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Einar Mikkelsen (1880-1971)

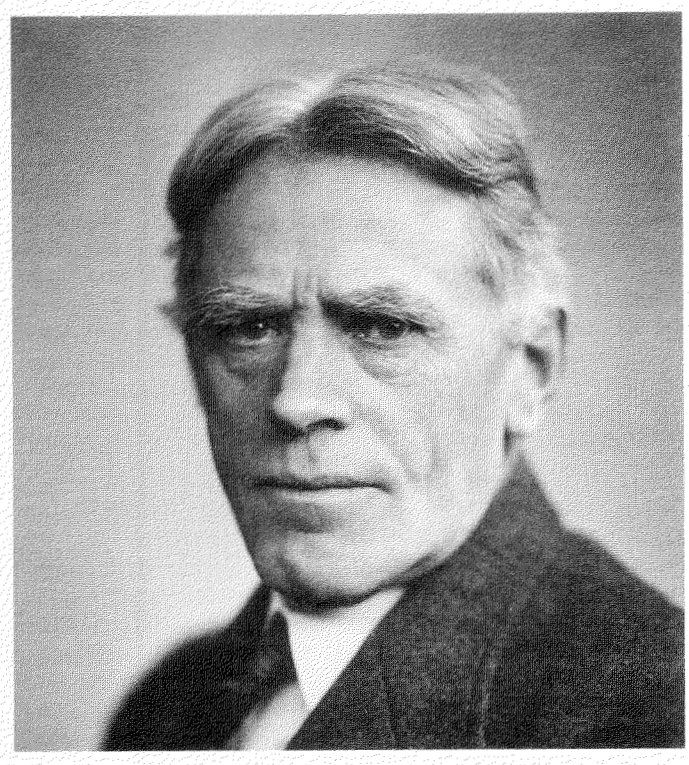
The concept of having or not having luck has always been a strong component of Scandinavian folklore. Luck more than anything else often determined the fate of mythical heros as portrayed by the old Norse storytellers. Not only was Erik the Red's son Leif the legendary founder of Norse settlements in Vinland and the bringer of Christianity to the Norse settlers in Greenland, he was also Leif the Lucky. Einar Mikkelsen, or Mikkel, as he was often called, would have been quite at home in the old Norse society. Exploring new lands and seeking tough challenges in the northern regions of the world was as much in Mikkel's blood as any Norseman could have wished for himself.

Mikkelsen was born in Denmark on 23 December 1880 and wasted little time expanding his horizons. Before the end of his fifth year he had already run away from home once. While he was still a child, the family moved to Copenhagen, where his father became a strong advocate of trade schools and the teaching of crafts in the regular school system. There can be little doubt that for his parents Mikkel must have been a handful to bring up. He disliked most everything about school and undoubtedly anything that smacked of confinement, rules and regulations. It is perhaps not surprising that geography was the only subject that interested him. For a young man with a great taste for the unknown that subject at least had something concrete to offer. When Mikkel turned thirteen his geography teacher left the school and so did he.

His favourite place was the busy harbour in Copenhagen, where ships from all over the world loaded and unloaded their exotic cargos before heading out on the high seas again. A last attempt to keep Mikkel in private school also failed and his father decided to send the young man to sea on the Danish school ship *Georg Stage*. Young Mikkel was finally in his rightful element and his parents, who seemed to have been remarkably supportive of their restless son, must have breathed a sigh of relief. Mikkel became a shipwright and was soon ready for his first deep-sea adventure. On board the three-masted bark *Emilie* he had his first encounter with icebergs.

For three years Mikkel worked on various ships in the oceans of the Far East, never losing sight of his dream to explore unknown lands. In 1896, the year Fridtjof Nansen and Hjalmar Johansen returned to civilization from their attempt to reach the North Pole, Mikkel travelled to Sweden in an attempt to enlist with Andree's Swedish Balloon Expedition (*Eagle*) destined for the North Pole. To his great dismay he was deemed too young for the expedition, and he returned home not knowing that Lady Luck was holding his hand — Andree and his two companions never returned from the Arctic. Thirty-three years would pass before remains of the expedition (and unexposed film) were found on Kvitoya near Svalbard.

