

Fridtjof Nansen

Man of many facets

On a simple grave in a quiet garden outside Oslo a name is inscribed, Fridtjof Nansen. There are no dates upon the stone and somehow this is fitting. For there is a timelessness about great men; and in Norway, and indeed the world, Nansen must be numbered among the foremost.

The sheer range of his accomplishments was astonishing. He was explorer, author, athlete, scientist, statesman, and a laureate of the Nobel Peace Prize. In addition, he saved the lives of countless thousands through his humanitarian work after the first World War

By Linn Ryne

The world claimed Fridtjof Nansen, but he was firmly rooted in Norway. He was born into a family with a distinguished record of public service. The outstanding qualities of leadership and the compelling urge to probe the unknown had already been strongly evident in his ancestors. On the maternal side of his family was Count Wedel Jarlsberg, commander-in-chief of the Norwegian army at the time when Christian V was king of both Denmark and Norway. On his father's side was Hans Nansen, one-time mayor of Copenhagen, who also explored the White Sea. In character Fridtjof Nansen is said to have resembled most of all his mother; a capable, industrious woman, who ran the large household efficiently while still finding time to study and improve her mind. His gentler qualities, which came more to the forefront in later life, came perhaps from his quieter, more ascetic father, a lawyer of repute and a man of unswerving integrity.

By most standards, and certainly by those of his times, Fridtjof Nansen had a privileged childhood, from his birth in October 1861. His family was never troubled by the spectre of poverty which haunted so many at that time. In his formative years he had many opportunities to pursue his innumerable interests. In the spacious farmhouse at Store Frøen, near Christiania (now Oslo), he spent a happy boyhood, together with his brother Alexander and a number of half-brothers and sisters. Though urbanized now, Store Frøen was at that time a rural paradise. Immediately behind it lay Nordmarka, the extensive forested area north of Christiania. Here the young Nansen's love of the outdoors was born, among the solitude of the endless stands of stream-laced pine and spruce.

Although his family was relatively wealthy, Nansen was taught the value of hard work and discipline at an early age. Plain food and simple living characterized the family at Store Frøen.

A man of many talents

Nansen's budding ability in many fields of activity soon became apparent. As a boy his thirst for knowledge and determination to see things through singled him out from his contemporaries. As a young man he was an outstanding skater and skier. His sporting

activities gave him the physique, stamina and endurance that were to serve him so well during later trials.

Fridtjof Nansen's interests and talents were so diverse that it was no easy task to select a course of study when he entered the University of Christiania. Although he greatly preferred physics and mathematics, he believed that zoology studies would allow him to spend more time outdoors; so that was the course of study he selected. The subject he was later to probe so deeply, oceanography, was still in its infancy.

The call of the north

Nansen's lifelong passion for the far north was kindled during student days, when at a tutor's suggestion, in 1882, he took passage aboard a sealing vessel to the Arctic Ocean. On board the "Viking" he was to make notes on winds, ocean currents, ice movements, and animal life. Nansen did his job well. Second best was never good enough for his uncompromising nature. He made thorough scientific observations; copious notes that were illustrated by sketches.

At this time too he started to write the many diaries that have given posterity such interesting glimpses into the inner recesses of his mind.

Apart from the scientific aspects, a significant result of the voyage with the "Viking" was not just that it marked the beginning of Nansen's commitment to the north. It had also set his inquisitive mind on the track of fresh theories. A piece of driftwood on the ice sparked a train of thought which finally culminated in the voyage of the "Fram". Nansen was intrigued at the presence of the driftwood and puzzled as to which direction it could have come from. His final theory that it could only have drifted from Siberia was later fully substantiated by the findings aboard the "Fram".

Before this event, however, Nansen was to undertake the journey that first brought his name to puton. Aboard the "Viking" he had caught tantalizing glimpses of the eastern coast of Greenland, a seaboard shrouded in mystery at that time. No one but the Inuit had set foot on the eastern coast. No European had penetrated far into the inland snowfields. The idea of crossing the inland icecap took root in Nansen at that time, though he was not to undertake the journey until 1888.

The academic life

On his return from his voyage on board the "Viking", Nansen was offered the post of curator of the natural history collection at the Bergen Museum, a flattering offer for a man of only twenty; fresh out of University.

