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978-1-108-07105-5 - The History of Greenland: Including an Account of the Mission Carried on by the United Brethren in that Country: Volume 1

David Crantz

Excerpt

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THE
HISTORY
OF
GREENLAND.

BOOK I.—CHAP. I.

Of the Country in general.—I. Its Situation and Boundaries. —II. Name and Aspect.—III. Geography of the West Coast, Fredericsshaab, Fisher's Lodge, and Lichtenfels.—IV. Godhaab and Zukkertop: Mission at New Herrnhut, and summary Computation of the Inhabitants.—V. Holsteinburg, South Bay and Egede's Minde.—VI. Disko Bay, Christianshaab, Clauhaven and Jacobshaven.—VII. Rittenbenk and Noogsoak.—Face of the North Country.—VIII. Face of the South Country.

I. GREENLAND is well known as the most northern tract of land lying between Europe and America; and considering its vast extent, compared with the small part as yet known to Europeans, may be justly numbered among the unexplored regions of the north. Various navigators have coasted it from the most southern point, the promontory of Farewell, in lat. 59°, proceeding in a north easterly direction towards Spitzbergen, as far as 80° north latitude, and towards the north or north-west as far as lat. 78°. No vessel, however, has hitherto gained its northern extremity, so that we cannot determine with

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any degree of certainty, whether it be an island or connected with some other continent. That it is joined towards the east to Spitzbergen, Nova Zembla, or the north of Tartary, was only a vague conjecture which has been exploded by the discoveries of the Dutch and Russians. Another supposition, that it terminates on the north-west in America, admits of being supported by much more probable arguments. In the first place, Davis's Strait, or more properly Baffin's Bay, is known gradually to contract towards the north; and the shore, though generally high where it borders on the open sea, flattens as we advance nearer the pole. Again, the tide, which, near Cape Farewell, or even *Cockin's sound*, lat. 65°, rises at new and full moon more than 18 feet, seldom exceeds two fathoms in the neighbourhood of *Disko*, and may probably, as we proceed still farther north, entirely disappear. *

To these reasons we may add the testimony of the Greenlanders themselves, though not much to be relied upon. According to their accounts, the strait at last becomes so narrow, that the natives of one coast may be heard by their neighbours on the other; and that were it not for the rapidity of the current which sets in a southerly direction through the middle, they would even be able to visit each other.

II. The name *Greenland* was first given to the east side by its discoverers, the Norwegians and Icelanders, on account of its uncommonly verdant appearance. This side, generally called ancient or *Lost Greenland*, is at present entirely unknown to us; since, owing to the prodigious quantities of floating ice, none are able to approach it.

The tales of Icelandic writers, who describe in glowing colours the fertility of ancient Greenland, with the beauty of its villages and churches, are generally considered to be completely chimerical. However, it ought to be mentioned, that traces of a superior state of cultivation have been observed also on the west coast; and

* See Note I.

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NAME AND ASPECT.

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remnants are still to be seen there of dwelling-houses and churches, probably erected by the Norwegians ; so that in this respect it may have been no way inferior to the more famous eastern side.

West Greenland is inhabited by Europeans between the 62d and 71st degrees of north latitude, and has sometimes been erroneously termed by voyagers Davis's Strait, which again has not unfrequently been confounded with the whole arm of the sea separating Greenland from America. Davis's Strait, properly so called, is only that narrow channel, about 40 leagues broad, between the promontory of Walsingham on James' island in North America, and *South Bay* in Greenland ; and extends from lat. 71° as far as *Disko* island.

It is called after John Davis, an Englishman, who discovered it while endeavouring to find the north-west passage, and has since that time been visited by various nations, on account of the whale-fishery ; especially by the Dutch and English, who have furnished us with the best outlines of the coast.

The shore, on this side, is high, rugged, and barren, rising close to the water's edge, into tremendous precipices and lofty mountains, crowned with inaccessible cliffs, which may be seen from the sea at the distance of a hundred miles. In these respects, it bears some similarity to the coast of Norway, with this difference, that the Norwegian mountains are clothed with wood, and rise with a more gradual ascent.

