

# From explorer to expert: Sir William Martin Conway's 'delightful sense of something accomplished'

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**ABSTRACT.** In 1896, Sir William Martin Conway led an expedition to the Arctic archipelago of Svalbard, then a *terra nullius*. It was the first expedition to cross the interior of the main island, Spitsbergen. Was Conway an 'expert' explorer or an enthusiastic amateur, or something in-between? This article examines Conway's comparisons of Arctic versus Alpine in his expedition narrative, *The first crossing of Spitsbergen*, and his portrayal of expedition members' expertise and shortcomings. Distinctions between Arctic explorers, travellers and tourists at that time are assessed, as is Conway's occasional tendency to highlight the polar aspects of his homeland while perceiving the island of Spitsbergen in a notably English light. Conway's expert status developed with the subsequent publication of journal articles and *No man's land*, the first history of Svalbard. In the latter, his simplicity of style and form, and the pronounced British bias of the main narrative, contrast with the scholarly breadth and focus of the final reference sections, which acted as a catalyst for subsequent international bibliographical and cartographical compilations relating to the region.

## Introduction

*The First Crossing of Spitsbergen. Being an Account of an Inland Journey of Exploration and Survey, with Descriptions of several Mountain Ascents, of Boat Expeditions in Ice Fjord, of a Voyage to North-East-Land, the Seven Islands, down Hinloopen Strait, nearly to Wiches Land, and into most of the Fjords of Spitsbergen, and of an almost complete circumnavigation of the main Island.* Such was the full and exact title of the account of an expedition in 1896 led by British mountaineer and art historian Sir William Martin Conway (1856–1937). The expedition narrative portrays Conway as an explorer contributing geographical knowledge, in contrast with the activities of tourists in the region. Conway's narrative style and self-representation render his exploits accessible to a wide readership, presenting an almost unique figure in Arctic terms, on the boundary between amateur and professional.

Conway's mountaineering career began in 1872 with the ascent of Breithorn in the Alps. He had studied mathematics at Trinity College, Cambridge and this comprised the academic foundation of his appointment as Professor of Art at University College, Liverpool (1884–1887). In 1892 he mapped 2000 square miles of the Karakoram Range in the Himalayas, for which he was knighted. He was editor of *The Alpine Journal* for one volume only (1894–1895) and led his final climbing expedition, in the Bolivian Andes, in 1898. He was Slade Professor of Fine Arts at the University of Cambridge (1901–1904), coinciding with his presidency of the Alpine Club (1902–1904), before becoming inaugural president of the Alpine Ski Club in 1908.

In 1896 and 1897, Conway led expeditions to Svalbard. (Svalbard denotes the entire archipelago in this article, and Spitsbergen denotes its main island.) The Royal Geographical Society (RGS) and the Royal Society (RS) sponsored Conway's exploration of the interior of

Spitsbergen in 1896, the first time an expedition had been mounted for this particular purpose, though Swedish scientist and expedition leader Adolf Erik Nordenskiöld had completed the first crossing of Nordaustlandet, another island in the archipelago, in 1873 (Holland 1994: 289; Kjellman 1875; Leslie 1879; Kish 1973).

Holland (1994) categorized Conway's 1896 expedition as a 'British exploring expedition', with the expedition's achievements listed as 'sketch surveys by Conway of the central area of Spitsbergen between Isfjorden and Agardhbukta and of the shores of Wijdefjorden. Gregory and Garwood made geological collections, and Trevor-Battye conducted zoological studies' (Holland: 394). The following summary of the expedition route (see also Fig. 1) is based on information provided in Holland.

The 1896 expedition members travelled from Bergen to Isfjorden (labelled 'Ice Fiord' in Fig. 1) by tourist steamer, reaching the west coast of Spitsbergen on 18 June. Conway, together with geologists John Walter Gregory and Edmund Johnston Garwood, landed at Adventfjorden (in Isfjorden) and they started out on their inland journey. They travelled up Adventdalen (Advent Valley) and crossed the watershed to Sassendalen (Sassen Valley, see 'Sassen B.'), ascending Sticky Keep (mountain) on the valley's southern side on the way. They met explorer and naturalist Aubyn Bernard Rochfort Trevor-Battye, who arrived by boat and returned to Sassenfjorden soon after. Conway, Gregory and Garwood continued along Sassendalen and crossed to Agardhbukta (Agardh Bay, the innermost bay on the east coast of Spitsbergen, southeast of 'Sassen B.'). This was the first crossing of the island of Spitsbergen. They then returned to Sassenfjorden and made their way around the coast back to Adventfjorden, arriving on 29 July. In the meantime, Trevor-Battye and Conway's cousin H.E. Conway, whose sketches illustrate the expedition narrative, had examined Ekmanfjorden (on the northern

