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An Arctic Republic of Letters in Early Twentieth-Century Canada

The writing of historical polar exploration in the English-speaking academy has undergone a substantial shift in the past twenty years, to the point where it may be safe to declare that the once-dominant triumphal and hagiographical style, inherited from the nineteenth century, has breathed its last. The explorer as depicted in this tradition has become a figure of fun in current discourse, easily recognizable in the contours of caricature. Sherrill Grace, for example, presents for our inspection “courageous men battling a dangerous, hostile, female *terra incognita* to prove their masculinity and the superior force of their technology” whose fate is to “die nobly in struggle, or to map, claim, name, and control unstructured space, even if only on paper.”¹ It is all too simple to dismiss these aims in an era with less palpable sympathy for them. Instead, many current writers have chosen the more difficult approach of grounding these explorers in appropriate political, social, and cultural contexts, and subsequently uncovering the rationale behind their beliefs and practices.

Accordingly, many recent studies about nineteenth- and twentieth-century polar exploration adopt the nation, rather than the person, as their primary organizational and analytical unit. That nation has been, alternately, the United States, as in the works of Lisa Bloom, Beau Riffenburgh, or Michael F. Robinson; Great Britain, as in Francis Spufford’s and Max Jones’s monographs; or one of the Scandinavian countries, as in the collection of essays edited by Michael Bravo and Sverker Sörlin.² These

¹ Sherrill E. Grace, *Canada and the Idea of North* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001), 15.

² Lisa Bloom, *Gender on Ice: American Ideologies of Polar Expeditions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Beau Riffenburgh, *The Myth of the Explorer: The Press, Sensationalism, and Geographical Discovery* (London & New York: Belhaven Press, 1993); Michael F.

studies have skillfully combined political or state considerations with those of society and culture to account for the myriad ways in which expeditions were structured, represented and interpreted. Felix Driver has recognized the same inherent complexity of these enterprises, and has coined the apt term “cultures of exploration” to describe “the wide variety of practices at work in the production and consumption of voyages and travels.”¹ Yet these were not the only nations that engaged in historical polar exploration, although they have been extensively treated, even overrepresented, in such literature.² How well might this nation-centred model elucidate other national traditions of exploration?

The history of Arctic exploration in Canada, a country with no custom of polar exploration, does not fit easily into either the heroic or the societal paradigm. Canada has never boasted explorers of the popular stature known to other nations. It has merely adopted those of foreign extraction and absorbed them into domestic historical narratives, as in the case of many early modern English and Scottish explorers of Canadian territory, such as Henry Hudson, Simon Fraser, and Alexander Mackenzie. Hence there has been less fodder in Canadian historical exploits for the hagiographical, biographical tradition of old. As well, lacking what Jones terms “the leading actors in cracking stories of adventure,” Canadians have never developed distinctive cultural

Robinson, *The Coldest Crucible: Arctic Exploration and American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Francis Spufford, *I May Be Some Time: Ice and the English Imagination* (New York: Picador, 1997); Max Jones, *The Last Great Quest: Captain Scott's Antarctic Sacrifice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Michael Bravo and Sverker Sörlin, eds., *Narrating the Arctic: A Cultural History of Nordic Scientific Practices* (Canton, MA: Science History Publications USA, 2002).

¹ Felix Driver, *Geography Militant: Cultures of Exploration and Empire* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 8.

² Though the literature on other nations is scant, at the recent Arctic Discourses conference in Tromsø, there were papers on Italian representations of the Arctic by Margherita d’Ayala Valva and Elizaveta Khachatryan. Johan Schimanski and Ulrike Spring spoke about similar discourses at play in the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

discourses about Arctic explorers.¹ However, certain Canadians came to explore the Arctic reaches of the nation, primarily in the twentieth century. Yet these people did not identify themselves, first and foremost, as explorers. Many of them pursued other occupations—as American traders, hunters, tourists, university academics, institutional scientists, military and naval officers, government bureaucrats, or trappers—and would glean geographical knowledge in the course of their tasks in the North.²

Historians of twentieth-century northern Canada have often failed to take the breadth and impact of these actors into account. It was once common to organize such accounts according to the three institutions, sometimes facetiously known as the “Holy Trinity,” that had the greatest impact on the region: the Hudson’s Bay Company of traders, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, and the Catholic and Anglican missions. This neat and tidy compartmentalization of historical actors may serve to clarify political and social trends. But it trivializes or even obscures the untidy people who rest outside these central categories, yet are constituent of northern history all the same. A quotation from this historiographical tradition will illuminate the problem:

