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978-1-108-07514-5 - Narrative of an Expedition to the East Coast of Greenland: Sent by Order of the King of Denmark, in Search of the Lost Colonies, Under the Command of Captain W. A. Graah of the Danish Royal Navy
Wilhelm August Graah Translated by George Gordon Macdougall

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Narrative of an Expedition to the East Coast of Greenland

In 1828 a Danish expedition was sent out from Copenhagen under the command of the naval officer and explorer Wilhelm August Graah (1793–1863). Its goal was to locate lost Norse settlements on the coast of Greenland, which had existed in certain places from around the turn of the millennium until their collapse some centuries later. The Danes did not find any settlement where they searched on the eastern coast, and the men endured harrowing conditions and near starvation during three winters. First published in Danish in 1832 and reissued here in its 1837 English translation, Graah's work opens with a brief history of the exploration and colonisation of Greenland before recounting his own expedition. Observations on the Greenlandic Inuit are incorporated as well. Addressing what was known about the Norse settlements at that time, the appendix also contains the expedition's scientific observations.

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WILHELM AUGUST GRAAH
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NARRATIVE OF AN EXPEDITION

TO THE

EAST COAST OF GREENLAND,

SENT BY ORDER OF THE KING OF DENMARK,

IN SEARCH OF

THE LOST COLONIES,

UNDER THE COMMAND OF

CAPT^N W. A. GRAAH, OF THE DANISH ROYAL NAVY,
KNIGHT OF DANNEBROG, &c.

TRANSLATED FROM THE DANISH,

BY

THE LATE G. GORDON MACDOUGALL, F.R.S.N.A.,

FOR THE

ROYAL GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY OF LONDON.

WITH THE

ORIGINAL DANISH CHART COMPLETED BY THE EXPEDITION.

LONDON:
JOHN W. PARKER, WEST STRAND.

M.DCCC.XXXVII.

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PREFACE.

THE death of MR. MACDOUGALL, the Translator of the following pages, who was unfortunately drowned at Largs, in Scotland, in October, 1835, having unavoidably delayed the publication of this work, advantage has been taken of the delay, to profit by the kind offer of CAPTAIN JAMES CLARKE ROSS, Royal Navy, to add a few notes to the work; which, from his experience on the Coast of Greenland, and in the Arctic Seas, cannot fail to enhance its value.

It has been considered better to allow the homely style in these pages, probably attendant upon an almost literal translation of the Danish, to remain unchanged, rather than risk the chance of error, by substituting the more usual forms of expression.

THE EDITOR.

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OFFICIAL INSTRUCTIONS

TO

W. A. GRAAH, Esq., FIRST LIEUTENANT, ROYAL NAVY.

HIS MAJESTY THE KING having been graciously pleased, by Royal Mandate bearing date the 18th of last December, to nominate you to the command of an Expedition having for its object to explore the East coast of Greenland, from Cape Farewell to lat. 69° North, We, the undersigned Commissioners specially appointed to direct the preparations for, and subsequently to superintend, the same, communicate to you the following Instructions for your government.

The Expedition will consist, besides yourself, of Mr. Vahl, as Naturalist, and Mr. Matthiesen, Superintendent of the Colony of Frederick's-hope, in Greenland. Copies of the Instructions given to these gentlemen, are herewith furnished you, for your information. You are, further, authorized to take with you a Danish sailor, to serve as cook. The choice of the individual is left wholly to yourself: we would, however, recommend you to select for this office, some person already familiar with the navigation of the Greenland seas. The rest of the persons to be attached to the Expedition will be native Greenlanders, of whom you will engage a sufficient number, men and women, to man two women's-boats, and two kajaks, these being the sort of vessel in which we deem it most advisable for you to perform your voyage.

You will, in company with Mr. Vahl, and the sailor above-mentioned, take a passage in the vessel destined to sail, about the middle of March, for the Colony of Juliana's-hope. Arrangements to that effect have been concluded with the Greenland Board of

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Trade, and preparations will be made for reception in it of whatever articles it may be necessary for you to take with you for the purposes of the Expedition, and concerning which you will apply—with regard to provisions, stores, and other like necessaries, to the undersigned the Councillor of Justice Gede;—and as far as regards the Instruments you may require, to the undersigned Captain Zahrtmann.

