

# NORWAY'S GREAT EXPLORERS

## Nansen And Amundsen: Two Modern Vikings

**A**LTHOUGH both Nansen and Amundsen have been dead for a decade, in the imaginations of all but the babes of this generation they are still great men. To earlier generations, who lived while first one and then the other led the world into the Arctic and the Antarctic, they assume the proportions of giants. For Norway they were the modern vikings. Both were strong men, of mind as well as body. Both were bold. Both were wiser than most among men who are not generally called fools. To courage they added reason, and the polar ice and snows became home to them.

Amundsen was lost in 1928, searching for the Italian flyer Nobile. To the end he was Amundsen, a personality which rode over difficulties, whether they were human or natural. The Arctic caught him in his last sally, but until then he dominated the Arctic, as he had dominated the Antarctic. He was, and remains, symbolic of those same Norsemen who went out from Norway centuries ago to invade England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland, to colonise the Shetlands, the Orkneys, Iceland, Greenland, and, small as their ships were, to sail right across the northern seas to the American continent.

### Sportsman And Scientist

While Amundsen was spectacular, and efficient at the same time, Nansen was unremittingly efficient, and spectacular only in results; not so much in method. Amundsen was more of the sportsman, taking a well-planned fling at high odds. Nansen was a scientist, meeting big difficulties with simple plans that always worked.

Norway has no legend of Captain Oates, no last words of Scott, no Cherry Garrard to write about the worst journey in the world, no Shackleton, no Wild, no magnificent failures in Arctic exploration. Her Arctic stories are stories of magnificent successes, with milestones marking the road—seldom frozen bodies.

### Nansen Began Young

Fridtjof Nansen was born in 1861 and was educated at Oslo and Naples. In 1882, when he was 21 years of age, he took the *Viking* into the Arctic on a long voyage, and when he returned was rewarded with an appointment as keeper of the natural history department in the museum at Bergen. It was in 1888 that he made his famous journey across Greenland, with two Norwegians for company and three Lapps. Still a young man, he had made a complete and thorough study of Arctic life and conditions. He worked in all his journeys and voyages on the assumption that the explorer in the cold latitudes could not efficiently attempt to adapt his environment to his needs as a civilised person. It was his theory that the civilised person must adapt himself to the natural conditions. This he did, with remarkable results. He knew about the folly of Franklin's expedition. For him there was to be no folly, no mistake that could not be rectified, no danger that could not be minimised.

### Common-sense Theories

After all, his theories were only common sense. He decided, for example, that where others had taken "fowling pieces" as weapons for shooting animals for food, he would take rifles. One cartridge, he saw, would shoot at the best two pounds of not very good bird. One bullet, on the other hand, would drop 100 or more pounds of good fat bear. Therefore bullets were better. Nansen took bullets. Obvious as this may seem, it is the sort of plain fact which many other explorers have passed by. Andree, following closely after Nansen, with all the benefits of Nansen's experience, still somehow overlooked

*Among New Zealand mountaineers, there is a famous old-timer's saying that no mountaineering accident is the result of mischance. This grim but practical philosophy was applied to their work by the two greatest explorers of modern times, Norway's Fridtjof Nansen and Raoult Amundsen. In what the rest of the world considered hazardous adventures, they applied the principle that success, and life itself, depended on their own efforts to anticipate difficulties, and meet them, and overcome them. For them the Arctic became "The Friendly Arctic." Out of the Arctic, and, for Amundsen, the Antarctic, too, they carved successes which more than anything else have rebuilt during the last sixty years the spirit of the Scandinavia which dominated the northern world six and seven centuries ago.*

even that truism. He took shotgun and cartridges, found himself often perilously short of food, became with his companions the victim of serious dietary troubles, and finally died, according to Stefansson only because Nansen's rudimentary precepts had not been followed.

Great men, it seems, are not always endowed with the capacity for seeing what is immediately below their noses. Nansen could, and could take notice. He built his large plans upon secure foundations, much in the manner of Kingsford-Smith, and from his ability to see to such small matters as the food value per weight of his ammunition, he gained a reputation for greatness which did not fall very far short of genius.

