

## A HERO IN THE FRIENDLY ARCTIC: DECONSTRUCTING VILHJALMUR STEFANSSON'S RHETORICAL MANEUVER

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There are many motives for writing an Arctic exploration account. As the commander of *The Canadian Arctic Expedition* of 1913–1916, explorer and anthropologist Vilhjalmur Stefansson furnished his account with the optimistic title *The Friendly Arctic: The Story of Five Years in Polar Regions* (1921). Here, readers are presented with the main events of Stefansson's extensive trek through the Canadian Arctic Archipelago, which covered some of the last blank spaces on the Canadian map. Thus, in one sense, *The Friendly Arctic* can be read as a travel narrative. More importantly, however, it is a story about the Arctic in which the frame is an imperative. Stefansson's persistent message throughout his account is "Go North!"; live by the Inuit example, and thus open your eyes to the friendliness and to the untapped resources of the northern regions. Another motive is no less important, and will be my focus in the present article: *The Friendly Arctic* is also the story about the Arctic explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson.

"Showman" and "profiteer" were among the names Stefansson was given by his critics.<sup>1</sup> In his autobiography, the celebrated Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen even went so far as to warn that Stefansson's Arctic "discoveries" should be taken with many grains of salt (Amundsen 1927b, 227).<sup>2</sup> After the fatal shipwreck in 1913 of one of the flagships of the *Canadian Arctic Expedition*, Stefansson naturally had to answer to severe criticism.<sup>3</sup> His expedition continued to be marked by controversy, and this was to cast a dark shadow on Stefansson's later reputation as a Northern pioneer. The element of self-portrayal is therefore important in *The Friendly Arctic*, which provided him with a chance of going on the offensive, so to speak.<sup>4</sup>

Several literary scholars have focused on the so-called *narrative persona* as a central element of the success of an exploration account.<sup>5</sup> Not only has this narrative feature been read as a key to the guarantee of authenticity of that account, but it must

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<sup>1</sup> See Goldring 1987 and Diubaldo 1998.

<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to notice that Amundsen's "many grains of salt" in the English edition of the Norwegian autobiography *Mitt liv som polarforsker* (1927a) really is a moderation of the original's characterisation of Stefansson's so-called "Blond Eskimos" as "*det mest håndgripelige sludder der nogensinne er kommet nordenfra*" ("the most palpable nonsense that ever came from the North") (ibid, 209, my translation). Even more serious is Amundsen's blow against Stefansson when he states that: "*En mere urimelig forvrengning av forholdene nordpå har aldri vært fremsatt enn at en dygtig skytter 'kan leve av landet'. Stefansson har aldri gjort det, til tross for at han påstår det*" ("a more unreasonable distortion of conditions in the North has never been asserted than the one that a skilful marksman can 'live off the country'. Stefansson has never done it, in spite of the fact that he claims to have" (ibid, 211, my translation). Thus, Amundsen even goes so far as to imply that Stefansson's ice journey over the Beaufort Sea never had taken place.

<sup>3</sup> As a result of the shipwreck of the *Karluk*, eleven of the crew died, either during their subsequent march over the ice or at their refuge on Wrangel Island in the Chukchi Sea.

<sup>4</sup> See also Diubaldo 1998, 196.

<sup>5</sup> See MacLuhlic 1977, Tallmadge 1979 and Ryall 1989.

also be seen in relation to the more performative functions of such a text.<sup>6</sup> In my reading, the term *implied author* replaces that of narrative persona. By this I mean the author's second-self, that which we infer as "an ideal, literary, created version of the real man" (Booth 1961, 74–75). In the words of Jakob Lothe, "the implied author then becomes practically a synonym for the ideological value system that the text, indirectly and by combining all its resources, presents and represents" (2000, 19). Crucial aspects of the narrative's reception are at stake here, in other words. What happens, then, if the implied author of an exploration narrative *fails*? Is it possible to read the kind of criticism with which Stefansson frequently was met as rooted in some of the *narrative* aspects of *The Friendly Arctic*?

