



Arto Suvanto

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Sverdrup's Arctic Adventures. Or: What makes an Expedition Report worth reading? – Otto Sverdrup: *New Land. Four years in the Arctic Regions* (1903)

Otto Sverdrup, born 1854, is one of the main polar explorers in Norway. However he is much less known not only than Fridtjof Nansen and Roald Amundsen, but also than Hjalmar Johansen, who was a member of Nansen's Fram expedition 1893-96, and also lesser known than Eivind Astrup, who took part in two of Robert Peary's expeditions across northern Greenland in 1891-92 and 1893-94. Hjalmar Johansen and Eivind Astrup published their own accounts from the expeditions: *Selv-anden paa 86°14'. Optegnelser fra Den Norske polarfærd 1893-96* (1898) and *Blandt Nordpolens naboer* (1895). Astrup's book was reprinted in 1990 and 2004, and Johansen's book was reprinted in 1942, 1949 and 2003. They are both included in *the Polar Library*, together with books by Nansen and Amundsen (*the Polar Library* is by Kagge publishing house).

Otto Sverdrup's polar expedition report *New Land (Nyt land)*, a two volume work from 1903, from the second Fram expedition 1898-1902 to north-west Greenland and northern Canada, is in comparison never reprinted. He is not in *the Polar library*. And his name is among readers of travelogues very much forgotten. Why is this, and what kind of book is *New Land*?

First some words about Otto Sverdrup. He was in 1888 picked to be one of the six members of Fridtjof Nansen's expedition to cross the ice cap on Greenland on skies and with sledges. In the book *First Crossing of Greenland*, which Nansen published in 1890, Sverdrup is depicted as a reliable and strong man, both physically and psychologically. However we do not learn to know him very much, he is just the image of a solid man. He was also a

member on Nansen's next expedition, Sverdrup was captain on Fram in the years 1893-96 in an attempt to let the ship be frozen in the arctic ice and be carried by ocean currents to the North Pole.

The earlier mentioned Hjalmar Johansen took part in the same expedition, the Fram-expedition, and wrote a book about it. Sverdrup did not do that. According to his biographer, Per Egil Hegge, he had planned to write a book, but he was loyal to Nansen who asked him to write a chapter in his own book instead, *Farthest north (Med Fram over polhavet)*, which was published in Norwegian in 1897 and in English the year after. This was maybe Sverdrup's big mistake, because while Nansen made a fortune of the book, Sverdrup only got a little amount. He is not mentioned on the title page, it is Nansen's book, Sverdrup is only contributing with a sort of appendix, an account of the period after Nansen and Johansen had left the ship on March 14 1895 in an attempt to reach the north pole on cross country skis. Sverdrup is then limited to tell about the very last part of the journey.

However when one compares Nansen's account with Sverdrup's, the tone of it, the narrative, the figurative language, one comes in doubt whether a book by Sverdrup from this expedition would have been of any public interest. Sverdrup writes a rather flat prose, gives hardly any glimpses of his inner life, his dreams and hopes, ambitions and imaginations. He reports what actually happens, and emotional nature descriptions – as Nansen is famous for – is far from his temper.

Let's have a look at a passage from Nansen's part of the book, from the chapter "The Winter Night" (Vinternatten):

What depth of beauty, with an undercurrent of endless sadness, there is in these dreamily glowing evenings! The vanished sun has left its track of melancholy flame. Nature's music, which fills all space, is instinct with sorrow that all this beauty should be spread out day after day, week after week, year after year, over a dead world. [...] There is red burning blood in the west against the cold snow – and to think that this is the sea, stiffened in chains, in death, and that the

sun will soon leave us, and we shall be in the dark, alone!
(Nansen 2002:109)¹

In Sverdrup's narrative the shift from autumn to winter is depicted much more soberly:

The sun moves quickly in these latitudes from the first day that he peers over the horizon in the south till he circles round the heavens all day and all night; but still quicker do his movements seem when he is on the downward path in autumn. Before you know where you are he has disappeared, and the crushing darkness of the Arctic night surrounds you once more. (p.498)²

What this darkness does to one is up to the reader to imagine. Nansen in comparison writes in a lyrical prose where the inner reaction is as vivid as the description of the externals. The passage cited is from Nansen's diary, dated October 7 1893. Nansen has in these on-the-spot reports evidently literary ambitions, and he writes in the style of the literary symbolism of the 1890s; the passage cited could be from a prose poem by the Norwegian poets Sigbjørn Obstfelder or Vilhelm Krag.

