

# What on earth happened to all the working dogs of Arctic Canada?

## QIMMIT: A Clash of Two Truths

By Gary Rolfe

If you look at a map of the Canadian north you'll notice that communities are more or less equidistant apart. That is not coincidence. In the 1950s the Canadian government was under increasing international pressure to do something about housing the nomadic Canadian Inuit whose way of life was considered sub-standard by southern sensibilities. One result of that bureaucratic pressure relegated the wealth of working dog teams in the Canadian north to dead cultural history.

How? Rightly or wrongly, the Canadian police (the R.C.M.P.) have been accused of slaughtering 21,000 dogs to immobilise the Canadian Inuit during the 1960s and 1970s. I lived in Arctic Canada for a while and there was always an undercurrent of bitterness towards whites. I had heard about the dog extermination so knew a little about why this should be. Even now the controversy continues as to the reason why the killings were carried out. That is until *Qimmit: A Clash of Two Truths* was released. I have been waiting for this film for a long time.

Many of the interviewees (through an interpreter) expressed tearful thanks to be, at last, given the chance to tell the story of what they experienced. It makes for harrowing viewing at times but you can feel their uplifting relief at the opportunity to share a deeply troubling memory. Until this film was made many of the witnesses carried the haunting burden of their memories without telling a soul. The sorrow in their eyes and voices was indescribable. I am not

embarrassed to say that I wept watching *Qimmit: A Clash of Two Truths*.

There was a story of an R.C.M.P. officer laughing as he killed dogs. Whelping bitches shot dead without warning. There were stories of many dogs being wounded. There were stories of dead dogs piled high, being torched and left to burn. The shooting of a dog team in harness in front of a sled while the owner, preparing to leave on a hunting expedition, stood there helpless and in fear of the police. The film described police records of an R.C.M.P. officer (name undisclosed) who single-handedly shot dead over 250 dogs in one year within a single community. As someone said in the film, the Mounties always get their dog.

Some local Inuit were ordered by the R.C.M.P. to kill dogs. One Inuk describes how he didn't ask for or want the job but was ordered through fear and police intimidation what to do. The Inuk suffered disturbing reprisals from his community.

The two narrators in the documentary obviously had a very difficult job with so much emotion flying around but they were intelligent and carried me through the film without bias. They asked the questions and the answers gave you enough to judge for yourself.

As the film progressed we watch one of the interviewees begin to learn the story of what it was that made the elders of her own family so bitter about the past. I was left with the positive feeling that even though

the bitterness still obviously rankles deep within the older Canadian Inuit population, the youth are beginning to understand why this is so. The important point being that it is the youth who determine the future of the Canadian Inuit's relationship with their past and future with dogs. And I sincerely hope it is a good one.

Now that the film has been made I understand at least one northern Canadian province is distributing yearly financial compensation to those dog drivers who suffered from the slaughter of their dogs. I also believe that there has even been a muted official government apology over the killings. But nothing from the police. They continue to deny any wrong-doing.

On film, former R.C.M.P. officers of the era allege these stories are either fabrications or the result of cultural misinterpretation. The death of 21,000 sled dogs: fabrications or cultural misinterpretation? The sequel to *Qimmit: A Clash of Two Truths* would benefit from the use of a lie-detector while conducting interviews on the R.C.M.P. denying the killings. But what's the point? The dog slaughter may or may not have been the result of an official written policy but the end result was still the same. There's no denying what happened.

I have to admit despite my longing to see this film once it arrived and was in my house it remained unwatched for days. I was dreading my seething with rage at what I expected it to portray. Instead I wasn't left with that at all. *Qimmit: A Clash of Two*



*Truths* was that good. If you are interested in northern breeds I urge you to watch this documentary.

On a lighter note, in my opinion, the greatest adventure fiction book ever written is Jack London's *The Call Of The Wild*. The 1997 film starring Rutger Hauer and Bronwen Booth is wonderful but be warned this one will make you cry too, although for different reasons. The copy I have is the Danish version but it is available in English.

If you're on the lookout for genuine films about dogs depicted in the Canadian north one I recommend is Robert Flaherty's classic 1920's silent documentary *Nanook of the North*.

Another is the Canadian Geographic 1990s film *Dog of the Midnight Sun*. It is a good documentary even though this one talks about the demise of, what they term, the Canadian Inuit Dog saying they are endangered and only a few hundred exist. There have been long-publicised research findings clarifying that the Greenland Dog and the Canadian Eskimo Dog populations are in fact genetically the same dog breed. Oh, and by the way, if you don't like the word

'Eskimo' and consider it a derogatory slur on the Canadian Inuit take it out on the Canadian Kennel Club. It's their choice of breed title, not mine. But what I will say is that the single breed of dog above Greenland's Arctic Circle is simply called the Greenland Dog by the people born and bred here. And in turn they consider themselves Greenlanders, not Inuit. So, with over 20,000 working dogs in Greenland the breed is not threatened globally in contrast to those few dogs that still exist in Arctic Canada.

All these films are well worth watching. Which leaves me just to say, I wish someone would make a film about the remarkable and thriving Greenland Dogs in Greenland.

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*Editor's note: Look for a new feature column in Mushing, starting in Spring 2012, by Gary about his travels, adventures, and lifestyle living in Greenland and working with traditional Greenland dogs.*