

BENJAMIN LEIGH-SMITH

ARCTIC EXPLORER



ACARSA - SCIENTIFIC EXPEDITIONS

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MY GRANDFATHER

THE ARCTIC EXPLORER

Benjamin Leigh-Smith was 34 years older than his wife, my grandmother, Charlotte (Sellers). She told me stories about his life that I remember to this day.

He was a modest man, but not averse to the admiration of Ladies on the dance floor. She also told me how he had always kept the key to their house in his waistcoat pocket. Getting home in the early morning, after being presumed lost for many months, he let himself in quietly so as not to disturb anyone.

She said that what he regretted most was the loss of a water-proof box that contained many of the measurements they had taken of the deep sea warm water currents off Franz-Joseph land. He was not only an explorer, but also a man with a first class scientific mind who in 1872 foresaw the dangers of global warming.

Christopher Leigh-Smith
Christopher Leigh-Smith, Ben's grand-son



Ben and his wife Charlotte in their garden at at Scalands. © All rights reserved.
 “ En famille» at Scalands “.

A 19TH CENTURY

ENGLISH FAMILY

The family distinguished itself over several generations. The explorer's grand-father was William Smith, who with William Wilberforce fought to abolish the slave trade in America.

His father was Benjamin (Ben) Smith — the name Leigh-Smith only appears at the time of his union with Anne Longden, the mother of his children — carried on his father's work fighting the slave trade.

His sister Barbara Leigh-Smith later became Barbara Leigh-Smith Bodichon by marriage. Barbara obtained the emancipation of women, their right to education and the right to manage their own affairs which was the sole right of their husbands until then. She was also a renowned and highly talented painter.

His niece was Florence Nightingale (The Lady of the lamp in the Crimean war). She reformed nursing in war and peace in the World. She also created many homes for unmarried mothers.

Another niece was Frances Pathenope Nightingale, Lady Verney: painter and writer.

His wife's sister, Eugenie Sellers, was a highly respected archaeologist who became assistant director of the British School in Rome.

His youngest son, Philip Leigh-Smith, was a diplomat and took part in British Relief Missions to Russia before, during and after the Bolshevik revolution. He wrote several novels including Pandemonium and the Red Horse that won great acclaim for giving a profound insight into life in Russia of the time. He married Alice Prebil in 1933 Later Dr. Alice Prebil Leigh-Smith PhD in physics and discoverer of element 85. Alice also worked with Irene Joliot Curie in Paris and at the Radium Institute in Bern. Philip wrote a hilarious comedy entitled « Ladies in Diplomacy » which may or may not be based on the true adventures of his wife. Her work continues to this day in London and Cambridge. She was awarded the Order of Merit in Chile.

His only grandson, Christopher Leigh-Smith, is specialized in meat substitutes as an alternative to animal slaughter for food.



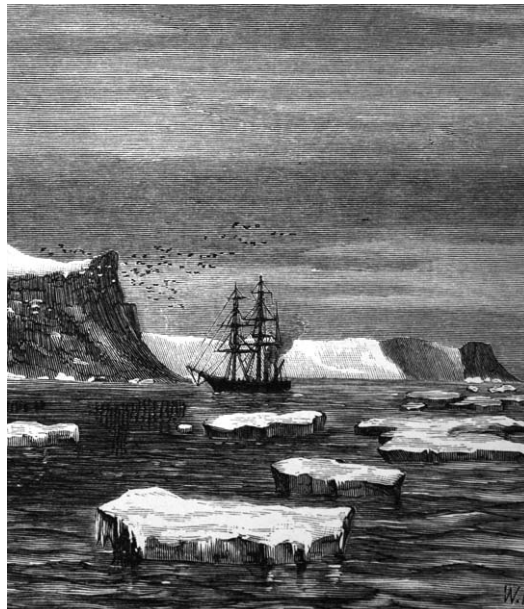
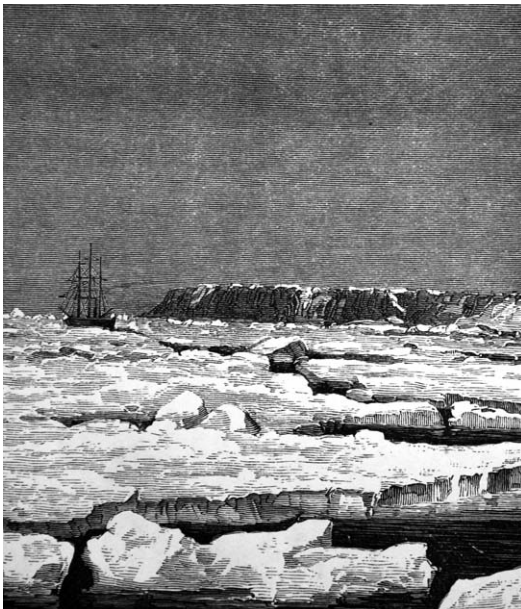
BENJAMIN LEIGH-SMITH

(1828-1913)

Benjamin Leigh-Smith was an arctic explorer, born in England on the 12th March 1828. He first became a barrister in London specializing in the defence of women's rights. He was, however, irresistibly drawn to polar exploration.

He makes five voyages an attempt to reach the North Pole. In 1871 and 1872 he explores virgin regions North of Spitzberg. At a relatively shallow depth of 457 meters in very deep waters he discovers a current having a relatively high temperature of 0.6°C ., and corroborates his theory that there was a means of forging a passage across the Arctic through the Barents sea.

In 1873 on a new expedition with the DIANA he brings supplies to Professor A.E. Nordenskiöld in the North.



THE VOYAGES OF

THE «EIRA»

Having gained experience from his three previous expeditions, Benjamin Leigh-Smith, concludes that what he needs is a ship especially built for the ice. At his expense he commissions the yard of Stephen and Forbes in Peterhead. Their job to build a wooden hulled ice-breaker. This results in the S.S.EIRA (Steam Ship). She is a 240 tonnes screw barquentine equipped with a 50 horse power engine with an overall length of 129.6 ft.. This ship meets their requirements and they sail in her in 1880 to the discovery of new territories and sea-ways through the arctic.

The Eira fell in with the Peterhead whalers Hope on July 11th 1880. Captain John Gray, captain of the Hope signed for that season a young medical student from Edinburgh, to spend the last year of his course as a ship's doctor, a certain Conan-Doyle, who fell into the sea no less than three times. The crew nicknamed him "The Great Northern Diver."

Many who have studied the life and times of the author agree that it was his "Arctic Adventure" that would eventually persuade Doyle to leave the medical profession and take up the pen. His experience aboard the Hope and maybe the Eira, is strongly reflected in such works as The Little Square Box and The Captain of the Pole Star.



On board the EIRA in 1880. From left to right: David Gray, Benjamin Leigh Smith, Arthur Conan Doyle (the spiritual father of Sherlock Holmes) John Gray (from the Hope) Dr. Walker, Dr. Neale and Dr. Lofley.

