

Kalaallit Nunaat? Suu, ajunngilaq! Two New Books on Greenland in Polish

Piotr Klafkowski | Uniwersytet Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu

Reviewed by Piotr Klafkowski, Institute of Sociology, University of Szczecin, the author of *Current West Greenlandic Teaching Aids* (Lingua Posnaniensis XXXVII, Poznań 1995).

Knud Rasmussen – *Nowi Ludzie*. Translated from the Danish by Agata Lubowicka. Maria Curie-Skłodowska University Publishers, Lublin 2016. This is the Polish translation of Knud Rasmussen's first book, *Nye Mennesker*, published in 1905.

Agata Lubowicka – *W sercu Ultima Thule. Reprezentacje Grenlandii Północnej w relacjach z ekspedycji Knuda Rasmussena*. Fundacja na Rzecz Nauki Polskiej, Toruń 2017. The title translates as *In the Heart of Ultima Thule. The Presentation of North Greenland in Knud Rasmussen's Accounts of His Expeditions*.

These two important additions to Poland's rather scant literature on the country still better known as Greenland (the country's own name is Kalaallit Nunaat, the Land of the Kalaallit) are reviewed together, as they are really a two-part whole: the source material (2016) and its extremely detailed discussion (2017). As the translator of the former and the author of the latter told this reviewer, the books had originally been expected to come out in reverse order, but it seems to me that the present order is just perfect; the field data first, its discussion second. The connecting link between the two books is of course Knud Rasmussen (1879–1933), who I hope needs no introduction.

Let this review begin with one critical point aimed at both volumes: no maps and hardly any plates. These are no small matters: Knud

Rasmussen was a much-photographed man, and his first book deserves to have more plates than just two (Lubowicka 2016, pp.11 and 13). What's more, a book like Lubowicka 2017 – an extended commentary on a sourcework that has become a travelogue classic – cannot do without at least a few maps. Can we reasonably expect that the reader, a proverbial Mr. Average, will know where such places as Upernavik, Agpat, Ummannaq, or even the title Thule, are? The few maps used as illustrations in the 2016 volume, old maps as they only show Danish place names, stress the need of at least one modern map in each volume.

Let us now pass on to the discussion of the two volumes.

Nowi ludzie is the Polish translation of Rasmussen's debut book, *Nye Mennesker*, translated from the first edition published in Danish in 1905. Unfortunately, the translator does not say anything about the subsequent editions and/or reprints of the book, nor do we find a word about its availability in languages other than Danish and Polish. The book has become a classic in cultural anthropology, and it is always difficult to review classics. For those unfamiliar with it let me just say that the book consists of three parts.

Part One (pp.29–127), titled *The New Men*, is devoted to Rasmussen's meeting the Inughuit – the natives of North Greenland, the northernmost dwellers of the globe – and is a combination of a travel diary and a folklore collection.

Part Two (pp. 131–185) is titled *Primitive Views of Life* and presents a collection of native myths in topical arrangement: creation, people, soul, body, name, life, death, beliefs, consequences of one's deeds, protective means (amulets and magic spells), and shamans. A brief reflection – few modern anthropologists, if any, would dare using the word *primitive*, which shows how far the understanding of anthropological „Others" has come since 1905.

Part Three (pp. 191–255) is titled *Tales and Legends*, and is arranged in three topical sections: animal tales, curious tales and travel adventures, and meeting the unknown tribes.

The book opens with *Translator's Foreword* (pp. 10–19) and concludes with an *Afterword* by the Danish Eskimologist Brigitte Sonne (pp. 257–271). The *Foreword* introduces the reader to Knud Rasmussen and briefly recalls the Polish contributions to the study of Greenland. The *Afterword* is a kind of summarizing commentary on the myths included in the book. The main text contains only a few footnotes, mostly explanations of the Greenlandic words used. The *Afterword*, in its own footnotes, refers to some more recent publications in the field. Unfortunately there is no bibliography, nor even a further-reading list.

As I have no access to the Danish original I cannot comment upon the translation. I can only say that the quality of its Polish is very high, the translation reads easily while

all the time keeping the „alien“ character. The translator certainly knows her own language, not only Danish.

A word about the book as such. It is a beautifully printed one. The paper is of very high quality but not too heavy, the layout is just excellent (though I think the cover would look much better without the strange grid superimposed upon the original photo of 1910), and the binding – though glued, not sewn – does not break when the book is fully opened. The printing type is very clear and does not tire the eyes. As mentioned above, the book uses old maps of Greenland as untitled plates on unnumbered pages (pp. 27, 129–130, 187–188, 191). Congratulations to the publishers!

Let us now pass on to the second book, Lubowicka 2017. Let me begin by saying that it is multithreaded book with a very precise outline in its detailed list of contents. I think the best way to present this book is to follow its list of contents quoting the chapter and subchapter titles.