The region northeast of Great Bear Lake ... was occupied almost continuously from 1908 by a succession of white men who represented a veritable cross-section of motives and personalities. There were J. C. Melvill, the wealthy hunter

¹ Jones, *Quest*, 23. Indeed, the innovative theme that many Canadian writers have developed since the beginning of the twentieth century inverts the historically common hegemonic relationship of Euro-Americans with the natural world. The hero less often conquers the wild Canadian or Arctic wastes than he or she is consumed by them; in such narratives, the land is the first and strongest character. See Margaret Atwood, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature* (Toronto: Anansi, 1972) and Northrop Frye, *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (Toronto: Anansi, 1971) for further discussion.

² Since the Canadian region under discussion encompasses more than the latitudinal Arctic, the terms “arctic” and “northern” will be used interchangeably in this paper.

and traveller; Jack Hornby, the romantic ill-starred misfit; Stefansson, the ambitious, headline-hunting anthropologist and Anderson, the naturalist, popping in and out; the Douglas party ... come to see the celebrated copper occurrence ... D'Arcy Arden, the hunter and trapper who settled down and made the area his home....¹

This description performs two kinds of mischief. It accentuates eccentric personalities, in an echo of the elder hagiographical approach, at the expense of serious aim or purpose. It also denies any connection between the named historical actors. Yet all these men, except Melvill, were, in fact, bound together in a network of correspondence in which information about the North, gathered in various circumstances, circulated freely and widely. I contend that this network represents an entrée into the investigation of these non-institutional historical actors in the Canadian North, whom northern historians have neglected, to the impoverishment of their narratives. Since there is no prior methodology in this historical tradition for studying such people, one must be selected. This network was a byproduct of informal Arctic exploration; it was neither commissioned by the government nor discussed in the media. Therefore I would argue that it cannot be adequately understood by means of the heroic or societal models that have been used elsewhere. What is required is a scope that lies between the individual and national scales.

To locate such a scope, we may turn to practitioners of the history of science. This sub-discipline has experienced a shift in the last twenty-five years, consonant with that of the historical community on the whole, away from intellectual history toward social history. The lessened emphasis on ideas has diminished the stature of the heroic scientist, commonly found in older academic writing. Such figures are now more commonly integrated, as with explorers, with their contemporary political and cultural milieux. Emma Spary writes that if “one explores naturalists’ associations,

¹ Morris Zaslow, *The Opening of the Canadian North, 1870-1914* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1971), 247.

their institutional and patronage affiliations, a very different account of the meaning of their natural historical enterprise becomes possible.”¹ In this new venture, scientific correspondence becomes of greater significance. The epistolary connections between individuals are now increasingly recognized as an essential component of the advancement of knowledge, as well as an important social bulwark in scientific communities.² In particular, the seminal theoretical work that Bruno Latour has conducted on networks has spurred others to inquire into the production, dissemination, and reception of scientific ideas in Europe during the Enlightenment.³

Science and exploration cannot be collapsed into one enterprise. Historically they have often jostled each other uneasily, having utilized similar means toward ends that were regularly quite disparate. Comparing or contrasting the quotidian practices of science and exploration is not the aim of this paper, however. It focuses instead upon the textual knowledge that exploration inevitably produces—informal, unpublished knowledge in this case—and draws upon the theories of Latour and others to suggest profitable ways in which this correspondence network might be understood.⁴ While much insight can be gleaned from academic

¹ Emma Spary, *Utopia's Garden: French Natural History from Old Regime to Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 251.

² Michael Collie and Susan Bennett, eds., *George Gordon: An Annotated Catalogue of His Scientific Correspondence* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1996), ix.

³ David Philip Miller usefully deploys Latour in his analysis of the correspondence networks of Sir Joseph Banks, the renowned late eighteenth-century naturalist, collector, and administrator. See “Joseph Banks, empire, and ‘centers of calculation’ in late Hanoverian London,” in David Philip Miller and Peter Hanns Reill, eds., *Visions of Nature: Voyages, Botany, and Representations of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 21-37. See also Bruno Latour, *Science in Action: How To Follow Scientists and Engineers Through Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).

