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## History Peter Freuchen's beard

Was Denmark's most recognisable polar explorer a liar or just a good storyteller? Both, perhaps, and definitely a lot more



August 18, 2016 - 5:32am - By Iben Bjørnsson

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At the Arktisk Institut/The Danish Arctic Institute we have an old black-and-white photograph. A small one, in a little black wooden frame. On the back, it says: "Greenland. Back-up Jesus, 1910-1913. Thule".

And indeed, one of the men in the picture looks like what most of us probably imagine Jesus looked like: shoulder-length hair and an inscrutable expression. The man in the picture is, in fact, Peter Freuchen. Another man, slightly behind him and to the right has his hands on Freuchen's shoulders. His features are both Greenlandic and Danish. The man is Jens Fleischer, Knud Rasmussen's uncle.

But this picture isn't all we've got. Our archives can boast a far more unusual artefact: a little white box trimmed with gold containing a grizzled, red-brownish beard. On the back of the box it says: "Grandfather's beard, from the days of exile."

"Grandfather", in this case, is Freuchen, and the grandchild was Navarana, who was named after her grandmother.

**VI INTERNATIONAL FORUM  
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*Jesus of Thule (Photo: Arktisk Institut)*

How does one earn the bizarre privilege of having one's beard neatly stored in a little box in a Copenhagen attic? Somehow, Freuchen's history and personality makes it all less bizarre.

Author and journalist Janni Andreassen is a Freuchen biographer and has described him this way: "He really created the connection between northern Greenland and Denmark. He was a very socially involved person, which showed in his way of dealing with – and looking at – life in general. He was, first and foremost, very intelligent and he was brilliant at telling stories. He was accused of being unreliable and lying through his teeth and whatnot, but being a brilliant storyteller doesn't necessarily make you a liar."

Jes Stein Pedersen is a literature editor at Danish daily *Politiken*, which Freuchen also worked for as a correspondent for most of his life. Mr Pedersen has been fascinated with Freuchen since learning about him as a child, and he has written about him many times – and not just because of their common workplace.

He explains the reason for his fascination: "It seems like he could do everything. He was a stoker, polar explorer, cartographer, zoologist, filmmaker, trade manager, journalist, author. He was even, at one point, the leader of the Danish Professional Boxing Federation! Furthermore, he was able to speak to anybody and everybody. There was something about him both humble and grandiose that people responded to."

Peter Freuchen was born in 1886, into a family of merchants. And despite not taking school all that seriously – and ending with the marks to prove it – he still went on to study medicine at the University of Copenhagen in 1904, just 18 years old.



*The beard attached to its rightful owner, 1932 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)*

By the end of 1904, the *Danish Literary Expedition* to Greenland that had departed two years earlier returned to Copenhagen. Freuchen was captivated by the accounts and by the Arctic that he read about in books. And now he heard that the leader of the expedition, Ludvig Mylius-Erichsen was planning another one, the *Danmark Expedition*. So he biked across town, to the home of Mylius-Erichsen, knocked on the door and asked to come along. Mylius-Erichsen said yes, and, with that, Freuchen's fate was sealed.

During the expedition, Freuchen did a little of everything: he could operate a sewing machine and make expedition equipment: warm clothes, sleeping bags, dog harnesses, etc. He was an assistant to Alfred Wegener (the German who was later to put forth the theory of continental drift), from whom he learned meteorology. JP Koch (who found Jørgen Brønlund's body at 79 Fjord) taught him cartography and land surveying.

Freuchen thrived, despite the harsh conditions of expedition life. And he was a fast learner. In 1907, just 21 years old, he was given responsibility for a small meteorological station 70 kilometres from the expedition headquarters in Danmarkshavn. It required him to spend the winter in small hut. He had a number of companions during the winter, but Freuchen was the only one to stay there the full six months. It was no fun being in the "mouldy, disgusting hut", he wrote. Even so, he never regretted going to Greenland for one moment. From his diary:

*Maybe I'll be dead in three days, but then one thing will be certain: I will have fought to the end and never sat back and twiddled my thumbs. But I don't ever think I regretted, even for a second, that I went along on this expedition. I belong here. I am good at something here; I am just as good as the others who are here. This would be my life if I made it home. Back to Greenland.*



*Young Freuchen at the sewing machine aboard the 'Danmark', 1907 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)*

When Freuchen returned to Denmark, he went back to his medical studies. But everything was about Greenland now. He rented a room with expedition companion Koch and he started writing about Greenland for *Politiken*.

