

Abridged as 'White Christmas' Arena Magazine, No. 38 (December 1998-January 1999), Melbourne, pp 23-24

Draft for *Arena Magazine*

October 31, 1998

White Christmas: North Norway, Greenland, and Nunavut in Winter Dark

by Peter Jull

[Illustrated by 'the tennis players', i.e., the Sami shamans with racquet-like drums on the rock at Skavberg, Tromsø, ca. 3500 BC.]

In Darwin the high summer with its heat, rain, flooded roads, and shutdown of many activities has special pleasures. One can get work done. Visitors are few, and even a few days at a resort are affordable. People draw closer and share an unstated enjoyment in their isolation, like Marvell, 'Annihilating all that's made/To a green thought in a green shade'.

Brisbane, too, is beautifully quiet and lush around Christmas. I am glad to have acquired these pleasures. It wasn't always so.

The cold of the winter solstice in the circumpolar north, and dark or *Mørketid* (*murky* or *dark time* in Norwegian), is not for everyone. Once when I had just returned and brightly told a doctor a dream of being stranded there in the dark he took fright lest I be suicidal, prescribing medication.

I had just made my first trip to Greenland after years of reading and interviews. It was an exciting time. That country was preparing for home rule six months hence. A referendum would soon be won on the home rule plan negotiated by the two Greenland MPs in Copenhagen and five members of the elected Greenland Council with Danish MPs from Conservative to Communist, with a law professor as chairman.

The radical left Inuit party, IA, opposed home rule as a Danish deception; the temperance movement opposed it ('A country that is drunk all the time cannot govern itself!'); and the mayors and municipalities feared a loss of their power and patronage. The referendum was won 2-1. Self-confidence and success have since grown steadily.

IA recanted and provided many fine ministers in coalition with Siumut, the Left party which has been the core of every government. The temperance movement still have lots to do in a country whose scattered traditional hunting camps and trading posts were roughly centralised into post-war towns in a few years. That brought high material quality of life, disorientation, and beautiful ultra-modern towns set improbably on rocky points and islands amid drifting icebergs and steep mountains.

Nationally organised fisheries would be the economic base, and are, but not on the scale hoped by planners. The state Royal Greenland Trade provided plentiful employment and high quality services and production in many fields. It has been re-organised and Greenlandised.

Until US forces arrived in the early 1940s the country had been quarantined by Copenhagen. Once Greenlanders saw the verve and material splendour of the outside world, they wanted it. Isolated from Denmark which was under Nazi occupation, they also developed a taste for running things themselves.

Denmark has rejected Inuit native title rights to Greenland, but the Home Rule Act contains both a clause on unity of the Danish realm and a recognition of special rights for Greenlanders. To date this has meant joint Denmark-Greenland control through a double veto on resource policy and projects, generous resource-revenue sharing agreement favouring Greenland, and Greenland veto on future military bases and manoeuvres (sparked by the controversial USAF base, Thule).

Greenland is midway between Queensland and Western Australia in size. Eighty-five percent of the surface is covered with glacial ice. Most of the population live in towns on rocky points in the south-west, the largest, Nuuk (formerly Godthaab), being the capital. When Erik the Red named the country in 982 AD he was not wrong. His former farm is 'green land' supporting an Inuit sheep-raising community today, and Inuit have re-inhabited other Viking farms with good results in areas near ferocious Cape Farewell.

The total Greenland population of 55,000 is 80% Inuit-speaking and Greenland-born. The rest are mostly Danish short-term workers or Danes committed to the country, e.g., through marriage. The country is probably the most beautiful on earth, and the verve of its people, notably including artists, scholars, and political classes, plus its elegance of design and warm hospitality, make it a treat to visit.

Its towns each have their own character. Crossing the sea-ice in polar-bearskin pants by dogteam at Qaanaaq and eating raw frozen whale, hot tea, and fresh Danish pastries while interviewing hunters aggrieved with Canada's boundary enforcement was memorable. Ilulissat with its Ice Fjord and the pastoral Narsaq in the south are favourites, although my wife trumps me, she having seen remote East Greenland.

Greenland background in English is Jette Ashlee's annual update from Canada's Indian and Northern Affairs department; chapters in *Volume 5, Arctic*, of the Smithsonian's Handbook of North American Indians (*sic*), and Harhoff's Greenland survey in the *Palestinian Yearbook of International Law*, Vol. VIII, 1994-95.

