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978-1-108-07098-0 - Memoirs of Hans Hendrik: the Arctic Traveller, Serving under Kane, Hayes, Hall and Nares, 1853–1876: Translated from the Eskimo Language

Translated by Henry Rink Edited by George Stephens

Excerpt

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MEMOIRS
OF
HANS HENDRIK,
THE ARCTIC TRAVELLER.

—
INTRODUCTION.

A COUPLE of months ago I received from my friend, Herr Krarup Smith, who resides in Disko Island, a narrative written last winter in the Eskimo language by a native who had shared in several Arctic expeditions. Herr Smith, who is Inspector of the Northern Danish Settlements in Greenland, supposed that parts of the MS. might be fit for publication in some journal. He therefore suggested that I should make such extracts as might suit this purpose. But I had hardly run over the pages before I had made up my mind to publish it entire, just as it was. What I have struck out is not worth mentioning. My reason was, that I had never read any adventures in the far North so curious relatively to their shortness. On translating specimens to others I was corroborated in my opinion, and especially we agreed that, besides setting forth striking vicissitudes, every line helps to describe the inhabitants of the Arctic regions, by reflecting their ideas and their mental development in the person of our author.

I was led to undertake the difficult task of translating the MS. into English, not only by the desire to

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render it accessible to the widest circle possible, but also from a special regard to our author's fellow-travellers in England and America. My doubt whether I should be able to render the sketch tolerably well in English was overcome by my friend, Professor G. Stephens, offering to give it a final revise.

This peculiar record requires some explanation, both as to the author himself, and as to the renowned travellers whom he accompanied.

Birthplace and Nationality of the Author.

In Southern Greenland, on the border of Davis Strait, is the small trading establishment, Fiskernæs. Its latitude is not more northerly than middle Norway, but its climate is more severe than the northernmost coasts of Norway and Iceland. It has been proved by experience that, nowadays, only the present natives are able to live even in the most favourable tracts of Greenland, without being supplied with their chief necessities from more genial countries. Our author belongs to that remarkable Eskimo race which is spread from Greenland to Behrings Straits, and is able to procure a comfortable existence in countries where men of our race only have been able to stay for a couple of years by the help of the numerous and expensive resources of modern civilisation.

It is well known that the capability of the Eskimo to brave their climate depends on their ingenuity in catching and making use of the seal. When they find no better materials, they build a comfortable house merely out of snow, both light and heat it with their seal-oil lamps, manufacture excellent garments out of sealskins, and have the most suitable food for a cold climate in the flesh and blubber of the same animals.

Our author affords a striking example of the independence of his nation, of the climate within their vast territories, as well as of aid from foreign nations. When a young man he was suddenly removed from

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his home to a country about 1000 miles nearer the North Pole, and found himself so attracted by its amenities, that he did not hesitate to settle down there. Furthermore, in his birthplace his countrymen are accustomed to have in their immediate vicinity a shop where they may barter their produce for all sorts of European articles. In Greenland we divide this merchandise into what is necessary, useful, or a luxury. But he proved the whole to be nearly superfluous, for he settled amongst a tribe not only in a state of perfect seclusion, but which had scarcely seen a white man before.

Fiskernæs comprises the trading post of the same name and the Moravian missionary station, Lichtenfels, upon an island, some 3 miles from each other, and numbering both together 240 inhabitants. For more than 100 years Lichtenfels has been the residence of from two to four missionaries, who are recruited from Germany. But the natives here are very poor, and the community has decreased nearly one-half in the last thirty years. The most obvious feature in their impoverishment is their want of boats for their travelling life in summer. This roaming is necessary not only with regard to their hunting and fishing, but also for their health. It counteracts the deadening influence of the climate, and the isolated situation of the dwelling-places. The natives of Lichtenfels only exceptionally have been farther than 20 miles from their home, and many, perhaps, never leave it. I note this expressly to throw light on the condition of our author when he was engaged by the foreign travellers.

Seal-hunting by kayak is still continued by the Greenlanders in the same way as by their ancestors a thousand years ago. The strangers who settled in their land have not taught them the least improvement as regards this chief means of subsistence. For this reason, and as they have kept their language un-

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altered, the Greenlanders maintain a certain independence, notwithstanding the general supremacy of foreigners. They know that they must wholly rely upon themselves; and their peculiar life under numerous hardships and dangers develops from early youth a faculty of self-help not so often found in civilised societies, where division of labour prevails. For the same reason, poverty has a less depressing influence than elsewhere. The hunter will always keep up a certain degree of mental vivacity contrasting with his impoverished state. The dangers besetting kayak-hunting are especially bracing.

The Greenlanders have also taken well to school instruction, and skill in reading and writing is as common amongst them as in any other country.