It was with a little more enthusiasm that Mikkel enrolled in navigation school. Undoubtedly he could see that the only way to carve out a decent life at sea was to become captain of one's own vessel. But the school didn't slow down Mikkel's search for adventure, and he remained alert to any rumour of planned expeditions. In Norway, Nansen's famous captain from the polar ocean drift, Otto Sverdrup, was about to embark on a



Einar Mikkelsen.

multi-year expedition that would result in a Norwegian claim of sovereignty over Canada's High Arctic islands. Mikkel was quick to apply but Sverdrup could not be bothered with the eager young man. He was told that he was too young and that the expedition needed real men. The words must have stung and perhaps laid the foundation for a strong commitment in his later political battles with Norwegians in arctic matters.

Next he tried to get on with the Baron von Toll Expedition to the New Siberian Islands. Again the word was no and again the lady saved him. Several of the expedition members, including von Toll, disappeared somewhere in the frozen wastes, never to be seen again.

But persistence finally paid off for the twenty-year-old man. A Danish lieutenant by the name of Amdrup offered Mikkel an opportunity to join the East Greenland Expedition and he accepted without hesitation. The expedition's goal was to chart the rugged coastline between Scoresby Fiord and Angmagssalik on the east coast of Greenland. They could reflect on the sobering fact that a French expedition in the *Lilloise* under the command of Lieutenant Blosseville had attempted to chart the coast in 1832. The ship and its 82-man crew were never heard from again.

Amdrup's expedition was based on a very different approach. Instead of trying to force his way through the ice in a large ship, he and three men would use an 5.5-metre oak-planked boat, the *Agga II*, for the journey. Daringly the four men pushed, hauled and rowed their way south through fog, churning ice floes, icebergs and numerous bears during the 45-day journey. On an Inuit winter site, Nualik, they were shocked to discover all the 38 inhabitants of a large sod and stone house dead inside. Later the incident took on difficult

proportions when the expedition members reached Angmagssalik and were accused of killing the Nualik people. The accusations were laid to rest and the Amdrup expedition was deemed a great success.

Mikkel's appetite for adventure had really been whetted, and as soon as they returned from Greenland he began to investigate all avenues in search of other planned arctic expeditions. Finally word reached him of the proposed Baldwin-Ziegler Expedition and his application was mailed without hesitation. Not hearing from Baldwin, Mikkel gave up and travelled to Hamburg, where he was about to ship out on the *Alexandra*. Just as they were leaving the harbour he received a cable from Baldwin urging him to join the expedition. Mikkel barely managed to get off the ship. It was a lucky departure — the *Alexandra* went down, with the loss of most of her crew.

Baldwin's aim was seemingly straightforward. As a member of Peary's arctic expedition in 1893-94, he was now on his own quest to reach the North Pole. His financial support came from Ziegler, a German/American baking powder millionaire. With Amdrup, Mikkel had seen what a well-planned expedition was like; now he was to learn all about poor planning and its disastrous consequences. After countless mishaps en route to an unknown destination, Mikkel and seven others volunteered to spend the winter of 1901-02 in a small, comfortable cabin at Camp Ziegler on Alger Island, one of the many that make up Franz Josef Land. The increasingly unpopular Baldwin originally had planned to head south for the winter, much to the relief of the shore party. But that was not to be. By the time the ship got under way the ice already blocked any escape, and Baldwin and a very unhappy crew were forced to spend the winter on board *America*. The expedition was altogether an enormous failure and Mikkel was determined that next time he would set out on his own expedition. He also knew what his goal was going to be.

