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Heroes and Nomads in Norwegian Polar Explorer Literature¹

In 1888 six Norwegians crossed the Greenland-ice on skis. Two years after, the expedition leader Fridtjof Nansen published the book *På ski over Grønland* (English title: *The First Crossing of Greenland*) about the expedition. In Norway, this book has had an enormous influence and for modern Norwegian travel authors, it has become a kind of centre from which they organise their travels and their writing. This paper will focus on how *På ski over Grønland* has been read and its impact on the travel genre. Also, I will look briefly at another book published by the Norwegian Bjørn Staib, about 85 years after Nansen's. This book too is important in the Norwegian polar explorer discourse.

Bjørn Staib: *On skis toward the North Pole* (1965)

In March 1964, eleven Norwegian men and about one hundred dogs leave Ellesmere Island. The expedition leader is Bjørn Staib, who had crossed Greenland earlier on the same route as Nansen. Now, Staib's goal is to reach the North Pole. No Norwegian had done that before him. Of course Roald Amundsen had crossed the Pole in a zeppelin, but he never landed.

Staib and his men meet obstacles from the first day. The pack ice is massive and impenetrable and Staib's men have to use axes to make a way through. Each time they cross an obstacle, new ice is waiting on the other side. This ordeal continues for weeks. They have to carry their sledges across the ice blocks, and as they slowly move forward, the track collapses behind them. There is no way out.

¹ This paper is based on three chapters from my book about Norwegian travel literature: *I eventyret. Norske reiseskildringer fra Astrup til Aasheim*.

Later Staib describes the landscape as dramatic, monotonous and threatening. Several times the ice opens underneath the camp, and they have to escape in a rush before tents, men and dogs disappear into the black and cold water. The original plan was to reach the Pole, and then return to an American base, not far from the Pole. However, after weeks of struggle through the ice, Staib and his men realise that they have to change plans. Instead they move their focus to the base, and use all their capacity to get there. They eventually do, and are safely brought out by a plane.

This was a remarkable expedition by many counts, even if Staib and his men never reached their goal. The Norwegian Polar History describes it as years ahead of its time¹. Bjørn Staib later wrote a book about the expedition. It was translated to English and published in 1965 as *On Skis Toward the North Pole*, and it was also translated to Swedish. Curiously, it was never published in Norwegian, or by a Norwegian publisher. And why was that? I think it is because Staib writes outside the genre. In the Norwegian Polar expedition genre, there is no room for losers, or men who do not achieve their goal.

In order to understand why, we can look at some of the first Polar expedition books published in Norwegian. The first Norwegian books on Polar expeditions are Fridtjof Nansen's *På ski over Grønland* and Eivind Astrup's *Blandt Nordpolens Naboer*. Both of these books are translated into English, Nansen's book with the title *The First Crossing of Greenland* and Astrup's book with the title *With Peary Near the Pole*. Directly translated the titles are a bit different, and since some of my points are related to the titles I have tried to translate them more directly. Nansen's *På ski over Grønland* can be translated to "Across Greenland on Skis" and Astrup's *Blandt Nordpolens Naboer* to "Among the Neighbours of the North Pole".

There are some similarities between these two books. They were published only five years apart and they tell the stories about men who cross Greenland and overwinter together with the Inuits. Both Astrup and Nansen are curious about nature and the Inuits.

¹ Goksøy: "Kappløp i gamle spor".

They want to learn and use the Inuits' methods, tools, equipment and clothing. However, there are also some essential differences between the two books, and a difference in the way the books have been read. These differences centre around how the authors relate to their home country and how they relate to the land they visit.

Fridtjof Nansen: *På ski over Grønland* (1890)

Let us start with Fridtjof Nansen's *Across Greenland on skis*. This is, no doubt the most well-known Norwegian book about a polar expedition. It is the first Norwegian book which describes a polar expedition and it is the first Norwegian polar expedition of its kind. The book tells the story about six Norwegians in two rowing boats outside the coast of East Greenland. The men row and push the boats through the ice, and after a lot of effort, they reach the coast. Here they put on skis and sledges and start the actual crossing of the ice. They reach the west-coast six weeks after they started and become the first expedition ever to have crossed the continent.

