

## Eskimo art, customs recorded in paint by artist

by Shirley Whittington  
When Winnifred Marsh came from London to Eskimo Point on the west shore of Hudson Bay in 1933, there were no coloured polaroid cameras. She recorded what she saw around her with water colours and coloured slides of those paintings were shown to a large audience at Midland's Public Library last Wednesday night.

Eskimo Point, an archeologist inspired her to use her paints to record folk arts and customs that have largely disappeared over the past decade. Fascinated by the delicate beadwork embroidery on deerskin parkas, Mrs. Marsh made a coloured record of the designs. She also painted the faces of the children that she taught in the Mission school, and of their elders, engaged in the work of the settlement. Mrs. Marsh brought some of her on the spot sketches to the library with her, and talked about her decade in the Western

Arctic. "The autumn is a particularly cruel time up there," she said. "There was not enough snow to build an igloo, and the people used to pull their caribou tents tighter and tighter in order to keep out some of the cold. They couldn't use ice for building, although Hudson Bay was frozen. It was just too cold." She remembered a day she spent inside an igloo sketching and fighting the melting drips of water that ran down the neck of her parka. "In the middle of the night," she said, "a group of people came running over to our house,

shrieking with laughter. What was the joke? The joke was that the igloo in which I'd been painting all day had collapsed during the night." The igloos in Mrs. Marsh' paintings are not the symmetrical doomed affairs of popular mythology. They look more like enormous snowdrifts, which was in fact what they were, with the addition of beams for roof support. They were never heated, and access was through a long tunnel.

One of the most striking pictures was of a young Eskimo woman, in beaded parka, framed in an irregularly shaped porthole of snow. "That was the day our whole house was covered with snow," said Mrs. Marsh. "When we opened the back door, it looked like a solid sheet of styrofoam." Her husband dug his way out of the house, and created an opening in the snow outside the kitchen window, and this is how that particular picture was born. The folk crafts and ancient arts of survival are all gone now and Mrs. Marsh feels that the influence of the white man has not been altogether good. "When we had the mission school," she said,



Author and friends

Author-artist Winnifred Marsh discussed her paintings with two admirers during last week's guest lecture at the Midland Public Library. Mrs. Marsh presented slides and talked of her experiences in Canada's far north.

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"we taught the children to read and write in their own language first. Then we taught them to write in English, and a little bit of arithmetic so that they could deal with white men."

Later, government schools separated the children from their families. "This caused a terrible gap between children and parents," she said. "The children were educated in English and there was a language barrier as well."

Winnifred Marsh's paintings have been collected into "The People of the Willow" a beautiful book which tells a little about what it was like to be one of the first white women ever to live in the Arctic circle. It tells a great deal more about the folkways and arts of the Eskimo, which have disappeared in the onrush of civilization. Reverend Donald Marsh became the Anglican Bishop of the Arctic. He died in 1976, and Mrs. Marsh is dedicated to the task of producing a second book from her husband's notes. The Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire bought 37 of Marsh's drawings and paintings which will be presented to Canada's new Museum of the North in Yellowknife. The IODE connection was alive at Wednesday night's book night. After Mrs. Marsh showed her pictures, and spoke about her life among the Padlimiut, local members of the IODE served coffee and refreshments.

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