

Dispatch from the North (V)

November 20, 2007



Stray Iqaluit Pleasures

Nightly Pursuits

One agreeable aspect of staying in a new place for several weeks is gradually falling into a settled regimen that could never be predicted on first acquaintance. For me in Iqaluit, that still includes daily visits to the plastic-horrors coffee shop and strolls on the beach, but also evenings at the Storehouse Bar and Grill. Located in the upscale Frobisher Inn, the town's newest watering hole boasts a fashionable interior of cozy alcoves, pool tables and a U-shaped bar, in a cavernous space usually filled by last call. On weekends, the pace is frenetic. With the latest hits of Donavan and the Eagles turned up full blast, a few brave souls take to the dance floor to display this town's trademark minimal-effort shuffling dance style.

The old Klondike bars must have felt a little like this – minus the swanky surroundings and the bilingual Inuktitut signs -- I tell myself each night as I survey the room. The full range of Iqaluit society is represented: twentysomethings and retirees, office-workers and drifters, Inuit and qallunaat, all milling about with remarkable ease as



The Storehouse

they line up for yet another tray of Coors or fistful of shooter glasses, while eyeing the sports reruns on the massive video screen. Bar staff are everywhere. So are wall postings of the house rules: “NO weapons. NO hanging feet or clothes on chairs. NO intoxicated persons. Any person asked to leave will NOT be allowed re-entry until they talk to the manager between 3 pm and 4 pm.”

I, for one, wouldn't want to test management's mettle. Patrons forced to appear the next afternoon with an appropriate

apology could be forgiven a little trepidation as they await this grown-up version of a visit to the high school principal. In a one-saloon town – which, if you ignore the Legion's back-in-the-day bandjams, and a few modest holes in the wall, is exactly what Iqaluit is -- banishment from Mecca is no minor threat.

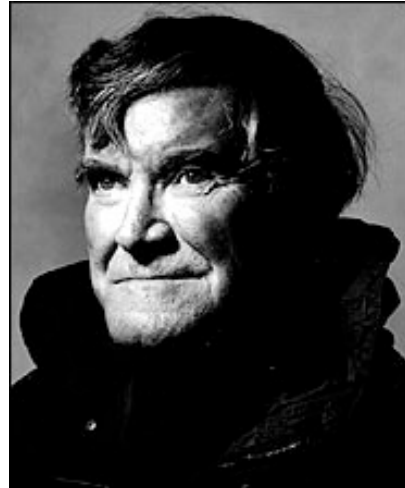
From Ulus to Ipeelee

The Storehouse management may run a tight ship, but that doesn't stop it from tolerating a little *esprit de commerce*. All night long, town visitors are accosted by scruffy-looking hawkers bearing miniature Inukshuks and walrus ivory jewelry. I've even been offered a trinket ulu knife I saw earlier that afternoon in an Arctic Ventures sale bin, now relieved of its box and 'Made in China' label. But who can blame these people for sustaining themselves thanks to unsuspecting tourists? At least they show a cool politeness, the usual response to a spurning of their merchandise a silent shrug, as they scope out the room for the next customer.

At the ritzy restaurant just down the corridor -- the only oasis of fine dining in the entire town -- there's a similar air of mercantile bustle. Here it's real artwork on offer, by people who look as though they could actually have produced the stuff. But most (though not all) of the pieces have a hurried, crank-'em-out whiff about them.

Such wares hardly do justice to a market whose loftier heights have a global profile. Earning a reported \$10 million annually, even before counting this underground trade, the market is fascinating not just as an emblem for much that is happening in Nunavut today, but for what it reveals about perceptions of Inuit culture. There's a common belief among buyers who shell out \$500 or more for a hastily carved dancing polar bear that they're purchasing the product of a timeless artistic tradition. Such notions are light years from the truth.

Things started sixty years ago in Baffin Island's very own Florence, the hamlet of Cape Dorset, which in good renaissance style managed to acquire a line of Medici. The first of these art promoters was a qallunaaq named James Houston, who visited the North in the late 1940s, and was captivated by the Inuit carvings he saw. In 1951, he dogsledded from Iqaluit to Cape Dorset to meet the art's reputed master, Osuitok Ipeelee. Houston encouraged him to produce pieces far larger and more dramatic than anything done before. As a strategy to create wider interest, Houston paid Ipeelee the then exorbitant price of \$50 for one of these works -- a caribou carving now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum in New York.



James Houston

Houston was one of those restless, ingenious catalysts any group of artists would kill to have working on their behalf. An artist himself, he was employed as a local government official, which gave him the chance to live in Cape Dorset and the needed official contacts to churn out an endless stream of creative and promotional schemes. It was his idea to produce prints by adapting Japanese techniques. After an extended trip to Japan, the skills he returned with allowed the town's artists to begin experimenting with new materials and techniques, shifting from wood to stone blocks, then to waxed paper templates, as they adopted Japanese mulberry paper as their main printing medium.



