

The Jens Munk story

By John Bechtel ~ Freelance Writer

Illegitimacy cast a long shadow in the early Reformation era. A bastard child, Jens Munk was born to affluence on June 3, 1579, when both Shakespeare and Galileo were 15 years old. The events of Jens' early life presaged everything that came later. His mother, his brother Niels, and he were reduced to poverty by the conventional and hypocritical social and religious mores of a 17th-century society convulsed with spasms of Reformation piety. The story begins with Jens Munk's grandfather, Niels, a nobleman from a manor house in Halland, in the then-Kingdom of Denmark.

Jens' grandfather Niels makes enemies

A nobleman was expected to marry a woman from another established noble family. Niels scorned the custom of the day and married a common woman. Niels had enemies among the other nobles, who remembered that the Munk clan had sided with **Danish king Christian II** and the peasants in the civil war of 1525. That war was primarily an uprising of peasants against the abuses of the nobility. The spiteful nobles neither forgot nor



17th century illustration of Copenhagen, Denmark.



King Christian II

forgave this egregious betrayal by one of their own. They sought revenge by using what they had, his violation of marriage custom, to strip him of his patent of nobility. His son, Erik (Jens Munk's father), was forced to begin his career with this handicap.

Jens' father Erik makes more enemies

Erik was an ambitious, arrogant,



King Frederick II

thieving scoundrel who made it his life's goal to acquire riches and regain the family title by any means necessary. He murdered and used false evidence to cheat and even hang those in his disfavor. Erik was by no means the only nobleman to engage in such behaviors, but his hyper-aggressive, imperious pursuit of property and fame offended many

among both the peasants and the nobles. He forgot that the hands you trample on the way up could expedite your way back down. Erik acquired many properties, and the king finally knighted him, but his enemies were patient and waited for the propitious moment to strike.

Under relentless accusation of foul play, fraud, and abuse of the king's property, Erik Munk finally lost all of his fiefs on the order of **King Frederick**, much like a sheriff repossessing your properties and it makes the front page news. However, Erik kept his prized title to nobility for a while, at least. He knew, that by law, his two illegitimate sons Jens and Neils (named after his grandfather) could not inherit property from him. Moreover, if he married their mother, who was a commoner, he could be punished by death. So there was to be no inherited title for Jens and his brother Neils. There was no way Erik's common-law partner Anna and her two boys could share Erik's wealth at its peak, but they all shared in his fall.

Erik mysteriously disappeared from his son's life. Jens was shipped out to Aalborg, where his father's sister was married to the mayor. It seemed as if fate smiled on Jens, for he got something of an education and acquired good manners. Jens was eight years old. He didn't know why his father had disappeared, and he never saw him again.

Jens Munk's life can best be described as a determined, indefatigable event, but ultimately frustrating effort to gain honest recognition for his exploits and contributions, and to regain his family's status as a member of the Danish nobility. It was not to be.

The Portuguese period of Munk's life

At the age of 12, in 1591, Jens Munk shipped out to Oporto, Portugal. The century following Christopher Columbus's discovery of America in 1492 had been a golden age for Portugal. They had discovered and conquered one continent after another, and at one time controlled much of India, Africa, and South America. Their discoveries came so fast, it was becoming a problem finding names for all of them, and the Portuguese began naming places after the date on which they were discovered.

Cristóvão Jacques discovered Bahia, in what is now *Brazil*, on November 1st, All Saints' Day. So it was named Bahia, which means "bay" and the full name of the place became "City of the Holy Savior on the Bay of All Saints." When another Portuguese explorer, found a bay farther south on January 1st, 1502, he named it "January River," *Rio de Janeiro*.

However, that world of Portuguese dominance came to an end in 1580, when Jens was one-year-old, when **Philip II, King of Spain**, inherited by marriage Portugal and all of its possessions. For a short time, Philip ruled an empire more than ten times the size of Alexander the Great's, from the Americas to the Chinese border.

