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History

The misery of Peary's elusive channel

There was fame, honour and respect to be won by those who explored Greenland around the turn of the last century. For some, there was also death



July 7, 2016 - 10:33am - By Iben Bjørnsson

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In the [previous article](#), we introduced the Danish Arctic expeditions and their history. This time, we'll look into some of them more closely in order to provide a picture of the harsh surroundings and circumstances in which they took place.

You probably had to have been cut from a different cloth to go on these year-long expeditions, not knowing for sure whether you'd return. But if you made it, there was fame, honour and respect to be won. Names like Knud Rasmussen, Peter Freuchen and Ejnar Mikkelsen were big in their day, but, if you don't know them, keep reading, you will.

The promise of fame was not altogether unattractive. It was something that the participants often were aware of. Ludvig Mylius-Erichsen leader of the Danish *Literary Expedition* to Greenland 1902-1904, wrote in his journal:

**VI INTERNATIONAL FORUM
ARCTIC: TODAY AND THE FUTURE**



**RUSSIA, SAINT-PETERSBURG,
DECEMBER 2016**

*As soon as the individual participant in a common expedition realises that it is like those from which men has become famous, he is captivated by an irresistible urge to become number one, to secure for himself material to captivate the world's interest, especially before the others.**

(Cited in Niels Barfoed, Manden bag helten: Knud Rasmussen på nært hold, 2011)

Peary and the channel

We'll return to Mylius-Erichsen. Let's begin with another famous Arctic explorer. Robert Peary was an American Navy officer and civil engineer who was widely known for his Arctic expeditions. He was catapulted to fame when he claimed to be the first man to reach the North Pole in 1909, but our story starts with an earlier expedition of his.

In 1891-1892, he explored the northernmost part of Greenland, some of which today is named Peary Land. It was part of the colonial-scientific exploration culture to name the places after those who 'discovered' them, regardless of whether anyone lived there to begin with. Many of these names are the names we know the areas by today.



Ludvig Mylius-Erichsen aboard the 'Danmark' in 1907 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

Peary Land is a peninsula at the top of Greenland. But Peary had a theory that one of the fjords led to a channel separating Peary Land from the rest of Greenland. If that was the case, it opened the possibility of claiming it for the US, which might have been what Peary had in mind when he said to have claimed the North Pole and its "adjacent regions" in 1909.

He named the fjord in question Independence Fjord (he reached it on July 4, America's Independence Day). The channel he thought lay in extension became known as the Peary Channel. On the south side of Independence Fjord, at a place he named Navy Cliff, he placed a cairn.

You might ask yourself at this point what a cairn is. It is – or was – a paramount feature of an expedition: a pile of rocks built by humans both for navigation purposes and to serve as a communications system: a way of saying 'somebody was here'. More often than not, travellers would leave a written message, called 'cairn reports', in a bottle, box or some other small container, reporting on the status of the expedition, a description of travel routes and main results. It wasn't just to mark the territory; the cairns had a more gloomy function as well. They served to secure information in case the expedition members died.

The *Danmark* Expedition: Sledge Team 1

In 1906, a big expedition departed from Copenhagen that was to become probably the most famous, and infamous, Danish Arctic expedition. As was customary, it took its name from the ship that carried it to Greenland: the *Danmark*.



The 'Danmark' in Danmarkshavn, 1907 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

The purpose of the *Danmark Expedition* was to explore the north-eastern coast of Greenland, which was still a white spot on the map. The ship carried geologists, zoologists, archaeologists, meteorologists etc. Among them was German meteorologist Alfred Wegener, who was later to put forth the theory of continental drift. The expedition was led by Mylius-Erichsen, an explorer and author, and, as noted above, a member of the *Literary Expedition*.

Although not its main purpose, one of the tasks of the expedition was to find out whether Peary Land was indeed an island. Mylius-Erichsen decided to take on that task himself. In March 1907 when the expedition was well under way, he and his Sledge Team 1 left the ship at its anchorage in Danmarkshavn (meaning 'Denmark Haven') to investigate. With him were cartographer Niels Peter Høeg Hagen and Greenlandic musher Jørgen Brønlund.

They eventually reached Independence Fjord, more than 600 kilometres north of Danmarkshavn. But they were late. They had lost their way and started exploring the wrong fjord, south of Independence. When they realised this, they decided to go on to Independence, even though they were behind schedule.

On June 1, 1907 they spotted Peary's cairn at Navy Cliff and knew that they were in the right place: there place where Peary thought the channel would be. Except, upon investigating they found that it wasn't. Peary Land is not an island. And with this discovery, they could begin the journey back.

