

## **Fridtjof Nansen and the North Pole kayaks**

by Alice Courvoisier

One evening, while I was staying at a friend's in Tromsø, the conversation turned towards the summer 2011 expedition planned by the director of the Norwegian Polar Institute, with aim to kayak to the North Pole, study ice conditions along the way, and emphasize how much of an issue global warming is. "Have you heard about Fridtjof Nansen?" then asked my friend's landlord before narrating one of his countryman's Arctic adventures. Months later, upon reading Nansen's riveting biography by Roland Huntford, I discovered that he had, in fact, been the first person who attempted to take kayaks to the North Pole.

Born in Oslo in 1861, Fridtjof Nansen was a fascinating character. Although he did not reach either of the Poles himself, he revolutionised polar travel and prepared the road for Roald Amundsen's success. As a young man, Nansen had been able to marry an eagerness to learn with an unshakable confidence in his own abilities, which led him to seek out the best masters. A true polymath, he made his *début* as a neurologist. Following careful microscopic observations of the nervous systems of marine invertebrates, he became an early defender of the theory that cellular nerve units were distinct and not fused into a continuous webbing as was widely believed. Then, in the aftermath of his Arctic expeditions, he made pioneering contributions to the burgeoning field of oceanography. Alongside his scientific efforts, Nansen, a keen sportsman, felt a strong urge to spend time in the open air. He was a passionate hunter and an accomplished skier. In particular, he held the view that skiing was "a means of travel", an idea that led to his first Arctic enterprise: the crossing of the Greenland icecap.

Where previous explorers had sought safety in numbers, Nansen put his faith in compactness and speed. Six men formed the Greenland expedition, including two Sámis, all seasoned skiers. The food and material were to be transported on man-hauled sledges, so they had to be light and fit for purpose. This was no small undertaking: a hundred and twenty years ago, one didn't just walk into an outdoors shop to get kitted out. Nansen designed much of the equipment himself, experimenting with various types of skis and sledges. Furthermore, no efficient stove was yet available to the polar traveller. Nansen succeeded in improving on the current models, but in spite of his efforts, fifty percent of the fuel consumed was still wasted. He had chosen to take alcohol, which is light and flammable at low temperatures, but noted that "it is drinkable and can be a temptation even to the best of men", as a result, he did all the cooking himself. Nansen also pioneered the use of a layering system of clothing to avoid overheating during exertion. To help regulate their temperatures, the Norwegians wore up to three layers of wool and a wind protection layer of thin, water-proofed canvas; in contrast, the Sámis stuck to their traditional garments.

The expedition itself was a feat of endurance. Left at the edge of the East Greenland icepack by the sealer *Jason*, Nansen and his companions drifted for more than twenty days southwards before finding an open lead that would finally take them to land. Upon reaching the coast, their first task was to row back northwards as close to their intended starting point as time allowed. A difficult climb up the icecap was then followed by a month-long ski journey in varying conditions. In good winds, the men would also sail their sledges and on occasions, the going was perfect, a reward for all the hours of toil; "we didn't have time to eat. It was such fun to ski," Balto, the younger Sámi, recorded saying.

When Nansen and his team finally reached the west coast and the Danish settlement of Gothåb on October 3<sup>rd</sup> 1888, they learned that the last boat to Denmark had already left, so they had no other options but to winter in Greenland. Typically, Nansen made good use of this time by learning the Inuit ways. "I am fast turning Eskimo," he recorded, "I live as the natives do, eat their food, and am learning to appreciate such dainties as raw blubber, raw halibut-skin, frozen

crowberries mixed with rancid blubber, and so on. I talk to the people as well as I can, go out in my 'kayak' with them, fish and shoot on land and water.” His careful ethnographic observations were published in a book entitled *Eskimo Life*, where he voiced his admiration for the ingenuity of a people able to live in some of the most unforgiving conditions found on the planet. He wrote

Many people nowadays are vastly impressed with the greatness of our age, with all the inventions and the progress of which we daily hear, and which appear indisputably to exalt the highly-gifted white race far over all others. These people would learn much by paying close attention to the development of the Eskimos, and to the tools and inventions by aid of which they obtain the necessaries of life among natural surroundings, which place such pitifully small means at their disposals.<sup>1</sup>

Nansen was particularly fascinated by the kayaks, “beyond comparison, the best boat for a single oarsman ever invented”, and his writings told of an age when these crafts were still widely used by Inuit hunters, though following contact with the Europeans, traditional skills were already in decline. In *Eskimo Life*, Nansen gave a very detailed description of the kayak, built to fit its owner like a garment, with a frame of drift-wood covered by taught seal skins; of the clothes worn when kayaking, such as the *tuliq*, a hooded, skin jacket whose lower margin can be fastened to the cockpit rim, thus forming a water-tight extension to the craft and of the various types of weapons developed by Inuit hunters. He also emphasized the importance of being able to right oneself after a capsize, which enables the masterly kayak-man to “defy almost any weather”. It isn't long before he tries the craft for himself.

