


# Dundas Harbour

## Keeping Watch over the Northwest Passage

Photography by Dennis Minty | Story by David F. Pelly

**O**n the south coast of Devon Island, the old abandoned RCMP detachment at Dundas Harbour looks out to sea, as if set down there to watch over the entrance to Lancaster Sound and the Northwest Passage. It is a forlorn but starkly beautiful spot, one which the archaeology suggests was used for centuries by Inuit, long before the *qallunaat* (white men) arrived. In Inuktitut, the place is called *Talluruti*, which means “a woman’s chin with tattoos on it,” a name derived from the crevasses and streaks on Devon Island which resemble the traditional tattoos from a distance.



The old RCMP post at Dundas Harbour looks out over the eastern entrance to the Northwest Passage.



After considering the plan for two years, the RCMP sent three constables to open the detachment at Dundas Harbour in August 1924, deposited there with fuel and provisions by the Canadian Government Ship *Arctic*. Constable E. Anstead in charge, with Constables G.T. Makinson and V. Maisonneuve. By official accounts, the buildings were “erected without mishap and the stores were placed in a storehouse situated about a quarter of a mile from the living quarters,” no doubt a precaution against marauding polar bears. They passed a quiet winter, seeing no one and scarcely any wildlife. They travelled only very little, due to the “inhospitable nature of the interior” of Devon Island and the rugged ice of the frozen sea. For the first three years of their existence at the post, the men did not even have radio contact with the south. They waited for the annual visit of a government ship to receive the year’s news.



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Above: The central building at Dundas Harbour, the constables’ living quarters, stands today as a reminder of what life was like at this isolated post.

At that time, there were four Eastern Arctic detachments, at Pangnirtung, Pond Inlet, Dundas Harbour and Craig Harbour, the latter even farther north on Ellesmere Island. All four were visited by the *Arctic* during the summer of 1925, bringing more fuel and provisions. In 1926, the Constables pioneered a travel route across Devon Island, enabling patrols to shuttle between Craig Harbour and Dundas Harbour.

Constable Maisonneuve, still there in the spring of 1926 but due to transfer out that summer, committed suicide on June 16. Another officer, Constable W.R. Stephens, shot himself by accident while walrus-hunting the next summer.



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This cold-weather house, built of rock and sod, was used by Thule Inuit – the direct ancestors of today’s Inuit – sometime after 1200 AD. It has collapsed now, but once had a roof supported by whalebone. Nearby, an abundance of walrus, whale and seal bones offers a strong suggestion of how these people survived here, long before the arrival of the RCMP.



Right: Early Inuit hunters and later the RCMP probably took advantage of the walrus haul-out right beside the entrance to Dundas Harbour.