The implied author is a central element in my reading of his book, and particularly of Stefansson's self-representation as Arctic explorer in this narrative. It seems crucial that such a narrative version of Stefansson the explorer is one of integrity and confidence. In order to grasp this kind of implied author, however, it is necessary to examine the roles of Stefansson as narrator and character in his own story, and I propose to do this through close readings of central passages from the narrative.

### No hero of the literary North

There seems to be little doubt that Stefansson's implied author is a passionate believer of exploration by forage. He is a robust man of the outdoors, and by combining his intellect, knowledge of local customs, and considerable northern experience, he turns exploration into a more or less effortless trek across a friendly Arctic. Passages from the chapter titled "We are 'rescued' by Captain Louis Lane" (Stefansson 1921, 374) further testify to this general impression of a man who is self-contained and *flows* with the Arctic environment (Pálsson 2002, 279). Stefansson is now two years into his northern travels and halfway through his narrative. In terms of geographical exploration, he has gone beyond McClintock's farthest to discover new land to the north.<sup>7</sup> His small exploratory party has been separated from the rest of the expedition for about half a year. Then, one day in early August 1915, an approaching schooner is finally sighted from Cape Kellett. Stefansson rushes along the beach to greet the crew of the *Polar Bear*, and his unexpected arrival naturally causes quite a commotion. The men onboard simply cannot believe that Stefansson has survived these past months in the Arctic wilderness. Thinking that he must be starved, Captain Lane immediately offers Stefansson anything he wants to eat.

I had only to say what I wanted and the cook would prepare me the finest dinner I ever saw. I tried to make clear that while I was hungry for news my appetite for food was very slight. In fact, the excitement had taken away what little I might have had. As for that, I had been in the North so long that I could think of nothing so good as exactly what we had been eating on shore—caribou meat. I had the delicacy to refrain from stating to Captain Lane that none of his food was as good, but I tried to put him off by explaining how eager I was for all sorts of news that I knew he could tell

<sup>6</sup> Besides serving informative and pedagogical purposes, the exploration account constitutes an appeal to other Arctic explorers, contemporary research communities, potential sponsors, etc.

<sup>7</sup> This is "First land" or Brock Island in the Northwest Territories of Canada.

me. But these diplomatic protests evidently rather worried him, so I finally asked for some canned corn. Corn has always been my favourite vegetable yet I don't think I had eaten half a dozen spoonsful before I forgot to continue. (ibid, 375)

The general impression that Stefansson's narrated travels constitute a textbook demonstration of his friendly Arctic theory is reinforced here. Narration is slowed down into a scenic presentation of the encounter between the two men. While narrative voice in general remains stable throughout Stefansson's account, narrative perspective<sup>8</sup> here seems to approximate the vision of Stefansson the protagonist (the experiencing-I) who politely tries to turn down the captain's well-meaning offer.<sup>9</sup> As a consequence, the reader is invited to sympathize with Stefansson's protagonist. Captain Lane would surely have found a more appreciative recipient of his offer in the *literary* Arctic; the Arctic of starvation and close encounters with death. The underlying message is that in the *real* Arctic starvation can be avoided by living off the country. The captain's attempt to fatten Stefansson up appears rather ridiculous through this kind of perspective.

Two pages later perspective is external and limited to the later first-person narrator (the narrating-I) who reinforces the impression that Stefansson is no romantic hero of the literary North. As he has been away from civilization for so long, Stefansson receives the news of the First World War over a year after it has started. The story of his "revelation" seems afterwards to have been presented as a particularly moving scene in the newspapers. These are the comments of the later narrator on such newspaper stories:

The question of how the news of a world cataclysm would strike a person who heard of it only when the tragedy had been a year in progress seems to have been generally interesting to newspaper editors and paragraphs. [...] A story that isn't true is usually interesting—that is what it is made to be. This was extremely interesting, as the number of editorial comments proved. It was usually printed under the heading, "Stefansson Wept." After a dramatic account of how the news of the war was brought to me comes the climax: Under the crushing effect of the tragedy that had come upon the world I broke down and wept. These were not the ordinary snivelings of a sentimentalist—they were the tears of a hero who had borne all the terrors of the polar wilderness without flinching and who had met stolidly even his own semimiraculous rescue from the jaws of death. For it appeared the *Polar Bear* had rescued me from starvation. (That she did so with a warmed-up tin of corn was not specified.) (ibid, 377)

<sup>8</sup> By narrative perspective I mean the text's point of orientation, or "the *vision* through which the narrative elements are presented" (Lothe 2000, 39, emphasis added). In contrast, a discussion of narrative voice belongs under the heading of narration, and relates to speech presentation (ibid, 41).

