TO FARTHER MOUNTAINS
A Baffin Island Chronicle
by Philip C. Ritterbush

I.

Our valley did not open easily from the inlet where we left our boats. The glacier that lapped the land beyond had in its advances to the sea conveyed vast cargoes of boulders. These now carpeted the landscape around us in fields of rubble laced by streams or folds of ill-balanced debris. At any time one of the blocks might shift with the weight of one of us clambering over it, snapping an ankle like a matchstick. We struggled up and over whole ridges of loose rock, laden with food and gear for a week's journey.

Disdaining caution, Peter and Don, the two youngest (and strongest) of our party of five, thrust their way eagerly from block to block, cursing impatiently each time a rock on which they'd tried to stand spun out from underneath and bounced down the unstable slopes. The rest of us, more respectful of the hazards, made our way more slowly, as though mindful that it was something of a privilege to be exposed to the instability of the earth's surface in a place where it had been newly worked. In a century or so, movement by frost and other weathering would compose the terrain in more settled forms. There would be little settling, though, if bulges of ice from mountains rimming the valley continued to refashion the landscape. We had to pass over the lower end of one such descending glacier, an abrupt cliff of ice, over which we lowered our heavily laden packs and then roped down one by one.

As we toiled up yet another of these ridges of debris, longer and higher than those before, I began to think that we'd find at its top the bare ice of the glacier that we intended to follow into the valley above. The day was draining away into the long arctic twilight as we neared the top of the slope. On coming over the final rise, I was surprised to hear the waters of a river hissing past us below. Before us stretched a hanging valley, seemingly the bed of a lake once dammed here when ice wedges had blocked the river, which now coursed erratically across its floor in numerous braids. The scene before us was like a wild Wagnerian amphitheater. Its grays and blacks were unrelieved by any touch of green. Over cliffs to either side, waterfalls poured down.

I felt that with patient exploring we could find a campsite above the cliffs and make our way easily to the glacier beyond as it was now in sight above. But Peter was already in headlong descent toward the first watercourse in the amphitheater, and thus we became committed to wading out into the chill rushing water. Night overtook us as we crossed one by one up to our waists, leaning into the force of the torrent, straining to place our feet among the sliding stones that we could feel beneath us (wearing rubber socks with our climbing boots hung across our shoulders). Tired and more than a little intimidated by the rawness of the scene, we probed in vain for places to cross. Confined by streams, we were forced to the head of the amphitheater. The boulders on which we stood shook with the roar of the watercourses on either side. We were then swept by driving rain. Mutely intent on withstanding the forces arrayed against us, we tied our tents to rocks, fought the winds to get rain covers in place over them, and crept into our improvised refuges.

When I awoke, snug in my sleeping bag, I saw through the tent flap that the rain continued. Van, the leader of our party, was already into the torrent beyond up over his knees. With help from Peter, whose eagerness and strength were welcome in these circumstances, he found a place to cross the stream. Together they rigged up a mountain-climbing rope to secure us in entering the stream which burst icily from the snout of the glacier with a roar and dashes of spray. Just as I reached the rope and swung toward the river, one of my shoulder straps parted.

The stream might well have torn off my pack altogether if Van had not alertly grabbed my shoulder and pulled me over to a rock. We repaired the strap with a length of nylon webbing, and after a cold plunge, I stood safe on the other side.

We had chosen a difficult course, but our collective strength as a group was adequate to its hazards. The route I preferred would have been easier, but if we had argued divisively about it, we might have weakened the entire expedition. Van, a 45-year-old orthopedic surgeon from New York City, was on his sixth arctic mountaineering expedition. We had trusted his judgment in committing ourselves to the river crossings. As I watched him make his way, the last to come over, I felt a flush of comradely respect for his leadership. We then stood together. The path to the glacier was open before us.

Baffin Island, the Fifth Largest Island in the World,
with Cumberland Peninsula and Sound on Upper Right

II.

When our explorations began, the Cumberland Peninsula was not well mapped. Some seacoasts were uncharted until they could be photographed from the air because wide shelves of ice barred across from the open sea, even in summer, here at the Arctic Circle's latitude. One south-facing bay, often free from ice, had been visited by the English navigator Sir Humphrey Gilbert as early as the 1580s. He had named its headland Mt. Raleigh. An enterprising British sailor-mountaineer had climbed this mountain several years before our first trip to the area, but its other mountain ranges had not been visited so far as we knew.