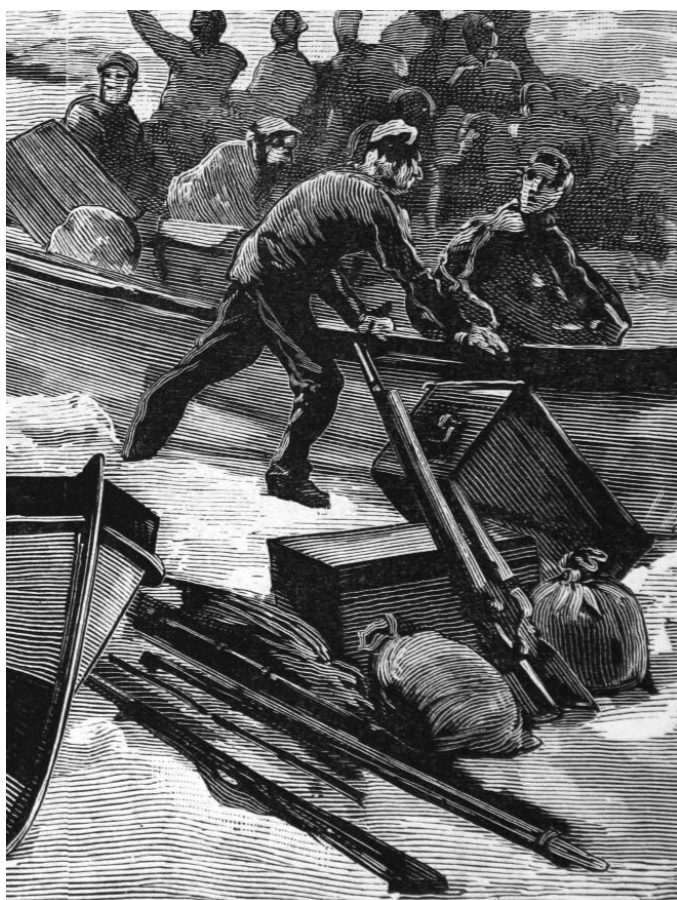
Ben's maritime and overland discoveries as well as his observations on the local flora, fauna and minerals were universally acclaimed by the World's leading scientists and brought him many decorations for his work. By way of Royal recognition Cape Leigh-Smith was named after him as well as much of Spitzbergen and Franz-Joseph Land after his family and crew.

On the 14th of June 1881 he sails with 25 crew, a cat, a canary and Bob the dog who was to prove invaluable to the expedition. His goal: the discovery of new territories North of those discovered in 1880, as well as a study of the deep sea currents and their influence and more especially the Gulf Stream.

On the 21st of August 1881, on a magnificent sunny day their ship is crushed between two icebergs off Franz-Joseph land. Luckily the crew are able to salvage much of the stores and equipment before the EIRA goes down. The men knew they would be prisoners of the ice for many months.



On the 21st of August 1881 the EIRA sinks in a few hours.



The crew strive to save a maximum of stores and equipment to survive the dreadful polar winter they are facing.

THE LODGE

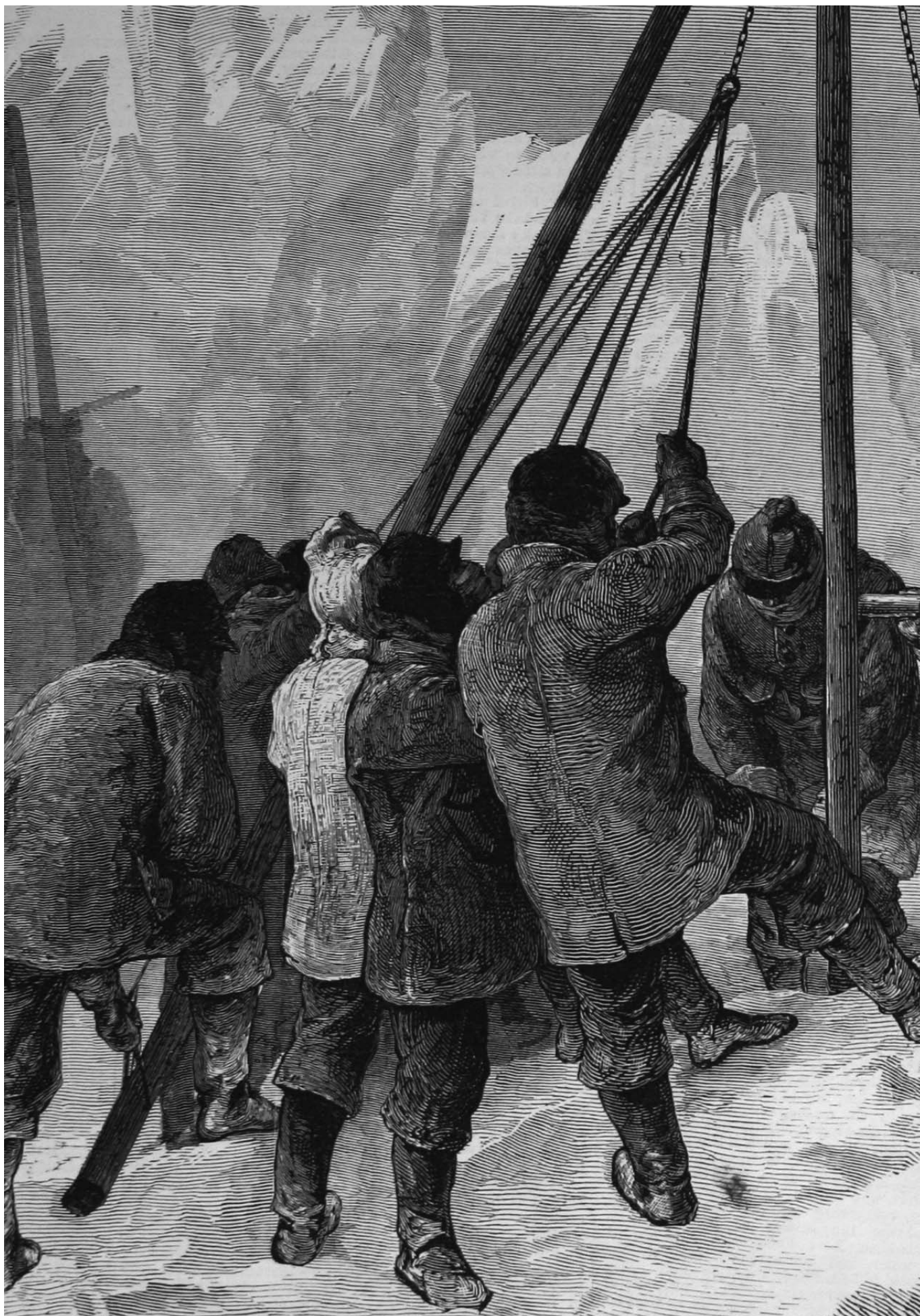
AT CAPE FLORA

Immediately after the EIRA went down the men set to building a shelter that was almost immediately wrecked by the gale force rain and winds. On the 23rd August despite their utter exhaustion they manage to recover debris from the ship that float up to the surface and are blown onto the shore nearby.