The six years Nansen spent in Bergen were devoted to hard study, not outdoors as he had hoped, but in the laboratory. The transition from the rugged days aboard the Arctic sealer to the quiet daily routine of the laboratory, painstakingly studying minute animals through microscopes, was abrupt. His chosen theme of study was among the most difficult and exacting in zoology; the central nervous system. One of his papers, "The Structure and Combination of Histological Elements of the Central Nervous System" (1887), earned him his doctorate. It contained so many novel interpretations that the examining committee accepted it with a degree of scepticism. Today it is regarded as a classic.

On ski across Greenland

At the back of Nansen's mind all the time he was studying in Bergen was his project to cross the Greenland icecap, and in 1887, he embarked on the preparations for the journey. His plan was daring and original; foolhardy in the opinion of many. Instead of landing on the inhabited west coast, and striking inland from there, he planned to land on the east coast and move west. He reasoned that by starting from the west the team would have to make the return trip by the same route, as no ships would await it on the inhospitable east coast. That meant double the distance to cover compared with an east-west trek. Starting on the east coast meant that there would be no retreat; there was only one way to go - forward. This was a philosophy that suited Nansen's all-or-nothing attitude perfectly. Burning bridges behind him was a strategy that he was later to employ again, and with equal success.

The task facing the team was formidable. The east coast was almost permanently barred by a belt of drifting ice, packed and driven by the powerful polar current. Ships and men had been lost in its grip. Huge icebergs drifted in the few sheltered bays, and overhanging glaciers threatened to break off at any moment. Immediately behind this grim barrier lay the chain of mountains that rimmed the coast.

Finance was another obstacle. Despite the University's recommendation, the national assembly was loath to grant money to such a hazardous project; one whose benefit to science seemed dubious. However, one thousand dollars from a well-to-do merchant in Copenhagen was sufficient to set the ball rolling.

The painstaking manner that the expedition was planned characterized Nansen's work, both then and later. Every move was carefully planned, and the ultimate success of the venture was largely dependent upon his devoted attention to detail.

The six-man expedition set out in June 1888. On July 17th the men left the safety of the ship, expecting to row to land in their open boats within 2 - 3 hours. It took 12 days. Not until July 29th were they able to set foot on land, and then only at a point 300 miles to the south of their original goal. Adverse winds and currents swept them far to the south. When ice floes closed in around them they were forced to drag the boats over them until they reached open water again. Finally, almost one month after leaving the ship they were able to start the actual trek across the ice cap, having successfully scaled the precipitous cliffs that bordered it. The trek across the icecap along a route well south of the one originally planned, lasted until late September, when after almost superhuman effort in temperatures that fell to 50 below zero, they finally reached the west coast. Nansen, still only 27 years of age, had led his team, without mishap, where no man had trod before. Throughout the back-breaking journey the team had also made careful record of meteorological conditions, and other important scientific facts.

No boats were due to leave Greenland until the following spring, so Nansen spent the enforced winter there, studying the Inuits and gathering material for his subsequent book "Eskimo Life" (1891).

In May 1889 Nansen and his men returned in triumph to Norway, to a reception befitting national heroes.

The "Fram" quest takes shape

But Nansen did not rest on his laurels. His mind was still wrestling with the question of the driftwood he had observed on the ice floe off Greenland. Further evidence of an east-west ocean current had come to light when pieces of equipment belonging to the "Jeanette", an American vessel that had foundered north of Siberia in 1879, were discovered off Greenland. Nansen was convinced that these too had followed the drift of an arctic current that must flow from Siberia, towards the North Pole and from there down to Greenland. His plan was to build a ship strong enough to withstand the ice pressure, to sail it north from Siberia until it froze in the ice pack, and to remain in the ship while it drifted west towards the Pole and to Greenland. He expounded his theory to the Norwegian Geographical Society and the Royal Geographical Society of London. His plan met head-shaking scepticism from scholars, who did not believe that such a ship could be built, and who said that the voyage was tantamount to suicide.

The Norwegians, however, believed in their new young hero. The Storting granted a large part of the necessary expenses for the expedition. Subscriptions from the King, and from private individuals provided the rest.

The next three years were spent on preparations. A ship was to be built and Nansen collaborated with famous shipbuilder Colin Archer to design it. The result was the "Fram" (Forward).

The "Fram" was no beauty. Visitors viewing it today in its special museum outside Oslo may consider it squat and ugly. But it was supremely suited to its task. The three-layered hull, of oak and greenheart was immensely strong, braced as it was with heavy beams in all directions. Its rounded shape gave the ice nothing to grip. When the ice started to exert its tremendous pressure the "Fram" would simply be pushed upwards. Fore and aft it was iron-clad. The living quarters were warm and cosy. There was a well-stocked library, and games and musical instruments that would help the men pass the many weary months they were to spend on board.

