

Title: Into the Great Emptiness

Subtitle: Peril and Survival on the Greenland Ice Cap

Author: David Roberts

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Contents: 356 pp, 5 maps, 15 b&w photos, index, bibliography

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Review: Paul Caffyn

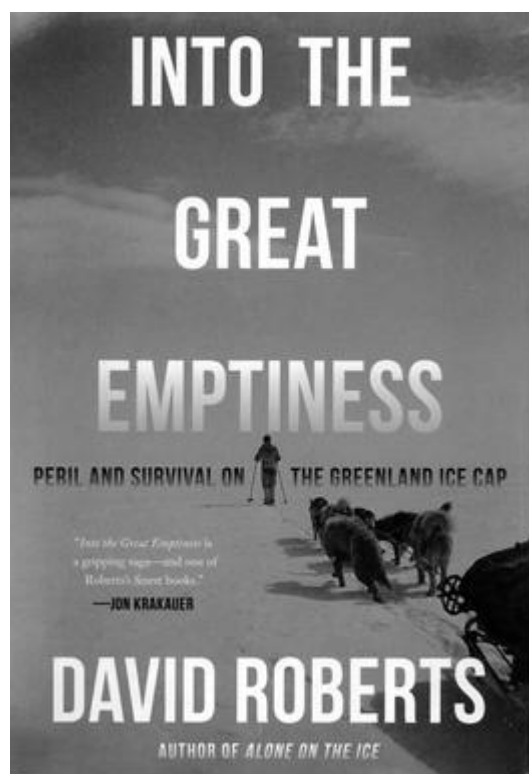
On 20 August 1932, Gino Watkins disappeared whilst hunting seals from his skin kayak in an East Greenland fjord. At the age of only 25, he was leading his fourth Arctic expedition. During the British Arctic Air Route Expedition of 1930-31 (BAARE), Gino was so impressed by the paddling and hunting skills of the local Angmagssalik paddlers, he had a skin kayak built and went on to master the skills of paddling, rolling and seal hunting. Gino and other expedition members took their kayaks back to England where they displayed the skills they had learned.

Fellow BAARE team member Jamie Scott wrote a comprehensive biography of Gino, first published in 1935 while John Ridgway penned a slimmer biography of Gino in 1974. When I first saw a May 2021 FB post from accomplished author David Roberts, that he had just finished a new 160,000-word biography of Gino, I was enthused at the prospect of a new book. But David posted his 'not amused publisher' wanted a 100,000-word text maximum and that his upcoming weeks must be devoted to destroying 'my precious sentences (and Gino's inimitable quirks)'. Diagnosed with throat **cancer**, and after enduring a torrid time with treatment, David sadly passed away in July 2022

In the book's acknowledgements, David writes due to both 'covid lock-down' and his treatment, he was unable to visit SPRI (Scott Polar Research Institute) or RGS (Royal Geographic Society) in England and thus not able to see any of the East Greenland expedition diaries or photos. David wrote he was reliant on books he could buy on-line. He was also unable to visit the big home libraries in USA. And again due to the same constraints, he was unable to visit Greenland.

So, with high expectations for a fresh look at Gino, I was disappointed to find the bulk of the book comprises lengthy extracts from the expedition books written by Freddy Spencer Chapman and Jamie Scott. After opening with the attempts to rescue Augustine Courtauld from the Greenland ice cap, buried by winter snows in the BAARE weather station, 120 miles inland from the coastal base, the chapters move through the four expeditions that Gino planned and led.

Did I learn anything new about Gino from this book? Not a sausage! But to check on names and events, I did delve back into the expedition books published in the 30s. In the past, I was more interested in Gino the kayak man, but I came away with an boosted appreciation for the planner, equipment developer and inspirational Arctic expedition leader.



The bibliography is not complete, while the lean photo choice adds nothing new. This could have been a sought after new Gino biography, but the trimming of 60,000 words with David Robert's precious sentences with 'Gino's imitable quirks' and his failure to access the original expedition diaries and photos held by RGS and SPRI, leaves me unimpressed.

For paddlers not aware of this inspirational young Cambridge lad, this book provides a wonderful insight to the short life of Gino. But this book could have been much more.