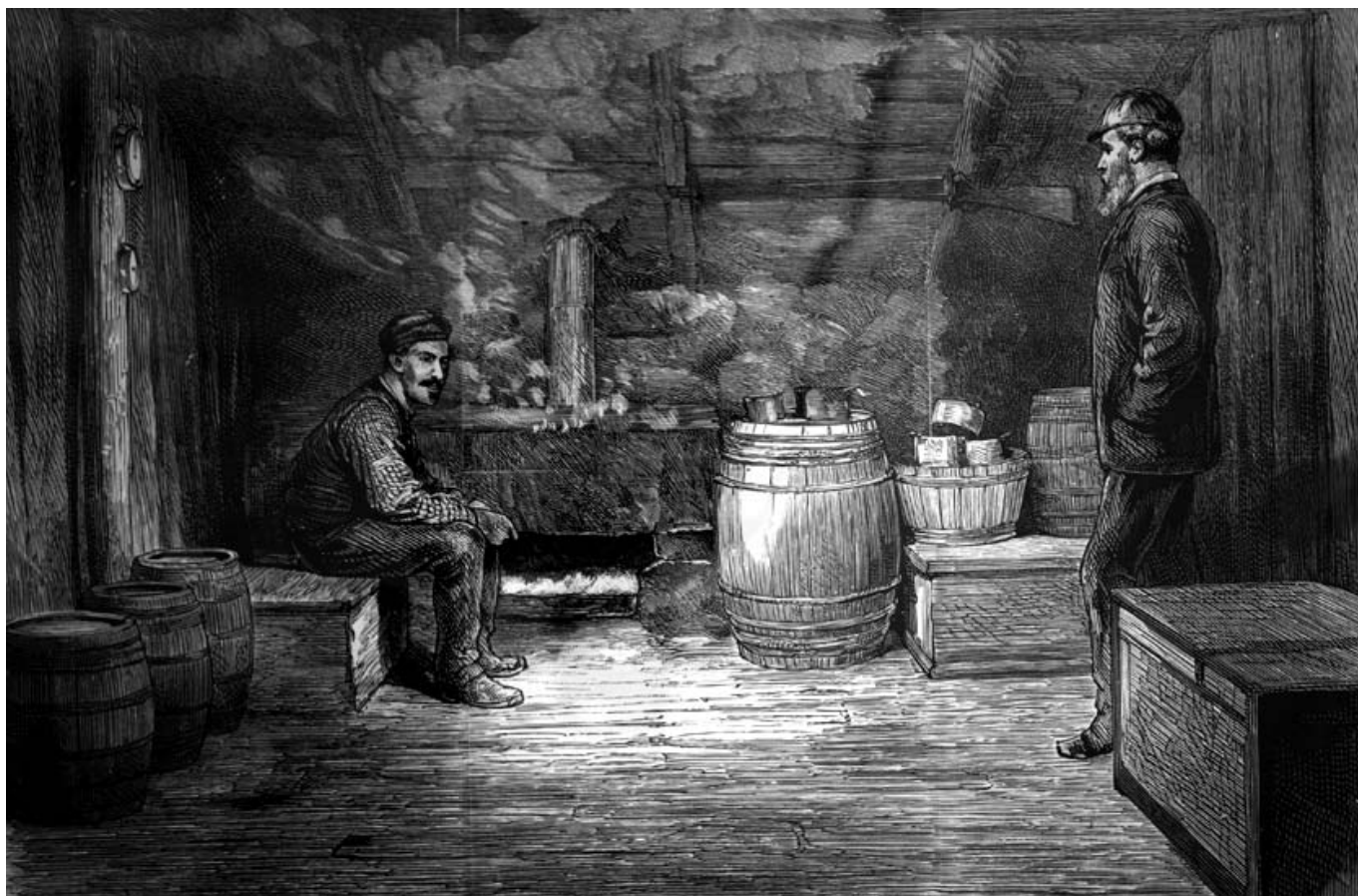
On a green patch, 20ft above sea level, they build a solid hut made from rocks, earth and wood. Anticipating the long winter months ahead they also built other huts to store the fish and meat they would need to catch. Bob the dog was invaluable in this and without his unremitting courage none of it would have been possible.

On several occasions during fishing and hunting expeditions one or even several men would fall into the icy waters. Bob the dog always managed to save them, sometimes even running back to the camp for help.

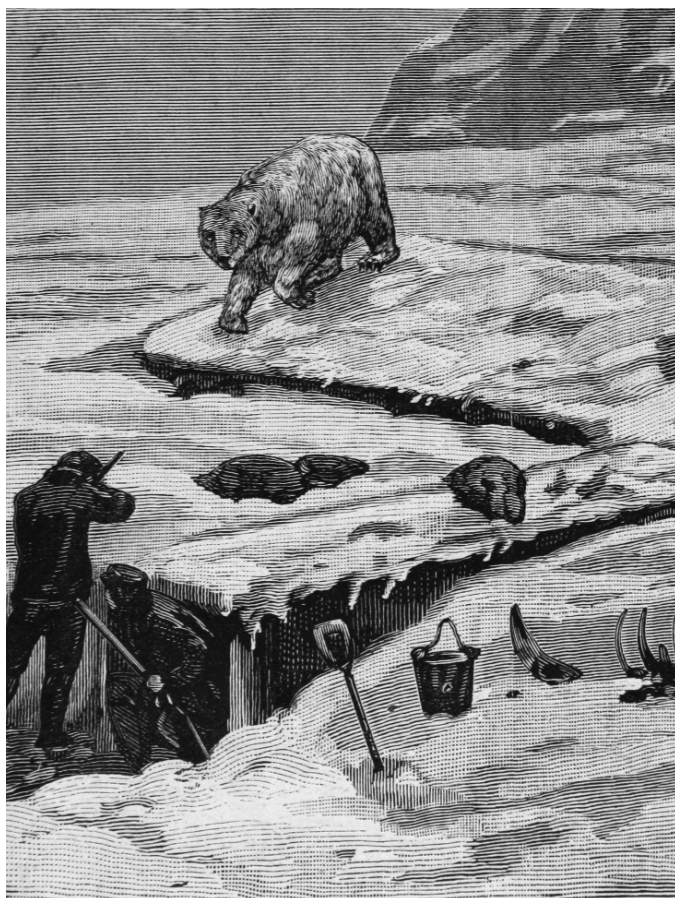
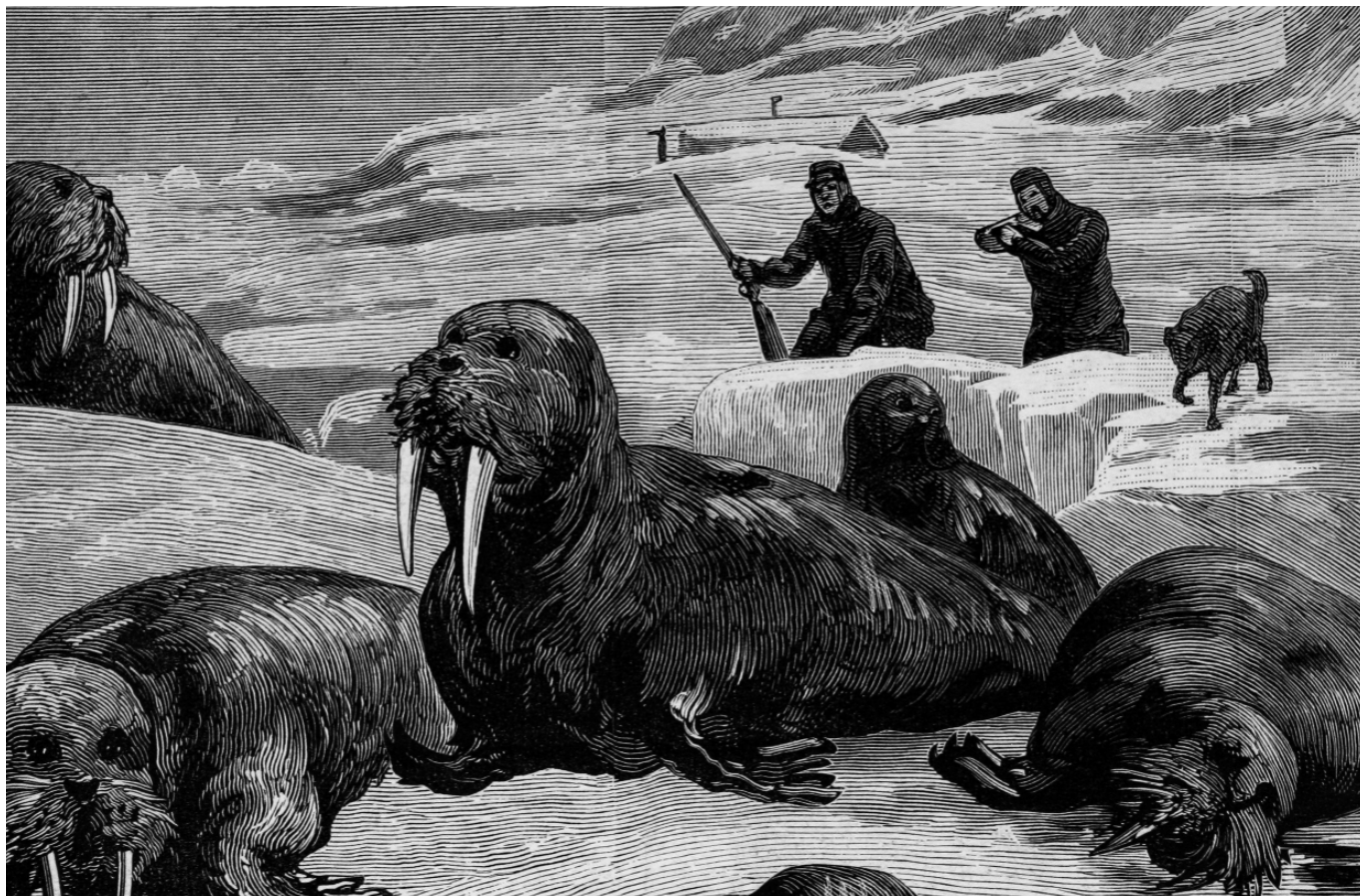
Thanks to Ben's military-like discipline all his men survived. There was a time-table set for doing chores, for celebrations, for reading and other recreations. They played cards and even organized a small theatre production. Dr. Neale had the EIRA's bell rung on Sundays at 09.30 hrs to call the men to a religious service. There was a musical box (that still works perfectly) that was saved from the wreck and played daily. Part of each day was set aside for making sails in preparation for the attempt they would need to make the following year to row and sail back towards home in 4 small life-boats.



