

The Precursor of the International Geophysical Year. The Norwegian-British-Swedish Antarctic Expedition

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On the 11th of February 1950, the **Maudheim** ^{p.648} wintering base was established on the Quar Ice Shelf at 71°02.6' S 10°55.5' W in Queen Maud Land, the territory claimed by Norway in 1939. This base would serve as the home of the Norwegian-British-Swedish Antarctic expedition.¹

The idea of a Norwegian-British-Swedish expedition was conceived during the Second World War by the Swedish geographer Hans Wilhelmsson Ahlmann (1889–1974) to research global melting and glacial retreat in the southern hemisphere and to seek the causes and effects of the *klimatförbättring* – the “climate improvement” – he had registered in the northern hemisphere.² The possible global effects and his belief in a Scandinavian obligation to participate in the quest for knowledge led him to focus on international cooperation to realise his plans. Ahlmann sought to continue the Swedish polar tradition and planned the expedition as a continuation of Otto Nordenskjöld's prior

expedition to Graham Land.³ He expected to attract British collaboration, leveraging on the fact that the country was in territorial dispute with Argentina and Chile in this region.⁴ The Royal Geographical Society accepted his offer of collaboration in September 1945.

Photographs from the *Schwabenland Expedition* (1938–1939) of snow-free mountains with interspersed glacier tongues showed the area around Queen Maud Land to be ideal for geological and glacial science.⁵ Driven by the conviction that “to determine whether the contemporary climate changes are of regional or universal character, it is of the utmost importance to study the glaciers in Antarctica”,⁶ Ahlmann also approached Norway as a potential partner, owing to that country's territorial claim of the area.⁷ Instrumental to successfully gaining their participation was the growing Soviet initiative on polar research and exploration⁸ and the argument Ahlmann made regarding the

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consequent threat that the Soviets posed to Norwegian territorial interests as he urged an increase in Norwegian polar activity. The British agreed to this cooperation on the condition of Norwegian leadership of the expedition, underscoring the importance of strengthening the Norwegian claim in Queen Maud Land.⁹ In April 1946, the Norwegian Geographical Society took responsibility for preparing the expedition, while the Royal Geographic Society and the Scott Polar Research Institute formed a committee in Britain and Ahlmann led the Swedish committee. After the Norwegian Geographical Society received an initial grant in October 1946, they invited the head of the Norges Svalbard- og Ishavsundersøkelser, Anders Orvin, to participate in the planning and assist in the logistics of the proposed joint expedition (as was desired by the Ministry of Trade and Norwegian Foreign Minister Lange). However, Orvin announced that the office was too busy with its own Arctic expedition preparations,



and the Norwegian Geographic Society was left with the full burden of planning the Antarctic expedition.¹⁰

Unexpected problems in acquiring a ship, along with conflicting internal objectives, postponed the start of the expedition until the director of the newly founded Norwegian Polar Institute, Harald Ulrik Sverdrup, took on full responsibility for the expedition in March 1948. The expedition finally left Norway in mid-November 1949 and reached Queen Maud Land on the 11th of February 1950. Comprised of personnel from Norway, Sweden and the British Commonwealth (United Kingdom, Canada, Australia and an observer from South Africa), the expedition addressed at once ambitions of scientific discovery and other motives, including access to weather data, whaling grounds and resources, as well as military training and territorial control. All these factors contributed to the realisation (and funding) of the expedition. Unlike previous Norwegian ventures to the Antarctic, the expedition was government-funded and, even though it was not promoted as a political expedition in order not to stir smouldering conflict in the politically fraught post-war period, it was operated as a means of reaffirming an official statement of national presence and consolidation.

During the expedition, the scientific activity and sheer presence validated Norwegian sovereignty. Set beforehand, the scientific programme was adapted on site to respond to challenges arising from the context and the available expertise. Designed to support

national interests with cartography as its main objective, the scientific programme offered an opportunity to test new equipment and working methodologies as well as unveil groundbreaking information about the continent. Charting unknown areas and naming land translated into the production of printed and published maps that could be used as hard political currency in the disputes over sovereignty,¹¹ and the possibility of testing new equipment and training personnel undercover on a “civilian” expedition proved to be of great military interest.¹² To that end, all three countries had military representatives on the committees and among the expedition crew; nevertheless, the use of military air crews was technically also a necessity for the execution of the expedition and for the scientific surveys.

Although operating at the end of the world, the reverberations of changes in the geopolitical situation caught up with the expedition. The high expectations set for the newly established Norwegian Polar Institute did not persist, and the envisioned ambitions of fruitful cooperation resulted in a hefty administration. Despite the turbulence following the expedition – especially the disputes over settlement with Britain – the projected public image of harmony prevailed¹³ and the Norwegian-British-Swedish expedition has a legacy of being a scientifically motivated expedition that placed scientific investigation before geographical discovery in the name of planetary climate concerns. This legacy is what granted the expedition the title of being a worthy forerunner of the

upcoming International Geophysical Year (1957–1958).¹⁴

The Norwegian-British-Swedish expedition thus became the first multilateral expedition to the Antarctic region. The logistical groundwork, the scientific programme and the output provided valuable knowledge and marked the beginning of an era of collaboration in Antarctic policy. While unsuccessful in the search for causes of global warming, the *symbolic value* of science remained and the continued emphasis on research motivated further cooperation, leading to the IGY and to the established reading of the continent for science.