<sup>9</sup> Although the statement "I had been in the North so long that..." may be of a hybrid character, in which perspective is both with character and narrator.

Even though Stefansson in all probability is taken aback by the news of the Great War, the focus of these passages is rather the crude exaggeration of this scene which has circulated in the media. As opposed to what people back home might have assumed, it seems important to get across that their journey has never come near to so-called storybook standards. The image given in the media of Stefansson as a daring hero of the literary North is a *misrepresentation* which the later narrator simply refuses to let pass in silence. Irony is here used to counter the discourse of a weeping polar hero, and instead the passage testifies both to the polar expertise and to the level-headedness of Stefansson as implied author.<sup>10</sup>

Narration in both of the two quoted passages is retrospective, however there is considerable temporal distance between the protagonist who is active in the plot and the later narrator who comments on the situation. In this example it seems clear that the distance between the act of narration and the related events probably spans several years, as the narrator refers to newspaper articles written after the news of Stefansson's so-called revelation had reached civilization. Perhaps it is possible to see Stefansson's autodiegetic narrator as varying between degrees of presence in his story, in the terminology of Gérard Genette (1980, 244–45). While in the latter case he serves as an observer or commentator of his story, in the former he is more clearly present as the story's protagonist. Another way of conceiving of this variation is through the concept of perspective or vision. The dominating perspective in *The Friendly Arctic* is that of the much later narrator who "sees" the events without participating in them. This is an external perspective, however perspective may also be internal and delegated to Stefansson as a character.

What I have been trying to demonstrate through these examples is that both the protagonist's actions and the later narrator's evaluation of events serve to support the view of a friendly Arctic. Both belong within the discourse of Arctic friendliness. The difference between the two roles of narrator and character is thus of minor importance here. Rather, the two passages provide an example of *consonant self-narration*, in which an "unobtrusive narrator [...] identifies with his earlier incarnation, renouncing all manner of cognitive privilege" (Cohn 1978, 155).<sup>11</sup> The views expressed by Stefansson's later narrator—who is a fervent advocate of the friendly Arctic—seem to be largely in accordance with Stefansson the character's

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<sup>10</sup> A similar misrepresentation of Stefansson is contested in Chapter XXVI, in the form of a quoted magazine article written by George H. Wilkins who describes Stefansson's unexpected arrival at the camp of the *Mary Sachs* near Cape Kellett in 1914. Wilkins professes that he has thought of Stefansson and his men "as worn and haggard, starving and struggling on toward camp with one last effort. In fact, [...] in every condition of which I have read of heroic explorers in storybooks." After discovering that Stefansson and his men are in fact still alive, telling no tale of hardship, hunger, or adventure, Wilkins admits to being almost disappointed. "They had travelled eastward over the ice," he says, "shooting bears or seals when they had need for food, and had made the journey over a thousand miles, living on the local food supply, and had never missed a meal!" (Wilkins, in Stefansson 1921, 276–77). Even though Wilkins's apparent expectations of the North as a barren setting for the performance of heroic deeds are disappointed, Stefansson's heroism is still stressed through his testimony.

<sup>11</sup> In contrast, Proust's fictional account *Remembrance of Things Past (À la Recherche du temps perdu)* (1913–27) provides a particularly illustrative example of *dissonant* self-narration, according to Dorrit Cohn. Here, "a lucid narrator [turns] back on a past self in ignorance, confusion, and delusion", something which implies a significant distance between these two roles (1978, 145).

experiences in the Canadian Arctic. This is the general picture of the narrative communication situation in *The Friendly Arctic*. As a result, Stefansson's implied author appears as both a reliable traveller and an Arctic expert and visionary.