⁴ Indeed, Latour’s broader insights about the social aspects of science are applicable to exploration as well: they are both messy, political, and in-

studies of scientific correspondence networks, there is yet another model of a group that chimes more perfectly, in its form and content, with the northern network under consideration, and that may yield a more fruitful comparison. I refer to the early modern European Republic of Letters.

Drawing a comparison between phenomena in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe and twentieth-century Canada is an unusual strategy. Given the many obvious differences in the political and social conditions of these two times and places, it is not my intention to make direct causal connections. The suggestion of similarity is made in the hope that historians of northern Canada, and of the Arctic in general, may perceive new avenues of inquiry by which to approach familiar material. Hence the first Republic of Letters is invoked in the following discussion only insofar as it serves as an analogy for the second, and so the comparison will be necessarily lopsided. The several main points of congruence are instructive: in both cases, one finds networks of voluntary correspondence, guided by a shared but unwritten code of values that shaped interactions and reinforced a sense of community among members. Moreover, both groups worked toward the achievement of knowledge, which they pursued, in concert, through a variety of activities related to research, criticism, and publication. As the discussion develops, readers will see further instances of similitude in the demographics, geographical distribution, and sense of purpose and morality of the two groups.

There is no reason why scholars of the Arctic should be familiar with the Republic of Letters; therefore some explanation, which will, in its course, simplify a vast body of literature, will ensue.¹ Antique in origin, the term *res publica litteraria* began to be rendered into vernacular languages in fifteenth-century Europe, although the zenith of the group it denoted lay several centuries

herently imperfect activities, guided by human relationships of patronage, friendship, and rivalry, and fraught with emotion and polemic.

¹ For a recent if brief historiographical summary of this literature, see Lawrence Brockliss, "Introduction: The Republic of Letters and Enlightenment," in *Calvet's Web: Enlightenment and the Republic of Letters in Eighteenth-Century France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

hence.¹ It came to denote a particular confraternity formed in the social upheavals that characterized the aftermath of the religious wars of the sixteenth century. As the meanings that imbued concepts of private and public space, as well as citizen and state, shifted in society, new actions and allegiances became possible.² The Republic of Letters was essentially a community of independent male scholars across Europe who frequently wrote to each other in the pursuit of knowledge. This virtual republic, which yielded to no borders and yet held no territory of its own, was made material solely through its correspondence.³ While these exchanges most obviously served intellectual desires in facilitating the transfer of knowledge, information, and even gifts, they played an equally important, if not more important, social role in cementing and maintaining relationships between scholars, and in providing opportunities for scholars to establish their cerebral authority within the community.

Membership in this Republic was voluntary, and was instantiated because of individual sympathy with communal aims and values. The primary goal of the Republic was to create an egalitarian space for dialogue in which opinions could be exchanged without the fear of bias arising from national, religious, historical, or other schismatic barriers.⁴ In this way, these scholars, such as the Frenchmen Denis Diderot and Jean Le Rond d'Alembert in the later Republic, hoped to provide an alternative fount of knowledge to that produced in national institutions such as churches, universities, and scholarly academies. They also wished to make

¹ Lorraine Daston, "The Ideal and Reality of the Republic of Letters in the Enlightenment," *Science in Context* 4 (1991): 370.

² Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), 2.

³ Franz Mauelshagen, "Networks of Trust: Scholarly Correspondence and Scientific Exchange in Early Modern Europe," *The Medieval History Journal* 6 (2003): 2.

⁴ Robert Mayhew, "Mapping science's imagined community: geography as a Republic of Letters, 1600-1800," *British Journal for the History of Science* 38 (2005): 74.

knowledge freely available to all.¹ Members of the Republic held dear the values of reciprocity, cosmopolitanism, status determined by merit, and fidelity to truth.² Social adherence to these shared tenets both shaped interaction between members and served to remind them of the community's identity.³

In composition and distribution, as well as general aim, what I will now term the Arctic Republic of Letters shares certain features with its namesake. Its members were also predominantly men, born in Canada oftentimes to middle-class Anglo-Saxon families.⁴ They were well-educated and lived in urban centres across Canada, the United States, and, in a few cases, abroad. Many of them had become friends while living in the same northern town or region for a time, but almost none of them settled there permanently; this was a network of southerners who maintained an interest in the North. Geographical distance divided them, as it did the early modern scholars, for most of their lives, and correspondence was the only means by which they could continue their relationships after they had left the North. Of similar aims and comparable moral codes I will write more later.

