

Pitseolak's People

A. DUDLEY COPLAND

People from Our Side, Peter Pitseolak. Transl. Ann Hanson. Hurtig Publishers, Edmonton, 1975. 166 pp. \$12.50 cloth, \$8.95 paper.

Four hundred years ago the first contact between Europeans and the Baffin Land Eskimo people took place. Since that time, almost everything that has been written about this interesting country and its remarkable people has come from "our side". This trend is being reversed. Peter Pitseolak, a highly gifted Eskimo, took the time to record his thoughts about his people and a way of life that has, unfortunately, gone forever. The photographic illustrations were selected from over one thousand negatives from Pitseolak's own collection.

Peter Pitseolak (phonetically "peach-oo-lak") devoted the last year of his life--he died in 1973 at the age of 71--to recording, in syllabic writing and in several hours of interviews with the editor, his thoughts and memories from his early years and what he considered the difficult years of transition. Pitseolak was one of a family of eight children by the third wife of his father Inukjuarjuk, who during his lifetime had four wives and sired sixteen children. His grandfather, Etidluie, had travelled extensively in Baffin Island and along the north shore of Arctic Quebec as far as Fort Chimo where he was employed for a few years by the Hudson's Bay Company.

Before the syllabic form of writing was introduced to the Eskimo by missionaries, events and stories were passed down by word of mouth, very often in song. This method had its weaknesses, since it was possible that much could be gained or lost in the telling. Many of the legends and fables differ very little throughout the north, the story of the Sea Goddess, and of creation, and many others must have originated during the epic migrations of this remarkable race.

Many of Pitseolak's stories go back to the years before his birth and deal with the spell which the Angnacock, or Shaman, had over his people, their superstitious belief in the powers of "worship" stones, which were often given gifts, and of the almost reverent kneeling on reaching shore, a custom so universal that it must also have originated in ancient times.

He is on surer grounds when he writes of what he was told by men who lived at the time of certain events, such as when the whaling ship *Seduisante* disappeared in a blinding snowstorm in 1911 off Nottingham Island with the loss of all hands. Kingwatcheak, an Eskimo who spent the winter in Scotland as a member of the whaler *Active* crew, and not in London as the narrative states, gave him an accurate account of what

Pitseolak calls the "Tooniks", the ancestors of the present day Eskimo, who were really members of an older culture which had survived on Southampton Island until approximately 1902. With the exception of three small children who survived and were adopted by other Eskimo, they were wiped out by an epidemic brought by a whaling ship. Having often visited the site of the stone age village on Southampton Island, and listened to the stories told by a man who served on the *Active* along with Kingwatcheak, I know Pitseolak's account to be accurate in every detail.

I came to know Pitseolak in the late 1920s and was impressed by his intelligence and pleasing personality. It was no surprise to me to learn that, in later years, he took to photography. He was extremely adaptable and open to new ideas, while at the same time he valued all that was good in the past. It is not surprising that the translator, Ann Hanson, was impressed with "the beautiful sentences" because Pitseolak, although he lacked any formal education, admired the old story-tellers and apparently inherited their gift of language.

People From Our Side is a moving document. It tells of the care-free days when food was plentiful and the people gathered together in the summer camps to enjoy the rich bounty of the sea and the companionship of relatives and friends. In the old life style, hampered by lack of boats, it was necessary to live in larger camps in order to pool their hunting talents.

With the arrival of the fur-traders, things began to change. To reap the full benefits of trapping, the people had to spread out in order to cover a larger territory, Pitseolak states that his people were not then free to move as they wished from settlement to settlement. This is not entirely correct. Quite often a family would decide to move for some trivial reason, leaving behind its meat caches to become dependent on others. This was certainly discouraged by the traders and Pitseolak only records one case when a man was ordered back to his home in Arctic Quebec.

The narrative records in surprising detail the many changes that took place, the coming and going of traders and missionaries, and there is evidence that the editor did considerable research to ensure accuracy as to names and dates and the occurrence of special events. I find few mistakes relating to this period, though I would suggest that the Bowhead whale, and not the Blue Whale, which is not seen this far north, was what the whalers sought. There is also a slight misunderstanding about the experiment with reindeer at Kamadjuak [Amadjuak]. This was entirely a Hudson's Bay Company venture, planned and executed from London and sadly mismanaged in the north.

In the final chapter of the book, "Modern Times", Pitseolak recalls the story he heard of the predictions of the Shaman Ohotok. His parents told him that the sorcerer had a vision of a red flag flying at Cape Dorset, and smoke issuing from people's mouths, sure indicators that one day many white people would arrive in Cape Dorset. He then goes on to relate the joy people experienced on the arrival of the Hudson's Bay Company supply ship *Nascopie*. Then the government people began to arrive, camps were closed and the people herded into permanent

communities. Education and the development of the arts became more important than hunting.

In the last few pages of the narrative, Peter Pitseolak, this unique, intelligent chronicler, makes his assessment of the old ways and the new. He deplors the increasing use of alcohol and the quarrelling and fighting that results, but feels grateful for the comfort of a warm house and happy that he can get white man's food when he wants it. He listens to the children use English in their homes and fears for the survival of the Eskimo language. Hopefully, he adds, the better ones, the ones who care for themselves, will derive much benefit from the new ways. The narrative ends with these words, "For myself, I am sad that the Eskimo way has gone". Those of us who had the good fortune to live in the Eskimo country when the "old ways" were still in evidence will add a fervent *Amen* to Pitseolak's statement.

This is an attractive book, with a priceless collection of photographs which could not be taken today. The snowmobile has replaced the dogteam and most of the Eskimo people have adopted white style clothing, or have copied the traditional garments in cloth. The "architects of the snows" no longer live in snowhouses and have abandoned other skills developed by their ancestors over the centuries.

Readers may find themselves stumbling over the single, meaningful names of the Eskimo, but this will not detract from the reading of this interesting chronicle. Ann Hanson's translation has preserved that almost lyrical turn of phrase which makes pleasant reading. Unfortunately the fine map has been bound into the book as two pages. A foldout map would have been an improvement. Editor Dorothy Eber is to be congratulated for preserving what would otherwise have been lost to us. Praise is also due to those who worked on the negatives to give the pictures clarity, and to Hurtig Publishers for their generous layout of the photographs.

A. Dudley Copland, an authority on the Canadian Northland, traveled with Pitseolak years ago, and has done many radio talks, magazine articles, and short radio plays.