

‘Inuit in Church’: Clearing Photographic Misattribution

by WILLIAM C. JAMES

The recent exhibition of the still photography of Robert Flaherty, better known of course as a pioneer in documentary films, is remarkable for a number of reasons and, if an article in the *Canadian Forum*¹ is an indication, has the capacity to engender controversy. Shown in Vancouver, New York, and Ottawa, the exhibition consists primarily of portraits of Inuit in the eastern sub-arctic, around the time of the First World War. These portraits immediately remind one of Edward Curtis' photographs of Indians, a comparison which Mrs. Flaherty made during a 1915 visit to New York (with decided preference for her husband's work). The exhibition has been accompanied by the publication of a substantial catalogue, replete with essays on various aspects of Flaherty's life and work, as well as a significant article on early Arctic photography reprinted from *The Archivist*.²

One of the photographs (Cat. No. 69) in the section entitled "Documents (1910-1921)" features an Inuit congregation in a church and is given a special prominence in the catalogue, appearing opposite the "Foreword." Twice within the catalogue this photograph is mentioned as being unique within the Flaherty canon because it "is perhaps the only photograph which comes close to an overt political statement" and because of its "political connotations."³ It is offered as a demonstration of Flaherty's awareness that the Inuit were undergoing significant cultural changes, and is considered among several other photographs which "shatter any myth of his naivety." Such an interpretation gains special force from the fact that the members of the Inuit congregation are seated beneath a sign affixed to the rear of the church which bears the words of John the Baptist's admonition: "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand." Many people viewing this photo as exhibited and published will undoubtedly find it to sum up much that is lamentable in Christian missionary endeavours among Canada's native peoples.

1 Peter Wollheim, "Robert Flaherty's Inuit Photographs," *Canadian Forum*, (November 1980): 12-14.

2 Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker, ed., *Robert Flaherty, Photographer/Filmmaker: The Inuit 1910-1922* (Vancouver, 1979).

3 *Ibid.*, p. 25 and p. 88. The same photograph and statements are to be found in the Summer 1980 issue of the journal *Studies in Visual Communication* which was devoted to an examination of Flaherty's early career. See Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker, "Robert Flaherty/Photographer," *Studies in Visual Communication* 6, no. 2 (1980): 11-13.

This particular photograph, however, can no longer be used as a basis for an interpretation of Flaherty's photographic art because evidence has now come to light which proves beyond any doubt that it could not have been made by him. While there may still be some question as to who the photographer actually was, the location of the church may now be definitely specified. Furthermore, the photograph as exhibited is made from a glass lantern slide (not the "original glass plate" as the "Exhibition Index" states) held in the collection at the Robert and Frances Flaherty Study Center in Claremont, California. This lantern slide (and therefore the exhibited photograph) is not identical with the original negative (a fact which raises some intriguing questions). And this photograph may be set in the context of several others of the same interior — one of them actually by Flaherty — taken over the span of about a decade.

For about the past year, the author has been doing research into the life and work of a Canadian photographer, A.A. Chesterfield (1877-1959), many of whose photographs are housed in the Queen's University Archives. While employed by the Hudson's Bay Company in the old District of Ungava from 1902-04 Chesterfield made about two hundred photographs, many of them portraits of native people, at Fort George and Great Whale River, the location of much of Flaherty's work ten or more years later. In September 1980 Mrs. Chesterfield, the photographer's widow, provided a vintage photograph of Inuit people in a church along with a number of other items for deposit in the Queen's University Archives. This photograph, printed herewith, is identical to the one in the Flaherty exhibition, except that it includes more than a dozen members of the congregation, seated on the left, who are cropped out of the lantern slide from which the photograph attributed to Flaherty was made. Initially this photograph, obviously more representative of the original negative than the lantern slide is, suggested that by some means Flaherty had been in possession of a photograph by Chesterfield (or Chesterfield of one by Flaherty).