And he also made a new friend: Knud Rasmussen, seven years his senior, who had participated in the *Literary Expedition*. Knud Rasmussen was born and raised in Greenland, his grandmother was Inuit, and he knew the country and the language. He was there to see the *Danmark Expedition* off when it departed from Copenhagen.

Ms Andreassen explains their first meeting: "On the way back to Copenhagen in 1908, the Danmark docked in Bergen while Knud Rasmussen was on vacation in Norway. He came aboard and he and Peter had a chat for the first time."

There was an immediate sense of fellowship. Mr Pedersen: "Knud Rasmussen noted that Freuchen was tough, hardy and alert."



*Rasmussen (left) and Freuchen. Portraits from the early days at Thule, 1910-13 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)*

Rasmussen had plans to establish a trading station in what was then known as the Cape York District in north-western Greenland. He got the idea during the *Literary Expedition*, in 1902-04, when he and Mylius-Erichsen stayed there for almost a year. A missionary station was eventually established there in 1909.

Rasmussen, who became the owner of the station, asked Freuchen if he wanted to come along and manage it. Of course he did. They founded it in 1910 and named it Thule after the mythical northern location of classical Greek and roman literature.

Trading Station Thule, as well as the nearby mission station North Star (Nordstjernen), was close to the settlement of Uummanaq. Here, Freuchen witnessed the meeting between native population and the Danish way of life. And he wasn't too impressed with the missionaries. The catechist, for example, drank, beat his wife and chased after other women.

Freuchen became critical of the church and those who served it. Ms. Andreassen: "He pointed out some aspects of Danish colonial rule that he found offensive and immoral, for example the work of both the Danish and Greenlandic pastors, who preached the Bible but didn't live by it themselves. He also criticised the schooling, which was undertaken by the settlements' pastors."



*Children outside Thule trading station. Photo taken by Freuchen during the First World War (Photo: Arktisk Institut)*

And something else happened. In 1911 Freuchen met an Inuit woman named Navarana. This meant that now he wasn't just a witness to the colonial encounter, he was personally involved. Ms. Andreassen: "He married a wise woman who was able to, discreetly, let her

husband know how to behave up there. That had a huge influence on his relationship and his life with the people there. They became family.”

However, there was a big problem, at least as far as the Church of Denmark was concerned: Navarana did not believe in the Christian god, and she apparently had intention to start doing so. The Danish missionaries were shocked. One journal wrote: “Mr Freuchen is in a heathen marriage with a heathen woman and is carrying out heathen culture in his home.” (Andreassen 2013).

Freuchen considered the moralising hypocritical and probably even a little comical. In a memoir from 1936, he wrote:

*In general, missionaries will go straight to the sixth commandment. Sexual issues are the favourite topic of the Christian church. This is wise insofar as sexuality interests everyone and if the church can manage this difficult topic, it can control everyone. Wisely and shrewdly observed! However, a little sad and ridiculous for the poor heathens that no missionary has ever had success in teaching his own compatriots to live up to the Christian demands. (Freuchen, 1936)*

On a more serious note, his marriage was used by the church to discredit his criticism of its ministers in Greenland.

Heathen or not, Navarana was his wife. They were living together and continued to do so.



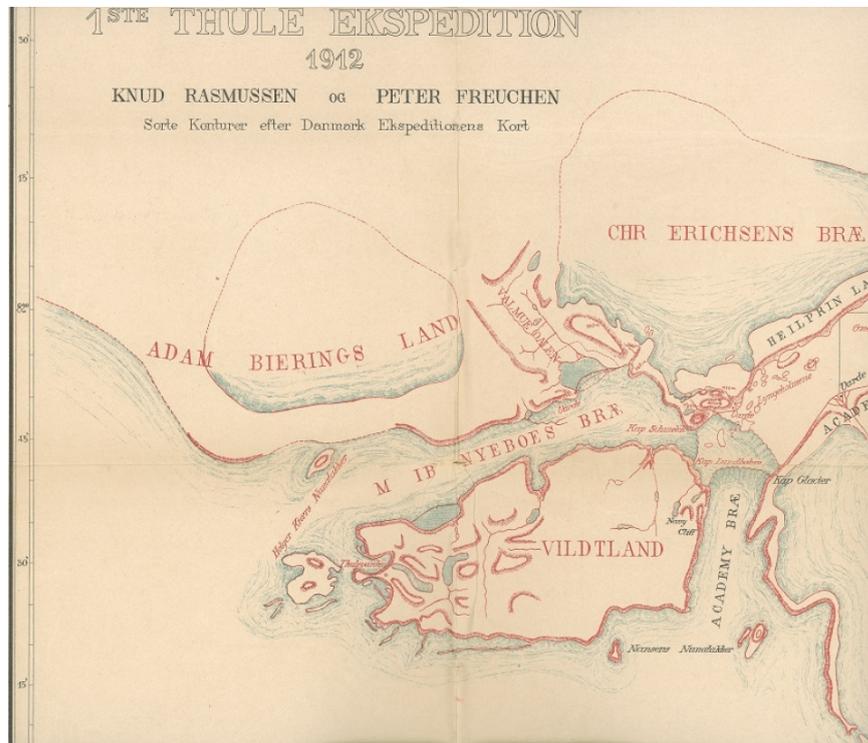
*Freuchen and Navarana at their home in Thule, 1916 or 1917 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)*

