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries (McGrath, 1984:4-9). Dr. Henry Rink's *Tales and Traditions of the Eskimo*, first published in 1875, *The Central Eskimo* by German anthropologist Dr. Franz Boas, which was published by the Bureau of American Ethnology in 1888, the various works of Diamond Jenness and Helen Roberts stemming from the Canadian Arctic Expedition, 1913-1918 (Jenness, 1922; Roberts and Jenness, 1925), and Knud Rasmussen's multi-volume *Report of the Fifth Thule Expedition 1921-24*, are central sources for much of the Indigenous arctic poetry and creative prose. In addition, the writings of Danish explorer Peter Freuchen (Dagmar Freuchen, 1961) contain many legends and songs from the Inuit oral traditions.

Rink's work, which first appeared in Danish as *Eskimoiske eventyr og sagn*, was translated into English by the author and published in Edinburgh (Rink, 1975:iv). It deals with the language, social order, religion, and history of the peoples of Greenland. Of prime importance to understanding Inuit literature is the excellent collection of 150 tales and legends primarily from Greenland and Labrador.

Boas' work contains the results of his observations and collections

made during a journey to Cumberland Sound and Davis Inlet in 1883 and 1884 (1888:408a). Of special interest are religious tales as well as songs which are part of the oral tradition of the people with whom he interacted.

Volume XIIa of the *Report of the Canadian Arctic Expedition 1913-18* was published in 1922 and deals with Diamond Jenness' Southern Party expedition from 1913 to 1916 among the Copper Eskimo in the Victoria Island area of the western arctic. Of interest to those seeking a cultural and sociological context into which one may place the Inuit oral tradition, are the sections dealing with religious beliefs, shamanism, and amusements. Of more direct interest for those interested in original tales and songs of the Inuit is Volume XIV, subtitled *Eskimo Songs*. Roberts and Jenness provide useful background material relating to how and when traditional songs were performed. Included are the music and words for dozens of songs whose subjects include weather, hunting, and social interaction. The original Inuktitut words are written in Roman letters. In addition, there is English translation and explanatory notes for most of the 137 songs. One such dance song from the Prince Albert Sound area was recorded during the 1914-16 period:

### **Song Number 7**

My thoughts went constantly,  
 To the great land my thoughts went constantly.  
 The game, bull caribou those,  
 Thinking of them I thought constantly.  
 My thoughts went constantly,  
 To the big ice my thoughts went constantly.  
 The game, bull caribou those,  
 Thinking of them my thoughts went constantly.  
 My thoughts went constantly,  
 To the dance-house my thoughts went constantly.  
 The dance-songs and the drum,  
 Thinking of them my thoughts went constantly.

(Roberts and Jenness, 1925:415)

Rasmussen's work is rich in its compilation of materials relating to the Inuit creative experience. The oral tradition he chronicled from Inuit he met during the Fifth Thule Expedition of 1921 to 1924 was later published in English in his comprehensive *Report*. Many of the tales and songs later anthologized by Petrone and others are to be found in Volume Seven,

*Intellectual Culture of the Iglulik Eskimos* (1929), and in Volume Nine, *Intellectual Culture of the Copper Eskimos* (1932). Peter Freuchen was part of a 1906 expedition to Greenland and later travelled with Rasmussen on expeditions which began at Thule. Freuchen's *Book of the Eskimos* allows readers to experience legends and tales from the people of Greenland, as well as to a lesser extent, those from the eastern, central, and western arctic.

These early volumes serve as the basis from which several later anthologies of poetry or collections of tales have been taken. With the exception of the Boas volume, which was reprinted in paperback in 1964, early anthropological volumes are available primarily in private collections or academic libraries. Much more accessible, although still somewhat limited in their availability, are those published during the second half of the 20th century.

Edmund Carpenter's *Anerca* (1959) contains Inuit songs and short prose tales collected by Robert Flaherty in 1913-14. These are supplemented masterfully with the sketches of Enooesweetok and commentary by the editor:

In Eskimo the word to make poetry is the word to breathe; both are derivatives of *anerca*, the soul, that which is eternal: the breath of life. A poem is words infused with breath or spirit: "Let me breathe of it", says the poet-maker and then begins: "I have put my poem in order on the threshold of my tongue" (Carpenter, 1959:np).

