

# Nova Dania

## Entries of Jens Munck at Churchill, Manitoba

1619-1620

*“Concerning the birds which are in this region, there came in the course of eight days all kinds, namely all manner of geese, swans, ducks, terns, lapwings from the southlands, swallows, woodcocks, which are a good and precious bird, gulls, falcons, ravens, ptarmigan, eagles.”*



*In search of the Northwest Passage, the Danish ships were forced to overwinter in Hudson Bay. "Munck's Haven" where the two Danish ships landed (contemporary engraving).*

## Philippe Grandjean

**I**N LATE MAY, 1620, WINTER STILL held its iron cold grip on two silent Danish warships. Trapped eight months earlier in the annual freeze-up, the ships and crews had been forced to over-winter in Hudson Bay, Canada. To Jens Munck, expedition leader, seasoned sailor, and experienced arctic explorer, the long, harsh winter at the 59th latitude became a deadly struggle for survival. Commissioned by Christian IV, King of Denmark, to find the legendary Northwest Passage, Captain Munck had set sail a year earlier from the Copenhagen, Denmark harbor. Relying on the best navigational maps of the period, his expert seamen, and prevailing theories, Munck had calculated a relatively short voyage. Furthermore, based on his experience with weather conditions at the 59th latitude in Europe, he did not expect arctic weather in Hudson Bay. Accordingly, the two ships were well-stocked with the supplies necessary for a summer voyage, but no winter clothes. This fatal omission soon made itself painfully felt.

From the icebound ships, the ill-clothed men scoured the snowcovered tundra for frozen cranberries and crowberries, and found enough to provide some essential nutrients, but not enough to prevent scurvy. With his doomed crew, the captain suffered from pains in the joints and muscles, bleeding gums, loss of teeth and extreme exhaustion. Because of the scurvy, frostbite would not heal, and afflicted fingers, toes, ears, and noses constantly ached. During the winter of 1620, starvation, overwhelming cold, and scurvy claimed sixty-two of Munck's sixty-four men.

The notes in Jens Munck's diary were explicably short. Munck was hardly a man of letters, but now he could barely hold the quill. But as he had faithfully done during a lifetime of sailing, the captain laboriously continued to enter daily events in his diary. His entries tell of increasing despair and hopelessness as the icelocked bay and frozen tundra resisted any hint of spring. Then comes the entry of May 22, 1620:

By the Providence of God there came a goose close to the ship, whereof the leg had been shot off three or four days before. This we did seize and cook, whereof we had sustenance for two days. Concerning the birds which are in this region, there came in the course of eight days all kinds, namely all manner of geese,

swans, ducks, terns, lapwings from the southlands, swallows, woodcocks, which are a good and precious bird, gulls, falcons, ravens, ptarmigan, eagles.

Warmed by the unexpected sunshine of the May day, the snow blanketing the tundra and the Danish dead began to melt. Overhead, flocks of migrating birds hurried toward the breeding grounds farther north. Unfamiliar with these North American species, Munck used Scandinavian names to identify the wildlife he saw. Some of his identifications were incorrect, but the combination of current ornithological information and Munck's notes make it possible to piece together a reasonably accurate record of wildlife in Churchill, Manitoba, in the early 17th century. One inaccurate identification was Munck's description of "lapwings from the southlands." The European species, the arrival of which is still regarded today in Denmark as a sign of spring, does not occur in North America. Munck may have applied its name to various species of shorebirds because he lacked the proper names and, perhaps, the skill to differentiate them. Of the twenty-odd species of shorebirds now found at Churchill, only nine occur regularly in Denmark.

He calls another shorebird a "woodcock," but this species breeds no closer than 500 miles farther south today. The old Danish word "snyppe" can, however, also mean snipe, a common visitor at Churchill today. Another candidate is the more abundant Short-billed Dowitcher, a shorebird which could be mistaken for either a woodcock or a snipe by one unversed in ornithological details.

Munck mentions "all kinds of ducks and gulls." In Scandinavia, in Brazil where he lived for several years, and on his numerous long voyages, the Dane must have seen many species of birds. However, the sudden appearance of so many species after the emptiness of winter must have impressed and heartened him. Although Munck did not, and undoubtedly could not, identify the numbers of different species that he saw, the diversity present 366 years ago can still be appreciated.

**B**IRDS OF PREY WERE PROBABLY MORE common in 1620 than today. The Merlin and Peregrine Falcon could have been seen from Munck's ship. Today the Merlin still breeds in Churchill as it probably did in 1620. Bald or Golden eagles may have occurred, but the captain may

have mistaken a Rough-legged Hawk for an eagle.

The ravens mentioned by Munck are common today, as they may have been in the 17th century, but Munck's swallows were probably more numerous then. Munck was undoubtedly watching the Tree Swallow. Today the Tree Swallow is the only swallow that breeds regularly in Churchill, and only in nest boxes. The swallows that Munck saw probably nested in hollow trees that were available before lumbering reached northern Manitoba.

His diary mentions the first "greylag geese" on April 25, 1620, with large numbers arriving two weeks later. These early arrivals must have been Canada Geese, which currently breed in the Churchill area and which usually begin to arrive in late April. From the middle of May, Snow Geese of both color phases start to appear. As his diary indicates, Munck welcomed the geese, not only for the accompanying mild weather, but also for the new fare they provided. After the lean months of salt provisions and hardtack, the one-legged goose must have been quite a feast for the ailing survivors. Visions of roast goose, however, remained only fantasies, for the survivors' loss of teeth and sore gums precluded anything but soup.