Nansen chose twelve men to accompany him on the journey, including Otto Sverdrup, who had crossed Greenland with him, and who was to captain the ship. In June 1893 the expedition left Christiania, with provisions for six years and fuel oil for eight. Nansen believed the trip would take two to three years. But he took no chances with other peoples' lives. He was leaving behind his wife Eva (formerly Eva Sars), a promising young singer, and a six-month old daughter, Liv.

After the voyage up the coast of Norway, "Fram" struck east, moving far along the coast of Siberia. The course was changed to north and on September 20 the "Fram" reached the pack ice, the rudder and propeller were pulled in and the "Fram" was prepared for its long drift westwards with the ice.

Alone in the ice

The ship proved fully adequate to its task. During the three years that the team was completely isolated from the outside world, she was a safe and comfortable haven. Even when the dreaded pressure ridges of ice threatened to crush the tiny, 400-ton vessel, beneath their enormous weight, the "Fram" stood the test, and emerged as watertight and secure as when she had been built.

The dangers were not only physical, but also mental. Boredom, and the sapping of energy that accompanied it, was a constant threat. Nansen countered it with careful plans to keep the men constantly occupied with useful work on a fixed schedule. Scientific observations were an important part of this.

Progress was painfully slow, and after many frustrating months the "Fram" had moved only slightly. Nansen's restless spirit found it hard to cope with the monotony of life on board. The "Fram" did not appear to be drifting as close to the Pole as he had hoped. He decided to make a dash for the Pole, taking with him one of the strongest and most stalwart of his men, Hjalmar Johansen. Finding the ship again would be impossible, so Nansen planned to make for Spitsbergen, or Franz Josef Land after reaching the Pole, leaving the "Fram" in the capable hands of Otto Sverdrup.

The bid for the Pole

On March 14th 1895 Nansen and Johansen left the ship. With dogs, kayaks and sledges they made a desperate bid for the Pole. But once again their progress was pitifully slow, and the conditions worse than expected. Finally, at 86 degrees 14 minutes north, the closest to the Pole any man had come, they decided to turn back, and to make for Franz Josef Land.

The three-hundred mile journey cost five months of exhausting labour. Finally Nansen and Johansen arrived at the island which Nansen later named Jackson Island, after the British explorer. There they spent the nine months of winter in a tiny hut which they built from stones. In May of the following year the two men broke camp and started their journey south. In mid June, however, they had the almost unbelievable good fortune to meet on the ice Frederick Jackson, leader of a British scientific and exploratory expedition working in Franz Josef Land. The two Norwegians returned with him to the British headquarters.

An account of Nansen and Johansen's gruelling sled journey in the Arctic has very recently come to light in the shape of a diary written by Nansen. An associate made a fair copy of Nansen's 599 neatly hand-written pages and these were recently put on display at the Polar Museum in Tromsø, north Norway.

Two months after the two men's arrival at the British headquarters - on August 13th 1896 - Jackson's expedition vessel deposited Nansen and Johansen at the port of Vardø in north Norway. Unbeknown to them the "Fram" had on the same day shaken off the last of the pack ice near Spitsbergen and was steaming south for the first time in three years. Only one week after Nansen and Johansen's arrival the "Fram" cast anchor in the far north port of Skjervøy. As Nansen had correctly predicted, it had drifted west with the currents.

Home in triumph

Nansen and his 12 man-team made a triumphal progress down the coast of Norway, reaching Christiania on September 9th. They were ecstatically received. The nation that had so long been subservient to the Danes and the Swedes was locked in a crisis with Sweden over the issue of the union. War threatened. Norway needed national leaders, and here was one cast in a mighty mould. At the age of only 35, Nansen had more accomplishments to his credit than many distinguished older men.

In all the clamour and the adulation for the heroic aspects of Nansen's journey it was perhaps easy to overlook its scientific significance. His research had provided invaluable new knowledge. It had proved beyond doubt that there was no land close to the Pole on the Eurasian side, but a deep, ice-covered ocean. The men had discovered a current of warm, Atlantic water at some depth below the polar ice, and compiled information on currents, winds, and temperatures that scientists would use for many years. For the new science of oceanography, the voyage of the "Fram" was of major significance. For Nansen himself it marked the turning point in his scientific work. Oceanography became the focus of his research.