Since a specific empirical basis is necessary to illustrate the characteristics of this network, the following analysis will be grounded in the correspondence of two of its members, George Mellis Douglas and Vilhjalmur Stefansson. This choice is made partly for reasons of breadth and coherence. Their richly detailed correspondence spans over forty years, survives in full to the best of my knowledge, and is readily accessible.⁵ But Douglas and

¹ Goodman, *Republic*, 24-25.

² *Ibid.*, 23.

³ Anne Goldgar, *Impolite Learning: Conduct and Community in the Republic of Letters, 1680-1750* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), 6.

⁴ The wives of some of these men were often just as interested in the North as their husbands; many had lived or travelled there with their spouses. Their influence upon this network is considerable, but more difficult to trace, and certainly beyond the scope of this paper to discuss.

⁵ This material comes mainly from the George Mellis Douglas fonds (MG 30 B 95) at Library and Archives Canada (LAC) and the Stefansson

Stefansson were also important figures in this Arctic Republic, despite differing widely in ability and experience, as the following biographies will make plain.

Douglas (1875-1963) was born to prominent Anglo-Saxon parents in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, although his parents later moved their family west, to rural Ontario. He received training in maritime engineering at Rutherford College in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England, and subsequently enjoyed a long career as a mining engineer and consultant in Mexico and Arizona. Douglas's Arctic experiences began when his cousin, James Douglas, funded an overwintering expedition in 1911 to Great Bear Lake, the Dismal Lakes, and the lower Coppermine River (all in the northwest quadrant of the present-day Northwest Territories of Canada) with the sought-for end of mineral discovery. George Douglas would return to the Northwest Territories in 1928, 1935, and 1938 on expeditions made for similar purposes, although they differed in time span and logistical support. He eventually retired to the same Ontarian farm on which he had grown up. In the midst of his rustic life, he made time to correspond widely with friends he had met in the North.¹

Stefansson's (1879-1962) background, by comparison, was less bourgeois. He was born to Icelandic-Canadian parents in rural Manitoba, Canada, and grew up in what was then the Dakota Territory in the United States. He completed degrees in anthropology and theology at the University of Iowa and at Harvard before embarking on the first of his three Arctic expeditions. He spent almost the entirety of the period between 1906-1918 travelling in the western, central, and High Arctic between Alaska and the Boothia Peninsula, conducting ethnographic and scientific studies for, by turns, the American Museum of Natural History

Collection (SC) at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, USA. A small number of documents were obtained from the George Douglas fonds at the Trent University archives in Peterborough, Ontario and the George Whalley fonds at the archives of Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario.

¹ Although there has been no full-length scholarly treatment of Douglas, see Enid Mallory, *Coppermine: The Far North of George M. Douglas* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 1989) for biographical information.

and the Canadian government. He was the leader of the famed Canadian Arctic Expedition of 1913-18, about which much has been written. Upon his retirement from exploration, he became an active, if controversial, public speaker, author, and Arctic advisor to the Canadian and American governments. Near the end of his life, he became attached to Dartmouth College as a resident Arctic expert.¹ Douglas and Stefansson, although they had both travelled in the Coppermine region early in the second decade of the century, never met in the North. Instead, Douglas visited the American Museum of Natural History in New York in 1913, and there met Stefansson, who was in the United States briefly, preparing for his next expedition.²

Turning now to the greater correspondence network in which they were involved, we may begin with some explanation of its logistical operations. In both Republics, the principle of reciprocity, or one letter sent for every letter received, guided the flow of correspondence. As David A. Gerber notes, “The fundamental ethical obligation in the epistolary relationship is the commitment to remain in contact.”³ These epistles were usually not meant for the eyes of one’s correspondent alone, as would be the case today. Letters were reproduced and circulated throughout the networks openly, or to a select few members who would be interested in

¹ The two classic biographies of Stefansson are Richard J. Diubaldo, *Stefansson and the Canadian Arctic* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1978) and William R. Hunt, *Stef: A Biography of Vilhjalmur Stefansson, Canadian Arctic Explorer* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1986). Stefansson has represented his own experiences in the posthumously published *Discovery: The Autobiography of Vilhjalmur Stefansson* (New York and London: McGraw-Hill, 1964). See also Gísli Pálsson, *Travelling Passions: The Hidden Life of Vilhjalmur Stefansson*, trans. Keneva Kunz (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2003) for recent original research and interpretation.

