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978-1-108-07168-0 - In Northern Mists: Arctic Exploration in Early Times: Volume 1

Fridtjof Nansen Translated by Arthur G. Chater

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Accounts of the earliest exploration of the Arctic are scattered through many literatures. In writing this work, reissued here in the two-volume English translation of 1911, the celebrated Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen (1861–1930) returned to many of the original sources. Calling on others to help him interpret texts in several languages, Nansen begins his account with the first mentions of the Arctic in Greek literature and ends with voyages of the sixteenth century. He notably questions some of the traditional history based on Norse sagas. Each volume contains lengthy quotations from little-known documents, making much valuable information accessible to non-specialists. Volume 1 begins in antiquity and, after presenting maps and legends of the Middle Ages, turns to the voyages of the Norsemen to Iceland and Greenland. The final part deals with the possible discovery of North America or Vinland.

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VOLUME 1

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“THE GOLDEN CLOUDS CURTAINED THE DEEP WHERE IT LAY,
AND IT LOOKED LIKE AN EDEN AWAY, FAR AWAY”

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IN NORTHERN MISTS

ARCTIC EXPLORATION IN EARLY TIMES

BY FRIDTJOF NANSEN

G.C.V.O., D.Sc., D.C.L., Ph.D., PROFESSOR OF OCEANO-

GRAPHY IN THE UNIVERSITY OF CHRISTIANIA, ETC.

TRANSLATED BY ARTHUR G. CHATER

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VOLUME ONE

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PREFACE

THIS book owes its existence in the first instance to a rash promise made some years ago to my friend Dr. J. Scott Keltie, of London, that I would try, when time permitted, to contribute a volume on the history of arctic voyages to his series of books on geographical exploration. The subject was an attractive one; I thought I was fairly familiar with it, and did not expect the book to take a very long time when once I made a start with it. On account of other studies it was a long while before I could do this; but when at last I seriously took the work in hand, the subject in return monopolised my whole powers.

It appeared to me that the natural foundation for a history of arctic voyages was in the first place to make clear the main features in the development of knowledge of the North in early times. By tracing how ideas of the Northern World, appearing first in a dim twilight, change from age to age, how the old myths and creations of the imagination are constantly recurring, sometimes in new shapes, and how new ones are added to them, we have a curious insight into the working of the human mind in its endeavour to subject to itself the world and the universe.

But as I went deeper into the subject I became aware that the task was far greater than I had supposed: I found that much that had previously been written about it was not to be depended upon; that frequently one author had copied another, and that errors and opinions which had once gained admission remained embedded in the literary tradition. What had to be done was to confine one's self to the actual sources, and as far as possible to build up independently the best possible structure from the very foundation. But the more

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extensive my studies became, the more riddles I perceived—riddle after riddle led to new riddles, and this drew me on farther and farther.

On many points I arrived at views which to some extent conflicted with those previously held. This made it necessary to give, not merely the bare results, but also a great part of the investigations themselves. I have followed the words of Niebuhr, which P. A. Munch took as a motto for “*Det norske Folks Historie*” :

“*Ich werde suchen die Kritik der Geschichte nicht nach dunkeln Gefühlen, sondern forschend, auszuführen, nicht ihre Resultate, welche nur blinde Meinungen stiften, sondern die Untersuchungen selbst in ihrem ganzen Umfange vortragen.*”

But in this way my book has become something quite different from what was intended, and far larger. I have not reached the history of arctic voyages proper.

Many may think that too much has been included here, and yet what it has been possible to mention here is but an infinitesimal part of the mighty labour in vanished times that makes up our knowledge of the North. The majority of the voyages, and those the most important, on which the first knowledge was based, have left no certain record ; the greatest steps have been taken by unknown pioneers, and if a halo has settled upon a name here and there, it is the halo of legend.

My investigations have made it necessary to go through a great mass of literature, for which I lacked, in part, the linguistic qualifications. For the study of classical, and of mediæval Latin literature, I found in Mr. Amund Sommerfeldt a most able assistant, and most of the translations of Greek and Latin authors are due to him. By his sound and sober criticism of the often difficult original texts he was of great help to me.

In the study of Arabic literature Professor Alexander Seippel has afforded me excellent help, combined with interest in the subject, and he has translated for me the statements of Arab authors about the North.

In the preparation of this work, as so often before, I owe a

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deep debt of gratitude to my old friend, Professor Moltke Moe. He has followed my studies from the very beginning with an interest that was highly stimulating; with his extensive knowledge in many fields bordering on those studies he has helped me by word and deed, even more often than appears in the course of the book. His intimate acquaintance with the whole world of myth has been of great importance to the work in many ways; I will mention in particular his large share in the attempt at unravelling the difficult question of Wineland and the Wineland voyages. Here his concurrence was the more valuable to me since at first he disagreed with the conclusions and views at which I had arrived; but the constantly increasing mass of evidence, which he himself helped in great measure to collect, convinced him of their justice, and I have the hope that the inquiry, particularly as regards this subject, will prove to be of value to future historical research.

With his masterly knowledge and insight Professor Alf Torp has given me sound support and advice, especially in difficult linguistic and etymological questions. Many others, whose names are mentioned in the course of the book, have also given me valuable assistance.

I owe special thanks to Dr. Axel Anthon Björnbo, Librarian of the Royal Library of Copenhagen, for his willing collaboration, which has been of great value to me. While these investigations of mine were in progress, he has been occupied in the preparation of his exhaustive and excellent work on the older cartography of Greenland. At his suggestion we have exchanged our manuscripts, and have mutually criticised each other's views according to our best ability; the book will show that this has been productive in many ways. Dr. Björnbo has also assisted me in another way: I have, for instance, obtained copies of several old maps through him. He has, besides, sent me photographs of vignettes and marginal drawings from ancient Icelandic and Norwegian MSS. in the Library of Copenhagen.

Mr. K. Eriksen has drawn the greater part of the reproduc-

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tions of the vignettes and the old maps ; other illustrations are drawn by me. In the reproduction of the maps it has been sought rather to bring before the reader in a clear form the results to which my studies have led than to produce detailed facsimiles of the originals.

In conclusion I wish to thank Mr. Arthur G. Chater for the careful and intelligent way in which he has executed the English translation. In reading the English proofs I have taken the opportunity of making a number of corrections and additions to the original text.

FRIDTJOF NANSEN

Lysaker, August 1911

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