For many years there had been a persistent legend of a great unknown land in the polar sea beyond the north coast of Alaska. Mikkel was convinced that a search for this mythical land was a worthwhile challenge and set out in search of financial assistance. In 1905 he presented his plan to Sir Clements Markham, president of the Royal Geographic Society in England, and received support. As fate would have it, King Albert Edward's wife, Alexandra, was Danish and initially a great supporter of Mikkel's plans until he made the mistake of announcing publicly that if food became scarce he would not hesitate to eat his dogs. Luckily Mikkel's financial quest was far enough along that even without the queen's support he managed to get the necessary funding. He was aided in his quest by influential people such as Nansen and even Robert Peary, who was no doubt relieved to learn that the young man would not be encroaching on his territory in the eastern Arctic.

With sufficient funding, Mikkel headed for British Columbia in search of a vessel that would take the expedition to its destination on the north shore of Alaska. In Victoria harbour he found the *Beatrice*, a two-masted gaff-rigged schooner of 66 tons with a somewhat checkered reputation, having been involved with illegal hunting and smuggling activities in the Bering Sea. The ship was refurbished at Porter's shipyard and renamed *Duchess of Bedford* to give her a fresh start and her owner less trouble.

In those days Mikkel must have been one of very few people whose destination in Alaska was not the bustling gold fields. He was soon aware that keeping his crew from joining the great stampede to the gold fields would be his first big challenge. Even though he by-passed Nome and headed for Port Clarence, about 160 km farther north, four crew members still tried an unsuccessful escape, stopped mostly thanks to Captain Hamlet, of the U.S. Revenue Cutter *Thetis*. The men were later dropped off in Jabbertown near Point Hope.

Mikkel's next challenge was to squeeze his vessel between the shallow north coast and stranded pack ice until he reached Point Barrow. Here, in August 1906, a ship approached from the east and later in the day Godfred Hansen could tell him that the *Gjoa* had indeed made it through the Northwest Passage and that Amundsen had dashed off to the gold rush town of Eagle on the Yukon River to telegraph the message to the rest of the world.

On 17 August, Mikkel reached Flaxman Island, where the *Duchess* was iced in. The cold, dark winter months were spent making preparations for the journey to investigate the mysterious land to the north. Sachawachiak, a native from Flaxman Island, taught Mikkel and his companions the intricacy of dog sledge travel, and finally at the end of February a party of three departed in the bitter cold. For 60 days they struggled through treacherous ice fields, discovering nothing but ice and more ice until they were about 192 km north of the coast. The mythical land was nowhere to be seen and the exhausted party headed back to the Alaskan coast. Their depth soundings along the way did determine the extent of the Continental Shelf.

When they reached Flaxman Island they found that the *Duchess* had been crushed in the ice. The crew had erected a hut on land with her salvaged timbers and planks and the ship's name board had been hung over the door. For Mikkel it was not the last time his expedition ship was turned into a hut.

Now it was a matter of getting home to Denmark, and on 15 October he set out from Flaxman Island on a remarkable journey that would take him over 4000 km by sled and on foot to Valdez via Candle City, Nome and Fairbanks. When he tried to send a telegram from Candle City, an angry operator told him that his little joke was in bad taste: a newspaper story had circulated in Alaska to the effect that he and his party had perished on the ice. In Nome he became a guest of the city, was wined and dined and undoubtedly looked upon as a very unusual man. One merchant implored him to transport over $40 000 worth of gold to Seattle, which he did rather reluctantly — Mikkel must have had an honest face. A telegram from Nome to Fairbanks ensured similar royal treatment in that six-year-old town, with its population of over 6000. The trip itself was both dangerous and exhausting and very nearly cost him his life when the rising tide caught him on the ice foot along a precipitous part of the coast south of Nome.