In a foreword to *Farthest north* Ronald Hunterford writes that the book became an instant bestseller in the 1890s, and says that "One explanation for its success was the sheer romantic nature of

¹ "Disse drømmeglødende kvelder – for et dyb af skjønhed, med en understrøm af uendelig klang! Den svundne sol kaster sin vemodige glød ind i ensomheden. Det er naturens salme, som fylder rummet tung af sorg over at al dens skjønhed spredes dag efter dag, uge efter uge, år efter år, over en død verden. [...] Rødt brændende blod i vest mod den kolde, kolde sne. Ja havet der hjemme ved soleglad – også dette er jo havet, havet stivnet i lænker, i døden, og snart forlader solen os, og vi blir tilbage i mørket." (p.207)

² Hurtig går det under disse bredder med solen, fra den første gangen kikker frem over synsranden i syd og til den kredser frit rundt himlen hele døgnet igjennem; men endnu større hastverk synes den at ha når den er på retur om høsten. Man ved ikke ordet af før den er borte, og polarnattens knugende mørke omgir en på ny. (p. 457)

it”.¹ The many quotes from Nansen’s diary contributes a lot to this romantic nature, while Otto Sverdrup chose another discourse for his report. He, however, also kept a diary, but does not give us any glimpses into this, maybe because he here airs all his frustrations. Or to put it another way: He is not writing literature. In Sverdrup’s diary of March 7 1895 we can read the following about Nansen: ”Such childish manner as this man has, he has none of the qualities of a polar explorer. The whole expedition is a mess. He can never make a decision, it’s only big words. He is boasting all the time. And he can’t stand coldness more than a little girl” (my translation).² It is not a trace of this disregard for Nansen in Sverdrup’s final report, of course not, since Sverdrup’s account from the journey is a chapter in Nansen’s book.

What makes an expedition report a good reading? Friction among the men in the group is one thing (1), and Nansen uses this narrative device in his book *First crossing of Greenland*, where the two Sami members of the expedition is criticised and ridiculed. Sverdrup is more careful with personal details, while he in the diary writes about one of the crew members, Rudolf Stolz: ”he is too stupid to realize that he is the greatest fool under the sun, the biggest louse that ever wore a man’s trousers”.³ There is no trace of this disregard in the book. Even the depression, drug addiction and suicide of doctor Svendsen – one of the 16 men in the expedition – is covered up. On the other hand Sverdrup here is making a clever allegory that can be deciphered. First we are told that ”The doctor kept the spirit up among the men”,⁴ and the

¹ (<http://site.ebrary.com/lib/tromsoub/Doc?id=2002347>, page XIV)

² ”[...] slike gutungetok som den fyren har, synes han er gruli lidet skikket til polarreisende. Kan aldri komme sig til at tage en beslutning, bare rot og nav og store ord. Skryt over alle grenser, fra først til sist. Kulde tåler han ikke mer en en jentunge.” (Per Egil Hegge: *Otto Sverdrup. Aldri rådløs*, Oslo 1996, p. 71)

³ My translation; ”han har ikke selvkritik nok til at forstå at han er den største tosk solen har skinnet på og at han er den største lus af et mandfolk som har gåt med buxer” (Hegge p. 115).

