

## Rasmussen: On the short list of the world's greatest travel writers

by John Bechtel  
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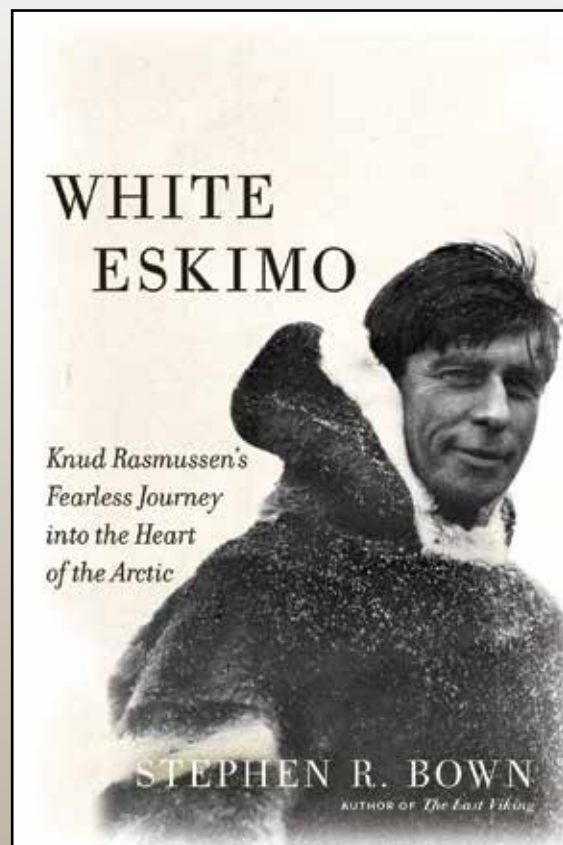
**Knud Rasmussen's story rivals that of the greatest characters in fiction. He was a cross-cultural hybrid of a Danish missionary father, one of those sent to help solidify Denmark's territorial claim to the world's largest island, and a one-fourth Inuit mother. Knud played with Inuit friends, spoke the native language, and was totally integrated as a child in their primitive culture. He learned to hunt, drive dog sleds, and survival skills in a harsh climate.**

As a teenager he was sent to a Danish boarding school near Copenhagen, where he was a charmer but a lackluster student. He loved music and tentatively entertained thoughts of being an opera singer. He became a lifetime student, not in the hallowed halls of university life, but in exploration of the hostile wilds of Greenland and the Canadian Arctic.

Rasmussen's interests as an explorer were atypical for his time. He had no lofty ambitions to be the first at anything, although he was in fact the

first to cross the Northwest Passage by dog sled. His fascination was with the isolated indigenous peoples of the deadly frozen wastelands of the Far North, the Inuit and others who had outlasted the Vikings. This was his personal heritage, and because of his exposure to urban Danish culture in Copenhagen, he realized all too well that the Inuit way of life was soon to disappear. He wanted to ease the transition from their own culture of a thousand years to one that was soon to be imposed on them by Europeans.

He was welcomed by them, lived and ate with them, hunted with them, and listened to their stories, their myths, and their songs. He was a trusted white man who looked and acted more like an Inuit. And most importantly, he wrote everything down.



He became a world class anthropologist and ethnologist, and his Fifth Thule Expedition was a three-year, 20,000 mile Greenland-to-Alaska adventure that was a breathtaking, death-defying real-life match for Homer's *Odyssey*.

Rasmussen was charismatic not

only with the ladies in Denmark and the Arctic, but he was a natural team leader who inspired courage in his men. He was quick to share credit for any achievements, had an easy sense of humor, and an infectious smile. He relieved stress with members of his team by telling stories and even singing opera to them.

His story is finally brought to us in the English language by Stephen Bown, author of *White Eskimo—Knud Rasmussen's Fearless Journey into the Heart of the Arctic*. In Denmark Rasmussen is a national hero, but Danish language biographies of him emphasize his Danishness and treat his passion for Greenlandic-Inuit culture almost as an afterthought. As author Bown states: "... the priority in these biographies was to detail