A studious interlude

For many years Professor Nansen, as he had then become, devoted his attention to the study of the oceans. Alternating work at the University of Christiania with field expeditions, he cruised extensively in both the Norwegian Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. There he compiled scientific data and dredged for plant and animal life. His findings showed the influence of the sea on land climates more clearly than had ever been shown before.

A new role

For Nansen the step from explorer and scientist to statesman was not a long one. His qualities of leadership had been clearly demonstrated. He was respected and esteemed by his countrymen.

By 1905 the disagreement on the union between Norway and Sweden had deepened into a crisis. Norway was insisting on its own government. It wished its foreign policy to be put in the hands of the king, and not the Swedish foreign minister, as the Swedes had decided in 1885. By August 1905 matters had come to a head, and the Norwegian people had voted for a total split with Sweden. During the tense period when war seemed imminent, Fridtjof Nansen sought to instill bravery into his countrymen, calling on them to "Go forward, forward to a free Norway".

When the Swedes made demands that were totally unacceptable to the Norwegians, Nansen was hastily despatched, first to Copenhagen, and then to Britain, where he spent almost a month convincing the British of the justice of the Norwegian cause. Gradually the demands were tempered, on both sides, and by mid October a treaty was signed releasing Norway from Swedish rule.

Nansen's standing among the Norwegians was such that in 1905 he was asked to act as Norway's prime minister. Reportedly, he was also secretly requested to become either president or king, when the new form of government was decided. He declined both offers, on the grounds that he was "a scientist and explorer". However, he played a personal part in bringing to the vacant Norwegian throne the Danish Prince Carl, who took the Norwegian name Haakon VII.

The years in London

In spite of his strong wish to remain a scientist, Nansen did not decline when King Haakon asked him to become Norway's ambassador in London, where he served from 1906 - 1908. The mid year of this period, 1907, had been a sad one for Nansen. His wife, Eva, died

suddenly, and previous to that he had relinquished all hopes of leading an expedition to the South Pole. He had planned in detail a major expedition to this unknown continent. However, the young explorer Roald Amundsen had asked him for the "Fram", for a lengthy voyage north of Siberia that might yield valuable oceanic discoveries.

Nansen's South Pole expedition was to be his life's achievement. He might need the "Fram" to carry out what would probably be the crowning scientific achievement of his career. He pondered the question, and with characteristic unselfishness, but a heavy heart, decided to hand the "Fram" over to Roald Amundsen.

Pleading for Norway

World War I brought an abrupt end to oceanic research and exploration for more than four years. Norway remained neutral, but encountered serious difficulties when the USA, entering the war in 1917, placed restrictions on the export of food. A commission was despatched to Washington, with Fridtjof Nansen at its head. For more than a year he led the long and often exasperating fight to secure food for Norway without giving up the country's neutrality. Finally, cutting through the bureaucratic jungle, he took matters into his own hands, and signed an agreement giving Norway yearly shipments of essential supplies in return for certain concessions.

World War I aroused in Fridtjof Nansen an abhorrence for the senseless slaughter of warfare. When the League of Nations began to take shape after the war he worked tirelessly for its success, and was for many years Norway's delegate at its assemblies. In the negotiations prior to its establishment, the small, neutral nations had been virtually forgotten. The major nations dictated the terms. The small ones looked on.

Nevertheless, Nansen saw in the League a new hope for mankind and he persuaded not only Norway, but also the other Scandinavian countries to apply for membership as soon as this was permitted; and Norway duly joined.

Work for the forgotten men

His work in this field completed, Nansen planned to devote the rest of his life to his chosen vocation, science. He had been a reluctant statesman and diplomat. He was entitled to retire from the international field with a clear conscience.

But the new League of Nations thought otherwise. Suffering in prison camps in Europe and Asia were half a million forgotten men; prisoners of war, who had fought for Germany and its allies. Locked in the grip of the Revolution, the Russians were largely indifferent to their fate. Many of the prisoners no longer had a homeland. They knew nothing of their families and little of what had occurred, and they were dying in thousands from cold and hunger.

The League of Nations faced the enormous task of repatriating these men or giving them a new homeland. Obviously the work must be led by a man of special calibre; one who could act quickly and resolutely, and who commanded the trust and respect of the international community. The choice fell on Fridtjof Nansen.

Though Nansen at first said "no" to the request, the repeated persuasions of the League soon had their effect. In April 1920 he left Christiania to start his difficult mission. The Soviet

government would not recognize the League of Nations, and there were virtually no funds available for the task of feeding, clothing and transporting the men from the camps.