⁴ My translation; ”Doktoren var utrættelig i at holde Situationen oppe” (p.88).

attentive reader will here think that this is either very true or very false – that something might be communicated very indirectly to us. Later on we hear that the doctor starts a newspaper on the ship, and that he is in charge of the program for the National Day celebration. But then, one day while out on an excursion the doctor gets sick, snowblind – Sverdrup states, before he gives the rather odd comment that one should not pity snowblindness, because it is always the person's own fault (p.172). However Sverdrup offers to follow the doctor back to the ship, but the doctor refuses, saying it is not necessary. Sverdrup asks again, and the doctor refuses again.

The doctor stays back at the tent while the others go hunting, and when they come back, the doctor is dead. The narrator gives no explanation here, we only have learned not to pity snowblindness, and also that it is not dangerous. How then die from it? We have to read Sverdrup's diary to understand that. The doctor is not dead by illness, but has, after a long depression, committed suicide, shot himself, in front of his captain, at the moment Sverdrup returns from the hunting – as a kind of punishment of Sverdrup for having left him alone, maybe. This is vividly reported in the diary, but not in *New Land*. In the book it is only stated that the doctor lies dead when the group come back from hunting. It is difficult to criticize this cover-up, because suicide was a taboo then as now, and Sverdrup has to pay respect to the doctor's memory and to his family. But the result is that this drama in the group, which must have been going on for a long time, is almost invisible for the reader of *New Land*.



NØDTVEBT. HENDRIKSEN.
 OLSEN. STOLZ. FOSHEIM. SIMMONS. BRASKERUD. SVENDSEN.
 LINDSTRØM. SCHEL. ISACHSEN. BAUMANN. SVERDRUP. RAANES. BAY. HASSEL.

DELTAGERNE I FÆRDEN.

Back to the question: What makes an expedition report a good reading? As mentioned friction in the group of men, another is dramatic episodes (2), fighting the ice, fighting a bear, and in Nansen's books there are numerous examples of this. Here again Sverdrup tends to let the suspense disappear, dissolve, by not preparing the event for the reader, by telling the story too fast and by forgetting to give us impressions of the impact of the event. Let me just give one example: On May 27 1900 the ship is suddenly on fire. This might not only end the expedition, but could endanger the men's lives. However, the chapter, "Fram on fire" is only two and a half pages long; Sverdrup does not manage to get more out of it. It is a disappointed reader who finishes this chapter that is the beginning of volume two of *New Land*, a chapter which includes a brilliant and dramatic drawing of the fire by Otto Sinding. But it is a fire that in the narrative is to quickly extinguished.



„FRAM“ I BRAND

A third criterion of what makes an arctic narration interesting might be poetic passages sprung out of nature experiences (3). Again Nansen is a good example. And Sverdrup is not. (We have seen examples of this before.) Meeting with other people and cultures is a fourth attraction in a travelogue (4). While Nansen, in *First Crossing of Greenland*, gives us interesting glimpses into Inuit culture, and his own reactions to the meetings, Sverdrup in *New Territory* is rather brief about the expedition's meetings with the Inuit – in Egedesminde, in Godhavn, in Upernivik, and from the several visits from Inuit on board the ship. What Sverdrup never seems to get tired of, is hunting episodes; page after page, chapter after chapter is filled with the hunting of seal, polar bear, fox, rabbits, caribou, walrus, wolves, geese, musk ox, grouse, eider duck and other animals and birds. This is not only to get food, but is regarded as a sport. Sverdrup hates shooting an animal who is not on the run. Then it is murder, and not sports. The numerous hunting tales tire me but might be of interest to other readers.

I am myself more interested when Sverdrup meets people, like when he suddenly meets the famous American polar explorer Robert Peary in the ice, on October 6 1898. But this meeting is without dramatic nerve in the book. Sverdrup has suddenly

discovered a man in a distance, on an Eskimo sledge: "Who could it be? My thoughts fixed involuntarily on Robert Peary" (p. 27). And it is Peary. Sverdrup, however, spends only a third of a page on the visit, which is in strong contradiction to the concluding remark: "Peary's visit was the event of the day in our tent. [...] My heart felt quite warm with patriotism" (p. 28).

