

**THE CEASELESS QUEST FOR KNOWLEDGE:  
STEF AND HIS COLLECTION AT DARTMOUTH**

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Rector Gunnarsson, Rector Bessason, Director Einarsson, colleagues. It is indeed an honor to be asked to speak today about Vilhjalmur Stefansson—Stef—and his vital collection, his legacy, at Dartmouth College. I am grateful to Librarian Sigrun Magnúsdóttir for extending the kind invitation to me. To offer a presentation on Stef and his collection in this venue, in Akureyri, at this University, with the newly-formed Stefansson Arctic Institute nearby, and in sight—across the fjord—from Stef's parents' farmstead, this indeed is a rare privilege. Stef would be pleased.

The American poet Philip Booth, in his poem 'Stefansson Island,' wrote:

Stefansson: a walrus of a man  
whose walk is paced to sled dogs  
on the offshore ice. (Booth 1966)

This was Stefansson, the giant whose exploratory eye was cast over thousands of square miles of unknown, uncharted Arctic, mapping and defining as he went. The Stefansson who began his relationship with Dartmouth College in 1921 was a scholar whose research and publications would change our understanding of the polar regions. In that year, Stef presented seven copies of his monograph *My Life with the Eskimo* to the Dartmouth Outing Club.<sup>1</sup> (Stefansson 1913) Stef had learned of the outdoor activities of the club, one of the oldest outing clubs in the United States, and wanted to support their aims.

Stef's first visit to the campus occurred in 1929 when he was invited to give a series of four lectures under the auspices of the Guernsey Center Moore Foundation Fund. The first of these lectures was held in 103 Dartmouth Hall, a large classroom and auditorium. As a result of the overflow crowds at the presentation, the subsequent lectures were held

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<sup>1</sup> The letter of acknowledgement from the president of the Outing Club can be found in Vilhjalmur Stefansson, Correspondence, 1895-1962, *s. n.*, 1921, Dartmouth. Dartmouth College Library, Special Collections, Stef. Mss. 196. It is interesting to note that the Outing Club president in 1921 was Ellis O. Briggs who joined the U. S. Foreign Service in 1925 and was successively Ambassador to the Dominican Republic, Uruguay, Czechoslovakia, South Korea, Peru, Brazil, and Greece.

in Webster Hall, the largest auditorium on campus. The student newspaper noted that 'He combines as do few others a record of achievement in polar exploration which has made him world-famous, with all the powers of a great public speaker.' (*The Dartmouth* 1929, 1929a, 1929b) He was, of course, both world famous and a powerful orator. Already, the first full-length biography of him had been written. The author was Guthmundur Finnbogason, the Chief Librarian of Iceland, and the monograph was published here in Akureyri (Finnbogason 1927). Many other biographies, appreciations, and critical studies of his work would follow.

It was about this same time that Stef began to amass one of the world's largest and finest polar libraries. The genesis of the collection was a gift of some 300 duplicate polar titles from the library of the American Geographical Society. The director of that organization, Dr. Isaiah Bowman, suggested the disposition of these titles to Stef. Evelyn Stefansson (Nef), in the Stefansson memorial issue of *Polar Notes*, wrote that, 'Unlike most passionate book collectors, it was not possession of the books that Stef wanted, but the information they contained.' She further noted, 'Into the making of his library he put all of his wealth, such as it was, and his most creative thinking'<sup>2</sup> (E. Stefansson 1962). Stef himself made the point most clearly: 'The growth was primarily the result of my habit of making book collecting a by-product of everything I did.' (Stefansson 1964) One rare bookman commented that Stef impoverished himself in the search for books and he mortgaged his home to raise the capital to bid on a copy of Goldson's *Northwest Passage* (1793), a volume still in the collection. He continued by stating that in his twenty-two-day appraisal of the collection, he found numerous titles entirely unknown to bibliographers (Everitt 1951; Goldson 1793). Yet Stef had found them, and found photographs, and manuscripts, and preserved them and made them available to any individual in need of information.

