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Seven Hours, a Rubber Dinghy, and a Shipwreck: The Search for *Nova Zembla*

by Matt Ayre

STOOD ON WHAT IS POSSIBLY THE MOST REMOTE beach on the stark and mountainous east coast of Baffin Island, I was surrounded by the 117-year-old wreckage of the *Nova Zembla*, the first historical British whaling shipwreck to be identified in the Canadian High Arctic. On reflection, even among the mass of splintered timbers and twisted iron, it was hard to believe this shoestring endeavour to locate the wreck had actually succeeded.

Eighteen months earlier I was dutifully engaged in my postdoctoral research, hunting for clues about the Arctic's past climate in extant logbooks from Britain's Arctic whaling trade. A subset of these documents had formed the key source for my doctoral work, and now convinced of their value I had set out to find all that survived. During the transcription of one such logbook, that of the *Diana* on its 1902 voyage from Dundee, Scotland, to Baffin Bay, I came across an entry that was unknowingly about to catapult me from the familiar lignin-scented silence of those dusty archives and into the very world I had come to know so vividly through centuries old oil-stained prose. The logbook entry stated, "One of the *Nova Zembla*'s boats came alongside and reported to us that the *Nova Zembla* was ashore a little to the southward, and that water was up to the 'tween decks."

Nova Zembla, a veteran whaler of nearly thirty years had been lost, wrecked somewhere high in the Canadian Arctic. Like *Diana* and the other handful of whalers that were still attempting to eke out a living in the death throes of this once industrious trade, *Nova Zembla* hailed from Dundee, the last bastion of Britain's once dominant Arctic fleet. By the turn of the 20th century, dwindling stocks and technological advancement had rendered the enterprise that lit and lubricated the march of the Industrial Revolution into irrelevance. The Bowhead whale, the prized quarry that saw thousands of ships pit oak against ice, had been hunted to near extinction. Only the Dundee ships were left, picking off scraps until the Great War finally called time on nearly 400 years of Arctic oil.

In reality, this account of *Nova Zembla*'s loss was no different to the tens of previous wreck accounts I have read in those staccato glimpses into that bygone era; indeed, over 200 British whalers went down while in search of the fabled black fish. *Nova Zembla*'s loss was at most a footnote in my quest for observations on wind, precipitation, and crucially, ice. I moved on from the *Diana*'s 1902 logbook, to a diary from its 1903 voyage next on the docket for investigation. Here the crew visit the wreck of *Nova Zembla*, noting the ship lay on a rocky bottom and that they were able to salvage a rudder. My interest was piqued, the wreck was clearly in shallow water, yet an afternoon's procrastination could uncover no records it had been found. With romantic images of the discovery of *HMS Erebus* and *HMS Terror* playing in my mind I began to wonder if *Nova Zembla* was still there? Could it be found? Could I find it? At the time I could not imagine this flight of fancy might actually materialise into something, but curiosity got the better of me and I delved into this rabbit hole of history.

Built in 1873 in Bremerhaven, Germany, *Nova Zembla* was a purpose built 140 ft barque-rigged steam whaler. Sailing from Hamburg in 1874, Captain Hashagen rescued the crew of the *Tay*, a Dundee whaler that had been crushed by ice in the notoriously dangerous Melville Bay of Northwest Greenland. The owner of the *Tay*, W.O. Taylor, purchased *Nova Zembla* almost on site, and the ship sailed from Dundee, Scotland, from 1875 onwards. John James Cooney had just assumed captaincy of the *Nova Zembla* during that fateful voyage of 1902, but he first appears in the records in 1893 as the bosun, his previous ship listed as the famous *Terra Nova*. He climbs the ranks to mate by 1896 and finally captain in 1902, losing the ship he knew so well just six months into his inaugural command.

Cooney's bad luck was not to end there; the following year he took command of the *Vega*, *Nova Zembla*'s sister ship that had already achieved fame in the world of polar exploration, being the first vessel to successfully transit the Northeast Passage under a Swedish expedition lead by Baron Nordenskiöld in 1878–80. Cooney lost *Vega* the same year, crushed like so many before in the treacherous ice of Melville Bay. This portion of the voyage was considered such a danger that when ships sighted the Devil's Thumb, a distinctive landmark on the west coast of Greenland that marks the start of this arduous passage, the crew were ordered to move their effects and supplies on deck as ships had been known to be crushed by ice without a moment's notice.

