

Spitsbergen Through *The Times*: Intertwined British Mining and Politics in the London Daily Newspaper

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1. Introduction

Spitsbergen in the European High Arctic, today Svalbard, has never been a British colony. Yet a number of English and Scottish mining and exploration companies sought their fortunes in the former no man's land during the first half of the twentieth century. The main contenders were the London-based Northern Exploration Company, Ltd. (NEC, 1910-1932) and the Edinburgh-based Scottish Spitsbergen Syndicate (SSS, 1909-1953). These and a number of smaller firms battled it out against the environment, against each other, and against other nationalities who also laid claim to the archipelago's natural resources. Being unable to carve out a polar existence in isolation, however splendid, their business success depended on an effective network of private, public, and governmental support and funding. The company histories have been published elsewhere (Kruse, 2013). This article is an assessment of the British enterprise in an important and influential section in the British mainstream media. It asks whether the aforementioned companies were successful in swaying political debate and public opinion in their favour.

Spitsbergen, as Svalbard was commonly known prior to 1925, was first documented in 1596 by the Dutch pilot Willem Barentsz (Conway 1906; de Veer, 1598). Hence, the name is Dutch and would originally not have been spelt with a 'z' – a detail that will resurface again shortly. London's Muscovy Company followed suit in 1607, which led to the earliest known mention of coal in 1610 and the attempted annexation in the name of King James I. in 1614. During the first half of the seventeenth century, the previously uninhabited Spitsbergen was dominated by the land-based whaling industry, but the interest in the fjords dwindled with the whale population until the early British claim was largely forgotten. Spitsbergen resumed its no man's land status. A leap forward in time brings us to the end of an era of great adventures and scientific explorations, which coincided with the beginning of mineral prospecting in the last decade of the nineteenth century. In 1899, a Norwegian skipper sent a first commercial shipment of coal to Norway, a country without native coal reserves. In 1904, almost three hundred years after the first mention of the resource, the English, represented by a small Sheffield-based mining company,

again followed suit. The NEC's map of 1919 (Fig. 1) not only emphasizes Spitsbergen's relative closeness to Europe; it also indicates the mineral motives that lay behind the journeys made there.

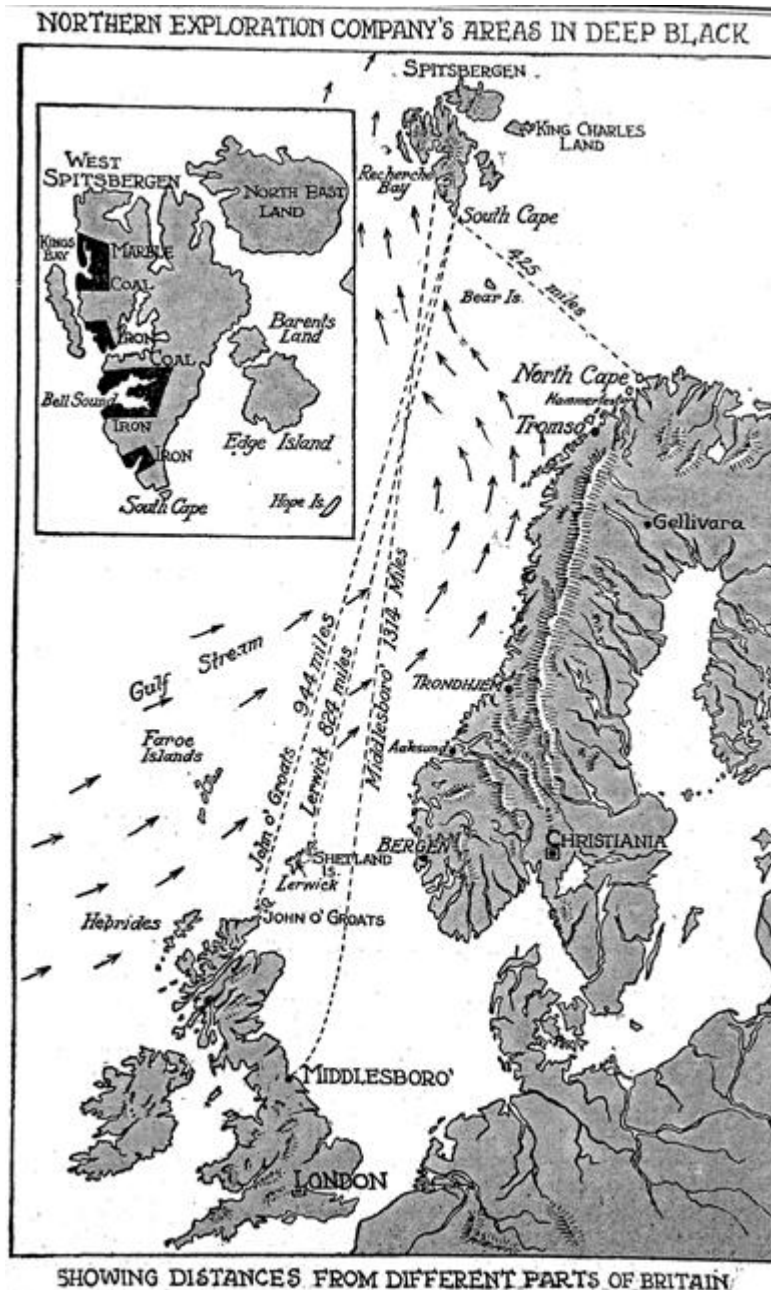


Figure 1: Northern Exploration Company map of 1918, showing Spitsbergen's relative closeness to Britain as well as an inset outlining the company's claims and mineral resources¹

Since Barentsz, information about Spitsbergen was undoubtedly shared among numerous mapmakers, whalers, scientists, and others. In more recent times, however, "the press in its various forms was instrumental in the dissemination of Arctic representations" (David, 2000: 81). David (2000) has shown that although *The London Times*, referred to as *The Times* hereafter, only modestly reported on the Franklin era

¹ Coal and iron in Spitsbergen (1918) Pam (*32):622.333, Scott Polar Research Institute, Cambridge.

1845-1859, pressure from illustrated weeklies led to increased coverage of the British Arctic Expedition 1875-1876. Drawing on this historic relationship of the London daily with the Arctic, I ask whether and to what extent the British mining presence on Spitsbergen was covered in the capital's news and whether this coverage in turn formed public opinion and shaped the geopolitical sentiments of the early twentieth century. This study focuses on the period between the first Sheffield pickaxe breaking the frozen ground in 1904 and the liquidation of the last British company to own Spitsbergen territory in 1953. For this period, I am able to highlight apparent trends of unwavering tourism, heightened international tension, and post-war optimism. It is only by comparison with the cold facts of the London Stock Exchange and the *Gazettes* that these trends are found to have amounted to very little hard cash.

2. The Times *Digital Archives Online*

Topics of general national interest that roused balanced public opinion and debate are best observed in the capital's press. With this assumption, I accessed the digital archives of *The London Times* (Gale, 2020) and the *Gazettes* (The Stationery Office, 2020) online. Within the given constraints, it was impossible to use a greater number of newspapers, knowing, for instance, that *The Edinburgh Times* and the long-running *Glasgow Herald* published keenly on the Scottish Spitsbergen Syndicate. Similarly, the *Bo'ness Journal* and the *Linlithgow Gazette* followed local miners aboard the Syndicate's expeditions with great interest. However, within the project, access to the online archives was convenient, and it remains an exercise for the future to assess supplementary English and Scottish publications. Geographically, I narrowed my search terms to both 'Spitsbergen' and 'Spitzbergen', since spelling preferences varied over time. On a positive note, the historical references to the uninhabited archipelago in the papers are not endless. Thus, I am confident that a simple place-name search produced a comprehensive list of citations for my chosen temporal range. 1904 witnessed the first English claims – in modern times – being staked out on Spitsbergen and thus marks the beginning of British mining in the field. After years of paper-pushing, the last British mine and concession owners on Spitsbergen wound up in 1953, providing an opportune cut-off date for this study.

Newspapers commonly had and still have their own agendas. At the turn of the twentieth century, the question of newspaper ownership was a topic of discussion since, "behind every single London daily newspaper [...], there [was] a multi-millionaire, a millionaire, or a very wealthy colleague" (Northcliffe, 1922: 7). The cited A. C. W. Harmsworth, 1. Viscount Northcliffe should know, as he was himself a British journalist and publisher, who shortly assumes a prominent role. Thus, newspapers are sources to be approached with caution because owners and editors, even with the best intentions, were highly selective and potentially introduced filters, inaccuracies, and distortions into their work. The readers were basically being told what to know, which is not necessarily that same as what they believed to be true. Feelings and opinions about knowledge thus gained were expressed in editorials and letters to the editor, which were very subjective. Although such news items and letters should be taken with a pinch of salt, they nonetheless represent the state of common knowledge at a given time. To weigh up their credibility, a short glance at the résumés of *The Times* and the *Gazettes* has been provided below. We

should keep in mind that no government publications, i.e. no factsheet, on the subject of Spitsbergen existed. The Foreign Office first issued an official report on the Arctic archipelago in 1920. Incidentally, the Spitsbergen Treaty had been signed that year and the former *terra nullius* had become Norwegian, soon to be renamed Svalbard.

