

*In May this year, a Briton named Alex Hartley gamely claimed as his personal territory a tiny island in Svalbard that had been revealed by retreating ice. Svalbard's islands have a long history of claims and counter-claims by adventurers of diverse nations: the question of who owns the Arctic is an old one. In this next article in our unreviewed biographical/historical series, Frode Skarstein describes Norway's bid to wrest a corner of Greenland from the Danish crown 75 years ago.*



## Erik the Red's Land: the land that never was

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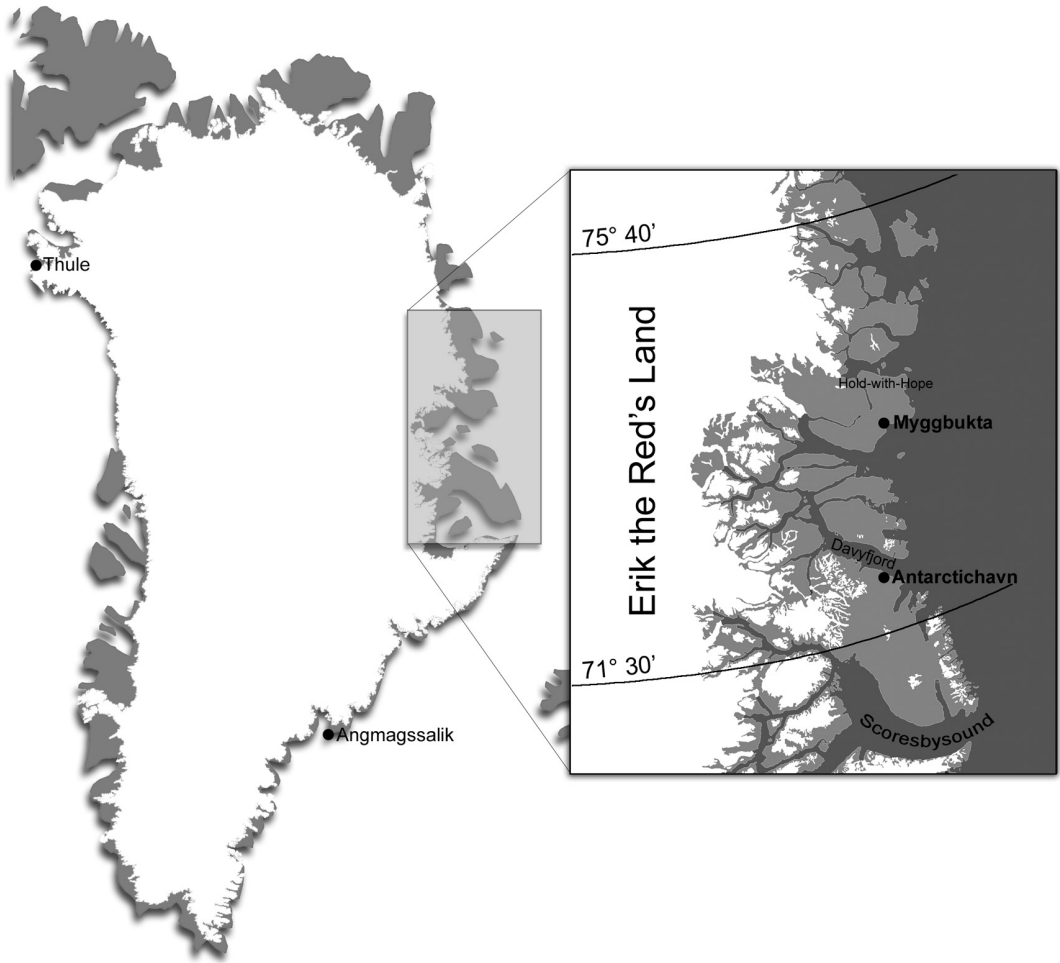
“Saturday, 27th of June, 1931. Eventful day. A long coded telegram late last night that I deciphered during the night. At five pm we hoisted the flag and occupied the land from Calsbergfjord to Besselsfjord. It will be exciting to see how it develops.” (Devold 1931: author's translation.)

Although not as pithy as the *Unity's* log entry from 1616—“Cape Hoorn in 57° 48' S. Rounded 8 p.m.”—when the southern tip of the Americas was first rounded (Hough 1971), the above diary entry by Hallvard Devold is still a salient understatement given the context in which it was made. The next day Devold sent the following telegram to a select few Norwegian newspapers:

“In the presence of Eiliv Herdal, Tor Halle, Ingvald Strøm and Søren Richter, the Norwegian flag has been hoisted today in Myggbukta. And the land between Carlsbergfjord to the south and Besselfjord to the north occupied in His Majesty King Haakon's name. We have named the country Erik the Red's Land.” (Smedal 1934: 127; author's translation.)