The same contempt with which white men look down upon people of other races has amply manifested itself in his intercourse with the Eskimo. It has been asserted a hundred years ago, that in Greenland the worst Dane was considered better than the best Greenlander; and this may be so even occasionally now. If a man brought up as a native seal-hunter takes service with foreigners, many of whom consider him an inferior being, and who can only speak with him imperfectly by interpreters of the superior race, he at times must feel himself misunderstood and wronged. A native like Hans, who was taken from his quiet and solitary homestead and had to live with so many strangers, could not help at times being placed in this condition. What he says on such occasions will therefore be found a natural part of the picture he gives. However, thoroughly to understand the strange suspicions exhibited in some parts of his statement, we must consider the traditions still living amongst the Greenlanders about atrocities formerly committed in their country by foreigners, as well as their indistinct ideas of the wars and military discipline of the white men.

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But we see that the instances of feeling himself aggrieved were exceptional. That mutual satisfaction was the rule, is also evident from his taking employ so often. As regards his superiors, I shall only remark that the first of them, Kane, praises him as a very useful and active fellow, on whose energies as a hunter the supplies of the travellers often depended; and the last of them, Sir George Nares, says in his official report: "All speak in the highest terms of Hans the Eskimo, who was untiring in his exertions with the dog-sledge and in procuring game."

The American Expedition under Kane.

1853—1855.

The small sketch map which I have added to this book gives an idea of our author's Arctic travelling routes. It will be seen that he shared in all the four renowned expeditions which have thrown light upon the narrow branch of the sea that divides the Greenland from the American Arctic islands. As far as I know he is the only man who did so. These voyages were undertaken with very different resources, but all of them exhibit examples of skill, courage, and perseverance rivalling the most daring enterprises in other parts of the Arctic regions. The final result with regard to the North Pole, that they only explored the whole of Smith's Sound, proves the enormous difficulties they had to surmount in forcing their way step by step through this passage. The chief aim, however, has now been attained. The end of this mysterious thoroughfare has been reached, and it was found to lead to an ocean, without any land visible, and covered with ice apparently moving only at intervals of many years and without the least probability of being navigable, while on the other hand the extraordinary ruggedness of the ice defies the sledge.

The pioneer was Elisha Kent Kane, who had been

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appointed Surgeon to the Grinnel Expedition in search of John Franklin in the years 1850 to 1851. As the leader of a new expedition he left New York on the 30th of May 1853, in the brig 'Advance.' He touched at Fiskernæs, where he engaged Hans; and at Upernivik, where he obtained another worthy helper, a Dane named Carl Petersen, who became famous afterwards as interpreter and assistant to Arctic navigators.

The other members of the company were—

Henry Brooks, <i>First Officer.</i>	Henry Goodfellow.
Isaac J. Hayes, M.D., <i>Surgeon.</i>	Amos Bonsall.
August Sonntag, <i>Astronomer.</i>	George Stephenson.
John Wall Wilson.	George Whipple.
James McGary.	William Godfrey.
George Rilay.	John Blake.
William Morton.	Jefferson Baker.
Christian Olsen.	Peter Schubert.
	Thomas Hickey.

Kane took his winter-quarters in Rensselaer Harbour, lat. $78^{\circ} 30'$. This place being 15° north of Fiskernæs, where during the shortest day the sun appears about two hours above the horizon, it is not wonderful that Hans was surprised by a perpetual night of about four months' duration. His ideas of the northernmost regions must have been derived from the tales and traditions of the Greenlanders; and these, as far as I remember, seldom mention the darkness in winter, but chiefly dwell on the severity of the weather. However, I am inclined to believe that his terror was partly connected with his ideas about the destruction of the world, which may have been rooted in his imagination at an early age.

From his two years' winter-quarters on the eastern border of the sound, Kane, by help of dog and drag sledges, undertook surveys in different directions, partly across to the American side, but mainly along the coast, pursuing it northward, to find, if possible, the northern end of Greenland. Of these sledge

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expeditions, that of Morton and Hans reached the highest latitude— $80^{\circ} 40'$ —and discovered the open water long said to be connected with an open sea around the North Pole.

In his travelling account, Dr. Kane goes beyond what he promises in his preface—a simple narrative of the adventures of his party. He has set forth theories which afterwards proved unfounded. This, of course, has injured his work, but not cast into the shade the merits of this gallant and talented man, who brought us the first intelligence from those inhospitable regions. His book gave numerous interesting and remarkable facts concerning northernmost Greenland, obtained by immense labour and rare efforts. Especially is his information valuable on the mode of life of the small isolated population of all mankind nearest to either Pole, braving the climate from the abundance of walruses, bears, and other animals, first described by Kane.

It is well known that Kane, in 1855, abandoned his vessel, and made his escape in boats to the most northerly Danish trading station, Upernivik. Only Hans remained, settling amongst the natives of Smith's Sound.

The American Expedition under Hayes.

1860—1861.

I. J. Hayes, who acted as Surgeon of the expedition commanded by Dr. Kane, after his return, drew up a plan for a new exploring voyage towards the North Pole, *viâ* Smith's Sound. With this object he applied to the scientific public for assistance; first the American Geographical and Statistical Society, before which he read a paper in December 1857, setting forth his scheme, and the means proposed for its accomplishment. Notwithstanding his indefatigable zeal, he did not succeed in fitting out an expedition

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by aid of private subscription before 1860. On July 7th he left Boston, in the schooner 'United States,' accompanied by the Astronomer, Sonntag, who had been with Kane.