"Deep snow and meltwater ..."

But the journey back proved challenging. They had been gone for too long, and their provisions ran out. On June 4, Brønlund wrote in his journal:

We ate the last of the oatmeal. We're going to have to kill a dog to feed the others. From this moment, we had a series of accidents, of which we never worried before; only rarely did we find anything to shoot, and, when we did, we had bad luck. Our dogs lost their strength day by day, because they were not properly fed.

(Cited in Vagn Lundbye, Omkom 79'fjorden, 2006)

Just four days later, on June 8, Mylius-Erichsen wrote in a cairn report:

Futile hunt for muskoxen and seal, combined with sudden high temperatures, vast fjord-ice melt, deep snow and new snowfall, have delayed the journey and forced us and our dogs to exist on minimal food while facing strenuous work.



A map of the localities mentioned in this article (Source: nunagis.gl/) (click to [enlarge](#))

This is why they had planned to return earlier; summer had come and that meant thin, treacherous ice and wet, heavy snow. The exhausted dogs didn't stand a chance. The three men decided to stay put for the summer and survive on whatever game they could shoot. Which, as it turns out, wasn't much. Man and beast starved. In a cairn report dated August 8, Mylius-Erichsen described the previous month's hardships:

Suddenly, mild weather set in. Deep snow and meltwater on the ice, lack of game and sickness and fatigue among the dogs hampered and delayed our journey, so we didn't reach this place until June 12. Any further advance on the ice was impossible. Only 15 dogs were alive then, one has died since.

*Lacking nourishment for us and the dogs and not having had game since July 16, today we – after shipping ourselves onto firm ice on an ice floe – with 14 dogs, 2 sledges and all of our gear, have to seek towards more game-rich areas from this locality, totally devoid of game, which we have roamed for a distance of 5 miles**.*

If we succeed in getting meat, and when the ice is once again passable, probably by the end of this month, we plan to ride the 125 miles back to the ship and hope to arrive by the end of September, with or without dogs.

But something went wrong. They got caught on the sea ice, and August came to an end without them getting on their way. On September 12, Mylius-Erichsen wrote yet another cairn report, stating that they, only then, were beginning the journey home:

Since we left the summer camp, approx. 11 miles from here, we have had to slaughter 7 dogs for the sustenance of ourselves and the remaining dogs, while we sat on the sea ice half a mile ashore, stopped by meltwater. Finally, on August 25, we reached land, and shot 4 hares. Since then we have, in one-day journeys, moved the campsite approx. 8 miles into the Danmark Fjord. Progress to more fertile hunting grounds still halted by mild weather, impassable new ice and finally by open water from coast to coast.

(All Mylius-Erichsens cairn reports cited in Ole Ventegodt, Den sidste brik, 1997 and Lundbye 2007)

Since conditions along the coast were impassable, they thought about going back over the inland ice sheet and still counted on a return – with or without the dogs.



The 'Alabama' wrecked in sea ice, 1910 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

“Deceased, 79 Fjord ...”

These cairn reports were not discovered until some years later. For the time being, the rest of the expedition didn't know what had become of Sledge Team 1. The last ones to see them were Sledge Team 2, led by the expedition's chief cartographer, JP Koch. They had met in May 1907, and Koch knew that Sledge Team 1 had gone to Independence Fjord. He and Sledge Team 2's musher, Tobias Gabrielsen, went north in search of them.

Between two fjords in an area named Lambert Land, at the 79th latitude, they found Brønlund's body. He had dug out a little cave that he knew was to be his final resting place. In his journal, otherwise in Greenlandic, the last page is in Danish:

Deceased 79 Fjord after attempt at return over ice sheet. I come here in decreasing moonlight and could not be further from frostbite in feet and darkness.

Other bodies are in the middle of fjord, in front of glacier (approx. 2 ½ miles).

Hagen died November 15 and Mylius about 10 days later.

*Jørgen Brønlund.
(Lundbye 2007)*

Brønlund wrote the message of his own death. But even though he gave the location of the other bodies, Koch couldn't find them. He didn't try very hard either. He said it was pointless, something for which he was later criticised.

An air of mystique

In 1988, a map appeared in an attic in Jutland, Denmark, said to have been drawn by Koch, indicating that he actually did find the bodies. But the map also said not to publish it; that the circumstances were too terrible and that his travel partner, Gabrielsen, hadn't know anything about the find. One theory is that the bodies had been so badly mauled by polar bears that Koch simply threw them in the water. But we can't know this for sure, which is probably one of the reasons that the *Danmark Expedition* has acquired an air of mystery and intrigue: no-one knows, or can know, what happened to the bodies of Mylius-Erichsen and Høeg Hagen.