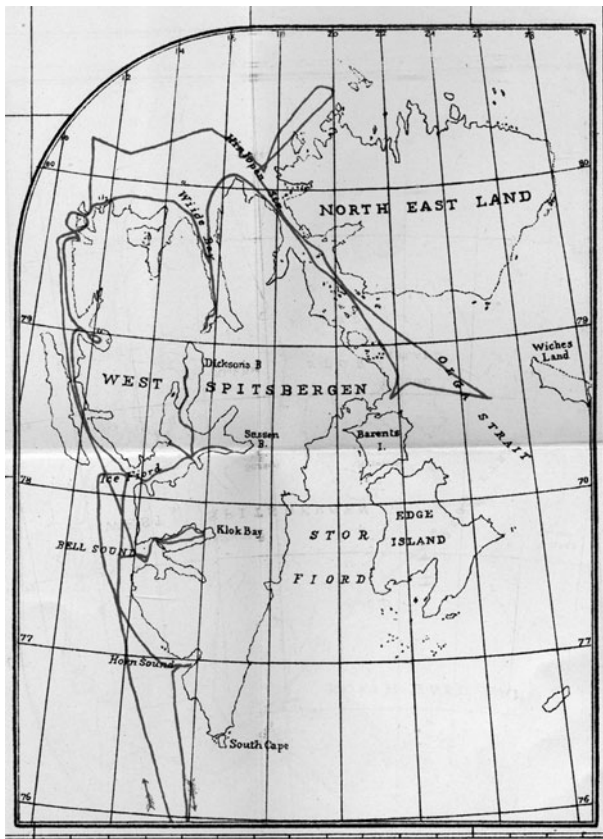


Fig. 1. Sailing routes of the 1896 expedition, inset in the sketch map of part of Spitsbergen. From a survey by Conway in June, July, and August, 1896 (Conway 1897b: opposite 348).

side of 'Ice Fiord') and Dicksonfjorden ('Dickson B') by boat. On 5 August they all left Adventfjorden on *Expres*, a tourist steamer, to visit Andrée's balloon expedition site on Danskøya (Danes Island). The ship continued along the northern coast of Spitsbergen as far east as Sjuøyane (off 'North East Land'), then passed through Hinlopenstretet ('Hinlopen Str. '), where ice at the southern end forced them to turn back. They next examined Widjefjorden ('Wiide Bay') and returned along the west coast of Spitsbergen to Bellsund ('Bell Sound'), where Gregory examined fossils at Kapp Lyell (on its southern side), while the rest of the party visited Akseløya (Aksel Island, en route to 'Klok Bay'). On 12 August they again returned to Adventfjorden from where Garwood and Trevor-Battye sailed south to Hornsund ('Horn Sound') to climb Hornsundtind (1431m). The expedition departed for mainland Norway on about 16 August.

### The first crossing of Spitsbergen

Conway's expedition approached Svalbard on 'this 17th of June 1896 ... the three-hundredth anniversary of the discovery of Spitsbergen by Barendsz [sic]' (Conway 1897b: 40–41). The region was becoming a focus of international media attention, notably as Salomon August Andrée's advertised departure point for his first attempt

to reach the North Pole by hot air balloon, as well as the destination of a geological and topographical expedition led by Baron De Geer. Both were Swedish expeditions, following in the wake of well-regarded Swedish polar research conducted over the previous three and a half decades (Wråkberg 1999). The intensity of human engagement with Svalbard, in political and scientific as well as commercial terms, was at an unprecedented level. (There was also a wider international focus on the Arctic Ocean as a whole at that time: Fridtjof Nansen's *Fram* expedition of 1893–1896 across the ice was still in progress and its successful outcome would coincide with the conclusion of Conway's own expedition.) Conway related his encounters with the daring aviator, the Swedish aristocrat, the Norwegian hero and others, including Wilhelm Bade (pioneering maritime captain), in terms more reminiscent of the social hub of a village than an Arctic wilderness, and almost no details are revealed about these encounters other than to note their occurrence. Conway's own expedition is set in its historical context on several occasions in the narrative with reference to earlier Arctic explorers, and this may be intended to enhance its status by association. Meanwhile, the glue binding together all the 1896 expeditions to Svalbard was their use of and/or association with a burgeoning tourist trade to the main island of Spitsbergen: tourist steamers served as expedition vessels for Conway and De Geer, and special voyages on *Erling Jarl* and *Expres* steamships were chartered to enable tourists, including Conway's expedition party, to visit the site of Andrée's anticipated balloon expedition. Conway's expedition also coincided with the construction of a visitors' hut at Advent Bay by the Vesteraalen Steamship Company, which offered cruises to the region during the summer months. This burst of tourist activity enhanced the status of expeditions to Svalbard, indeed to any Arctic region, as media spectacles. Placing a positive spin on Samuel Johnson's aphorism, Conway had anticipated Svalbard as 'a place worth seeing and even worth going to see' (Conway 1897b: 1), but upon arrival noted that with the increasing influence of tourism upon the region, 'assuredly the vulgarization of Spitsbergen has begun' (Conway 1897b: 70).

### Arctic versus Alpine

In later life, Conway claimed that he was partly inspired to venture north to the Arctic by a paper describing the ascent of a hill on Spitsbergen, which was sent to him as editor of *The Alpine Journal*, and partly by the sight of the frozen Serpentine in Hyde Park in London in 1894:

The sheet of ice was broken up and the sun was penetrating the mist and glittering on the ice. The tender evanescent beauty of the scene took sudden possession of me. Thus, perhaps, on a grander scale might arctic visions fashion themselves. At that moment the fates decided for me the two expeditions carried out in 1896 and 1897 (Conway 1920: 192).

Conway's encounter with the exotic thus took place before the expedition members had even left London. Undergoing this experience before actually reaching the Arctic was standard practice in almost all travel narratives of this genre (Jones 2004: 40). The Arctic perspective of Conway's voyage was then re-inaugurated by a ceremonial crossing of the Arctic Circle, when 'all came on deck to "dilate with the right emotion"' (Conway 1897b: 27). A more genuine 'dilation' occurred upon reaching Lofoten, when 'the Arctic fever seized me at that moment and thrilled through every fibre' (Conway 1897b: 30).