Pawns in their game: Devold (left) and fellow expedition members during the 1931 occupation of Erik the Red's Land. (Photographs courtesy of the Norwegian Polar Institute Picture Library.)



Thus, the Norwegian occupation of a vast territory in East Greenland, considered by most of the world to be Danish, was a fact (Blom 1973).

Devold, then in charge of a trapping expedition based at Myggbukta, East Greenland, was originally educated as an economist at the University of Oslo. Fuelled by a frustration with routine banking work and a passionate desire for hunting and other outdoor pursuits, he quit his job. Through employment in various exploratory activities in Arctic areas such as northern Norway, Svalbard and Jan Mayen, he gained experience with, and a strong taste for, expedition life in the far north (Devold 1940). When, in 1931, Devold and his trapping expedition occupied a segment of East Greenland in the name of the Norwegian king, it was a private initiative, carefully designed to force the Norwegian government to follow suit and give its support to the private occupation. The masterminds behind this plot were Adolf Hoel and Gustav Smedal. Hoel was an influential Norwegian geologist who was head of Norway's Svalbard and Arctic Ocean Survey (Norges Svalbard- og

Ishavsundersøkelser), which evolved into the Norwegian Polar Institute. Smedal was a lawyer with strong nationalistic influences. Both men were wholeheartedly involved in the acquisition of Arctic territories for Norway (Blom 1973). Hoel's efforts in securing Svalbard and later Dronning Maud Land in Antarctica as Norwegian territories were crucial to the process. With well-tended connections in the Norwegian government and parliament, Hoel and—especially—Smedal tried to rouse the Norwegian government into officially annexing East Greenland in the late 1920s, but to no avail. The Norwegian government was determined to approach the matter through negotiation.

Greenland first came under Norwegian rule when, in the year 1261, the Norse population in Greenland requested to be ruled by the Norwegian King Håkon IV Håkonsson (H. Ingstad 1966). This most remote Norse colony then followed Norway into the union with Denmark in 1384. After the Kiel treaty of 1814, Norway was ceded to Sweden as compensation for Sweden's loss of Finland and Åland to Russia. However, a parenthetical clause in the final draft of the treaty stipulated that although Denmark gave up Norway itself, Norway's colonial possessions of Greenland, the Faroe Islands and Iceland remained under the Danish crown. Here lay the root of the conflict that was to culminate with the Norwegian annexation of eastern Greenland. This treaty was never accepted by Norway. With Norway



Two important actors in the East Greenland conflict. To the right, Norwegian Hallvard Devold, leader of the private occupation in 1931, and third from the right, the Dane Lauge Koch, leader of the daunting Danish three-year expedition that stirred Smedal into putting into action his scheme to provoke an official Norwegian claim to Erik the Red's Land. The picture is taken in March 1927 at Hold-with-Hope, during the Foldvik expedition of 1926–28, well before the plot had been conceived.



The Norwegian delegation to the Hague, the Netherlands, during the preparation for the court trial in November 1932. Adolf Hoel is seated on the right, with Gustav Smedal seated next to him.

coping with a new union (with Sweden), 100 years passed before the ownership of Greenland was seriously disputed again (Blom 1971).

Since the early 1920s, tensions between Norway and Denmark had been slowly rising on the East Greenland issue, with Denmark responding to increased Norwegian activity in East Greenland and an awakening national Norwegian feeling on the subject. Beginning in early 1776 (and lasting until 1950), entry into Greenland was severely limited through a Danish state monopoly. The purpose of this monopoly was to protect the native Greenlandic culture from the damaging effects unrestricted contact with the European civilization would certainly entail. However, this system also made foreign offshore economic utilization, such as fishing, very difficult given the vast distances between the vessels' home bases and Greenland. The policing of these restrictions was in practice limited to the southern and western coasts of Greenland. However, it was feared in Norway that if Danish sovereignty over Greenland were left unchallenged, the exercise of Danish sovereignty would be extended to include East Greenland and the monopoly could interfere with Norwegian trapping activities on the east coast of Greenland (Blom 1971).

From the 1920s on, economic interests and a national Norwegian opposition to Denmark and Danish rule dominated Norwegian discourse on the East Greenland issue. Several non-governmental special interest groups formed around economic or nationalistic interests, or both. The opinion in Norway could be divided between those who wanted to maintain negotiations with Denmark and those who felt that such negotiations were futile and urged more direct action. Both countries, but especially Norway, started a process of establishing rights to the territory through use and exploration. The establishment of the Norwegian telegraph station in Myggbukta in 1922 was a turning point: after this time exploratory activities virtually exploded.

