

Franz Boas (1858-1942)

A desire to delve into “the simple relationships between man and land” among the Baffin Island Inuit was the ambitious goal of a 25-year-old German scientist who left Hamburg aboard the *Germania* on 20 June 1883. The schooner was bound for Kingua Fjord in Cumberland Sound, where the young German would stay for a year, the *Germania* herself returning home with the German scientific team of the First International Polar Year 1882/83. That voyage — one hundred years ago — marked the beginning of intensive and innovative field work on Inuit geographical perception, social and economic organization, and religious beliefs. In retrospect, this research was also the pivot of an extraordinary scientific career of an influential and farsighted man who shaped modern anthropology in North America — Franz Boas. All his life Boas encouraged rigorous scientific work and international cooperation; moreover, as a conscientious citizen and scientist, he energetically fought cultural and racial prejudices, the implications of which he was keenly aware, having been exposed to them as a Jew in his homeland of Germany. His arctic endeavours, although only a small part of his scientific work, not only advanced the discipline of anthropology in general, but contributed immensely to our knowledge of man-land relations and Inuit culture in the Canadian North.

Born and raised in Minden, Westfalen, Germany, Franz Boas studied natural sciences and philosophy in Heidelberg, Bonn, and Kiel, where he took his doctorate in physics in 1881, writing on the perception of the colour of the water in the Bay of Kiel. His dissertation clearly reflected his interests in geography and philosophy, disciplines in which he took minors. His curiosity about the Inuit and their arctic environment grew out of the question of how environmental influences on human behaviour affect spatial distribution. The favourable atmosphere of international research cooperation, which began in Germany and other European countries in the 1860s and culminated in the International Polar Year 1882/83, encouraged his plans for field work that was to move away from simple geographical exploration of uncharted lands and toward an integrated study of both physical and cultural systems in a particular area.

The German Polar Commission helped Boas reach Baffin Island in September 1883, but for the next year he relied only on Inuit, on whalers, and on himself, single-handedly organizing his geographical and anthropological work. Covering nearly 4000 km on foot, by sled, and by boat, Boas showed no signs of physical fatigue, always pushing himself to the very

limit. He vigorously pursued his scientific goals but never neglected to ask for local advice and to adjust to unforeseen circumstances, such as when canine disease left him without dogs for long stretches. With simple instruments he charted the configurations of Cumberland Sound and the east coast of Baffin Island, producing a map that served as a reference into the twentieth century.

His relationship with the Inuit was based on mutual respect and appreciation, evident in his sole use of native place-names and in his criticism of explorers and whalers, who arrogantly and whimsically assigned European names, thus creating a never-ending confusion. His dedication to the people and their culture was dictated not by a romantic perception of the “native”, but rather by the urgent feeling that as much as possible of the cultural tradition of the Inuit must be preserved, an approach he followed in his later work among the Northwest Coast Indians and instilled in his students. The enormous body of information on Inuit culture, so valuable to today’s Inuit, found its way into two major English publications that still retain their immediacy and are accepted source books.

After his field work on Baffin Island Boas returned to Berlin University, where he qualified as *Privatdozent* (university professor) in Geography in 1886 by writing a treatise on his Baffin Island work. His urge to continue field research among the Indians of North America led him to the Northwest Coast, his area of study for the rest of his life. His own research interests, the academic quarrels and anti-semitism in Germany, and personal ties in the United States strengthened his conviction to seek a career in America. After holding various positions (e.g. Clark University, Chicago World Exhibit, and American Natural History Museum) he found his academic home at Columbia University in 1896, where he remained until his retirement in 1936. Here he institutionalized and promoted anthropology as an accepted field of inquiry. He became a leader in the study of race, culture, and language and stimulated new research frontiers in physical anthropology, linguistics, and folklore. Very quickly rising to prominence, Boas established numerous anthropological associations, journals, and congresses.

Even though his achievements were not always accepted uncritically, he has remained one of the great anthropologists of our time. The centennial of his arctic year will present an opportunity to review the achievements of an exceptional man who preserved invaluable parts of Inuit culture which would have been lost without his perseverance.



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