

Pálsson, Gísli. 2003. *Travelling Passions: The Hidden Life of Vilhjalmur Stefansson*. Winnipeg, Canada: University of Manitoba Press. 374 pages.

As its subtitle suggests, Gísli Pálsson's *Travelling Passions* tells the story of a largely unknown part of Vilhjalmur Stefansson's life, his relationships with four women. Since it was a complex life and bridged two cultures, the chronology provided is useful. Given the focus of this book, it is not surprising that many aspects of his career, such as the disaster of the *Karluk*, are only touched upon. But the Endnotes provide the information needed to pursue a fuller understanding of this particular event. These Endnotes and the Bibliography are indeed especially valuable because Stefansson was such a controversial figure and his life and contributions have been assessed so differently.

Pálsson had had a long-standing interest in Stefansson's career, but it was his learning of "a bundle of private letters...that had, incredibly enough, recently turned up at a flea market near Hanover, New Hampshire" that gave him the impetus to undertake this book. These letters led him, in particular, to Stefansson's relationships with Orpha Cecil Smith, Pannigabluk, Fannie Hurst, and Evelyn Baird. Interestingly, each of these women corresponded to a stage in Stefansson's career: Smith—the Toronto part of his life prior to and at the beginning of the Arctic explorations; Pannigabluk—the Arctic explorations; Hurst—Greenwich Village and developing fame; Baird—New Hampshire and a settled academic life.

The book makes clear that Stefansson the man could not be separated from Stefansson the explorer. Stefansson's single-minded determination and even ruthlessness become apparent as Pálsson details his relationships. The most tragic of these is that with Orpha Cecil Smith. Even though she broke off their engagement and married someone else, she never stopped loving Stefansson and never loved her husband. Cecil's daughter is quoted as saying of her father that "On his deathbed he had said, in a sad voice, that he had fathered his two children 'by appointment'."

The most interesting and the most controversial of Stefansson's relationships is that with Pannigabluk. Though described as a seamstress and traveling companion, she was much more than that: language teacher, translator, negotiator, lover, wife and mother of his son. Much of the book is concerned with this relationship during Stefansson's time in the Arctic. But it goes beyond this period to explore as well its effects on his son Alex, and Stefansson's grandchildren by him. The clandestine seventeen-year relationship with Fannie Hurst is reduced to a single chapter with the result that it is largely summarized and one gains no

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real sense of its importance to him or the degree of intimacy that must have existed between the two. He married the twenty-seven year old Evelyn Baird when he was sixty-two; their marriage is given more space than is the Hurst relationship, but perhaps because it occurred during Stefansson's most conservative years and was the most public, it is also the least interesting.

It is the relationship of Stefansson with his Inupiat wife Pannigabluk that is most likely to engage the modern reader. Current cultural attitudes and a lack of historical knowledge mean that Pálsson must repeatedly explain and even defend Stefansson's choices. In doing so, he explains the Inupiat attitude toward the family, contrasting it with the Victorian values prevalent in Canada and United States at the time. Some readers will see this as the making of excuses, but Pálsson does a good job of creating the historic context for the ordinary reader. Stefansson's other relationships are more the stuff of everyday life. The fiancé neglected for a career, the clandestine affair, the stable marriage of an older man and a younger woman.

*Travelling Passions* is as much about the Stefansson's times and the differences that existed between various cultures he inhabited. Pálsson tells, for example, the stories of the dreadful effects of bringing northern people to live in the south. In particular, he focuses on Minik, one of six Greenlanders Stefansson convinced to go to the United States. Within six months five were dead. Minik survived only to become a lost man, at home neither in Greenland nor in New York. It was fear of this fate that may have urged Stefansson not to bring his son Alex to the south.

This is, ultimately, a book about ambition and its costs. The four women in Stefansson's life, his son Alex, Alex's children, Cecil's husband. They all, in some way, served his ambition or were affected by it. At age twenty, before his Arctic expeditions, he wrote a poem about the struggle between love and fame. "But if the prize of a woman's love/ Falls not on me or you,/ Let us hide the blight of a ruined life/ In a work that is strong and true." A premonition of what was to come or just a hard-headed realization that great things are never accomplished without a cost?

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