² Douglas to Stefansson, 10 April 1923, SC; Stefansson to Douglas (in reply), 19 April 1923, SC.

³ David A. Gerber, *Authors of their Lives: The Personal Correspondence of British Immigrants to North America in the Nineteenth Century* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2006), 102.

their contents. Such third parties might be allowed to keep copies of this correspondence, or they might be asked to annotate and return the original sender's letter.

Throughout their lives, Douglas and Stefansson each regularly forwarded copies of their correspondence to several of their close friends within this network. Other names, approximately thirty in total, appeared occasionally after the small "cc," typed or inked legibly on a discreet corner of a letter, that enables one to trace movement through this network. One might explain the existence of this latter group by reference to the sociologist Mark Granovetter's theory of the "strength of weak ties." He maintains that new information, ideas, and rumours most often arise from one's acquaintances rather than one's inner circle of friends.¹ Accordingly, when Douglas or Stefansson required advice on certain matters, they would send a copy of a letter to an acquaintance who might have been an expert in that matter, in the hope of gaining new insight.

Granovetter argues further that people who maintain many weak ties in their relationships with others tend to become nodal points in a network. Such individuals often served as the points of overlap between different correspondence networks, and had a broad remit in gathering and disseminating information.² The seventeenth-century figure Père Marin Mersenne in the original Republic certainly played such a role. A contemporary wrote of him, "He had become the center of the world of letters, owing to the contact he maintained with all, and all with him, ... serving a function in the Republic of Letters similar to that of the heart in the circulation of blood within the human body."³ In similar vein,

¹ David S. Lux and Harold J. Cook have turned Granovetter's general insights specifically to the study of correspondence networks in their article "Closed Circles or Open Networks?: Communicating at a Distance During the Scientific Revolution," *History of Science* 36 (1998): 179-211.

² *Ibid.*, 192. A latter-day interpretation of a similar concept may be found in Bruno Latour's *centres of calculation*, which is discussed in chapter 6 of *Science in Action*.

³ Quoted in Paul Dibon, "Communication in the Respublica Literaria of the 17th Century," *Res Publica Litterarum* 1 (1978): 50.

Douglas and Stefansson were nodes within entirely disparate networks. While Douglas communicated with many retired Hudson's Bay Company traders, Mounted Policemen, and trappers, Stefansson maintained his connections with American and Canadian politicians, industry officials, professional explorers, and military officers. Together, they had access to a staggeringly broad array of opinion and knowledge about the North.

That knowledge, however, first had to be filtered through what might be called the moral workings of the correspondence network. The problem of verifying the accuracy and validity of information received through letters existed in both Republics. To generalize briefly, European intellectuals during the Enlightenment had become disenchanted with the ancient method of forming knowledge through disputation, and came to prefer instead an empirical, proto-scientific knowledge that could only be gained through direct experience. If one could not attain such experience oneself, one could accept reliable testimony as an adequate alternative. Yet here the exigencies of correspondence posed a dilemma. In both early modern Europe and early twentieth-century Canada, travel was expensive and the distances prohibitive, so meetings between correspondents were rare. But trust, particularly as viewed by early modern moral philosophy, could only be acquired through personal acquaintance, which allowed a direct assessment of one's character.¹ How, then, could information passed between strangers be rendered trustworthy, and thus usable?

Recent work in the history of science has treated trust as a quality that could be transmitted, along with information, within the personal letter.² Introductions to acquaintances and guarantees

¹ Mauelshagen, "Networks," 9.