The necessary balance in this narrow, crank little vessel is very difficult for a beginner to acquire. One feels as if he were swinging on a knife's edge, and it is very necessary, so to speak, to keep your hair parted well in the middle,

he reports. For initial practice, his craft was fitted with outriggers in the shape of small kayaks, about two feet long, which were fastened behind his seat. He soon got comfortable though and accompanied the natives on eider-duck shooting and halibut fishing trips. He described the latter as “[his] chief amusement”. “Pulling up these huge, strong fish, which are big enough to upset a boat, from a little canoe is the best sport on the way of sea-fishing I have yet to come across,” he wrote. The hunt involved long hours of waiting in subzero temperatures and cold wind before the longed for bite spurted bursts of dangerous action. Once caught, the fish is towed ashore by a line taken between the kayaker's teeth.

Through *Eskimo Life*, Nansen attempted to share his admiration for the native Greenlander's way of life. “To estimate the worth of a human being, you must see him at his work,” he asserted before relating a typical hunting day, from the pre-dawn weather check to the men's return and their sober yet colourful recounting of the hunt, which follows the evening meal. He wrote,

if we understand by courage that faculty, which, in moment of dangers, lays its plan with calmness and executes them with ready presence of mind, or which faces inevitable danger, and even certain death, with immovable self-possession, then we shall find in Greenland men of such courage as we but rarely find elsewhere. [...]

It is gallant business, this kayak-hunting; it is like a sportive dance with the sea and with death. There is no finer sight possible than to see the kayak-man breasting the heavy roller that seems utterly to engulf him. Or when, overtaken by

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<sup>1</sup> Fridjof Nansen, *Eskimo Life*, 1893, accessed online at: [http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Eskimo\\_Life](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Eskimo_Life)  
subsequent quotes from F. Nansen are taken from the same source.

a storm at sea, the kayaks run for the shore, they come like black storm-birds rushing before the wind and the waves, which, like rolling mountains, sweep on in their wake. The paddles whirl through air and water, the body is bent a little forwards, the head often turned half backwards to watch the seas; all is life and spirit – while the sea around reeks like a seething cauldron.

Hunting from a kayak is dangerous work, yet the Inuit man accepts it as his lot: “in spite of the many dangers and suffering inseparable from his industry, he devotes himself to it with joy,” Nansen observed with respect.

In April 1889, Nansen and his companions finally boarded a southbound ship, relieved to head home but sad to leave Gothåb, the friends they made and the carefree life they enjoyed at the margin of the world. Fame awaited Nansen upon his return. His successful expedition had been revolutionary in many ways: he had confirmed the suitability of skis for polar travel, and as a consequence, triggered the development of the sport outside Norway's boundaries; he had also proved that a small team could achieve more than large numbers. Importantly, all his men came back unhurt and, in spite of the hardships, they had enjoyed themselves, in sharp contrast with the litany of suffering emerging from past polar expedition reports. As Nansen insisted, he had “simply returned from a ski tour”.

Nansen might have had in mind to return to the Arctic when he diligently studied the Greenlander's survival techniques. In fact, his next expedition was to be a bid to reach the North Pole. At the time, scientific arguments pointed towards the existence of a polar stream flowing from Siberia, across the Arctic Ocean, past the North Pole and towards Greenland. Nansen's idea was to use this current to take a ship as close to the Pole as possible. He expected that his vessel would be beset by ice and drift with it, so it needed to be strong enough to withstand the ice pressure. Colin Archer, a Norseman of Scottish descent, took on the challenge and constructed a round and stubby hull in order to prevent the ice from getting any grip on its structure, which was reinforced, yet kept as flexible as possible. Furthermore, since the ship was to be the home of the expedition for years in Arctic conditions, the living quarters were suitably insulated.

*Fram* left Norway at the end of June 1893, followed the Russian coastline as far as the Laptev sea, then headed North until it reached the ice pack at about 78° of latitude. Then the slow drift with the polar current began. The thirteen expedition members knew they would be trapped in the ice, and lost to the outside world, for an indeterminate amount of time. In the ship's holds were five years worth of supplies and a library of six hundred books, including the works of Ibsen, Zola, Dostoevski and Goethe, alongside chronicles of previous polar expeditions; further distraction was provided by a growing family of sledge dogs. Despite their extreme isolation however, *Fram's* crew knew they were as safe as can be. They had enough food and suitable shelter: in spite of a few scares, the ship's hull stood the test of the ice.