Though Nansen's prime wish was to continue his scientific work, he saw in the task now facing him great possibilities. He could help prove that the League of Nations was a practical tool for improving the lot of mankind, and not just an idealistic vision. Also he could help the men whose sufferings touched him profoundly.

Such was the stature of Fridtjof Nansen, that the Soviet authorities agreed to negotiate with him personally. Funds were somehow raised, and the gigantic task put in hand. By September of 1922 Nansen was able to tell the League of Nations that the mission had been accomplished. The Nansen Relief organization had succeeded. Well over 400,000 prisoners of war had been repatriated, not only quickly, but at amazingly low cost.

Help for the starving

By now more than 60 years old, Nansen still yearned most of all to return to Norway to pursue his scientific interests and spend time with his family. But his talents were needed by the world. Even before the last of the prisoners of war had been repatriated or relocated in new homelands, another crisis had struck. A failure of the crops in the Russian grain growing areas brought famine to 20 million people. Epidemics followed in its wake. The International Committee of the Red Cross appealed to Nansen to lead a project to help the people of the famine-stricken areas. Once again he put his own interests aside to come to the aid of others. He made an agreement with the Soviets authorizing him to open in Moscow an office of the International Russian Relief Executive. But his appeals to the League of Nations for funds to finance the work met deaf ears. The League was unwilling to aid a Communist country.

Through fund-raising tours Nansen succeeded in raising some finances, though not sufficient to save all of the starving people, and thousands of them died. This partial defeat affected him deeply. Nansen was a stranger to failure, at least in most of his quests, and the adamant refusal of the League of Nations was a blow to his vision of its potential. However, he was able to bring help to many people, particularly in the Ukraine and the Volga districts.

Refugee aid

Parallel to the famine project Nansen also organized and led another major one; that of aiding the 2 million hapless Russians who had fled both revolution, and counter-revolution and were being shuttled from country to country like cattle. So many countries close to the USSR were involved that a central leader was needed who could negotiate with many different governments. The League asked Nansen to act as High Commissioner for Refugees, with the task of coordinating all the relief organizations

The cardinal task was to provide the refugees with an accepted means of identification. This would not only give them status, but the possibility of procuring a passport. Nansen proposed that certificates be issued giving the most important information on the holder. Many governments agreed to recognize the "Nansen Passport". The greatest single achievement in Nansen's refugee work was probably the resettlement of several hundred thousand Greeks and Turks who fled to Greece in 1922 from eastern Thrace and Asia Minor following the defeat of the Greek Army by the Turks. Poverty-stricken Greece was unable to receive them. Nansen devised an unprecedented scheme. An exchange of populations would be effected between

Greece and Turkey. Half a million Turks would be returned from Greece to Asia Minor; receiving full compensation for their financial losses. Further, a League of Nations loan would enable the Greek government to provide new villages and industries for the homecoming Greeks, who would take the place of the Turks. The ambitious plan took eight years to complete, but it worked perfectly.

Nobel laureate

In recognition of his work for refugees and the famine-stricken, the Nobel Committee in Christiania decided to honour Fridtjof Nansen with the 1922 Nobel Prize for Peace. He was only the second Norwegian to gain this distinction. Typically, he donated the money to international relief efforts.

From 1925 onwards, Nansen devoted much of his time to aiding Armenian refugees. Then, as now, they were a troubled people. After the Turkish massacres they had been driven into the desert to die. Nansen argued their cause. He worked incessantly to provide them with a homeland, or to raise funds to help them develop irrigated areas in the deserts. His aid plans were turned down by the League of Nations. His requests for funds met little response. These setbacks affected him deeply. He tendered his resignation as High Commissioner for Refugees - but the League refused to accept it. Despite this failure Nansen's work for the Armenians increased his standing to such a degree that, even today, his name is highly revered among them.

Nansen continued his work in the League of Nations. In the Assemblies of 1925 to 1929 he played a major role in securing the adoption of a convention against forced labour in colonial territories, and in preparations for a disarmament conference.

A quiet end

Despite his keen interest in national defence - Nansen became the president of the defence association of Norway in 1915 - disarmament was an issue of burning importance to him. The final resolution to convene a disarmament conference in 1932, was made at the eleventh Assembly of the League in 1930. But Nansen's place was vacant. On May 13th, he had died quietly, at his beloved home, Polhøgda, near Oslo.

The clarity of Nansen's vision, and his ability to cut through petty detail to arrive at a lofty goal were precious qualities in troubled times. The world needed Nansen then. It needs people of his calibre now, and indeed at all times.

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