While he was managing the trading station, Freuchen was also observing and writing. In addition to the critical articles about the church, he observed, researched and wrote articles about many different topics, like the local fauna and the health of the population, even though he never did finish his medical studies in Copenhagen.

Rasmussen was away from the station a lot, either exploring or back in Denmark, but as the [previous article](#) explained, the two of them crossed the ice sheet on the *First Thule Expedition* to look for Ejnar Mikkelsen and the Peary Channel in north-eastern Greenland. And more Thule Expeditions followed.

The second took place in 1916-18, when Rasmussen went with another famous Arctic explorer, Lauge Koch. Freuchen had to stay in Thule. He was irritated about that, but perhaps it was just as well: the expedition had a tragic ending. Two members died, and there was a bitter dispute in which Koch was criticised for having abandoned one of them before he was dead. Koch and Rasmussen never spoke again.

But while Freuchen was planning to go along on the *Third Thule Expedition*, Rasmussen had other plans. Freuchen was to be given leave. He had written to Rasmussen in Copenhagen to ask to have it cancelled, but before the letter reached him Rasmussen had already dispatched Freuchen's replacement. And when he finally received the letter, Rasmussen insisted: Freuchen seemed like he could use the break. He had appeared nervous when they last met, and he had heard from the others at Thule that he was hot-headed and unpredictable.



Map drawn by Freuchen during the 'First Thule Expedition' (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

Besides, Rasmussen needed Freuchen to finish a number of articles based on his observations. The latter may have just been something Rasmussen said to hide the real reason. Ms Andreassen says: "It is difficult to say whether or not he suffered from what is sometimes referred to as 'polar cabin fever' or 'Arctic hysteria'. But not having someone he could have intellectual discussions with got to him. Knud saw that, as did the chairman of the trading-station committee, Marius Ib Nyeboe, so they told him, 'You're going home now.' Plain and simple."

And then, that was that. Freuchen was no longer being sent on leave, he was being replaced permanently. In 1919 he returned to Denmark along with Navarana and their two children, a daughter, Pipaluk, and a son, Mequsaq.

But the stay in Denmark was not a successful one. Freuchen was sick and Navarana was homesick. Unable to get his station-manager job back, he asked for a spot on Rasmussen's *Fifth Thule Expedition*. It was to be the family's ticket back to Greenland. Tragedy was to strike soon after, however: before the start of the expedition, in August 1921, Navarana died from the Spanish flu, which had been ravaging Greenland's west coast that summer. It was a hard time for Freuchen. In a letter to his brother, he wrote:

*Everyone's sick and I'm sad.*

Perhaps going on a long expedition was just as well. As he wrote to his parents:

*At least I have the remedy that is often applied by the polar Eskimos: to go far away to forget one's sorrows.*



*Freuchen, Navarana and the children in Denmark, 1920 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)*

The *Fifth Thule Expedition* was to become the most renowned of the Thule Expeditions. It was an ethnographical expedition lasting four years and started in Greenland, crossed Canada and finished at the Bering Strait. Along the way, the expedition encountered various Inuit communities. Rasmussen noticed that they had substantial similarities – culturally, socially, linguistically. He was able to get far speaking Greenlandic.

The expedition went a long way towards making Rasmussen's name. Some of the expedition participants wrote publications for scientific journals, but Rasmussen himself published a popular narrative, *Across Arctic America* (published in Danish as *Den store Slæderejse*, or 'The Great Sledge Journey'). He also received an honorary doctorate from the University of Copenhagen and the many artefacts he brought home became the foundation of the National Museum's Arctic exhibition.

In 1924, on their way back across Arctic America, an incident occurred that was to have a decisive influence on the rest of Freuchen's life: on his way across the Melville Peninsula in north-eastern Canada, he lost his way in drifting snow. He took shelter behind a boulder and made a makeshift hut from his sledge where he was able to spend the night. The temperature was  $-54^{\circ}\text{C}$ .

