

*Commemorating*  
*Roald*  
*Amundsen's*  
NORTHWEST PASSAGE

by  
David F. Pelly

*Inuit and Norwegians Share Connections  
at Gjoa Haven Celebration*



Grey clouds hang low in the September sky over a tiny sheltered harbour at the southeast corner of King William Island, in the heart of Canada's central Arctic. A stiff northwest wind, while it only ruffles the water's surface in the harbour, reminds everyone of winter's impending arrival. The sun breaks through for brief moments to reflect the sentiments of the many residents of the small hamlet of Gjoa Haven, and the visiting dignitaries, who gather on this chilly autumn day to celebrate the anniversary of Roald Amundsen's arrival here on a similar day 100 years earlier. Premier Paul Okalik turns up the collar of his leather jacket against the biting wind. The ambassador from Norway basks in the warm hospitality shown to him and his wife during their five-day stay in Gjoa Haven. "According to Amundsen's account, they were also received by the Inuit in a very friendly way," says Ingvard Havnen. "That very much coincides with what we have experienced."

Roald Amundsen, a national hero in Norway, was the first to successfully navigate the full length of the Northwest Passage on board the 72-foot sloop *Gjoa*. In 1903, he set sail from Norway, determined, as Amundsen himself put it, "to combine the dream of my boyhood as to the Northwest Passage with an aim, in itself of far greater scientific importance, that of locating the present situation of the Magnetic North Pole." It was, as it turned out, an extraordinary journey involving unprecedented interaction with Inuit during two winters spent in the harbour Amundsen named "Gjøahavn" after his ship.

After Amundsen left Norway in June, with his crew of six, they crossed the North Atlantic, stopped on the west coast of Greenland to re-supply and to purchase



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some sled dogs, traversed Baffin Bay, encountered solid pack ice and, on August 20, entered Lancaster Sound to begin the Northwest Passage. The first part of their voyage, Amundsen declared, "resembled a holiday excursion." The rest, he was certain, would not be so easy. Two days later, the expedition stopped at Beechey Island, where John Franklin and his men found their last safe refuge six decades before, over the winter of 1845-46. It was from here, "on holy ground" as Amundsen put it, paying homage to his predecessors, that Franklin "passed into darkness – and death." With this somber reminder, the *Gjoa* pushed on, following the needle of her compass, bound for the magnetic north pole which lay somewhere to the southwest. As the men sailed into the vaguely charted waters of Peel Sound down the west side of Somerset Island, Amundsen felt confident not only that they had slipped through the worst ice of the Passage, but also that he was nearing his objective of finding the magnetic pole.

"Our voyage now assumed a new character. Hitherto we had been sailing in safe and known waters, where many others had preceded us. Now we were making our way through waters never sailed in, save, possibly, by a couple of vessels, and were hoping to reach still farther where no keel had ever ploughed. We were very sanguine."

On September 12, 1903, sensing the onset of winter, Amundsen guided his small ship into a tiny harbour near the southeastern extremity of King William Island. "The harbour itself was all that could be

ABOVE: Gjoa Haven on the day of the 100th anniversary celebrations in September 2003.

BELOW: A bronze bust of Roald Amundsen.



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desired,” he wrote. “The narrow entrance would prevent the intrusion of large masses of ice, and the inner basin was so small that no wind could trouble us there from whatever quarter it blew.” The men set about preparing for winter, moving supplies ashore into a storehouse, building “Variation House” in which to take their magnetic readings during the year ahead, and another small house they called “Magnet” in which two of the crew would live. By early October

**RIGHT:**  
Inuit from the  
region visiting  
on *Gjoa*'s deck.



Frozen in the ice,  
Amundsen and crew  
celebrate Christmas  
aboard the *Gjoa*.



awful” and made them cough. But strangest of all was the food and drink they were offered. “They were given a cup of tea and a biscuit,” as Keanik recalls her grandfather’s account. “Tutanuaq thought to himself, now, what are they giving us to eat. He did not know that the biscuit came along with the tea. The biscuit was square. Although the tea and biscuit were offered to them, they did not have it right away. When it was indicated, Tutanuaq decided that he would have the soup, which he

thought was a broth from a wild animal. Before he took a drink from the broth, the *qallunaaq* put some white stuff into the liquid. It tasted very bad when he took the first sip. He only took one sip. All three Inuit men took a sip. After that, they indicated to the *qallunaaq* in the boat that they wanted to leave, without ever touching the biscuit that was offered to them.”

Thus began an interaction that was to grow over the next two years. Some Inuit spent considerable lengths of time camped in close proximity to the ship. They traded meat and caribou clothing for useful items, metal in particular. Amundsen visited their camps, often staying overnight. The Inuit taught the *qallunaaq* a great deal about survival and travel in Arctic conditions, skills which unquestionably contributed to Amundsen’s success some years later on his quest to reach the South Pole. As the Norwegian ambassador, Ingvard Havnen, commented during the recent celebration of these exchanges, they “established friendly relations ... some would say even more than friendly.” Indeed, there are a few people in Gjoa Haven today who are proud to declare that they are Roald Amundsen’s grandchildren.

the ship was frozen in place and Amundsen records that they “were ready to stand the winter on-board.” One day in early November, by Amundsen’s account, they saw five Inuit hunters approaching the ship. Fearful of “these Arctic barbarians,” Amundsen and two of his men armed themselves and marched out across the sea ice “to meet the enemy” head on. It did not take long, however, to realize that the curious Inuit posed no threat, as they shouted friendly greetings, and soon the two groups of strangers were embracing. On the ship, the visitors were shown below and offered coffee and biscuits, which Amundsen records, “did not appear to be particularly to their taste.”

Inuit oral history in Gjoa Haven today offers a slightly different rendering of the first encounter. Martha Keanik was born in approximately 1915. Her grandfather, Ayarajuq Ivayarra Nakashook, was among the curious group of hunters – he said there were three – who were the first to approach the *Gjoa* frozen in the ice, having noticed from a distance some days before that “there was a long pole in the middle of the ice.”

As Nakashook reportedly told the story to his granddaughter, “when they entered the boat, the smell was so strong, it smelled awful.” They were offered a pipe of tobacco, which they had never before seen, and were amazed to see the *qallunaaq* (white man) make “a small fire to light the pipe with only a slight motion of his hand.” Smoking was a new experience for the Inuit men, who found that it “tasted



**ABOVE:** Martha Keanik  
is the granddaughter  
of Nakashook, one of  
the men in the first  
group of Inuit to visit  
the *Gjoa* in 1903.

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**BELOW:**  
Paul Iqalluq:  
"My father was the son  
of Amundsen ... I'm one  
of the proudest people  
in Gjoa Haven."

*By early October the ship was frozen in place and Amundsen records that they "were ready to stand the winter on board."*

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**TOP RIGHT:**  
A calm, natural  
harbour, Gjøahavn,  
as it was in 1903.



**ABOVE:**  
Ayarajuq Ivayarra  
Nakashook was one  
of three Inuit who  
first approached  
the ice-beset *Gjoa*.

**RIGHT:**  
The ambassador from  
Norway, Ingvard Havnen,  
with his wife Elisabeth,  
meet Nunavut Premier  
Paul Okalik at the  
Gjoa Haven airport.



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If nothing else, this reflects the community's enthusiasm today for its lasting association with Amundsen's expedition 100 years ago. The event in September of this year was much more than the unveiling of a plaque. It was a community celebrating its own past, and fostering optimism for its future. There was storytelling and singing, dancing and feasting. One of the elders, Annie Arqviq, speaking at the official ceremony, commented that she would like "all people to work together like this for the benefit of future generations in Gjoa Haven." The spirit of her remarks was not lost on anyone present. Least of all on the Norwegian ambassador, who said later: "This has been an unforgettable experience. Both my wife and myself have been totally overwhelmed by the reception we have received up here, by the hospitality, by the willingness to share." The knowledge willingly shared by Inuit 100 years ago, according to the ambassador, had a major impact on Amundsen's

The Northwest Passage has not changed – it was never easy, as so many early explorers discovered.

Amundsen and his men spent two winters at Gjøahavn. Apart from learning Inuit ways, with 19 months of daily observations, they amassed a wealth of data on the magnetic north pole. Their principal scientific objectives were to gain an understanding of the magnetic effect's extent – what sized area did the pole itself cover? – and to assess whether it was a fixed

or moving phenomenon. They determined that the location could be pinpointed and that it had moved 60 kilometres from the approximate position charted by James Clark Ross in 1831. The science complete, the expedition was ready to move on.

In August 1905, the *Gjoa* headed west, found its way through the shoals of Simpson Strait, despite fog, and became the first ship to negotiate this final link in the Northwest Passage. The laurel was not theirs to wear yet, however. The next winter trapped them again, this time somewhat west of the Mackenzie

expeditions, but the spirit of co-operation goes deeper. "There are many, many connections between Norway and the Canadian North." Those connections, he suggests, offer opportunities to "work together like this for the benefit of future generations," as Annie Arqviq put it, on contemporary issues of Aboriginal rights, sovereignty, the environment and climate change.

Gjoa Haven's ceremony in September this year was originally planned to coincide with the arrival of a modern Norwegian vessel on a voyage to commemorate Amundsen's. Just as the *Gjoa* had done, the *Jotun Arctic* intended to over-winter in the tiny harbour. Everything went as planned until skipper Knut Solberg wanted to leave Resolute Bay and head south toward King William Island. His way was blocked by heavy pack ice. "The Coast Guard thinks it's too risky, even if they send in an ice breaker," he said, and turned his vessel around to head back to Greenland.

River. The crowning moment came in the summer of 1906, when Amundsen sailed his ship around the top of Alaska, to become the first skipper to successfully navigate the entire Northwest Passage. **AB**

*Regular contributor David F. Pelly was in Gjoa Haven for the celebrations, assisting with the production of television documentaries about the Northwest Passage.*

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*Archival photos taken from, The North West Passage, by Roald Amundsen, (1908) courtesy of the Vancouver Maritime Museum.*