The expedition leader Fridtjof Nansen was a biologist; he was fascinated by Polar research and had earlier participated on an expedition along the coast of East Greenland. But Nansen was also a ski and outdoor-life enthusiast and was apparently attracted to the idea of spending time in nature. However, he does not write much about his personal motivation for the expedition, but rather focuses implicitly on the scientific value of such a trip. Nansen quotes a letter he wrote to the University in Oslo: "Grønlands indre er et av de fullstendigste terræ incognitæ vi har på vår jords overflate; det frembyr imidlertid så mange videnskapelige oppgaver å løse at det tillike utgjør et av de interessanteste." (*"The interior of Greenland is one of the most complete terræ incognitæ on the surface of the globe; it is however presenting so many scientific challenges that it also makes it one of the most interesting ones."*)¹

What is the value from an expedition like this? he asks later, and answers:

¹ Nansen: *På ski over Grønland*, p. 24 (My translation)

Der kunne svares meget derpå og bl.a. erindres om hvilken innflytelse et sådant høyland av is og sne må ha på klimaet i alle omkringliggende deler av jorden, hvorledes hver enkelt del av jordflaten står i høyere sammenheng med de øvrige. Men allerede det at Grønlands indre er en del, og ikke en ganske liten del, av denne planeten overflate hvorpå vi lever er nok til at vi vil kjenne den, og at vi ikke opphører, om enn veien skulle gå over graver. Jo før det kan nåes, desto bedre.

(There are many answers and one has to have in mind the impact this sort of mountain plateau of ice and snow has on the climate of all the surrounding areas, and how every part of the surface of the land is connected to the others. But the fact that the interior of Greenland is a part, and not a quite little part of the surface of this planet on which we are living is an argument important enough to search knowledge about it, and not to stop, even if the way is leading into graves. We have to reach the interior, the sooner the better.)¹

For Nansen, an important motivation was that he wanted to make a survey of the ice. Thus, he expresses the same ideas and thoughts as the majority of the travelling Norwegians in the late 19th century who wrote about travelling into wild nature or unknown places. They all travelled to achieve knowledge or honour in the name of their country². In this way, the travel itself is not the motif. The motif is what the travel results in. In Nansen's book there is a lot of evidence which point in this direction.

Earlier expeditions that had tried to cross Greenland had started at the west coast. From here, they had walked to the east, planning to turn when they reached the east coast, and then walk back to the west-coast. None of these expeditions ever reached the east coast; they were forced to turn half way. Nansen's genius plan was to start at the east coast and go to the west. The west-coast

¹ Ibid. p. 326

² See for example: Carl Lumholtz: *Blandt menneskeædere. Fire aars reise i Australien* (1888) or Knut Dahl: *Dyr og vildmænd. Reiser i Sydamerika og Nord-Vest-Australien*. (1897)

was settled and from here, a ship could bring them home to Norway. In this way, the distance was divided in half, which of course was an advantage. But in Nansen's eyes there was another advantage with this plan. Going westwards meant that they had the settlements, the civilisation in Godthåb or Nuuk in front of them, and every step brought them closer to the ship and to Europe. Nansen puts it like this:

På den måten kastet man alle broer bak seg, ikke ble det nødvendig å drive mannskapet fram, østkysten skulle neppe lokke en tilbake, mens forut lå vestkysten, dragende med alle sivilisasjonens behageligheter. Det var intet valg, kun fremmad. Ordren ville lyde: Døden eller Grønlands vestkyst.

(That way we burned all bridges, and it was not necessary to force the men to continue, the east coast was not tempting for anyone, the west coast however was ahead, fascinating with all the comforts the civilisation could offer. We had no choice, but to go ahead. The order was: Death or the west coast of Greenland.)¹

The theory that the west coast, fascinating with all the comforts civilization could offer, would pull them forward seemed to work: Nansen writes: "Tanken på å nå dampskipet til Europa var det som drev oss frem der inne på isen, tanken på skipet var det som alltid spøkte oss i hodet og aldri tillot oss å nyde livet om noen stund," (*"The idea of reaching the last departure of the steamer to Europe was the driving force on our way on the ice, the idea of the ship appeared repeatedly in mind never giving us any opportunity to enjoy life."*)²

Consequently, they were very disappointed when the ship had left when they reached Nuuk:

Noget av det første jeg spurte om var skipet til Danmark – var det allerede reist? Ja, fra Godthåb var det gått for et par

¹ Nansen: *På ski over Grønland*, p. 24 (My translation)

² Ibid. p. 414

måneder siden, og det var ingen skip som kunne nåes nu. [...] Dette var lite trøstelige etterretninger. [...] Det var et helt luftslott av skjønne forhåpninger som der med et slag sank i havet.