So Mylius-Erichsen did become famous – albeit perhaps not in the way he had imagined – and the expedition did fulfil the purpose that was so important in these years: to explore and map the world. The last white spot on the Greenland map was filled in and in spite of its leader dying, it was considered a great scientific success: for example, Peary's theory about the channel could be disproven – though not until some years later. Until then, Mylius-Erichsen's discoveries, along with his body, were lost somewhere in north-eastern

Greenland.



The hut on Shannon Island, made from parts of the 'Alabama', 1910. It's still standing there today (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

This remained a big unanswered question after the return of *Danmark* to Copenhagen: Mylius-Erichsen and Høeg Hagen's bodies, and not least their journals and papers, which many thought must be somewhere up there. In a last cairn, perhaps?

The Alabama Expedition

Questions surrounding the dead men and their remains were the reason that another well-known Arctic explorer, Ejnar Mikkelsen, now started planning an expedition to search for them. Koch, who had found Brønlund's body, was displeased about it, but Mikkelsen stressed that he wasn't going to look for bodies and sensation, but rather to get a hold of those papers, which he considered to be of the utmost scientific importance.

A committee to finance the trip was formed and its instruction stated that the journals and any other of the papers left behind by Mylius-Erichsen and Høeg Hagen were the main purpose of the expedition. However, it also stated that given the circumstances, Mikkelsen could travel west by the Peary Channel, which everyone at home still thought existed.

The instruction also had a paragraph that revealed that even though Mikkelsen did not state sensation as the purpose, he knew very well that there was fame to be had:

You are allowed to write dispatches for magazines, both during and after the end of the expedition. However, you must make sure that dispatches etc. to magazines or journals are not dispatched in such a way that they will arrive at said magazine etc. before the reports to the committee. Furthermore, you are allowed to write a popular travelogue and give talks if you wish.

(Ejnar Mikkelsen archive, Danish Arctic Institute)

Mikkelsen went to Greenland on a ship named *Alabama*.

In their footsteps

When the *Alabama* reached the waters off Shannon Island, ice prevented the ship from sailing further north. They had to tow it ashore and continue on dog sledges. It was some 500 kilometres to Lambert Land, where Brønlund's body had been found.



Ejnar Mikkelsen (left) and Iver Iversen, during the time on Shannon Island (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

They reached Lambert Land in the fall of 1909. They located Brønlund's body and made a proper grave for it. They then continued north to search for the place that Brønlund had described, but couldn't find it: that is, they found neither bodies nor cairns. After searching in vain for three days, they went back to the ship for the winter.

When the sun came out in the spring, Mikkelsen and fellow expedition member, Iver Iversen, the ship's engineer, went north to conduct a second search. But this trip was arduous, filled with obstacles and bad weather. They, too, were delayed.

Nonetheless, they found what they were looking for: Mylius-Erichsen's cairn reports from August and September 1907, the ones quoted above. But then Mikkelsen did something he shouldn't have, or rather, he didn't do what he should have. Usually, when an explorer reaches a cairn, especially if he empties it, it is customary to leave two things: a new report stating one's own progress and a copy of the report that has been removed. But Mikkelsen did neither. Instead he left the cairn empty. He later wrote that it was because he was exhausted and suffering from scurvy.

From his instructions, we know that Mikkelsen would have liked to explore the elusive Peary Channel, but know, in Mylius-Erichsen's last reports, he read that it didn't exist. Plus, as mentioned, he was not in a good shape. He had found what he was looking for; nothing to do but return to the *Alabama*.

But the return trip proved just as hard.

Stranded

May 28 we began return trip along the coast, which was rendered very difficult by illness and hunger. All the dogs died.

(Ejnar Mikkelsen archive, Danish Arctic Institute)

With the dogs dead, Mikkelsen and Iversen had to leave their goods, because they were too weak to pull the sledge. They reached Danmarkshavn where there was a hut. Here, they spent a month recovering. But continued bad conditions and their own lack of strength rendered it impossible for them to go north and fetch their goods. And there were still some 200 kilometres back to Shannon Island and the *Alabama*.

They finally reached Shannon Island in November 1910. But there was no *Alabama*. It had sunk after being damaged in ice and lay as a wreck, packed in ice. The crew had managed to salvage enough timber to build a small hut on Shannon Island. But the crew was gone too at this point. They had caught a ride on a Norwegian ship. Now, it was just Mikkelsen, Iversen and a small hut. On Shannon Island and nearby Bass Rock, where there was a hut

and a depot from an earlier expedition.