Osuitok Ipeelee

Houston's participation allowed for a rich collaboration -- continued by his like-minded qallunaaq successor Terry Ryan -- that helped make Inuit art so spectacularly successful in international markets. Most Canadians don't appreciate just how famous this art form is in comparison with other national artistic movements (the Group of Seven, for example) or how pivotal it has been as a model for artists from indigenous backgrounds worldwide. What looks achievable now for so

many of these artists -- potential success through sophisticated marketing and the cultivation of a global audience -- was by no means as straightforward in the early 1950s, when Houston took that dogsled trip to meet Ipeelee.

This success story continues into the present, an incalculable boon to Nunavut's economy. While much of the highly prized work still emanates from Cape Dorset, there's a territory full of imitators doing their best to jump on the gravy train. It's not just part-time artisans such as those I meet at the restaurant or the edgier types at the

Storehouse Bar. Virtually every time I'm out on the streets here after dark, I'm approached by someone offloading a worthless trinket, piece of jewelry, or carving.

Such sidewalk encounters are unnerving. It's not that they're unsafe – those I meet, as always, are polite – but because of what they symbolize. Forget global warming and predictions of melting icecaps. This vast territory is in danger of drowning in a sea of schlock. As for what this trend suggests about the territory's formal economy, none of it is good. Jobs may go begging, but according to most estimates Nunavut has Canada's worst unemployment, highest poverty rate and lowest rate of school completion. With its rapid population growth, and the toxic mix of troubles facing the latest generation of youth, things aren't about to get better.

Out of the Frying Pan

If you want to make friends in this town, you do not allude to these issues as an opening conversational gambit. It's not that those you speak with necessarily disagree -- if they're qallunaat, let them talk long enough and they wax eloquent with their own pet theories. But they bristle when such sentiments come from an outsider.



The Legislature

The plain fact is that the fledgling territorial government is swamped – short of cash, mired in debt, and almost completely dependent on Ottawa for funds. In June, for example, the government finally released its long-awaited plan to deal with the epidemic of suicides. Several weeks ago in the legislature, a member from the terri-

tory's western region (where a distinct dialect of Inuktitut is spoken and anti-Nunavut separatist sentiments are growing) posed several questions about the plan to Premier Paul Okalik. Does it have a lead minister? Have any new dollars been allocated? What are the success measures? How is it being promoted? Wisely perhaps, Okalik deflected every question. Also, since June all traces of the plan have been removed from the Nunavut government's website: bad publicity.

Okalik's preference is to talk about the government's promises to make Inuktitut the working language of Nunavut by 2020, and to gradually introduce bilingual education for all of the territory's Inuit youth. Like countless Canadian leaders in the past, he has learned an important lesson – when fending off political flak, there's nothing better than a few controversial language proposals to keep everyone happily clawing at each other's throats. These ones are so outlandish (businesses are understandably adamant that the 2020 plan is unworkable; the education scheme ignores the lack of both Inuktitut-speaking teachers and relevant curriculum materials), they're doing the trick superbly.



Postmodern Inukshuk

Speak to Inuit, especially the more hopeful ones, about these trends and you will get a different picture. Those in the political class contend that the working language legislation is necessary to ensure jobs and access to services for Inuit who speak only Inuktitut. They also suggest how important it is for young Inuit to be fully bilingual if they are to retain any vestige of traditional knowledge, since so many of them now grow up in solely English-speaking environments. Qallunaat who insist on applying conventional benchmarks to measure Nunavut's success, these Inuit add, miss the point. Life for most people in this territory is infinitely better than it was half a century ago, even if the move away from the land is eradicating connections with the past. Outsiders without first-hand knowledge of this progress cannot sit in judgment, nor should they think that highlighting issues such as the suicide crisis gives a valid view of Nunavut today. I'll plead guilty on each count, and leave it at that.

Bring Your Passport

What I find most interesting about the way the new Nunavut government chooses to handle political issues is their over-riding emphasis on appearances outside the territory. The suicide crisis, for example, is commonly referred to as 'our secret'. It's part of a self-conscious wariness that infuses reporting in the media (in particular the two avidly read weekly newspapers, *Nunatsiaq News* and *Nunavut News/North*) and reflected in virtually all personal contacts I've had here.

The Inuit I encounter are invariably civil, but the sort of casual friendliness one is used to in everyday encounters elsewhere in Canada is lacking. For me this is most evident whenever I'm riding in a cab (everyone takes them; there's a general in-town fare of \$6, so no need for meters) that picks up other passengers. Those who climb into the front seat or beside me never make eye contact or utter a greeting. If they do speak, it will be to another Inuk passenger (not to the cab driver, who is almost certainly Québécois), and then usually in Inuktitut. It's indicative of a more general stance. Visitors are tolerated, and of course their payments for Inuit-made goods are absolutely essential, but that's it. The only qallunaat permitted into this territory's tightly bound society are those who earn their way in, as long-term residents who've shown their loyalty to the place – the modern-day equivalents of James Houston.