The Times, a national newspaper since 1785, was traditionally regarded as a serious publication with high standards for a lower to upper middle class readership.² It is claimed to be the best-known and most cited newspaper in the world (Gale, 2020). Facing financial ruin at the end of the nineteenth century, it was saved by the editorial zest of Moberly Bell (1890-1911). From 1908, *The Times* belonged to the aforementioned newspaper pioneer Alfred Harmsworth, who, in his own words, was determined “not to be dictated by extremists in the Labour Party, who are just as stupid as the extremists of the Tory or any other party” (Northcliffe, 1922: 11). Harmsworth’s previous association with the Jackson-Harmsworth Expedition to Franz Josef Land in 1894-1897 may have served to strengthen later ties between the London daily and Arctic reporting. In reference to Harmsworth’s motivation, Jackson alluded:

He is bearing the whole of the large cost of this expedition, partly because he has a long-standing interest in Arctic work, and partly because he has an enthusiastic patriotism. To see England resume the work she did so splendidly in the past is, I believe, his great desire. (Harmsworth, 1894: 143)

Harmsworth, whose involvement may also have secured publication rights and boosted newspaper sales at the time, briefly replied that to speak of the expedition before she returns would be to brag (Harmsworth, 1894). The motives presented to the public press were decidedly less patriotic:

As to Mr. Jackson’s chances of reaching the Pole I shall say nothing. For my own part, I shall be entirely satisfied if he and his companions add to our knowledge of the geography and flora of Franz Josef Land and the area lying immediately north of it. With “beating the record” I have very little sympathy. If Mr. Jackson plants the Union Jack nearer the Pole than the Stars and Stripes (who head us by four miles only), I shall be glad, but if he came back, having found the Pole, but minus the work of the scientists, of which our expedition consists, I should regard the venture as a failure. (Speak, 2003: 51)

About the later Lord Northcliffe, the *New Statesman* remarked that,

[he] never pressed or indulged his personal views and predilections until he had made quite sure of his public. He has a real sense of journalistic values. When he bought *The Times* he played no tricks with it and made no substantial alterations until he felt strong enough to carry his public with him. (Northcliffe, 1922: 22)

² <http://archive.timesonline.co.uk/tol/archive/> - This website has been taken offline since I first consulted it in 2010.

At one stage, Northcliffe, “was travelling round the world, trying to find out [...] where best [British] surplus population should emigrate” (Northcliffe, 1922: 7), but his views on the potential of an Arctic no man’s land are unfortunately not known. Incidentally, his brother Cecil Harmsworth was Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs between 1919 and 1922, a most vibrant period also in the history of Spitsbergen. Following Northcliffe’s death in 1922, *The Times* was owned by the Astor family until 1967.

A search of *The Times* digital archives produced nearly 2,000 hits. Unfortunately, the citation list includes countless references to funeral homes entirely unrelated to the topic. Comprehensive screening would have been too time-consuming and, consequently, a statistical analysis could not be undertaken. The majority of items, leaving aside the funeral homes, concerned pleasure cruises, shipping news, and weather reports. These were also not studied individually. Instead, items were carefully selected to illustrate the state of British mining and exploration on Spitsbergen and its geopolitical implications without offering an exhaustive account. The information is divided into sections, reflecting the reality of reading a newspaper not from cover to cover but according to personal preferences. The sections included in this paper are advertisements, business and finance, and news. In addition, editorials and letters are indicative of opinions, while Stock Exchange lists are treated separately to act as factual comparison to potentially distorted information.

The *London Gazette* lays claim to being England’s earliest newspaper, yet it does not disseminate general news (The Stationery Office, 2020). Established in 1665, it has become an official journal of record of the British Government, in which certain statutory notices require publication. The *Gazette* is therefore highly specialised. Although its readership includes government, business, and individuals, the circulation is small. The *London Gazette* broadcasts notices of importance to the United Kingdom and the England. The *Edinburgh* and *Belfast Gazettes* cater for Scotland and Northern Ireland, respectively. For many an unfortunate business, being ‘gazetted’ has always implied the official notice of bankruptcy. Like the stock market, the *Gazettes* are included in this study to verify the authenticity of the Spitsbergen press releases.

3. *Arctic Advertising*

Since 1819 already, classified advertisements had concerned the so-called pleasure cruises to the Arctic archipelago and other shipping news. The mention alone, without additional research having been done here into whether such cruises actually took place, occurs at a remarkably early date in Spitsbergen’s short human history, the widely accepted date of the start of commercial tourist cruises being 1881 (Kruse, 2016).

The islands found mention in literally hundreds of advertisements between 1904 and 1953. Since advertising purposefully targets the imagination, it arguably did more to shape the British perception of Spitsbergen than business notices and other news items may have done. Seven selected example of eye-catching display advertising emphasize how cruise operators and businessmen attempted to persuade customers to buy their services and products. Usually, advertising campaigns are short-lived due to inefficiency or changing market conditions (Belch & Belch, 2004), but the Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company, better known as the P. & O. Company, was singularly

successful in promoting tourism in Spitzbergen. In 1909, a prominent display (Fig. 2) featured,

The Land of the Midnight Sun. Spitzbergen for pleasure-seekers is accessible during only a few Summer Weeks. On the 1st July the luxurious Cruising Yacht 'Vectis' [...] will leave Tilbury Dock on a Cruise to Spitzbergen of 27 Days [...]. She may, circumstances being favourable, visit also the encampment at Dane's Island, of the Wellman-Airship Polar Expedition.³

The Land —
of the —
Midnight Sun.



SPITZBERGEN

for pleasure-seekers

is accessible during only a few Summer Weeks.

On the 1st July the luxurious Cruising Yacht "VECTIS," owned by the PENINSULAR AND ORIENTAL STEAM NAVIGATION COMPANY, will leave Tilbury Dock on a CRUISE TO SPITZBERGEN OF 27 DAYS, in the course of which she will visit the NORTH CAPE, TRONDHJEM and the FJORDS OF NORWAY. She may, circumstances being favourable, visit also the encampment, at Dane's Island, of the Wellman-Airship Polar Expedition.

The "VECTIS," although a vessel of 6,000 tons, carries a strictly limited number of passengers, so that she is never crowded. She has numerous single-berth staterooms; and not more than two passengers are placed in any cabin, unless desired.

The P. & O. COMPANY'S OFFICES at Northumberland Avenue, W.C., or 122, Leadenhall Street, E.C. will be pleased to assist intending passengers in the selection of berths, and to furnish illustrated programme of this and other Summer Cruises on request.

Fares from
30 Guineas.

Enquirers should write for Booklet No. 5 or Call at the P. & O. Offices.

Figure 2: Display advertisement 'Land of the Midnight Sun'⁴

A similar display in 1911 read, "Leaving London on 28th June. A pleasure cruise to Spitzbergen, The North Cape & The Fjords."⁵ (Fig. 3) The fares for a 27-day cruise were 30 guineas, approximately a reasonable £1,800 at present. The Vectis even boasted a wireless installation.

³ *Times*, Jun 23, 1909, p. 12.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Times*, Jun 7, 1911, p. 4.

Leaving LONDON 28th June.

A PLEASURE CRUISE TO

SPITZBERGEN,

The North Cape & The Fjords.

A run across the North Sea; through the sheltered waters of the Inner Lead to Tromsø; thence over the Arctic Sea to Spitzbergen; back then to the North Cape, the Lofoten Islands and Trondhjem, exploring on the way the most beautiful of Norway's Fjords. This is the outline of a

P & O PLEASURE CRUISE

of Twenty-eight Days, offering one of the most attractive Summer holidays that could be devised. On this Cruise the "VECTIS" will leave Tilbury, on Wednesday, the 28th June, at the conclusion of the festivities attendant on their Majesties' Coronation. Fares range from 30 Guineas upwards, according to position of cabin. Write for Illustrated Programme.

SUMMER CRUISES.

From LONDON (Calling at Leth). By the new Twin-screw S.S. "MANTUA" 11,000 Tons.

"THE NORWEGIAN FIORDS" - - - - -	Cruise E—June 15 to June 29.
"THE NORTHERN CAPITALS" - - - - -	Cruise C—July 11 to July 29.
SWEDEN, DENMARK, RUSSIA, &c. - - - - -	Cruise D—August 4 to August 23.

By the well-known S.V. "VECTIS."

"SPITZBERGEN, THE NORTH CAPE, &c." - - - - -	No. 5—June 28 to July 25.
"THE NORWEGIAN FIORDS" - - - - -	No. 6—July 27 to August 19.
"THE NORWEGIAN FIORDS" - - - - -	No. 7—August 11 to August 24.

Fares—Cruise E from 12 Guineas; Cruise C from 15 Guineas; Cruise D from 20 Guineas; Cruise 5 from 30 Guineas; Cruises 6 or 7 from 12 Guineas.

AUTUMN CRUISES by the "VECTIS."

DALMATIA, VENICE, CORFU, &c. - - - - -	No. 8—September 8 to October 7.
CONSTANTINOPLE, GREECE, &c. - - - - -	No. 9—October 12 to Nov. 4.

Fares—Cruise 8 from 25 Guineas; 9 from 20 Guineas.

The P. & O. Cruising Itinerary provides travel, uncrowded, in luxurious ships, well manned, well found, well fed—to the choicest spots lying within the ocean radius fixed by available time. Life on a P. & O. Cruising Steamer may be restful; it need never be dull; its aspects vary sufficiently to please all diversities, whether of age, taste or activity. Dainty fare, smooth and rapid table service and ample cabin attendance are assured by a highly trained staff under skilled supervision. Fares, covering all things (except wines, &c.) needful during the voyage, are moderate, with a minimum of less than £1 a day. Journeys ashore are organised under expert conductors; independent excursions, with or without local knowledge, are easy. Write for Programme.

