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978-1-108-07159-8 - The North West Passage: Being the Record of a Voyage of Exploration
of the Ship Gjøa 1903–1907: Volume 1

Roald Amundsen

Excerpt

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THE NORTH WEST PASSAGE

BEING THE RECORD OF A VOYAGE OF
EXPLORATION OF THE SHIP "GJÖA"

1903 — 1907 BY ROALD AMUNDSEN

WITH A SUPPLEMENT BY FIRST

LIEUTENANT HANSEN

VICE-COMMANDER OF

THE EXPEDITION.

CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTION.

FROM the days when the Phœnician sailors groped along the coasts of the Mediterranean, in the early dawn of civilisation, up to the present time, explorers have ever forged their way across unknown seas and through dark forests — sometimes slowly, and with centuries of intermission, at other times with giant strides, as when the discovery of America and the great voyages round the world dispersed clouds of ignorance and prejudice even in reference to the globe itself.

We all know that many explorers have been impelled by the desire for riches which they thought awaited them in unknown lands and seas; in fact, it may be said of the majority of expeditions, that they would never have been undertaken had it not been for the

Chapter I.

stimulus of some purely material object or expectation. But the history of that branch of exploration, whose goal has been the eternal ice under the poles, shines forth with a bright and pure splendour of its own, not only with the lustre of the white snow-fields and strange celestial signs of the Arctic Region, but also with that of true and untainted idealism. If we except fishing or hunting expeditions pure and simple (to which, in fact, polar exploration owes a very great debt of gratitude), we may safely assume that even the most extravagant flight of imagination has never led anyone to penetrate the Arctic Regions in the hope of finding “gold, and green woods.” It is in the service of science that these numerous and incessant assaults have been made upon what is perhaps the most formidable obstacle ever encountered by the inquisitive human spirit, that barrier of millennial, if not primæval ice which, in a wide and compact wall, enshrouds the mysteries of the North Pole. In spite of all the tragic calamities, the sad failures and bitter disappointments, these assaults have been repeatedly waged and as repeatedly renewed, and are still being renewed to this day. And this dogged perseverance, if it has not yet quite reduced the fortress, has at least forced its gates ajar and gained a glimpse into the far-distant mysteries lying beyond them.

A mighty breach was made in the ice rampart when Nordenskjöld achieved the North East Passage, and wrenched the Asiatic continent from its grasp. A generation earlier, Franklin, and the Franklin Expedi-

Introduction.

tions, had proved that a strip of open sea bathed the whole coast of North America, and many are the other breaches made by skilled and hardy Polar explorers who have essayed to tear away the dark veil of mystery enshrouding the North; heavy have been the sacrifices made to achieve this end, and none more heroic than those made on the North West Passage.

Perhaps no tragedy of the Polar ice has so deeply stirred mankind as that of Franklin and his crew, stirred them not simply to sorrow, but also to stubborn resumption of the struggle. We knew there was a sea passage round Northern America, but we did not know whether this passage was practicable for ships, and no one had ever yet navigated it throughout. This unsolved question agitated above all the minds of those who, from their childhood, had been impressed by the profound tragedy of the Franklin Expedition. Just as the “Vega” had to navigate the entire passage to the East, so our knowledge as to this strip of open sea to the West must remain inadequate until this passage also had been traced from end to end by one ship’s keel.

The little ship to whose lot this task fell was the “Gjøa.” Little was it dreamt when she was being built, for a herring-boat, in the Rosendal ship-yard on the Hardanger, that she was to achieve this triumph, though it is hard to say what they do not dream of up there in the Fjords. Nor did any such dream ever enter the mind of her future skipper when the story of John Franklin first captivated his imagination as a

Chapter I.

boy of 8 or 9 years old. Yet the imagination of a boy offers a very wide scope.

