

Arctic heatwave or The vicissitudes of shooting films in the Canadian North

by Robert Worrall

With the recent airing of *Cook and Peary: Race to the Pole* on American television, the citizens of Frobisher Bay have chalked up another successful entry in their lengthening film production log.

Frobisher's 2400 inhabitants, tucked into one of Baffin Island's thousands of inlets 2000 km north of Montreal, had already seen a succession of crews come and go before *Cook and Peary* stars Rod Steiger and Richard Chamberlain arrived.

Robert Altman and company had been up earlier to film chunks of *Quintet* and, before that, Paramount had been shuttling cast and crew to and fro on another Altman shoot, *White Dawn*.

The latest visitors came here after a co-venture agreement was struck between Montreal's Filmline Productions and Robert Hamli Productions of New York - and after ITT agreed to sponsor *Race*, helping to recoup the production's \$3.5 million budget.

The film took a fresh look at a long-standing debate about who really won the race to discover the North Pole. Historians favoured Admiral Robert Peary (Rod Steiger), but, in this latest account, the filmmakers, with the help of screenwriter I.C. Rapport, give the decision to the historically underrated Dr. Frederick Cook (Richard Chamber-

lain).

While most doubt Cook's side of the story, they all agree Peary was a nasty person. He hardly shared the limelight with his black assistant Matthew Henson, and the Eskimo guides who, like their ancestors before them, probably knew where the North Pole was all along anyway.

The more interesting question for the film community is how filmmakers find working in the north. With a film like *Race to the Pole*, the question couldn't seem more appropriate.

Rod Steiger had an odd complaint: "I'm strangely disappointed that it's not as cold as I thought it would be." Americans don't resist the chance to knock our weather, but Steiger was in other respects gracious: "I've enjoyed the countryside, and I find people here much more direct. The stress factors are different, and they affect behaviour - you must have incredible self-sufficiency to exist up here - and I respect that."

Director Bob Day complained about the weather too. "As usual, it was a dumb thing, but here we were making a movie about the North Pole in July." In fact Day spent much of his time trying to locate properly nasty weather. "We were chasing ice and snow, and it was melting all around us wherever we went." So much so that Richard Chamberlain came very close to being swallowed up by the arctic's icy waters when an ice floe broke up right under him.

Weather conditions forced shooting delays, and devising the logistics to make the best of the situation fell to

assistant director Jim Kaufman of Montreal. He knew the territory, having worked with Altman on *Quintet*, and he had decided views on scheduling. "The achievement is not being on budget or on schedule, but making a good film," Kaufman said.

Plans to search for amenable weather conditions on Baffin had just been abandoned in favour of a new strategy to find a location on nearby Broughton Island. With the half-dozen skidoos he had available, Kaufman had to figure out how to shepherd more than 40 people, and transport equipment.

"It seems when you work, you never stop and look at what beautiful surroundings you're in," Kaufman reflected at one point. "Today, we were waiting for the tide to come in and it was just beautiful. We could stop and look."

Steven Felder, a self-described production "mercenary" from New York, was up for his first visit to Canada's Arctic as the film's associate producer. Weather, naturally, was on his mind too: "Unfortunately, commitments from financiers and sponsors - and CBS - came late, and that meant we had to film during the one month when everything melts and drifts out to sea."

Felder said delays shaved preproduction time to barely three weeks for a four-week shooting schedule. "Frobisher Bay was the logical choice. At the time it was scouted with the projected weather conditions, we expected to film everything we planned. Unfortunately the weather changed a week before we got here." That meant not only scouting

Broughton Island, but going as far afield as Greenland.

A hard-headed New Yorker, Felder had other things on his mind besides weather. "Generally the quality of the crew has been very good - they were enthused and involved and worked very hard."

