

Eskimo rights

THE culture of the Eskimos - or Inuit (The People), as they now prefer to be called - has suffered the usual disastrous collision with the European variety. Unlike many other peoples, however, the Inuit have had some success, well documented by Ian Creery,¹ in peacefully resisting the pressures exerted on them. With a more accurate conception of the elements of their problem, they would stand a better chance of achieving their ultimate purpose, namely a return to a free and independent existence.

Their ancestors are believed to have crossed from Siberia to Alaska and Canada about the year 10,000 B.C., or 5,000 years after the glaciers of the last major Ice Age began to melt. Their culture had probably changed little between then and the end of the last century, when they made their first significant contact with people of European extraction.

Their country is that of the tundra between the tree-line and the polar ice-cap. It is inhospitable to man; for the permafrost is but a few inches beneath the surface, while temperatures are sub-zero in the winter, and over 100 degrees Fahrenheit during the summer days.

The only method of gaining an independent livelihood is by hunting; so the coast-dwelling Inuit hunted the sea mammals (fish are deficient in essential fats), and the rest either followed, or intercepted in their periodic migrations, the great herds of caribou and musk-oxen that thrived off the barren land.

None of an animal's carcass was wasted. Edible parts were shared with the dog teams that dragged the sleds; skins were made into tents and clothing; and bone and horns into hunting and domestic equipment. The horn of the musk-ox was particularly important as providing the material of the cross-bow, fundamental to the Inuit way of life.

Though, unlike the Palaeo-



• An eskimo shaman making a bow from sections of caribou antler at his Little Lakes summer camp.



By
**DAVID
REDFEARN**

lithic hunters of Europe, they practised nothing that could be called fine art, they took a pride in the intricate decoration of their equipment. Their parkas, for instance, would contain inlays of variously coloured pieces of fur; and their wooden meat-trays, sled- and kayak-

frames, made perforce from small pieces of scrub-willow, linked with tenon and mortise joints, were masterpieces of the carpenter's art.

All this and their social life, outlined by Creery, is confirmed in more detail by Farley Mowat,² who lived among the Ihalmiut tribe of the Inuit from 1947 to 1950, their last years of freedom, learned their language, and listened to the tales they had to tell.

Their tribal organisation was a living proof that the absence of a government does not nec-

essarily mean anarchy; for decisions affecting more than the unitary family were taken by means of consensus; and an unwritten code of conduct governed their everyday life.

For example, though private property in personal equipment was the general rule, any particular item would be at the disposal of anybody who for the time being needed it more than the owner, even if no permission were asked.

To be angry at such an occurrence would be regarded as a sign of madness, as Mowat discovered to his cost when somebody borrowed his rifle.

It was some time before his friends recovered full confidence in him. Indeed, in this and every way, the Inuit led the kind of happy, unselfish and stress-free life that Henry George³ attributed to the cabin passengers, in contrast to those of the steerage, of the ship that he used as a symbol of world society.

Their natures and framework of ideas being such, the Inuit would hardly have understood had they been told in 1670 that King Charles II of Britain had presented the Canadian Arctic to the Hudson Bay Company, or again in 1870 that this valuable property had been transferred to the Canadian Government, who had renamed it the Northwest Territory.

Luckily for them for the time being, the climate and general conditions being unattractive to most white people, no immediate attempt was made to take possession or to levy tribute.

THE FIRST substantial encroachments on the Inuit economy were made by Scottish and American whalers during the 19th century. It has been estimated that, between 1868 and 1911, the Scots alone took

more than 20,000 baluga whales from the Davis Strait, while the Americans followed the herds round the north coast of Alaska, and nearly wiped them out during little more than a decade.

After the whalers came the fur traders, whose approach was more insidious and destructive. In the late 19th century in particular, there was a heavy demand in Europe for the fur of the white fox. In return for these furs, which were obtained by trapping, the traders provided

REFERENCES

1. Ian Creery, *The Inuit (Eskimo) of Canada*, Minority Rights Group, 1983, Report No.60.
2. Farley Mowat, *People of the Deer*, Souvenir Press, 1989.
3. Henry George, *Progress and Poverty*, New York, Appleton, 1879 (book IX, ch.IV).
4. David Redfearn, *Human Rights — Artificial or Natural?* Land & Liberty Press, 1982.

magazine rifles and large supplies of ammunition.

With these labour-saving devices the Inuit were enabled to hunt more effectively, and so were tribes of Red Indians to the south. Between them, they caused serious depletion of the herds of caribou and musk oxen on which their economy depended.

When the demand for the white fox fur fell off, and as a result the supply of ammunition dried up, the Inuit were left to starve; for in the meantime they had lost the arts of making and using their traditional weapons.

The response of the Canadian authorities, when at last they became aware of the plight of the Inuit, has been predictable. On the one hand, they have furthered the cause of the great industrial projects, such as the

James Bay hydro-electric scheme and the Mackenzie Valley oil and gas pipelines, both of which represent considerable threats to the old Inuit way of life.

On the other hand, the Inuit themselves have been assigned the traditional role of native peoples, that is, the one of cheap labour. They have also been favoured with old-age pensions, child allowances and other "welfare" payments that they do not really want. What they do want, and have bargained for to some effect, is their land, which is being taken from them piecemeal in the name of industrial progress.

They evidently appreciate the point that I have attempted elsewhere to demonstrate,⁴ namely that a people with access to land has automatic freedom to throw off impossible conditions of work or general existence, and does not require the 30 articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

What they need to rethink is their alternative proposal to the one generally offered to them in exchange for basic aboriginal rights, that is to say a limited area of land of undefined location, a lump sum in compensation, and various so-called benefits. What they have in fact asked for is half the Northwest Territory, to be administered by themselves.

If they were to ask instead for the public collection of the full annual rental value of all land, which would eliminate any temptation to monopolise it, and make it available for use by anybody on the same terms, then they would share in the general prosperity, instead of attempting to create their own and thereby risk inequalities of opportunity among their own people. The germs of such a scheme are already present in the local property tax of some British Columbian cities.