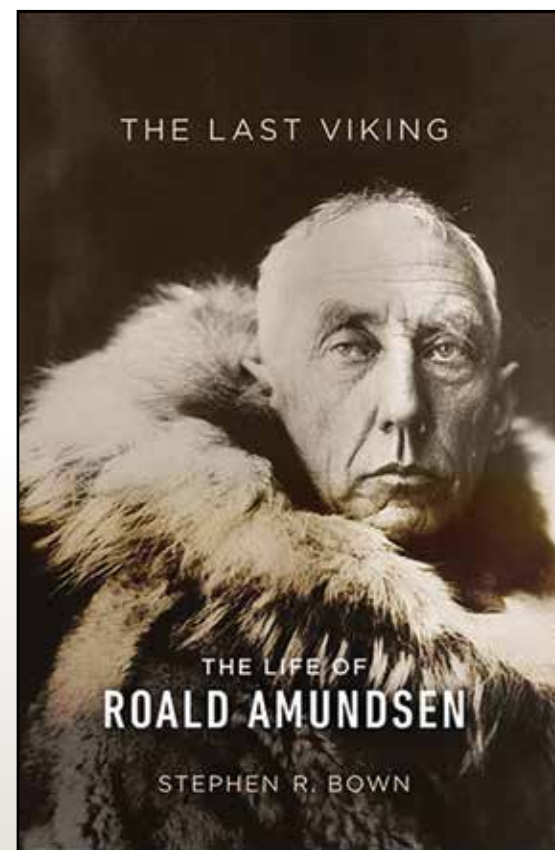
Rasmussen's relationships within the literary and cultural circles of early twentieth-century Denmark at the expense of exploring the intellectual and cultural world of Greenland and the Arctic."

In the United States, Rasmussen never achieved the popularity of Amundsen, but that is largely because there wasn't much documentary evidence about Rasmussen's travels available in the English language. The research and translation that Bown had to undertake to make his book possible is astonishing.

If you enjoy a thriller that is true but reads like a novel that you can't put down, read *White Eskimo*. It will bring Greenland and the Canadian Arctic to life in vivid technicolor. *White Eskimo* won the 2016 William Mills Prize for Non-Fiction Polar Books, and soon there will be a Dutch edition.

There is a documentary-style video reproduction of Rasmussen's visits with the Inuit in 1922

available for free at: <https://www.isuma.tv/thejournalsofknudrasmussen>. A word of caution, however: this handheld video-cum-documentary is not typical Hollywood fare, requires patience, and contains significant portions in the Inuit language. It is very authentic but moves much slower than *White*



*Eskimo*, which is edge-of-the-seat narrative.

Bown, who is currently writing his tenth book, says "My lifelong interest in history is fueled by the lessons to be learned from studying the successes and failures of history's greatest thinkers, leaders, and innovators, those who challenged conventional thinking and entrenched power structures to change their world."

Bown's previous book *The Last Viking—The Life of Roald Amundsen* is also riveting, and a Japanese translation is in the works. A film production company is seriously looking into a dramatization based on the *Last Viking*.

Of the two explorers, Amundsen and Rasmussen, I liked Rasmussen better, because of his likability quotient. Maybe it was the book covers that drew me to this conclusion: Amundsen looks worn out and cranky, and Rasmussen looks like someone I would welcome into my home with a huge bear hug (although neither of these explorers might find my metaphor appealing!) But there may be some truth to appearances.

Both were very successful, but very

different. Both admired, respected, and learned from the indigenous people of the Arctic. Amundsen drew bigger crowds at the conclusion of his exploits, especially in America. Both were dogged by frequent problems financing their expeditions. (Travel writers today often bemoan the same necessity of constant marketing to get paid for their efforts.) Both seemed to have a sixth sense that one era was ending and another was beginning. Both probably suffered a sense of aloneness.

Rasmussen was a prolific, cheerful, and entertaining writer, even when dealing with ghastly events. The record of his Fifth Thule expedition alone filled ten volumes. After all the hardships and near-death experiences they survived,

both explorers died young; Amundsen in an ill-fated solo flight to the North Pole to rescue a competitor he never liked; and Rasmussen as an indirect result of eating some bad meat.



Author Stephen Bown was born in Ottawa. He graduated with a degree in History from the University of Alberta. After living in St. John's, Newfoundland, Vancouver and Ottawa, he now resides in Canmore, Alberta with his wife Nicky and his son Andrew, age 14, and daughter Clara, age 12.

We thank subscriber Hälle Flygare, whose own story was featured in our Spring 2016 issue, for bringing Stephen Bown and his work to our attention.

Steve's next book, a work in progress, will be about the shipwreck of Danish seaman Vitus Bering and companions; the scurvy, starvation and survival of an arctic winter on an uncharted deserted island between Alaska and Russia. Visit

Stephen Bown's website at <http://www.stephenbown.net/stories.php> for three short historical stories, with twenty more available for free on Kindle Unlimited.

There are travel writers who create light material for coffee tables. The great writers transport you not only to a different place, but another time where people behave, dress, eat, and talk in ways that are strange to you. Such writers stir deep empathy in you for these strange people, and you want to know how they live, what they believe, and why, without judgment or denunciation or fear. For a time you participate and involve yourself emotionally with their story; you almost become one of them.

Such a writer was the explorer Rasmussen, whose passion and journals gave the world the gift of three decades of loving investigation of the civilization of the Far North.

Author Stephen Bown now recreates that in the first-ever comprehensive biography of Rasmussen in English. We are grateful to both for their extraordinary achievements.



Award-winning author Stephen R. Bown