What did Peary look like, how did he dress, what did he say, what did they talk about? No such report is given by Sverdrup. Is this just clumsiness in the narrative or is there a hidden disregard here? Meetings up in the extreme north is generally a big event. However Sverdrup's chapter has not got the title "Robert Peary", but "Our first meeting with the musk oxen". This is *not* alluding to Robert Peary, but is the actual animal musk ox, which the expedition often hunts. The visit from Peary is just a side track in the hunting tale. In the English translation however, from 1959, this chapter has got another name: "A strange encounter", which refers to Peary and not to the musk ox. The translator has evidently thought the title of the chapter, set by Sverdrup, was a shame. But it could as well be deliberately done by Sverdrup. Looking back on the incident we now know that Peary never mentions the meeting with Sverdrup in any of his writings. And according to oral sources by the Inuit, Peary tried to stop the Inuit from visiting *Fram*, stating that Sverdrup was his enemy (Hegge, p. 100). Peary was longing for the north pole and might have felt all expeditions this far north in "his area" to be a threat, although Sverdrup only wanted to complete the map of northern Greenland.

And this, mapping, is of course a fifth attraction of a polar narrative (5). It is interesting to see the totally undiscussed paradox of on the one hand Sverdrup's talks about white spots on the map and virgin land untouched by man, and on the other hand read his reports from all the abandoned Inuit settlements. There are traces of culture everywhere, to exaggerate a bit. However Sverdrup does not reject the Inuit way of living. One can find passages like this in the book: "To obtain the best results, it is necessary to take lessons from the two races of Nature's children who have learned to use it by the experience of centuries, namely, the Lapp and Eskimo" (p.

19). But soon after he betrays himself by giving exclamations like "science has won" (my transl., p. 84).

When it comes to mapping, the ever-returning question is: fjord or sound? A fjord is a disappointment while a sound might be an opening to new "virgin" land. Discussions like this are often found: "Up to that time it was unknown whether the sound discovered by the American Dr I. I. Hayes in 1861 was really a sound leading through to the west, or only a large system of fjords" (p. 24) Usually, almost ever, it is a fjord, a new "boring" fjord, and all the sledge expeditions describing the collecting of material by the scientist, get a bit tedious to read about. The book has no narrative flow. It is 1035 pages of the same over and over again – bad weather, good weather, hunting, taking care of the the ship, the equipment and the dogs, making observations and collecting specimen. The rutine life makes in parts for a rather dull narrative. While working on the book on board on *Fram* in 1901 Sverdrup writes in his diary: "I can not write anything that people would like to read. I am just telling about the same prosaic realities again and again".¹ In many ways he is right.

Does that, however, make it a truer narrative than Nansen's? Does the lack of narrative devices make for a more true story? Probably not; if so, that would be bad news to us lovers of fiction and poetry, and storytelling on the whole. And of course Sverdrup in his writing does have a style too, not very flashy and seductive, but more laconic. And this can be rather charming. Listen to a statement as this, from the four-year voyage in the Arctic, at least one year longer than they wanted, because of difficult ice conditions an early winter: "The mood among the men might be slightly influenced by the weather".² I would think so.

It is amusing to see how the translator does not always catch this laconic tone. On May 18 the whole crew is evidently very reduced after National Day celebration the day before, too much drink through a long day and night. This is, however, hidden in

¹ My translation; "Jeg kan ikke skrive noget som folk kan læse. Det blir bare en opramsen af ensartede faktorer" (Hegge p.120).

² My translation; "Stemningen ombord syntes ofte at staa i et vist Forhold til Veiret" (p. 163).

this statement, quoted from Sverdrup's diary (and included in the book): "The newspaper *Verdens Gang* once suggested that the Day of Penance and Prayer should be moved to May 18; I agree with that suggestion".¹ This is the now sober man's regret. In the translation however we can read this: "On 18 May we [...] found ourselves very fit and more inclined for work, perhaps, than many at home in Norway on the day after the Seventeenth of May" (p. 132). Sverdrup in fact says the opposite.