On your arrival at Juliana's-hope, you will communicate with Mr. Matthiesen, and we judge it most expedient for you thereupon to set about exploring the coasts in the immediate vicinity of the Colony, particularly in the direction of North, by which means you will the sooner meet with him. On his reaching Juliana's-hope you will, in conjunction with him, determine on the measures to be taken with respect to the building of your women's-boats, the engaging of crews for them, and whatever else may be necessary towards the furtherance of your Expedition. You will perceive from the copy furnished you of the Instructions given Mr. Matthiesen, that we have thought it most conducive to the interests of the Expedition to intrust to him especially the charge of these preparatory measures, as being the individual most likely to be possessed of the requisite local knowledge. Though we, however, thus exempt you from this duty, we still leave it to your discretion, as commanding the Expedition, to determine whether, or not, it may be expedient for you to take steps towards these preparations previously to his arrival.

We presume that, on being joined by Mr. Matthiesen, you will be able to determine at what time your preparations at Juliana's-hope will be completed, and this ascertained, you will decide upon the place which you may think best adapted for you to winter at. We are of opinion, that Nennortalik or Friederichsthal are best suited to this purpose, as you will there be able to take advantage of the first opportunity that may offer in the Spring of 1829, for setting out upon your Expedition. As, however, the preparations above referred to, and various other circumstances, may create obstacles that we are here unable to foresee, we leave all this to your discretion, advising only that you employ the year 1828 in such a

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manner as to enable you to seize the very first occasion that may present itself in 1829 of setting out; with a view to which, you will, as soon as Mr. Matthiesen shall have joined you at Juliana's-hope, at all events transmit, by women's-boats, to Nennortalik or Friederichsthal, the various articles you may design to take with you upon your Expedition.

Whatever leisure time may be at your disposal between the date of your arrival in Greenland and your going into winter quarters, you will employ in drawing up a chart of as much as possible of the coasts of the district of Juliana's-hope, determining by astronomical observation the latitudes of the principal points, and their longitude, as well by means of the chronometers with which you will be provided, as by lunar observations whenever an opportunity for making such may offer. These observations you will enter regularly in a register to be kept for that purpose, and in which you will be careful to specify in every instance the data on which your calculations have been founded, as also, in a separate section, whatever magnetical observations you may make, as well of the dip and variation of the needle, as of the intensity of the magnetic force. At the place where you may winter, and whither, we take it for granted, you will have had your larger instruments conveyed, you are further directed, besides the above, to neglect no opportunity of accurately determining the longitude by observation of the occultation of fixed stars, and the eclipse of satellites, with a view to subsequent comparison with simultaneous observations made in Europe; and you will therefore combine with the meridian of said place the various points where, in the course of the year, you may have made observations of longitude. Among your other magnetical observations, you will, still further, be careful to note the diurnal changes of the magnetic needle, and specify the same in your register, which, on your departure for the East coast, you will leave, under a sealed cover, in safe keeping, together with such of your instruments as you cannot conveniently take with you. You will, moreover, annex a copy of the observations you may make next Winter, for determining the positive longitude, to the Report you are to address to us before setting out for the East

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coast, which Report we expect to receive with the homeward-bound ship of 1829. As early as possible in 1829, you will set out on your Expedition, whose limit is to be the southernmost extremity of the land seen by Captain Scoresby in 1822, the same called by him Cape Barclay, and said to be in lat. $69^{\circ} 13' N.$, and long. $24^{\circ} 25' W.$ of Greenwich, beyond which you will in no case proceed. We judge that you will be obliged to pass one Winter on the East coast, but not more than one; and we enjoin you, therefore, on no account to turn back without having reached the object in view, be the difficulties you may encounter what they may, until the year 1830 be so far advanced that it may be absolutely necessary for you to do so, in order to reach Friederichsthal before the setting in of Winter, and thus avoid the necessity of spending another Winter on that desert coast. The only event in which you are authorized to deviate from the rule here laid down, is the following. As the aim and end of the Expedition is to seek for traces of the old Icelandic colonists supposed to have inhabited these coasts, every effort should be made by you to sail along the whole extent of them as high as lat. 69° , and this, accordingly, we recommend you to do, without stopping to make any special researches on the way, the more so as you will doubtless be furnished with abundant time for so doing, by the stoppages which the nature of the navigation will, from time to time, compel you to make.

