Problematic Postage: Canada's Claim to the Arctic through a Postage Stamp

Daniel Dumas

Summary

Settler societies have simultaneously attempted to extinguish Indigenous claims to lands while appropriating aspects of Indigenous cultures to differentiate themselves on the global stage. They have done this through a variety of methods, including the issuance of stamps as symbols of a greater national narrative. This article seeks to demystify one such example, the 1955 "Eskimo hunter." It is argued that this stamp, issued by the Canadian Post Office Department, sought to incorporate Inuit culture into the Canadian imaginary while strengthening the nation's tenuous claim to the High Arctic during the 1950s, coinciding with the relocation of several Inuit families to Ellesmere and Cornwallis islands.

Philatelic materials—postage stamps or documents related to postal history—are often overlooked in terms of their significance and impact on nation-building. Pauliina Raento states that the postage stamp is instrumental in providing a positive image of one's hometown or homeland and thus promotes nation-unifying pride. The study of philatelic materials therefore offers a unique view of the messages and representations governments are seeking to convey to the masses. This article considers the story of one stamp issued by the Canadian government in the 1950s that prominently featured Inuit peoples for the first time, while also arguably attempting to bolster the country's claim to the High Arctic by highlighting its effective occupation of the region.

In the Canadian context, the Post Office Department—the precursor of the Canada Post Corporation—played a significant role in facilitating the country's national expansion by ensuring social cohesion and communication over a massive territory in a relatively inexpensive way. Circulating since 1851, stamps have been designed to define and portray Canada's national identity with representations of iconic symbols such as the beaver and the maple leaf, natural landscapes, industrial achievements, and prominent figures. The Post Office Department also used many Indigenous symbols and images on stamps. Arguably, these particular stamps served as a means of what Patrick Wolfe qualifies as recuperating Indigeneity, propagating the idea that the Canadian Settler state was an Indigenous Nation with a rich and unique history and culture, thus distancing itself from its colonial roots.

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"Eskimo hunter" 10-cent stamp, 1955.

Designed by Thomas Harold Beament, 1955.
Courtesy of Library and Archives Canada.

On 21 March 1951, the *Canadian Philatelic Review* publicized Postmaster General Édouard-Gabriel Rinfret's announcement that the Post Office Department would commission a series of stamps designed by Canadian artists to publicize the character of Canada and Canadian art. A selective committee chaired by future Governor General Vincent Massey approved assorted designs relating to five desired themes, including "portraits of Canadian Indians or Esquimax [sic], or designs based on native life." This led to the creation of the "Eskimo hunter" stamp, issued on 21 February 1955. The 10-cent stamp portrays an Inuk in a *qajaq* (kayak) resting on calm Arctic waters with an iceberg looming in the background and a plane soaring above in the sky. At first glance, the image seems relatively harmless, as it portrays an Indigenous person living in what can be perceived—and romanticized by the Settler state—as a traditional lifestyle in an Arctic environment. However, if one takes the date of issuance into account, the "Eskimo hunter" stamp becomes a politically charged statement about Canadian sovereignty.

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This Inuk hunter captures the former public imaginary of Inuit peoples that likely inspired the "Eskimo Hunter" stamp's design, circa 1908–14.

Unknown photographer, c. 1908–1914.
Accessed via Wikimedia on 25 June 2020. Click here to view source.

In 1953, two years before the stamp was issued, the Canadian government began relocating 92 Inuit from Inukjuak in Northern Québec and Mittimatalik on Baffin Island two thousand kilometers north to the High Arctic on Ellesmere and Cornwallis Islands. The Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources—responsible for Inuit affairs at the time—stated that the "pioneer experiment" was a solution to the widespread suffering of Inuit caused by the collapse of the fur trade in the Eastern Arctic and dwindling food supplies within communities considered to be overpopulated. However, as Tina Loo suggests, the relocation of Inuit was not necessarily a selfless intervention of the welfare state, but also conveniently served as a means of strengthening Canadian sovereignty in the contested space of the High Arctic. Following the Second World War, the government became increasingly preoccupied with foreign stakes in the region. These included Inuit from Greenland crossing over unhindered to Ellesmere Island to hunt and, more importantly, increased American economic and military interests amidst the onset of the Cold War. US officials often openly questioned the validity of Canada's claim to the largely unpopulated Arctic Archipelago. Tester and Kulchyski suggest that the 92 Inuit relocated to both Ausuittuq (Grise Fiord) and Qausuittuq (Resolute Bay) represented a geographical solution to what were defined as geographical problems.