The collection grew quickly and, by 1941, attracted the attention of the United States Navy. On 1 July of that year, R. A. J. English, acting on official orders, paid a visit to Stef in New York City and inspected the collection. A portion of his report to the Hydrographer merits review:

This office and library occupies three apartments, or about twelve rooms. The library contains several thousand volumes of polar literature, the greater part of which pertains to the

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<sup>2</sup> See also Evelyn Stefansson, 'A Short Account of the Stefansson Collection,' *Polar Notes*, 1 (1959): 5-12, for an excellent overview of the development of the collection. See also, Philip N. Cronenwett, 'The Stefansson Collection: Past, Present, Future,' *Proceedings of the Twelfth Northern Librarians Colloquy* (1988): 167-174; and Philip N. Cronenwett, 'Polar Archival Records: A Modest Proposal,' *Proceedings of the Fourteenth Polar Libraries Colloquy* (1992): 195-207.

Arctic. Many of these volumes are very rare, and probably are not available elsewhere in the United States. The collection was acquired during the last fourteen years and is valued by Dr. Stefansson at \$200,000. (Stefansson 1941)

As the collection grew through World War II and as Stef's reputation as the premier American scholar and authority on the Arctic increased, Stef was courted by academic institutions, governmental bodies, and corporations to attempt to lure him into joining with them. Stef was aware of the interest of organizations in his library and his work, but he remained in New York with his library and his scholarly activities continued to be focused on the polar regions.

Stef had continued during and after the war to lecture at Dartmouth on an irregular basis. In 1947, the relationship was made more formal. It was announced in October of that year that Stef was to be Arctic Consultant at the College, where he would provide lectures, courses, and advice to students and faculty. Several weeks later he was on campus to give a series of lectures that would foster awareness of the Arctic and its role, would develop a better understanding of the Arctic, and would provide practical advice and experience (*The Dartmouth* 1947, 1947a). Stef was appointed Arctic Consultant annually for the remainder of his life. He clearly enjoyed Hanover and the College as he and Evelyn decided to move permanently to Hanover and, of equal importance, to deposit the polar collection at Dartmouth in the Library (*The Dartmouth* 1951, 1951a; *Dartmouth Alumni Magazine* 1952).

Less than a year-and-a-half after the collection was placed on deposit, it was acquired for the permanent collections of the College. In part a gift of the Stefanssons and in part a purchase with funds provided by Albert Bradley, Executive Vice President of General Motors Corporation, the collection quickly became a focus of the College's Northern Studies Program. John Dickey, President of the College, stated that:

"It is the great good fortune of Dartmouth, and, indeed, of the nation that this internationally prized collection on the Far North is now assured of remaining here where it will be readily available to American, Canadian, and other scholars as a part of Dartmouth's projected Northern Frontier Studies Program" (*Dartmouth Alumni Magazine* 1953; Dartmouth College, Office of Information Services 1953).

From its acquisition to the present day, the collection has grown significantly. There are now some 5,000 printed volumes ranging in date from the sixteenth century to the present. Nearly twenty linear meters of vertical files containing pamphlets, clippings, and ephemera complement the printed volumes. Twenty-five thousand photographs, many of which are of the Canadian Arctic Expedition, are available to researchers. Hundreds of maps, many of them extremely rare or unique, provide cartographic support. Finally,

there are more than 225 manuscript collections containing records from the eighteenth century to the present. A few representative examples of the range and type of holdings will provide us with a sense of the breadth and depth of the holdings.

Of premier importance are Stef's own papers, consisting of more than 30.5 linear meters of journals, correspondence, diaries, reports, manuscripts of books and essays—both published and unpublished—and ephemera relating to his career as an Arctic explorer and as a student and scholar of the polar regions. There is a published finding aid to the collection so that researchers who are interested in the material can locate items down to the folder level. (Stefansson 1902-1962) The earliest documents in the group relate to Stef's student days at the University of North Dakota, the University of Iowa, and Harvard University. Next are records and documents from the Anglo-American and Stefansson-Anderson Expeditions. Several cartons document the Canadian Arctic Expedition, the five-year odyssey that imprinted Stefansson's name in the annals of polar exploration. The remainder of the collection, the bulk of the holdings, consists of manuscripts, essays, research notes and records, and drafts of manuscripts relating to the many and varied interests Stef maintained. There are, for example, the manuscripts of monographs such as *The Friendly Arctic* (1921), *Iceland* (1939), and the posthumous *Discovery* (1964) as well as of essays from his earliest contributions to the journal *Heimskringla* to the posthumous essay in *The Icelandic Canadian* (1964).<sup>3</sup> Stef's papers are among the richest and most important bodies of polar manuscript material, both published and unpublished, available anywhere.

