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Scarcity in the Arctic: A Colonial Construct?

The globe's peripheral regions have often historically been seen by Europeans as places of extremes—of climate, of customs, of flora and fauna—and, along with the South Pacific, Africa, and the Americas, this category has included the North Atlantic islands of Greenland, Iceland, and the Faroe Islands.[1] The extremes which marked the North Atlantic were not only the literary tropes of utopia/dystopia which have often marked distant lands in European imagination but also the contrasts of scarcity and plenty. Greenland, Iceland, and the Faroe Islands were places of privation, hardship, and "doing without." Seeing northern regions as places of scarcity is unsurprising, but there is historically a particular flavor to scarcity there. Arctic scarcity was not simply scarcity of fresh vegetables or fruit, although it was that as well. In Iceland, as Nanna Rógnvaldardóttir notes in her historical cookbook, salt could not be used for preserving fish or meat after the earliest settlement period because it was impossible to produce enough of it for this purpose. This seems peculiar: Iceland is surrounded by salt water, and Norway, from where most of the Icelandic settlers came, had a long practice of fish-salting. But the scarcity of this basic foodstuff in Iceland was linked to a scarcity in nature and landscape. Iceland quickly became deforested by the early settlers (starting already around 870, and probably becoming critical by about 1350)[2] and the wood which they needed to boil saltwater to extract the crystals was in short supply. A scarcity of landscape was a food scarcity: even when the foodstuff was actually abundant, the land itself did not allow it to be used.[3]

Scarcity in the north was a predictable scarcity of a limited growing season for which one could prepare by pickling vegetables and preserving fruit, but at the same time it was also a scarcity that caught populations unawares. In some cases, this was because of rapid environmental change, as during the medieval settlement period in Iceland. Other travelers, such as the nineteenth-century Arctic whalers whom I discuss later

1 It is a trope which still exists to some degree: as an interesting example, see Judith Schalansky, *Atlas der abgelegenen Inseln* ["Atlas of Remote Islands"] (Hamburg: marevelag, 2009), whose introduction is titled, "Paradise is an island. So is hell."

2 According to Jesse Byock, *Viking Age Iceland* (New York: Penguin, 2001), Icelandic birch forests had disappeared by the mid-1300s (58–59).

3 Nanna Rógnvaldardóttir, "A Short History of Icelandic Food and Cooking," in *Icelandic Food and Cookery* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 2002), 2. I have addressed the question of the "landscape deficiencies" of Iceland in more detail in my book *Iceland Imagined: Nature, Culture, and Storytelling in the North Atlantic* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011).

in this article, could be surprised by a remarkably cold winter during which even the Inuit could not catch fox and caribou.

Adapting, Substituting, Economizing

Especially during and after the eighteenth century, when discussions of improvement of a country's resources began to play an important role in the discourse of the state bureaucracy in northern Europe, ideas of how to prepare for or to prevent scarcity circulated widely, often concluding with remarks about the causes of hunger and want: did the responsibility for conditions lie with the government or with individuals? Danish officials often blamed Icelandic farmers for not undertaking repairs of their fences, which led to erosion of pastures by sheep grazing, while the housewives were urged to avoid waste in the kitchen and collect seaweed to use in cooking.

When scarcity was discussed within individual households, officials often referenced the key role of women as household managers in conserving resources and finding enterprising new ways to reduce hunger. In this, these ordinary housewives were certainly challenged by the circumstances of the North: what there is not is a constant refrain in travelers' accounts of the North Atlantic, regardless of whether the writers came from the United States, Germany, England, or even from continental Scandinavia. While the Icelanders surely had some things in common with the Danes, Swedes, and Norwegians, there was still nothing in those countries that was going to prepare you for the shock of North Atlantic food and nature. Here, one was forced to live on sheep heads and rotten shark, and no other vegetables besides cabbage. As Henry Holland, a British medical student who accompanied the Scottish mineralogist George Steuart Mackenzie on his expedition to Iceland in 1810, wrote: "They have little good turf and no good potatoes—they live amidst all the asperities of soil and climate—the face of nature is everywhere to them dreary and desolate."[4]

