



Wild men in and out of science: finding a place in the disciplinary borderlands of Arctic Canada and Greenland



Suzanne Zeller^{a,*} and Christopher Jacob Ries^b

^a Department of History, Wilfrid Laurier University, 75 University Ave. W., Waterloo, ON N2L 3C5, Canada

^b Center for Science Studies, Aarhus University, Ny Munkegade 120, Building 1520, 8000 Aarhus, Denmark

Abstract

This essay compares the early twentieth-century Arctic experiences of the artist-naturalist Ernest Thompson Seton (1860–1946) in Canada and the explorer-geologist Lauge Koch (1892–1964) in Greenland during a time of transition in the history of scientific exploration. It focuses on the extraordinary careers of two uneasy contributors to this transition, from both inside and outside of the scientific profession. Seton's and Koch's careers serve as fault-lines marking important disputes over the production and construction of knowledge, and conceptions of scientific truth. Seton, internationally famous author of the 'realistic' animal stories *Wild Animals I Have Known* (1898), endured public criticism as a 'nature-faker' who anthropomorphized his animal subjects unduly. Intent on earning recognition as a modern field scientist, he travelled to Canada's Barren Grounds in 1907 to stake new claims to scientific knowledge and field methods. Koch joined the legendary Arctic explorer Knud Rasmussen's Second Thule Expedition (1916–1918) before leading Denmark's Jubilee expedition to North Greenland (1920–1923). He returned to Denmark a national hero whose further expeditions during the 1930s transformed Arctic geological fieldwork, but not without very public challenges from the Danish scientific community. The problems encountered by Seton and Koch in their efforts to establish their field practices in the disciplinary borderlands between traditional natural history and modern ecology and geology, respectively, offer insights, over several generations, into the historical transition from the older Romantic lore of the heroic individual explorer to modern infrastructures and practices. Their responses highlight larger fissures in twentieth-century reconceptions of the Arctic, of nature, and of science at large.

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Despite their separation in time and place, the Canadian artist-naturalist Ernest Thompson Seton (1860–1946) and, a generation later, the Danish explorer-geologist Lauge Koch (1892–1964) shared qualities, outlooks, and harrowing early field experiences that cast them both as modernity's ambivalent harbingers on their respective Arctic frontiers in northern Canada and eastern Greenland. Each combined a conviction of his own personal exceptionalism with long-term grievances against an early mentor. Character and circumstance intensified these traits over time, stoking ambiguities that infected both their subsequent Arctic experiences as well as their contributions to Arctic science. The Arctic, in turn, inflected their careers immeasurably, as a contested space in which larger themes involving negotiations over shifting territorial and cultural boundaries, authority in constructions of scientific and environmental knowledge, and modernity's intrusions into colonized northern lands played themselves out with considerable intensity.

This comparative study highlights the uneasy early twentieth-century passage from traditional heroic individualism to modern systematic approaches in Arctic scientific exploration. It focuses on the extraordinary – and extraordinarily complex – careers of Seton and Koch as equally uneasy contributors to this important transition: the former from outside and the latter from inside of the scientific profession. Neither experience was a happy one, as both Seton and Koch, wildly popular in their day, became caught up in scandals that formed fault-lines for important disputes over scientific truth.

A key factor in the work undertaken by both protagonists was their reliance – and indeed their insistence – on the field as the site in which they could most reliably generate scientific knowledge. They encountered resistance within a larger historical context in which the laboratory had become the accepted (and expected) site for what the historian of science J.V. Pickstone terms *Experimentalist Ways of Knowing* that predominated at the cutting edge of

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: szeller@wlu.ca, cjries@christopherjacobries.dk.



Fig. 1. Ernest Thompson Seton, dated 1924 (Philmont Museum, Seton Memorial Library, Cimarron, New Mexico).

Foundations

Ernest Evan Thompson (who later adopted the older family surname Seton) was born into the Darwinian age in South Shields, Durham County, in northern England in 1860. His father, Joseph Logan Thompson, was a prosperous Scottish ship-owner who risked his capital on the vagaries of traditional seafaring once too often. After suffering a spectacular financial collapse, the family emigrated in 1866 to Lindsay, Canada West (now the province of Ontario), to build a new life on the no less uncertain foundations of backwoods farming. Seton later described his transplantation to a colder climate by recalling the hypothermia suffered during long winter treks to a log-cabin country schoolhouse, where an assigned reading about a polar bear family's cruel fate at the hands of Sir John Franklin's Arctic expedition during the 1820s 'profoundly' moved him to tears.³

After four years Joseph Thompson abandoned this arduous backwoods life, moving the family in 1870 to a poor immigrant neighborhood in Toronto's 'Ward' to gamble on a third career as an accountant. A stern Calvinist who, with his long-suffering wife Alice Snowdon, raised eleven children under challenging circumstances aggravated by his own difficult personality, Joseph became a lifelong lightning rod for Ernest's internal conflicts. Indulging an interest in science, he expended scarce family funds on books, telescopes, and other instruments while thundering against modern theories of evolution. After nurturing Ernest's childhood love of nature, Joseph incurred his son's unforgiving resentment by rejecting as impractical his dream of studying zoology at university.⁴ At the insistence of Joseph, whose own father had also denied him a university education, Ernest enrolled instead in Toronto's Ontario School of Art, where his outstanding talent earned him a gold medal in 1879 (Fig. 1).⁵