Now, as you will perceive from the Manuscript Chart accompanying these Instructions, this coast, according to the old traditions handed down to us, never was inhabited so high up; if, therefore, between the 62^{nd} and 63^{rd} degrees of latitude, you meet with any vestiges of ancient colonization; if you discover fiords, with regular vegetation on their banks, like those in the district of Juliana's-hope; if you observe any conformity between the face of the shore and the ancient charts; or fall in with a race of people different from the natives of West Greenland; and, if on proceeding further, you find no longer any actual, nor any vestiges of a former, population, you will, in such case, turn back without proceeding to the above-mentioned Cape Barclay, in order that you may devote the more time to a close and careful examination of

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the traces thus discovered. You will learn from the Instructions drawn up for Mr. Vahl, what the points of Natural History and Philosophy are, to which his attention is to be especially directed, and with regard to which, you will afford him all the facilities and assistance in your power,—an injunction which it is the less necessary for us to urge, as we are well assured that you will feel disposed yourself to take part in such scientific pursuits, as well as encourage others to assist in them, whenever practicable. To your especial care we recommend the drawing up of a chart of the East coast, in so far as may be possible on a voyage like that on which you are about to enter, not doubting that you will make the best use of your small collection of instruments, which, for your Expedition to the East coast, should, in our opinion, comprise but a pocket chronometer, a small sextant, a small azimuth-compass, an artificial horizon, and a couple of good telescopes. Yourself, as well as Mr. Vahl and Mr. Matthiesen, will enter, in a day-book, full and copious notes of all the observations and remarks you may make in the course of your Expedition, with a view to their being reduced to order, and extracts made from them when a fitting opportunity may offer.

The above comprises all that we here, and at this moment, are capable of furnishing in the form of Instructions, for an enterprise of so peculiar a nature as that in which you are about to engage. The rest we leave to your skill and discretion, our unqualified confidence in which is best attested by our recommendation of you to this important trust. We take, however, occasion to remark, that there is no way in which you can more advantageously display these qualities, than by maintaining that perfect good understanding among the members of the Expedition, which we look upon as absolutely indispensable to its ultimate success.

We take this opportunity of informing you, that a yacht, belonging to Messrs. Svendsen and Thorlacius, of Cœnundafjord, in Iceland, is expected to make an attempt at reaching the coast of Greenland, in the Summer of 1829, or 1830. If, therefore, you should see a vessel of this description, you may conclude it to be the one here spoken of, and, if practicable, you will place yourself

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in communication with it, in order to transmit to us, by this channel, intelligence of your condition. For the rest, you will furnish us with information of your progress and proceedings as often as may be practicable; and especially if, as we suppose will be the case, you should spend the Winter of 1829-30 on the East coast, you will be careful to send intelligence to that effect, to Nennortalik, in order that it may be transmitted to us by the ship that may be sent to Juliana's-hope, in 1830. All such reports you will address to the undersigned Count Moltke.

We presume that you will spend the Winter of 1830-31, at the same place, and occupied with the same employments, as that of 1828-29, and, as no further attempt is contemplated, whatever may be the result of your Expedition, you will, in the Spring of 1831, resume your hydrographic labours in the district of Juliana's-hope, taking care, however, to return to that colony by the time that the ship destined to sail from thence is ready to put to sea, when you will embark in it, together with Mr. Vahl, and the sailor you take with you, and repair hither. Mr. Matthiesen, on the other hand, after having rendered you the account referred to in his Instructions, may, in the Spring of 1831, at once proceed to resume his ordinary functions at Frederick's-hope.

With respect to your means of conveyance and subsistence in Greenland, both before and after your Expedition to the East coast, orders have been given to the Superintendent of the Colony of Juliana's-hope, who, as well as his subordinate functionaries, has been commanded by the Greenland Board of Trade, not only in this, but likewise in every other respect, to furnish promptly, yourself and companions with all the aid you may require, and they may be in condition to afford.

Having thus made every provision which we have judged calculated to promote the success of your enterprise, and having touched here on all the points to which, circumstanced as we are with respect to the distant country where it is to be prosecuted, we have thought ourselves justified in calling your attention, leaving the rest to your own conduct and discretion, we have now but to express our earnest hope, that, by a propitious combination of

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events, you may be so fortunate as to attain the object of your enterprise,—an object that has been sought in vain for centuries, and that involves national interests of such great importance.

COPENHAGEN,
Feb. 21, 1828.

A. W. MOLTKE, J. W. HORNEMANN,
 GEDE, ZAHRTMANN.

INSTRUCTIONS

FOR

MR. VAHL, AS NATURALIST TO THE EXPEDITION.

HIS MAJESTY THE KING has been graciously pleased, by Royal Mandate dated the 18th of December, 1827, to order that an Expedition, under command of W. A. Graah, Esq., First Lieut., Royal Navy, and to which Mr. Matthiesen, Superintendent of the Colony of Frederick's-hope, will be attached, shall, in the Spring of 1829, set out from the district of Juliana's-hope, in South Greenland, with the view of exploring the East coast of that country; and His Majesty has been further pleased to appoint you Naturalist to the same.