A few months later, the author discovered at the General Synod Archives of the Anglican Church of Canada in Toronto that the "larger" photograph exactly as provided by Mrs. Chesterfield had appeared in July 1903, though without any attribution, in a kind of newsletter describing activities of Anglican missionaries in the Canadian north, and published by the Church Missionary Society.⁴ The publication of this photograph, then, occurred when Flaherty was still in his teens, some years earlier than any of his surviving photographs, and more than seven years before he first arrived at Great Whale River in December 1910. This evidence proves conclusively that the photograph is not Flaherty's and strongly suggests that it is, after all, by Chesterfield (who was at Great Whale River during this period). Further, the caption for the photograph as published, "Eskimos in Church at Whale River," pinpoints the site of the church. Two sources had erroneously suggested to the editor of the catalogue, Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker, that Lake Harbour on Baffin Island was a likely location.

4 *Keewatin and Moosonee Mailbag* 3, No. 3 (1903): 51.



The cropped photograph in the Flaherty exhibition cuts off all but the edge of a second sign with a scriptural quotation. This sign, hanging to the left of the door at the rear of the church, offsets the harshness of the injunction to repentance with the gentler invitation in Jesus' words: "Suffer little children to come unto me and forbid them not." The apparent "political connotations" of the picture attributed to Flaherty are softened somewhat by this missing motto. As indicated in the "Exhibition Index" at the back of the catalogue, a photograph similar to Cat. No. 69 was published in the *Canadian Courier* (28 October 1911) with the notation "photograph copyrighted by R.J. Flaherty." In the *Courier* photograph, the interior is obviously of the same church although, even with the entire rear wall in view, only the single sign with the admonition to repentance appears. Presumably the second sign had been removed from the church by this time. Did Flaherty then crop the Chesterfield photo to make it more nearly correspond to his own as published in the *Canadian Courier*? With its attribution to Flaherty, more attention might have been paid to the *Courier* photograph (though apparently no copy of it exists among the 1500 items in the Flaherty collection at Claremont, California). Not only could it serve as the basis for the same kind of interpretative judgments as are made regarding the Chesterfield photograph, but the caption in the *Courier* provides a clue to the location: "a little church on the Ungava shore of Hudson's Bay" is appropriate to Great Whale River, though not to Lake Harbour.

Yet another photograph completes this remarkable sequence. The interior of the Great Whale River church (again with an Inuit congregation in attendance) was photographed in the summer of 1912 in the course of an expedition

up the east coast of Hudson Bay.⁵ By this time both signs, with their gospel verses as shown in the earlier photographs, have been replaced by what seem to be two posters with pictorial representations of scriptural scenes, of a type still to be found in Sunday School rooms. Clearly visible in this picture is the Inuk lay reader in charge of the service. One wonders what “political connotations” this photograph might have.

It seems clear, then, that the photograph of Inuit in church as exhibited can no longer be attributed to Flaherty. Further, on the basis of a survey of the Flaherty collection as copied and held for research purposes in the National Photography Collection of the Public Archives of Canada it appears that Flaherty was in possession of other photographs by Chesterfield for which, in one case at least, the glass plate negative is held in the Chesterfield Collection at Queen’s University. And, therefore, there is now new evidence to confirm the acknowledgment, made in the catalogue of the Flaherty exhibition, “that Flaherty collected as well as took photographs” (p. 83). How many photographs were collected by Flaherty, and from what sources, remains an uncertain matter.

5 See William Tees Curran, *In Canada’s Wonderful Northland* (New York, 1917), p. 217. The caption reads: “Eskimos at Service, Great Whale River.” It should be mentioned that at least partially visible in all these photographs is a third sign, this one with an inscription in Inuktitut, hanging over the door. A mural by two Inuit artists on the east wall of the present church at Great Whale River is perhaps indicative of the progressive indigenization of the mission there. The scene depicts Peter’s attempt to walk on the water, with Peter portrayed as an Inuk, and the location as Great Whale River itself. (The mural is featured in an article in a 1978 issue of *The Arctic News*, a publication of the Anglican Diocese of the Arctic, sent to the author by the Rev. Andrew Wetmore, the present incumbent of St. Edmund’s Anglican Parish, Great Whale River).

Résumé

Identifier des photographies est souvent une tâche très astreignante pour l’archiviste, et le résultat s’avère toujours loin d’être idéal. L’auteur démontre comment il a été à même de s’attaquer à un tel problème, impliquant le fameux photographe et réalisateur de films documentaires, Robert Flaherty.