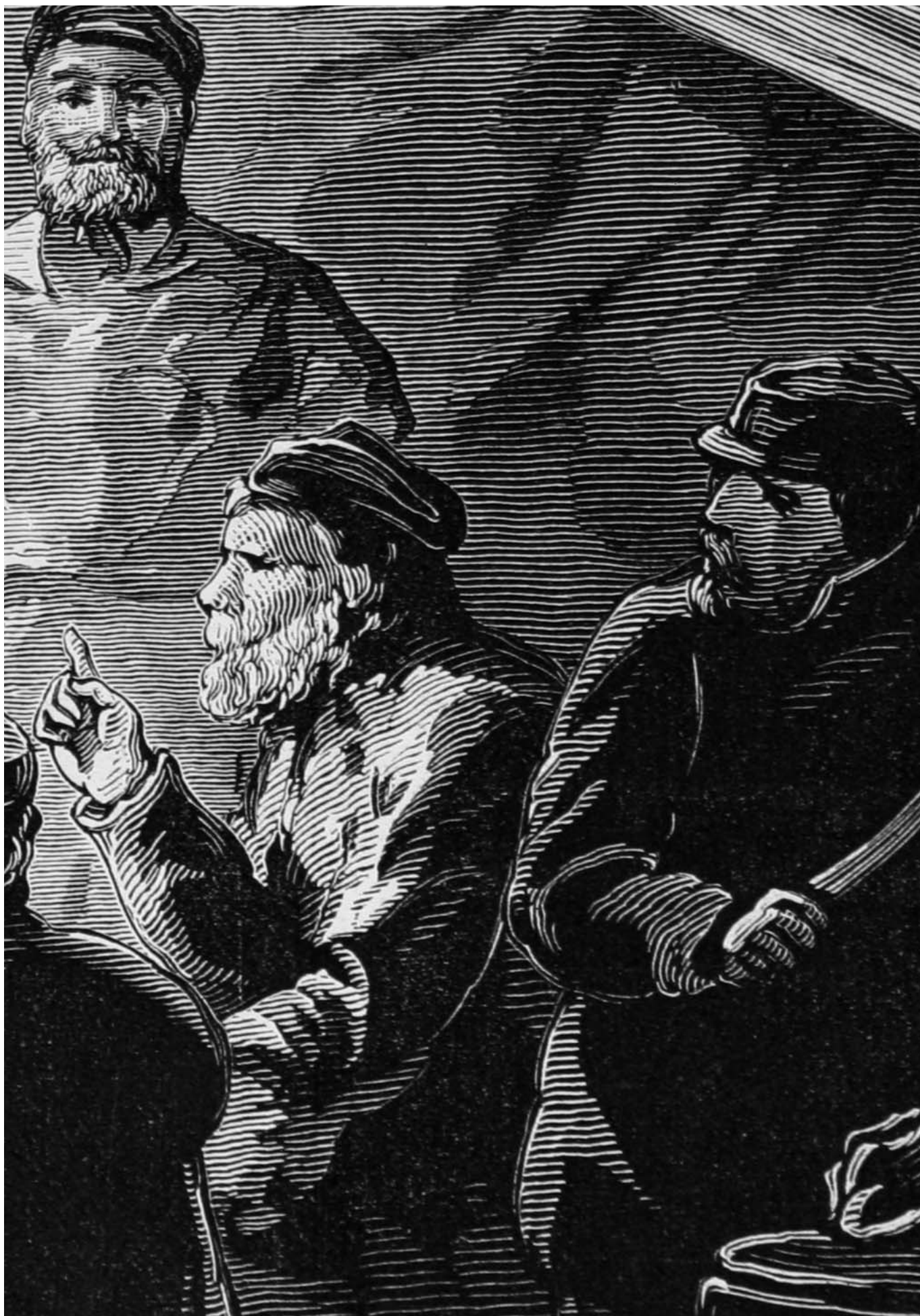
Ben's men hurriedly building a temporary shelter for the EIRA's stores.



The Lodge on Cape Flora.
To the right Ben talking to one of the crew inside the Lodge.



Some stages for the daily survival of the crew and their faithful companion, the dog Bob.



Ben's military discipline ensures the survival of all hands.

OF THE GEAR RECOVERED FROM THE WRECK

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Scale of Feet



A glimpse of the ship's inventory.

