

Father Joseph Buliard: 'He Came And Dwelt Among Us'

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In August of 1949, a floatplane buzzed low over the north shore of Garry Lake in the heart of the Keewatin District – part of mainland Nunavut today. It banked, descended to the water and skipped to a stop by a small island. A skinny man with thick glasses climbed out and stepped on to the tundra. Dwarf birch and willow tangled at his feet, eskers snaked off in the distance and the lake stretched to the horizon. This island would be his new home. He was Father Joseph Buliard of the Oblate Missionaries of Mary Immaculate, and he was here to establish Canada's most remote mission. That much he knew. What he didn't know was that within 10 years, due to forces set in motion by his arrival, this land would be emptied of its people, and he would be gone too.

Buliard was born and raised in France, but by the time he reached Garry Lake, at age 35, he'd already been in the Canadian Arctic for a decade. He'd served as a priest in the remote settlements of Repulse Bay and Baker Lake, ministering to Inuit who'd gathered around the Hudson Bay Company posts there. Now he had a more ambitious assignment. The plane had brought him into the wilderness – about halfway down the 1,000-kilometre length of the Back River, where the water collects into a series of enormous lakes. The north shores of those lakes, he knew, were home to about 15 families of nomadic caribou-hunting Inuit, the Uvaliaqtiit. This island was their summer gathering place. Here, he would bring them the word of the Lord. But Buliard needed help to establish his mission. Despite his decade of Arctic experience, he was relatively unskilled on the land, so he relied heavily on an Inuk named Anthony Manerluk – an orphan who'd been Buliard's guide and companion since he was 15 years old. Buliard had terrible eyesight and clumsy hands – at Repulse Bay, he'd fallen through the ice, frozen his fingers and never fully recovered. Though he learned to run dogs, set fish nets and travel on the tundra, he never became an expert. Manerluk kept Buliard's mitts and boots clean of snow, hunted and fished for him, and built igloos when they travelled together throughout the region. And over the coming months and years, they travelled a lot. They sought out the Uvaliaqtiit, who were often on the move. They met families like that of Ninayok and her husband Sabgut, and hunters like the man Arnadjuak. And of course, people also came to see Buliard at the cabin.

At least some of the Inuit held Buliard in high regard. And in his own way, Buliard certainly cared about them. But he never learned to appreciate the Inuit's sophisticated concept of nuna – a worldview encompassing the land and all its relationships. Expressing a view common among missionaries of the time, he once wrote that the nomadic Inuit were "living like animals." No matter what Buliard may have thought of them, as time went on, they came to him more and more frequently. He had supplies. Just as Manerluk and others taught the priest some of their skills, changing his relationship with the land, Buliard's missionary work did the same for them. His presence – especially his reliable supply of tea, ammunition and relief rations – persuaded the Uvaliaqtiit to spend more time near the island. In just a few years, families who'd survived entirely on wild foods – mainly caribou – began integrating Buliard's provisions into their subsistence economy. Soon, some of the local Inuit, like John Adjuk and his wife, stuck close to the mission, and had come, in a way, to depend on it.

Then, on October 24, 1956, seven years after Buliard's arrival, everything at the Garry Lake mission suddenly changed. Buliard, by then 42 years old, hitched up his dog team, planning to head a few miles onto the frozen lake to check his fish nets. As his clumsy hands set up the harnesses, Adjuk came over and expressed concern. Buliard's helper, Manerluk, had been sent south to be treated for tuberculosis, so the priest was going out alone. Adjuk warned him a storm was coming. Buliard left anyway. The bad weather set in, and later, five of his dogs returned to the mission. There was no sled with them, and no priest. Adjuk went searching, but the blizzard had obliterated any tracks. Buliard's nets were untouched. He was never seen again. That night remains a mystery – did Buliard's bad eyesight lead him astray? Was he killed by the cold? Did he plunge through thin ice? The RCMP launched a brief murder investigation, but no one was ever charged. The Uvaliaqtiit, for the most part, accepted his disappearance. Manerluk, though, was deeply sad. He said, "When I heard of Father Buliard being lost, I felt I lost a parent."