(The first I asked was if the ship to Denmark already had left? Yes, it had left Good Hope some months ago and no ship could bring us home (...) This was inconsolable news. (..) An illusion of beautiful expectations suddenly sank in the sea.)¹

They had to spend the winter in Greenland. But even if he was disappointed, Nansen used the opportunity to learn from the Inuits. He learns about fishing, hunting and their food habits and he learns to paddle the kayak. He writes: "Deres uskyldige, sorgløse vesen, deres fordringsløse tilfredshet og godhet smitter en og forjager alt mismot og urolig higen." ("*One get's influenced by their innocent, carefree character, their modest satisfaction and kindness. All dejection and restless yearning disappears*")²

Eivind Astrup: *Blandt Nordpolens naboer* (1895)

Five years after Nansen's *På ski over Grønland* was published, another Norwegian, Eivind Astrup published a book, *Blandt Nordpolens Naboer* (English title: *With Peary Near the Pole*). As the Norwegian title indicates, this book is about staying together with the Inuits. Let us first take a look at the motifs for Astrups travel.

In the first pages, Astrup expresses disgust with the life in the Euro-American civilisation. He writes: "Jeg ønskede nemlig intet mindre end at komme bort fra den civiliserede verden jo før jo heller. Thi besjælet, som jeg var, af et levende ønske om at prøve mine kræfter paa nye og ukjendte felter, magtede jeg ikke længer at holde mig selv i tøiler." ("*Most of all I wished to leave the civilised world the sooner the better. Because I was possessed of a*

¹ Ibid. p. 414

² Ibid. p. 470

*living desire to test my gifts in new areas I did not manage to bridle myself”*¹

For Nansen it was important to make a survey of Greenland in the name of Norway and the Euro-American civilisation. Astrup was eager to escape from the same civilisation. Astrup participates in an expedition lead by the American Robert Peary. Peary’s plan is to walk across the island, on skis or snowshoes and with dogs to draw their sledges. It happens to be Astrup and Peary who will complete this expedition. They do so, and reach the east coast after several weeks.

Like Nansen, Astrup does not brag about his achievement and the reader has to read between the lines to understand that this was an impressive and outstanding achievement. But unlike Nansen, Astrup shows a personal satisfaction for participating. For him the travel and the expedition itself are the goal, not to win something on behalf of Norway or the United States.

When Astrup and Peary reach the east coast, they have travelled half of the distance on their ski and sledge-tour. Astrup is close to ecstasy when he describes this coast. Enthusiastically, he describes moraines, boulders, green icelakes, snow sparrows and bouldering glacier rivers. He writes: ”Aldrig havde livet forekommet os skjønnere.” (*“Life had never appeared more beautiful”*)² He does not portray himself as a hero, he is not proud to be half way on a long polar expedition, he is just excited to experience those enormous, untouched Natural areas.

Astrup points out the adventure and overwhelming nature as the most fascinating with this travel. After reflections like this, it is no surprise that Astrup do not look forward to the return: ”Og med tungt hjerte maatte vi vende ryggen til disse kyster, netop nu, da vi befandt os paa tærskelen til de hemmelighedsfulde egne, der udgjør jordklodens nordligste areal.” (*“It was very sad to leave these coasts, just in the moment being on the threshold of the mysterious regions composing the uttermost north of the planet.”*)³

¹ Astrup: *Blandt Nordpolens Naboer*. p. 1 (My translation)

² Ibid. p. 198

³ Ibid. p. 211

Consequently there is a huge difference between the way Nansen and Astrup describe the movement westwards. When Nansen goes westwards, civilisation is temptingly in front of him. When Astrup moves westwards, the paradise is behind him and he is on his way back to the country he escaped from.

Let us then look briefly at how Astrup portrays the Inuits. He writes: "Et samfund, hvori frihed, likhed og broderskab ikke er et fjernt og haabløst ønske blot, men den ægte, sande virkelighed!" ("A society in which freedom, equality and brotherhood is not a distant and hopeless desire but the real, true reality.")¹

The freedom of the Inuits fascinates Astrup. The small Inuit societies have no leaders, or chiefs and the inhabitants thus have a genuine freedom: "[Inuitene oplever] ikke den frihed, der er begrænset af en lovbogs strenge bud, men friheden, saa fuldkommen som man overhodet kan haabe at faa den her i verden." ("[The Inuit-people] do not experience the freedom restricted by the dictate in a severe legislative code, but freedom as complete as you can wish in this world.")²

Like Nansen, Astrup learns and adopts survival techniques from the Inuits. He is also fascinated by the Inuits' character and temperament, but more than Nansen, he glorifies and admires their way of living together and, both explicitly and between the lines, he expresses that the Inuits' way of life is an ideal for western civilisation.