But at the same time that the North Atlantic dictated a particular scarcity, it offered a particular abundance. If the traveler were to remain in this distant colonial province for a bit longer than the average European gentleman on Sir Joseph Banks's version of

4 Henry Holland, *The Icelandic Journal of Henry Holland*, ed. Andrew Wawn (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1987), 32.

the "Grand Tour," one could find something to compensate for what was missing, as illustrated in the notes of Gytha Thorlacius, the wife of Theodorus Thorlacius, a Danish sheriff in Iceland, in the years between 1801 and 1815. She missed "Danish bread," i.e., wheat bread (wheat was imported to Iceland at this time and was quite expensive), and had to make do with "Icelandic bread" made from rye or barley. In fact, the staple more usually eaten in Icelandic households at the time was not bread, but dried fish spread with butter.[5] On the other hand, she remarked that "all Icelandic root vegetables are much higher quality than those in Denmark. Kohlrabi weigh here 4–5 pounds; when you cut them, the juice runs out freely."[6] In fact, Gytha admires "Icelandic food" enough that she resolves to compose her and the children's diet entirely from it, although she reserves "Danish food" for her husband's meals. In doing so, she reverts to the perhaps more common nineteenth-century Danish impression of Iceland as a place of scarcity, with the household divided between women and children who can survive this scarcity, and the husband whose status entitles him to whatever abundance can be found. She also points out how economical it is to run a household on local rather than imported food. While the North Atlantic is marked by scarcity of most fundamental basics of life—bread and salt—it offers some exotic foodstuffs to compensate. A twentieth-century American housewife in Iceland, Amalia Líndal, remarked that it was difficult in her first years in the country to learn to think of horse and whale meat as ordinary foods.[7] Even after she has accepted horsemeat herself as a substitute for beef, she passes it off as corned beef to her visiting mother in order to make it more palatable.

Starving amidst Plenty

This theme of contrasting scarcity and plenty persists further north, with even more dramatic consequences. For European and American whalers, Greenland is a land without trees and without bread, yet rich in exotic and profitable goods such as polar bear furs, sealskins, and whale oil. Emphasizing the plentitude of the Arctic, the Canadian polar

5 There was, however, an Icelandic upper class at this time who could afford special order luxury goods such as almonds, lemons and other fruits, and flour for baking from Copenhagen, as Hrefna Róbertsdóttir demonstrates in her "Munaðarvara og matarmenning: Pöntunarvara árið 1784," *Saga: Tímarit Sögufélags* 50, no. 2 (2012): 70–111.

6 *Fru Gytha Thorlacuius' Erindringer fra Island*, ed. Harald Prytz (Copenhagen: Levin and Munksgaard, 1930), 28–29. My translation. History has not been very kind to Mrs. Thorlacuius's memoirs. The original manuscript was destroyed in a fire in 1881, and the only copy of it that survives is a summary interspersed with comments made by her son-in-law, Victor Bloch, from the original in 1845. Since Victor places the text which I have cited above in one of his many sets of quotation marks, we can feel confident enough in understanding it as the author's own words, but obviously many more of her observations did not survive.

7 Amalia Líndal, *Ripples from Iceland* (Akureyri: Bókaforlag Odds Björnssonar, 1988), 45.

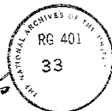
explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson looked back with contempt from the perspective of the past one hundred years of polar discovery on the mid-nineteenth-century explorer Sir John Franklin and his party of more than a hundred, which had "contrived to die to the last man, apparently from hunger and malnutrition" in a place of such abundance of animal life, where the Inuit had "been living for generations, bringing up their children, taking care of their aged."[8] Franklin and other British gentlemen explorers had failed to use dogsleds, taken canned goods instead of killing seals and their own dogs for meat, and dressed in European rather than Inuit clothing. It was the explorers, rather than the environment itself, who had created the scarcity. Vilhjalmur re-imagined the Arctic environment as a "friendly" one that only kills travelers who are too stupid to take advantage of the cornucopia around them.

