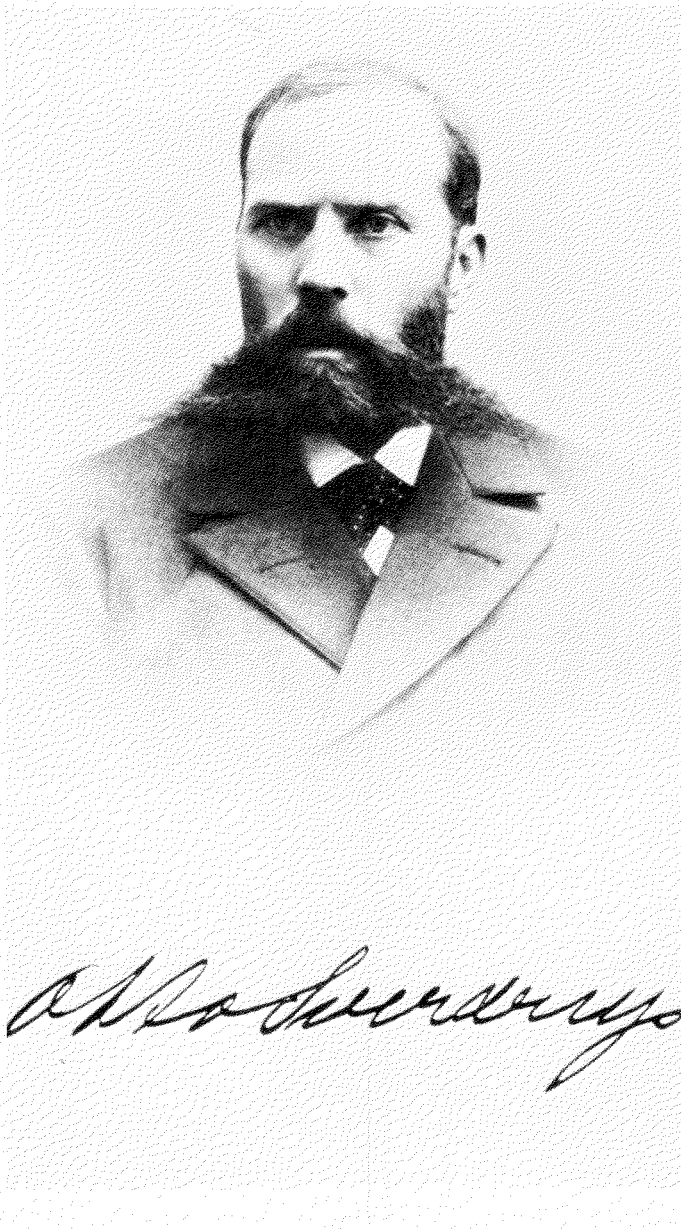


Otto Sverdrup (1854-1930)



Born on his father's farm, Haarstad, in the Helgeland area of Norway on 31 October 1854, Otto Sverdrup spent his childhood among the fiords, forests, and mountains. From an early age he was an excellent skier and could handle rifle or small boat with equal skill. He went to sea at the age of 17, sailing aboard both Norwegian and American vessels, and obtained his mate's ticket in 1878 and his master's certificate in the early 1880s. After a few more years at sea, from 1885 he stayed ashore for a number of years helping his father, who in the interim had moved south to the farm of Trana, near Steinkjer.

There he became a close friend of a young lawyer, Alexander Nansen, and when the latter's brother Fridtjof was looking for volunteers to attempt the first crossing of the Greenland

Ice Cap on skis, Sverdrup volunteered and was accepted. The plan was that they would be landed from the sealer *Jason* on the east coast of Greenland in July 1888, but ice prevented the ship from reaching shore, and hence the six-man party left the ship in two boats. It took them ten days to reach land, having been carried well south of their starting point by the ice drift, and a further two weeks to retrace their steps north along the coast to where the ski journey was to begin. After 40 days on the ice cap, they safely reached the first rocks and tundra on the west side. Since it was now late in the season, the party was obliged to winter at Godthåb and did not finally return to Norway until May 1889.

Almost immediately Nansen began planning for an even greater expedition. In 1884, various items indisputably from the wreck of De Long's *Jeannette*, which had been crushed in June 1881 north of the Novosibirskiye Ostrova, had been found on an ice floe off the coast of southwest Greenland. Clearly they must have been carried by ice drift across the Arctic Basin and south via the East Greenland Current. On this basis Nansen conceived the idea of deliberately placing a specially-built ship in the ice near where *Jeannette* had been crushed and of allowing the ice drift to carry the ship along her presumed transarctic drift route; scientific observations would be made throughout the drift. Right from the start Otto Sverdrup offered his services as captain of the expedition vessel, and for three years (1890-1893) his attention was almost wholly devoted to the building of the ship. This remarkable vessel, named *Fram*, was designed and built by Colin Archer, but every stage of her construction was personally supervised by Sverdrup.

Having taken *Fram* eastward through the Northern Sea Route, Nansen and Sverdrup deliberately allowed her to become beset northwest of the Novosibirskiye Ostrova in September 1893, and there her slow westward drift began. By November 1894 it was clear that *Fram's* drift course was not going to take her as far north as Nansen had calculated, and hence, in late February 1895 Nansen and Johansen set off with two dogteams to get as far north as possible, and then to make their own way south to Zemlya Frantsa Iosifa and home. This meant that from that date until mid-August 1896, when *Fram* emerged safely from the ice northwest of Svalbard, Sverdrup was in sole command of the ship. He was entirely responsible for the ship, its crew, and the scientific programme for more than half of the total duration of the famous ice drift.