The "MANTUA" and "VECTIS" have numerous single-berth cabins; not more than two passengers are berthed in any cabin, unless by request. The number of passengers is limited so that all may dine simultaneously. Both ships have wireless installations.

Plans of the Ships and all necessary particulars on application:

PENINSULAR & ORIENTAL STEAM NAVIGATION CO.,
 Chief Office: 122, Leadenhall Street, E.C. } LONDON.
 West End Branch: Northumberland Avenue, W.C. }

Programme post-free.

Figure 3: Advertisement 'A Pleasure Cruise to Spitzbergen'⁶

Such displays invariably appealed to well-to-do travelers in search of Arctic adventure. Their size and hence the associated costs of advertising indicates a proud and successful company behind the campaigns. By referring to Wellman, this company attempted to capitalise on the British fascination with polar explorers. Yet, expressing the fare in guineas at a time when the coinage had long been replaced by the pound introduced aristocratic overtones and thus pinpointed the preferred clientele. The wireless installation would have been of interest to both the journalists who wanted to report back from the Wellman Expedition in real time and the progressive businessmen who needed to be available everywhere at every time. What is not mentioned in these advertisements is that tourism and indiscriminate hunting on Spitsbergen almost led to the extermination of land animals (Conway, 1906), and that many a quick-witted fortune-seeker may have

⁶ *Ibid.*

taken the opportunity of readily available transport to explore the natural resources in the region. I suggest that mineral prospecting was a byproduct of early, prolonged tourism.

In the closing stages of the Great War, the special form and *Times* section of Financial Advertising demands our attention. In 1918, *The Financier* promoted “arrangements for the publication of a most important series of articles dealing with recent developments in Industrial and Financial circles. Every intelligent investor will find these articles of the greatest possible value and interest.”⁷ On Tuesdays and Fridays, Spitsbergen’s wealth in particular would be written about “[by] *The Financier’s* Special Commissioner with the Shackleton Expedition (the only writer who accompanied the expedition). Graphic Description of Mineral Wealth in the Arctic.”⁸ *The Financier*, too, sought to benefit from an association with a polar celebrity, despite the fact that Shackleton never went to Spitsbergen in the end. Nonetheless, the display conveys the sense of urgency in a period of financial optimism.

In 1919, miscellaneous financial notices in *The Times* cost 2s. 6d. per line. By today’s standards, therefore, the shareholder information placed by the Scottish Spitsbergen Syndicate Ltd, one of the two firms in the focus of this paper, cost £250.⁹ In addition to company particulars, the reader learns that claims made by Dr. William Speirs Bruce (the academic title being a persistent mistake) between 1895 and 1909 comprised approximately one twelfth of the archipelago and were officially protected by the British Foreign Office. Next to coal, the mineral resources included gypsum, oil shale, and possibly iron ore. Mining could be carried out day and night, and at only five days steaming from Aberdeen, icebreakers could open ports between May and October to supply markets in Norway, Sweden, and Russia. The public company, which was careful to avoid confusion with any other company active on Spitsbergen, had a cash working capital of £85,000 and had recently received permission to deal in shares. Despite the assertion that the notice was not a pamphlet, I cannot help thinking that its primary purpose was to attract further shareholders. Later that year, the rival Northern Exploration Company raised the awareness of their operations on Spitsbergen by strategically hosting a photographic exhibition by Richard N. Speaight – free of charge.¹⁰ His obituary relates that Speaight was the official photographer to the Spitsbergen Expedition in 1919.¹¹ The photographs have not yet been found.

In 1925, the year in which the Spitsbergen Treaty was ratified, *The Times* printed a curious display of a biplane passing over two polar bears playing in a white landscape under the midnight sun (Fig.4). It was titled “Amundsen’s Flight to the Frozen North on Shell”.¹² It told that, [when] the intrepid explorer aeroplaned over ice-choked seas and Arctic wastes, he relied on Shell. The report from Spitzbergen states, ‘There were tense moments, as the motors had not been started during the past few days, but the aeroplanes

⁷ *Times*, Oct 7, 1918, p. 12.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Times*, Sep 17, 1919, p. 20.

¹⁰ *Times*, Nov 28, 1919, p. 4.

¹¹ *Times*, Mar 9, 1938, p. 16.

¹² *Times*, Nov 27, 1925, p. 6.

shot forward over the snow and were out of sight in a few minutes.”¹³ Undoubtedly, the front-page advertisement referred to Amundsen’s failed North Pole expedition that year, which was nonetheless regarded as a triumph in the face of adversity.¹⁴ Two things to arise from this are that firstly, the media on both sides of the Atlantic eagerly awaited an undisputed claim to the North Pole. Secondly, mining companies were anxiously witnessing the development of petrol as an alternative to coal.



**AMUNDSEN'S FLIGHT
TO THE FROZEN NORTH ON SHELL**

When the intrepid explorer aeroplaned over ice-choked seas and Arctic wastes, he relied on Shell. The report from Spitzbergen states, "There were tense moments, as the motors had not been started during the past few days, but the two aeroplanes shot forward over the snow and were out of sight in a few minutes."

In Shell the right proportion of easy starting and anti-pinking hydrocarbons is used to maintain good balance under all conditions in all weathers.

SHELL
THE WELL-BALANCED PETROL
FOR EASY STARTING

Figure 4: Display advertisement 'Amundsen's flight to the frozen North on Shell'¹⁵

A last display advertisement to catch my eye concerned mining equipment. Aerial ropeways had long been successful in the High North, where snow and rugged terrain often hindered land transport. However, following the Second World War, the British Ropeway Engineering Co. Ltd. was not so much interested in Arctic mining history as in Spitsbergen still being the equivalent of the end of the world and the outpost of civilization, "[...] from Spitsbergen to the Tropics Breco Ropeways are providing the answer."¹⁶ Obviously, 'the Tropics' were tarred with the same brush, Breco priding itself in being able to offer services to everywhere on Earth. Despite unwavering tourism and the attempt at

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *New York Times*, Jun 19, 1925, p. 1.

¹⁵ *Times*, Nov 27, 1925, p. 6.

¹⁶ *Times*, Mar 12, 1948, p. 3.

industrial development, the geographical misconception was persistent: throughout the temporal range of this paper, Spitsbergen clung onto its reputation as a distant land and unattainable goal.

4. *No Man's Business*

While advertising campaigns put their money on polar heroes to raise Spitsbergen's profile in their favour, entrepreneurs initially speculated in gold for the same effect. In 1911, a Scottish correspondent telegraphed that "[the] Harwich steamer Repentor has returned to Aberdeen after an expedition to Spitzbergen in search of gold, regarding which the closest secrecy had previously been observed. 'It is now stated that the expedition has been an unqualified success, gold-bearing quartz of payable value having been found in considerable quantity.'"¹⁷ Many a reader may have established parallels to the Klondike gold rush and all its implications. Whether the apparent discovery continued to be the subject of closest secrecy or whether it was simply a flash in the pan is unclear. *The Times* at least did not report on it again.

We read about developments in the no man's land again towards the end of the Great War. The Stock Exchange informed that "[the] shares of the Northern Exploration Company, a concern which owns considerable mineral areas in Spitzbergen were quoted at about 29s. 6d."¹⁸ Thus begins a flurry of business news from the High North. In spring 1919, "[a] finely illustrated pamphlet has been issued by the Northern Exploration Company, which directly or indirectly, owns most of the southern portion of Spitsbergen's coal area. Reports of the company's mine manager are included, together with a mass of information regarding the resources of Spitsbergen."¹⁹ Noteworthy here is the timely switch to correct the spelling of the place-name, lest readers and potential investors interpret the spelling with a 'z' as sympathy with enemy Germany. Prior to the 1919 expedition, a *Times* correspondent commented cautiously on the NEC company meeting:

It was an interesting speech which the chairman delivered yesterday [but] it should be noted that though the company has been in existence for several years its really serious work has yet to be done. Experts have differed as to the value of the mineral deposits, and until their practical exploitation on a commercial scale has been undertaken it will be difficult to appraise their real value.²⁰

The item took the wind right out of the company's sails, whose own comparably overoptimistic outlook was printed only two pages later.

The proceedings of the NEC's ordinary general meeting in summer 1919 offered an extensive and predictably selective and confident business history.²¹ Following short administrative details, yearly expeditions between 1904 and 1909 had discovered marble and coal deposits and had led to the firm's registration in 1910. Iron ore was found in 1913

¹⁷ *Times*, Oct 13, 1911, p. 13.

¹⁸ *Times*, Aug 28, 1918, p. 10.

¹⁹ *Times*, Apr 16, 1919, p. 22.

²⁰ *Times*, Jun 27, 1919, p. 20.

