

Astronomy Talk 13th October 2020

The Cape York Meteorite

This was a “Zoom” talk given by Bob Mizon about the Greenland meteorite. At 31 tons, it is the biggest meteorite in any museum in the world (New York) - but behind its presence there lies a dark story....

It was called the ‘Tent’ by indigenous Inuit people. It is one of eight pieces of a huge iron object that fell in Greenland about 9000 years ago. In 1818 James Ross had brought back iron spear tips from the area and reported that the Inuit had a source of iron which he hadn’t been able to see because of bad weather.

When Robert Peary brought three large pieces to America from Greenland in the late 19th century, he robbed the local Inuit of their only source of iron, with dire results. He also brought back some of the indigenous people - much to their ill fortune. Most of them died of TB, one made his way back to Greenland, and the survivor, a child called Minik, was adopted by the museum’s curator William Wallace.

In 1907, aged 17, Minik discovered that his father’s funeral had been faked. He had watched stones and a stuffed ‘body’ wrapped in a sheet being buried. The body had in fact been dissected and the skeleton later exhibited. The Museum refused to return his father’s remains, and Minik went back to Greenland in 1909.

In 1916, he returned to the USA, only to die in 1918 of the Spanish ‘flu. Finally, in 1993, all the Inuit remains were taken to Greenland, and on the grave marker, laid by the Queen of Denmark, is written, in the indigenous language, ‘Nunamingnut uteqihut’ – ‘They have come home’.