

2023 Surdna Summer Fellowship Final Report

Agnes Macy Class of 2024

This summer, I traveled to Greenland for anthropology research with a broad theme and an open mind. “Movement with Meaning: Traversing Landscape and Time in West Greenland 2023” certainly lived up to its name and what I was able to accomplish exceeded my expectations. While in Greenland, I spent five weeks camping in four villages—Ilulissat, Qeqertarsuaq, Aasiaat, and Sisimiut—conducting anthropology research and connecting with local Greenlanders. My research had multiple focuses centered around change and Danish colonization’s role in driving social shifts in Greenland, specifically over the past hundred years.

I had countless meaningful conversations with people in Greenland, all of which were inspired by a collection of photographs I assembled from The Peary MacMillan Arctic Museum’s collection prior to the trip. I had archival images from Arctic explorer Donald MacMillan’s 1926 Greenland expedition as well as other photographs from the time. I started each conversation with people by showing them archival images from their village and letting them steer the discussion. Every person I spoke with was excited by the photographs and commented that the only photographs of Greenland from that era were taken by outsiders, so they lack photographic archives from that era. I met with museum directors in each village to talk about the images and hear their reflections on change and constants in the built landscape and community since MacMillan visited in 1926. Their viewpoints were incredibly insightful and directed my research focus.

Another important aspect of my research was a comparative project of MacMillan’s photographs and photographs I took while standing in the same location as him. Conversations with museum directors and locals were essential for locating the exact position in which his pictures were taken. Once I took these comparative photographs, I shared “then and now” compilations on the community Facebook pages, as Facebook is how most people connect in Greenland. I posted multiple collections of images on Facebook with an English and Greenlandic caption, and I was surprised to see hundreds of comments on all the photographs. People commented with memories of old places in the 1926 pictures and identified family members MacMillan had photographed. These comments are precious and I plan on entering identifications of people into the Arctic Museum’s database.

Perhaps the most important facet of this project was the reciprocal component. Throughout my time in Greenland, I was very cognizant of potential ethical issues with anthropological research. In order to combat entering communities with an extractive approach, I ensured that I did not have an agenda and expectations when entering conversations. Additionally, I connected Greenlandic Museum directors with the Peary MacMillan Arctic Museum in order to get Greenland museums access to the digital archival images of their villages. Each museum director was incredibly grateful to have access to MacMillan’s images in the Peary MacMillan Arctic Museum collection, as they are a valuable aspect of their village’s history.

My methods throughout the trip mimicked those of MacMillan; not only did I take photographs of the same scenes in the same places he stood, but I also kept a detailed handwritten journal. During my trip, I referenced MacMillan’s 1926 maps and journals from Bowdoin’s Special Collections and Archives. I hope that my work in Greenland will bolster Bowdoin’s connection to Greenland and will continue the tradition of students visiting the Arctic. With my observations, detailed field notes, and journals, I plan to continue this research in an honors thesis this coming school year. I am intrigued by shifts in the physical and cultural landscapes in the past hundred years while investigating Denmark’s role as a colonizer.

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Funded by the Surdna Fellowship