James Houston presented *Tikta' Likta: An Eskimo Legend* in 1965. Two years later, his *The White Archer: An Eskimo Legend* was published. As the full titles indicate, these are specific legends and not collections. Black and white sketches and conclusions featuring song chants add to the effectiveness of these volumes. In 1969, the National Museums of Canada published a book of individual Inuit tales together with photographs of soapstone carvings illustrating these tales. The book *Eskimo Stories from Povungnituk, Quebec: Unikkaatuat* (Nungak and Arima, 1969) also includes a very useful appendix titled "A Review of Central Eskimo Mythology."

In 1970, Herbert Schwarz' *Elik and Other Stories of MacKenzie Eskimos* appeared. It contains one poem and nine tales along with black and white sketches. In addition, there is a section of photographs and biographical information for each of the storytellers. Richard Lewis' *I Breathe a New Song: Poems of the Eskimo* (1971), has a very useful introduction by Edmund Carpenter. The collection contains over eighty Aboriginal poems which provide a pan-arctic perspective of Indigenous arctic songs from

Greenland to Siberia. It also has a bibliography as well as illustrations which add to the impact of the work. Sources of the poetry include many songs originally chronicled by Rasmussen and Jenness.

In 1972, Edmonton's Hurtig Publishers presented *Tales from the Igloo*, twenty-two stories translated by Maurice Metayer (1972) and illustrated in colour by Agnes Nanogak. The Foreward is by Canadian poet Al Purdy. Tom Lowenstein's translation *Eskimo Poems from Canada and Greenland from Material Originally Collected by Knud Rasmussen* appeared in 1973. The Introduction and the Notes section at the conclusion of the poetry are valuable in establishing the context of the poems. Lowenstein uses the research of Rasmussen from half a century before to divide the poems according to four categories: Songs of Mood; Hunting; Songs of Derision; and Charms. It is interesting to see how the poems fit naturally into these categories, although they were transmitted orally by Inuit from different groups living in widely divergent regions of the north extending from Greenland to the Western Canadian arctic.

Among the songs is the East Greenlandic "Song To Spring":

Aja-ha aja-ha  
 I was out in my kayak  
 making toward land.  
 Aja-ha aja-ha  
 I came to a snow-drift  
 that had just begun to melt.  
 Aja-hai-ja aja-hai-ja  
 And I knew that it was spring:  
 we'd lived through winter!  
 Aja-hai-ja aja-hai-ja  
 And I was frightened  
 I would be too weak,  
 too weak  
 to take in all that beauty!  
 Aja-hai-ja  
 Aja-hai-ja  
 Aja-ha

(Lowenstein, 1973:47)

Edward Field's translation of *Eskimo Songs and Stories Collected by Knud Rasmussen* (1973) is yet another collection owing its material to the research of the Danish explorer. The thirty-four legends and stories as well as poems based on the songs and stories of Netsilik Inuit are well illustrated

with several prints from the recently deceased Canadian artist Pudlo. Bernard Ekogatok's *Naraye, Anarktee, and Other Stories* (1974) is printed on brown paper in an extra large format with brown sketched illustrations, thus creating a warmth which enhances the literature. The twelve tales and two poems are printed in English as well as in Inuktitut syllabics.

Mark Kalluak's *How Kabloonat Became and Other Inuit Legends* appeared in 1974. It contains fifty-four stories in English. The text is supplemented by black ink on single colour sketches as well as several photographs of the arctic and its people. In 1976, Hurtig Publishers presented *Stories from Pangnirtung* illustrated by Germaine Arnaktauyok. As noted in the Foreword by Stuart Hodgson, these are not a re-telling of the stories and songs collected by Rasmussen or Rink. Rather "the people of Pangnirtung share their memories, their values, and their aspirations" (1976:7) The text is well supplemented with colour prints. Leoni Kappi's *Inuit Legends* contains twenty-six tales written in English as well as in Inuktitut printed with Roman letters. This 1977 volume also makes effective use of colour prints. Like *Inuit Legends*, *Eight Inuit Myths* is presented in English with Roman-lettered Inuktitut. The tales were collected by Alex Spalding and Thomas Kusugak at Repulse Bay in the 1950s for the National Museums of Canada.

There are also individual stories which appear in separate volumes such as those published by Houston in the 1960s. Markoosie's *Harpoon of the Hunter* (1970) is one such book. Collections such as *The Sky Clears: Poetry of the American Indians* by A. Grove Day, published in 1951, Edith Fowke's *Folklore in Canada* (1976) and James Houston's *Songs of the Dream People: Chants and Images from the Indians and Eskimos of North America* contain a limited amount of Inuit work but are primarily anthologies meant to provide samples of literature from a variety of authors other than Inuit. Houston's work has a fairly good representation of twenty-one songs translated into English and one in Inuktitut, while Fowke's collection has only two traditional Inuit tales in prose, and the Day volume an eight page section on Eskimos.