Danmarkshavn, August 29, 1911

To any visitors: I ask the master of any ship arriving here to try and connect with the mentioned American depot where there was a lot of open water in springtime. We wait there until mid-August, the latest, after which we will try to reach Angmassalik by boat. (Ejnar Mikkelsen archive, Danish Arctic Institute)

They had waited for almost a year. They would wait for one year more. After that, they would try to get away in a rowboat.

Just a month before the deadline they had set for themselves, on July 21, 1912, they were found and picked up by a Norwegian ship. By this time, they had been gone for three years, and it had been almost two years since they had seen other human beings. For almost two years, they had been stranded on Shannon Island and Bass Rock. We are given an insight into this life by Iversen's journal. In September 1911, he wrote:

I find that the last few days have gone by very slow, and I have been tired of life because of it. September is very slow to be gone. I have wondered if a ship might be nearby, but that is probably too much to hope for. (Iversen's diary, Polar Library, Copenhagen)

Meanwhile, on the west coast ...

At this point in the story, we'll have to set back the clock, because before Mikkelsen and Iversen were rescued, no-one knew what had become of them. The last anyone had heard was in summer 1910 when the crew of the *Alabama* returned to Denmark. Since then, not a word.

As time passed, people began to wonder what had become of Mikkelsen and Iversen. But the government refused to send out a search expedition. No-one knew where they might be, and the *Alabama Expedition* was itself an expedition sent out to search for lost men. Where would it end?

Meanwhile, on the west coast of Greenland, Knud Rasmussen and Peter Freuchen sat at the Thule trading station, which Rasmussen had founded in 1910 and which Freuchen had been brought in to manage. Rasmussen and Freuchen are probably the most famous of the Danish Arctic explorers. But that was later. At this point, they were still relatively unknown.



Peter Freuchen (left) and Knud Rasmussen, Thule, 1913 (Photo: Arktisk Institut) ([click to enlarge](#))

Rasmussen was of mixed Danish-Greenlandic ancestry, born and raised in Greenland. As a child, he became familiar with Greenlandic society and language. Among his childhood friends were Brønlund. In 1900, while travelling in Iceland, he met Mylius-Erichsen and the pair decided to organise an expedition together. This was the *Literary Expedition* of 1902-1904. It took them north along the west coast, and they made contact with Greenland's northernmost Inuit population, in the area now known as Thule. Brønlund also participated. In the years to come, Rasmussen travelled to different parts of Greenland. And in 1910, at the age of 31, he founded the Thule trading station.

As his manager, he chose Freuchen. At 24, Freuchen was younger than Rasmussen, but he had participated in the *Danmark Expedition*, and it was then that he fell in love with Greenland. Later, he fell in love in Greenland; with an Inuit woman from the area around the Thule station, and whom he married. He started out as a medical student in Copenhagen, but he gave it up for Greenland. He, along with Rasmussen, was later to gain fame as an author writing about all things Arctic.

Searching for the searchers

So here they were, at Thule. They were actually planning an expedition to the north, partly to explore Peary's channel which, if it existed, would reach the west coast somewhere. But in the summer of 1911 they got the news (which travelled slowly in those days, especially to Thule) that no-one knew what had become of Mikkelsen. They decided to speed up the plans and organise a search/rescue expedition. However, equipping an expedition takes time; they had to go to Upernavik for dogs and provisions, so it wasn't until spring 1912 that they were able to set off.

With Inuit travel companions Ulloriak and Inukitsok, Rasmussen and Freuchen travelled across the ice sheet, from Thule to north-eastern Greenland, to look for Mikkelsen and Iversen and to explore the Peary Channel, which everybody still thought existed. We know that Arctic expeditions are not a walk in the park, and, to be sure, they had their accidents: Freuchen went snow-blind and was hit by a harpoon in his left buttock. But they reached the camp where Sledge Team 1 had stayed during the summer of 1907. They also found

Mylius-Erichsen's cairn, but were surprised to find it empty, something which was unusual. Rasmussen left a report in it that read:

Here, at the cairn, we have found no report, nor have we found traces of Ejnar Mikkelsen and Iver Iversen anywhere else in the fjord.

(Knud Rasmussen's expedition report in Geografisk Tidsskrift, no. 22, 1913)

Freuchen would write later:

We didn't know he had been here. On the contrary, we took it as a sign that he had not reached this place. Hence, we didn't know whether to look for him to the north or south.

