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

Around 1900 the geography of the High Arctic, in particular the North Pole region, was still largely unknown to man – as was the interior of Antarctica. The old and partly mythical concepts lingered on. This lack of knowledge was in it self a driving force behind polar expeditions, but certainly personal ambition and national competition played a part too. In the 19th century the interest in polar exploration grew, partly as a result of the prolonged search for the lost Franklin expedition of 1847. Mass media had a taste for polar heroism and contributed to an increasing public interest. Technical advances in navigation as well as increasing public interest made more advanced expeditions possible.

The theory of an open Polar Sea gained popularity in the 19th century, partly because of the search for Franklin and expeditions by Elisha Kent Kane, Isaac Israel Hayes and others, partly as a result of more scientific approaches like those of August Peterman and Silas Bent.

The preferred approach by naval powers like Britain was to use ships and try to penetrate the ice – with little or no success. Nansen's "Fram" expedition in 1893–96 showed that it was possible to work *with* the natural elements, letting his ship freeze into drifting ice, but he still did not get close to the Pole itself. During his Greenland crossing in 1888, Nansen had shown the advantages of using light equipment: skis and sleds. Americans like Cook and Peary learned from the Inuits and used dog teams, as did Amundsen. The 20th century offered new opportunities with the advent of motorized airships and airplanes.

Polar expeditions using Svalbard as a point of departure represent all these various approaches – ships, sleds, and aircrafts. Only the latter was successful in actually reaching the North Pole: Byrd & Bennet 1925 (possibly), Amundsen-Ellsworth-Nobile 1926 and Nobile 1928. Some notable examples from Svalbard:

• 1764–66: Chichagov (RU)	Ships in 1765 and 1766. Reached little more than 80°.
• 1773: Phipps (GB)	2 ships, nearly wrecked at Sjuøyane.
• 1818: Buchan-Franklin (GB)	2 ships, NW Spitsbergen
• 1827: Parry (GB)	Man-hauled boat-sleds, 82°40'
• 1861: Torell (S)	Planned sledding, not carried out
• 1868: Nordenskiöld (S	Steam ship "Sofia", nearly wrecked at 81°
• 1872–73: Nordenskiöld (S)	Planned to use reindeer, but man-hauled sledges instead
• 1894: Wellman (US)	Steel steamer "Ragnvald Jarl", wrecked at Sjuøyane
• 1896–97: Andrée (S)	Hydrogen balloon, crashed at 82°56', died on Kvitøya
• 1907, 1909: Wellman (US)	Airship "America", failed
• 1925: Amundsen-Ellsworth (N/US)	Flying boats "N24" and "N25". Emergency landing at 88°, managed to fly back to Nordaustlandet in one plane
• 1926: Amundsen-Ellsworth-Nobile (N/US/I); Byrd-Bennet (US)	Airship "Norge" transpolar flight to Alaska. Byrd & Bennet in fixed-wing airplane, claimed to have reached the pole.
• 1928: Nobile (I)	Airship "Italia", crashed on return from the pole.

Food for thought

- Why was Svalbard a popular point of departure for North Pole expeditions?
- Are the polar expeditions important in Svalbard's history? Why, or why not?