Two for two is quite a remarkable, if unfortunate, claim to fame, and it is no wonder it was said bad luck sailed with

him. Nevertheless, experienced Arctic seamen like Cooney were a dying breed and he was given commanded of yet another famed ship of polar exploration—the *Windward*. *Windward* found fame as a supply ship for the 1894 – 97 Jackson-Harmsworth expedition to Franz Josef Land, serendipitously encountering Nansen when he was nearing the end of his *Fram* expedition, during which he proved the trans-polar drift theory. Following this first encounter with Arctic fame, *Windward* went on to become the ship that would house Robert Peary during his first North Pole expedition before eventually returning to Scotland and it's whaling roots in 1904. Cooney's luck held under *Windward* during his initial voyage, but the notion bad luck sailed with Cooney again rang true in 1907. After successfully navigating the perils of Melville Bay, *Windward* ran a reef off the north west coast of Greenland, leaving Cooney and his crew to make the 450 km voyage to Pond Inlet (Mittimatalik) in their open-topped whaling boats.

It is a wonder anyone agreed to sail with the seemingly cursed captain, but to his credit no man was lost as a direct result of these wrecks, and he continued to be involved in the trade until his death in 1912. Cooney's exploits, as with any news pertaining to Dundee's Arctic whalers, were a hot topic at the time, and journalists were eager to publish accounts of the perils these hardy men faced at the icy edges of the known world. A quick search of the British Library's online newspaper archive was all it took to uncover the news stories regarding *Nova Zembla*'s loss, with first-hand accounts from some of the 42 crew, all of whom survived and were brought home by fellow whaleships *Diana* and *Eclipse*.

Nova Zembla had been forced to run for shelter during an intense and blinding snowstorm. His years of experience evident, Cooney bore up for a well-known and secure harbour. At 10:20 pm on 18 September 1902, the crew were startled by the sudden lurch of the ship and the painful sound of splintering timbers. *Nova Zembla* was aground a mile south of the harbour entrance and 300 yards from shore. Immediately ordering the anchors dropped to reduce weight gave no saviour, the storm had *Nova Zembla* firmly in its teeth. The masts were the first go, followed by engines being thrust up through the deck; all hope was lost, *Nova Zembla* was a total wreck. By the following morning, the crew had managed to launch some of their six whaling boats and make it to shore, with those left onboard the deteriorating hull witnessing their shipmates running up and down the beach to stay warm. A party was sent to pull the two-hour hard row around the rocky peninsula into the harbour to seek assistance from other ships that might have been sheltering the storm, there finding *Diana* and *Eclipse* safely at anchor. Safety secured, and following the tradition noted by eminent whaling historian Basil Lubbock as an old and stupid custom, *Nova Zembla* was set alight and abandoned.

This wealth of clues contained in the newspaper records was impressive, and pinning down *Nova Zembla*'s potential resting place became somewhat of a hobby. By this point I was working with a colleague, underwater archaeologist, Dr. Michael Moloney, who shared my growing enthusiasm for this historical mystery. With a chart of the region laid out, we began to piece together the clues I found in *Diana's* logbooks and in the local newspaper interviews. After correcting for the considerable amount of magnetic variation (nearly 90 degrees!), the logbook entries began to make a lot more sense, and we soon had our fix, fairly certain we had narrowed down *Nova Zembla*'s final resting place. Naturally, the first thing we did was look up the spot on Google Earth. It was in shallow water, you never know, we could get lucky! An approximately 140 ft long anomaly sitting at a northwest heading present 300 yards off a beach left us a little stunned. Was it that easy?

It now appeared this piece of historical procrastination might actually yield something, and a high-resolution satellite imaged was obtained. That promising ship-shaped blip promptly disappeared, our hopes dashed by what was likely a conveniently grounded iceberg. Our constant discussions had not gone unnoticed, and another colleague, Dr. Ravi Sankar, offered to run some analyses on the satellite image. Another anomaly emerged a little farther from our earlier pin-pointed spot; the crew writing in the logbook could be forgiven for slipping up on the odd detail given their situation. Furthermore, what appeared be a sediment plume could be seen extending out on the lee side, a known hallmark of shallow water wrecks.