The Inuit (Eskimo), although fabulous hunters and sea-voyagers, rarely ventured inland, and over the century since the anthropologist Franz Boas had visited and written about them, their traditional settlements had greatly declined owing to disease and decimation of the marine mammal populations.* A new topographic map series had since become available, but even so it took Van and his wife Bobbie many evenings of close study with the aid of aerial photographs to arrive at estimates of the characteristics of valleys and to decide which mountainous areas might best repay future visits.

* Concerning the decimation of marine mammals, see Farley Mowat, "The Farfarers, A New History of North America" (2002)

Ten years before, Van and I with four other men and two women had entered the valley from another side, having followed an arm of the sea from an Inuit settlement where a boat could be chartered. This year, with our own inflatable boats and small outboard motors flown in with a ton or so of other gear, we could choose our own route along the coast. The earlier trip had afforded us glimpses of handsome snow peaks along a glacier we couldn't follow to its source. The photographs from our first visit had been submitted to the Glacier Inventory of the Government of Canada, which had invited us to explore the valley to its rim. Bobbie had wanted to accompany us, as her devotion to arctic exploration is as strong as Van's, but her new baby daughter vetoed that. After gaining the glacier from the sea, we readily advanced until we stood once again at the portal of the valley looking into a scene that we would be the first to enter.

We made our camp on a ribbon of boulders being conveyed like freight by the slow-moving ice mass. Meltwater gurgled along a channel at the glacier's edge under flanks of rock sweeping upwards to a crest overhead. We made a little circle of stones on which to sit and placed our gasoline stoves at its center. Bobbie had packed us a number of food boxes containing large cans of dried food from a supplier on the West Coast and various small items like cheese and candy bars. Each was a feast of abundance when it was opened, sometimes with a rum ration or a special delicacy like shrimp curry or wonton soup, but by our last day each biscuit and apricot slice had to be counted under eagle eyes ready to glare at any unfair division. Van stirred a dollop of margarine into each serving, holding our calorie level to about 3,000 per day (and keeping us regular, I suspected). Unexpected extras, whether instant breakfasts or freeze-dried strawberries, were received with excesses of gratitude, and each meal was eagerly spooned into the plastic bowls we held in readiness in accessible pockets of our packs.

One adventure that I found strangely moving was placing a radio-telephone call using a battery-powered long-range transmitter atop a nearby fold of ice. Its dipole antenna snaked out for hundreds of feet across mud and rocks. The voice of the Inuit operator two hundred miles away in Frobisher crackled out from the set in Madame Butterfly accents as she relayed the call over a satellite hookup to Washington DC. "Are you calling on the ship's radio?" asked the friend I called, no doubt gazing out his window into a hazy summer landscape. "Listen," I said shortly, "this is the wilderness. We're standing on a glacier. There isn't a tree within hundreds of miles, and big ships can't get anywhere near here."

We awoke to brilliant sunshine and soon made up two teams that fanned out over the glacier. The summer's sun softens the snow even in the far north, so we wore snowshoes to hold us on the surface as we walked. We were also tied together with ropes to guard against falls into crevasses—seams that open where a glacier ripples down over steps in the underlying rock. Often they are covered with fallen snow so climbers must be constantly on guard. By midday we had gained the heights at the head of the valley and were pacing up unbroken sweeps of snow, fluted crests, and ridges where rock slabs made an edge that we could follow while looking out over the valley below.

So we came to a new summit from which we could see over into two valleys farther on, both so rugged that only a strong party using the most painstaking modern techniques could hope to explore them. We had thought to attempt a circuit of the ice and snow peaks rimming our valley, but any route leading on from where we stood would have involved us in a steep confrontation with an icy mountain wall that we did not have time to attempt. We rested on the summit, photographed the terrain, made journal entries on the obstacles we noticed, and then took a sweeping course in descent, our shadows lengthening before us, until eventually we spied the tiny pyramids of our tents ahead on the ice.

III.