²¹ *Times*, Jun 27, 1919, p. 22.

and 1914. Although the territorial claims had been lodged with the Foreign Office, the chairman felt that

[All] pioneering work or Empire building that has ever been accomplished by British subjects had been done not with the help of, but in spite of all the opposition of our own Government [...]. It is the private enterprise and initiative of men in business and exploration that have made this vast Empire what it is to-day.²²

This statement was brought into relation to supposed Government plans to exploit iron ore during the Great War. However,

[there] were clever engineers in the Ministry of Munitions who reported that there was no iron ore of value in Spitsbergen. These clever gentlemen, who had never been to Spitsbergen themselves, fancied they knew much better than our company and its employees who had been there several times.²³

It is not hard to see that the NEC had hoped to benefit from direct Government involvement and demand. In addition to potential northern markets, there would have been a British market. However, it is difficult to understand the intended effect and future implications of the allusion to “the childish and dangerous way in which our Government has treated the coalmines of this country during the war”,²⁴ more so in the light of “[the] enforced cessation of [NEC] activities during the war [which] led to a belief in Norway that [they] were a moribund company. [...] The British Foreign Office has been duly notified, and has made a strong protest to the Norwegian Government.”²⁵ The prospecting company, acting in *terra nullius*, essentially needed the support of government institutions to diffuse and, where possible, regulate complicated international situations. This reliance on the Foreign Office to recognize and defend newly staked-out claims was demonstrated when it was announced that “the Northern Exploration Company (Limited) has acquired further important territory in Spitsbergen (with good natural harbours) to the extent of nearly 3,000 square miles, in which coal and other valuable minerals have been found, now making the area owned by this company approximately 5,000 square miles. This new territory covers the Southern Peninsula to South Cape. The British Foreign Office has been notified.”²⁶ An important secondary function of repeatedly referring to the British Foreign Office was giving the impression that the investments of its enterprising citizens would be protected. It was good advertising.

While the NEC had been in the business news since August 1918, the Scottish Spitsbergen Syndicate woke from Great War hibernation only a year later. Formerly a private enterprise that could remain under the radar of the press, the SSS now converted into a public company, reportedly dividing its £10 shares into £1 ones.²⁷ Elsewhere,

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Times*, Jul 5, 1919, p. 21.

²⁷ *Times*, Aug 20, 1919, p. 18.

Messrs. Jordan had founded Spitsbergen Minerals, “with a capital of £60,000, to acquire mines and prospect and explore mines and grounds supposed to contain minerals, ores, precious stones, &c.”²⁸ It seemed that Arctic mining companies were about to mushroom on the archipelago. However, Spitsbergen Minerals was never mentioned again. Instead, we learn that the directors of the Scottish Spitsbergen Syndicate had issued a memorandum to its shareholders, disclosing the particulars which were printed a day later and which I already referred to in the advertising section above. It was cited that “[the] British Foreign Office has informed the syndicate that these claims are officially recognized and will be protected, notwithstanding alteration in the political status of Spitsbergen, which is now being considered by Inter-Allied Commission.”²⁹ Once again we may appreciate this reference to the Foreign Office for geopolitical and publicity reasons.

Interest in Spitsbergen developments was not just a one-sided affair. While faithfully reporting on the British involvement in the Arctic, *The Times* would occasionally turn an eye to Norway, a young nation and all the more serious contender to the British claims. At first, the headlines were promising. “Norwegian company’s sale to British Group” insinuated trouble in the Norwegian camp:

The Norwegian Government had offered the company a loan of 150,000 kroner (approximately £12,500), and had requested [the Norwegian Coalfields, or Norske Kulfelder] not to sell its interests, but in view of the social conditions of the country and the possibility of the establishments of Labour Councils, &c., it was considered that it would not pay to continue working under the altered conditions.³⁰

The implications were that Norwegian claims on the archipelago were weak and that the British had come out top-dog. The underlying message to potential investors was that there was money to be made here and that the situation, at least on the British side, was indisputable. However, the Great Norwegian Spitzbergen Coal Company (Store Norske Spitsbergen Kulkompani) was set to put up a fight. While “coal mines and ports had [...] been inspected in England [...] the directors would arrive at a decision regarding the purchase of mining machinery from America, with which it would be possible to increase the working and shipping efficiency on Spitsbergen.”³¹ The notice would leave British coal owners with a bitter taste, having lost the supremacy in coal to a progressive America, but would invariably reach one conclusion – there was money to be made here.

5. *News of the High North*

Prior to the Great War, Spitsbergen-related items in the news section were a mixture of brief parliamentary comments and expedition accounts, neither of which were directly concerned with mining matters. Nonetheless, they formed the preamble of the mining history that unfolded. In 1907, for instance, J. D. White (1866-1951, then MP for Dumbartonshire) was cited to have asked Sir Edward Grey (1862-1933, then State

²⁸ *Times*, Sep 6, 1919, p. 16.

²⁹ *Times*, Sep 16, 1919, p. 17.

³⁰ *Times*, Dec 13, 1919, p. 21.

³¹ *Times*, Apr 20, 1920, p. 20.

Secretary for Foreign Affairs), “whether [Grey was] aware that some months ago an attack, which nearly had fatal consequences, was made upon a British subject in Spitzbergen, that British lives and property were in serious danger, and that a message was sent requesting British assistance.”³² Furthermore, White enquired, “if [Grey could] state whether any negotiations [were] in progress to have Spitzbergen placed under responsible national or international control; and whether [Grey would] consider the advisability of promoting such an arrangement.”³³ Regrettably, we do not learn the details of this attack, but the reply, quoted in full, set the political agenda until the conclusion of the war. It reads:

His Majesty’s Government [had] received reports of an outbreak which took place in Spitzbergen last spring, in the course of which injuries were inflicted upon a British subject. The long interval that elapsed between the outbreak and the date when it became known here made it impossible for any British warship to reach the island in time to afford any help, even had the actual situation warranted such a step. In reply to the last part of the hon. member’s question, His Majesty’s Government [could not] undertake to initiate negotiations with the object of instituting some kind of control over Spitzbergen. Any British subject going to that island for trade or other purposes [did] so at his own risk, and [the Government could not] exercise any jurisdiction or assume responsibility there.³⁴

While the above exchange marked Spitsbergen out to be dangerous and risky, William Speirs Bruce, lecturing before the Royal Geographical Society in 1908, portrayed parts of it as bleak and inhospitable.

Prince Charles Foreland [today Prins Karls Forland] was to all intents and purposes not surveyed at all. But the reason was plain. Prince Charles Foreland bore the brunt of the weather, and sifted it of its crude elements, as it were, before it passed it on to the mainland. It was seldom that the mountains were clear of the dense canopy of clouds, which were often down to 100ft., and not infrequently right to sea-level. Many parts of the west coast were fringed with reefs, and even in Foul Sound [today Forlandsundet] the water was often very shallow and the bottom rocky.³⁵

Topographic survey undertaken in such uninviting terrain echoed the Victorian ideal in which progress relied on “the energy sparked by man’s struggle with his own environment, and to many of the imperialists the struggle was an end in itself” (Morris, 1979: 305). Perhaps the news item, in addition to painting a picture of the land, served to relate what kind of man and scientist Bruce thought himself to be or wanted to be seen as. *The Times* also reported on his plans for 1909 and 1914, one under the luring title of “Unknown

³² *Times*, Aug 17, 1907, p. 8.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Times*, Apr 14, 1908, p. 7.

Islands”.³⁶ The scientific party included geologists who would most likely carry out mineral prospecting.

Despite Bruce’s expeditions to the Antarctic as well as to Spitsbergen, Shackleton remained the British public’s favourite polar explorer. The leader of the Nimrod Expedition to the South Pole (1907-9) proposed to take some of his staff and equipment to the Arctic archipelago in May 1911. “The interior of Spitzbergen is little known, and probably affords excellent ground for biological and geological research. In Sir Ernest Shackleton’s opinion it would be an excellent place for sanatoria for consumptives.”³⁷ Although he merely repeated what several British explorers and scientists had said for years, the public bestowed him with a greater authority in polar matters. In any case, Shackleton did not set foot on Spitsbergen in 1911 nor at any other time.

In spring 1911, a headline referred to the important development of “wireless telegraphy in the Arctic Circle.”³⁸ Following the establishment of a station in Ingøy, another would open on Spitsbergen, presumably in Green Harbour (today Grønfjorden). “The establishment [would] of course solve many problems which [had] hitherto been beyond solution in these remote regions, where the fate of expeditions [had] often remained unknown for months. It will at the same time open up great possibilities for the exploitation of new fields of enterprise.”³⁹ While the improvement in communication would indeed be commendable, it was perhaps naïve to think that “[the] initiative which Norway [was] taking [would] not affect the question of future control, as the Spitzbergen station [might be] left to the common government of this No Man’s Island, should such a government [be] established.”⁴⁰ The correspondent appeared to have been unappreciative of the geopolitical implication of any development that took place on Spitsbergen at the time.

Geopolitics became a pressing matter once more towards the end of the Great War. There had been an international conference in Christiania (today Oslo) in 1914, “to draw up proposals for regulating lawlessness by means of international police supervision.”⁴¹ However, negotiations were postponed indefinitely upon the outbreak of war, and British activities on Spitsbergen itself had come to a halt while the citizens were defending the homeland. In early 1917, the Royal Geographical Society had written a letter to Balfour (1848-1930, then Foreign Secretary), outlining that British claims on Spitsbergen warranted protection. Yet it was not until spring 1918 that this letter was made available to *The Times* in the hope of re-igniting the geopolitical debate. It highlighted “the importance of taking immediate steps to safeguard British interests, political, strategic, and commercial, in Spitzbergen, and to urge that the matter be adjusted with [British] Allies before the termination of the war.”⁴² It called attention to Spitsbergen, “due to its geographical position, to its relative proximity to the British Isles and an important trade

³⁶ *Times*, Jul 21, 1909, p. 14; *Times*, Jul 13, 1914, p. 6; *Times*, Aug 1, 1914, p. 5.