The book opens with an *Introduction* (pp. 9–47). Its first, untitled part (9–16) is a brief but detailed sketch of the Danish presence in Greenland and the reactions of the native Greenlanders to it. It is followed by *Greenland and the Greenlanders in the Danish Discourse* (pp. 17–27) which is really a history of the West's contact with Greenland. The next subchapter's title needs no comments – *Knud Rasmussen* (pp. 27–34). It is followed by an extremely interesting section on *The Current State of Polar Literature Researches* (pp. 34–39), that refers to many works in Scandinavian languages as well as to the Polish classics by the Centkiewicz couple (Alina Centkiewicz, 1907–1993, and her husband Czesław Centkiewicz, 1904–1996, were both Arctic explorers and the most popular Polish writers of adventure books set in the Arctic). The next subchapter is titled *Structure of this Work*, a capsule summary of its arrangement and main motives. Finally, the last section of the *Introduction* offers the *Explanation of Key Terms* used throughout the book: colonialism and imperialism; Denmark as the colonial state/empire; Inuit, Inughuit, Eskimo, Greenlanders; North Greenland; place names. Now the reader knows everything he may need to tackle the main part of the book.

The first chapter is titled *Postcolonial Studies* (pp. 49–74). The author defines postcolonial studies as new reading of texts created during the colonial period, aimed at unmasking the methods of Western domination and the suppression of the non-Western societies (p. 49). It is pointed out that the postcolonial studies are closely connected with the rereading of travel literature as it mirrors the Western attitudes to the various „natives“. Separate subchapters are devoted to Edward Said and his *Orientalism* of 1978 (pp. 54–59) and to the ideas of Homi Bhabha (pp. 60–63). The longest subchapter is titled *Connections of the Danish Polar Exploration Discourse with Colonialism – The Polar Literature as the Final Product* (pp. 63–72). This introduces two main motives reappearing in various contexts throughout the book:

a/ the fact that the Danish occupation of Greenland did not bring the enforced „development“, but rather aimed at keeping the country at the contact stage as long as possible, while having great gains because of it;

b/ that Knud Rasmussen’s aim was not only the romantic wanderlust, the dream of discovering new lands and new peoples, but the clear aim of making those new lands and peoples the property of Denmark, something which casts a shadow upon the fearless hero image.

The second chapter is titled *Meeting the Cultural Other in New Men’s Land* (pp. 75–178). The long chapter – though the next one is even longer – follows a very precise outline that is best shown by the titles of its subchapters. *The Danish Literary Expedition to Greenland 1902–1904* (pp. 75–78) gives the historical and literary background. *The Subject’s Prejudices Concerning North Greenland and the Inughuit* (pp. 78–84; the „Subject“ is of course Knud Rasmussen himself) is an exercise in chasing the Happy Land myth. *Northern Greenland and the Inughuit as The Others* (pp. 84–94) focuses on the preconceptions about the Inughuit and the actual contact. *The Eskimo Arcadia and the Arcadians: The Trail of Idealization and its Disturbance* (pp. 94–113) is the logical next step, the confrontation of preconceptions with reality. *The Eskimo are Primitive: The Trail of Essentialization and its Destabilization* (pp. 113–127) is a study of describing „The Others“ and the question of the narrator’s or the describer’s starting point. *Us and the Others: Binary Oppositions, their Reversal and Questioning* (pp. 127–142) gives very interesting reflections on how Rasmussen compared the „unspoilt“ Inughuit with those Inuit (that is the south-western Greenlanders) who have already been „spoilt“ by the Danish occupation. This again brings to mind the unique character of the Danish rule of Greenland – trying their best not to introduce too many changes and modernizations. *The Inughuit as the „Endlessly Different“: Exotization and the Lack Of It* (pp. 142–154) focuses on Rasmussen’s presentation of the Inughuit in the way that distanced them from the Europeans by stressing their peculiar features incomprehensible to the outsider. *North Greenland and the Inughuit Understood Through the Prism of Native Myth* (pp. 154–162) tackles the same subject from the other point of view, explaining the Inughuit in terms of their own myths and what they consider normal. *The Narrator’s Voice versus Native Voices – Master Narrative and the Heteroglossia Aspect* (pp. 162–175) stress the great variety existing within the Inughuit community and their different ways of interacting with the arriving outsiders. The last subchapter, *The Meaning of the Historical Context for the Impact of the Work* (pp. 175–178, „the Work“ being Rasmussen’s 1905 book) places the book in the general Scandinavian context of the epoch.

The third chapter, titled *Mapping the Ultima Thule: Meeting the Telluric Other One* (pp. 181–308) is the book’s longest one, with its 127 pages almost a book in itself. As usual, the list of contents shows that the length of this chapter is fully justified, and its inner structure is both logical and easy to understand.

The third chapter consists of three subparts: a brief untitled introduction (pp. 181–200), *Part One: The Continental Glacier and North-East Greenland as Dangerous Wilderness: Heroization and Sensationalism* (pp. 201–245), and *Part Two: Terra Feminarum, Male Journey in Female Nature* (pp. 246–308). Again, it seems best to present the work using its extremely logical list of contents as the guide.