Not every aspect of the Arctic was so pleasing. Like Walter J. Clutterbuck in *The skipper in Arctic seas*, (Clutterbuck 1890), Conway noted the two-dimensional aspect of Spitsbergen scenery, for which he provided the following explanation: 'the sun shone straight on to the hills, so that there were no shadows to define and diversify their forms. Even the Temple looked flat and mean under such illumination' (Conway 1897b: 209). Comparisons between the Alps and the Arctic region did not always redound in the latter's favour: 'We arrived in camp thoroughly fatigued. . . . Purer air can scarcely be found. Though pure, however, it was certainly relaxing, and made life laborious. It possessed none of the stimulus of alpine breezes' (Conway 1897b: 221). Visually, however, the Arctic held its own: 'such pure snows no Alpine height presents, nor such pale-blue skies, nor that marvellous, remote, opalescent sea with its white flocks and its yet more distant shore' (Conway 1897b: 175). An unnamed expedition member nonetheless established his own order of priorities between Arctic and Alpine, expressing relief that they were 'on a *pukka* glacier at last, with rivulets on its surface, crevasses, moulins, and the whole Alpine bag of tricks' (Conway 1897b: 176).

### Expertise and shortcomings

Conway alluded frequently to the expertise of his fellow expedition members, simultaneously validating the expedition's overall scientific worth. J.W. Gregory worked at the time in the geological department of the Natural History Museum, obtaining leave to travel in Europe, the West Indies, North America and East Africa, as well as to Svalbard. (He was appointed to the foundation Chair of Geology at the University of Melbourne in 1900 and in the same year was briefly appointed Director of the civilian scientific staff of the British National Antarctic Expedition of 1901–1904, but resigned on learning that he would be outranked by the expedition's commander, Robert Falcon Scott.) Aubyn Trevor-Battye's first exploring/sport hunting expedition to the island of Kolguyev in the Barents Sea had taken place two years previously, and he travelled there again in 1904 (Stone 1986).

In highlighting expedition shortcomings, particularly his own, Conway trod a fine line between writing a factual account of a serious expedition and writing in the style of a humorous travel narrative, a genre popularized by classics such as *Three in Norway – by two*



Fig. 2. On the way to Sassen Bay (Conway 1897b: opposite 103).

*of them* (1882) and Jerome K. Jerome's *Three men in a boat* (1889). The novelist Cutcliffe Hyne, whose travels in the north coincided with Conway's first expedition to Spitsbergen, adopted the same narrative approach in *Through Arctic Lapland* (Hyne 1898, cited in Stone 2004). The style also echoes that of *Letters from high latitudes* (Blackwood 1857), the expedition narrative of the Marquis of Dufferin and Ava, the first 'gentleman traveller' to Svalbard in 1856: their narratives illustrate the potential for a light-hearted approach in Arctic literature.

Conway's self-portrayal as an enthusiastic amateur often pinpoints the expertise of the others: his own geological limitations, for example, where 'in this also experts had the best of it. I smashed away, and found only bad specimens, whilst rare treasures leapt forth to their lightest taps' (Conway 1897b: 108). He occasionally portrayed himself as a figure of fun to lighten the narrative, and Conway and Gregory adopted the British naval phrase 'it ain't Arctic' to condemn their own errors of judgment: going out into the field without a rifle or provisions, or walking unroped on a glacier (Conway 1897b: 208, 211). Shortcomings extended to Conway's own area of scientific responsibility, though here the comments were less self-critical:

'I suppose,' said Trevor-Battye to me, 'the plane-table work is very easy.' As a matter of fact it is often very difficult, but nowhere more so than in Spitsbergen, where it is heart-breaking. . . . [E]stimates have often to take the place of observations, unless you can afford to wait upon the weather, as an explorer never can. The inaccuracies introduced one day can seldom be corrected on another, and thus perplexities multiply. . . . ultimately what you get for your pains is a survey in which any fool can detect errors and manifest them as proofs of your incapacity (Conway 1897b: 71–72).

The cartographer B.V. Darbishire, who had been due to join the expedition, had to withdraw because of sudden





Fig. 3. The summit of Fox Peak (Conway 1897b: opposite 85).

illness, leaving Conway responsible for making sketch surveys. The latter's amateur frankness regarding the limitations of surveying in Svalbard calls into question the presumed infallibility of other surveyors of the region, who perpetuated inaccuracies that in some cases have still not been resolved: the Norwegian Polar Institute's website currently warns that in outlying areas of Svalbard, 'the accuracy of the old [cartographical] data may deviate by several hundred metres in relation to the terrain and in places may be significantly outdated' (Norwegian Polar Institute 2013).

The portrayal of a lack of expertise was followed by a depiction of surveying as a rewarding activity, perhaps intending to imply that Conway was proficient at it after all:

It is delightful to behold the blank paper slowly covered with the semblance, however vague, of a portion of the earth's surface before unmapped. . . . Each mile traversed explains the mile that went before. . . . Every march solves a problem and leaves in the heart of the surveyor a delightful sense of something accomplished (Conway 1897b: 72; see Fig. 3).

Conway's topographical activity, inspiring his 'delightful sense of something accomplished', highlights a distinction between the explorer and the tourist: measuring the world (even if not entirely accurately), rather than passive observation. His overall interest in science seems to have been limited, though he was careful to acknowledge its importance. It provided distraction – a 'search for birds, flowers and stones enlivened the otherwise dreary way to the mouth of the Russian Valley' (Conway 1897b: 54) – and lightened the mood on several occasions: '[Gregory] was actively employed measuring the details of four hundred specimens of a bone from the head of cod-fish. He said the pastime was excellent' (Conway 1897b: 34).