A range of mountains enclosing our valley on its north side had been viewed from a distance by a university exploring party that had named its principal peak Mt. Gilbert. The rock summit stood 5,000 feet above the nearby fjords. One day, while the others were photographing the glaciers in an adjoining valley, I set out to see if I could reach it. I promised Van to take no risks that could get me into trouble and be ready to turn back if the weather deteriorated. While our valley was shrouded in cloud, the rest of the horizon was bright throughout the day. I began to think I would make it if my strength lasted and the ridge offered no surprise obstacles.

My climb began as a rock-strewn slope punctuated with green spots where moss and grasses grew, or small prostrate willows rose at most two inches from the ground. Hour by hour, I patiently mounted from rock to rock, enjoying their colors and textures. Through a process akin to meditation, I sought to enforce a rhythm on the motion of my body to husband strength in reserve for each part of the ascent remaining. When I gained the heights, I saw that the ridge narrowed ahead, falling away steeply on my side and plunging vertically down the other into gorges through which glaciers fanned down to the sea. I carried an ice axe whose shaft made a reassuring anchor for each careful step as I launched myself onto the roofs of snow and threaded my way among the chimneys and parapets of rock rising at their junctions. The rocks held firm when I tested them before letting my arms swing my weight around their corners. As I edged along the snow crests, I felt as though I was on a swinging hinge poised between earth and sky. My mood gradually changed from pensiveness to exultation.

The airy ridge ended in a descent over loose flakes of rock. I then came to a window in the ridge where two standing slabs framed the northward view as a monumental landscape tapestry. In the foreground one of the glacier-occupied valleys fell abruptly away between embracing curtains of rock. A fjord lay in the center of my view like a carpet of various shades of blue, paling to gray in a broad bay beyond. Gem-toned icebergs dotted its near reaches and joined to form long bands across the bay. The flanks of the fjord were cloud-dappled heath, gray and brown in color. Above these, to either side, rose snow-streaked peaks of darker tone. The bay was enclosed by farther lines of mountains and then the northern sky, a uniform pale green across the entire horizon. I sank to one knee, grasping an abutment, and exclaimed, “Bless you, fjord! Bless you, peaks around! May you always be as beautiful as you are now!” Suddenly my body was wracked by sobs, tears coursed down my cheeks, and I loudly wept, tightening my grip on the corner of gnarled rock. Only with long minutes of rest after this bout of feeling had passed away could I regain my balance and continue on.

I came out onto a level saddle covered with shards of black rock. Ahead the white snow shoulder of Mt. Gilbert heaved up, followed by a horizontal rib, and then the steep summit cone. Near the limits of my strength, I paused a number of times to rest, further drained by the icy water soaking into my boots from the softer snow of the open slopes. When I came to the final cone, the snow was harder. What a luxury to sit for a few minutes to strap spiked plates to the soles of my boots! Then I climbed to a narrow platform of rock surrounded by sky. As my gaze swept across a jumbled wild panorama, I sang a few snatches of the Canadian national anthem.

Then, carefully controlling each downward step, I descended my footprint ladder in the snow to rejoin the earth below. Wading back through the soft areas, weaving back along the rooftops, and walking deliberately down the long slopes of rocks back into our familiar valley, I experienced the fading of the day and the onset of night. Van was standing watch at camp’s edge where I crossed the last stream of a long march. I handed him a small rock from the summit. In exchange, he gave me the heartiest of handshakes.

IV.

Our boats were chosen for travel in calm water—inflatable little cargo barges lying low in the water. Each could carry half a ton of gear and three men at a speed of a few knots. We intended to follow an arm of the sea, carry the boats over a neck of land and come into the ice-free bay south of Mt. Raleigh, cross it, and then enter a long elbow-shaped fjord that we could follow to the foot of a mountain range rising to 6,000 feet—the major objective of our exploring effort this year. The only other way to reach the elbow-shaped fjord would be a long voyage in the waters of the open sea, which we could not attempt in bad weather. So we were prepared to carry boats, motors, gasoline, food, expedition gear, and personal effects across an 8-mile portage in order to shorten the distance travelled and be confident of holding to our schedule.

We had chartered a DC-3 to fly from the commercial airport at Frobisher to the service runway of a radar station. There we'd hired a truck to take our gear to the water's edge. After the first part of our trip, we returned to that point for the remainder of our supplies. It took a day to repack the food boxes and carry out repairs to one of the motors, following instructions from the dealer in New York relayed by Bobbie over the radio-telephone. Then, following advice offered to us by one of the Inuit who worked at the radar station about leads of open water we could follow through the icebergs, we set off for the horizon.