Although the undersigned Commissioners entertain no doubt, that, as a man of honour, and lover of science, and one aware no less of the importance of the object at which the Expedition aims, than of the necessity that must accrue to those who participate in it of a sacrifice of the ordinary conveniences of life, your conduct will be marked by a strict attention to the duties incumbent on you, they nevertheless, feel it to be their duty, in obedience to His Majesty's command, to communicate to you the following Instructions, the observance of which is of importance to the success of the Expedition.

I. As the successful issue of the enterprise contemplated

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depends not only on the correctness of its original plan, and the courage of those engaged in it, aided by a propitious combination of events, but likewise on their tact and prudence in their intercourse, as well with one another, as with the natives of the country; it is incumbent on you to maintain, as far as may depend on you, unanimity and concord among the members of the Expedition, and, with respect to the natives, uniformly to observe such a line of conduct as is calculated to gain their confidence and good will.

II. Immediately on your arrival at Juliana's-hope, you will proceed to explore the various large fiords in its vicinity, particularly such as have not hitherto been visited by naturalists, and as you judge, either from your own observation, or on the information of others, most likely to yield results important to science. The women's or other boats, with their crews, provisions, &c., which may be required by you for the purpose of prosecuting these researches, will be furnished you on application to the Superintendent of the Colony.

III. You will make out a list of the various specimens you may find, adding a description, where requisite, of such as are new, or rare. Of such as are unusual here, you will, as far as may be practicable, make a collection,—of animals, namely, and minerals for the Royal Museum, and of plants and seeds for the Botanic Garden. Should there occur among these specimens any of which we do not possess correct delineations, and which it may be impossible for you to transport, you will, if time permit, make coloured drawings of them, with a view to their insertion in the *Flora Danica*.

IV. As some of the mountains of Greenland are accessible, you will endeavour, by barometrical observations, to ascertain their height, as also to determine the limit of the snow-belt and the glacier, and of the various vegetable productions at different altitudes. We could wish, further, to be furnished with your observations on the temperature of the earth and of springs.

V. Should you discover any ruins, or other vestiges of ancient colonization by Icelanders, particularly any not already described

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by other travellers, you will take notes thereof, and make search for stones with Runic inscriptions, which stones, should you find any, you will have conveyed to Juliana's-hope, or, should this be found impracticable, take accurate copies of the inscriptions on them.

VI. You will keep a journal on which the incidents of the day, and whatever else you may observe worthy of remark, in the course of your excursions, shall be regularly registered, a copy of which journal you will, on your return, deliver into our hands.

VII. As you will be furnished with proper instruments for the purpose, you will be enabled to make meteorological observations. These, likewise, registered in a separate journal, you will deliver, on your return, into our hands.

VIII. On setting out for the East coast, you will take with you no more books, instruments, &c., than are absolutely necessary. As you proceed, you will endeavour to collect as many specimens of Natural History as there is room for in the boats. As measures will be taken to establish, if possible, a communication between the different inhabited places on the East coast and the nearest Danish establishment, you will endeavour, from time to time, to have whatever you may thus collect transported to Juliana's-hope, in order to make room in the boats for more.

IX. What has been already observed at §§ VI. and VII., relative to the journals or registers to be kept by you, applies no less to this part of your Expedition; and we take occasion to observe, that, as we are possessed of little or no knowledge concerning the natural productions of the East coast of Greenland, it will be incumbent on you here, even more than elsewhere, to make out as full a catalogue as possible of the same, wherein you will be careful to indicate such as are likewise to be found on the West coast, as well as also to make drawings, as aforesaid.

X. During the Expedition to the East coast, your attention will be especially directed to the native Greenlanders you may meet with. You will, in particular, be careful to observe, if the people inhabiting the said coast differ from those of the West in form, stature, complexion, dialect, and manners; if they inhabit

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different dwellings, make use of different implements, &c. You will make diligent inquiry, if they have among them any tradition of their country having formerly been inhabited by another race of men, and if any remains of their habitations, any Runic inscriptions, or other traces of them, are to be found, of which vestiges, should you meet with any, you will be careful to insert due notice, and, where possible, drawings, in your journal.

COPENHAGEN,
Feb. 21, 1828.

A. W. MOLTKE, J. W. HORNEMANN,
GEDE, ZAHRTMANN.

NOTE.—The Instructions for the Interpreter attached to the Expedition contain nothing that could interest the reader, for which reason they are here omitted.