**The moods of yesterday in light of today: Tension in implied author**

What are the narrative implications for the implied author if the experiences of the protagonist and the comments of the narrator are more clearly at odds with each other? A later chapter provides an interesting point in case. Its rather neutral title is "Wilkins leaves the expedition [1916]". The story of how this happens is no less neutral. George Hubert Wilkins has served as the expedition photographer, but after his cameras have been lost in the shipwreck, his skills are no longer needed and he decides to join the forces at the front instead. There is no drama to this story, and it takes up only one and a half of the chapter's 21 pages. The rest of it is devoted to the spring travels of Stefansson and two of his companions, Natkusiak and Emiu. More importantly, it is also largely devoted to the various obstacles the three men encounter on their journey.

One of the most challenging of these obstacles turns out to be a minor accident in which Stefansson sprains his ankle. Both the trivial nature and the rare occurrence of this incident is initially emphasised by the narrator. "In general my polar experience has been nearly free from the hardships that most impressed me in the books I read before going North", he says:

For nine polar winters I have never frozen a finger or a toe nor has any member of my immediate parties. My only experience was on my first expedition when I once got my feet wet in an overflowed river with the temperature perhaps forty below and froze one of my feet enough to raise a slight blister. I have now forgotten whether it was a heel or a toe. (Stefansson 1921, 490)

A trifling matter such as a frozen toe or heel appears to be no obstacle to the experienced Arctic traveller.

With this kind of introduction one should think that a sprained ankle poses a minor problem for Stefansson. In the following narrative, however, it frequently appears as an annoying hindrance to their work. Stefansson soon regrets that he must ride on top of the sled, "blanketed and propped up in the manner of white men in western Alaska" (ibid, 491); then, six weeks of continual fog makes surveying difficult (ibid, 496); the weather conditions are reported as being particularly unfavourable (ibid); and fog and clouds cause considerable suffering to their eyes, and consequent delay to their travels (ibid, 497). To top it off, they have not spotted any seals for some time now, and Stefansson finally comes to "the conclusion that the food question [is] getting serious" (ibid, 499). In fact, all of these scenes of obstacles jar loudly with the discourse of friendliness which we find elsewhere in the narrative.

Finally, Stefansson decides that he must go out to hunt for provisions. He feels that he has been a burden to the party lately, and hobbles along on his bad ankle (ibid). The account of this adventure is introduced as being copied directly from his field diary. This means that narrative voice is delegated to Stefansson as diary

narrator.<sup>12</sup> Narrative perspective, on the other hand, is at least for the most part limited to the protagonist. On setting out for a seal, he encounters a tide crack in the ice:

I am not sure what I was thinking, but probably of finding a crossing of the tide crack that would not expose my foot to a wrench, when I found myself falling. [...] When I struck, it proved to be on glare ice—the blizzard that roofed over the crevasse must have been blowing while there was still water in it, so that the snow which fell into the crack dissolved in the water. I seem to have struck on my feet, but of course they slipped, and I fell on my left side—the one of the sprained ankle. The crack was not wide enough for me to fall either backward or forward, for my face was towards one wall, my back to the other. [...] Before moving I noted the thickness of the ice I lay on, which was about eight inches, but with a fresh tide crack an inch wide through which water could be seen. According to this eight-inch thickness I should have drowned had I fallen in yesterday. (ibid, 500)

The dramatic nature of Stefansson's fall is underlined by rendering it in the form of a scenic presentation taken directly from the diary, in which narrative time comes close to story time. Careful attention is paid to detail, and through the (diary) narrator's assessment of the potential danger of the fall the readers are alerted to the tragic outcome this *might* have had. Both of these narrative aspects combine to increase suspense and remind us that Arctic exploration is no risk-free activity. In fact, Arctic nature may prove to be *unfriendly*, even a dangerous hindrance to the explorer. And yet, the discourse of friendliness is soon restored as we read on to learn how Stefansson crawls thirty yards along the floor of the crevasse and climbs out of an opening nine feet above him—only to shoot a seal “without incident at a hundred and thirty-five yards” (ibid, 501). In fact, the rest of the diary excerpt comes close to being a self-rescue manual, and when narrative voice and perspective are back with the much later narrator, he concludes by re-emphasizing the unusual character of the incident:

There are several points for reflection about this accident. [...] the most remarkable thing is that such an accident should never before or since have happened to me or to any one with whom I have been associated. We fall into cracks often, but with this exception they have always been so narrow that we have been able to catch and support ourselves by our arms. This accident would not have happened now but for my Eskimo type goggles with their narrow angle of vision that prevented my seeing where I stepped. (ibid, 501–02)

The rhetorical maneuver which is performed in these pages is interesting, and it also seems to appear in other parts of Stefansson's account. While the narrator of the

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<sup>12</sup> While this narrator also is retrospective, we can therefore assume that the temporal distance between narration and related events has been reduced.

above quote downplays any drama in this potential crisis, the diary presentation of the accident has just the opposite effect.

Likewise, in an earlier chapter devoted to the crossing of Melville Strait, there is a similar disparity between the testimonies of these two narrative instances. Here, summer is upon Stefansson and his exploratory party, and progression is accordingly slow.<sup>13</sup> The men have to push on as fast as they can in order to reach the whalers expected to arrive at Cape Kellett in August, however they are constantly delayed by the thawing ice on which they are travelling. When they are not wading through icy water or “scrambling across wet ice hummocks” (ibid, 358), “needle ice” is damaging their boot soles and threatens to cripple the dogs (ibid, 352). “‘It never rains but it pours’ is true in more senses than one of our situation this evening”, Stefansson observes by quoting from a diary entry on July 11th; “short rations and heavy rain on an ice field are a disagreeable combination” (ibid, 357). The subsequent entry describes another failed attempt to get a seal, and on July 13th the four men eat the last of their food. Perspective in both entries is with Stefansson as protagonist. At this point in the story, however, we are offered the narrative’s dominating, external perspective again, as the much later narrator intervenes with a moderation of the former account of such unfriendly dealings with the Arctic. “It is a bit exaggerated to say, as the diary did above, that we were short on rations”, he says. “Rather we were eating things that were not particularly agreeable. Our last lunch was a piece of sealskin with a little blubber attached. We enjoyed it, although we could think of things we might have preferred” (ibid. 358).

On a larger scale, then, two opposing claims are made in Stefansson’s *Friendly Arctic*. On the one hand, the narrative can be read as an Arctic manual; as Stefansson’s advice on how to make use of Arctic nature, how to travel and hunt by the Inuit example, thus making prolonged advance trips to reach previously unexplored areas, both on land and on sea ice. And yet, when one reads against the grain of this dominant discourse, one discovers that Stefansson both frequently runs up against hindrances and at times even seems to lose faith in his own advice. In Chapter XVIII perspective is delegated to Stefansson as protagonist again as he goes through “a period of anxiety” when warmer weather threatens to break up the ice on which they are travelling. At the time, Stefansson even begins to doubt his own firm belief in the possibility of living off the waters underneath (ibid, 190–91). Three chapters later, we learn that his relief at reaching land ice is “beyond description” (ibid, 224).<sup>14</sup> Such testimonies seem largely to go against both the idea of the feasibility of travelling indefinitely on sea ice and the faith in the bountiful Arctic which is expressed elsewhere.

Interestingly, at one point in the narrative a footnote offers a meta-perspective on this kind of gap which sometimes appears between the character’s reported experiences at the time and the much later evaluation of these. Again, a quoted diary

<sup>13</sup> Besides Stefansson, the exploratory party now consists of Storker T. Storkerson, Charles (Karl) Thomsen and Ole Andreasen (summer travels, 1915).

<sup>14</sup> Although here the later narrator emphasises that “[l]ater years brought us thorough familiarity and confidence in the ocean ice, but the relief and at-home-ness of the land ice *then* were beyond description. [...] No matter how sound the reasons for your confidence in a theory, it seems to be part of a somewhat irrational human nature that you never feel quite sure of being able to do anything unless someone has done it before” (Stefansson 1921, 224, emphasis added).

entry sheds light on a seemingly hopeless situation in which Stefansson and his men have been travelling under particularly trying conditions, and now find themselves in great need of food, equipment and fuel.<sup>15</sup> According to the later narrator, a “mental depression” appears in this diary entry, in which Stefansson criticizes another member of his expedition for failing to leave a much-needed depot for them in the area. As it turns out later, this was in fact not the case after all, and an explanation is offered as a footnote to a comment made in the entry:

This statement and one or two other sentences from the diary of September 26th are reproduced here not as facts but to show *a state of mind at the time of writing*. It will appear later that [ship master Aarnout] Castel had not failed in any sense which he could be criticized [...].