All the Greenland hills, except where the rocks are smooth and perpendicular, are covered with eternal ice and snow, which accumulate particularly on elevated flats, entirely filling many valleys, and in all probability increasing from year to year. Those rocks on which the snow cannot lie appear at a distance of a dusky-grey colour, and without any signs of vegetation ; but upon nearer inspection they are found to be streaked with numerous veins of coloured stone, with here and there a little earth, which affords a scanty nourishment to some hardy species of heath. The valleys, which con-

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tain several small brooks and ponds, are overgrown with a sort of low brush-wood.

The whole coast is indented with a series of deep bays or fiordes, which penetrate a great way into the land, and are sprinkled with innumerable islands, of various dimensions, and the most fantastical shapes.

III. Of so wild a country, only thinly inhabited on the coast, a long geographical description would be needless. It may, however, be proper to give a brief account of the principal places, as they lie in order along the shore, obtained chiefly from a merchant who resided a great number of years in the country.

The majority of the Greenland nation live between Staatenhuk and lat. 62°; or, as the natives usually express it, in the south. In this part of Greenland no Europeans have settled, so that it is but very partially known to us.

Farther north the first place deserving notice is the colony of *Fredericshaab*, founded in the year 1742 by Jacob Severin, a Danish merchant, upon a projecting point of land, called by the Greenlanders *Pamiut*, or a tail. It is an eligible place for trade, and possesses a good harbour, about a mile distant from the open sea. On an island to which the Dutch merchant vessels resort, many Greenlanders have fixed their abode, as they find there abundance of seals and rein-deer.

The first traders, Gelmeyden and Lars Dalager, and the first missionary, Arnold of *West Sylo*, came hither from *Godhaab*. This colony, *Fredericshaab*, had at its first commencement to struggle with many difficulties. In the first place, the ship which brought over the first settlers from *Godhaab* was lost on its return to Jutland, and every soul on board perished. Another ship, sent over by the colonial establishment, was necessitated to winter in Norway, at a great expense. In the year 1743, a vessel freighted with provisions from *Godhaab* was wrecked, and half of the cargo destined for the use of the colony lost, with two of the crew. In the year 1744, the ship, when only eight

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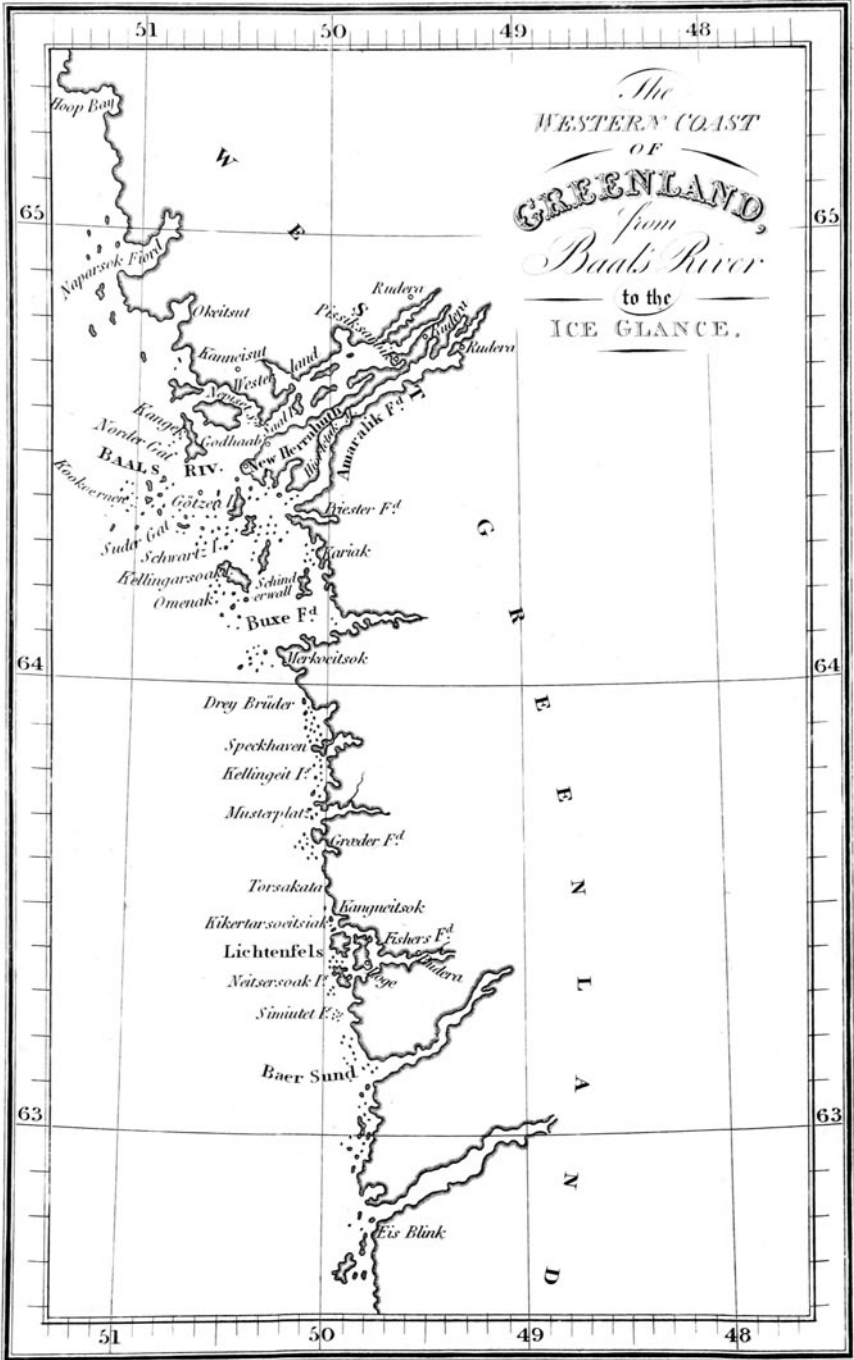
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Vol. p. 4