When the waters lie still, gray under lowering skies, wildlife is most readily seen. Seabirds called murres swim in anxious circles as boats come near and then dive. When you watch for them to reappear, you may see a seal's rounded head satisfying its curiosity before the animal plunges underwater. At other times stiff winds raise waves that make it difficult to think of anything but maintaining headway. Once, when we had beached our craft to wait for the wind to subside, we saw two beasts heaving through the swells, and only after some moments of watching them did we realize that they were bulkier than seals and that they were blowing off vapor. "Walrus!" Peter exclaimed, and we held them in sight for as long as we could, admiring their ability to go when we could not.

It was late in the summer. The sun was setting earlier, and nights had become dark enough to make it hard to see icebergs. It was rarely much above freezing out on the water. I became increasingly reluctant to continue voyaging on into the night and pressed on several occasions for us to make camp while it was still light enough to cook and select a pleasing campsite. Van was worried about being delayed by bad weather and wanted us to keep going, night or day, whenever weather conditions permitted. The younger lads flourished their bravado whenever a difference of opinion developed about going on. Lew, our fifth member, was an ex-Marine always ready for an endurance trial and a little too well-mannered to try to dissuade Van from contesting the elements. I only enjoy being a minority of one when I can convert it to a majority somehow or other. I was several times very angry when we kept going into the night and only made camp after midnight.

One morning I was furious to find that we'd been drinking in the dark from a stream draining a wild goose rookery profusely littered with their turds! Two hundred yards away was a sweet stream and pleasant meadow, but moving the tents would have been a surrender to reason. They stayed there for two more nights, and we returned to them after carrying gear overland toward the bay. Another night, we had to beach our boats on a boulder slope and perch our tents between snowfields and a waterfall because the swells had become so threatening after nightfall.

We could be unanimous, it seemed, only in the face of impossibility. Whenever the majority of our party became gung-ho, our margin of safety was accordingly reduced. This was exactly the opposite of the result I'd intended by urging caution. Maybe I would have done better

not to have challenged the others on the matter. The safety equation is often hard to formulate, and its human dynamics can be even more complicated. I spent many hours worrying about it.

As we came around the elbow in the final fjord on the last leg of our journey, we could barely make headway against a gale sweeping down upon us. Van explained that the extensive system of glaciers in large valleys cools the air overhead, which then flows down in streams, combining near the sea into a torrent of wind sweeping between mountain walls at great speeds. As our motors strained against its force, we filled them repeatedly, filtering the gasoline-oil mixture through funnels we could barely hold in our cold hands. After losing one, we had to hand the other back and forth as our boats bobbed up and down on the whitecaps. As we slowly drew near the end of the fjord, we realized how costly the delay had been. The tide was going out, and we could not make it to shore!

In a very few minutes we were stranded on an expanse of mud a mile from our goal. Our humor wore thin as the hours dragged by, and when water slid back toward us and the boats could be floated once again, we started pulling them toward the shore, only to find that the river channels we had to cross concealed quicksand. It is indeed true that fighting quicksand just makes you sink in faster. Your only recourse is your companions who can pull you out with a rope or a paddle. Our sea boots filled with mud, our crotches chilled, and our love for the arctic under severe strain, we struggled across a succession of channels and fell on the shore with a gratitude that not even the clouds of mosquitoes awaiting us there could shadow.

V.

The slopes above our landing site were green and bedecked with flowers: bearberry, dwarf laurel, willow-herb, and pyrola. A forceful stream rushing down over boulders was all we could see to suggest the large glacier above out of sight, beyond which rose an unnamed peak marked on our maps as 5,975 feet in elevation. It took much of a day to sort ropes and climbing hardware, food and camping gear. Once we started to move upward, we found that three weeks' toughening can give a man buoyancy even under a 70-lb. pack. By evening we had come to the glacier's edge, leaving the moist slopes with their plagues of mosquitoes below. We found a tiny meadow for our ease and made camp there.