The 15 years before 1922 saw about five research-related expeditions, with a total of five overwintering events. During the 15 years after 1922, about 20 expeditions and nine overwinterings occurred (Mikkelsen 2001).

The number of trapping expeditions increased even more dramatically (Mikkelsen 2001). In 1929, to promote the interests of their respective nations, the Danish Østgrønlandske Fangstkompani Nanok (East Greenland Trapping Company Nanok) and the Norwegian Arktisk Næringsdrift (Arctic Commercial Enterprise) were created. Both companies aimed at exploiting natural resources through activities like trapping in East Greenland. A notable feature of efforts to claim the land during this time was the erection of buildings. In the period between 1908 and 1931, Norwegian trappers put up more than 80 buildings. In 1926, an expedition headed by Hallvard Devold initiated a trapping scheme that utilized extended chains of cabins separated by the space of a day's dog sled travel. These cabins enabled the trappers to tend traps across great expanses of land (Devold 1940). The trappers' diaries and memoirs reveal that they were eager to extend their networks of cabins, which were concrete evidence of their use of the land and would therefore strengthen their claims to it (Giæver 1931; H. Ingstad 1935; Devold 1940).

Protracted negotiations about the sovereignty issue and rights to economic exploitation stalled in 1924 with the Østgrønlandsavtalen (East Greenland Agreement), which was limited in scope and was only a temporary agreement (Mikkelsen 2001). In December 1930, the outline of a Danish three-year expedition scheduled to embark in the summer of 1931 became known (Koch 1955). Gustav Smedal, the nationalistic lawyer introduced earlier in this account, felt that the extent of this expedition would tip the balance in favour of the Danish. Although many options had been explored during the spring and early summer of 1931, it had become clear to Smedal and Adolf Hoel that the Norwegian government would not attempt to annex East Greenland on its own initiative (Smedal 1934). Material documenting

A large number of cabins like this one at Holmbugt was built in the period between the occupation of 1931 and the Hague ruling. This cabin, optimistically flying the Norwegian flag, was built by the *Polarbjørn* crew for Helge Ingstad's 1932–34 expedition.





Helge Ingstad, appointed governor of Erik the Red's Land, in the Davyfjord area of East Greenland, 1933. After the Hague ruling, Ingstad left for Spitsbergen, where he served as regional governor for several years. (Photo: John Giæver, courtesy Norwegian Polar Institute Picture Library.)

how the private occupation actually came about is scanty, with the exception of the rich private diaries of Smedal himself. His main argument for a private occupation was that it would make the Norwegian government see that even the trappers feared that the upcoming Danish three-year expedition would loosen Norway's grip on the territory. Furthermore, a private occupation would be sure to elicit press coverage and if the newspapers leaned in favour of a Norwegian annexation of East Greenland, it would be difficult for the government to forsake the tiny band of trappers on this remote Arctic island. According to his diary, Smedal was virtually alone in the belief that a private occupation would stir the state into action. The events, however, played out as Smedal thought they would. On 10 July, after intense lobbying by Smedal, Hoel and the special interest groups, an unanimous Norwegian government voted to occupy the areas that Devold and his crew had declared Norwegian.

In April 1933, the Permanent Court of International Justice, in the Hague, ruled against Norway, and Denmark's claims to sovereignty over the whole island of Greenland were acknowledged. Helge Ingstad—the lawyer, trapper and explorer who later gained reknown for his discovery (with his archaeologist wife) of the remains of a Viking settlement in Newfoundland (A. S. Ingstad 1975)—overwintered as governor of Erik the Red's Land from 1932 to 1933. In his account of the time spent in East Greenland, Ingstad described the moment at Antartichavn, after a year of trapping and building cabins, when the telegram with the court ruling arrived. His words probably expressed the suppressed feelings shared by most of the trappers, who saw their emotional and economic investment in Erik the Red's Land vanish:

“He [the radio operator], doesn't say anything, just hands me a telegram. It reads: ‘Norway in the Hague court, case lost on all issues.’ Not much is said. But, as if coincidentally, it happens that, one after the other, we get

up quietly and make our way out of the cabin. Around us the country rests, sparkling white under the spring sun. [...] Nansenryggen, Steinrøysdalen and the mount where the first musk ox was shot. Beyond, the promised land rises with mountain upon mountain, all this which we have lived with and assumed was ours.” (H. Ingstad 1935: 134; author’s translation.)

The Norwegian government accepted the international court’s ruling and since then has not in any significant manner challenged Danish sovereignty over the whole of Greenland. If nothing else, the sovereignty conflict between Denmark and Norway served to boost exploration and research in East Greenland, which proceeds at a pace and to an extent that probably would have taken decades to achieve without the economic and nationalistic motivations that fuelled the conflict.

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