London, Published May 20th 1819 by Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme & Brown, Paternoster Row.

Sid^s Ball Sculp^t

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GEOGRAPHY OF THE WEST COAST.

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miles from the harbour, sprung a leak, in broad day, against a piece of ice, and the crew barely escaped in a boat to land, after spending two days and nights at sea. In the ensuing years, it was frequently impossible to get her into port on account of the floating ice; and it became necessary to unload her cargo near *Godhaab*, and convey it in boats to *Fredericshaab*, a distance of forty leagues. Of late years, the ice has not been so troublesome, and the colony has been almost entirely rebuilt. It carries on at present a brisk trade in blubber, and the skins of foxes and seals.

Three leagues north of *Fredericshaab* is a bay abounding both in capelins and herrings.

At a distance of about nine leagues from the colony is the well-known *Ice-blink*. It consists of a large and elevated sheet of ice, casting by its reflection a brightness over the sky, similar to the northern lights, which may be seen at a great distance from the sea. The mouth of the adjoining bay or fiorde, is blocked up by ice driven out by the efflux of the tide, and so wonderfully piled up by the waves, that the spaces between the islands are completely vaulted over, and the whole presents the sublime spectacle of a stupendous bridge of ice, of eighteen miles long and four and three-quarters broad. Under the arches of this bridge, which are from twenty to sixty yards high, boats may enter the harbour, though threatened with destruction by the masses impending from above. Large pieces of ice also, detached from the mountains, are frequently driven through by the tide. When the Greenlanders wish to fish in this bay, they carry their kajaks over land, and then find an open sheet of water, 12 leagues long and about one in breadth.

Remains are found along the shores, of Greenland houses, whence we may conclude, that the mouth of the fiorde has not always been closed. The points of land, which run out a great way into the sea, on both sides of the *Ice-blink*, consist of banks of sand so fine and light, that when agitated by the gentlest breeze, it darkens the air like a cloud, and fills the eyes and

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mouths of all who approach within eight leagues of the shore.

About 20 leagues from the colony there is an opening in the land, called in the maps *Bear's Sound*, through which many suppose that there is a passage to the east side. If we may credit the accounts of the Greenlanders, remains of old Norwegian buildings are found on its shores.

Not far from this opening there is a lake of brackish water, which has a communication with the sea, at high water, by means of two narrow channels. In spring, speckled seals flock in great numbers to this lake, and are easily taken by the Greenlanders in an ebb-tide.

In lat. 63° and 20 leagues north of *Fredericshaab* there is a narrow fiorde, to which the first missionary, Egede, gave the name of *Fish-bay*, from its containing a great variety of fish. Near its mouth lie two considerable islands, from 12 to 16 miles in circumference. On the southernmost of these the so called *Fisher's-lodge* is built on an agreeable spot overgrown with tall grass. The Greenlanders call this part of the country *Kikkertarsueitsiak*. On one of the islands is a lofty mountain, by comparing which with the circumjacent summits the Greenlanders trace their way to the bays frequented by seals.