³⁷ *Times*, Dec 21, 1910, p. 6.

³⁸ *Times*, Apr 22, 1911, p. 5.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Times*, Feb 18, 1914, p. 7.

⁴² *Times*, Mar 13, 1918, p. 5.

route, and to its extensive deposits of steam coal and other minerals.”⁴³ Citing the British occupation in 1614, the Royal Geographical Society thanked *The Times* for the publication, asking “May we not hope that *The Times* itself will revert one day to the original form of the name?”⁴⁴

Meanwhile, *The Times* reported on the international perspective of Spitsbergen affairs. The German semi-official news agency, for instance, argued that “the British claims to sovereignty in Spitsbergen [could not] be considered, as at the Spitsbergen Conference in 1914 all the participating Powers recognized Spitsbergen as a ‘no man’s land’.”⁴⁵ While this statement was invariably true, there is no evidence to support that “British economic interests in Spitsbergen before the war were less important than those in Germany.”⁴⁶ Spitsbergen had long been the centre of an international tug-of-war, yet it was the Norwegian press that briefly put all historical claims aside to focus on the present. “While admitting that public opinion in England [was] justly protesting against German interference on Spitsbergen [...] England [could] calmly await her hour, as, owing to her dominating maritime position, she [was] always sure of a decisive influence in the final settlement.”⁴⁷ The Norwegian press considered that “the questions of influence over Spitsbergen [was] one between Norway and Great Britain. [...], but under no conditions can these interests be so great as to be allowed to interfere with what ought to [have been] the principle object of Norwegian foreign policy, namely, the maintenance of good relations with England.”⁴⁸ Thus, any nation’s interests in Spitsbergen were dwarfed by the needs of political relations at a larger European scale.

Undeterred by this international tug-of-war, or perhaps motivated by it, the Northern Exploration Company reportedly went back to business. Following its 1918 expedition, a *Times* correspondent quoted that, “the deposits belonging to [the company were] visited by a number of British and Norwegian experts, all of whom [declared] that the iron deposits [were] incomparably rich and unsurpassed in Europe. The coalfields, too, [were] being developed by the company.”⁴⁹ Perhaps he meant that the coalfields of the company were being developed by Norwegians. While the British had unanimously vacated the archipelago to go to war, individuals of neutral Norway had used the situation to strengthen their hold over the resources. The hundreds of miners on Spitsbergen in the preceding years and the output of 80,000 tons of coal in 1918 invariably referred to Norwegian undertakings. In reality though, the question remained, “whether England after the war [would] recognize the occupation of the coalfields which have been seized during the war.”⁵⁰ To demonstrate the company’s political agenda, “the expedition took possession of the German claims [at Ebeltoftthamna], dismantled the wireless apparatus

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Times*, Mar 14, 1918, p. 5.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Times*, Oct 1, 1918, p. 7.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

and unfurled the Union Jack on the flagstaff that formerly flew the German colours.”⁵¹ I have found no evidence that these actions were designed to conciliate the British Government after the earlier verbal attacks or drum up support among the anti-German public. The 1919 expedition was decidedly less politically charged.⁵²

In Britain, geopolitical interest in Spitsbergen had not yet subsided. The Royal Geographical Society attentively listened to M. Conway’s lecture on “the Political Status of Spitsbergen”.⁵³ His information would soon be out of date. On September 26, 1919, the report of the Spitsbergen Commission in Versailles was approved and the archipelago would be placed under Norwegian sovereignty, respecting mining and other rights held by foreigners.⁵⁴ The signing of the Spitsbergen Treaty on February 9, 1920 did not deter the Scottish Spitsbergen Syndicate from organizing a large expedition to develop their estates that year.⁵⁵ Nor did it stop the Norwegian press from publishing a dubious account of the Norse occupation of Spitsbergen in as early as 1291, on the grounds of which “Norway [claimed] Spitsbergen as her indisputable possession.”⁵⁶ References to old sagas contributed precious little to the political debate of Norwegian sovereignty and the ratification of the Treaty in 1925. Nonetheless, the Spitsbergen archipelago and Bear Island were given the joint official name of Svalbard, “an old Norse Saga name meaning ‘Cold Coast’.”⁵⁷ On August 14, 1925, the Norwegian sovereignty over Svalbard was officially proclaimed.⁵⁸ After this year, news about mining on Spitsbergen were sporadic, but it is unclear if a change in political status was to blame or if the global economic downturn after the Great War also played a role.

6. *Polar Opinion*

While *The Times* generally supplied its readership with somewhat objective information, the readers in turn expressed their subjective opinions in editorials and commentaries. The following is a selection of editorials and letters that were pre-occupied with the developments on Spitsbergen. In accordance with the greater coverage of the subject in the news towards the end and immediately after the Great War, most of these were also penned at that time. We meet again with William Speirs Bruce, the gentlemanly scientist, who instead of having a political or economic agenda asked if the Minister for Food or the National Service had considered oil and meat from the poles. “In Spitzbergen I have also eaten and enjoyed seal meat, and I have lived well for months on whale meat and enjoyed it.”⁵⁹ I include this item here to indicate again what kind of person the explorer and consultant behind the Scottish Spitsbergen Syndicate was. He could have pressed the company’s mining interests – but he chose not to. His allegiance presumably lay with his scientific work, which warranted no response from the public.

⁵¹ *Times*, Dec 10, 1918, p. 5.

⁵² *Times*, May 12, 1919, p. 11.

⁵³ *Times*, Dec 10, 1918, p. 10.

⁵⁴ *Times*, Sep 26, 1919, p. 9.

⁵⁵ *Times*, May 5, 1920, p. 18.

⁵⁶ *Times*, Aug 9, 1922, p. 14.

⁵⁷ *Times*, Apr 24, 1925, p. 11.

⁵⁸ *Times*, Aug 14, 1925, p. 9.

⁵⁹ *Times*, Feb 14, 1918, p. 9.

By and large, the language of opinions was indignant, even outraged, especially if directed at government incompetence or if the writer felt personally hard done by. Thus, the editor called the earlier Spitsbergen conferences at Christiania “a series of leisurely meetings [...] to decide upon the future control of the Arctic archipelago of Spitsbergen. The outbreak of hostilities stopped its deliberations, and nothing was settled. Thereafter, the question of Spitsbergen, like many other questions, disappeared from view.”⁶⁰ He was concerned that a clause in the Brest-Litovsk Treaty implied “that the Germans and the Bolsheviks decided to share Spitsbergen between themselves.”⁶¹ Pointing out substantial British and Norwegian mining interests on the archipelago, he conceded that “[the] Bolsheviks may give away Russian provinces if they choose, but they cannot hand over to Germany a region where the Russian flag has never flown. Herr von Kühlmann might as well persuade M. Trotsky to give him the North Pole.”⁶² To be on the safe side, though, “it seems desirable that the Foreign Office should take definite steps regarding Spitsbergen without delay.”⁶³ J. R. Maples, the secretary of the Northern Exploration Company, shared these sentiments, “realizing the value to the nation of the many mineral deposits [the NEC] have located, and the extreme danger of their becoming anything other than British-owned.”⁶⁴ A less altruistic view would undoubtedly be that the possessions also had value to oneself and that the company would be none too pleased if they were to lose their estates.

The editorial and Maples’ statement provoked instant reactions. The following day, one J. Bennington Fraser wrote: “[the editorial] deals with Spitsbergen from a political rather than an economic standpoint; while the former is, for the time being, of more urgent importance, it is only on account of the possibilities of the latter.”⁶⁵ He pointed out that both articles had underplayed the importance of iron ore, of which he himself had samples analysed. Furthermore, “it is within [his] personal knowledge that this ore was offered to the British Government some two years ago, but despite the strongest recommendations of the Ministry of Munitions for the acceptance of the offer, the Treasury turned the proposition down at the last moment.”⁶⁶ In the light of British resources dwindling during the war, “it is high time for the authorities concerned to act promptly, in order that these deposits may be conserved for the British nation.”⁶⁷ Jonas Reid, Norwegian consul to Siberia, supplemented Maples’ statement by pointing out that Spitsbergen was, of course, a no man’s land. “Consequently, neither the Russian Government nor the Government of any other country could claim any national rights.”⁶⁸ With regards to mining activities, Reid referred to a company headed by the Russian naval officer Veimarn but conceded that “[the] only serious efforts to develop the coal deposits on commercial lines up to the

⁶⁰ *Times*, Mar 11, 1918, p. 9.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Times*, Mar 11, 1918, p. 9.

⁶⁵ *Times*, Mar 12, 1918, p. 5.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

outbreak of war were made by an American concern, the Arctic Coal Company [...].”⁶⁹ Incidentally, the Americans sold out to a Norwegian company, and Reid appeared to have considerable material interests in the latter.