Astrup and Nansen as heroes and nomads

As we have seen, Astrup and Nansen are quite different. Nansen wants to bring home a victory, whereas Astrup wants to escape.

The image is not black and white. Astrup and Nansen have different perspectives, but they are part of some of the same discourses. Astrup is, for example, influenced by the European tendency to make surveys, he says that "[Jeg ville] søge mine længsler tilfredsstillede i de civilisatoriske fortroppers store væddeløb" ("[I wanted to] satisfy my longings in the great race of

¹ Ibid. p. 253

² Ibid. p. 259

the civilized vanguard.")¹ He also thinks it is an honour to join Peary when they discover and prove that Greenland is an island. On the other side, in Nansen's book, we can find a longing for the wild. As we saw, Nansen also admires the Inuits.

We also have to remember that Astrup did not have the same responsibility for the expedition's sponsors or for the nation: Where Nansen was an expedition leader and the originator, Astrup was only an adventurous participant who was chosen because of his skills.

The opposition I have outlined can nevertheless tell us a lot about two different ways of travelling and it can tell us about the Norwegian Polar explorer discourse in the 20th century. Let us look first look at the tradition for Polar literature. Unlike Nansen, Astrup was soon forgotten. Astrup was celebrated when he returned to Oslo, and his book sold well for a while. But the book was not republished in its totality before 1990. Astrup died the same year he published his book and a memorial was raised for him at Frognerseteren in Oslo, it was overgrown by the forest.² Nansen, on the other hand, was celebrated as a national hero, his travel and his book became the proof and the symbol on the Norwegian ski-tradition. Nansen's picture has decorated bank notes and stamps. At the time Nansen published his book, Norway tried to liberate from Swedish colony-mastery, and did so in 1905. The skiing tradition was an important symbol as something typically Norwegian and their records and their unique achievements showed what Norwegians could manage.

Secondly, Nansen's stay with the Inuits was repressed by readers. For instance Henning Wærp has shown that when the Norwegian author Atle Næss retells the story in the Norwegian Polar History, he does not mention this stay.³

Consequently Nansen has influenced the Norwegian Polar expedition literature considerably. It is important, however to

¹ Ibid. p. 1

² Ingstad: "Forord" (Foreword in Eivind Astrup's *Blandt Nordpolens Naboer*)

³ Wærp: "'Innlandsisen, våre lengsles mål' – Om Fridtjof Nansen: På ski over Grønland (1890) og noen andre bøker i hans spor".

outline some concepts that can describe the two kinds of travel-concept which Astrup and Nansen represent. Zyed Manzurul Islams book *The Ethics of Travel* outlines the concepts nomadic and sedentary travel. A nomadic traveller seeks to meet the other face to face. To travel as a nomad does not necessarily mean to be vagabond, it is about nomadic travel in non-literal sense. The nomadic traveller does not become attached to a particular culture, or a particular way of understanding reality, but seeks as far as possible to appropriate and use the new experiences he gathers on his travels. Traveling like this opens the traveller and never lets him return as the same individual. The opposite, sedentary travel moves geographically, but does not deserve the name "travel", says Islam. The movement of sedentary travel is driven by the need to secure a vantage point from which to carry out a representation of difference. Islam's use of the binary concepts nomadic and sedentary travel can be usefully applied as a backdrop.

Nevertheless, we may call Astrup a nomadic traveller. He was an open minded traveller who was much more willing to change than other Norwegian travellers at the time. Astrup wants to become an Inuit and when he returns, he is not the same as when he left Norway. He leaves Greenland with new understandings about how people can live together with each other and with nature.

But was Nansen a sedentary traveller? Using Islam's concepts as a backdrop, Nansen is definitely more nomadic than other Norwegian authors from the same time, but compared to Astrup his focus is on Norway, rather than on Greenland. For Nansen, the centre of existence is Norway and Europe. He travels to Greenland to make a survey in the name of Norway, he is longing for home, and overwinters only reluctantly. For Astrup, the opposite is the case. He wants to escape from Norway, Europe and USA, and he wants to stay as long as possible in Greenland.