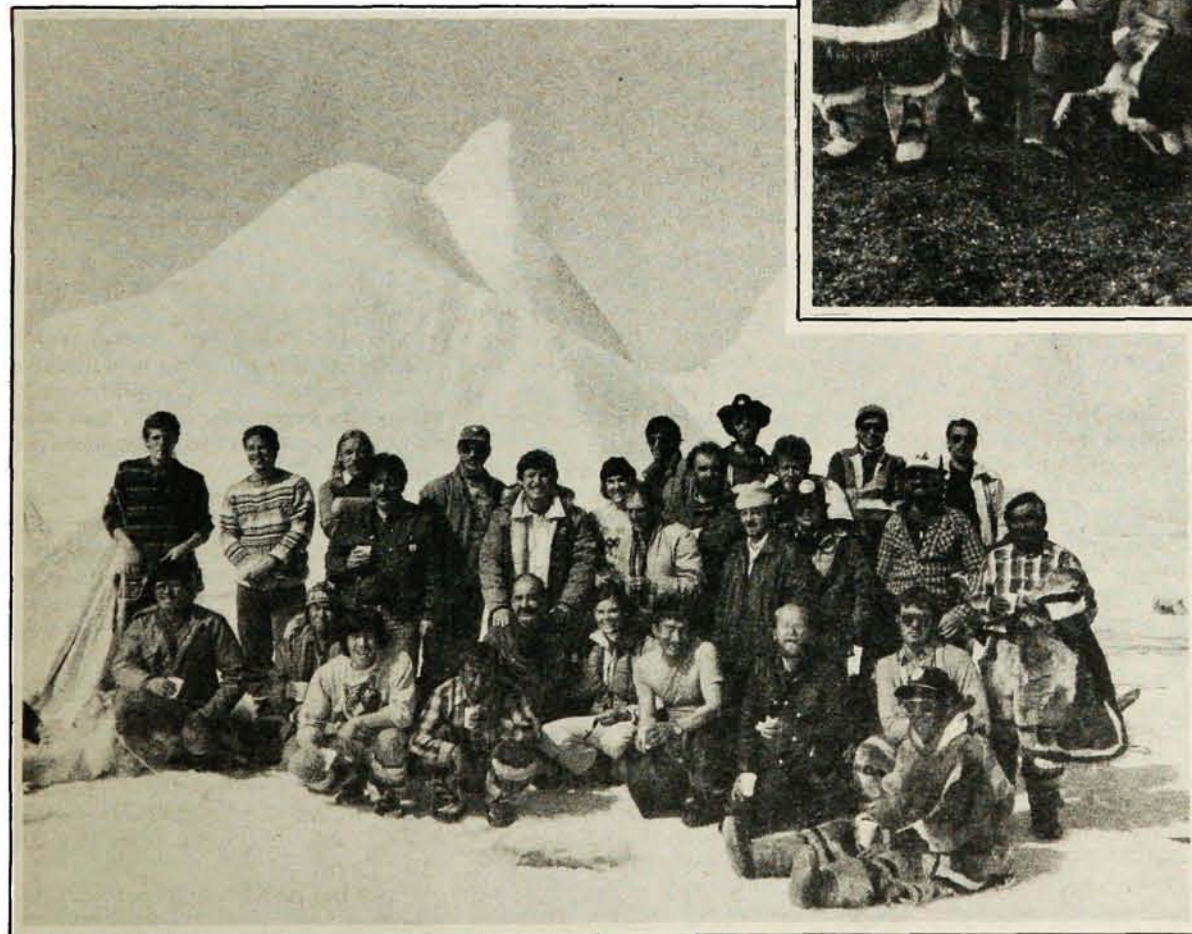
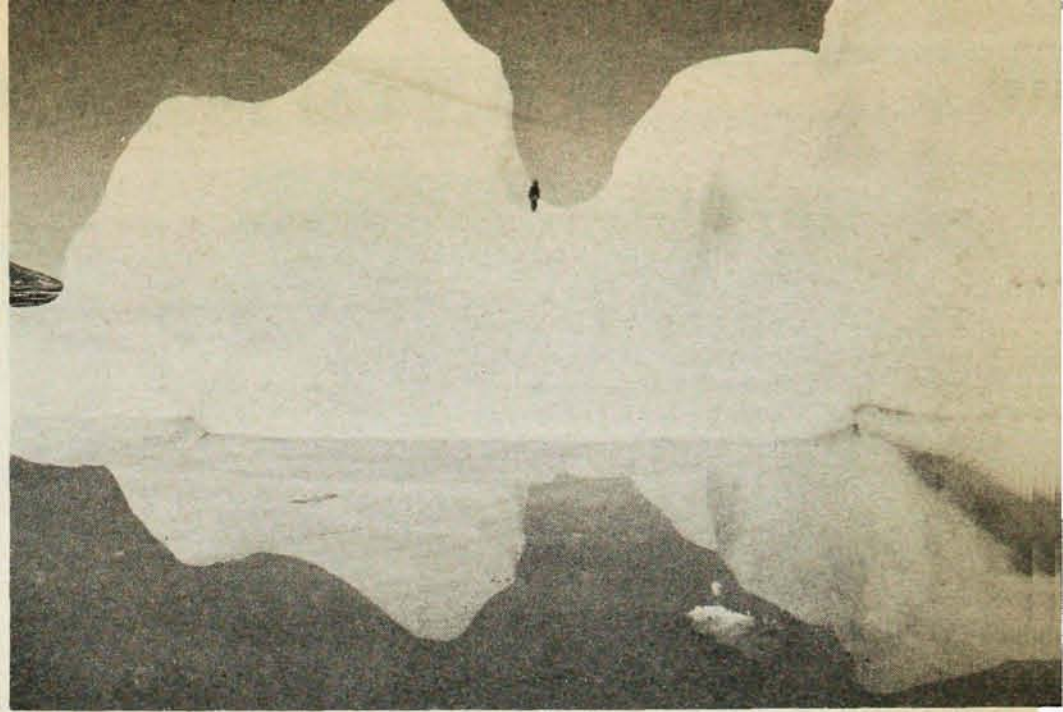
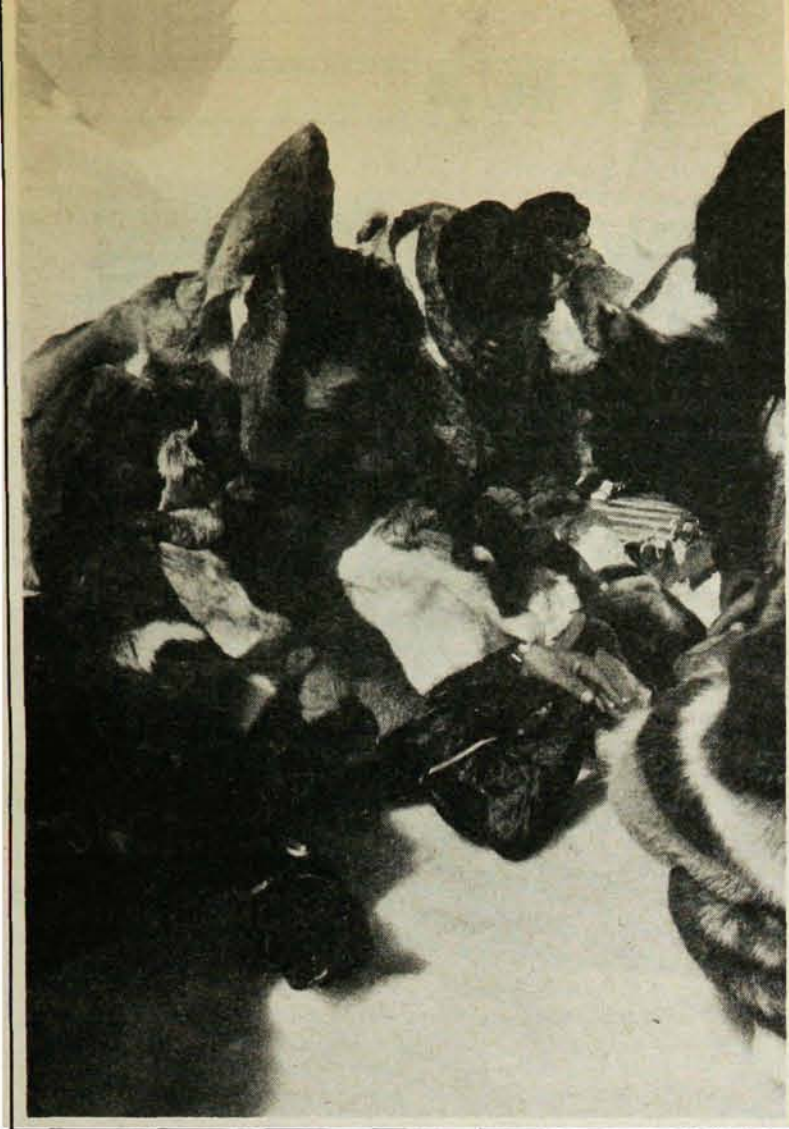
But there was enough in Felder's comments to make nationalists bridle just a little. "American crews have more experience technically and are used to moving at a faster pace, but Canadians seem to have learned how to move quickly on this film," Felder said. "I think Canadian crews have the potential to be as good as other crews."