Of equal historical importance to Stef's papers is the body of his correspondence. From his earliest college years to days before his death, Stef maintained a voluminous correspondence and retained the incoming letters as well as carbons of outgoing letters. The collection, now housed in 109 cartons and extending over 48 linear meters of shelving, contains correspondence for nearly sixty years, and these are sixty of the more important years in the history of polar exploration. From 1895 to 1962, Stef corresponded with many of the major figures in the history of exploration as well as most scholars interested in the field. The collection is eminently accessible, as it has a card index with entries for each individual and institution with whom Stef was in correspondence. An example of the material retained is the partially-printed, partially-holographic postal card from the Landsbókasafn Islands acknowledging the gift of copies of *My Life with the Eskimo* and *The Friendly Arctic* and signed by Jón Jacobson, the Librarian (Stefansson 1922).

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<sup>3</sup> The most comprehensive and complete listing of Stef's publications can be found in Robert Mattila, *A Chronological Bibliography of the Published Works of Vilhjalmur Stefansson (1789-1962)* (Hanover: Dartmouth College Libraries, 1978).

A few of the names found in the collection will suffice to give an indication of the breadth and depth of the holdings: Roy Chapman Andrews, Bernt Balchen, Margaret Bourke-White, Richard Evelyn Byrd, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Lincoln Ellsworth, Guthmundur Finnbogason, Halldor Hermannsson, Helge Ingstad, Rockwell Kent, Charles Lindbergh, H. L. Mencken, Robert Peary, Knud Rasmusson, Sir George Hubert Wilkins, and Orville Wright. Explorers, inventors, scholars, photographers, authors, and critics; all are represented in the correspondence.

Aside from the correspondence and papers of Stefansson himself, which form the core of the manuscript holdings of the collection, other manuscript collections were acquired by Stef and others still have been acquired in the decades since his death. One example, purchased at auction last year, is a essay by William Innis Pocock, a lieutenant in the Royal Navy, in which the author provides detailed plans, with attending wash drawings, of a series of designs for using trip hammers, saws, and paddle wheels driven by steam to force a ship through pack ice. (Pocock 1828) Pocock, who was aware of the need to have support from influential individuals, dedicated his essay to the Duke of Clarence and Lord High Admiral of England, who would shortly become King William IV. Pocock's proposal was a direct result of Sir William Parry's difficulties in his 1827 attempt to reach the North Pole. His essay, as yet unpublished, was thought to have been lost in the nineteenth century.

The diary of George Rice from 7 July 1881 to 2 August 1883 is an excellent example of the expedition diaries that have been acquired in recent years. (Rice 1881-1883) Rice was a photographer, a member of the Lady Franklin Bay Expedition (1881-1884), who, as the expedition began to founder, took on more and more responsibility and finally assumed a leadership role. The handwriting of the diary begins with a strong, firm hand that details the day-to-day events of the expedition first in broad strokes and then, when the search for food became the focus of every moment of every day, centers on the pathetic attempts to hunt and fish. The last entry in the diary, written in a weak and shaking hand, makes it clear that the author would not survive much beyond that day. He did not.

The small but rich collection of the papers of Robert Peary that are in the Stefansson Collection are particularly important for several reasons. (Peary 1889-1970) The small group of letters in the collection gives evidence of Peary's need for recognition and the difficulty he was having in coping with the conflicting claims to the conquest of the North Pole. Over and over, he maintained that he had reached the pole first and that his nation, and the world, ought to recognize that achievement without argument. A second important portion of the collection is the working draft for his book, *Northward Over the Great Ice*. Finally, there are over 600 working photographs that Peary and his colleagues took and that were used in his publications. What is of particular interest to researchers is the method in which images were selected, cropped, and manipulated—by whitening out and by highlighting with light and dark inks—so that the point that Peary wished to make was reinforced by the illustration accompanying the text. Nearly all the illustrations used or discarded from his monographic publications are represented in the Peary collection.