As he so often did, Stefansson was provocatively overstating his case about the abundance of the Arctic. The Arctic was only fruitful when it was not desolate, and both Inuit and foreign explorers often starved and died there. The Arctic journals of nineteenth-century whaling captains in northern Canada like George Joseph Parker from the *Orray Taft* often report meeting Inuit who were on the verge of starvation when they came to the American whaling boats looking for food and work. On 10 March 1873, nearing the end of a very long winter, Parker wrote in the ship's logbook that the natives had come, but only to say that they were starving, five of them had died, and they could not do any hunting to help the ship's crew: "our wants are great for meat, meat, meat."[9] Their arrival in this condition was a grave disappointment, as Parker had waited all winter long hoping for the Inuit come and help him feed his men, who were sick, dying, and on the verge of mutiny. Parker survived the ordeal with skill, courage, and extraordinary luck, but hunger and death were conditions of equal opportunity in the Arctic. Other whalers in similar situations starved and died, and their deaths marked the Arctic in the popular nineteenth-century American imagination as a place of hunger and want. The disaster year of American whaling was 1871, when 40 whaling ships left San Francisco and New Bedford and 33 of them were lost. Amazingly, all the sailors were rescued that year, but five years later the Arctic claimed 12 American ships and more than 50 lives.[10] Such disasters of hunger and suffer-

8 Vilhjalmur Stefansson, "The Lost Franklin Expedition," in *Unsolved Mysteries of the Arctic* (Freeport, New York: Books for Libraries Press Reprint, 1972), 36. For more of Stefansson's views on living in polar environments, see also his *The Friendly Arctic: The Story of Five Years in Polar Regions* (New York: Macmillan, 1943).
9 *Orray Taft*, logbook no. 400, New Bedford Whaling Museum and Library collection, New Bedford, MA, p. 31. The *Orray Taft* was in a particularly bad way, having struck rocks and filled with water only six weeks into the voyage on 14 September 1872. Parker was trying to overwinter in the Hudson Bay with hungry and mutinous men; he ultimately survived and returned to New Bedford in August 1873.
10 Eric Jay Dolin, *Leviathan: A History of Whaling in America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 350 –52.

ing and the dramatic newspaper stories written about them, however, actually result from the lure of the Arctic as a place of abundance: these sailors were only in polar latitudes in the first place because they believed the Arctic to be a land of plenty where they would get rich from catching whales and selling their oil (fig. 1).

Rough Estimate



Item	Cost
Charter of vessel for 15 months	$1,500.
Fitting out of Men for cruise	1,500.
25,000 Gallons of Casks	1,000.
Boats and Whaling-gear	1,000.
Bread	480.
Flour	250.
Pork	600.
Oat and Indian meal	60.
Coffee	125.
Tea	52.
Sugar	48.
Molasses	150.
Butter	100.
Whiskey	120.
Coal	75.
Tobacco, out of bond.	100.
Guns, Knives and Saws, for trade.	400.
Probable incidental expenses	400.
Total	$8,135.

Fifteen (15) men is all that would be necessary and should be shipped on a lay "Catch nothing, get nothing".

Very Respectfully &c Geo. E. Tyson

Figure 1: Arctic necessities: Captain George E. Tyson's cost estimate for supplies for an Arctic whaling crew. The United States National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland, Record Group 33, 401. The draft is undated but Tyson sailed in the 1860s–1880s.