Officials in Baker Lake, nearly 300 kilometres southeast, didn't get word of Buliard's disappearance until January of 1957. In June, Father Ernest Trinel was flown in to replace him. Caribou were sparse at the time, and some Uvaliaqtiit families were struggling, so Trinel picked up where Buliard had left off. He gave out relief supplies. But this act would become highly controversial. Distributing food and gear was a common practice at Arctic missions; it was part of looking after the flock. But it also, of course, drew Inuit to the men who were trying to convert them. And it didn't sit well with some government officials. By the time Trinel arrived at Garry Lake, Ottawa was enacting a policy promoting Inuit "independence." The priests and the bureaucrats disagreed: were the supplies a tool to bring souls to God, or essential food-aid for people in need? In August of 1957, after two months at the mission, Trinel sent a message to Baker Lake. It read: "A community of 60 Eskimos menaced to starve at Garry Lake." The caribou had not come, and Trinel saw the situation as life-or-death. The nearby storehouse was stockpiled with food, and Manerluk and others were put in charge of distributing it. Government agents came with a relief shipment in August, but not everyone agreed the rations were needed. Douglas Wilkinson, the Northern Affairs officer based in Baker Lake, called the food drop "the worst thing that could happen." He claimed the Inuit at Garry Lake had "hoodwinked the father into giving out most of his supplies." Meanwhile, Trinel was worried he himself wouldn't survive the winter. He left, going to Baker Lake in early December. On December 15, a final shipment of food arrived at the storehouse.

That winter was cold and grim. The lack of caribou meant the Uvaliaqtiit weren't just hungry, but poorly clothed. The government had given them fish nets, but in their threadbare garments they couldn't venture far to fish. Ninayok and Sabgut had put up lots of fish in the fall, but had given them away to people who were even worse off. A man named Angeelik shot nine caribou, but they were soon consumed. By early in the new year, Ninayok told an official, "Eskimos were forced to eat their dogs." The situation became desperate in January and fatal by February. With barely any food left, starving and freezing, Arnadjuak and a companion travelled from their camp to the storehouse to see if they could gather supplies. Inside, they started a small stove. It exploded, and both men ran out into the cold. As the building burned, Arnadjuak ran to a nearby structure, crawled between two mattresses and died. His companion made it back to camp, but he had none of the food his family was expecting. It wasn't long before they all died of starvation.

Between late February and early March a total of 17 Uvaliaqtiit died. One man was found frozen next to a fishing hole. The RCMP, who were responsible for making a winter patrol through the area, didn't do so. Father Trinel and government officials didn't make contact with Garry Lake until April 24. On May 10, Ninayok, who played an important role in piecing the story together, was evacuated for emergency medical treatment. A flurry of government and media attention followed, placing blame all around. Some accounts held the Inuit responsible; others blamed Mother Nature, as though the starvation was inevitable. No white man wanted to assume guilt: not the missions, for their role in altering the area's subsistence economy. Not the government, for its ever-shifting relief policies. And not the police, for having failed to make their winter rounds. Some pointed to the storehouse fire as a single, clear cause, but a pathologist's report on the deaths cited prolonged hunger and exposure – "definite evidence of severe malnutrition as evidenced by weight loss and extreme loss of all fat."

After these events, the Department of Northern Affairs flew into action. Within five months they'd launched a dramatic project. They deployed staff to the Hudson Bay coast and, some 500 kilometres from the Uvaliaqtiit homeland, began constructing a new settlement for some of the survivors. Today, the village is called Whale Cove. Many of the Uvaliaqtiit who were brought there had never seen the sea. By 1959, just a decade after Father Buliard had set up the first-ever mission at Garry Lake, nobody was left. The Uvaliaqtiit people had either died or been moved away. Father Buliard's cabin stubbornly remains. It stands to this day, its shell of thin boards blackened by sun and cold. Shreds of tarpaper cling to its walls; wind whips through it. It had been occupied for so short a time, but long enough to change everything.