In contrast, young Lauge Koch enjoyed a stable life of privilege. Born in 1892 in Kaerby, Denmark, Koch grew up in a family that had for generations dutifully served the Lutheran state church as upright, dedicated priests and even bishops. Like Seton, Koch inherited his parents' serious-minded values of self-important earnestness, unflinching diligence, and moral righteousness.⁶ Unlike Seton, however, Koch was expected to pursue an academic career, possibly to follow his father Carl as a man of the cloth. This latter plan failed utterly with Lauge, whose private tutor recognized as early as 1902 his fixation on natural history, along with his remarkable persistence, his inability to assess the quality of his own work, and his need for frequent praise.⁷ More fortunate than Seton in one important regard, Koch secured his father's support of his

science after about 1890.¹ The challenges faced by Seton and Koch involved shifting claims to institutional landscapes. In the post-Darwinian years, extending at least until the early decades of the twentieth century, researchers became more inclined to closet themselves in museums and/or laboratories than to venture out into the field. In their anomalous passion for fieldwork, Seton and Koch entered into the crossfire over a 'new natural history' whose adherents in various areas of natural science, including zoology, geology and eventually ecology and ethology, were themselves torn over issues of approach and method.² For the likes of Seton and Koch, the result was a perfect storm in which they reaped the whirlwind that they themselves helped to sow.

¹ J.V. Pickstone, *Ways of Knowing: A New History of Science, Technology, and Medicine*, Chicago, 2000, Part III.

² E.B. Poulton, *The Colours of Animals*, London, 1890, 386; E. Seton-Thompson, Introduction, in: R. Lydekker, *The New Natural History*, New York, 1901, v–vii; W.F. Ganong, The cardinal principles of ecology, *Science* n.s. 19, 482 (25 March 1904) 493–498; C.C. Adams, *Guide to the Study of Animal Ecology*, New York, 1913; C.C. Adams, The new natural history – ecology, *Natural History* 17 (1917) 491–494; R.W. Burkhardt, Jr., Ethology, Natural history, the life sciences, and the problem of place, *Journal of the History of Biology*, 32 (1999) 494; J. Ilerbaig, Allied sciences and fundamental problems: C.C. Adams and the search for method in early biology, *Journal of the History of Biology* 32 (1999) 439–463; R.E. Kohler, *Landscapes and Labscapes: Exploring the Lab-Field Border in Biology*, Chicago, 2002, esp. chap. 2; D.N. Livingstone, Putting Science in Its Place: Geographies of Scientific Knowledge, Chicago, 2003; D.A. Finnegan, The spatial turn: geographical approaches in the history of science, *Journal of the History of Biology* 41 (2008) 369–388; L.K. Nyhart, Natural history and the 'new' biology, in: N. Jardine, J.A. Secord, E.C. Spary (Eds), *Cultures of Natural History*, Cambridge, 1996, 427–443; K.H. Nielsen, M. Harbsmeier, and C.J. Ries, Introduction, in: K.H. Nielsen, M. Harbsmeier, C.J. Ries (Eds), *Scientists and Scholars in the Field: Studies in the History of Fieldwork and Expeditions*, Aarhus, 2012, 9–28.

³ E.T. Seton, *Trail of an Artist-Naturalist: The Autobiography of Ernest Thompson Seton*, New York, 1940, reprint ed. 1978, 14–15; J. Franklin, *Journey to the Shores of the Polar Sea*, London, 1829. Seton biographies include J. Wadland, *Ernest Thompson Seton: Man in Nature and the Progressive Era 1880–1915*, New York, 1978; M. Redekop, *Ernest Thompson Seton*, Don Mills, ON, 1979; B. Keller, *Black Wolf: The Life of Ernest Thompson Seton*, Vancouver, 1984; H.A. Anderson, Jr., *The Chief: Ernest Thompson Seton and the Changing West*, College Station, TX, 1986; B. Morris, *Ernest Thompson Seton, Founder of the Woodcraft Movement 1860–1946*, Lewiston, 2007; D.L. Witt, *Ernest Thompson Seton: The Life and Legacy of an Artist and Conservationist*, Santa Fe, 2010; see also T. Loo, *States of Nature: Conserving Canada's Wildlife in the Twentieth Century*, Vancouver, 2007.

⁴ J.M. Seton, *By a Thousand Fires: Nature Notes and Extracts from the Life and Unpublished Journals of Ernest Thompson Seton*, Garden City, N.Y., 1967, 13–20.

⁵ Seton, *Trail of an Artist-Naturalist* (note 3), Part I, esp. 5; Seton, *By a Thousand Fires* (note 4), 19–20.

⁶ Jeg har måttet fægte mig frem [I have had to fight my way through], Koch interview, *Politiken* (1 July 1961) 33.

⁷ P. Munck, Teacher's assessment of Lauge Koch, 1902, Lauge Koch Sagen, Box 2, Archive of the Danish Geological Museum, Copenhagen.

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