My last wintry trip was to North Norway, ill after exuberant air-conditioning in Bangkok airport. Having seen no northern hemisphere winter for seven years, the Christmas trees, lighted shops, snow, aurora borealis, and dark days in Tromsø hit me hard. Accompanying Getano Lui, Jr., of Torres Strait to a Sami township was a highlight. We drove north along a fjord which widened ahead of us into the open Arctic Ocean. The trip impressed Getano, who wrote in his 1993 ABC Boyer lecture on return:

'Unlike Australia where areas like Torres Strait are neglected, Norway has laws and policies which make sure that even the most remote communities have high living standards equal to those in the most central places. It is this aspect of life in northern Europe from which Australia may have most to learn.'

The last time, I had been to this Kåfjord in spring. Old Sami friends told us about their teenaged daughter's outstanding promise as a writer over lunch while we gazed at the spectacular Lyngen Alps and Fjord in brilliant sunshine. They had brought avocados from a Canaries holiday, a food my world-travelled Norwegian professor companions eyed suspiciously.

What struck me on this winter trip was how remote seemed the bitter free-market and anti-government rant of English-speaking countries. It was a relief to be among people who, although outraged and scornful about specific policies and Oslo 'experts', believed in community and public problem-solving.

People came in on fine roads snaking around the rugged cliffs and coastal mountains to attend the meetings. At my seminar on indigenous issues in Australia's coastal zone inquiry, members of a Sami Parliament committee on the same subject were active participants.

North Norway awes any outsider. It is hard to believe that Canada, USA, and Australia find it so easy to avoid adopting such can-do health, housing, infrastructure, and public sector commitment to remote and indigenous areas when Norwegians proved their success long ago.

Later an old friend and I drove south to Nordland. Visiting an old man by a Sami mountain, he told of watching British and German navies slugging it out in 1940 from that high ground. The next morning, driving around the glassy fjord in twilight we found the roads out of Narvik lined by neat little bundles of metal. A scene out of *South Park* or *Monty Python*, this scrap for sale was the remains of Hitler's navy.

Two recent books on Norwegian experience are *Becoming Visible: Indigenous Politics and Self-Government*, by Brantenberg *et al.* (University of Tromsø, 1995) and *Sami Culture in a New Era*, by Gaski *et al.* (Karasjok, 1997).

My first Arctic winter trip was to the North Magnetic Pole as young assistant to northern Canada's head of government. That year I was crippled by cyclical migraines. For three weeks I took long walks several times daily in dark and cold alone with the aurora on the windswept island outside the DayGlo orange base. Whether magnetism, solar wind, three squares in the mess hall, fresh air, or blackness, I was cured. (I have lately imagined a healing 'headache farm' at the South Magnetic Pole, but it is inconveniently at sea now, so unhappy executives and intellectuals will have to wait till it lands.)

The Inuit community at the Pole was being introduced to equal liquor access. This quickly proved a local disaster and subject of a documentary shown on Australian TV. Worse, I was involved. Those days were also historic for seating the first Eastern Arctic representatives and agreeing on a sweeping constitutional plan. The plan centred on carefully supervised local government to 'educate' the Inuit (and Indians farther south). A child growing up in the troubled village, John Amagoalik, would soon lead the movement to reject such plans in favour of land claims, first, and then Nunavut self-government – the real 'architect of Nunavut' in Pauline Hanson's term.

Amagoalik and the Inuit movement have effectively renegotiated Canada's northern governance, programs, and policy from outside the legislature for many years. Dene Indian and Inuvialuit Inuit did the same in areas to the west. *Northern Governments in Transition* by Cameron and White (1995) describes the outcome. The first Nunavut government will take office in April, while negotiations continue for the Dene and Inuvialuit.

I could recount many other such winter trips. In all these places indigenous rights and political reform have been part of workable and non-threatening 'reconciliation'. The far north of North America, the North Atlantic, and Eurasia may seem exotic and extreme, but they are pleasantly and increasingly 'normal', the special problems of Russia apart. If Australians and their politicians were less reluctant to face the cold, they could learn much from a visit.

Cold or hot, north or south, may race politics and indigenous aspirations in Australia and abroad fare better in 1999 than in 1998. And may all your Christmases be white – or green – as you choose!

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