May 30th, 1889, was a red-letter day in many a Scandinavian boy's life. Certainly it was in mine. It was the day when Fridtjof Nansen returned from his Greenland Expedition. The young Norwegian ski-runner came up the Christiania Fjord on that bright sunny day, his erect form surrounded by the halo of universal admiration at the deed he had accomplished, the miracle, the impossible. That May day the Fjord celebrated its most beautiful spring revels; the town was radiant with decorations; the people held high holiday. That day I wandered with throbbing pulses amid the bunting and the cheers, and all my boyhood's dreams reawoke to tempestuous life. For the first time something in my secret thoughts whispered clearly and tremulously: "If *you* could make the North West Passage!" Then came the year 1893. And Nansen sailed again. I felt I *must* go with him. But I was too young, and my mother bade me stay at home and go on with my lessons. And I stayed. My mother passed away, and for a time my affection for her memory struggled to keep me faithful to her wish, but at last it gave way. No bond could restrain my yearning to pursue the object of my old and only desire. I threw up my studies and decided to start the long training for the goal I had set before me, that of becoming an arctic explorer.

In 1894 I engaged as an ordinary seaman on board

Introduction.

the old “Magdalena,” of Tönsberg, and went out seal-hunting in the Polar Sea. This was my first encounter with the ice, and I liked it. Time passed, my training progressed, and from 1897 to 1899 I took part, as mate, in the Belgian Antarctic Expedition under Adrien de Gerlache. It was during this voyage that my plan matured: I proposed to combine the dream of my boyhood as to the North West Passage with an aim, in itself of far greater scientific importance, *that of locating the present situation of the Magnetic North Pole.*

As soon as I got home I confided my project to my friend Aksel S. Steen, under-director at the Meteorological Institute. In fact, I did not know, myself, whether the object which I had set myself was of sufficient importance. He speedily convinced me that it was. With a card of introduction from Steen, I went to Hamburg to submit my project to the greatest authority of the day in terrestrial magnetism, Privy Councillor Professor Dr. G. von Neumayer, at that time Director of the “Deutsche Seewarte” (German Marine Observatory). As I unfolded my project, the amiable old gentleman’s interest grew, until in the end he actually beamed with rapture, and for some time I received instruction at the “Deutsche Seewarte,” under his personal direction.

At last the great day arrived when the project was to be submitted to Fridtjof Nansen. I think it is Mark Twain who tells of a man who was so small that he had to go twice through the door before he could be seen.

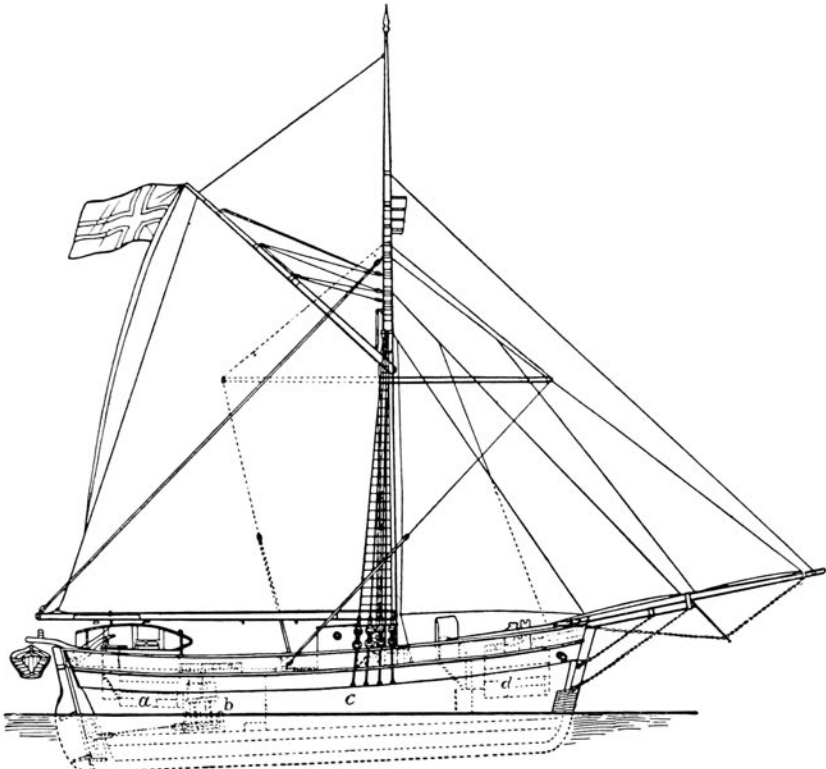
Chapter I.

But this man's insignificance was nothing compared to what I felt on the morning I stood in Nansen's villa at Liysaker and knocked at the door of his study. "Come in," said a voice from inside. And then I stood face to face with the man who for years had loomed before me as something almost superhuman: the man who had achieved exploits which stirred every fibre of my being. From that moment I date the actual realisation of the "Gjøa" Expedition: Nansen approved of my plans.