### Explorers, travellers, tourists

With first-hand experience of the Arctic, Conway would have been aware of the relative status of individuals travelling in the region at that time: the explorer, extending the frontiers of geographical knowledge, usually in receipt of public/private funding; the gentleman traveller of semi-independent means and/or timetable, able to determine his own itinerary and mode of travel; and the tourist tied to a fixed route and timetable. Exploration can be segregated from travel and tourism by the key distinction of seeking out the new, rather than what is known to be agreeable, or spectacular, or noteworthy.

In his essay on communication between literary scholars and critics, Rosengren (1990) distinguishes between academic, essayistic and journalistic criticism, carried out by scholars, 'semischolars' and journalists who 'cooperate and compete with and between themselves' in books and scholarly journals, in magazines, and in newspapers (Rosengren 1990: 107–108). This threefold status differentiation compares in some respects with that of explorers, travellers and tourists in the field of Svalbard travel. However, Rosengren's initial classification subsequently breaks down into a series of overlapping dichotomies: 'scholarly and semipopular communication within the literary field', 'scholars and journalists', 'essayists and academics' (Rosengren 1990: 111, 116, 119).

Attempting to define Conway's status, his 'expertise', according to the three Svalbard-related categories, or indeed within Rosengren's classification, tends to result in a similar overlapping of terms. Funded by the RGS and the RS (as mentioned above), Conway was pushing back the frontiers of geographical knowledge yet he consistently defined surveying as an art, rather than a science. His subsequent historical research was published in *The Geographical Journal* and as a book that attracted international attention. 'Semischolar' may define Conway with reference to his easygoing account of the first crossing of Spitsbergen, but the corresponding in-between term of 'gentleman traveller' does not match Conway's self-portrayal in his expedition narrative, so that his Arctic prowess teeters between the role of 'explorer' (in his own eyes) and that of 'tourist' (as sometimes perceived by others).

Arlov's *Svalbards historie* (2003), for example, incorporates a text box just under half a page in size entitled 'The first hiking tourists?' (Arlov 2003: 210). Arlov refers to Conway's 1896 'visit' and 'walking tours on Spitsbergen', but no mention is made of the expedition's exploration or surveying achievements, nor of Conway's academic standing (although Gregory's scientific credentials are acknowledged). Conway's status is downgraded even further by specifying Garwood as the 'well-known mountaineer': not only is the (British) public recognition of Conway's mountaineering achievements ignored, but both he and Garwood are sidelined towards the category of 'sportsmen'. The expedition is designated first and

foremost a 'lysttur' (excursion, or pleasure trip: compatible, of course, with the style and content of much of Conway's narrative). Arlov's depiction systematically blocks his reader's perception of this venture as an expedition, despite Conway's first crossing of Spitsbergen, thus negating the latter's status as an explorer. Arlov nonetheless endorses Conway's status as a Svalbard historian, paraphrasing and citing *No man's land* on several occasions (Arlov 2003: 64, 67, 115, 153, 162, 164, 189, 296).

Conway's descriptions of tourist antics provide humour in the narrative, but also serve to establish a clear distinction between 'them and us' (Conway 1897b: 64–65). P.J. Capelotti's recent article, entitled 'Extreme archaeological sites and their tourism' (2012), cites Conway's 'them and us' comments in his narrative regarding the (undesirable) civilizing effect of a tourist hotel being built in Adventfjorden in 1896 and the arrival of shiploads of tourists, as well ridiculing their frustrations as aspiring hunters with nothing to shoot at during the few hours they spent ashore (Capelotti 2012: 242–243, 245). Tourists visiting a Svalbard archaeological site nearly a hundred years later, in 1993, are presented in a similarly disparaging light: 'many tourists gathered along the shoreline to share champagne and peanuts, and one part of Wellman's hydrogen-generating apparatus was in reuse as a garbage bin' (Capelotti 2012: 248). These descriptions are reminiscent of the 'vulgarization' cited by Conway, and Capelotti's own status is unambiguously on the right side of the line dividing 'them'/tourists and 'us'/Arctic archaeologists.

On Conway's part, however, first impressions of mainland Arctic terrain in an early part of the narrative represent a transgression of this borderline. Upon reaching Svolveær in Northern Norway, "[w]hat a place," we all cried, "for a summer holiday!" (Conway 1897b: 30). Such an aside, illustrating Conway's very British sense of humour, probably fell flat with many of his international readers. Scandinavian expedition narratives of that time, for example, did not engage with their readers in the down-to-earth frank tones of Conway describing the eventual crossing of Spitsbergen:

We spent in all three hours and a half on the east shore of Spitsbergen. It was long enough. ... For the exhilaration of doubt and expectation was substituted the solid satisfaction of success, a more enduring but a less exciting emotion, and one by no means inconsistent with such substantial comforts as a hot meal and a warm camp (Conway 1897b: 182).

This experience is reminiscent of the (then) common tourist experience of travelling all the way to Spitsbergen to spend just five hours in Advent Bay before turning round and heading back to Norway, and in the final chapter, 'Spitsbergen as a summer resort', the tourist borderline is blurred still further. Conway asserted that the ongoing future significance of scientific/geographical

knowledge of the region as a whole rested not only on individual achievement (for example that of Conway himself) but also on the collective weight of cumulative interest and the informed awareness of the public at large. This positions tourism as a driver for science, providing a definitive endorsement of tourism in the region and another comparison with the Alps:

No one will assert that the minute knowledge we now possess of the great Alpine range [in Switzerland] would have been attained if the playground of Europe had been located elsewhere. ... a public has been provided to take an interest in Alpine science, which but for them would scarcely have come into being. The same thing will happen to Spitsbergen if summer travellers can be persuaded to frequent it (Conway 1897b: 342–343)

Contemporaneous Svalbard actors may have been disconcerted by the ambiguity of Conway's attitude, torn between distaste for the spread of tourism in the Arctic and endorsing its practicality and usefulness to the trained academic mind: 'a chance for competent men to enjoy holidays of an active, health-giving, and novel sort, and at the same time to perform good and fruitful service to science' (Conway 1897b: 349).