Back in Denmark the Alaskan adventure received little notice, and Mikkel soon felt the urge to seek new challenges. News had reached Denmark of the tragic outcome of the Danmarks Expedition to Northeast Greenland. In 1908, Lauge Koch and Gabrielsen had launched a relief expedition to discover the fate of the missing expedition members, Mylius-Erichsen, Hoegh-Hagen and Bronlund. Only Bronlund's body had been found and the relief expedition nearly experienced a similar fate. Northeast Greenland was a tough place to explore.

Mikkelsen decided to organize another expedition in search of further evidence of the missing men. Members of the Alabama Expedition would be transported to Greenland on the

45-ton, single-masted, gaff-rigged vessel *Alabama* powered by a 16 HP diesel engine. On 20 June 1909, just over two months after Peary claimed the North Pole, the *Alabama* expedition departed from Hellerup harbour north of Copenhagen on its way to Iceland and Greenland.

For once Lady Luck left Mikkelsen's side. A large number of sled dogs transported to the Faroe Islands for transfer to the *Alabama* had to be destroyed; the replacement dogs obtained later in Angmagssalik were of poor quality; the *Alabama*'s engine was becoming totally unreliable and, as it turned out, so was the engineer. In Iceland they met up with the Danish inspection ship *Islands Falk*, whose captain offered one volunteer for the job. If Iver P. Iversen had known what was in store for him he would undoubtedly never have set foot on the *Alabama*.

Their difficulties were not over. In stormy weather with poor visibility Mikkelsen forced the *Alabama* through heavy pack ice, and although they made it the ship was badly bruised. Winter quarters were established on the northeast point of Shannon Island, at least 200 km south of the planned Danmarkshavn location. The more southerly location resulted in much longer sled journeys, an added hardship for both men and dogs. On 25 September Mikkelsen, with Iversen and Jorgensen, headed northward on a 1000 km sled journey. Problems with thin ice slowed them down and on 25 October the sun peaked over the horizon for the last time. On the 31st, guided by large numbers of fox tracks in the snow, they reached Bronlund's body, which they placed in a stone cairn. Terribly short of provisions, the return trip took on desperate proportions and began to resemble the previous search expedition. They made it back on 16 December but the trip cost Jorgensen five toes, amputated after he emptied half a bottle of whisky, the only anesthetic available.

Alabama in winter harbour, Northeast Greenland, 1901. Photo credit: Arktisk Institut.

Mikkelsen was eager to establish depots for the next northward thrust, and soon after the sun's return he and Iversen, supported by Laub, Bessel and Poulsen, headed north again. After 38 days, on 10 April 1910, the two men bid farewell to the support party; they had two sleds and 15 dogs. After an epic eight-month struggle during which they found two messages left by Mylius-Erichsen, they finally approached their home base on Shannon Island on 25 November. The trip back had been dreadfully tough, with hunger stalking them every step of the way. Mikkel very nearly died from scurvy and only Iversen's heroic efforts saved his life. They hallucinated from hunger and were forced to rest frequently. Along with constant hunger came depression and fear of another kind. Mikkel asked Iversen if he was afraid of being the one who carried the rifle; he replied that he was, but Mikkel insisted that he keep it just the same. On 15 August they had eaten their last dog, Grimrian, and about a month later they managed to reach Danmarkshavn Station, where they were saved by the cached food supplies. It is easy to imagine the two men's eagerness to meet up with their comrades. In the November darkness they thought their eyes were playing tricks with them — it looked like the ship was up on land. In a way it was, but like the *Duchess* before her, the *Alabama* had now been turned into a hut, a dark, lifeless hut. Their shouts went unanswered and the truth must have sunk into their consciousness rather reluctantly. They were still alone in the silent winter night looking at the name board of the *Alabama* nailed over the door.

The abandonment could not have been altogether surprising, since Mikkel had left orders for the men to return home if he and Iversen were not back by 15 August. After clearing most of the snow from the main hut and making the rough quarters as wind-tight as possible, they settled in. It was 25 November 1910. Since no coal had been saved from the crushed ship it was rarely possible for the two men to heat the hut above the freezing point. With only a dull saw at their disposal they only got really warm when they tried to saw the remaining ship timbers.