We now had a strong case and received support from the Arctic Institute of North America and the Royal Canadian Geographical Society to turn those first frivolous fantasies into reality and head north in search of *Nova Zembla*. A few brief discussions with friends in Nunavut had not corroborated any of our evidence, but the area was so remote it was apparently rarely visited during the summer open water season. This was no big budget endeavour, and we could not stretch to charter a boat, plane, or helicopter that could deliver us to our destination. We managed to convince the operator of a cruise ship, that intended to pass the area, to stop at our determined location, kindly agreeing to grant us a short seven-hour search window to find the proverbial needle in this remote and briny haystack.

A whirlwind five months from first reading that initial account in *Diana's* logbook, we were on a plane heading north, poised to transit the Northwest Passage and down into Baffin Bay where our adopted whaleship hopefully lay in waiting. The pace at which this trip came together did much to gloss over the known realities of working in the Arctic where weather and ice are king! We crashed back to reality with a 72-hour delay and a 600 km detour, finally boarding our commandeered cruise ship in the hamlet of Kugaaruk. As we made our way up the Gulf of Boothia most onboard thought of Franklin, but I was finally seeing for myself the seascape I had only imagined through the copperplate musings of forgotten sailors.

It was a joy to first arrive in a new and unfamiliar place and be greeted by friends. With only a few short hours in Pond Inlet, we headed to the most northerly of Canadian institutions—Tim Hortons to catch up and speculate on the

excitement ahead. As I mulled over the coffee to sugar ratio of the drink I'd been handed, I was co-opted into a game of duck-duck-goose by my friend's youngest daughter. A welcome distraction from my growing anxiety that I was expected to find a shipwreck tomorrow, in a place I'd never visited, from a handful of clues that recently celebrated their 116-year anniversary.

The engines began to slow at 4 am, the swell was heavy and the wind strong, in contrast to the previous five days of uncharacteristically calm, clear weather. We surfed the swell towards the GPS fix identified in the high-resolution satellite imagery, half joking on how easy this would all be. Our hopes were soon dashed in that first hour of this improbable search; the anomaly we were so sure of manifested itself as a collection of boulders just below the surface. We had to be in the right place though, the historical evidence was so strong. Being there, the accounts of the crew all fit; we could see the boulder strewn reef, the beach a mile south of the natural harbour, and the rocky promontory that protected its entrance. This was the right place, *Nova Zembla* was here somewhere.

Almost six hours of running grids over the reef with our fishfinder-come-shipwreck discovering sonar in an exposed Zodiac had left me near hypothermic and dejected, nothing had jumped out as being remotely ship-shaped. Our time was nearly up when I noticed something that looked suspiciously like wood on the beach. Driftwood in this part of the Arctic is rare, and warmed with anticipation, we quickly launched our small drone. Immediately it was clear we had been looking in the wrong place.

Spread across the surface of this fine, yellow-sanded beach were pieces of mast with iron fittings and planking with trunnels and paint flaking off. We saw a yard arm, a block and tackle, and immense rib timbers with iron rivets (some with evidence of burning). It was clearly wreckage from a sizeable, historical, sailing ship on the exact beach *Nova Zembla*'s stricken crew had run up and down in order to stay warm. As we had expected the wreckage to be underwater, we did not have permission to land on the beach, not that this would have been possible with the size of waves crashing onto the exposed jumble of boulders. Our drone's battery was suffering with the exposure, and our flight time had been reduced to four minutes, proving just enough time to capture a few fleeting photographs as evidence we were at least on the right track.

Just as our seven hours was up and we were being called back to the cruise ship, we managed to grab a few moments to launch the remotely operated vehicle we had been outfitted with by Deeptrekker. Estimating ourselves 300 yards offshore from where we had seen the wreckage, we piloted around, scanning the sea floor in the hope we had just initially missed a hull resting among the boulders. On reviewing the footage, we saw no skeletal outline of a hull but caught a glimpse of an anchor and chain lying on the seafloor.

Nova Zembla consumed my thoughts for the next twelve months, and almost a year to the day we returned north to Pond Inlet with the goal of returning to that once coveted harbour Captain Cooney ran short of 117 years earlier. We boarded the Government of Nunavut's fisheries research vessel *Nuliajuk*, a stout little 65 ft converted crab trawler with just enough space to house our expanded team of five. Captain Bob and his three crew, all Newfoundland crab fisherman, were the epitome of Canadian friendliness and hospitality as we made the 20-hour transit down to site.