Following the war, reports on Spitsbergen’s mineral resources were at best misleading. At worst, “[one] must confess that the history of ‘Spitsbergen’ reads like a long series of failures.”⁷⁰ Professor Haverfield, Oxford historian and archaeologist, based this observation on

a recent report of the State ‘Department of Scientific and Industrial Research’ [which declares] that while explorers differ, there seems no valid ground for believing in the existence in the islands of much ‘iron ore capable of profitable development’, and a Swedish expert, writing in 1914, said much the same [...]. Perhaps the scientific experts will find out the facts.⁷¹

It is noteworthy that the department should single out explorers as a group of people who commonly objected to unfavorable reports. Thus, the predictable response by H. G. Ponting, himself a polar explorer as well as a well-known photographer, was that the above correspondent showed a “complete lack on up-to-date information on the subject.”⁷² Ponting emphasized that

it is the present and the future of the country that is of more vital importance to Great Britain than its past, and it was for this reason that the Foreign Office granted me a passport this summer to join the expedition that proceeded to Spitsbergen to report on the mineral resources of the country, and to see that British rights there were respected.⁷³

Regarding the potential of Spitsbergen’s mineral wealth, Ponting envisaged that “Great Britain may, perhaps, regain the proud position of being the foremost iron and steel producing country in the world.”⁷⁴ He believed that Swedish reports to the contrary were “circulated for the purpose of discouraging British enterprise.”⁷⁵ A noticeable inaccuracy in the item was the reference to the Arctic Coal Company being a Norwegian concern, which had been profitable since 1910. As mentioned above, the Arctic Coal Company was initiated by Americans already in 1904. Although profitable, it was sold to three different companies in 1915 and 1916 and re-named in 1918, thus it had only been in Norwegian hands for two years by the time the item was written. In addition, A. J. Milne, chairman of the South-Western Mining Syndicate, found Ponting to be “under a very serious misapprehension when he makes such sweeping statement regarding the [inferior] yield

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Times*, Dec 14, 1918, p. 7.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Times*, Dec 16, 1918, p. 9.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

of iron from the deposits of the British Isles.”⁷⁶ Milner’s syndicate regularly obtained yields approaching and sometimes exceeding the Spitsbergen samples.

While fueling the debate over Spitsbergen’s mineral resources, Haverfield also rattled the cages of the spelling lobby. “We might even be told why we are to write Spitsbergen, not Spitzbergen. Is it because ‘Spitz’ sounds and looks more German than ‘Spits’? Does it?”⁷⁷ Reciting the Dutch documentation of the islands in 1596, M. Conway wittingly retaliated, “Why we should go out of our way to spell it in the German fashion is a question which perhaps Professor Haverfield will answer.”⁷⁸ Haverfield lastly lamented that “[the] latest use of the island is said to be as a good summer resort for broken-down university professors. I commiserate them – and ‘Spitsbergen’.”⁷⁹ This quip, however, was lost on F. Gower Gardner, former medical officer with the Northern Exploration Company, who two years later offered a few words about the archipelago’s climate in summer-time – incidentally one of “delightful conditions [which] would become a summer resort for tourists and those in search of health.”⁸⁰

Spitsbergen’s legal status having been settled, newspaper items with particular reference to mining or geopolitics were few and far between in the interwar years. In 1930, we read about the centenary of the Royal Geographical Society, whose successes in the promotion of practical geography were evident in undergraduate visits to Spitsbergen, among other places.⁸¹ Paradoxically, the 1930s gave little reason to celebrate as they witnessed the deaths of a generation of many Spitsbergen and polar celebrities. In 1936, for instance, the Rev. F. T. Gardner, who was instrumental in forming the Northern Exploration Company, passed away.⁸² In 1937, Great Britain lost Lord Conway of Allington, explorer and art critic, who was credited with the exploration of Spitsbergen’s interior in 1896 and 1897.⁸³ Comdr. Frank Wild, an explorer of the Antarctic who had been released by the Admiralty to lead the Northern Exploration Company’s expedition in 1918, died in 1939.⁸⁴ The obituaries of these and other entrepreneurs and explorers undoubtedly marked the end of an era.

Neither did the Second World War revive the readers’ interest in the archipelago beyond the necessities of the conflict. In 1941, one reader was taken aback to hear of the coal dumps on Spitsbergen having deliberately been set on fire. “It seems unfortunate that this coal has been destroyed, as very little supervision would be necessary to prevent its being shipped to German-occupied Norway. [...] it is surprising to think that the present coal dumps were not worth fetching to Archangel.”⁸⁵

A last editorial to be selected deals with Russian-Norwegian tensions in 1951.

⁷⁶ *Times*, Jan 9, 1919, p. 11.

⁷⁷ *Times*, Dec 14, 1918, p. 7.

⁷⁸ *Times*, Dec 17, 1918, p. 9.

⁷⁹ *Times*, Dec 14, 1918, p. 7.

⁸⁰ *Times*, Dec 18, 1920, p. 6.

⁸¹ *Times*, Oct 21, 1930, p. 15.

⁸² *Times*, Oct 13, 1936, p. 21.

⁸³ *Times*, Apr 20, 1937, p. 21.

⁸⁴ *Times*, Aug 21, 1939, p. 12.

⁸⁵ *Times*, Sep 12, 1941, p. 5.

Norway pledged herself in the treaty not to establish or permit any naval base or fortification on the islands, which were never to be used for warlike purposes. [...] During the war Spitsbergen was raided by the forces of each side in turn, but neither side attempted to turn it into a base. Some time before the end of the war, however, the Soviet Government approached the Norwegian government in exile with a view to changing the treaty and establishing joint defence arrangements after the war [...], the Soviet Government maintaining on two unconvincing grounds that the treaty ‘cannot remain valid’.⁸⁶

We clearly recognize cold-war undertones, but since the early 1950s mark the end of our temporal range, with the last British firm dissolving in 1953, ensuing political wrangling is outside the scope of the paper.

7. *Spitsbergen and the Stock Exchange*

At the time when Spitsbergen news became quiet, the London Stock Exchange began to tell a different story – and it was not a successful episode. Amid post-war optimism, “the shares of the Northern Exploration Company [...] were [initially] quoted at about 29s. 6d.”⁸⁷ In today’s money that would be approximately £31. This price had dropped to 22s. 4½d. when the company re-appeared in the supplementary lists for unquoted securities over a year later. Simultaneously, the Scottish Spitsbergen Syndicate opened for business at 45s., roughly £45 at present.⁸⁸ Subsequent quotes for both companies are sporadic, with the majority occurring in 1920 and 1921.

A look at Fig. 5 indicates that the shares of both companies lost value rapidly. Following a slight revival on February 19, 1920, which reflected the signing of the Spitsbergen Treaty, the Northern Exploration Company seemed to have been out of business by the end of the year. A singular reference to their shares in late 1921 placed these at a mere 3s., approximately £3.⁸⁹ The general downward trend of the Scottish Spitsbergen Syndicate was occasionally favourably interrupted. Thanks to the settled legal status in February 1920, the company shares reached a promising all-time high of 48s. 1½d. Thereafter, minor peaks of increases by 5s., 4s., and 6s. could be noted in November 1920, May 1921, and December 1921, respectively. Nonetheless, by February 1922, the price of the syndicate’s shares had fallen to 12s. 4½d., with outliers in winter 1922/23 at 6s. 3d. A last minor transaction of 10½d. in 1928, some years after the Treaty was finally ratified, has not been included in the diagram.⁹⁰ Thus, the heyday of public Spitsbergen companies on the London Stock Exchange realistically lay between November 1919 and February 1922. It lasted for less than 28 months. Neither the general post-war boom nor the legal stability and safety promised by the Spitsbergen Treaty led the companies to longevity and success.

⁸⁶ *Times*, Nov 1, 1951, p. 7.

⁸⁷ *Times*, Aug 28, 1918, p. 10.

⁸⁸ *Times*, Nov 28, 1919.

⁸⁹ *Times*, Feb 19, 1920; *Times*, Nov 25, 1920; *Times*, Nov 10, 1921.

⁹⁰ *Times*, Feb 19, 1920; *Times*, Nov 16, 1920; *Times*, May 28, 1921; *Times*, Dec 30, 1921; *Times*, Feb 15, 1922; *Times*, Dec 16, 1922; *Times*, Jan 3, 1923; *Times*, Jul 28, 1928.