Looking briefly to the south polar regions, an acquisition made possible by the Friends of the Library in 1991 provides important insight into the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition of 1914-1917. Under the leadership of Sir Ernest Shackleton, the expedition attempted to cross the continent from several starting points. In the diary of Thomas Hans Orde-Lees, the incredible story of bravery and daring is recounted on a daily basis for over a year (Orde-Lees 1915-1916). A typescript continuation of the diary, written after the heroic rescue at Elephant Island of Orde-Lees and his mates by Shackleton, takes the story to the point of the rescue. One of the interesting aspects of this diary is that Orde-Lees marked it up with colored pencils to facilitate use by Sir Ernest when Shackleton was using the diary while writing *South*, his narrative of the expedition. The diary, then, is not only a vital historical document in its own right, but also is important in our understanding of how an expedition leader makes use of materials in the preparation of a publication.

The final collection to be mentioned is a small group of the papers of Ada Blackjack (Blackjack 1922-1973). This particular body of records is very important for several reasons. First, Ada Blackjack was an Inuit, and, at that time, the literacy rate among native peoples of the American north was minimal. The fact that she was able to keep a diary is very unusual. Second, she was the sole survivor of the ill-fated Wrangel Island Expedition in which all other members of the party perished from cold, disease, and starvation. Blackjack's diary, from 14 March to 20 August 1923 is particularly important evidence in a much-disputed attempt to maintain Wrangel Island as a sovereign American outpost in the Russian Arctic seas.

The holdings of the Stefansson Collection, then, provide rich resources for the student and scholar alike. Owning materials, however, is not sufficient. For an institution to acquire and hold manuscript and printed resources and not make them available is not only unfortunate, but unacceptable. To that end, the Stefansson Collection has, in recent years, undertaken several projects to make materials and knowledge of the materials more well-known and more accessible.

In 1981, the collection was awarded a grant by the United States Department of Education, under its Title II-C program, for a project entitled 'Strengthening Polar Resources.'<sup>4</sup> This eighteen-month project provided funding for both preservation of books and manuscripts and much needed intellectual access points. As a part of the program, each monograph and serial was examined and conservation work, if needed, was prescribed. Minor mending such as repair of bindings and the construction of protective enclosures were performed in the conservation shop within the library. More

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<sup>4</sup> Grant G00810326. See Cronenwett, 'Stefansson Collection,' for a complete description of the grant and its results.

extensive reconstructions and restoration of leather bindings were sent to private conservators for the needed repairs. As a consequence, all of the printed material within the collection is stable and in useable condition.

A second part of the grant was the reprocessing of the manuscript collections. Each collection was examined, appraised, reprocessed, and rehoused in proper folders and containers. Collections larger than one container had a finding aid prepared for the collection so that researchers would have better access to information. The final aspect of the work was the recataloging of all monographs, serials, and manuscript collections to national standards and in machine-readable format. The resulting records were entered into the OCLC database, the RLIN database of the Research Libraries Group, and in Dartmouth's own online catalog. This latter catalog is now available on the web to provide international access with ease.<sup>5</sup> It was evident from the early days of the project that better access and electronic access to the records would provide researchers from on campus and worldwide a powerful search tool. The rise in use of the collection as the records were entered into the Library's database and into national databases was most evident.

A second major, and more recent, grant was made to the collection by the Gladys Kriebel Delmas Foundation of New York City. The foundation, in 1996 and 1997, supported vital work with the Stefansson photographic collections. Several activities were included in the grant. The first was to rehouse fragile photographic materials, including lantern slides, glass plate negatives, and photographic prints and negatives, that had survived for more than seventy-five years. Stabilization of prints, negatives, and lantern slides was also an important focus of the project. The third section of the project was organization of and access to the remarkable photographic collections that Stef had gathered and, in some cases, had taken himself. One exciting part of the project was the identification of a list of photographs taken by Sir George Hubert Wilkins, a member of the Canadian Arctic Expedition, in his own handwriting. As a result, we were able to match the descriptive list with the images and, as the list contained very precise dates when photographs were taken, a sequence of images was made possible. This information was added to the database created to provide access to the images.

One important by-product of the project was the development of a controlled vocabulary, an authority file, to describe Arctic images. We were, thus, able to better describe and more uniformly describe these photographs. This vocabulary or thesaurus is available to any researcher or polar library interested in obtaining a copy. We would be pleased to provide either a print copy or one in electronic form.