The whole list of the company was—

I. J. Hayes, *Commander*.
 August Sonntag, *Astronomer and second in command*.
 S. J. McCormick, *Sailing Master*.
 Henry W. Dodge, *Mate*.
 Henry G. Radcliffe, *Assistant Astronomer*.
 George F. Knorr, *Commander's Secretary*.
 Collin C. Starr, *Master's Mate*.
 Gibson Caruthers, *Boatswain and Carpenter*.

Volunteers.

Francis L. Harris and Harvey Heywood.

Seamen.

Thomas Barnum.		William Miller.
John McDonald.		John Williams.
Charles McCormick.		

The ship touched at Upernivik and at the outpost Tasiusak, northward of this settlement, where the party was increased to twenty-one souls, namely, by—

Danes.

Peter Jensen, *Interpreter and Dog-manager*.
 Carl Emil Olsvig, *Sailor*.
 Carl Christian Petersen, *Sailor and Carpenter*.

Eskimo Hunters and Dog-drivers.

Peter, Marcus, Jacob.

At the end of August they touched at Cape York and picked up Hans and his wife and child.

Hayes did not bring his ship quite as far as Kane, the hindrances from the drift-ice proving still greater this year. But the difference was only small; and, on the other hand, it must be remembered that Hayes brought his ship safe home. He took winter-quarters in Port Foulke, 40 miles S.W. of Rensselaer Harbour. On November 19th, the native Peter, or "Pele," disappeared; and on December 21st, just in the middle

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of the winter night, two months before the sun should re-appear, Hans and Sonntag started on their fatal journey, from which the latter was never to return. As alluded to by Hans, it was suggested by some on board that he had caused Peter to run away, and given false report as to Dr. Sonntag's death, which he had not taken pains enough to prevent. I only mention this as a curiosity, in connection with what I have stated above on the relations between the Eskimo and the foreigners in general.

On April 3rd, Hayes set out with a party consisting of twelve men, having one dog-sledge and one hand-drawn sledge, to cross Smith's Sound, and proceed as far as possible to the north on the other side. The difficulties were of the most disheartening kind. The whole sound was filled with drift-ice of the most massive description, crushed, piled up, and now frozen together, and having the spaces and crevasses between the hummocks more or less filled with drifted snow. It was like an accumulation of rocks closely packed and heaped up over a waste plain in great clusters and endless ridges, leaving scarcely a foot of level surface. The travellers had to pick their way as best they could amongst the inequalities, crawling over the walls of screwed ice and sometimes even climbing bergs more than 50 feet high. The obstacles encountered may be judged of by the fact that the journey of 80 miles across the sound took thirty-one days, notwithstanding the utmost exertions of strong and persevering men. The drag-sledge was left behind, and at last Hayes retained only one companion, George Knorr, with whom he reached his furthest point on the 18th of May, supposed to be a half degree farther north than the latitude reached by Hans and Morton on the opposite side in 1854.

July 14th, 1861, the ship was released and left Port Foulke. August 15th, it anchored in the harbour of Upernivik.

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The American 'Polaris' Expedition under Hall.

1871—1873.

Charles Francis Hall, a native of Cincinnati, had made two previous voyages to the Arctic regions, and by a long residence amongst the Eskimo thoroughly acclimatized himself, and acquired a complete knowledge of Eskimo life. He was neither seaman nor possessed of scientific acquirements, but an enthusiastic leader who had wholly devoted himself to Arctic discovery. For the expedition now in question he had a whaling Captain, Buddington, as his sailing-master. Dr. Bessels who had studied in Heidelberg, and had already made one trip to the Arctic regions, was the leader of the scientific explorations. The 'Polaris,' to whose equipment Congress had contributed 30,000 dollars, left New York June 29th 1871. The last letter from Hall was dated Tasiusak in lat. $73^{\circ} 21'$, August 24th. The passage north proved so exceptionally favourable this year, that from about the latter place the 'Polaris' reached her furthest northern point in Smith's Sound, lat. $82^{\circ} 12'$, in five days.

Here they were stopped, and though Hall was very reluctant to turn back, they followed the advice of the sailing-master and took winter quarters in Polaris Bay in lat. $81^{\circ} 27'$. Eighteen miles north of this place the ice appeared heavier than anywhere further south, but all visible from the harbour seemed only of one year's growth. From their furthest point they believe they saw land in a northerly direction, stretching as far as 84° . Hall died of apoplexy in November 1871. His attack was caused by want of caution in exposing himself to a sudden change of temperature on a sledge journey. The relation which Hans gives of his wife's sickness and vision is very characteristic with regard to the belief of the natives in the so called "Kivigtoks." By this name are denoted persons who flee mankind,