Some might say that the quiet or laconic tone shows a leader with lack of authority. In comparison to Nansen, who was the leader of the first *Fram* expedition, Sverdrup never gives any speeches to his men. He is like a hidden narrator, although he writes in first person. Is he really in charge of his men, does he give them appropriate tasks, a regular life to avoid apathy? One place we can read: "Sometimes we slept during the day, sometimes during the night; it didn't matter – the sun was shining 24 hours a day".² It did not matter? What kind of discipline is that? From other polar expeditions we hear of strong regularity, that the men have to parade on deck early in the morning, whatever weather or season. Nansen demands exercise from his men.

Why is Otto Sverdrup's expedition forgotten? Maybe because it did not bring any results that could catch the newspapers interest. Nansen could put *first* and *farthest* on his book titles. Sverdrup couldn't. Other expedition's became famous because of their failure. Sverdrup did not succeed in this either. And he does not stage himself as a hero, tragic or successful. The opening page of the book is typical of the modest tone:

One September morning in 1896, a few days after return from the First Norwegian Polar Expedition, we were lying out in Lysaker Bay unloading from the *Fram* when Dr Nansen came on board.

¹ My translation; "Verdens Gang foreslog i sin Tid at forlægge store Bods- og Bededag til 18de Mai; jeg er enig med "Verdens Gang" i det Forslag" (p.163).

² My translation; "snart sov vi om Dagen, snart om Natten; men det var jo ikke saa nøie – Solen skinnede jo Døgnet rundt" (p. 135).

”Do you *still* feel like going on another expedition to the North?” he asked me.

”Yes, of course,” I replied, ”if only I had the chance”.
(p.12)¹

And then Nansen gives him this opportunity, an Oslo firm of brewers are willing to equip a new scientific polar expedition, and Nansen, since he himself has no wish to undertake the task, puts Sverdrup in charge.

This makes in a way also this second *Fram* expedition into Nansen’s project. Sverdrup is only a hired man. This fact, which is stated in the opening, gives another tone to the book than if it had been Sverdrup’s own plans and ambitions that were carried out. Sverdrup does not have to fight for his project, get acceptance for it: in the public, in the science world and among sponsors. Nansen in comparison spends a lot of pages both in *First Crossing of Greenland* and *Farthest North* to describe all the hindrances that were laid for him, all the people who distrusted him and ridiculed the projects. At the same time Nansen makes the trips into something he has yearned for for many years, in order to make him look psychologically prepared, and to build the portrait of himself as the right man. Nothing of this discursive strategy is to be found in Sverdrup’s book, *New Land*.

After having read *New Land*, and in parts being terribly bored, it struck me that the book becomes more interesting when one compares it to other polar expedition books. The qualities of it then becomes clearer. It is not wildy exciting, but it certainly leaves you with a good impression of the polar expeditons of that time. And one understands that the answer to the question ”What could a polar expedition a hundred years ago be compared to?” has to be: nothing at all. No where else on the planet – except for

¹ ”Det var en Morgen i September Maaned 1896, nogle Dage efter vor Hjemkomst fra den første norske Polarfærd. Vi laa ude paa Lysakerbugten og lossede ”Fram”, som saa at sige var ”varm” endnu efter sin første Tørn over Polhavet. Som vi drev paa med Losningen, kom Dr. NANSEN ombord. ”Har du endnu Lyst til at komme aftsted paa en ny Færd nordover?” spurgte han mig.” (p.1)

the Antarctic – would a scientific expedition ”claim” four years of your life to bring back the results.

What the scientific results were, do we hear very little about. The last chapter ends with a political statement: ”So the *Fram*’s second polar expedition was at an end. An approximate area of one hundred thousand square miles had been explored and, in the name of the Norwegian King, taken possession of” (p.260). The modest Otto Sverdrup turns out to be not so modest after all. – May be I have to read the book one more time.

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