² *Ibid.*, 2-3. Steven Shapin has written extensively on this issue. See Steven Shapin, "Pump and Circumstance: Robert Boyle's Literary Technology," *Social Studies of Science* 14 (1984): 481-520; Adi Ophir and Shapin, "The Place of Knowledge: A Methodological Survey," *Science in Context* 4 (1991): 3-21; Shapin, "Here and Everywhere: Socio-

of trustworthiness were, indeed, nothing less than crucial to the functioning of these Republics. Learned men were dependent on a significant number of trans-regional connections, and “such networks could not have been developed and maintained without adequate substitutes for personal meetings and the immediate individual experiences that they enabled.”¹ In such cases, trust beget trust: because Douglas and Stefansson, for example, had met several times, and knew and respected one another, any third party introduced into their exchanges was indirectly marked by the long-held esteem and approval between them. Introductions were made usually with the intent that the new correspondent contribute immediately to the epistolary conversation on a certain topic, thereby increasing available knowledge.² To enable the most judicious use of the newcomer’s expertise, acquaintances would often be captioned. Thus Douglas introduced the schoolmaster Prentice Downes to Stefansson as a man “who has travelled much in the far North and is learned in its history.”³ As demonstrated, both weak social ties and the transmission of trust ensured the safe passage and use of information through these networks.

Having now examined the mechanical and moral operations of these networks, we may now consider the actual content of the Arctic letters—notwithstanding Anne Goldgar’s claim that, in these kinds of networks, “communication, not the thing communicated, was [the] focus.”⁴ In both Republics, the movement of

logy of Scientific Knowledge,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 21 (1995): 289-321.

¹ *Ibid.*, 15.

² Stefansson wrote about the correspondence of Douglas and Kenneth Durant, a man whom Stefansson had introduced to Douglas, that “when I can set boating and transportation specialists like you two writing each other about Indian canoes, white-man adoption and adaptation of them, and whatever thereto pertains, ... there goes apace a collection of knowledge and wisdom that might perish otherwise – likely would perish.” Stefansson to Douglas, 16 November 1958, SC. The theme of preserving knowledge for posterity is developed later in this essay.

³ Douglas to Stefansson, 3 February 1951, SC.

⁴ Goldgar, *Learning*, 11.

letters coordinated the lives of members of the network, made their activities known to each other, announced the appearances of articles or books of interest, and spread news about projects or research in progress.¹ Douglas and Stefansson regularly traded or requested updates on the faring of acquaintances, particularly the eccentric and erratic English explorers John Hornby and Charles Critchell-Bullock, whom they both knew. They would also compare opinions on recently published books about the North; these discussions usually became exercises in mutual gratification, since they had similar tastes and views. Of *Inuk* (1953), by the Catholic Oblate Father Roger P. Buliard, Douglas writes that it is an “absurd account.”² Stefansson agrees, naming it “that half-truthish and bafflingly falsificatious book.”³ At other times, in a mixing of the previously named activities, they would compare their opinions of certain people. Various letters discussed the historical English explorer Cosmo Melvill, or George Whalley, a professor of literature at Queen’s University who wished—problematically, in Douglas’s view—to write a biography of Hornby, to whom Douglas had been a close friend. After Douglas had grown more comfortable with the project, Stefansson wrote to say, “Glad you think Whalley is turning out well,” in a gentle affirmation of Douglas’s prior struggles.⁴

In addition to these opinionated dialogues, Douglas and Stefansson would discuss their current projects, which ranged from the scientific to the historical. Stefansson would often query Douglas on geographical or scientific matters—such as climate change, the cracking of sea ice, or Arctic nutrition—and then use such information in one of his many books.⁵ Douglas, who published very little, made a personal project of studying the history of exploration in the Canadian North. He was fascinated both by the recent history that he and Stefansson had helped

¹ Dibon, “Communication,” 46-47.

² Douglas to Stefansson, 2 April 1953, SC.

³ Stefansson to Douglas, 5 October 1953, SC and LAC.

⁴ Stefansson to Douglas, 30 September 1955, SC.

⁵ For example, see Douglas to Stefansson, 13 June 1940, SC and Stefansson to Douglas (in reply), 3 October 1940, SC.

create, as well as the nineteenth-century searches for the lost expedition of Sir John Franklin. Their relationship was somewhat unbalanced: Stefansson, the far greater public figure, drew upon Douglas's expertise frequently without necessarily crediting him in speech or publication. In the later years of their life and correspondence, one can detect some strain on Douglas's part, a hint of feeling ill-used. In at least one instance, Douglas kept interesting manuscript material secret, for fear that Stefansson might use it for his own profit and glory.¹