I couldn't feel the swell or hear the howling winds that the forecast had so eagerly promised. Then again, I was consumed with nausea, concealed inside my bunk in the forecastle—a lightless box of body odour, diesel fumes, and stagnant sea water—so my senses were not to be trusted. I extricated myself from my bunk and climbed up to the bridge, welcomed by clear skies and flat calm seas. The weather could not have been better, and we wasted no time in getting set up to go ashore.

The five of us, plus gear and Des, our helmsman, managed to make our way onboard the Zodiac and headed toward the shore. Initially we did a couple of passes up and down the length of the beach to survey for bears, a real risk in this part of the world, but thankfully none were immediately apparent on the sand. We started to head in to land but the reef was tricky to navigate even in the calm; it is no wonder once grounded here, *Nova Zembla* was doomed.

Even before we had brought all the gear up to a suitable basecamp, it was immediately evident that last year we had only sighted a small portion of what lay across these sands. We had landed at the western tip of the beach, 2 km from where we had conducted our brief drone flight, yet there were pieces of wreckage here, in fact there was wreckage everywhere we looked. We hadn't even begun to inspect what lay before us but I was already speechless. Large rib timbers abounded, but it was the first sighting of small intricately detailed pieces that excited me further. A panel with ornate floral carvings sat on the surface of the sand, and while the paint was curling off it, the fine details remained despite being exposed to over a century of the worst the Arctic conditions could muster. I didn't know it then, but I was staring at the once golden face of *Nova Zembla*, this being the section of bow where you might find the figurehead. This was later confirmed from a 1884 painting of the ship I tracked down on our return.

I zig-zagged my way between old and new tide lines up onto the fringes of the encroaching tundra trying to capture, in notes and photographs, as much as I could. I came across some thinner planking, this was clinker-built like the fishing cobles familiar to me from my formative years in the northeast of England. I realised this was the smaller wreck of the first whaling boat *Nova Zembla* had initially tried to launch when it had first hit the reef. It still had remnants of paint attached, but unlike the carving, the colours were clear; this whaling boat had a yellow and green stripe along it. I had read that the teams that crewed these boats often decorated them, but with few paintings and only sepia photographs, it was left to the imagination

as to how these whaling boats may have looked. Judging by those painted boards and a scrolling carved motif sticking out of the sand nearby, the teams took great pride in their whale boat's appearance.

As I moved closer to the spot where I had taken the drone photos in 2018 the density of wreckage seemed to increase. Sections of mast appeared with the yard arms that sat perpendicular to them to hold the sails. It was interesting to note that both these had been cut, and judging by the weathering to the exposed timber, they had been cut a long time ago, likely at the time of the wreck. The historical accounts point to the masts falling off in the maelstrom, but with the rigging, lines, and sails still attached all around the hull, the waves would have quickly filled the sails, and if not cut free, could have ripped the hull apart. It would have been a mad dash to liberate them as soon as possible in case there was any hope of saving the hull, a potential lifeline if *Diana* and *Eclipse* had not been around the corner.

The entire 4 km beach was awash with wreckage, including a 60 ft section of hull poking out of the sand almost immediately inshore of where we found the anchor in 2018. We spent two days photographing as much as we could and completing an orthogrammatic survey of the whole beach, stunned at the level of preservation and sheer volume of material before us. We were never naïve enough to think we were the first to discover this site, a fact abruptly apparent by the graffiti from 2014 carved into one the larger timbers. But to attach it to the historical accounts and identify it as *Nova Zembla* felt like a step toward furthering the industrial history of the Canadian Arctic.

A short 48 hours later as we sail into the forecasted storm, not even the 15 ft swell can dull my feeling of elation and disbelief. It was a mere handful of newspapers, potentially having once adorned a Dundonian fish supper, that lead me to Nova Zembla's final resting place.

Returning from 2019's discoveries and in the midst of planning an ambitious archaeological investigation of the wreck for summer 2020, I go back to my logbook climate research. During the transcribing of an 1899 diary, when in the harbour that would allude Cooney and the *Nova Zembla* three years later, I read; "… examined the wreck of the *Eagle*, you can see her engines plainly under the water."

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