On the return trip they had cached their records as a precaution before crossing thin ice between them and the Danmarkshavn station. As soon as possible they constructed a sled light enough to haul, as they no longer had any dogs. In mid-March they left a message at the south point of Shannon Island and headed north. After a long, hard trip they reached their depot, to find that a bear had broken into it. In spite of the damage they salvaged most of the materials and returned to the hut. That trip took six weeks and when they returned they decided to leave the *Alabama* hut and head to one on the southeast point of Shannon Island. The weather was good, summer had arrived, their mission had been completed, the flag was raised and they felt certain that a relief ship would soon arrive. But the weeks dragged on and slowly hopes began to fade. There would be no rescue ship that year. Their lifeboat back at the *Alabama* hut was the *Agga II*, used during the Amdrup expedition, and Mikkel's thoughts frequently turned to a possible dash southward using the boat. But could two men handle the heavy boat?

They might not have needed to speculate along those lines. On 23 July rescue had been only 26 km to the south. On that day a Norwegian vessel had landed at Bass Rock looking for any signs of the two men. Mikkelsen and Iversen found the ship's message in the fall when they decided to move south to the Bass Rock huts, constructed as a retreat depot for the unhappy Baldwin-Ziegler Expedition he had known so well. It took a while for Mikkelsen to forgive himself for not having journeyed to Bass Rock early that spring to leave a message for just such an occasion.

The men reluctantly began to prepare for their third winter in East Greenland. For nearly two months they struggled with getting their supplies down to Bass Rock from Shannon Island. They hunted and stocked up as much food as they could catch. Game was not plentiful and starvation remained a close companion. An attempt to move the *Agga II* south proved that it was impossible for two men to handle the heavy boat.

They discussed everything imaginable, equally aware of the need to survive not only physically but also mentally as friends in a 3.6 m^2 room. It was difficult to find anything new to talk about until they discovered that by eating a bowl of porridge just before going to sleep they dreamt well, providing topics for the next day. When the sun finally returned their isolation had lasted 23 months. One more attempt was made to haul the boat, but to no avail. Every day that spring they climbed the cliffs behind the hut to look at the ice situation — neither of them daring to mention the word ship! Then on 19 July they heard rustling outside and reached for the rifle, thinking a bear was paying them a visit. The door was opened and astonished sailors nearly fled at the sight of the two men inside. Lillenaes, captain of the Norwegian sealer *Sjoblomsten*, had found their message at the *Alabama* winter harbour and had headed straight for Bass Rock. It was quite a meeting and for Mikkelsen and Iversen the eight-man crew seemed like an awful mass of people. It was a sensational return.

For Einar Mikkelsen there followed a long period with presentations and talks throughout Europe. As usual the hero was celebrated with greater enthusiasm abroad than at home, and in Denmark some of his observations about the tragic Danmarks Expedition were seen as criticisms. He was not awarded the Danish Royal Geographic gold medal as expected, and at the ceremonies unveiling a memorial to the Danmarks Expedition members Mikkelsen was missing from the gathering in spite of having brought important expedition records back from Greenland. The Danish government eventually granted Mikkelsen 1000 kr (about $150) for his troubles and Iversen 600 kr.

His reception in England was considerably more positive and included strong support from the Royal Geographic Society, whose president at the time was Sir Lewis Beaumont.

Mikkelsen married Naja Holm, daughter of Gustav Holm, who had led the famous Konebaads Expedition to the southeast coast of Greenland in 1884. With a family it was time to find a more steady occupation, and for a while he worked for the Danish East Asiatic Company. Unhappy in that position, he eventually obtained work as an insurance adjuster for the Baltica Merchant Insurance Company. Following the tragic death of his young wife in 1918, he married her cousin Ella, who provided strong support through his later undertakings in Greenland.