In this book I am trying to present things not as they appear now but as they seemed then—with, of course, the exception of immutable facts, such as topography or temperature. It is in exploration as it is in life of tamer environments, that the moods of yesterday are difficult to enter into to-day. My mind has now a very different picture of the expedition from what I find in my diaries. I have assumed that the reader would be interested in the feelings and outlook he might have shared had he been with us, rather than in direct facts as they appear now that time has settled uncertainties and reversed contemporary judgments. (ibid, 555–56, emphasis added)

The distance in time between the different narrators operating in the text is made explicit in this quotation. With a distance in time comes also a change in perspective; the state of mind at the time of writing a diary is not necessarily the same as the moods of today, Stefansson here points out. While the retrospective narrator states that he is trying to present things as they seemed *then*, variations in the kind of perspective which is offered throughout the narrative at times gives a rather different impression, as we have seen. In general, an external perspective encompasses internal ones, and Stefansson’s later narrator provides the dominant voice of the narrative. Still, certain passages complicate this general picture.

If examples such as the ones discussed above—and the quoted diary entries in particular—destabilize the dominating discourse of Stefansson’s narrative, then why are they part of that narrative? One answer would be that they are an important element of the genre of the literature of exploration, and of the representation of the implied author in particular. Although Stefansson’s implied author clearly should not be associated with the so-called heroes of the literary North, it is still necessary to stress the heroism in his own achievement in some way. But how is it possible to be a hero in a friendly Arctic? The explorer needs to overcome a set of obstacles in order for him to stand out as the hero of his narrative. Stefansson’s dilemma seems to be that the very same set of obstacles belong to a northern vision which his narrative essentially rejects.

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<sup>15</sup> During the late summer/autumn months of 1916, Stefansson, Harold Noice and Karsten (Charlie) Andersen are forced to spend a month on Lougheed Island, before they cross over to Borden Island and Melville Island on the newly formed ice.

What I have been trying to propose here is that the kind of tension that we find in *The Friendly Arctic* can be related to the tension which characterizes Stefansson's implied author. While the narrative version of Stefansson generally is one of integrity and confidence, at times there appears to be an internal dissonance in the implied author which undermines this general impression. As a consequence, my argument about the "unobtrusive narrator" is only partially right; in some passages the narrator cannot be identified with the protagonist. This has consequences for the self-portrayal of Stefansson through his narrative. At times, the portrait of the friendly Arctic explorer is rather difficult for the reader to believe in, which may in part serve to explain why his account was frequently met with considerable skepticism.

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### A short biography

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### **English summary**

The article deals with Arctic explorer and anthropologist Vilhjalmur Stefansson’s self-presentation in the expedition account *The Friendly Arctic: The Story of Five Years in Polar Regions* (1921), which tells the story of his travels and trials in the Canadian High Arctic in the years between 1913–1918. The account has been considered a key text to Stefansson’s Arctic career, and provides a textbook example of his characteristic theory of living off the country in the so-called Eskimo way. Against the background of Stefansson’s debated position as Arctic expert and visionary, I ask if it is possible to read the kind of criticism with which Stefansson frequently was met as rooted in some of the narrative aspects of his account. The narrative persona or implied author is a central element in the literature of exploration, as several literary scholars have pointed out. My reading is centred around the implied author of *The Friendly Arctic*, which I argue must be read in light of the sometimes conflicting roles given to Stefansson as protagonist and narrator in his own story. Close-readings of passages from the account raise the dilemma of how it is possible to present oneself as a hero in an essentially friendly Arctic.

### **Key words**

Vilhjalmur Stefansson, *The Friendly Arctic*, Arctic Canada, discourse of friendliness, implied author, character, narrator, self-presentation