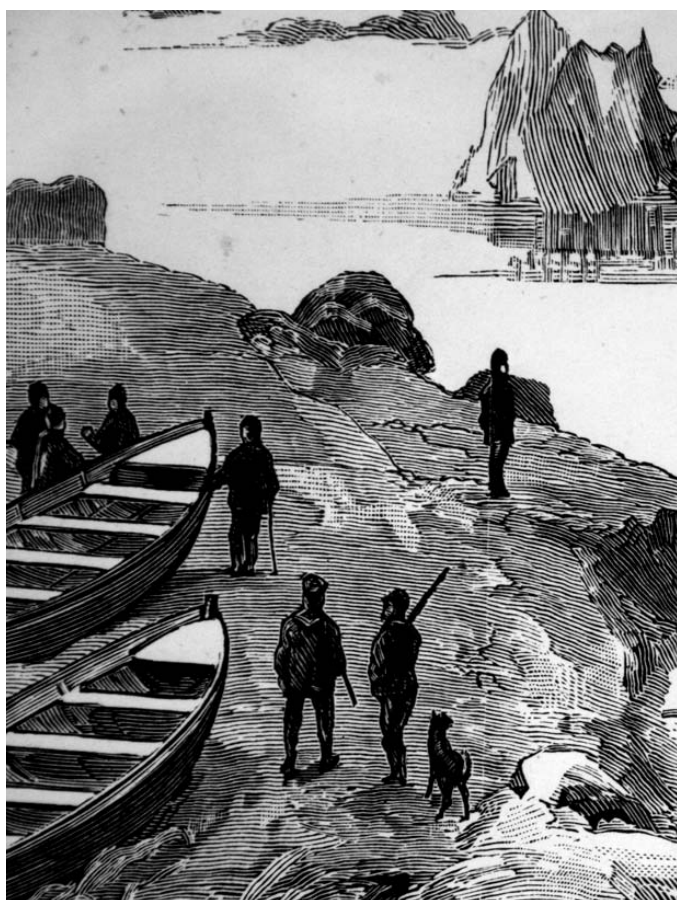
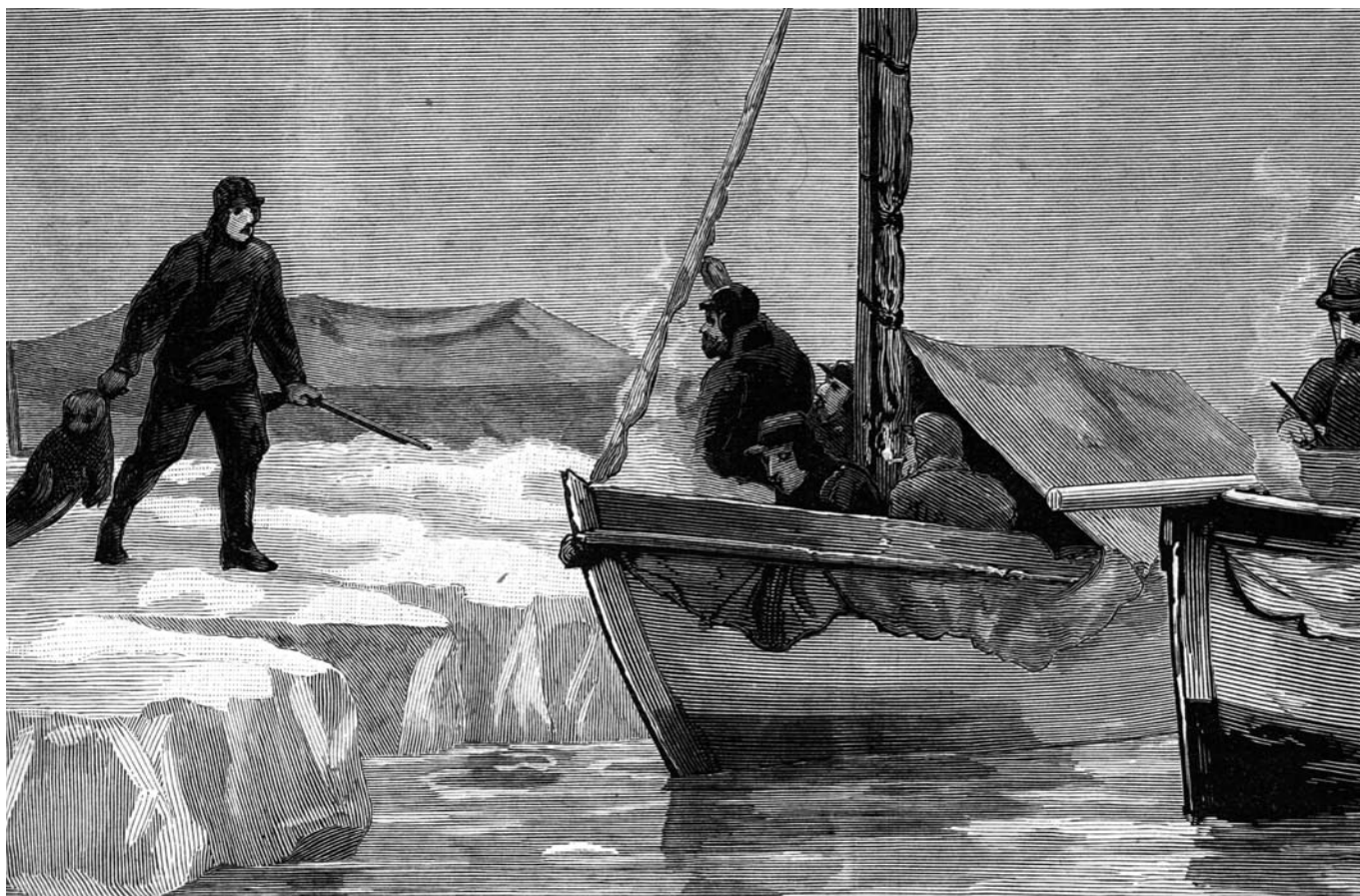
DEPARTURE