In this changing world, Jens Munk got a position on the Dutch ship Schoubynacht, headed for Brazil and sugar. A mile from the Brazilian coast, they were attacked by French pirates. After disposing of all the others either as prisoners or killing them in combat, the French discovered seven crew members, including Jens Munk, in hiding. With a shrug of their shoulders, they put them in a boat and told them to row for shore, and left their fate to Providence. Heading south through the jungle, in a region never penetrated or colonized by the Portuguese, and hiding from hostile natives with poisonous blowpipes, swamp water, leeches, crocodiles, jaguars, 24-foot giant constrictor snakes named by the Portuguese anaconda, and fevers, the group found their way south to Bahia.

Return to Copenhagen in 1598-99

Jens found employment and remained there for the next six years, becoming fluent in Portuguese. He had lived among strangers for seven years with no word from, or about, his father. On October 1, 1598, he sailed back to Copenhagen, expecting to collect his inheritance and went directly to 21-year-old **Christian IV**, crowned king only two years before. He was informed by a functionary that all his father's property had been seized by the State. After five years of incarceration, his father had hung himself in his cell. Jens was presented with his father's silver tankard and some used clothes and signed a receipt for them.

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King Phillip II

PHOTO: COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG

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Such were the circumstances of his first time in Copenhagen, then a city of 20,000. What a blow for an ambitious young man expecting to come into possession of real estate, peasants, and of course, a title of nobility.

Undeterred, in the next six years, Jens Munk went on 17 voyages, and transitioned into a skilled, respected mariner; from cabin boy to captain.

At about this same time, 800 miles away, Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, a play based on a Scandinavian saga. Although they did not know each other, the story was almost a portent of the tragedies in store for both Jens Munk and his monarch, Christian IV.

Christian IV and the call of the Arctic

Christian IV's reign of 59 years was the longest of all the Scandinavian monarchs. He was only two years older than Jens Munk, and they were destined to interact on the world stage. Christian was 19 at his coronation as king of Denmark and Norway, and his father had ruled over more water than anyone since the days of the Vikings. With an outsized ego, Christian IV set out to eclipse his father's achievements, and become the greatest monarch of the age. The global race was on to find an alternative sea route to the riches of the Pacific trade, and in Christian IV's view, the discovery of such an alternative route needed to be made by Danish ships.

Christian authorized four voyages to find the Northwest Passage in 1605, 1606, 1607, and 1612. The explorers kidnapped some native Greenlanders and shipped them back to Copenhagen for show. While they were at it, they declared Greenland to be the new property of Denmark. In a frenzy for quick riches, no one else bothered to challenge Denmark's claim to what they didn't know was an island the size of Mexico.

What they did find was icebergs the size of cathedrals, and channels of



PHOTO: COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG

King Christian IV

water that seemed to offer safe passage forward, only to fill quickly with ice floes ten feet thick that crowded their ships and prevented retreat. For the next two centuries, the much-anticipated shortcut between two oceans was revealed as a labyrinth in which ships and hundreds of men disappeared without a trace.



A Danish naval ship from Christian IV's time. Though there is no image of the ship captained by Jens Munk, it is expected that it looked much like this illustration from *The History of Denmark, Volume 4*.

Could Jens Munk succeed where Henry Hudson and William Barents had failed?

1609-1610 (Please refer to maps)

In 1596, Dutch explorer William Barents discovered Spitzbergen while looking for the northeastern passage to China. He got locked into the ice on the body of water-bearing his name, and he and his crew were forced to spend an entire year on Novaya Zemlya (Arctic Russian archipelago north of the Ural Mountains) before the ice broke up enough for them to take a small boat through. Barents didn't make the trip home. It is not known how the 12 survivors disposed of his body.