Mikkel was a good writer and published several novels and articles. He worked as a foreign correspondent covering, among other events, the war between the new Finland and the new Russia. Lessons in geography and his own keen observations came together in 1921 when a violent series of storms caused great damage at sea and on land in western Europe. Mikkel pressed his conviction that since most of the strong low-pressure systems moved eastward from Greenland towards Europe it would be possible, with the improvements in wireless transmissions technology, to transmit weather reports from East Greenland in time to prevent excessive damage from such storms before they hit Europe. In Denmark his suggestion met with considerable skepticism, although many voices were also raised in favour of the idea, especially outside Denmark.

Other important questions concerning Greenland loomed large on the horizon. At issue was Denmark's insistence on an official international declaration of sovereignty over all of Greenland. Unofficially, America and England had agreed to this for some time and on 16 June 1921 the International Court in the Hague made it official. Norway might not have objected too much had it not been for Danish insistence that its West Greenland trade monopoly be extended to East Greenland. The Norwegians had been sealing along the East Greenland coast for centuries and the Norwegian government declared the monopoly arrangement unacceptable. It was Mikkelsen's contention that the Norwegians usually hunted seals outside the Greenlandic territorial waters and that their activities within these waters were confined to limited sealing. In all of this he must have reflected on the fact that a Norwegian sealing captain saved his and Iversen's lives that desperate summer of 1912. In view of the Norwegian protests, Mikkelsen now vigorously pushed the idea of establishing colonies in East Greenland, an idea he and Iversen had often discussed during their involuntary stay in East Greenland. He teamed up with Harald Olrik, an assistant in the Greenlandic administration in West Greenland who viewed the proposed colonization as a way of reducing population numbers in West Greenland. The aim of the Olrik-Mikkelsen plan was to establish colonies in Scoresby Sound.

Although a resolution was declared in the Norwegian/Danish argument and a treaty was signed, it contained serious flaws. The most obvious was section 6, which basically stated that the Greenlanders could choose Norwegian or Danish sovereignty in particular regions. There was to be no Danish monopoly on the coast — hunting activities were open to Danes, Norwegians and Icelanders alike. It simply would be a race to see who first established their presence on the east coast of Greenland. In Denmark the Scoresbysund Committee was formed, headed by Vice-Admiral Wandel, who was assisted by Mikkelsen. In Norway Helge Ingstad was chosen to head the Norwegian claims in East Greenland.

The Danish government was not enthusiastic about the whole affair, fearful that colonization would cost too much. The committee continued to raise funds and eventually the government changed its mind but insisted on full control of the project. Mikkelsen didn't really object to that but insisted that speed was essential — time was short. It was agreed that he would head up the first stage of the colonization and immediately travel to Scoresby Sound to establish the colony. The West Greenland administration agreed to send 100 Greenlanders to the new colony the following year and Norway was informed that all this was in process, undoubtedly to take the wind out of their sails.

With the three-masted, 260-ton *Gronland* the colonization party left for Greenland. Three scientists were part of the expedition, geologist Thorkil Petersen (who died during the first winter), botanist Olaf Hagerup and zoologist Alwin Petersen. The *Gronland* came safely through the pack ice but then ran into serious trouble when fast-moving tidal currents squeezed the ship between large ice floes. For some time the ship was in great danger of being crushed and the rudder was badly damaged. From Denmark came the terse message that if a relief ship had to be dispatched the whole colonization business was over.

For Mikkelsen there was no choice; they would do what they came to do and worry about getting home when the time came. Equipment for three years was unloaded and houses were erected, not only for the main community but also for several small outposts. Six men would spend the winter in the new colony.