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Nunavut officially became Canada's third territory on 1 April 1999. In the early 1950s, several Inuit families were relocated from Inukjuak (indicated by the red circle) and Mittimatalik to Qausuittuq (left arrow) and Ausuittuq (right arrow), 2013.

Map by Yug, 2011.
Accessed via Wikimedia on 25 June 2020. Click here to view source.

The High Arctic relocations were traumatic for many of those involved and disrupted extended families and attachments to land, with some calling their new home "Prison Island," due to its extreme isolation and challenging environmental conditions, such as total darkness from November to February. Along with the relocated Inuit, the 10-cent "Eskimo hunter" stamp played an important role in further propagating the idea that the High Arctic was an inhabited Canadian space, patrolled by Inuit and easily accessible to the South by air—as the nonchalant plane in the background of the stamp suggests. The stamp itself, printed over 300 million times and widely circulated, is an excellent example of a performative visual medium seeking to recuperate Indigeneity for the Canadian state, distancing itself from its identity as a colonial outpost, by labeling Canada's North as a traditional Inuit—and by extension Canadian—territory. Completely glossed over is the Settler state's role in disrupting families and using Indigenous peoples as human "flag poles"—or in the case of the 10-cent stamp, as human "buoys"—to delineate Canadian territorial sovereignty in a contested region.

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Pictured are "Special Eskimo Constables" of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Joe Panikpakoochoo and Panikpak, along with Officer-in-Charge of the Eastern Arctic Patrol, Alex Stevenson, bound for Ellesmere Island aboard the *C. D. Howe*, the ship that would relocate Inuit families to the High Arctic two years later. Stevenson, one of the main architects of the relocation, stated: "Why not give the natives a chance to cover this country and also if it is considered necessary help improve the position regarding sovereignty rights," 1951.

Unknown photographer, 1951.
Courtesy of Wilfred Doucette, National Film Board of Canada/Library and Archives Canada.

Though later stamps portraying Inuit peoples and cultures directly featured Inuit art and representations of Inuit life, such as the 16-set "Singing Songs to the Spirit" heritage collection released between 1977 and 1980, it is important to note the early influence that the "Eskimo hunter" had in propagating specific nation-building narratives, which sought to assimilate Inuit peoples into the Canadian body politic. Considering today's spirit of reconciliation, it is crucial that we acknowledge how these narratives were tied to policies that adversely impacted people, places, and livelihoods.

Arcadia Collection:

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Notions and Nature

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- Raento, Pauliina. "Tourism, Nation, and the Postage Stamp: Examples from Finland." *Annals of Tourism Research* 36, no. 1 (January 2009): 124–48.
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- Wolfe, Patrick. "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native." *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387–409.

Related links:

- "'We called it "Prison Island"': Inuk Man Remembers Forced Relocation to Grise Fiord." *CBC News*, 30 June 2017. https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/forced-relocation-high-arctic-inuit-1.4182600
- "Inuit High Arctic Relocations in Canada." *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, 25 July 2018. https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/inuit-high-arctic-relocations
- Postage Stamp Guide: "Inuit Hunter." https://postagestampguide.com/stamps/15665/inuit-hunter-1955-canada-postage-stamp
- Postage Stamp Guide: Inuit stamps. https://postagestampguide.com/canada/series/search

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Websites linked in image captions:

- https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Inuit_hunter_with_harpoon.jpg
- https://commons.m.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Can_high_arctic_relocation.svg?fbclid=IwAR2YkpI1mtd7DfbK4KZeG1djLP-ant9WFbfwZDj3IkRolGT19UVIHD8AGHE

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Daniel Dumas obtained his master's in geography from the University of Ottawa in 2017. His thesis, entitled "Negotiating Life within the City: Social Geographies and Lived Experiences of Urban Metis Peoples in Ottawa," was a study in modern urban Indigeneity. Afterward, Daniel worked as a Special Projects Intern for the Alberta Ministry of Indigenous Relations in Edmonton, Canada. Daniel joined the Doctoral Program Environment and Society at LMU Munich in October 2018. His dissertation explores the evolving responses of Indigenous peoples to tar sands extraction on their traditional territories in Alberta, Canada.
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