On extras and local talent generally, Felder offered this: "The workforce here has been somewhat of a problem in terms of the number of available people who can work every day, and work hard."

"But the people we have found have worked hard. We couldn't do the film without them."

Director Bob Day spoke highly of his Canadian crew, but then he wasn't surprised. "It seems that crews all over the world - and I've worked pretty well all over the world - have a universal language anyway."

Rod Steiger conceded the film had fallen short of accurately reflecting Inuit lifestyle because research time had been pared down to almost nothing in the rush to beat meltdown. But he hoped, he said, that Inuit would benefit from the visit of cast and crew, and give a boost to local film ventures.



● Top left: Inuit crew members find wardrobe's idea of Eskimo boots a hoot; top right: man and iceberg, Broughton Island, NWT; centre right: best boy Walter Klimkiw, left, and CBS photographer Tony Esparza, together with Inuit extras at Frobisher Bay; bottom left: crew and extras during a break on location iceberg.

photos: © Jonathan Wenk

Joanasie Salamonie, an Inuit who had served on Altman's *White Dawn* shoot, said he enjoyed working on *Race*, suggesting at one point that his filmmaking experience – which includes a couple of Canadian productions too – taught him something of his own ancestry. "It's very important for the Frobisher people – if they're involved," he said.

One local hired on from the start was Frobisher businessman Tom Webster.

and southern filmmakers, here and in the U.S. Webster is also conversant in Inuktituk and he has a keen understanding of the north and its people.

He suggested back in May that the *Race to the Pole* crew race up and get down to business right away if they hoped to catch the miserable, that's to say ideal, weather. Webster was hired on then, but still the weeks passed.

"The production crew couldn't risk the gamble of bringing a new crew and actors all together on location for the first time without allowing them time in

a more controlled situation," Webster said. "In a studio, they could develop a working relationship, and I think that was a wise decision."

Webster agreed that costume-making and fitting time didn't allow for complete authenticity. "If we had the time, we could have been more authentic." Local craftswomen stitched away on the caribou clothing just as it was going out of season. Actors and extras were left to sweat in what passes for an Arctic heatwave.

Director of photography Ernie Day,

director Bob's brother, offered a comment before heading up the steps for the airlift back to Montreal and points beyond. "It's been very fast – like all TV movies. crash, crash, crash. Nothing holds up this machine once it starts rolling," he said.

"The first three days, we had rain. Tha: was good. actually, because the sun can make this place look like Switzerland.

"So, in the end, it wasn't that tough to get to the Pole," the younger Day said. "I can't wait to come back again."