In the main, both men considered the other expert in a wide range of Arctic subjects. It is interesting to note how the boundary between amateur and professional knowledge was sometimes fraught with tension, in an era when opportunistic Arctic exploration was increasingly made to give way to ordered Arctic science. Douglas considered that the generalist perspective of the explorer was advantageous: "[A]nyone excelling in exploration would be gifted with the clearer insight than that of the average and was able to express what he knew in terms not always within the comprehension of the ordinary man."² Neither made any pretense to professional standards in their scholarly pursuits, although Douglas seemed more aware of their shortcomings in this regard than did Stefansson. Commenting on a letter from a scientist and mutual friend, Douglas wrote, "My own rather unscientific records made fairly carefully for some thirty years, and intermittently for 65 years certainly do conform with more reliable evidence that the climate has become warmer; and from what I have read in various scientific publications ... [the] contention is well justified."³ Between these lines, then, filled with reports, reviews, and renderings of fact, one can also read about, and into, personal and professional anxieties.

As a certain moral code structured the reliable transit of information in this Republic, so did another moral code, a shared set of values, underpin the content of the correspondence. Within

¹ Douglas to Prentice Downes, 16 November 1952, LAC.

² Douglas to Stefansson, 7 November 1952, SC and LAC.

³ Douglas to Stefansson, 29 January 1951, SC.

the Arctic Republic of Letters, there was a discernable common attitude toward the production and dissemination of knowledge about the North. The preference was markedly empirical in its emphasis upon the personal, detailed, and objective collection of information. Douglas's letters, in particular, are strict upon the necessity of first-hand experience. When speaking of George Whalley, the would-be biographer, Douglas wrote in frustration, "Whalley has put [in] an enormous amount of work on Hornby, but he doesn't know the country, nor the class of people who have helped to create the Hornby Myth, and therefore can't evaluate evidence."¹

Moreover, there is a further desire for precise, detailed knowledge. In a 1942 letter to Stefansson that discusses the wartime construction of the Alaska Highway, Douglas maintained that one could only know an area properly if one walked over it, then flew over it, and if one had studied aerial and ground photographs both before and after the pedestrian trip.² Two decades earlier, Stefansson had asked Douglas for "as itemized and lengthy a description [of a meeting between Inuit and Dene] as you have time for, giving every detail you can remember."³ One can see, therefore, the longevity of these preferences for ordering information. The necessity for objective knowledge is also marked, particularly in Stefansson's letters. On many occasions, he asks Douglas for his "unbiased recollection" of places and people with whom they were both familiar, in order to check the validity of his memory and records against those of Douglas.⁴ In one instance, he acknowledges that he might be "asking loaded questions," but he is certain Douglas is independent enough in mind not to be swayed.⁵

Twinned with this empiricism is a strong desire for the preservation of this hard-won personal knowledge. Douglas and Stefansson were both aware that they had been among the few

¹ Douglas to Stefansson, 27 July 1955, SC.

² Douglas to Stefansson, 10 April 1942, SC.

³ Stefansson to Douglas, 19 November 1925, SC.

⁴ For examples, see *ibid.* and Stefansson to Douglas, 6 June 1955, SC.

⁵ Stefansson to Douglas, 26 October 1952, SC.

eyewitnesses to the rapid industrial transformation of the North. Having travelled and lived in both the “traditional” and “modern” styles—by canoe and by airplane, in tents and in pre-fab huts—they felt their experiences would be of great value to future generations. Stefansson thought that the material traces of their knowledge, the reams of Douglas-Stefansson correspondence, should be preserved in a special collection within his general archive, which he was planning to donate to Dartmouth College upon his death. He considered their long-standing textual exchange of first-rate value:

Although I have had many long-continued correspondences with important northern figures, I doubt that any one of them excells yours in value So I have thought of going back to our first exchange of letters and binding them, or otherwise gathering them, into volumes, arranging everything chronologically. I trust you approve!¹

But Stefansson knew of Douglas’s reluctance to commit his thoughts to publication, and foresaw that much of his personal experience would be lost to historians. Thus he enlisted the aid of Allan Nevins, a professor of history at Columbia University, as well as that of three of Douglas’s closest friends—the Dominion of Canada Archivist, W. Kaye Lamb; the past editor of the Hudson’s Bay Company magazine *The Beaver*, Clifford Wilson; and the writer and photographer Richard Finnie—in order to plan a series of taped interviews with Douglas at his home in Lakefield, Ontario.² The scheme never came to fruition, yet the dialogue is instructive: it illustrates how aware these men were of both the importance of their experiences and yet the fragility of their records. Stefansson rendered this paired need and fear such: “There is a new world in the north and the men who saw it

¹ Stefansson to Douglas, 12 March 1954, SC and LAC.