Soon after *Fram's* return to Norway, at Nansen's suggestion Sverdrup began planning for another arctic expedition aboard *Fram*, but this time he would be in sole command. The plan was to head north via Smith Sound and Kane Basin, then east along the north coast of Greenland to some suitable wintering site. From there sledge journeys would be made to the northernmost point of Greenland and south along its unknown northeast coast. There was *no* intention of making an attempt

at the Pole. With a well-knit team of 16 men, *Fram* sailed from Norway on 24 June 1898. But in Smith Sound, impassable ice stretching from Littleton Island to Pim Island blocked further progress northwards; after a prolonged wait and vain attempts to push north, Sverdrup snugged his ship down for the winter in a secure bay, named Fram Haven, at the north end of Rice Strait between Pim Island and Johan Peninsula on Ellesmere Island. The autumn was spent hunting walrus and muskoxen for dog food, and while thus engaged at his main camp at Fort Juliana on Hayes Fiord, Sverdrup was visited by Robert Peary, whose ship *Hope* was wintering near Cape Hawkes. Peary immediately saw in Sverdrup a rival in the race for the Pole and, in an unforgivable breach of arctic manners, refused Sverdrup's hospitable offer of a cup of coffee.

During their hunting trips Sverdrup and his men explored most of the Bache Peninsula area, discovering, incidentally, that it was a peninsula and not an island. Then in the spring of 1899 two sledge expeditions made major thrusts westward across Ellesmere Island, one of them reaching the sea at the head of Bay Fiord.

That summer Smith Sound and Kane Basin were again solidly packed with ice, and Sverdrup was forced to abandon his original plan for northern Greenland. Well aware of the vast unknown lacuna that lay west of Ellesmere Island and north of Jones Sound, he decided to make it the alternate focus of his expedition. With this intention, he took *Fram* south, then west, into Jones Sound and settled down for a second wintering in Harbour Fiord on the south coast of Ellesmere.

From there and from Goose Fiord, to which *Fram* moved in the summer of 1900, in a truly remarkable series of sledging expeditions over the next three summers, Sverdrup and his finely tuned, well-coordinated team explored the entire west coast of Ellesmere Island north to beyond the mouth of Nansen Sound, the entire coastline of Axel Heiberg Island, Amund and Ellef Ringnes Islands, King Christian, Cornwall, and Graham islands, as well as much of the north coast of Devon Island. In total this represented one of the most impressive feats of polar exploration ever achieved, effected in an extremely workmanlike fashion with a minimum of fuss or fanfare.

In the closing lines of his account of the expedition, Otto Sverdrup makes the unequivocal statement that he had taken possession of the lands he had discovered for the Norwegian king, and he so informed King Oscar on his return to Norway in the autumn of 1902. Thus arose the dispute that was to cloud Norwegian/Canadian relations for the next quarter-century.

It is not generally known that Sverdrup was involved in three further expeditions to the Arctic. In 1914 he was invited by the Imperial Russian Government to take command of the whaling ship *Eclipse* and search the Kara Sea for traces of the missing Rusanov and Brusilov expeditions; he found no sign of them, but during the wintering on the Taymyr coast, he played a major role in a precautionary overland evacuation of half of the crews of the Russian icebreakers *Taymyr* and *Vaygach*, which had also been forced to winter in the ice of the Kara Sea. Then in the spring of 1920, this time at the request of the Soviet government, Sverdrup took command of the ice-

breaker *Svyatogor* and rescued the icebreaker *Solovey Budimirovich*, beset and drifting in the ice of the Kara Sea, her coal and food supplies almost exhausted. Finally, in 1921, aboard the icebreaker *Lenin* Sverdrup escorted a convoy of freighters to the mouth of the Yenisey, thus contributing to the early stages of the build-up of the Soviet Union's important Kara Sea shipping operation.

Throughout this period and until the end of his life, Sverdrup continued to pursue two goals: one was to save his fine old ship, *Fram*; the other was to bring to fruition his claim that the lands he had discovered west of Ellesmere Island were Norwegian territory. The former fight Sverdrup won. Through his efforts at fund-raising, by the spring of 1930 *Fram* had been completely restored. And in the summer of 1936 the *Fram* Museum, which still houses the old ship in Oslo, was opened by King Haakon.

The other fight the tenacious old patriot lost, although it was a dignified defeat. The dispute over sovereignty of the Sverdrup Islands, by which name the islands he discovered are still known, was settled between Norway and Canada in a gentlemanly fashion that salvaged national pride. On 11 November 1930 the Norwegian government formally recognized Canada's title to the lands Sverdrup had explored. And in a related gesture, which was covered in the same article in many Canadian newspapers, the Canadian government paid Sverdrup \$67,000 for his original maps, diaries, and documents relating to his expedition in 1898-1902. Before the month was out, Sverdrup was dead.

Were he still alive, however, Sverdrup would undoubtedly have been raising a storm in the Norwegian press and in the Storting during the past decade. Intense exploration in the early 1970s revealed that the Sverdrup Basin, which in part underlies the islands he and his men had discovered, contains proven reserves of 10 trillion cubic feet of gas and 100 million barrels of oil. Probable reserves are vastly greater. One doubts if such a doughty old fighter as Sverdrup could have remained silent on finding that his hunch to hang on to these islands had so dramatically been proved right.

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