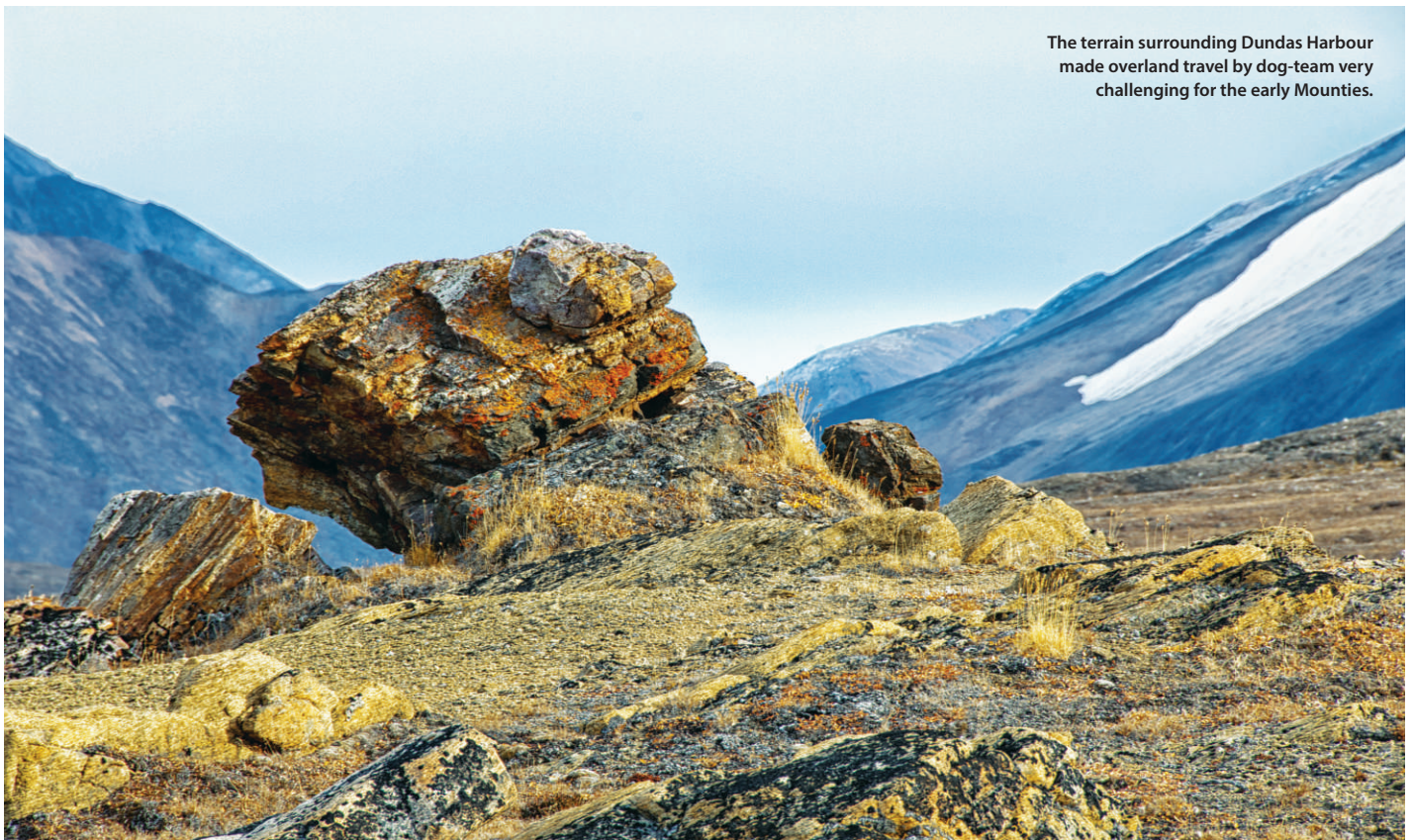


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Dominion of Canada Surveys marker, dated 1923, discovered not far from the RCMP post during Operation Lancaster in 2006.

Both of the men are buried in a small graveyard, Canada's most northerly, just upslope behind the detachment buildings. There also lies the young daughter of one of the Inuit families hired to help with the policing duties, primarily patrols of the surrounding country, empty though it was. With the assistance of Inuit hunters "Keepomee and Komonee" (the RCMP's spelling!) the Mounties were able to undertake far-ranging patrols to the north and west, covering thousands of miles by dog-team during the years 1929-32. For reasons left unrecorded, the RCMP temporarily withdrew from Dundas Harbour in the summer of 1933.

While the RCMP was operating its post at Dundas Harbour, the Hudson's Bay Company opened three trading posts within relatively easy reach: Pond Inlet 240 km to the southeast, Arctic Bay 200 km to the south, and Port Leopold 135 km to the southwest. Apparently the region provided good hunting and fox trapping. The latter two, Arctic Bay and Port Leopold (on the north-eastern tip of Somerset Island), operated for just one year, 1926-27, before the Canadian government decided that this area should be set aside for wildlife conservation, with restricted access for traders and other non-Inuit activities, to ensure the good hunting ground was preserved for Inuit. As part of the compromise for this loss of business, the HBC was given permission to establish a post on Devon Island, for which purpose the Company entered into a lease agreement with the RCMP to use the now empty buildings at Dundas Harbour.



The terrain surrounding Dundas Harbour made overland travel by dog-team very challenging for the early Mounties.



The old Inuit name for this corner of Devon Island is *Talluruti*, which refers to the lines of tattoos on a woman's chin.

On its way north in 1934 with the new traders bound for the Devon Island post, the HBC's ship *Nascopie* picked up three Inuit families from each of Cape Dorset, Pangnirtung, and Pond Inlet, along with their dogs and sleds and other belongings, and delivered them all to the facility at Dundas Harbour. They were apparently attracted voluntarily by the promise of good hunting and fox trapping in the region. The next summer, ice and weather hampered the resupply at Dundas Harbour, so the Company decided the concept was unworkable, and when the *Nascopie* got there in August 1936, it picked everyone up and abandoned the HBC's effort at Dundas Harbour, just one of several very short-term attempts to expand the trading network in the far North. The Inuit associated with that short-lived post were given the option to return home, which one Pond Inlet family and all three Pangnirtung families did. The others all moved with the HBC to re-establish a post at Arctic Bay, and some of those ultimately moved farther west to new posts, first at Fort Ross and then at Spence Bay (now Taloyoak).

Then in September 1945 the RCMP re-opened the Dundas Harbour detachment with two officers, Constables H.H. MacLeod and J.H. Biensch. Accompanying them



were two Inuit special constables, "Malla and Peeungeetoo," plus nine or ten members of their families, wives and children, all from Pond Inlet. For the next five years, it was the most northern post in the Arctic. The RCMP shut the detachment down for good in August 1951, and shifted north to re-establish the post at Craig Harbour on Ellesmere Island, from which location travel by dog-team was both safer and easier for purposes of their patrols.

Nevertheless, to this day, the RCMP visits Dundas Harbour annually to ensure the graveyard is kept in good order. Those graves, along with the weathered buildings in which all these people lived and worked, stand as sentinels still today, marking Canada's early efforts to establish sovereignty in the High Arctic. 