Nansen for his part anxiously followed the ship's latitude, his mood oscillating between hope and despair as *Fram* took six months to cover 1° and clear 80° N. Soundings showed that the Arctic Ocean was deeper than expected, resulting in slower currents than Nansen had anticipated: in all likelihood, *Fram* would not drift as close to the pole as he had hoped. As a result, plan B was officially launched in November 1894, after the men had been on the ice for over a year. A dog sledge party composed of Nansen himself assisted by Hjalmar Johansen would leave the ship for good, head for the Pole, then return to Norway via Franz Josef Land and Spitzbergen, where they hoped to find a sealer able to take them home. The two men would need to journey over water and to this purpose, they would need kayaks.

Nansen had brought aboard *Fram* specimens from Greenland and when a pool of fresh water

formed on the ice floe where the ship was beset during the first summer, the crew was given the opportunity to try kayaking. The Greenland kayaks were designed for hunting, with speed and manoeuvrability in mind, Nansen however needed a vessel to cross open leads in the pack ice and journey along land, with the capacity to carry up to three months of supplies. As a result, he developed one of the first adaptations of the native craft to his own specifications. The “North Pole kayaks” were made of a bamboo frame covered with waterproofed canvas, they were shorter and wider than the originals and had built-in hatches fore and aft for easier access to the stored material. They were to be carried along on sledges all the way to the Pole.

After months of experimentations, Nansen and Johansen finally left *Fram*, with three sledges and dog teams, on 13<sup>th</sup> March 1895. In early spring, temperatures hovered around 40°C below zero and often, travel conditions were difficult over the choppy frozen sea. Despite the harshness of the climate, the men worked within their limits, they had sufficient food and drink – thanks to the effectiveness of the newly invented Primus stove, and when the going was good, they were happy skiers on tour. Their progress over the rugged Arctic terrain however proved too slow. Fearing that their supplies would run out before they reached hunting grounds further south, Nansen decided to turn back on April 4<sup>th</sup>. They had reached 86°14' of latitude North, a record they'll hold for the next five years.

Nansen and Johansen were now on their way home, but their patience was going to be sorely tested once more. It took them four months to reach the edge of the pack ice and eventually set off towards land in their kayaks. They then journeyed along uncharted coasts, uncertain of their exact position, paddling, sailing or hauling their boats on the ice. On one occasion, they even set off in a gale as the floe they had camped on threatened to drift away from land for good. They progressed slowly, dependent on weather and ice conditions, until they realised they wouldn't make it home that year. So they settled for the winter as best as they could, hunting bears and walrus to supply their larder with meat and blubber, building a stone hut roofed with walrus hide. “One would not think this was a human habitation,” Johansen wrote, “it is absolutely like [the] adventure books I read as a boy, and never had I thought that I would ever live a life like this, à la Robinson Crusoe”. Despite the lack of comfort, survival was ensured: the men were still in control of their environment. Coping with the boredom of months of darkness and isolation was the main challenge, especially for Johansen since Nansen was a solitary figure and could be overbearing and moody at times. Although both men had been sharing the same sleeping bag, they were still addressing one another using the polite form, even when Johansen, disarmed and attacked by a bear had shouted to Nansen: “Now you must hurry, otherwise it will be too late!”

The following spring, the men shook off the winter torpor by a frenzy of activity as they made ready for departure, repairing their kayaks, sewing new clothes, hunting for fresh meat. They left their hut on the 19<sup>th</sup> May 1896 and about a month later, they chanced upon an expedition led by Englishman Frederick Jackson, who had set up a base at Cape Flora to the south of Franz Josef Land. Meanwhile, *Fram* was on a southward drift to the north of Spitzbergen. She broken free and eventually managed to extricate herself from the pack ice in mid-August. All expedition members were eventually reunited in Tromsø and celebrated with great pump along the coast on their journey back to Oslo.

“Nansen was the first Pole-seeker to return without loss of life”, Roland Huntford writes, “he had tamed the Arctic” and “completed the demythologising of the polar environment that he began on the first crossing of Greenland,” proving once more that a small party can succeed where cumbersome expeditions had failed. The tale of his journey is in any case still inspiring for the modern reader and his mindset was probably close to that of modern sportsmen who seek yet higher peaks to scale and wider seas to cross for lack of new lands to explore. Although Nansen never reached the Pole, his fame never faded. He became a diplomat and key public figure at a time when

Norway was looking to ascertain complete independence from Sweden, which it achieved in 1905. He subsequently got involved with the League of Nations and won the 1922 Nobel Peace prize for his work in aid of the repatriation of prisoners of war and with refugees.

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