#### Spitsbergen de-Arcticized – and England as a polar region

Conway's narrative references the British imperial experience with the inclusion of quotations from Gregory's African diary: he "spent a pleasant afternoon catching lizards and scorpions, and digging up skulls". I feared Spitsbergen might seem dull, if that was his idea of bliss' (Conway 1897b: 34). With the sound of tourists' shooting practice, the Arctic is momentarily transformed into Africa: 'Gregory, half asleep, leaped up. He thought it was the Masai coming to loot his camp (Conway 1897b: 61). Conway's earlier discoveries are brought to mind: 'so many plants that I had found by the glaciers and amongst the crags of the Karakoram-Himalaya ... maintaining themselves as happily in the heart of the Arctic regions as on the backbone of Asia' (Conway 1897b: 126). These references to Africa and Asia may reflect colonial views generally prevalent in British travel writing at that time, but the reader's anticipation of the author staking a British claim to this *terra nullius* is undercut in Chapter 1 by Conway's recommendation that the Norwegians, who would not claim their independence from Sweden for another decade, should be given the responsibility of regulating the region (Conway 1897b: 5). Despite his lack of interest in the region in territorial terms at that time (though he endorsed British claims to sovereignty of the region two decades later), and the fact that the first commercial mining of coal in the region would not take place for another year or two, Conway nonetheless perceived Svalbard's potential for development, with a primary emphasis on mapping and

surveying the terrain, rather than its potential colonial or entrepreneurial exploitation.

Conway's narrative exemplifies a more typically British/colonial view of the Arctic in the comparison between the island of Spitsbergen and England. There is a continuing complaint about the quality of the air, which 'is not stimulating. It resembles that of a moist English spring, when the ground is clammy beneath a dripping sky' (Conway 1897b: 192). In a more complimentary vein, good weather in early July is compared to 'an English May day' (Conway 1897b: 122). These comparisons with Africa, Asia and England contribute to a 'de-Arcticizing' of Spitsbergen. The verb 'to Arcticize' was coined by Elisha Kent Kane (1856: 261) and is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as 'to make arctic; to accustom to arctic conditions' ('arcticize' entry, *Oxford English Dictionary* 2004).

The island is further de-Arcticized by the attribution of informal place-names to expedition stopping-points: Sticky Keep (see expedition route) and Darbshire's Ham, denoting a dry spot in front of Elfenbeinbreen and named after the lunch menu (the ham accompanied the expedition, even though Darbshire himself was left behind), both still used to this day; and Black Ooze Camp, a place-name that has sunk without trace (Norwegian Polar Institute 2003: 418, 94). Another Arcticization is achieved by a striking comparison between England and Spitsbergen, and between England and the continent:

In future I shall always think of England as belonging in a climatic sense to the polar regions. The Arctic Circle ought to be drawn through the Straits of Dover. The contrast between London and Paris weather is the contrast between the Arctic and temperate regions. ... Our green lawns are but more refined Spitsbergen bogs. One has to come to these islands of the north to understand not merely the geological history, but the present atmospheric conditions of the British Isles (Conway 1897b: 214).

The frozen Serpentine in London, described earlier, and even the River Thames freezing for the first time in several decades in 1893 and again in 1895–1896, may have influenced the planning of the 1896 expedition; such a blurring of distinction between Arctic and non-Arctic may illustrate the author's innately (perhaps subconsciously) colonial view of the region; and from an international perspective, such sentiments may well have reinforced the perceived limitations of Conway's 1896 expedition. Mathisen (1954) alluded to a British territorial claim in 1919 and consequent national media responses that appeared to 'de-Arcticize' the whole region, going further than Conway's landscape portrayal: 'The strategic considerations mentioned in the press seemed somewhat untenable. It was even stated that Great Britain ought to develop Svalbard as an Arctic Gibraltar, and the highly unfavorable climatic conditions were almost ignored' (Mathisen: 106). The 'Arctic Gibraltar'

reference was also picked up by Østreng (1974), credited to botanist R.N. Rudmose Brown (member of Scottish scientific expeditions to Svalbard and consultant to the Scottish Spitsbergen Syndicate) in 1912 (Østreng 1974: 65, endnote 7). In the years following *The first crossing of Spitsbergen*, Conway's literary de-Arcticization of Spitsbergen was thus succeeded by the projection of more baldly-expressed British imperialistic views of Svalbard.

### Conway's second expedition

Conway and Garwood returned to Svalbard in 1897, arriving on the tourist steamer *Lofoten* and using this ship and the small tourist steamer *Kvik* to travel along the coast of Spitsbergen. They surveyed two unexplored areas of the island's interior: to the northeast of Billefjorden (one of the three fjord branches at the innermost part of 'Ice Fiord', Fig. 1, between Dicksonfjorden and Sassenfjorden) and in the vicinity of Kongsfjorden (on the west coast of Spitsbergen, about 79°N). From Kongsfjorden they returned south to climb Hornsundtind before rejoining *Lofoten* on 21 August to return to mainland Norway. Scientific results included sketch surveys by Conway and Garwood made geological collections (Holland 1994: 401). Conway's second expedition narrative, *With ski & sledge over Arctic glaciers*, was published in 1898, but he regarded it as no more than an appendix to *The first crossing of Spitsbergen* and it does not fall within the scope of this article.

### The first crossing of Spitsbergen reviews

Reviews of Conway's 1896 expedition account published in German and Swedish national geographical journals (surprisingly, it was not reviewed in *The Geographical Journal*) illustrate two contrasting ways in which Conway's presentation of events was received. One review appeared in the *Litteratur-Bericht* (literature report) section of the German geographical journal *Dr. A. Petermanns Mitteilungen aus Justus Perthes' geographischer Anstalt* (Wegener 1898: 144), written by Georg Wegener, a German geographer who had travelled to Svalbard in 1896 to see the preparations for Andrée's (unsuccessful) balloon expedition and met Conway. Wegener described Conway as a 'brilliant mountaineer', praising his sharp observations in the services of geographical research. Much of the review described Conway's associates and the expedition's route and objectives, as well as the topographical record of the entire middle belt of west Spitsbergen (Conway's 'delightful accomplishment'), defined by Wegener as the main achievement of the expedition. He praised the quality of the book itself and its appearance and illustrations, and its 'excellent humour and warm love of what it describes'. An appreciation of the inventory of Svalbard place-names in *The first crossing of Spitsbergen* concluded Wegener's half-page review. This entirely positive recommendation in an internationally-respected geographical journal, praising both the geographical significance of the author's





Fig. 4. Stuck in a snow-bog (Conway 1897b: opposite 109).

exploration and the warmth of Conway's description of the region, conflates science and tourism in a manner reminiscent of the work under review.

An earlier review of the book, published in November 1897, was less complimentary. It appeared in *Ymer* (Nathorst 1897: 249–252), the quarterly journal of The Swedish Society for Anthropology and Geography, and was written by Alfred Gabriel Nathorst, a Swedish geologist who had been leading expeditions to Svalbard since 1870. Nathorst's review assessed both the book and Conway's article of the same name (published in *The Geographical Journal* in April 1897). The book was recommended for those with plenty of time on their hands, while those seeking scientific content were advised to focus on the journal article's 'more concentrated presentation of the journey and its results'. Nathorst politely skewered Conway's false assumption that the interior of Spitsbergen would comprise the same snow and ice conditions as terrain further north, pointing out that the inland journey took 36 days, 'but could have been accomplished in a third of that time, if one understood the need to wait until the snow had melted' and noting that Gerard De Geer walked 15 kilometres (one-third) of the route in the course of a single day during a geological expedition led jointly with Nathorst in 1882 (Nathorst 1897: 250) (Fig. 4). Nathorst pointed out that Conway's botanical observations revealed nothing new to the expert, but conceded the worth of their comparison with plants growing in the Karakoram Himalaya, and of one individual having witnessed their growth in both locations for the first time (Nathorst 1897: 251). He was exasperated by Conway's continual reference to 'fossils' without further definition, claiming that 'in geological terms one learns nothing new'. He also criticized Gregory's findings on glacial erosion as being 'diametrically opposed to De Geer's observations' and declared that Garwood's interpretations of glaciers and comparisons with glacial phenomena in England 'seem doubtful in many respects' (Nathorst 1897: 251).

Nathorst hailed the expedition's most significant achievement to be the map of the area around Adventdalen and Sassendalen 'provided it is reliable' and concluded his review by focusing on 'the nomenclature of Spitsbergen' and Conway's 'close knowledge' of the oldest maps of the region, 'without question in scientific terms the most valuable of the entire work' (Nathorst 1897: 252). Whatever his opinion of Conway's expedition and narrative, Nathorst took the time and energy, and nearly four pages of the journal (of which he was editor at the time), to deconstruct them for his Swedish readers.

#### Conway's acquisition of expertise

After the second expedition in 1897, Conway began to compile information for *No man's land*, the first history of Svalbard, eventually published in 1906 (republished facsimiles of the original edition have been available in the UK, Norway and the USA in recent years). As an art historian, Conway had a particular interest in Dutch art, woodcuts and engravings of the early modern period and this clearly enhanced his interest in the early European history of Svalbard, made known to the world by Barentsz' 1596 northeast passage expedition, and the ensuing Dutch cartography of and whaling in the region. Conway's informally acquired knowledge of Dutch stood him in good stead in researching the region's history and sharpened his awareness of Dutch-influenced place-names in the region, relating these to the archipelago's history and establishing his status as an expert in this field. Conway's overall linguistic proficiency enabled him to glean information from historical texts written in English, French, German, Italian and Latin, and (with more limited success) Norwegian and Swedish.

Conway wrote introductory articles in *The Geographical Journal* about 'Hudson's voyage to Spitsbergen in 1607' (Conway 1900a), 'Some unpublished Spitsbergen MSS' (Conway 1900b), 'Joris Carolus, discoverer of Edge Island. A forgotten Arctic explorer' (Conway 1901), 'How Spitsbergen was discovered' (Conway 1903a) and 'The cartography of Spitsbergen' (Conway 1903b). They were reprinted with additions and corrections in the main text of *No man's land*, comprising 'the more strictly historical parts of this book' (Conway 1906: ix).

In *No man's land. A history of Spitsbergen from its discovery in 1596 to the beginning of the scientific exploration of the country* (1906), Conway's narration largely comprises a chronology of events presented in an accessible and enthusiastic style reminiscent of *The first crossing of Spitsbergen*. There is far greater emphasis on sixteenth and seventeenth-century activity in the region than on events thereafter. The first fifteen chapters cover European (primarily Dutch and English) whaling in the region up to the 1640s. Two further chapters cover the decline of English whaling (*circa* 1643–1657) and whalers' adventures during the latter part of the seventeenth century. This leaves just four chapters (just under

a third of the book) to relate events of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A chapter on Russian northeast passage expeditions assesses Arctic expeditions and the national characteristics they portray, ‘according to the special industries or occupations of the sending countries or societies’:

The Russian expedition had to some extent the characteristics of a White Sea trappers’ journey. The English expedition of Phipps was a kind of glorified whaling voyage under naval auspices, with the whale-hunting left out. The Swedish expeditions of the 19th century resembled the voyages of Scandinavian summer-season hunters in their sloops. Dr. Nansen’s arctic journeys were conditioned by the use of ski and were based on the ski-running sports of the Norwegian wintertide. My own explorations of the interior of Spitsbergen were the outcome of Alpine climbing and were in the nature of mountain and glacier explorations (Conway 1906: 263).

These limited Arctic stereotypes were probably not to the taste of most of the nationalities mentioned and may have reinforced a general lack of admiration for Conway as an Arctic explorer, given that his innate preference for altitude over latitude was evident even in this attempt to align the status of his 1896 and 1897 expeditions with other nations’ Arctic activity. It has the effect of de-Arcticizing Spitsbergen (yet again), portraying Conway’s exploration of the region in overall international/imperial rather than specifically polar terms.

The final chapter, ‘National expeditions to Spitsbergen’, did not help matters: its overwhelming British bias focused on Phipps’ 1773 North Polar expedition, *The probability of reaching the North Pole discussed* by the Hon. Daines Barrington (Barrington 1775), *An account of the Arctic regions* by W. Scoresby (Scoresby 1820), and British naval North Polar expeditions led by Buchan and Franklin in 1818 and by Parry in 1827. In a literary flourish guaranteed to flatter the Norwegians and enrage the Swedes (*No man’s land* was published the year after Norwegian independence, following the dissolution of the union between Norway and Sweden), Britain is portrayed metaphorically ‘handing over the baton’ at the conclusion of Parry’s expedition: ‘Just as the *Hecla* was losing sight of Spitsbergen the modest sloop conveying the Norwegian geologist Keilhau was nearing South Cape ... [he] deserves his little niche of fame in the temple of scientific honour. It was ten years before another Scandinavian followed Keilhau’s example’ (Conway 1906: 298–299). The 1837 expedition undertaken by Swedish scientist Sven Lovén is then referenced on the penultimate page of the book, only for his compatriots’ subsequent endeavours to be dismissed: ‘[w]ith these Swedish expeditions we are not here concerned. They belong to the later branch of our subject which lies beyond the scope of the present volume’ (Conway 1906: 299). Thus, almost all subsequent Svalbard activity is

relegated to a four-page ‘List of the principal voyages to Spitsbergen, recorded from 1847 to 1900’ (Conway 1906: 301–304).

The end section includes the above-mentioned chronology of principal voyages, plus a ‘Bibliography of the history and geography of Spitsbergen’, ‘The cartography of Spitsbergen’, a ‘Chronological list of maps of Spitsbergen’ and a ‘History of Spitsbergen nomenclature before the nineteenth century’ (Conway 1906: 305–368). These were all published in much smaller print than the main narrative and ‘were at one time intended to be published by the [Royal Geographical] Society as an extra publication’ (Conway 1906: ix). This reference section demonstrates the thoroughness of Conway’s research and restores, at least to some degree, a comprehensive impartiality to the whole volume that is missing from the main narrative.

*No man’s land* was ‘dedicated to Sir Clements R. Markham, K.C.B. President of the Royal Geographical Society 1893–1905, whose suggestion inspired and whose encouragement helped the journeys and researches upon which it is based’ (Conway 1906: dedication). There is nothing in the RGS archives or Conway’s private diaries to explain why the extra publication, referred to above, failed to materialize during Markham’s presidency, which ended a year before *No man’s land* was published, and this creates a sense of the book being both associated with the RGS and yet not endorsed by the society, at least regarding the publication of detailed historical information, and the broad scope of information this offered the reader. Perhaps the bibliography, cartography and nomenclature were too impartial, too international for the society’s taste. The comprehensive spread of languages and countries of publication over three centuries and the range of topics covered in the content of the books and articles listed in the bibliography seem rather to contradict the narrower focus of Conway’s main narrative: it is even possible that Conway himself might have preferred this information to have been published separately, instead of being tacked on to the end of the book.

The citation in the bibliography of 33 Swedish scientific texts published between 1862 and 1905 (almost 10% of the total bibliography: a generous quantity for a non-Swedish publication) illustrates this last point. Their inclusion is at odds with Conway’s decision not to focus on modern scientific expeditions to the region that took place from 1837 onwards. The omission of almost all Swedish scientific activity from the main narrative could not have failed to have seemed strategic to the Swedish scientists of that time, and to historians of a later date. Wråkberg (1999) credits Conway’s ‘thorough history of Spitsbergen exploration, *No man’s land*’, whilst noting that this ‘halted – *not without reason* – in the mid-nineteenth century, when Swedish-language literature began to dominate the subject’ (Wråkberg 1999: 118, my italics). The equivocal phrasing of Wråkberg’s original Swedish text posits both the neutral view that it was *not*



*unreasonable* for Conway's history of Svalbard to have ended where it did and the rather more critical view that Conway *had his own reasons* (strategic, possibly nationalistic) for stopping at that precise point and therefore not incorporating most of the Swedish scientific expeditions. This echoes Østreng's description of *No man's land* as 'a clear example of conscious repression of historical facts' that have 'political consequences' (Østreng 1974: 66). Wråkberg cites letters from Conway to Nathorst clarifying the extent, but also the limitations, of Conway's language skills:

...I don't know a word of Swedish... Dutch one can make out (between German and English) but the Scandinavian tongues fairly beat me. ... I shall ultimately read all the Swedish reports of travel, when I know for certain that their contents are not to be found in some other language. ... The rest which are in German I have of course read, and I have read all the old literature in Dutch, German, English, and French (Wråkberg 1999: 118, citing Conway letters to Nathorst dated 6 January 1897 and 28 October 1897).

The bibliographical, cartographical and nomenclatural information published in *No man's land*, not to mention the historical bias of its main narrative, clearly acted as an impetus for subsequent publications by Nathorst, J.M. Hulth and De Geer. Published under the overall title of 'Swedish explorations in Spitzbergen 1758–1908', they celebrated the 150th anniversary of the earliest Swedish scientific venture to Spitsbergen and the 50th anniversary of modern Swedish scientific exploration in the region. The three authors compiled, respectively, a historical sketch, a bibliography and a list of cartographical publications. The compilation was published in *Ymer* in April 1909 (Nathorst 1909; Hulth 1909; De Geer 1909), and this was the first time that the journal had ever published on any topic in English, rather than in Swedish. Much of the material was more or less a duplication of Nathorst's earlier, far less strategic presentation of 'Swedish work on Spitsbergen', published in *Nordisk tidskrift för vetenskap, konst och industri* in Swedish (Nathorst 1906). The 87 page *Ymer* compilation offered comprehensive information about Swedish scientific activity in the region and in its layout closely resembled the end section of *No man's land*.

Scholars from other nations were equally stimulated. The preface of a Russian bibliography of historical and literary texts relating to Svalbard, compiled by A.F. Shidlovskiy and published in 1912, opens with the observation that '[o]ver the past ten years, foreign scientific literature has been enriched by a whole number of bibliographical works concerning the Northern Arctic countries, and the Spitsbergen archipelago has been especially lucky in this respect' (Shidlovskiy 1912: i). This was followed by a bibliography of Norwegian texts about Svalbard scientific activity (Hoel 1919) and an account of *The Dutch discovery and mapping of*

*Spitsbergen* (Wieder 1919). Conway's research was thus the catalyst for literary territorialism relating to Svalbard, which manifested itself in the aftermath of the Great War as what Singh has dubbed the 'Spitsbergen literature lobby' (Singh 1980: 94).

Conway was appointed first Director-General of the Imperial War Museum in 1917 (a post he held until his death in 1937); in 1918 he became the Member of Parliament for the Combined English Universities; in 1931 he was raised to the peerage as Baron Conway of Allington. The start of his political career more or less coincided with his involvement in lobbying (unsuccessfully) for British sovereignty of Svalbard. His efforts were of some international significance at the time. Mathisen called him 'the most tireless advocate of an active British policy [regarding Svalbard sovereignty]' (Mathisen 1954: 105) – but the issue does not fall within the scope of this article.

### Conclusion

The boundaries of this article also preclude any discussion of the conflicting perceptions of Conway's expertise as a mountaineer, which are hinted at in Blakeney's history of *The Alpine Journal* (Blakeney 1974: 172–173), of peer responses to Conway's research in the field of art history or his innovations in the sphere of museology, and of views of his achievements as a politician, all of which deepen the ambiguity of this talented and complex individual, a subject of focus here for the first time in this journal.

Conway's initially ambiguous status as an explorer in the Svalbard region was defined on the one hand by his self-presentation in his expedition narratives and on the other hand by his academic standing (though as a Professor of Art History, not as a scientist). The articles he wrote for *The Geographical Journal* and his book *No man's land*, the first published history of the region, elevated his status to that of an expert on Svalbard. Latter-day perceptions of Conway as explorer, narrator, historian and Svalbard expert differ, often along similar lines to Conway's varied self-presentation in his 1896 expedition narrative. Given the choice between Arctic and Alpine, the expedition members would often rather have been in the Alps; the expedition members' expertise and Conway's shortcomings do not portray the narrator in a particularly good light; the co-existence of explorers, travellers and tourists in the region heightens the ambiguity of Conway's status; comparisons between the island of Spitsbergen and England may have served to reinforce international perceptions of the expedition's limitations; and the two reviews of the expedition narrative published in European national geographical journals were divided between the work's positive and negative aspects. However, Conway's subsequent authority as a compiler of the region's history is at least tacitly acknowledged by all those who cite Conway's expertise. The scope of the main narrative of *No man's land* is impressive,

despite its evident national bias, though Conway's status as a Svalbard authority relies largely on an originally unforeseen chain of events that led to the chronology, bibliography, cartography and nomenclature reference sections being included as appendices (though not titled as such) to the main text.

Was Conway a bumbling amateur, or the embodiment of Renaissance man, or a bit of each? Did he perhaps focus more on motive than result, as proof of his serious status? Conway's exploratory and scholarly achievements have been subsequently built on, even superseded, but his pioneer status as the first to cross Spitsbergen and compile comprehensive historical information about Svalbard is indisputable. He presented and embodied an ambiguity and subjectivity towards the Arctic that some found unsettling, and subjective perceptions of the man himself persist to this day.

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