The voyage and drift of Nansen's *Fram* began from New Siberia in 1893. By September she had been made fast to a floe and by March 3, 1895, the *Fram* had reached 84 degrees 4 mins. North. There Nansen and Johansen left her, fast in the ice, and on foot they travelled to 86 degrees 14 mins. North by April 7. Here they turned, and made south and west, helped by the drift Nansen had studied so closely. Care was necessary lest miscalculation take them into open water, and the broken ice against the warm upflowing Gulf Stream. For Nansen no mistake was possible. They safely reached Franz Josef Land, wintered there, living as the Eskimos would live, on meat and fat alone, and in June, 1896, met the Jackson-Harmsworth expedition which returned them safely to Norway in August. The *Fram* came in via Spitzbergen shortly after.

### With The League of Nations

The rest of Nansen's career was concerned with human problems. In 1897 he was created a professor of Zoology, and in 1908 of Oceanography. He took a big part in establishing Norway's national independence through severance of the union with Denmark, and from 1905-8 was ambassador for Norway in London.

It was one of Nansen's precepts that difficulties were made to be overcome. He ignored difficulties. If there were a job to be done, he started it and finished it, as simply as that. This principle he had applied to his exploration, and he applied it again after the war when the League of Nations called upon him to tackle a job of immense importance and, so it seemed, of almost impossible difficulty. As chairman of the League of Nations Commission for the relief of refugees and the repatriation of prisoners of war, Nansen took the work in his stride. Prisoners of war were returned to their own countries at a time when few knew just what those countries might be in a world of changing boundaries, and fewer perhaps knew where the prisoners of war were after four years of internments and confusion. Refugees poured out of Russia. Nansen found them homes. Famine and disease followed the war. Nansen tackled the job.

He died in 1930, his monument the memory of a man for whom life was a sum of problems to be tackled and resolved, whether in the Polar Seas, in the University, in the Embassy, or in the League of Nations.

### Fame Came Later to Amundsen

Amundsen was born in Borge, Smaalene, in 1872. He was born only eleven years after Nansen, but reached his maturity as an explorer much later. A brief statement of his accomplishments is a sufficiently revealing commentary on the man.

In 1903-6 he navigated the North-West Passage from end to end.

On December 14, 1911, he reached the South Pole.

In 1918-21 he navigated the North-East Passage in the *Maud*.

He failed in his plan to drift the *Maud* across the North Pole, so forsook transport by ship and reached for the new medium, travel by air. While Captain Wisting continued with the *Maud* from 1922-24, Amundsen went to Point Barrow in Alaska to fly to the Pole. His first attempt was actually made from Spitzbergen. In 1925 he reached 87 degrees 44 mins. North, and in May, 1926, he crossed the North Pole to Alaska.

In 1928 he went out to search for Nobile, and was lost.

### Courage And Calculation

In one respect Amundsen was like Nansen. He could not bear to nibble at a job of work. It had to be done, so Amundsen did it. From his own knowledge, and with Nansen's experience, he managed to do his jobs inordinately well. His dash to the South Pole was a magnificent piece of work. To others may go tributes for gallantry and endurance. But they failed where Amundsen succeeded. Behind his courage and endurance there was cool calculation and the practical application of the same quality of common sense found in Nansen.

But Amundsen was not the scientist that Nansen was. He was willing to make use of science and book learning; willing, indeed, to make use of anything and anybody that served his ends. But these things were subservient to his outstanding personality. There were unknown seas. Amundsen must know them. There were latitudes unvisited. Amundsen must visit them. Where other men failed, there must Amundsen succeed. He was impatient for success, but not so impatient that he did not make time to see that his eager spirit went always hand in hand with a shrewd consideration of practice and possibilities. In a shrinking world he still loomed large as a Columbus. Now that the world is smaller still, it will be a great man indeed who attains the same dramatic stature.