He woke the next day to find that the snow had piled up, making it impossible for him to get out. Using the edge of a frozen bearskin he began carving his way through the snow. It took hours, but he actually succeeded and was able to return to the expedition camp, exhausted and with severe frostbite in his left foot.



*Rasmussen with members of the 'Fifth Thule Expedition'. Leaving Point Barrow, Alaska, 1921 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)*

Maybe you've heard this story. Maybe you heard that he didn't use bearskin, but his own frozen faeces as a chisel to dig himself out. If that's the case, you didn't get it wrong, it's just that the story has improved somewhat over the years. When he returned to the camp he told the story of the bearskin. In a letter home he wrote that frozen faeces had been his back-up plan. As time passed, it became the main story, and he used in talks and books. He knew how to tell a story, and perhaps this is why people sometimes called him a liar.

However, it is only fair that he had a good story to show for his ordeal, because it cost him his left foot, which never recovered from the frostbite and had to be amputated in 1926. He took to calling his prosthesis his 'wooden leg' and it became – along with the beard – part of the legend of Peter Freuchen. But it also effectively stopped his career as an Arctic explorer. And perhaps it was just as well. Perhaps life in Greenland was not the same without Navarana.

With the *Fifth Thule Expedition* being Freuchen's last, it was also the end of his Arctic partnership with Rasmussen. You might even say that their Arctic partnership was the foundation of their friendship. Here, they complimented each other brilliantly, but in reality were two very different personalities.

Jes Stein Pedersen: "They were very different. Tom Kristensen (a Danish author) wrote that Knud Rasmussen was the romantic, whereas Peter Freuchen was the realist. Knud Rasmussen told of myths and noble savages, whereas Peter Freuchen somehow stripped all of that off and told, in the words of Tom Kristensen, the little truth."

Furthermore, after the expedition the two appeared to have fallen out. Rasmussen was angry that Freuchen had given Lauge Koch's book a positive review, and Freuchen was angry about missing payments for his time working for Rasmussen. They did not split up as enemies, but they also never became close friends again.

Cut off from more Arctic adventures, Freuchen returned to Denmark and bought a small island, Enehøje. It was here that his career as an author got underway; he wrote novels, articles, memoirs and even a movie script. And he always had a full house. Mr. Pedersen: "At Enehøje, hordes of people showed up to visit. He was, quite simply, fun and nice to be around."



From the movie 'Eskimo'. Freuchen and director WS van Dyke (Photo: Arktisk Institut)

But even though his expedition days were over, Freuchen still travelled the world. He often went to Greenland, including, in 1930 with Danish PM Thorvald Stauning as a sort of consultant. He also went to the US a number of times, most notably to film his movie, *Eskimo*. And it was in New York, when he was there for the opening of the film, that he received the news: Rasmussen had returned from the *Seventh Thule Expedition* gravely ill. He wrote to their common friend and expeditioner, Harald Moltke:

*I rarely see him and we never write. But he is the basis of my work; I count on him like no-one else.*

Shortly thereafter, Rasmussen died. Freuchen wrote in *Politiken*:

*My best friend is dead. We have starved and feasted, toiled and frozen together. You were always grand, honest and pure. Never did baseness enter your mind.*

Maybe Freuchen hadn't always thought that way about Rasmussen. But whatever had passed between them, in the end Freuchen loved Rasmussen and had tremendous respect for him, and he wanted his legacy to be spotless.

Freuchen lived on. He enjoyed success as author, even internationally, including in Germany, the US and the Soviet Union. In the US he also became a corresponding member of the Adventurers Club. And in 1938, he established the Adventurers Club of Denmark, which still exists today. Mr Pedersen, himself a member, says: "When you're nominated to be a member of the Adventurers' Club of Denmark, they ask: 'Great Peter, do you accept this new member?' and then you hear the knocking of the wooden leg."

In 1940, Freuchen and his new wife, Magdalene, sold Enehøje and moved to a house outside of Copenhagen, just a stone's throw from the house owned by Aage Berthelsen, a painter who was also aboard the *Danmark*. Mr Pedersen lives in Berthelsen's house today, a fact he only found out after he had moved in: "I like the thought of them – Rasmussen and Freuchen – sitting in this kitchen, drinking beer."

The same year as Freuchen moved to Copenhagen, Denmark was invaded by the Nazis. Freuchen had used Enehøje to host refugees from Germany and he had been vocal in his criticism of Nazi Germany, to the extent that he had been refused entry into Germany in 1936. In the autumn of 1943, he was arrested but released again. But they kept close watch on him, and after the murder of pastor and poet Kaj Munk in January 1944, Freuchen was convinced that it was about time to get out. He fled to Sweden with daughter Pipaluk in 1944, and this was when he shaved off his beard.