The untitled introduction contains the following subparts: *The First Thule Expedition 1912–1913* (pp. 181–185); *The Subject Split – The Scientist’s Authority and the Arctic Hunter’s Instinct* (pp. 185–198, (the „Subject” being of course Knud Rasmussen himself); *Male Journey and Male Adventure* (pp.198–200).

Part One of the chapter contains the following subsections: *The Continental Glacier and North-East Greenland as Dangerous Wilderness: Heroization and Sensationalism* (pp. 201–216); *The Place „Far From Home”: Opposition Between Being at Home and Being On a Journey* (pp. 216–222); *Chasing the Scientific Goal:Activity-Passivity Opposition* (pp. 222–226); *The Inughuit as Representatives of Nature: The Culture/Nature Opposition* (pp. 226–233); *Destabilization of the Binary Oppositions Constructing the Male Heroism of Polar Researchers* (pp. 234–245). I think these headings are self-explanatory.

Part Two of the chapter contains the following subsections: *Terra Feminarum, Male Journey in Female Nature* (pp. 246–247); *Scientific Masculinity: Erasing, Mapping, and Measuring* (pp. 247–262); *Esthetic Masculinity: East Greenland and the Continental Glacier as the Source of Grandeur* (pp. 262–275); *Resistance Against Differentiating The Other by Means of Scientific and Esthetic Masculinity* (pp. 275–276); *North Greenland as the Source of Telluric Awe and the Place That Resists Measuring* (pp. 276–284); *North Greenland as the Place with its Own History: the Language, History, and Voices of the Inughuit* (pp. 284–294); *„Being in the Landscape” and Breaking the Primacy of Visual Perception* (pp. 294–302); *The Space of Native Myth* (pp. 302–305); *„My Travel Diary” in its Historical Context* (pp.305–308, *My Travel Diary* being the title of Knud Rasmussen’s book of 1915).

As we see, the book is so rich in various subjects that a detailed review – which automatically would also be a polemic with several theses presented in the book – would be too long to be called so.

The fourth and last chapter is titled *Final Reflections* (pp. 309–317), an excellent survey of the main points covered in the book.

The one-page *Epilogue* (p. 319) stresses the metaphoric aspect of the Inughuit and their land as created by Knud Rasmussen.

The book ends with a detailed bibliography (pp. 321–333) in 5 topical sections: main sources, postcolonial theories and criticism, theories of literature and literary criticism, biographic and historical studies, finally a list of Danish grammars, dictionaries and encyclopedias used in the text. Maybe it would have been advisable to state it clearly that the „biographic literature” is on Knud Rasmussen, as the book mentions many other figures of historical importance. It needs stressing that the bibliography

includes numerous Danish works that are probably mentioned in Polish for the first time. However, I would like to make a small critical point: as the principal heroes of the book are the Inughuit, the language section of the bibliography should not leave out the following – Michael Fortescue, *Inuktun, an introduction to the language of Qaanaaq* (Thule and Copenhagen, Institut for Eskimologi publications 15, 1991) – which is, as far as I know, the only introduction to the language of the Inughuit available in English. Qaanaaq, by the way, is the northernmost settlement in Greenland, north of the old trading station set up by Knud Rasmussen and known as Thule.

The last two pages of the book – 335–336 – contain its summary in English, which I think is much too short and does not give the book full justice.

A few compliments on the technical aspects of the book – clear layout, extremely useful list of contents, easy-to-read typeface throughout (not an insignificant point when we have lengthy footnotes set in smaller type!), finally the fact that the binding is sewn, guaranteeing that the book will not fall apart. A separate word of praise for the design of the book's dust jacket.

A word of special thanks is due to the author for the detailed index of personal names (pp. 337–343), though an index of place names would also come in handy.

The mottoes opening some of the book's chapters (pp. 9, 73, 179, and in the Epilogue p. 319) are taken from the original Greenlandic literature in its own language, which to many readers will be the first encounter with modern Greenlandic literature. Here's where I miss a note on the only (as far as I know) bilingual Greenlandic/English anthology of modern Greenlandic literature: Michael Fortescue's magnificent *From the Writings of the Greenlanders, Kalaallit atuakkianniit (parallel edition with Greenlandic and English texts)*, University of Alaska Press, 1990.

I also regret that the book – some of whose parts concern the political history of modern Greenland – does not mention even once the Norwegian Arctic explorer Helge Ingstad (1899–2001), who played an important if controversial role in some of it.

What can we say at the end? One thing is obvious – we have before us the work that will stay and is sure to become a classic in Polish cultural anthropology. It is a definite proof that the marriage of cultural anthropology and philology gives wonderful fruits. It is easy to point out some small weak points in the work already done by someone else, but these are trifles against the enormous work that has gone into the book.

Agata – qujanarsuaq!!!!!!

PS. The Greenlandic title of this review translates: „Greenland? Sure, it's OK!”

The last word of the review is the Greenlandic for „great thanks”.