FROM CAPE FLORA AND RESCUE

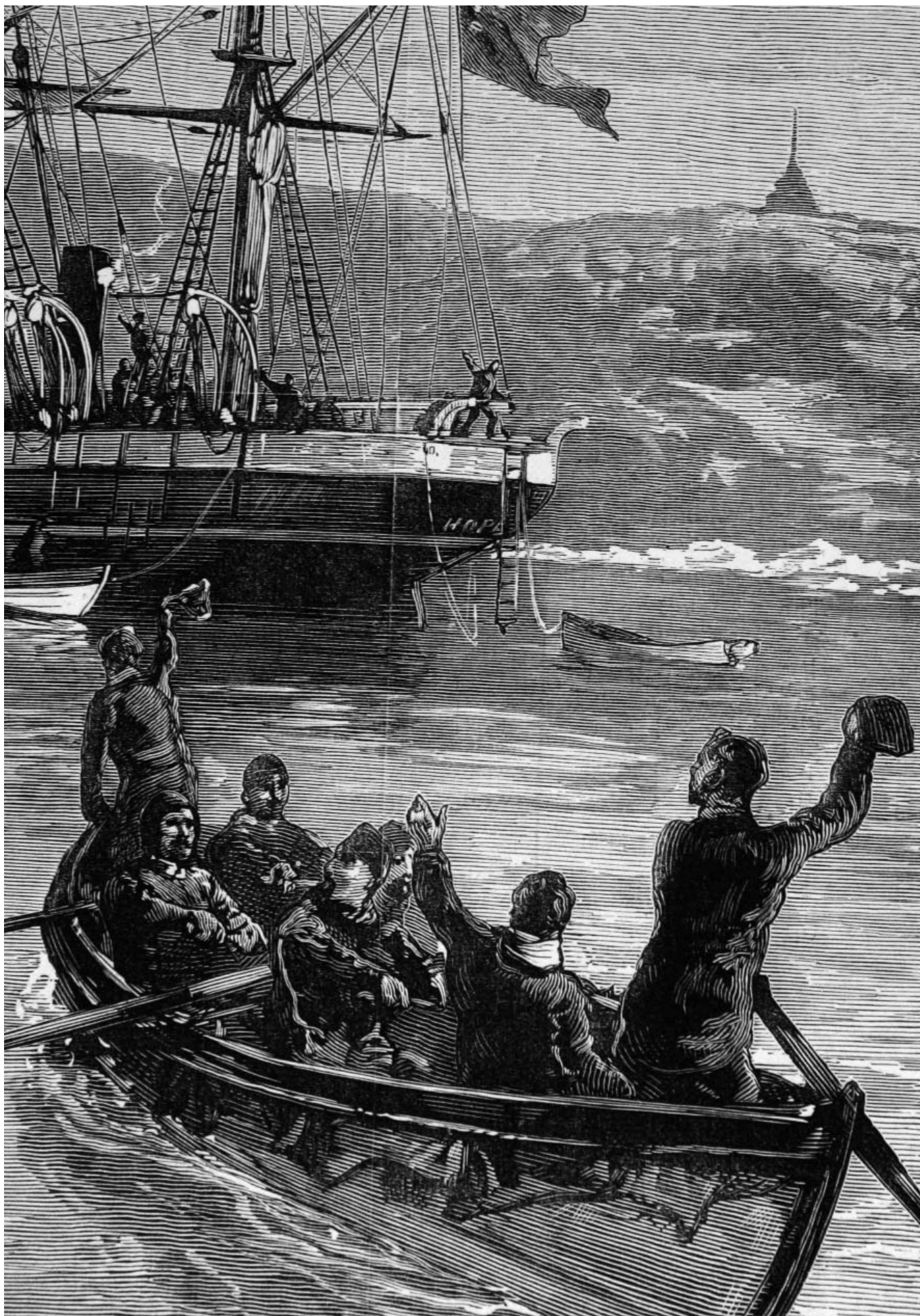
In may 1882 the ice begins to clear and the crew attempt to launch the boats in vain. They are too heavy to be dragged over the ice. On June 13th a violent storm breaks up the ice and on June 21st they manage to head for Nova Zemlya loaded with provisions.

During 3 weeks of terrible storms in their open boats they are in constant danger of capsizing. Despite it being late Spring the bitter cold freezes their clothing as well as their food reserves. Totally exhausted they are not far from Matyushin shar, on the Eastern coast of Nova Zemlya, when they are saved by three ships, that had set out to rescue them. The ships are: the Hope skippered by Sir Allen Young , the little Kara was also there with Sir H. Gore Booth and Mr. Grant and the Dutch exploration vessel, Willem Barents with Captain Hoffman.

Despite the loss of the EIRA the result of the expedition was positive. Ben's choice of setting up a base for future expeditions at Spitzbergen is widely approved and his discoveries and courage are acclaimed by the Royal Geographical Society. His legendary discretion nevertheless prevents the full recognition of the importance of his discoveries until quite recently.



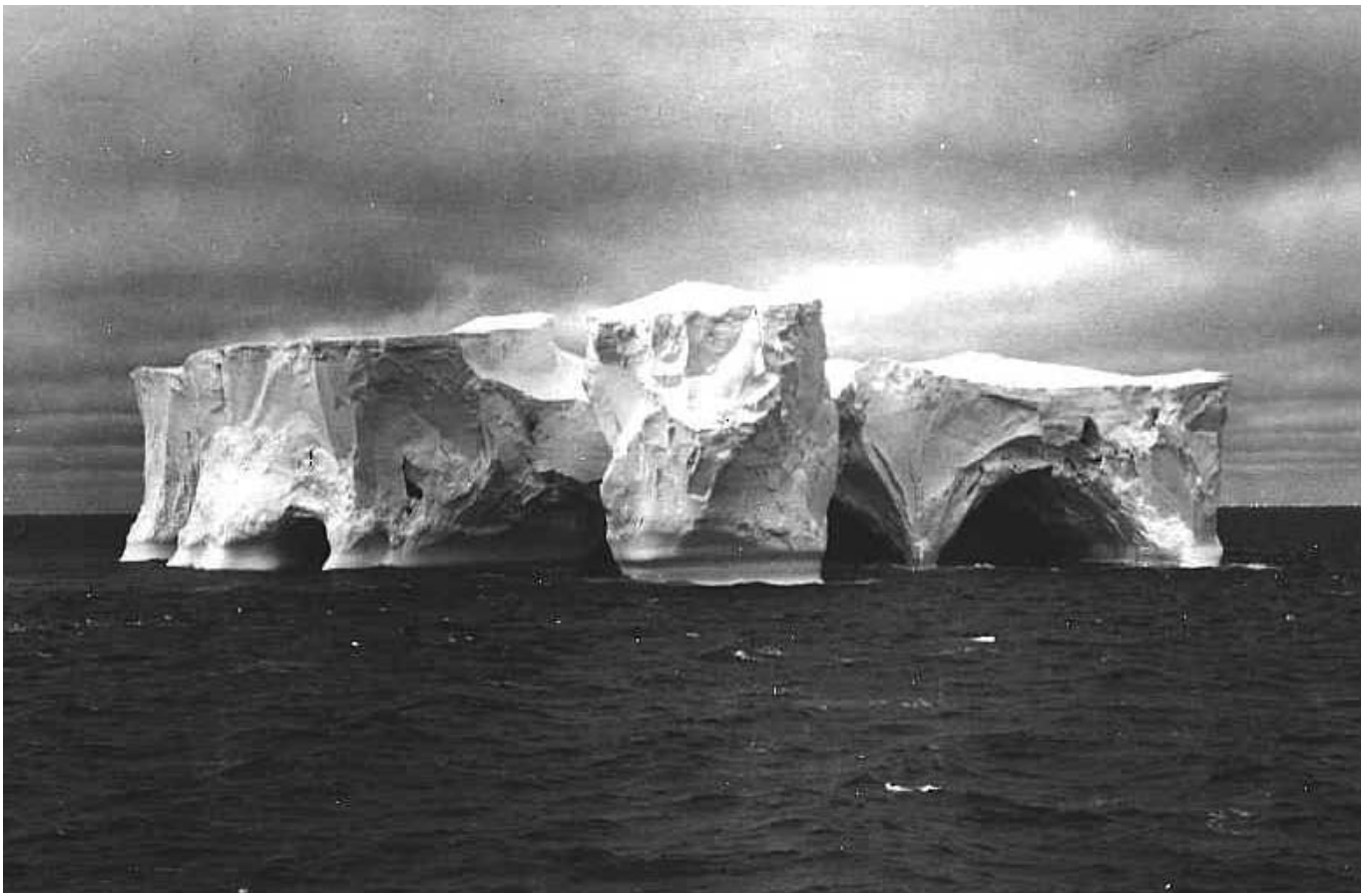
The crew's preparations for the return in May 1882 and the brave dog Bob. A dangerous journey lay ahead of them in their small boats in the hope of reaching civilization.



Three rescue ships were sent out from England. The Hope, Willem Barents and Kara. After several weeks of dreadful conditions all the crew, including Bob, shout for joy as they find the Hope in Nova Zemlya.

