

H. C. Petersen

- An invaluable admirer of the Greenland kayak

By Martin Nissen

In January 2004, H. C. Petersen (B. 1925), the author of "Skinboats Of Greenland", was invited as an honorary member of Qajaq København and Qajaq Denmark.

Through the last century, Hans Christian Petersen has personally experienced the development of Greenland from a kayak hunting community to a modern society where fishing is the primary industry. The speed with which the kayak disappeared in various parts of the country made H. C. Petersen devote himself to collecting knowledge and information about kayak techniques and types across the different districts of Greenland before it was too late. As the first principal of the folk high school of Sisimiut, he had the chance to meet fellow countrymen from all over Greenland who came to the school for short stays. Many of them were still practicing kayak hunting at home and some of the women were familiar with skinning the kayaks. He asked them about the present state of kayak development as well as their local native history. From these inquiries, H. C. Petersen realized that the approximate 4000 year old history and evolution of kayaking in Greenland was in danger of coming to an end. A deep admiration and respect for the kayak as the cultural heritage of his country made him want to document its use and development for the future. He was able, in a most gifted way, to present the essential parts of, what was such a vital necessity for the survival of the Inuit, the kayak. Over the following years, a long list of publications has come from the hand of H. C. Petersen. Among these, five should be pointed out as substantial contributions to the history of Greenland kayaking.

The first manuscript he authored was Qajaq - Inoqarfinni Tamani, but the publishers, Atuakkiorfik, were not in a hurry and it took 11 years before the book was brought to light in 1987. The year before, in 1986, Petersen authored the English version of Skinboats of Greenland as part of the series "Ships and Boats of the North" by the Viking Ship Museum of Denmark, The Museum of Greenland and The National Museum of Denmark. The work was composed of two parts - one on the kayak and the other on the larger skinboat - the umiaq. In 1997, the work was published in Danish (Den store Kajakbog) and, as was the case with the English and the Greenland versions, it was not a direct translation. H. C. Petersen felt that his book must be written to the intended audience and, therefore, every edition is revised and enhanced according to the people for whom it is written. As addenda to the work, and at the request of Hans Ebbesen, H. C. Petersen also published a collection of selected photographs from the great archives of The Arctic Institute under the name Skinboats in Greenland - in days of old (1987). The collection gives a valuable insight into the use of the kayak and umiaq after the introduction of photography to Greenland in the second half of the 19th century. Unfortunately, this photo collection is difficult to get hold of. However, for people interested in kayaking history, it is highly recommended. A shorter version of 'Skinboats Of Greenland' was published in German in 1986 titled Faszination Kajak - Tradition, Erinnerungen, Anleitung zum Bau.

In 1994, Petersen published a smaller book entitled Qaannamik Pinnguaatit with descriptions of kayak games, rope exercises and other customs related to kayaking. The book was greatly appreciated by Qaannat Kattuffiat (the National Greenland Kayak Foundation), especially since the kayak games were a part of the annual National Greenland Kayaking Championships. The rope exercises were

especially important for the kayak hunters in building up strength, balance, focus and stamina. In *Instruction to Kayak Building* (3rd ed., 2001), Petersen presents various technical building solutions from different parts of the south and west coasts. For this reason, the kayak described there is not to be taken as an anthropological study - and neither should it be built strictly according to the book without some adjustments. Many builders have burnt their fingers following the manual to the word. Being open minded and in touch with nature during his lifetime has given H. C. Petersen a deep insight into the rhythm of nature in the Arctic. He has traveled extensively throughout Greenland, both in the service of the Greenland Home Rule and the Inuit Circumpolar Conference, to evaluate the potential for a more sustainable livelihood among Inuit and the animals. This knowledge, along with his understanding and studies of climatic changes over the last century, formed the basis of his latest rapport for The Nordic Council of Ministers, *Fangststyr og klimarytmer i Grønland* (2002) (Preyanimals and Climatic Fluctuations in Greenland). In this report, Mr. Petersen puts forward his thesis on the connection between the cyclic climatic fluctuations and the varying distribution of preyanimals along the coasts of Greenland. He calls attention to the fact that the Gulf Stream, the part of the global climatic system which is of vital importance to hunting and fishing in Greenland, has a "pulse" of 100 and 1000 years respectively, resulting in a fall and rise in sea temperature. He proposes that it was exactly such a "warm pulse", climatic rhythm, in conjunction with technological and social developments, that made the kayak lose its significance as a means of hunting throughout the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s.

Ever since the founding of Qaannat Kattuffiat in the early 1980's, Petersen has been delighted to see the resurgence of Greenland kayaking, both within Greenland as well as abroad. By request of members of Qajaq USA and Qajaq København, Mr. Petersen will work on a translation of Qaannamik Pinnguaatit into English and Danish. Currently, Mr. Petersen is working on a book on the umiaq that he is hoping to complete in 2004. When that is done, it is the hope of Mr. Petersen to be able to complete his works with a book on "Kayaks and people in Greenland" with an emphasis on the great kayak hunters, so called piniartossuaq, through time. H. C. Petersen has contributed greatly to the renaissance of Greenland kayaking in various parts of the globe over the last decades. Qajaq København / Qajaq Denmark are, therefore, happy and proud to have H. C. Petersen as our honorary member.