The great (and not so great) polar expeditions from Svalbard

Thor B. Arlov, NTNU & UNIS

Content of today's lecture

1st half:
- Background and early attempts
  - Farthest North: motives and methods
  - Competing approaches to polar exploration
  - Timeline: North Pole attempts from Svalbard

2nd half:
- The advent of modern technology
  - Balloons or airship? Andrée and Wellman
  - A race towards the Pole: The 1920s
  - The North Pole attained – so what?

Problem:
- Results and effects of Polar expeditions?
- Was Svalbard important in the Polar race?

A North Pole primer

- The mystery of the North Pole region
- Revival of interest in the 19th century
- The search for the Franklin expedition (1845-47)
  - Scientific and technological advances
  - Imperialism and national prestige
  - Making heroes: the role of mass media

John Franklin (1786-1847)
Theory of the Open Polar Sea

- Kane’s exploration 1853–54 of Smith’s Sound
- A glimpse of an open Polar Sea? Hayes’ expedition 1860–61
- (Pseudo-) scientific explanations: August Peterman and Silas Bent (1870s)
- Weyrecht at Franz Josef Land 1872–74

Competing approaches

- Sailing: busting the theory of an open Polar Sea
  - Nordenskiöld’s “Vega” expedition 1878-79 through the Northern Searoute
  - De Long’s “Jeannette” expedition 1879-81
- Let nature do the job: drifting with the ice
  - “Fram” across the Polar Sea 1893-96
- Learning from the locals: skis, dogs and sledges
- New technology: Fly me to the Pole

A dozen polar expeditions

1750 1800 1850 1900 1950
- 1764-66: Chichagov
- 1773: Phipps
- 1818: Buchan & Franklin
- 1827: Parry
- 1861: Torell (trial)
- 1868: Nordenskiöld
- 1872–73: Nordenskiöld
- 1894: Wellman
- 1895–97: Andree
- 1907: 1905: Wellman
- 1925: Amundsen & Ellsworth
- 1926: Amundsen-Ellsworth-Nobile; Byrd & Bennett
- 1928: Nobile
Andrée’s first attempt 1896
- Salomon August Andrée and his plan
- A technological approach to polar exploration
- Supporters and sponsors: a matter of national pride and honour
- The aeronautical base at Virgohamna
- A visit of “Fram” and the end of an expedition
- Winner meets loser: Nansen’s appraisal of Andrée
- Planning for a second attempt

Fate of the 1897 expedition
- “Cut everywhere!” Departure on 11 July
- “All well” – the flight towards the pole
- Final crash on 14 July, at 82°56’ N, 29°52’E
- The march southwards: Franz Josef land or Spitsbergen?
- Final stop: Kvitøya in October
- Resolving the mystery: the “Bratvaag” expedition 1930
- Consequences for Swedish polar research
Doomed to despair?

David Hempleman-Adams flew from Svalbard to the Pole and back 2000

Wellman – pioneer or failure?

• Walter Wellman (1858–1934): journalist turned explorer
• With “Ragnvald Jarl” towards the pole, 1894
• Sledding from Franz Josef land, 1898–99
• Airship “America” at Svalbard, 1907
• Second attempt with “America” 1909
• Pioneer or failure? Wellman judged by his contemporaries
• Game over: Peary and Cook 1909

Amundsen airborne

• Amundsen: ageing hero, new technology
• A helping hand: Lincoln Ellsworth
• Ny-Ålesund as an Arctic airbase
• The flight to (nearly) 88° north – and back
The Pole attained – twice?
- Back on Svalbard 1926: Amundsen, Ellsworth – and Nobile
- Second generation of airships
- Byrd and Bennett snatch the prize – or do they?
- The flight of “Norge”
- The Amundsen-Nobile controversy: pride and prejudice
- The return of Nobile, 1928
- The “Italia” tragedy
- End of an era

Farthest north – so what?
- Epilogue: Kuznetsov 1948 and Herbert 1969
- The North Pole – vastly overrated?
  - The scientific challenges and results
  - Economic and strategic interests – was it worth the trouble?
  - “I must have fame” – heroism as driving force
  - The role of mass media and the public: polar exploration by proxy
- Polar expeditions in the history of Svalbard – are they important?