Nansen uses an adventure-formula when he constructs his book, and this formula is important for the way Nansen's book has been read. He uses the old adventure formula about a few brave men who defeat obstacles and dangers in order to complete an important mission. This is a formula which much popular fiction is

constructed around, writes J. M. Cawelti. Every historical period has its adventure or hero-story. "It presents a character with whom the audience identifies, passing through the most frightening perils to achieve some triumph,"¹ writes Cawelti.

På ski over Grønland is a huge book. Over seven hundred pages, it includes historic accounts on skis, scientific challenges and descriptions of the Inuits, but Nansen never lets the mortal danger or the importance of the mission out of sight. This way, Nansen constructs an adventure, or a heroic tale about Norwegians who confront dangers but complete the mission.

Norwegian polar explorer literature after the Golden Age

By 1895, there were only two Norwegian books on Polar expeditions, Nansen's and Astrup's. From this starting point, an important Norwegian genre grows. A new world-known Norwegian Polar explorer, Roald Amundsen published several books and so did Otto Sverdrup. Thirty-one years later, in 1926, Amundsen published his last book, and the period which is often called the Golden Age was over. After this, the publication of Polar exploration literature comes to a halt. In the following decades only a few books were published.

¹ Cawelti: *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance*. p. 40

Norwegian polar explorer literature 1926-1990.

In chronological order:

Høygaard, Arne og Martin Mehren: «*Ajungilak*» eller *Grønland på tvers*. 1931

Staib, Bjørn: *Nanok. Over Grønland i Nansens spor*. 1962

Thorseth, Ragnar: *Med kurs for Nordvestpassasjen. 75 år etter Roald Amundsen*. 1981

Thorseth, Ragnar: *Ferden mot Nordpolen*. 1982

Bronken, Kjell. *Eventyrlig isferd. På ski over Grønland 93 år etter Nansen ... en beretning fra en norsk-finsk transgrønlandsekspedisjon 1981*. 1982

Kristensen, Monica: *Mot 90° syd*. 1987

Petersen, Carl Emil: *Over den store bre. Alene i Nansens spor*. 1988

Johansen, Asle T. *På ski over Grønland 100 år etter. Nansen ekspedisjon fra 1888 – 1988*. 1988

Aasheim, Stein P: *Vestkysten eller døden*. 1989

Kagge, Erling: *Nordpolen. Det siste kappløpet*. 1990

Let us take a look at the books from 1926 to 1990. In sixty-four years, only ten books are published. Four of them have Nansen's name in the title, and one of them has an allusion to *På ski over Grønland*. Stein P. Aasheims book is called *Vestkysten eller døden* which means "The West Coast or Death" and alludes to Nansen's proverb. Interestingly, only one of these ten books deals with an expedition which did not reach the goal. That is Monica Kristensens *Mot 90° syd*, interestingly the only book written by a woman. I think this tells us something about the climate and the tradition and it explain why Staib's book never was published. In beginning of this paper, I have argued that Staib's book is not an adventure about heroes who reach their goal. I do not want to call Staib a nomadic traveller, but the fact is that he returns as another man. The massive ice and threatening landscape of the arctic has transformed him. He looses and he misses his goal. But like a protagonist in fiction literature, he gains an insight and learns

something essential. But he is not a hero, what he brought back was loss of honour, and consequently there is no room for him in the Norwegian Polar genre.

As can be seen from the list of Polar literature 1926 – 1990, Bjørn Staib published another book in Norwegian, two years before he attempted to reach the Pole. This book is called *Nanok. Over Grønland i Nansens spor*, (English title: *Across Greenland in Nansen's track*). For most of the readers who read this book today, it is a dull and predictable story. Staib and his companion ski across Greenland. They have dogs and sledges and follow Nansen's track. They meet few obstacles and nothing that produces interesting or general insights occurs. The men return unchanged. The book is neither written with the same respect for the nature, nor expresses the same anxiety and despair as Staib's next book. Yet, this book, when it was produced, followed the genre and was a part of the discourse and therefore could be published. Today, the climate for Polar exploration is different, and I believe that is why we now can look at Staib with newly critical eyes and be fascinated by his travel and his book. Since the beginning of the 1990s the genre focuses less on reaching the goal and more on how the expedition participants attempt to encounter the Arctic either solo, in the winter or along new tracks.

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