We encountered abrupt ice ridges ferrying unstable loads of sharp boulders and beaches of mud washing down from the ice mass beyond. The terminus of the glacier seemed neither to advance nor recede. The outer form may seem stationary, but there is internal movement. Snow accumulates in the upper reaches of every living glacier and congeals into ice, which is then subject to deformation and flow under its own weight. The downward flow is offset by melting in the lower reaches, where the surface melts a foot or so during the summer. Part of the meltwater streams down under the ice. The rest is lost from the surface by evaporation. We walked on a honeycomb of crystal bridges around narrow cells of meltwater that crunched noisily underfoot. It sounded just like walking on cornflakes.

We then confronted a major obstacle, an icefall, a zone where the ice rose steeply before us, broken into ramps and blocks by its tumble over uneven steps in the ground over which it descends. After careful study through binoculars, we embarked on a route leading upward between gulfs opening in the ice to either side. We followed ramps back and forth from left to right and right to left, seeking firm surfaces on which to climb. When the ice surface was more abruptly broken, we had to clamber awkwardly up steep corners. Beyond the bulge, still under the main body of the glacier above, were many hidden crevasses. We used a probe stick to detect these. Sometimes it would break through compacted snow to reveal hollow blackness just where one's next step would have been. We all got at least as far into these crevasses as one knee or an

entire leg, but most were narrow, and the ropes were held taut whenever we were doubtful of our footing, so we were able to keep moving without serious incident.

After gaining the more gently sloping expanse of the glacier's main body, we had four hours' steady ascent on snowshoes, savoring the sunshine and the view we had now gained of our objective. The peak was formed all of snow. It seemed implausibly white, pale, and silent against the clear sky. The fields of ice surrounding the mountain were extensive; we had six miles to go before reaching its central ribs. There, at the foot of a 500-ft. prow dividing the glacier, we made the second camp of our ascent.

We were within a day's easy reach of the top. Before more difficult or technically demanding climbs, nervousness can lighten your sleep. But we were confident about the next day and rested well. We had a clear dawn and could make our way up glistening snow slopes in yellow sunlight. I looked back down toward the fjord, out of sight at the bottom of a valley, and even began to think kind thoughts about our sea journey. "What do you guys think of Whitecap Mountain as a name to recommend for this?" I asked my companions, looking up at the curl of white against the sky. They greeted my poetic suggestion warmly, and it will figure in our report (and might be even more appropriate in the Inuit language).

As we climbed on spikes toward the ridgeline, I began to wonder what we would see on the other side. Unlike the expanse of glaciers behind us, the view beyond showed us ridge after ridge of rock and snow peaks: a practically inexhaustible alpine playground for those who most savor their sport when they have at least a whole mountain to themselves.

At the last rocks we paused for a lunch of canned sandwich meat, biscuits, cheese, fruit, chocolate, and lemonade. Relishing the crisp surface of the final slopes, we strung out—one rope of two, another of three—in single file, drawing ever nearer the crest. On gaining a shoulder, we joined the ridge flanking the peak on the other side and then strode exuberantly up to the summit ridge, overlooking an adjoining valley with a glacier similar to the one we had ascended.

A stiff wind was rushing up from that valley, but so long as we sat well back from the edge we could not even sense its presence. Like the gales that swept our boats on the sea and the storms from which some of our decisions were distilled, we put it out of our minds and smiled radiantly into one another's cameras.

Phil Ritterbush on the Summit Ridge, Baffin Island

We had yet to return to the fjord and make a final boat journey to the foot of the gravel bed where we had contracted for a light aircraft to pick us up. It was to be a race against time and tide, powered by the magnetism that draws one home. Lew and I even managed to attempt to climb an elegant rock peak near the camp. Everyone enjoyed the meals right to the very end. Our plane would carry us back across the Cumberland Peninsula at scarcely a greater elevation than we had reached on our own and show us little more of the landscape than we'd digested in our leisurely stay on the summit.

Forty miles to the east adjoining Mt. Raleigh was White Wind Peak, which Van and I had named and been the first to climb on our first trip to Baffin Island ten years earlier. Just about the same distance away to the west rose a throne-like snow peak surely higher than that on which we stood. If Van and Bobbie now turned to study of the skyline photographs we took, they might locate it on aerial photographs and maps. Perhaps they could choose a site where we could land once again, from boats or aircraft, and if we can cross the rivers and surmount the barriers of ice, we might all stand there together one day. If we do, we will look back to this place and once again redraw the horizons of our lives.

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