(Peter Freuchen, Min grønlandske ungdom, 1936)

They reasoned that Mikkelsen had returned before reaching that far, and may have sought out inhabited areas. In the end, they agreed that it was futile to go south and look for him. Otherwise, they thought, he might have gone up to the Peary Channel and west along it. If so, they would find him there.

Obviously, they didn't. And, when they reached Independence Fjord, they realised, like Mylius-Erichsen before them, that the channel didn't exist and that Peary Land was connected to Greenland (which they would have known sooner, had Mikkelsen not removed Mylius-Erichsen's report without replacing it).

With no trace of Mikkelsen, and no Peary Channel, Rasmussen and Freuchen decided to stay and explore the area north of Independence Fjord before returning west. And despite Rasmussen having a bad leg, and the both of them falling ill along the way, they were back in Thule in September 1912.

Much ado about nothing?

Coming back to Thule, even with the disappointment of not having found Mikkelsen, Rasmussen and Freuchen still considered their explorations important. They had solved the mystery of the Peary Channel, thinking they were the first to do so. Freuchen later wrote:

After a while, Knud and I were of the opinion that we had done something worth publicity. We had crossed the ice sheet up here, and returned the same way. It had been done previously, in 1888 by Nansen, but much further south. Now, our journey had not been planned and trumpeted in advance, and no-one had sung its praise afterwards. Back then, there was no radio to monitor our day-to-day progress and no big headlines in the papers to advertise us.

Now, we got the urge to shine in the spotlight as well and let people know that we were a heck of a couple of fellows, and we got the idea to go to Denmark and tell them.

(Freuchen 1936)

What Freuchen and Rasmussen obviously didn't know was that during the very days they were exploring north-eastern Greenland, Mikkelsen and Iversen were being rescued from the east coast.

They didn't find out about all this until the spring of 1913, on their way to Denmark, when they stopped over in Tórshavn, in the Faroe Islands, to send a telegraph that they were on their way home to tell about their journey, which no-one knew about. Not until then did they learn that Mikkelsen was safe and sound in Copenhagen. Rasmussen was obviously annoyed afterwards. In an article about their expedition, he wrote:

After returning, I learned that Ejnar Mikkelsen had been in Danmark Fjord and found two cairn reports from Mylius-Erichsen. That he did not leave a copy of the reports he removed any information about what he had done and intended to do, was careless. If he and Iversen had later died, a possibility which he would have had to consider, they could have gone missing and the reports from Mylius-Erichsen would have been completely lost.

(Rasmussen, 1913)

Mikkelsen's return to Copenhagen also meant that at this point everyone knew about Peary Land and the non-existent channel. The news they thought they had was something everyone already knew about.

Perhaps this is why Freuchen was later to describe the stay in Copenhagen as a bit of an anticlimax, even if they had made discoveries during their explorations that were later to be considered important.

"... get back as soon as possible ..."

Mikkelsen, who was terribly embarrassed about his blunder with the cairn, personally showed up to welcome Rasmussen and Freuchen when their ship docked in Copenhagen. But the committee for the *Alabama Expedition* didn't, which Freuchen spoke indignantly to the newspapers about. They had expected some gratitude from the committee of the expedition they had tried to rescue.

And this gets us back to our starting point: the fame, honour and respect that surrounded the Arctic explorers, which Rasmussen and Freuchen at this point seemed to think they weren't getting as much as they deserved. (One could have reassured them that they would get plenty later on.) The expedition was the first of many to take place with Thule as a starting point, and was hence named the *First Thule Expedition*. Both of them, as well as Mikkelsen, were to write a number of popular books based on their experiences in Greenland.

Everyone was to go on more expeditions, even if one would have thought that Mikkelsen had had enough for a lifetime. Which brings us to our other starting point: perhaps you indeed had to be cut from a different cloth to go on these expeditions, and then to do it more than once. Even if dangerous, the adventure acted like a magnet. Freuchen wrote about the stay in Copenhagen in 1913:

I had been gone from civilisation for three years, but felt more outside than those years could justify. Several of my friends were now great men, or on their way to becoming so; now I found out that what I was good at, mushing and catching walruses, didn't mean anything in the world, as I had prided myself in up there. I understood that it is dangerous to isolate yourself too much and think you're the same as before you went. I understood that I had to get back as soon as possible and stay up there, where I was happiest.
(Freuchen 1936)

**All original quotes are in Danish. Translation by author.*

***Although there is a difference between a standard mile (1.6km) and a Danish mile (7.532 km), the journal entries do not state which type of mile they are using. The distances described would seem to indicate distances are given in Danish miles.*

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