IN SEARCH OF THE EIRA

AND THE DATA LOST IN THE DEEP



History, science, discovery and passion follow the traces of the Eira.

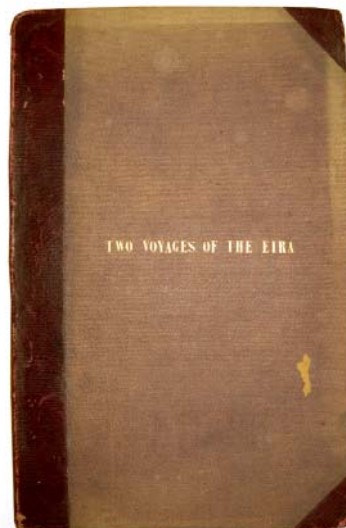
THE DOCUMENTS

THE EVOLUTION OF THE CLIMATE

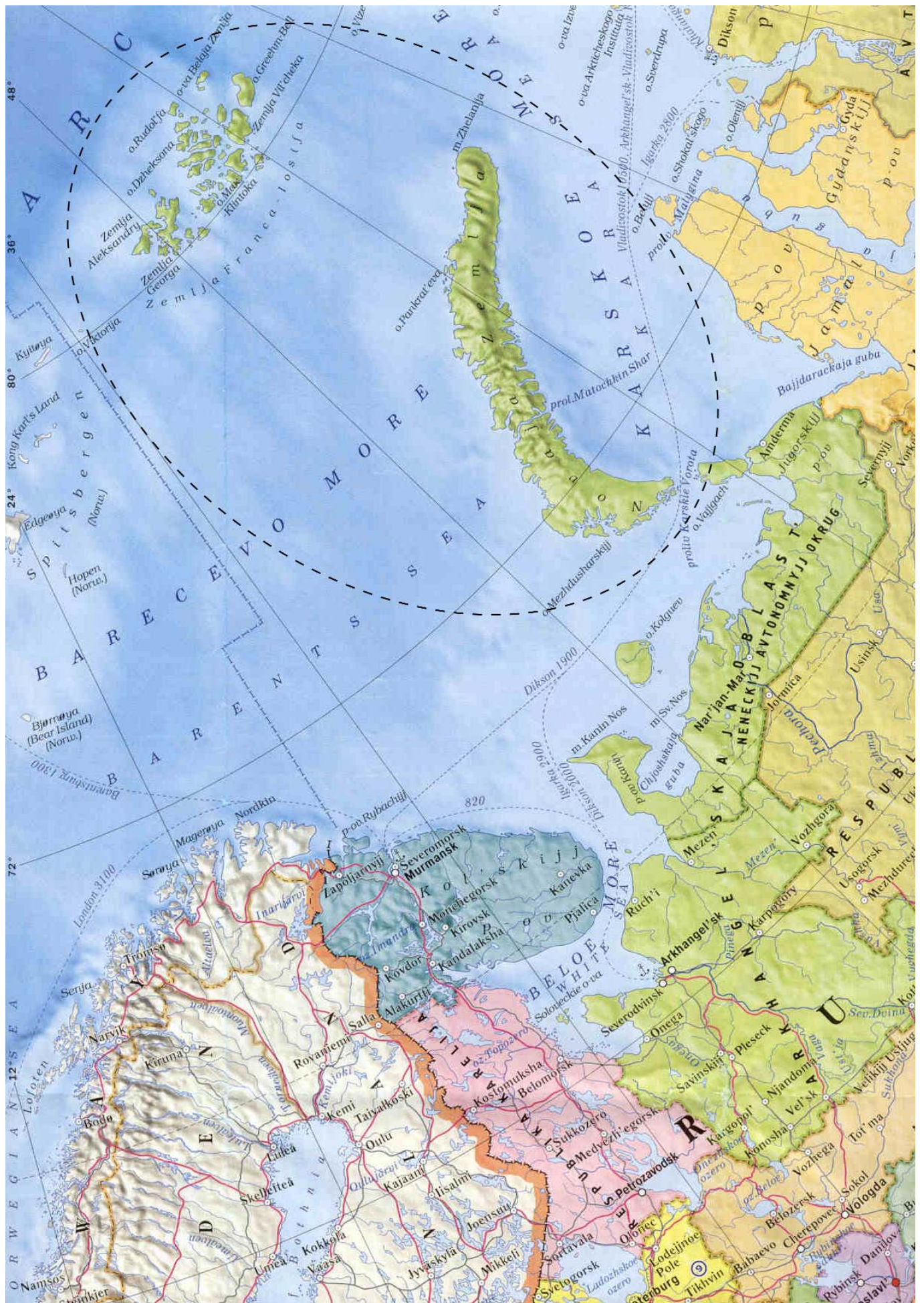
The Eira was neither a cruise ship for the rich nor a cargo boat for precious goods. She was a sailing steamer built for scientific research that carried only the necessary stores for a crew of 25 during a long and arduous expedition in her ample hold.

When she was crushed by the icebergs, the essential of the equipment had been salvaged as well as the scientific information that had been gathered.

The log that Ben had kept during their forced captivity in the Arctic was brought back safely. Not so the iron chest that contained extensive notes on the deep sea currents and their temperatures that had fallen overboard from one of the row boats on their journey back.



Much historical and scientific documentation on the life and work of Benjamin Leigh-Smith is to be found in museums, scientific institutes and universities.



Illustrating the Russian archipelago of Franz-Joseph Land in the Glacial Arctic Ocean and Nova Zemlaya

THE SURPRISING ENCOUNTER

OF 2 DESTINIES IN APRIL 2007

In the evening of the 12th April 2007, Christopher Leigh-Smith is searching for some information on the internet. To his surprise a familiar ship appears on the screen. It's the EIRA, his Grandfather's ship. The illustration is for a forthcoming Polar expedition.

« I want to find the wreck of the Eira » says Milko Vuille, a diver and explorer, from Neuchâtel in Switzerland. She went down off the coast of Franz Joseph Land in 1881. I am one of the leaders of an expedition organized by the Russian Academy of Sciences of St Petersburg and other Russian scientists due to sail in summer 2008 or 2009. The intention is to make a further study of climatic change, and make a study of the icebergs, the flora, the fauna and of course find the Eira and her lost treasures.

His companion, Marie-France Le Fel, hears Christopher say:
«Come and see, it's incredible. I must call him at once» !

That's how it all began. Milko Vuille and Christopher, Ben's grandson, both live in Switzerland not very far from one another.



Milko Vuille and the EIRA's Chronometer and Musical Box.

THE NORTH POLE

ON THE TRACE OF THE EIRA

Milko Vuille and his company, ACARSA, want to bring together top scientists and explorers to share their knowledge and passions to better understand the mysteries and wonders of our beautiful and fragile planet. Their discoveries will be destined not only to research but also to the public in general.

ACARSA is mostly concerned with the North Polar regions and Russian territories. This immense country still provides great opportunities for maritime and territorial discovery.

Milko Vuille lived in Russia from 2003 to 2004 and met Igor Pliusnin who is in charge of international programs for the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences. Igor told Milko about the Eira that had been crushed by an iceberg in 1881 whilst Benjamin Leigh-Smith, the Arctic Explorer, had been trying to find the then mythical North East passage.