Regulating Scarcity

In the historical record, hunger, whether that of the whalers or the Inuit, exists and has always existed in the Arctic. Scarcity, on the other hand, has to be created. Scarcity is not what exists, but what is perceived to be missing—for example, wheat bread by the family of a Danish official in Iceland—and often in the history of the Arctic this scarcity is a part of an apparatus of colonialism and a piece of imperial dynamics. It is a type of deficiency which calls on a state administration for action. Looking at the Danish state in Greenland, Thorkild Kjærgaard has recently and provocatively made use of scarcity and plenty as part of his salvo into a contemporary political conundrum. He argues that Greenland was not a Danish colony, but rather an equal part of the kingdom.[11] Among other reasons, he points to the fact that in the eighteenth century, exotic foodstuffs such as coffee, tea, and sugar were imported to Greenland as well as to the rest of the kingdom, so that the Greenlandic diet was more varied under Copenhagen's rule than it had been before their arrival. Under state management in the nineteenth century, he continues, there was little food scarcity and nutrition levels generally improved because of the presence of the state monopoly trading company and the provisions which it made for the Greenlandic hunters in their employ. In addition to luxury items, wheat bread and biscuits were rationed out by the monopoly company, and hunters who performed well were permitted to buy more coffee and sugar than was included in their usual ration allowances.[12] For Kjærgaard, this counts as evidence that Greenlanders were treated fairly and equally by the paternalistic Danish state which in all parts of its kingdom sought a high degree of control and regulation over the lives of its subjects in issues ranging from marriage to land cultivation.

While we could turn this claim on its head and argue that if the Greenlandic diet became Europeanized in the nineteenth century, this is evidence for a form of Danish cultural colonialism in Greenland, not against it, it seems more useful to place the proposition itself in historical context. "Scarcity" should not be understood as a description of physical or environmental conditions per se. It was a word that would have had very different meanings for Stefansson and for the American arctic explorer Charles Francis Hall, who admitted that he "considered some 'civilization food' [i.e.,

11 Thorkild Kjærgaard, "Landsmænd," *Politiken*, 13 January 2014, 10–11.
12 See Inge Høst Seidling, "Married to the Daughters of the Country: Intermarriage and Intimacy in Northwest Greenland, ca. 1750–1850," unpublished PhD dissertation in History, University of Nuuk, Greenland, 2013, for a discussion of Greenlandic household arrangements.

Figure 2: After the end of the monopoly trade: capitalism and abundance in Nuuk, Greenland, May 2013. The first shopping mall in Greenland is Nuuk Center. Built in 2012, it has a grocery store which sells pineapples, oranges, and whale blubber in addition to gift shops and clothing and toy stores.

supplies from a home port] as almost a necessity."[13] That certain foods were scarce did not mean that others were not abundant, just as a landscape that lacked trees might feature volcanoes and icebergs. Arctic scarcity, unlike Arctic hunger, did not exclude an abundance of oil and whales found there. Deficiency and scarcity are conditions of dependencies; they require improvement and action on the part of central authorities. James Vernon argues in his *Hunger: A Modern History* that in nineteenth-century Ireland and India, "famine came to represent the inhumanity and incompetence of British rule: the British had promised free trade, prosperity, and civilization; they had delivered famine and pestilence."[14] The Royal Danish Monopoly Trade in Greenland had promised to bring economic stability and it by and large did so, as Kjærgaard argues. The reduction of starvation and the presence of "civilization" was the reason why the company, with all of its attendant regulations on marriage, church attendance, family life, and so on, remained there and continued to exercise profound control over Inuit social and economic life until the end of its monopoly privileges in 1950 (fig. 2).

To say that food scarcities are part of an apparatus of colonialism is not to imply that they do not really exist, of course. They have existed to large degrees in the Arctic, and not exclusively in modern times either. They can, however, easily be employed in arguments for or against certain types of political power. When those in power are

13 *Narrative of the Second Arctic Expedition Made* by Charles F. Hall, ed. by J. E. Nourse (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1879), 142.
14 James Vernon, *Hunger: A Modern History* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007), 42.

not blaming the farmers and peasants directly or indirectly for their incompetence in repairing fences or growing potatoes, they are crediting themselves for any improvements or abundance in these areas, which can then be used as an argument for the continuance of the administration which has brought these improvements. Those without power, on the other hand, are likely to view the abundance of potatoes or fences with distrust and skepticism, and fault the authorities for not providing enough bullets or fishing equipment (all of these items were actually sources for these discussions in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century North Atlantic). Scarcity and abundance only exist in relationship with each other, and, in seemingly contradictory ways, both can exist in the same place at the same time.

Suggested Reading

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