But, of course, that was not everything. For a Polar expedition I wanted money. And at that time I had very little. What I had at my disposal was barely sufficient to provide a vessel and scientific instruments, so the only plan was to go round to all who were likely to take an interest in the enterprise. This was "running the gauntlet" in a fashion I would not willingly repeat. However, I have many bright and pleasant memories from those days of men who encouraged me and gave me all the support they could. I have also other memories—of those who thought they were infinitely wiser than their fellow-creatures, and had a right to criticise and condemn whatever others undertook or proposed to undertake; but let me put aside the dark memories and dwell only on the brighter. Professor Nansen was indefatigable in this matter as in all others. My three brothers helped me assiduously in my hard task. I first procured scientific instruments. Then it came to the *vessel*.

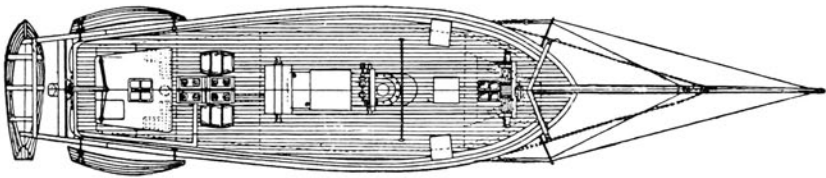
My choice fell upon the yacht "Gjøa," hailing from Tromsø. She was built, as I have already said, at

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a. Aft Cabin. *b.* Engine Room. *c.* Main Hold. *d.* Fore Cabin.

“GJÖA” (47 TONS R.).



DECK OF THE “GJÖA.”

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Introduction.

Rosendal, on the Hardanger, in 1872. Her owner was Captain Asbjörn Sexe, of Haugesund. After she had been used for many years as a herring boat along the coast, she was sold in the eighties to Captain H. C. Johannesen, of Tromsø, and sailed the Polar Sea for some years. She was not spared there, but had ample opportunities of proving herself an uncommonly well-built boat. When I purchased the “Gjøa,” in 1901, I had her fitted out for a summer voyage in the Polar Sea, so that I might test her and learn to handle her. I had never been on board a yacht, and was quite unaccustomed to handling so small a craft. The voyage turned out to my complete satisfaction; the “Gjøa” behaved splendidly under all conditions. Of course, it was necessary to make a number of improvements before she undertook her proposed long voyage. Most of these were carried out at the Tromsø ship-yard, and I owe my deepest gratitude to the Works for the extreme conscientiousness with which everything was done.

In May, 1902, the “Gjøa” hoisted her flag and bade farewell to what for many years had been her home port. I put in to Trondhjem to have the necessary ironwork on board executed at the engineering works of Isidor Nielsen. Petroleum tanks were built to the shape of the boat. Our little motor—a 13 H.P. of the “Dan” type—which was connected to everything that could possibly be driven with its aid, was easy to work and practical in every part. The motor was the pet of every one on board. When it was not working we seemed to miss a

Chapter I.

good comrade. I may say that our successful negotiation of the North West Passage was very largely due to our excellent little engine.

In the spring of 1903, the “Gjøa” was berthed alongside the Fremnaes at Christiania to take in stores and provisions. The large, peculiarly built provision boxes were stowed and closely packed like children’s bricks in a box. So neatly was this done that we found space on our little “Gjøa” for food and equipment, enough and to spare *for 5 years*. In the very important work of supplies I received invaluable help from Professor Sofus Torup. All our hermetically sealed goods, which were ready in October, 1902, were tested and examined by him. All our pemmican, both for men and dogs, was prepared by Sergeant Peder Ristvedt under Professor Torup’s supervision, as was also the fish meal.

In May, 1903, the “Gjøa” lay ready for departure, and all who were to take part in the expedition assembled. Their names were :—

1. First Lieutenant Godfred Hansen, born in Copenhagen in 1876. He was second in command of the expedition. During his term of service in the Danish Navy he had made four voyages to Iceland and the Færøes and was warmly interested in Polar exploration. He was navigator, astronomer, geologist and photographer.

2. Anton Lund, first mate, born in Tromsø in 1864. He had served for many years as skipper and harpoonist on the Arctic Sea.