As the Eira sank her men exclaimed sorrowfully:

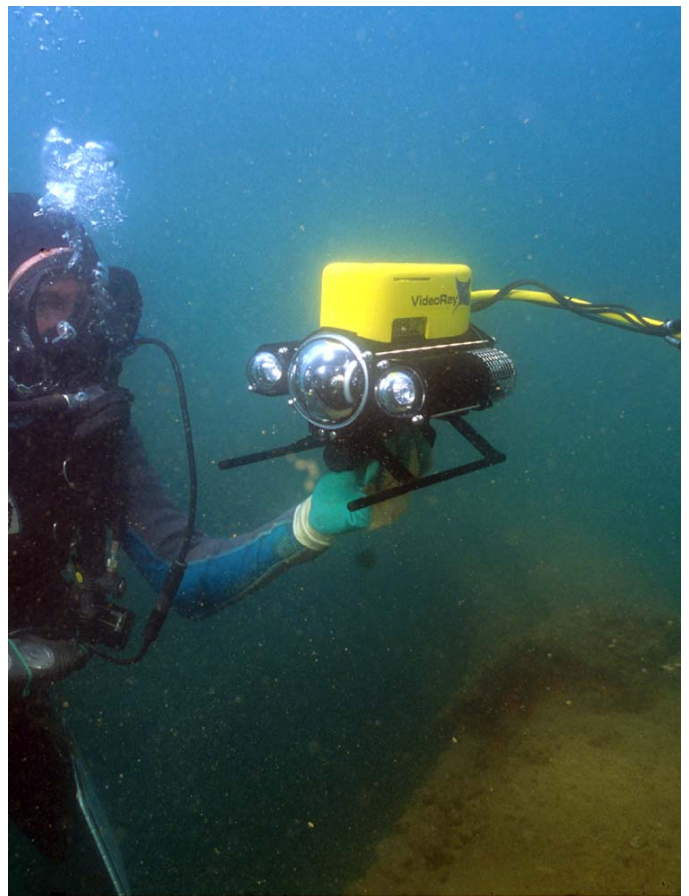
«She's awa; she was our home, she was a bonny ship !»

«She still is a bonny ship and she lies in only 11 fathoms.»

Exclaims Milko and we want to bring her up ! That is the not so crazy bet of the Swiss Explorer who hopes to sail Northward next year with his team.



The splendid St.Petersburg Scientific Academy where Igor Pliusnin, of «International Relations», first mentioned the «Eira» to Milko Vuille of «Acarsa». The head of the expedition is Yuri Gudoshnikov of the Russian Arctic and Ant-Artic institute.



Various logistical systems are planned for the expedition.

AIMS OF THE EXPEDITION

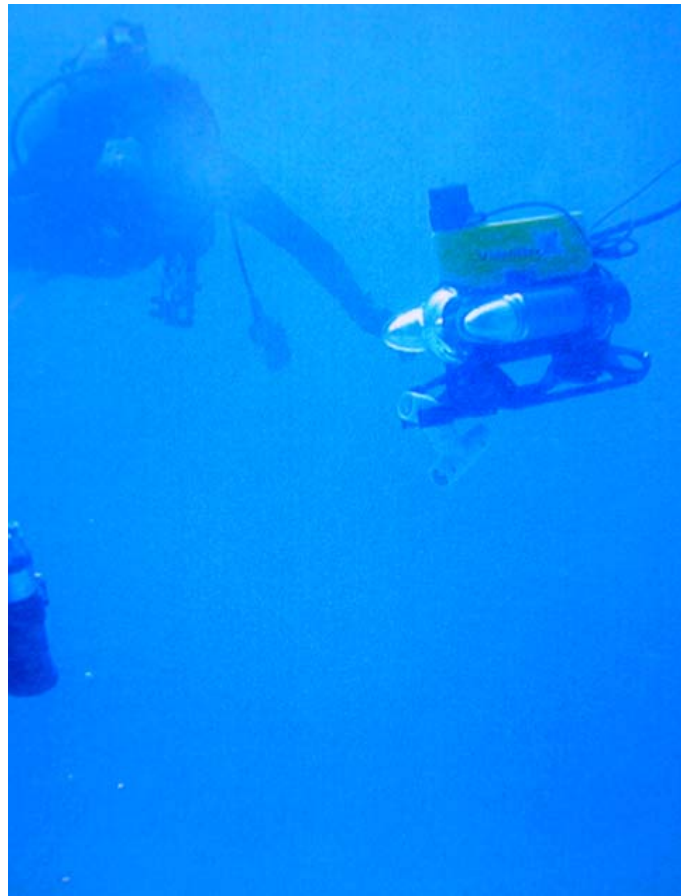
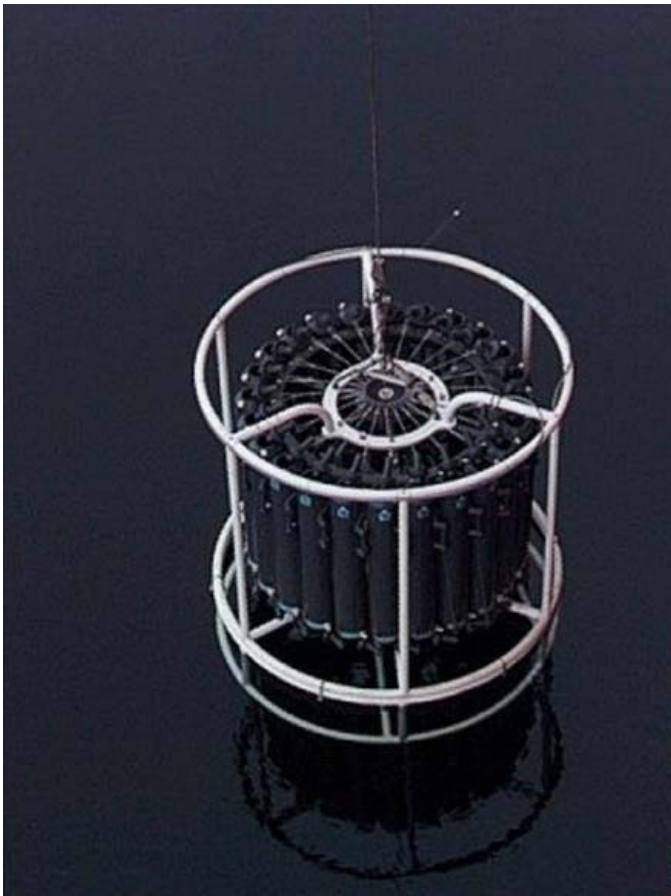
WILL HE FIND THE EIRA ?

It's been his dream since 2004. To organize an expedition in the arctic ocean, in the region of the Russian archipelago of Franz-Joseph Land, one of the northernmost lands to emerge on the planet, so as to find the wreck of the English ship that sunk there in the early 19th century and to carry out specific scientific research there on the waters, the ice, the flora and fauna of the region. An expedition as in the old days when the map of the World was scattered with white areas that were yet to be discovered.

Thanks to his connexions with Russian scientists, he has every chance of success. Now all he needs is to find the necessary sponsors and patrons as passionate as he is.

The chief aims of the Eira expedition will be the following:

- The analysis of the effects connected to climate change.
- Oceanographic research in the Barents sea.
- Logging of the icebergs sighted en route.
- Reconnaissance and investigation of glaciers around Franz-Joseph Land.
- Search for the wreck of the Eira.
- Visit of the historical camps of the North Polar pioneers.
- Biological research on the flora and fauna of the archipelago.



The research and exploration teams will dispose of the most recent technologies for their work.

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