In the 1980s and into this decade, more exposure to prose and songs from the arctic was made possible through the publication of a variety of collections. In 1980, Hurtig Publishers in Edmonton produced a small hardcover volume edited by Robin Gedalof and titled *Paper Stays Put*. It did not receive major distribution or promotion, but it remains a most valuable work for those interested in Inuit literature. It contains a good cross-section of contemporary Inuit prose pieces as well as one song and a traditional piece. Its value is enhanced by fine black and white illustrations done by Igoonook Ippellie.

Self-proclaimed as “the first comprehensive collection of Inuit poetry ever assembled,” John Robert Columbo’s *Poems of the Inuit* (1981) contains eighty poems, gathered by Jenness and Rasmussen. It also contains a very useful introduction and bibliography. In 1986, Agnes Nanogak collected twenty-two prose tales from the western arctic and created *More Tales from the Igloo*. Nanogak serves both as storyteller and illustrator for this book of tales with coloured prints. Lawrence Millman’s *A Kayak Full of Ghosts: Eskimo Tales* (1987) is an excellent collection containing dozens of prose tales from Greenland, Baffin Island, and Labrador. *Inuit Stories: Povungnituk*, edited by Zebedee Nungak and Eugene Arima, was published in 1988. This is an updated version of their *Eskimo Stories from Povungnituk* which appeared in 1969. Unfortunately, the very useful section dealing with Central Eskimo mythology is not included in this collection of black and white photographs of soapstone carvings with descriptions.

The most significant volume dealing with Inuit poetry and prose from early myths and legends to present day social satire is Penny Petrone’s *Northern Voices: Inuit Writing in English* (1988). Petrone provides readers with an excellent sample of poetry and prose from various regions of the Canadian arctic. She also presents useful historical background into which the literature may be placed. A good bibliography completes this excellent source book. Among the contemporary prose included in the volume is a brief excerpt from “The Independent Inuit” by Nellie Cournoyea of Aklavik. This piece originally appeared in *Maclean’s* in 1986:

### **Everybody Likes the Inuit**

When someone says, “I want to practise my own culture,” it doesn’t mean going back to freezing in igloos and hunting with bows and arrows. It means regaining the control we had over our lives before...

They glamorize and romanticize the Inuit ... and give us status the others don’t have. Canadians like to talk about us eating frozen meat and living in the cold. It gives Canada something other countries don’t have. Everybody likes the Inuit (Petrone, 1988:286).

In 1990 Michael Fortescue translated *From the Writings of the Greenlanders: Kalaallit atuakkiannit* which has sample literature from the oral tradition of Greenlandic Eskimos as well as present day writing of Native Greenlanders. The emphasis is on contemporary work. A glossary of words is most interesting as is the bilingual (English and Greenlandic with Roman

syllabics) text.

In Canada, Daniel David Moses and Terry Goldie produced *An Anthology of Canadian Native Literature in English* in 1992. Although the majority of works included in this anthology are from Indian and Métis authors, there are some representative Inuit traditional pieces as well as works by contemporary Inuit. Included, too, is an all too brief section discussing the Inuit literary tradition.

Although Inuit creative work such as carving is celebrated in the serial publication *Inuit Art Quarterly*, there are no comparable periodicals in which contemporary Indigenous writers in the arctic may have their work presented. *Inuktitut* and other pan-northern or specifically regional periodicals may have some poetry or offer opportunities for Inuit journalists, but there is no large, extensively Inuit literary journal.

Scholarly works such as Kathryn Kernohan's Carleton University dissertation *Eskimo Poetry* completed in 1972 and Robin McGrath's *Canadian Inuit Literature: Development of a Tradition* (1984) are very useful in providing a thorough overview of the Inuit literary tradition and modern Inuit literary evolution up to a decade ago. Useful, too, is Robin Gedalof's *Annotated Bibliography of Canadian Inuit Literature* which was published by the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs in 1979. It, too, is somewhat dated, but does include all major works and has an excellent and thorough history of periodicals in the north.

The preceding pages have documented the wealth of opportunities readers have to access samples of the rich Inuit literary tradition. What Rink, Rasmussen, Jenness, Roberts, and Boas first chronicled can now be shared through numerous anthologies and collections. Beyond the precontact legends and songs of the oral tradition, are works published in the latter half of this century which illustrate clearly the essence of the contemporary Inuit experience as well.

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