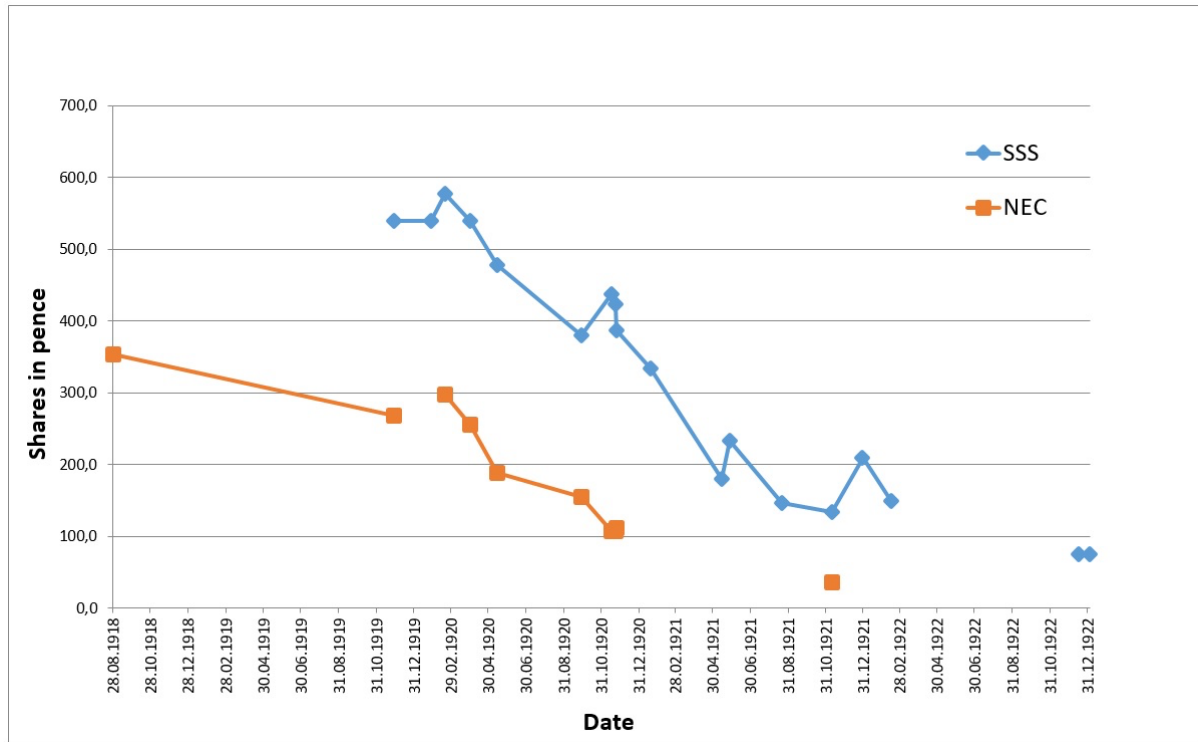


Figure 5: British Spitsbergen companies on the London Stock Exchange, 1918-1923

8. 'Gazetted'

The aforementioned *Gazettes* brought more Spitsbergen mining and exploration companies out of the woodwork than *The Times* ever did. For the companies in question, however, this was not a lucky circumstance because being 'gazetted' generally entailed an official notice of bankruptcy. It could also be an indication of a company voluntarily dissolving to continue trading under another name, but this intention is difficult to discern in the newspaper.

The first Spitsbergen companies to be hit in the *London Gazette* were the Spitzbergen Mining and Exploration Syndicate in February 1911 and Spitzbergen United in October the same year.⁹¹ However, the newspaper's reports were not all doom and gloom as on New Year's Day 1918 it related that all who wished to do so could send telegrams from Spitsbergen for 6d. per word.⁹² In 1924, we meet again with Messrs. Jordan's Spitsbergen Minerals, who had apparently conducted business in one form or another for almost four years.⁹³ While the Spitzbergen Mining & Exploration Syndicate had at least explored claims on Spitsbergen (Kruse, 2013), neither Spitzbergen United nor Spitsbergen Minerals appear to ever have set foot on the islands. Their business appears to have been speculation.

Regarding the Spitsbergen Treaty of 1920, the newspaper published a notice to all claimants of land at the time of its ratification in 1925. This notice contained three important provisions. Firstly, the government of the claimant had to send all claims to the

⁹¹ *London Gazette*, Feb 24, 1911, p. 1478; *London Gazette*, Oct 27, 1911, p. 7812.

⁹² *London Gazette*, Jan 1, 1918, p. 180.

⁹³ *London Gazette*, May 20, 1924, p. 4050.

commissioner charged with examining the claims. Secondly, the precise delimitations of the claims had to be marked on an accompanying map. Lastly, and most significantly, “the notification must be accompanied by the deposit of a sum of one penny for each acre (40 ares) of land claimed to defray the expenses of the examination of the claims.”⁹⁴ Thus, the companies that had persisted more badly than well throughout the financial downturn now had to take money in hand to protect their ailing Arctic interests. After a prolonged silence, and without mentioning the fate of the Northern Exploration Company (dissolved in 1934) and the Scottish Spitsbergen Syndicate (see below), the last Spitsbergen company to be ‘gazetted’ in the London publication was Scottish Spitsbergen (Development). The voluntary winding-up was announced in January 1953, creditors being asked to send their full names, addresses, and particulars of their debts or claims to be paid in full.⁹⁵

London’s sister publications, the *Edinburgh Gazette* and the *Belfast Gazette*, printed decidedly fewer Spitsbergen-related notices. While London dealt with news of importance to England, Wales, and Great Britain as a whole, the *Edinburgh Gazette* concentrated on Scottish relevance. Thus, it is here that we learn about the voluntary liquidation of the originally private Scottish Spitsbergen Syndicate in February 1919.⁹⁶ This explains a reference to the “Old Company”⁹⁷ in September that year, as opposed to the newly restructured public one. The ‘new Company’ in turn voluntarily wound up in 1950, with proceedings stretching into 1953, in order to re-register as the aforementioned Scottish Spitsbergen (Development).⁹⁸ Interestingly, the British Commonwealth and Foreign Parcel Post chose the Scottish rather than the imperial edition to announce rates of postage beginning at 4s. 0d.⁹⁹ – while the aforementioned notice to claimants of land, which also found mention in Scotland, was apparently the only Spitsbergen matter of interest to Northern Ireland.¹⁰⁰ On a positive note, though, the Belfast edition distributed no negative news of financial failure.

9. Discussion

The discussion is based on carefully selected information that unfortunately does not lend itself to statistical analysis. The number of newspaper items consulted are visualized in Fig. 6a and 6b.

⁹⁴ *London Gazette*, Aug 14, 1925, p. 5427.

⁹⁵ *London Gazette*, Jan 9, 1953, pp. 238, 241, 242.

⁹⁶ *Edinburgh Gazette*, Feb 7, 1919, p. 784.

⁹⁷ *Edinburgh Gazette*, Sep 5, 1919, p. 3039.

⁹⁸ *Edinburgh Gazette*, Jul 4, 1950, pp. 312-3; *Edinburgh Gazette*, Aug 17, 1951, p. 426; *Edinburgh Gazette*, Aug 22, 1952; *Edinburgh Gazette*, May 15, 1953.

⁹⁹ *Edinburgh Gazette*, May 2, 1952, p. 257.

¹⁰⁰ *Belfast Gazette*, Aug 21, 1925, p. 252.

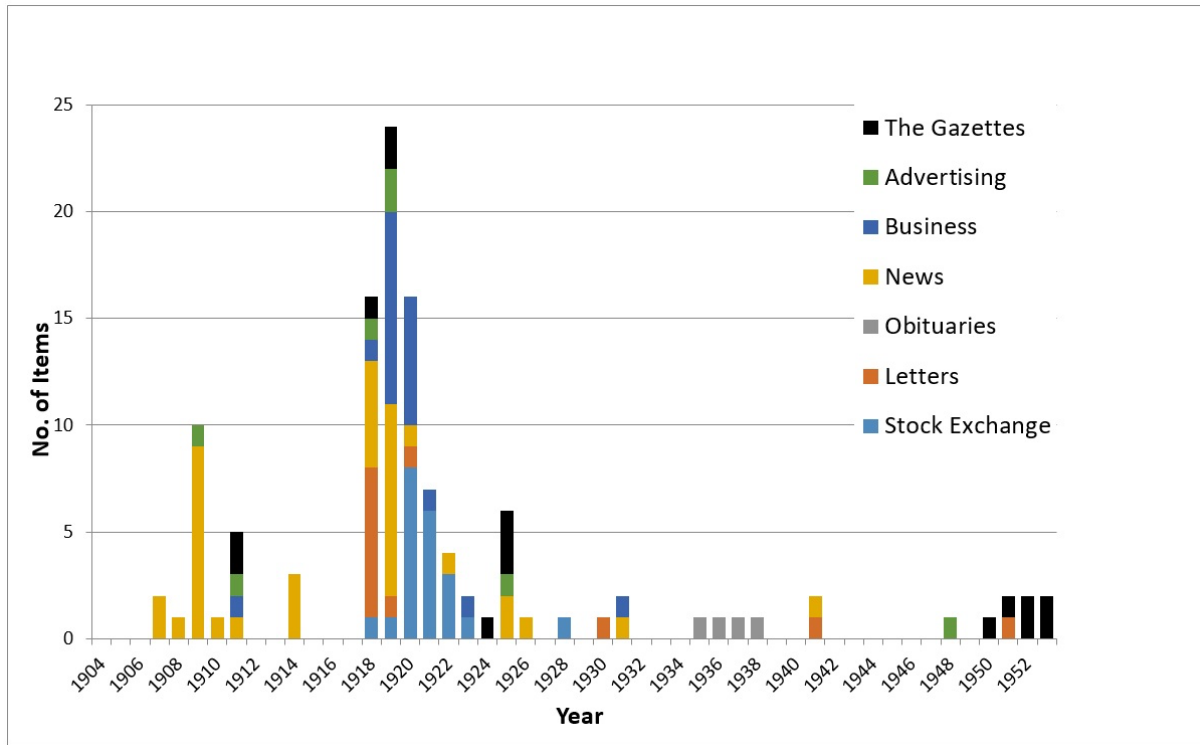


Figure 6a: The number of items consulted from different sections in *The London Times*, as well as the total number of items selected from the *Gazettes*