September arrived and the weather was changing. Skipper Nielsen had to somehow maneuver his rudderless ship through the pack ice and home using only sails and the engine. It was a formidable piece of seamanship. In one day alone over 800 maneuvers were recorded in the engine room log and some course changes were accomplished by carefully nudging the ship against ice floes. In Iceland an emergency rudder was rigged for the journey to Denmark. Initially they were assisted by another ship but the two vessels became separated in a bad storm and the *Gronland* continued on alone with its two red lanterns indicating that the ship was not under control. Eventually they arrived in Denmark and for once Mikkelsen brought back his expedition ship, even if it was badly damaged.

In Denmark there was still much opposition to the Scoresbysund plans. Much to his surprise Mikkelsen found that even his former friend Peter Freuchen had turned against him. The government took over and once again Mikkelsen found himself out of favour. Not only did he find himself excluded from any further work in Scoresby Sound, but all access to Greenland seemed blocked. It was obvious that he had made powerful enemies, including Daugaard-Jensen, director of the Greenlandic Administration.

In July 1931 the Norwegians used clause 6 and took possession of North Greenland. For the Danes, expansion and settlement were now essential, particularly between Angmagssalik and Scoresby Sound. The Norwegian claims pushed the Danish government into action and Mikkelsen was chosen to lead a scientific expedition along the coast he had travelled with Amdrup in the *Agga II* 32 years before.

It was an extraordinary year. To the south Knud Rasmussen set out on the seventh Thule Expedition to investigate the coast between Kap Farvel and Angmagssalik; to the north Lauge Koch set out on a three-year expedition to research and map the coast between Scoresby Sound and Danmarkshavn. Denmark was obviously taking no chances with the Norwegians. Norway decided to occupy a second stretch of coast. The issue was referred once again to the Court in the Hague and this time, on 5 April 1933, the decision favoured Denmark, declaring the Norwegian occupation illegal. The Danish government could have little doubt that the establishment of colonies in Angmagssalik in 1894 and Mikkelsen's work to set up the Scoresbysund colony in 1925 provided the basic position for the Danish victory. Mikkelsen was appointed to the post of inspector for East Greenland in 1934, the same year he received the gold medal from the Royal Geographic Society in London. In 1937 he and Ella spent a year together in Angmagssalik.

With the German occupation of Denmark on 9 April 1940, Greenland was isolated. The United States was asked to help and for five years provided the only lifeline to Greenland through its military forces. For years Mikkelsen tried to get out of occupied Denmark, but not until 1944, when he apparently was about to be arrested by the Gestapo for underground activities, did he and Ella escape to neutral Sweden. Here Ella had to remain while Mikkel eventually managed to get to the United States. The news from Greenland was much better than he had hoped for and finally, early in 1945, he managed to get there himself. Not surprisingly he arrived in a very different Greenland, in some ways a more lively and prosperous Greenland. The American influence had been both positive and negative and in his heart he knew there could be no turning back. He managed to get to East Greenland before heading home, a year and a half after he had left Ella in Sweden.

At the age of 65 he continued his efforts to provide the Greenlanders with some protection between the old and the new worlds — as much as that was still possible. In 1950 he stepped down officially from his post but continued to remain actively involved for nearly twenty more years. He was one of the principal founders of the Danish Arktisk Institut and served on the publications committee of the Arctic Institute of North America throughout the 1950s. His last visit to Scoresbysund took place in the summer of 1964 with great festivities and celebrations as he, the founder, was made an honorary resident of the colony. He attended the opening of "Mikis house," a communal gathering house and work place for the whole district.

Mikkelsen was totally aware of how difficult it would be for the Greenlanders to create a workable amalgamation of the Western and the traditional worlds. He understood as well as anyone that only by living in reasonably small settlements spread out on the land could the people continue to maintain most of the old hunting way of life. He knew that the land could not sustain the concentration of large numbers of people, that the hunting pressure would be too great. He could probably also sense that the future would not favour his vision of freedom. At the age of 85 he wrote, "You won't live like Danes but you will live like free people." He died on 1 May 1971, at the age of 91.

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