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<sup>5</sup> The URL for the Library is <<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~library>>. Aside from access to the catalog, the Web site provides a wealth of information regarding the Library and its services.

In the future, we hope to continue work with the Stefansson Collection photographs by scanning in the images from the Canadian Arctic Expedition and matching image to description. By mounting this combination on the World Wide Web, we will be able to provide international access to this important resource. A second future project is the recreation of a series of photographic albums electronically. The albums are on highly acidic paper with notes on the images written in white on black paper. While it is possible to preserve the text and the images separately, we hope to recreate digitally the entire album leaf by leaf so that the researcher has access not only to the text and image, but also the relative placement of the images. A final proposed project is to stabilize, print, and catalog the images in the collections within the Stefansson Collection that have not yet received such treatment.

A grant-funded project that will be completed within the month is, again a Delmas Foundation project. In this instance, the foundation provided the Research Libraries Group, an international consortium of 159 research libraries from five continents, with initial funding to convert finding aids for manuscript collections into electronic format using Standard Generalized Markup Language and the Encoded Archival Description format, a standard accepted throughout the United States. As a portion of Dartmouth's project, a number of the finding aids for collections within the Stefansson Collection will be converted and mounted on both the Library's web site and in a national database of finding aids that will be developed and maintained by the Research Libraries Group. One exciting aspect of this project for Dartmouth is that we will have a direct link from the cataloging record of the collection to the electronic version of the finding aid. We believe that this will provide students and scholars with much more refined information regarding our holdings and will, thus, improve the quality of our public service.

A series of endowed funds support the acquisition, preservation, and processing of materials within the Stefansson Collection. The earliest established fund was created by Mr. and Mrs. Peter B. Dirlam in 1965 to acquire materials for the collection and to support publications emanating from the collection. After Stef's death in 1962, a number of individuals provided memorial funds to honor him and his work. These funds were pooled in 1967, along with income derived from royalties and the sale of duplicate books, to establish the Stefansson Memorial Fund that is specifically intended to be used to purchase books, manuscripts, and photographs for the collection. A third fund, given in honor of the polar explorer and pioneer polar aviator Lincoln Ellsworth, has been established by the Lincoln Ellsworth Foundation of New York City. The foundation generously presented a gift in 1994 with additional gifts in the three succeeding years. The four foundation gifts, now in an endowment honoring Commander Ellsworth, provide resources for acquisition, processing, preservation, and cataloging of polar materials. A fourth fund was established in the recent fiscal year. The Edward Tuck 1950 Family Fund #2 was established to provide support for the collection. We are very grateful to all of the donors for their most generous support.



In 1959, Dartmouth honored Stef—in his 80th year— with the degree of Doctor of Letters. The text of the citation notes that ‘the Stefansson Collection at Dartmouth serves all who would venture with knowledge in person or in thought to the far north or the farthest south’ (*The Dartmouth* 1959). James Calvert, commander of the USS Skate, the submarine that surfaced at the North Pole based on Stef’s proposal, wrote that Stef’s creed was ‘the ceaseless quest for knowledge . . .’ (Calvert 1962).

That quest was both intellectual and physical. Stef was a scholar and a collector, who in the great tradition of his Icelandic forebears like Arne Magnusson of three centuries ago, collected a scholarly library, a rare book library, and a body of manuscripts that preserved the history of polar exploration.<sup>6</sup> And like his Icelandic Viking forebears, Stef was an explorer who, at great risk, ventured through and over the ice to seek new lands and carry that knowledge back.

Closing, as in opening, with poetry, listen to Egil Skallagrimson’s description of sailing through ice, as Stef would do, nearly a millenium later:

Thél høggr stórt fyr stáli  
stafnkvigs á veg jafnan  
út meth éla meitli  
andærr jotunn vandar,  
en svalbúinn selju  
sverfr eirar vanr theiri  
Gestils olpt meth  
gandr of stál fyr brandi (Nordal 1933-1945).

We at Dartmouth look forward to a long and mutually beneficial relationship with the Stefansson Arctic Institute and the University of Akureyri.

Thank you.

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<sup>6</sup> The most accessible study of the great Icelandic manuscript collector and scholar is Hans Bekker-Nielsen and Ole Widding, *Arne Magnusson, The Manuscript Collector*, tr. by Robert W. Mattila (Odense: Odense University Press, 1972).

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