² Stefansson to Allan Nevins, 14 May 1958; Nevins to Stefansson, 16 May 1958; Stefansson to Nevins, 19 May 1958; Stefansson to W. Kaye Lamb, 20 May 1958; Clifford Wilson to Nevins, 27 May 1958; Lamb to Stefansson, 30 May 1958; all SC.

unveiled and did the unavailing [sic] are passing off the stage, with their lines unspoken. Those not yet off should write their lines for Archives or speak them for the Museum.”¹

Indeed, Stefansson was not content that he and his fellow members of the Arctic Republic of Letters should be historical subjects; he proposed that they be the historians of, and in their own time as well. With funding from the Office of Naval Research, a branch of the American government, he undertook the editorship of the *Encyclopedia Arctica*, an epic six-million-word project that was to be the *Britannica* of the Northern world.² Over five years, beginning in 1946, he solicited articles from many members of this network of correspondence, considering them regional and historical experts. Although funding for the project was terminated because of Stefansson’s association with certain targets of McCarthyism in the early 1950s, the manuscript still exists in the Dartmouth College archives. As Diderot and D’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie* was the fulfillment and embodiment of the original Republic of Letters, so this encyclopedia would have been the central material representation of the Arctic Republic of Letters.³ Such a project reflects the vital concern of these men that their deeds not be forgotten, nor their knowledge pass away with their deaths. It also would have given them the perfect platform from which to represent the North in accordance with their shared values of personal experience, detail, and objectivity. Yet with the demise of the project, these men, and the collection of personal knowledge contained within their letters, have been largely overlooked in subsequent histories of the North. Stefansson’s fears, then, appear to have been justified.

In this paper, I have demonstrated the necessity for a different vantage point from which to understand the production and communication of knowledge about the Canadian North in the

¹ Stefansson to Douglas, 27 February 1957, SC.

² Vilhjalmur Stefansson, “Encyclopedia Arctica,” *Arctic* 1 (1948): 44-46.

³ A careful comparison of these two projects would, of course, need to scrutinize more closely the political and cultural contexts in which each encyclopedia was placed. Here the comparison is meant suggestively, not assertively.

early twentieth century. Rejecting both small-scale and large-scale models in past and present use by historians of exploration, I have drawn upon the work of historians of science regarding scientific communication networks. I have done so because the ways in which northern Canadian historians have typically rendered their subject have given too little credence to non-institutional actors, and have failed to acknowledge the vibrant connections between individuals inside and outside the North. I suggest that the early modern Republic of Letters provides the best model for interpreting the dynamics of this northern correspondence network. I have delineated the mechanical and moral workings of such a network, and have dwelt upon the information shared and values held in common, in order to build up a preliminary picture of this web of people. The Arctic Republic of Letters was responsive to the needs of its members, who met seldom, and who were communally anxious both to present the truth of their experiences and to expose the misrepresentations of others. Their correspondence network, then, served as an essential portal through which the trust and knowledge required for these exercises could be communicated.¹

The loss of living memory about these men and their experiences, as noted above, has been compounded by the unfriendliness of past scholarly climes toward the use of information contributed by people with no official professional or scientific authority, as was the case with many of these unofficial explorers. But in the twenty-first century, we have both the sympathy toward a wide variety of historical sources and the analytical tools to conceive of an alternative history of early twentieth-century northern Canada, one far richer in human endeavour and relationship, as told by these documents. Building this history using the conceptual blocks of a republic of letters is one option among many. However this community is received, or rendered by others in the future, I affirm, with Dena Goodman, that “it is a product of

¹ To emphasize once more the central role of correspondence in these matters, one might refer to Steven Shapin’s comment that “if a *community* is a group sharing a common life, *communication* is a means of making it common.” “Pump,” 481-82.

... my imagination, will, and desire, but if the community exists only by force of imagination, the institutions and individuals who compose it do not.”¹

¹ Goodman, *Republic*, ix.