

Hector Pitchforth (1886-1927)

Hector Pitchforth was born in India in 1886 and was brought up mainly in Leeds. Although deaf from a very early age, he qualified as an engineer and in the First World War served with the fishing fleet. In 1918 he sailed for Baffin Island in the auxiliary schooner *Erme* for the Sabellum Trading Company, which was quite the most irresponsible of the various concerns trading between the end of whaling and the entry to the farther north of the Hudson's Bay Company. John Pearson was the captain, though the legendary James Mutch was in overall command, but the voyage ended abruptly when the German submarine U-53 boarded *Erme* and set her afire. All survived, and Pitchforth returned to the fishing fleet. In 1919 he became engineer on *Erme's* replacement, a former racing yacht built in 1876 and named for a succession of damsels, the last being *Vera*. She was frozen in for a month but visited all trading posts and returned safely to Scotland. In 1920 she deposited Pitchforth at Cape Henry Kater on the east Baffin coast as a trader.

Pitchforth traded through the winter of 1920-1921 and, unusually for a trader, made a number of sledge journeys, naming one fiord after himself. He was removed by *Vera* in 1921, but in 1922 the vessel was crushed by ice and, more disastrously, James Mutch retired. He had been the only man who really knew the trade, and in 1922 the Eskimo agents were not supplied with goods and their furs were not collected. Furthermore, the agent at Kivitoo went mad and had two people killed before being killed himself. And it was at Kivitoo that Pitchforth was settled by Sabellum's new vessel, *Rosie*, in 1923. Early in 1924 he journeyed by sledge to Kater and also south to Cumberland Sound, where the Hudson's Bay Company and the Mounted Police were now to be found.

Meanwhile, the London manager of Sabellum recruited an 18-year-old clerk named Wigglesworth, who was sent out on *Rosie* to join Pitchforth at Kivitoo in 1924. But, as Pitchforth wrote that summer, Kivitoo was a poor place for trade, and he was moving back to Cape Henry Kater. Since the house at Kater was only 11 x 6 ft., there was no room for Wigglesworth, who was sent back to Britain, together with Nauyapik, an Eskimo sent to select trade goods, concerning whom Pitchforth wrote, "take him around Harrod's and Whiteley's", elegant department stores. But evidently Captain Pearson regarded himself as Mutch's successor and on those grounds refused to move the main house from Kivitoo, though he did move Pitchforth, however reluctantly.

By this time Pitchforth was not only deaf but suffering from snow-blindness, though, according to impartial witnesses, otherwise fit and competent for his work. But when the Canadian government offered to have him removed by their ship in 1925, the London manager of Sabellum said Pitchforth was "endeavouring to magnify some hardship he has voluntarily undertaken".

At that point they might have expected *Rosie* to remove Pitchforth, but she met heavy ice in 1925, Pearson fell ill, and he landed stores for Pitchforth 480 km to the south, together with the unfortunate Nauyapik, who was also ill. Sabellum was virtually without any revenue for that year, and the London manager was reduced to assuring Pitchforth's brother that supplies had been left at an alternative point on the coast and that Pitchforth would have moved there, although he had no way of knowing what had been done and no way of getting there in any case. The manager did arrange for the Hudson's Bay Company ship to collect Pitchforth and his furs from Kivitoo in 1927, but the plans fell through, and Pitchforth was at Kater anyway.

Hector Pitchforth spent an active winter through 1924-1925, though his survival was threatened by dog disease that prevented hunting for fresh meat. After that first year, he had nothing to trade and few visitors, and apparently he suffered from scurvy. He also injured his leg. On Christmas Day 1926 he wrote in his diary: "Sky a bit clearer to the Southward, a beautiful ruddy flash tinted the ice and snow most beautifully. Not in the least like Xmas to myself and I feel so ill as to be nearly helpless." A few weeks later a traveller noted snow drifted over his doorway, and in due course the Mounted Police investigated and took his body to Pond Inlet for burial.

Astonishingly, Pitchforth's death made the headlines when a ship reached Pond Inlet in the following summer: "WORLD'S LONELIEST MAN", and "ALONE IN THE ARCTIC; FATE OF A GAL-LANT ENGLISHMAN; DESERTED AND STARVED IN A FAR NORTHERN ISLAND; HECTOR PITCHFORTH IN WAR AND PEACE." Meanwhile Sabellum refused to pay Pitchforth's wages to his heirs until they gave up his diary, which it was hoped would tell where his furs were stored. It did not, and Sabellum collapsed. In fact the publicity was so unfavourable that this was the end of almost all the small trading concerns of that period. Pitchforth might have revived Sabellum had he lived, but in dying he destroyed it and changed the pattern of arctic trade for a generation.

FURTHER READINGS

- PITCHFORTH, H. 1924. Sixty-page letter to Sabellum Trading Company, 21 August 1924, in Baker Library, Dartmouth College, Hanover, N.H.
 ———. Diary, in Library of the Royal Geographical Society, London.
 WHITE, G. 1977. Scottish traders to Baffin Island 1910-1930. *Maritime History* 5(1):34-50.

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Photo courtesy of the late Ronald Pitchforth.