And, of course, there's every reason why the Inuit *should* feel this way, given the condescension and neglect that characterized attitudes in the past: the commercial exhibition of Inuit in zoo-like conditions in 19th-century Europe and America; the repeated epidemics of whooping cough, influenza and scarlet fever that ran unchecked in Inuit communities; the federal government's official identification of Inuit by numbers rather than names right up until the 1960s; the church-run residential schools that took Inuit children away from their families often for years at a time; the resettlements of the 1950s, when to establish territorial sovereignty the Canadian government forcibly relocated some Inuit families from Baffin Island and northern Quebec to the High Arctic, causing extreme isolation and pockets of starvation; and finally a continual blaming of the Inuit themselves for the trials they faced. The underlying resonance of all of this history is best expressed, at least for me, in a passage from a 1930s-era *Eskimo Book of Knowledge* produced by the Hudson's Bay Company:

The Book of Knowledge is a token of friendship provided for you...and for your family by the Governor of the Company. He is a man of great understanding and wisdom who decides the difficult problems of the Company and directs the traders in their duties... Take heed to what is written here, all you men and women of the North. Your people have not derived good from the use you have made of the White Men's things. The things which have been brought to you are good things in themselves, but you have misused some of these things, so that to-day you are a feebler people than in the old days when your fathers did not know the White Men. Your sons are less hardy, your wives bring forth fewer children. There is sickness among some of you. Here you shall learn how you have brought this weakness about.*

Three comments come to mind when reading this passage. First, CEOs never change. Second, as egregious as these sentiments seem to modern eyes, at least the Company was showing a scrap of concern in Inuit welfare – the federal government of the day showed none. Third, with a legacy like this, which is well within the living memory of older Inuit, it's no surprise that present-day Nunavummiut prefer to make their own decisions, mistakes included. If I had to guess, I would predict that the Yukon and Northwest Territories will become provinces in the not too distant future, but that Nunavut will not take the same path. Rather it will evolve into a semi-independent protectorate – rather like today's Greenland, where the Inuit population governs itself, except for an annual transfer of funds and oversight of matters like foreign policy by the Danish government.

*Quoted in Keith J. Crowe, *A History of the Original Peoples of Northern Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991), pp. 168-9.

Regardless, it's unlikely that many of the problems here – not just the suicide crisis, but family violence and substance abuse – will be handled in the systematic way that southern Canadians would prefer. Official Canadian attention in the Arctic will increasingly focus on geopolitical issues, particularly on how, in an era of global warming, territorial sovereignty can be maintained with the collaboration of Inuit authorities. In most other ways, southern Canadians will become observers. To me, as I leave this place, that seems fitting, even if in many ways a deeply disturbing prospect. For, in many senses that matter most, this isn't part of Canada – it's already another country.

I'll end with few more practical issues.



Iqaluit from the Beach

Aren't all sorts of new economic opportunities opening up there? Yes, but slowly. Most of the new mining exploration is on the mainland, in Nunavut's southwestern reaches, with talk of uranium, gold and more diamonds. However, the territory's sole operating diamond mine, Jericho, has been facing difficulties with low-grade ore, and proposed projects face the usual time-consuming process, including torturous negotiations with the Inuit's birthright organization, Nunavut Tunngavik. For the fore-

seeable future, the Northwest Territories will continue to dominate the northern mining industry.

Tourism has greater potential, though again will be no panacea. The breathtaking scenery on Baffin Island's eastern coast – dramatic fjords, glacial icecaps, and sheer cliffs -- is more like that in Norway than the rest of Canada. The area boasts the world's tallest overhanging rock face, over a kilometre high, on a peak known as Mount Thor. The new national park where it is situated is already legendary among the small international community of extreme climbers, as well as land-based parachutists known as BASE jumpers, who hurl themselves off mountaintops and skyscrapers, apparently for amusement.



The Glam End of Town

The most common way to see this scenery is on cruise ships, which stop at Inuit hamlets. Their arrival is a source of some ambivalence to inhabitants, despite the cash that visitors leave behind. When one cruise ship stopped at the Baffin Island village of Qikiqtarjuaq a few years ago, passengers sparked an uproar when they traipsed about the streets, barging uninvited into homes with cameras clicking. Due to this fiasco, there are now strict limits on tourist activity during such stops.

How prevalent are drugs? Until recently, the hard varieties were swamped by cheap substitutes such as solvents and aerosol. Now at the Storehouse Bar on weekends you see pushers lurking in the alcoves. Crack sellers presumably, though I haven't gone up to ask. They've yet to acquire the slickness of their southern counterparts – the haut-slouch duds are still self-consciously worn, with unforgivable sartorial mistakes (Stanfield's elastic bands peeking above low-slung pant-tops, not the mandatory Tommy Hilfiger or Calvin Klein). Perhaps they'll be tempted by distant glamour and head south. Here's hoping.

Where to next? Back south until early January, then Whitehorse and Dawson City: Robert Service, Jack London, the storied Chilkoot Pass. Can't wait.

Picture credits: All photos taken by your correspondent except James Houston (Irving Penn, *The New York Times*, April 22, 2005), and Osuitok Ipeelee (Charlotte Rosshandler, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada).