

## Jens Munk (1579-1628)

On the 4th of June 1620 Jens Munk must have surveyed a dismal scene surrounding him in Munk's Harbour, a place now more familiar as Churchill. On that day he penned his last will and testament, giving little thought to any idea of ever getting back to Denmark, which, after the grim winter on this forbidden coast, must have seemed far away indeed. A decade earlier, Henry Hudson's mutinous crew had set him adrift in the same bay that now trapped Munk, a bay that received more than Hudson's name. To Munk, this must have seemed his own final voyage as well.

Munk's life can best be described as a long series of determined but frustrating efforts to gain recognition and a legitimate place in the ranks of the Danish nobility. Born on 3 June 1579 in southern Norway, Jens Munk and his brother Niels were sons of the Danish nobleman Erik Munk and Anna Bartholomæidatter. If it were not enough that Erik's family tree was already somewhat tainted, the fact that he and Anna were not officially married assured the children much misery and endless frustration, particularly Jens. In the Age of the Reformation, such behaviour was not easily forgiven, and illegitimacy was a cause for shame and ridicule for the two boys.

As a child, Jens Munk spent much of his time near the docks watching the excitement of ships arriving from distant lands. Not surprisingly, he went to sea at the age of 13. In 1609, he set sail with his partner Jens Hvid for the ice-filled Barents Sea in search of fox and bear. The trip was a disaster, ending in the wreck of the ship and the near loss of all the men; however, the voyage proved Munk's capacity to survive severe arctic conditions and to conquer seemingly impossible odds.

In 1618 the Danish King Christian IV ordered Munk to ready a major expedition to embark for East India via Cape Horn. Tirelessly, Munk organized the ships, the men, the provisions, and the thousand details involved in such an undertaking. To his astonishment, however, the command was not to be his; it fell to a man of suitable nobility, Ove Giedde. Munk's setback was compounded by the deaths of his brother Niels and good friend Jørgen Daas. The future was bleak, but Munk was not easily discouraged. He approached the king with a plan to launch another expedition to the far east, this one to proceed through the assumed northwest passage. Perhaps somewhat guilty of his treatment of Munk, the king assented. Munk chose 61 men and two vessels, one the heavy mothership the *Unicorn* (*Enhjoringen*) and the other the light reconnaissance vessel the *Lamprey* (*Lampren*).

The ships were towed out of the harbour in a dead calm on Sunday, 9 May 1619. Soon after they were under way, a bizarre suicide by one of the crew cast a shadow over the voyage. Another death followed shortly. Then they were detained in Norway to repair the leaking *Lamprey*. Not until the end of May did they depart from Norway with three new men. They crossed the Atlantic and entered Frobisher Bay by mis-

take, and when they finally found their way into Hudson Strait, they accidentally sailed deep into Ungava Bay before they got back on the true course. By the time they reached Hudson Bay on September 4th, signs of scurvy were already present in the men.

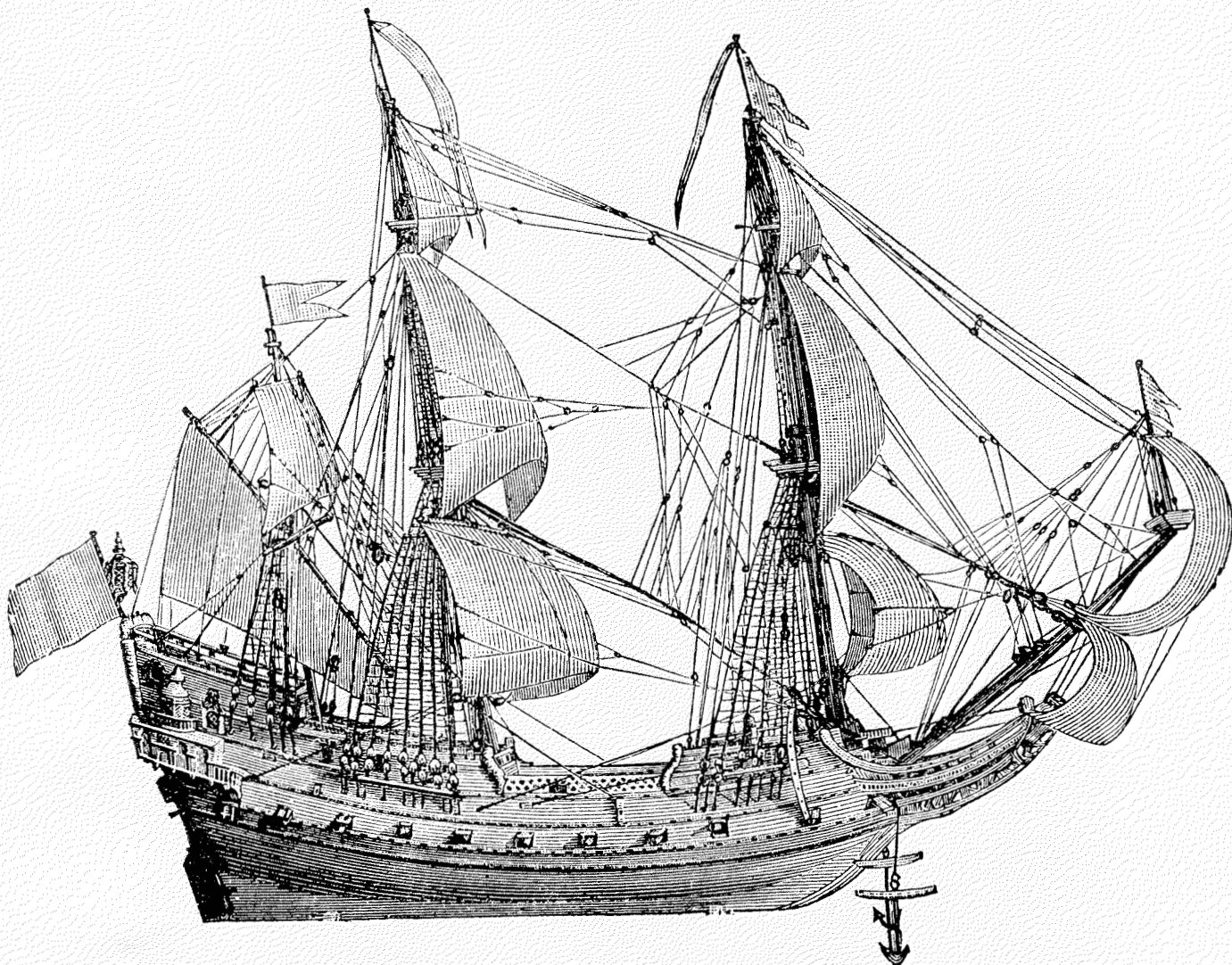
A savage storm forced Munk to make a spectacular entry with the *Unicorn* into a protected bay on the west coast at the site of present-day Churchill. The *Lamprey* soon followed, and the place was named Nova Dania. A wintering was clearly in store for the expedition, and little time was wasted in getting the ships to safe locations. The sheltered bay was a broad river mouth with extensive tidal flats. The *Lamprey* was hauled out of tidal reach and the *Unicorn* secured and used as winter quarters for both crews. Aware of the dangers of scurvy, Munk encouraged his men to eat berries and roots as long as possible, and the ravages of the dread disease were postponed for a while. Nevertheless, on the 21st of November one man died of scurvy, and another followed soon after.

Christmas was made as festive as possible, and for a few days the reality of the harsh and increasingly cold environment was held at bay. Yet for all but three of the crew, this was to be their last Christmas. With the arrival of the new year — 1620 — death began to stalk the ship regularly. One by one the men were buried on a nearby hill, but when May arrived no one had the strength to carry the dead off the ship. Only seven men were alive when Jens Munk sat down to write his last will and testament, and a few days later he and the ship's dog were the only living members on board. From the deck he was much surprised to see two crew members on shore and still alive; they had been unable to return to the ship several weeks earlier. Together, the three men began the slow road to recovery as spring prepared the land for summer.

In order to escape, a formidable task awaited them. The *Lamprey* provided the only hope for a return voyage, and it had to be hauled into the sea and rigged for a crew of 3 instead of 16. On July 16 Munk began another, perhaps the greatest, epic journey. One can only imagine the next 67 days in ice-infested and storm-swept seas, across Hudson Bay, through the Strait, round the southern tip of Greenland, and forever eastward. The master mariner got the ship through it all, and on the 20th of September he spotted the distant mountains on the west coast of Norway.

No hero's welcome awaited Jens Munk. One of his men was involved in a tavern brawl, and as the captain responsible for his men, Munk was jailed; the revenge of the nobility was never far away. Apparently, the king was in no hurry to see Munk released, but he finally ordered his release after three months' imprisonment.

The king was not finished with Munk, however, and ordered him to prepare for a second expedition to Nova Dania, this time to colonize the region. The plan came to naught when no volunteers could be found, and Munk was undoubtedly re-



Munk's mothership, the *Unicorn*, would have been similar to the heavy three-masted vessel illustrated here. (From *Jens Munk* by Thorkild Hansen.)

lieved. The expansionist king was not doing well, battles were being lost, and at the battle and defeat at Kiel in the spring of 1628, Jens Munk seems to have been wounded. He returned to Copenhagen, where his new young wife cared for him until his death a few months later.

Jens Munk had lived a remarkable life. In Canada, however, only one small island in Fox Basin bears his name. Munk himself never saw Jens Munk Island, but members of the Danish Fifth Thule Expedition thought it appropriate to leave one small reminder of his brief presence in this part of the world that had become — not Nova Dania — but Canada.

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