*Un-bearded exile: Peter and Pipaluk Freuchen in Sweden, 1944 (Photo: Arktisk Institut)*

Pipaluk got married in Sweden. Her father did the opposite. He divorced Magdalene and moved on to the US where he settled and married for the third time.

The occupation had a profound effect on Greenland, if indirectly. Cut off from Denmark, Greenland's primary contacts were with the US. No longer isolated, and having been introduced to new influences, Greenlanders refused to go back to the way things had been, and Denmark was no longer able to maintain either monopoly or romanticised colonial visions of 'noble savages'. The criticism of Danish colonial rule was fuelled by a Danish press tour of Greenland. The journalists didn't see the world that Rasmussen had depicted. They saw poverty, illness, poor housing and an incompetent, old-fashioned and rigid Danish rule.

In 1948, Danish PM Hans Hedtoft and a delegation from parliament went to Greenland to have a look at the situation and talk to the Provincial Councils about the future. Freuchen accompanied Hedtoft on the trip.

The trip resulted in the establishment of a commission that was to lay the groundwork for an overall modernisation of Greenlandic society. And seeing as how Freuchen knew so much about Greenland, he expected to be selected to serve on the commission as well. He had criticised Danish colonial rule since the Thule days. In 1920, he had written a series of articles on the inequality, not only between Danes and Greenlanders, but also among Greenlanders; since only few got an education, the majority were "held down in ignorance", as he wrote, and the educated minority came to constitute a local aristocracy in an otherwise egalitarian culture.



*The commission resulted in a massive forced industrialisation of Greenlandic fisheries. Here, new docks are being built in Egedesminde (present-day Aasiaat) in 1953. Note that the workers are Danish: the modernisation was later roundly criticised for seeking to make Greenland a copy of Denmark, a process that became known as 'Danification' (Photo: Arktisk Institut)*

Now it was time to correct so many of the wrongs that he had criticised for 35 years. Obviously he was going to be a part of that. Well, actually, quite the opposite. Danish officials in Greenland were not thrilled with him, and we already know what the church thought of him. He was simply too undiplomatic for politics.

Janni Andreassen: "He really wanted to be on one of the big Greenland commissions, and originally he was to be given a seat. But Hedtoft thought that he was perhaps too brazen and too forward. He probably was a bit cantankerous, but, as is often the case with cantankerous people, he was also usually right."

The new times in Greenland also meant a definitive farewell to the Thule he had known. In 1954, the trading station was moved to present-day Qaanaaq. Its residents had been moved in 1953. They needed to be moved out of the way to make way for an expansion of Thule Air Base, which had been established by US forces in 1951. In 1999, the Danish government issued an official apology for the forced relocation.

Freuchen didn't stop getting involved, only now he did it from his home in the US and during his frequent trips to Denmark and Greenland. He was still publishing books, and in 1956, the year he turned 70, he won on the American TV game show *The \$64,000 Question*, answering questions in categories such as "The Seven Seas" and "Exploring".

On the show he was presented as "Peter Freuchen from Thule, Greenland". It catapulted him to fame in the US, where he was already a popular author. It also created a stir in Denmark, where he participated in a radio and TV game show that summer, and, in 1957, he was flown to Copenhagen to participate in the televised national fundraiser for Hungarian refugees. There was plenty to do.

That same year, radio and TV producer Lowell Thomas wanted him to go to Thule and the North Pole with two other former Arctic explorers to do a TV series in the Arctic. Obviously, he accepted. And he looked forward to it: he had travelled widely in the Arctic, but one of the places he had never been was the North Pole. There was still an unknown to explore.



*Freuchen and his third wife, Dagmar, in New York, 1950s (Photo: Arktisk Institut)*

On their way there, the participants and crew had a layover in Anchorage, Alaska. While there, Freuchen dropped dead at the age of 71. There was no prior illness or any drama, he died as he had lived, on the go.

Freuchen was cremated, and his ashes scattered around Thule. There could hardly have been a more appropriate conclusion to a life that was shaped and given purpose by Thule and Greenland.

And, as he himself concluded one of his memoirs, *I al frimodighed* ('In all frankness'):

*Hence, as a travelling companion, I went up to Tasiusaq, up to Navarana and across the Melville Bay back home to Thule again. Back home to Thule.*

#### Literature and sources used for this article:

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*The article above is the fourth in a series published in collaboration with **Arktisk Institut/The Danish Arctic Institute**, which seeks to inform the public about Danish-Greenlandic history.*

*The articles are based on the institute's **Arctic Stories** podcast series, which is produced by the author.*

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