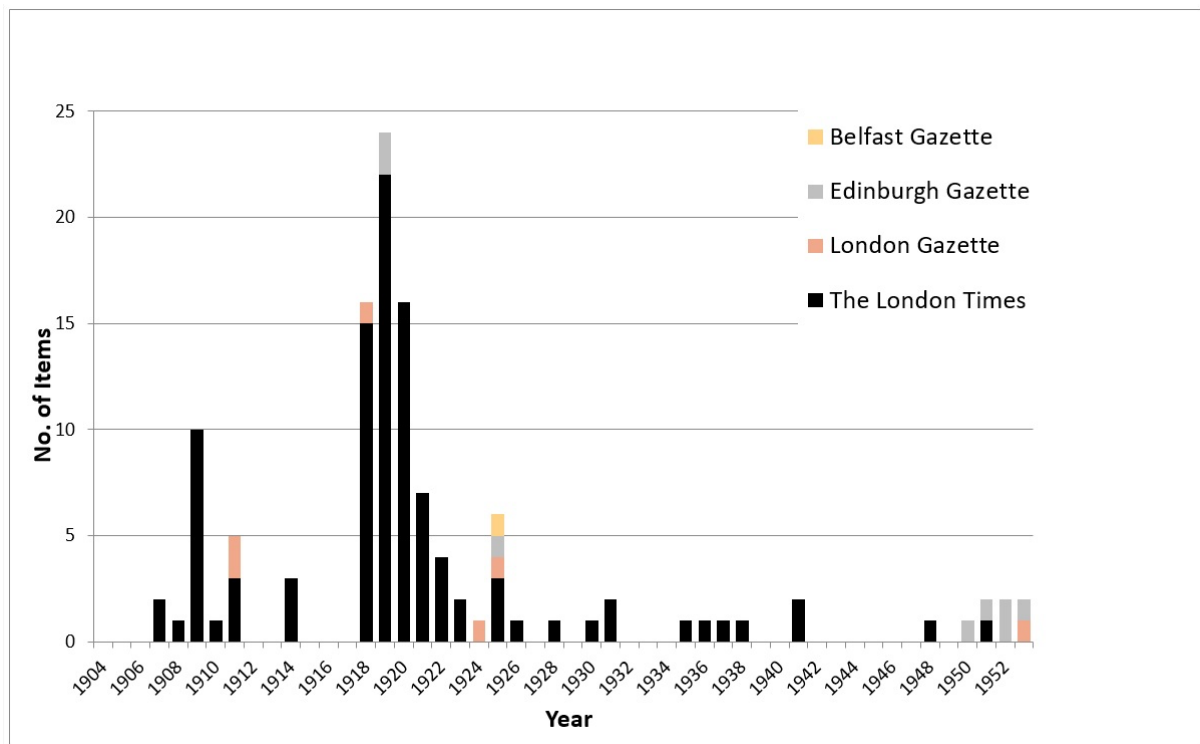


Figure 6b: The number of items consulted from the different *Gazettes* (London, Edinburgh, Belfast), as well as the total number of items selected from *The London Times*

This paper has teased out the story of the British involvement in Spitsbergen mining as told by *The London Times* and substantiated by *The Gazettes* of London, Edinburgh, and

Belfast. It is a local story that can only be understood in the context of global events like the Great War (1914-1918), the signing of the Spitsbergen Treaty (1920), the ratification of the Spitsbergen Treaty (1925), and the Second World War (1939-1945). It is a story of intertwined economic and political interests in four phases.

Since Henry Hudson verified the Dutch sighting of Spitsbergen in 1607, the British have frequented the islands in one capacity or another. It is justified, however, to use 1904 as the starting date for British mining activities and thus for this paper. In that year, the Sheffield-based Spitzbergen Coal & Trading Company fitted out its first expedition to its coal claim in Adventfjorden and Rev. F. T. Gardner went on a tourist cruise that instigated the formations of both the Spitsbergen Mining & Exploration Syndicate (1906) and the Northern Exploration Company (1910) (Kruse, 2013). The British Empire presumably being used to the worldwide wandering of its enterprising citizens, these events went unnoticed by *The Times*.

In a first phase of interest, *The Times* published its earliest news item relevant to the subject in 1907. We recall that this was prompted by 'unrest' at the mine of the Spitzbergen Coal & Trading Company in 1906, mining strikes certainly being a matter close to the heart of any British coal owner. It called into question the Government's view on the future political status of Spitsbergen, and for the time being, any person who ventured into the no man's land did so at their own risk. Despite the bleak picture that Bruce painted of his journeys, the islands seemed accessible and tourism proved popular. Both the gold rush and the Shackleton expedition heralded in 1911, however, came to nothing, while the geopolitical implications of the Norwegian wireless station in Grønfjorden was grossly underestimated. That same year, two obscure British companies were 'gazetted'. The outbreak of the Great War in 1914 almost seemed like a welcome excuse for voluntarily leaving the islands for the duration of the conflict. Still, this first phase is essential. The strike in Adventfjorden and the three unsuccessful Spitsbergen Conferences in Christiania had two important effects. Firstly, they brought the island group out of relative isolation onto the world's political stage. Secondly, the British Government, and presumably other stakeholder nations, had to position themselves and take a political stance.

With only a little background noise during the Great War, the onset of a second and most intense phase of interest can be tied to the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk between Germany and Russia on March 3, 1918. That year witnessed a peak in the number of letters to the editor, which were not many but all the more diagnostic. The British public was outraged over a clause in the treaty that suggested a German-Russian takeover of Spitsbergen and the correspondents demanded to see more decisive action from their Government. With resources at home seemingly running low, a bridge was quickly built between politics and economic interests: the onus now lay on the Ministry of Munitions to make the most of the alleged iron resources. Although the Treasury withheld funds, the Foreign Office and the Admiralty permitted and supported a Northern Exploration Company expedition even before the war was over. Afterwards, 'Spitsbergen wealth' appeared in financial advertising and the company began to trade on the Stock Exchange. Besides international tension and nationalism, a critical characteristic of this second phase was heightened post-war optimism.

At international level, we catch glimpses of American mining interests, Swedish rivalry, and Norway extending the hand of friendship to the British Government... while Norwegian citizens arguably jumped British claims (however, no claims could as of yet be officially registered anywhere). *The Times* thus revealed a network of stakeholders at home and abroad, whose interactions intensified in 1919. The Scottish Spitsbergen Syndicate and the Northern Exploration Company published pamphlets to substantiate their claims on Spitsbergen. The deposits of coal, gypsum, oil shale, iron ore, and others were of course said to be immense and economically motivated appeals were again made to the Foreign Office to incorporate Spitsbergen into the Empire. Meanwhile, the report of the Spitsbergen Commission had been approved in Versailles, and the decision over the archipelago's political fate lay in the hands of an Inter-Allied Commission.

British public opinion was surprisingly mute when Norway was granted the sovereignty of Spitsbergen. The signing of the Spitsbergen Treaty in 1920, a further milestone of this phase, did not bring British mining activity to a halt. On the contrary, the companies and their shareholders now hoped that political stability would increase economic gain. Transactions in shares peaked, but, as outlined above, the picture painted by the Stock Exchange over time was a dire one. I should mention that it is not clear if the death of Alfred Harmsworth and the change in *Times* ownership in 1922 had consequences for the coverage of Spitsbergen. On the whole, coverage declined with a tiny ratification-related peak in 1925. By then, the Spitsbergen bubble had truly burst not only for the British companies but also for all mining companies that were not subsidized by their national governments thereafter. However, we must set the terminal date for this phase at 1927. Undetected by our newspapers, it was the year in which the Danish Commissioner settled all claim disputes and awarded the claims. The settlement literally cut the British companies down to size (Kruse, 2013).

The third and quiet phase was overshadowed by the Wall Street Crash in 1929, which invariably affected British mining interests in Spitsbergen, even if no sources state so directly. The Northern Exploration Company, deep in debt, did not survive this phase (Kruse, 2013). Its unobserved dissolution in 1934 fittingly precedes a number of polar obituaries. In this period, too, a crucial date is overlooked: by 1937, ten years after the claims had been settled, all remaining mining companies were to have developed their properties into working mines – or forever let go of them. Again, a world war offered a welcome distraction from these problems.

The fourth and last phase of British mining in Spitsbergen might almost go unreported were it not for the notices in the *Gazettes*. The Scottish Spitsbergen Syndicate had remained debt-free and lasted the distance in a vegetative state (Kruse, 2013). Again, heightened post-war optimism renewed Scottish activity in Svalbard. However, the Syndicate had let its properties expire in 1937. Re-structuring and staking out new claims could not prolong the British presence on Svalbard beyond 1953.

10. Conclusion

In view of the British presence on Spitsbergen between 1904 and 1953 having been the subject of an extensive doctoral thesis (Kruse, 2013), the question is justified whether this article has any added value. And yes, it does. By assessing a much wider range of

newspaper items than was practical in the thesis, it has been possible to develop a clear and concise understanding of what was printed and to what effect. *The Times* took no particular sides or forced its own agenda. The focus was invariably a political one because – quite frankly – there were never any economic highlights to report. In fact, the expired British claims have never been worked by anyone thereafter.

Were the British companies successful in swaying political debate and public opinion in their economic favour? On the whole, the British Government had taken a political stance in 1907, from which it never wavered. While it looked after the rights of its citizens, it never intended to take control. The companies briefly managed to rouse public support for colonial rule over the archipelago, but this quickly subsided when the Spitsbergen Treaty was signed in Norway's favour in 1920. However hard the Northern Exploration Company in particular tried, *The Times* could not be instrumentalised.

While the aforementioned thesis may be too overwhelming as a starting point, this paper has provided a manageable baseline for new research questions and comparative studies. I hope to have entertained my readers and motivated my fellow researchers to investigate, for instance, other British publications or the newspapers of other stakeholder nations. We have much to gain from the high resolution of such information and from joint analyses.

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