Several times during the winter, Munck recorded that his men shot ptarmigan. Two species of ptarmigan are found in Churchill: the Willow Ptarmigan comes to breed in Churchill and the Rock Ptarmigan moves south to over-



19th century illustration.

Munck's men shot ptarmigan during the long bitter winter. Two species are found in Churchill: Rock and Willow ptarmigan.



The "hazel hens," (above) Munck refers to, which are common to Europe, were no doubt the similar Spruce Grouse. 19th century illustration.

winter there. Munck could have seen Willow Ptarmigan in the fall of 1619 and in the spring of 1620, but certainly dined on Rock Ptarmigan during the winter.

The entry of April 21, 1620, evidences the presence of yet another ptarmigan-like species: "On the same day toward evening seized we two hazel hens, which were extremely needful to us . . ." The hazel hen does not occur in North America, but Munck, who grew up in southern Norway, would have known this species. His "hazel hen" was undoubtedly the similar Spruce Grouse, a year-round resident of Churchill.

These few notes are unique. The Danes were the first Europeans to drop anchor at this then unexplored corner of the known world. Later explorers learned that the winter haven of the Danish expedition had been made, by incredible luck and excellent seamanship, in the only natural harbor along the entire west bank of the Hudson Bay. Munck's entries constitute the first written accounts of the birds and mammals from the Churchill area and remained the only records for nearly 200 years. Ornithological information was not collected until the late 18th century, when Samuel Hearne explored the west bank of Hudson Bay.

**I**N 1717, THE HUDSON BAY COMPANY took advantage of the natural harbor at the mouth of the river, called the Rivière Danoise by the French trappers, to found an outpost. The inhabitants of the outpost soon changed the name to the Churchill River in honor of a director of the Company, but the sense of doom and terror which lingered over the bones of the sixty-two Danes who had died so far from home remained hauntingly strong. Jens Munck added several new names to the maps, but none survived for long. Even Munck's name for this newly discovered land, Nova Dania, has crumbled into historical dust. Ironically, this land, once littered with the bodies of Danish seamen, was not even colonized by Scandinavians.

Today a large section of the coastal tundra is preserved as a wildlife management area. Polar bears dig caves in the thawed peat to escape the summer heat, and many females overwinter and give birth there. In autumn, large numbers of polar bears can be seen migrating to this area. Truly, Churchill is the only town in the world where polar bears regularly cause traffic jams.

On September 12, 1619, Jens Munck too, noted a large white bear in the water below the ship "which was eating some Baluge flesh, which was of a fish thus named . . ." The bear was shot, and its fur protected the captain from the sub-zero temperatures. The "Baluge," a beluga whale, had been caught by the crew the previous day. These small, white, toothed whales congregate in Hudson Bay, particularly in the Churchill River estuary, for calving and breeding.

Only a few other mammals are mentioned in the diary. On October 22, 1619, "lay the ice all over, since it was a terribly hard frost, and we seized on the same night a black fox . . ." Later on November 13, 1619, Munck writes, "first night seized we two black foxes and a cross fox, which all were delightful." These animals were probably color variations of the red fox, although this species is not specifically mentioned. On Christmas Eve, 1619, the crew gave presents to the minister: "one part gave white fox hides, so that the minister could line a kirtle . . ." Although the taking of these foxes was not mentioned in earlier entries, the gift indicates that arctic foxes occurred there.

Tracks of a wolf chasing caribou were found on January 27, 1620, but neither species was seen. The expedition had al-

ready enjoyed caribou meat, which they called "reindeer," during their stop-over in the Hudson Strait on August 1, 1619. Several entries mention the shooting of hares by the men. Today both arctic and snowshoe hares occur in the area, but the more extensive forestation during Munck's time makes the latter species more likely.

Not all the mammals mentioned by Munck can be identified. Thus on January 9, 1620: "began the men again seizing some foxes and sables." Munck had likely seen Siberian sable hides in Europe, but the species does not occur in North America. In appearance and distribution, three species of mustelids are possible candidates—fisher, marten and mink.

**T**HE ICE ON THE RIVIÈRE DANOISE broke on June 18, 1620. With remarkable will and excellent seamanship, Munck and the two surviving crewmen managed to navigate one of the ships out of the Bay, through the labyrinth of channels and islands of the Hudson Strait and into the North Atlantic. After successfully battling storms, including two hurricanes, the three men landed their mastless, sea-ravaged boat on the coast of Norway. Unfortunately for Munck, his news of the newly discovered land went unappreciated. The King's wrath for having lost men, a ship, and the royal investment without finding the fabled Northwest Passage fell heavily on the Captain.

The siren lure of the Northwest Passage, undiscovered for three more centuries, continued to pull the adventurous, the greedy, and the foolhardy to a tragic end. Not until 1906, when Norwegian polar explorer Roald Amundsen finished his two-year voyage through the Passage, was the search finally over. Ironically, the long-sought Passage proved almost useless for commercial navigation owing to shallow water and massive icebergs.

More than 350 years after Jens Munck, the ice still breaks on the Rivière Danoise at mid-June. On cue, polar bears and beluga whales appear, thousands of birds crowd the sky, and melting snow gurgles between the crowberries. Perhaps fewer furbearing mammals and birds of prey now greet the sudden arrival of spring. But today's modern facilities, transportation and growing interest in wildlife make Nova Dania a place to go to rather than escape from.

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