The lodge was built in 1754, according to an order from the general board of commerce, by Anders Olsen, principal of the colony at *Godhaab*. The trade in blubber, &c. is at present not very flourishing, as but few Greenlanders live in the neighbourhood.

About four miles from the lodge, the United Brethren, in the year 1758, built their second settlement, called *Lichtenfels*, which will be particularly described in the proper place.

Farther up in the bay, ruins are found, and among them pieces of a metal similar to bronze, probably fragments of bells used in the old Norwegian churches. Eight miles farther north lies *Innuksuk*, a Greenland place of residence; and again twelve miles farther, the

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Groede fiorde, also frequented by Greenlanders. At a short distance from hence is a large creek, with an even, sandy shore, which, on account of its extent and flatness, is called the muster-place, but at present uninhabited. Here the trade of the lodge may be said to terminate.

Next in order come the islands of *Kellingeit*, or, as the Danes call them, *Klingarne*, which lie within the sphere of trade belonging to the colony at *Godhaab*. Seals are caught here in great abundance, as they may be easily intercepted in the narrow channel between the islands. Five leagues from hence is *Merkoitsok*, and the *Buze Fiorde*, a Dutch harbour, where roving Greenlanders frequently spend the winter. The island *Kellingarsoak*, twelve miles farther north, was formerly well-peopled, and is only a short distance from the river *Kariak*, on the banks of which many Greenlanders still reside.

About four miles from *Kariak*, the large *Amaralik Fiorde*, thirteen leagues in length and three in breadth, penetrates into the land in a north-easterly direction. Close by its mouth is the *Priester Fiorde*, so called because the first missionary, Mr. Egede, had purposed settling a colony there, on account of the abundance of grass and underwood in the place. The reindeer and seal-hunt in the *Amaralik Fiorde* is very productive. In the adjacent country there are ruins of old Norwegian villages, with abundance of free-stone, and veins of red granite; but very few Greenlanders reside in the neighbourhood.

A few miles farther we pass under the *Hiorte Tak*, or *Stag's horn*. This is the highest mountain in the neighbourhood, perhaps in the whole country. The highest of its three peaks is visible from the sea, at the distance of 100 miles and upwards, and owing to its steepness is free from snow, except in the hollows.

This mountain is a beacon to navigators, and a weather-guide to the Greenlanders; for when a tempest threatens from the south, its summits are enveloped in a light mist.

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The *Kobe Fiorde* winds along this mountain ten miles inland, receiving the waters of a little *Elve* or brook, which deepens here and there into small ponds. Near this brook there is a good rein-deer hunt.

Proceeding northwards under the *Malina* and *Kyper* or partridge mountains, we next arrive at *Godhaab*, the third colony, lat. 64° 14', about 70 miles north of *Fisher's Lodge*. It is situated in *Balls Revier*, a bay which runs into the land in a north-westerly direction, 60 or 70 miles in length, reckoning from the islands in its estuary. These islands lie close together to the number of some hundreds, within a compass of four leagues. The remotest of them are called *Kookörnen* or *Cock islands*, by the Greenlanders *Kittiksut*. Between them and *Kangek* to the north is the usual passage, the *North Gat*. *Kangek*, called by the Danes *Hope Island*, is surrounded by many smaller islands. *Westerland*, which borders on *Kangek*, is separated from the main-land by a narrow water, called *Nepiset* or *Catfish Sound*. In autumn, the Greenlanders have their best seal-fishery here. Towards the south, the *Kookörnen* are separated by the *South Gat*, another passage, from a multitude of considerable islands. On the peninsula opposite the *Kookörnen* is the harbour with the blubber-house adjoining. About a mile from the sea, the Brethren's settlement of *New Herrnhut* is situated, and the same distance farther north the colony of *Godhaab*. Besides the principal building, in which the factor and the missionary reside with their people, there is also a store-house, smith's-shop, and brew-house belonging to the establishment. The church stands by a brook not far distant, and the houses of the Greenlanders lie scattered round it.

Farther up is the *Wildman's Ness*, where Eider ducks are shot in abundance during the winter evenings; and near it lies the island of *Saalberg* or *Saddlehill*, so called because its topmost peak, which may be seen 90 miles off, resembles a saddle in appearance. Not far from thence is the *Bear island*, and close by it the island of *Aupilartok*. Both these islands are about twenty miles