In 1607, Henry Hudson had the same idea, and he attempted to find a northeast passage and got as far as Spitzbergen before being turned back by ice. Hudson's report of large groups of whales on this voyage may have been a strong motivation for European interest in the Arctic whaling business in the following years. In 1608, Henry attempted again to find the Northeast

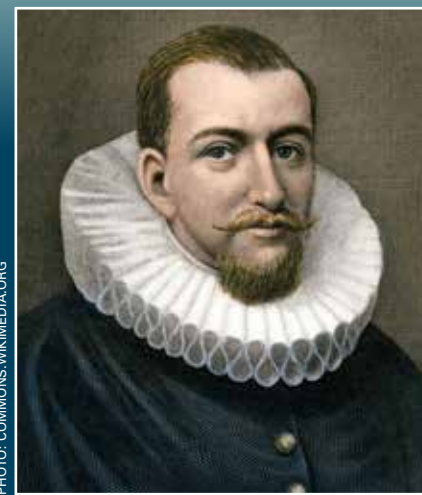


PHOTO: COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG

Henry Hudson

Passage, this time making it to Novaya Zemlya, where even in June they found the ice impenetrable.

In 1609, Henry Hudson was commissioned by the Dutch East India Company, Henry's third time to seek the eastern passage across the top of Siberia, but he once again was blocked by ice north of Norway. Without permission, Hudson changed course and sailed in the opposite direction, to North America, where he discovered the bay to what is now Manhattan, and he explored the river named after him to Albany. For several years, Jens Munk and Henry Hudson were crisscrossing the seas, each going in the opposite direction, but with very similar intentions and destinations; to be the first to find either a northeast or a northwest passage across the top of

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Hudson reported large groups of Arctic whales on his voyage in 1607, may have encourage the increase in the whaling business in following years.



MAP: WIKIMEDIA

Map of the Barents Sea and Novaya Zemlya (circled), where William Barent

and his crew were forced to spend an entire year after his ship became locked in the Arctic ice. He did not survive the trip home.



PHOTO: NATIONAL MARITIME MUSEUM

The death of Willem Barents, 1597, by Christian Julius Lodewyck Portman

Hudson's Final Voyage

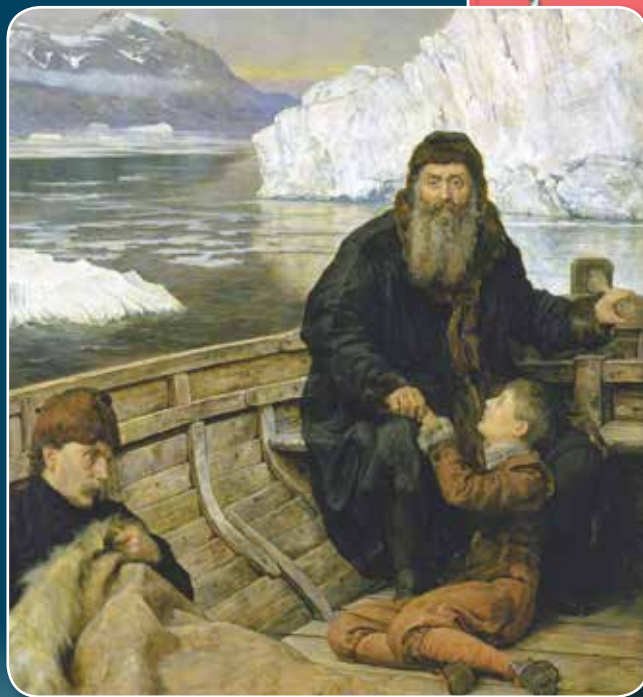
The British East India Company and the Muscovy Company, along with private sponsors, jointly funded Hudson's fourth voyage, on which he sought the possible Pacific-bound channel. Hudson sailed from London in April 1610 in the 55-ton ship *Discovery*, stopped briefly in Iceland, then continued west. After traversing the coast again, he passed through the inlet described by a previous explorer as a potential entry point to a northwest passage. (Now called *Hudson Strait*, it runs between Baffin Island and northern Quebec.) When the coastline suddenly opened up towards the south, Hudson believed he might have found the Pacific, but he soon realized he had sailed into a gigantic bay, now called Hudson Bay.

Hudson continued sailing southward along the bay's eastern coast until he reached its southernmost extremity.

While enduring harsh winter conditions with no outlet to the Pacific in sight, some crewmembers grew restless and hostile, suspecting Hudson of hoarding rations to give to his favorites. In June 1611, as the expedition began heading back to England, sailors Henry Green and



MAP: COMMONS:WIKIMEDIA.ORG



Robert Juet (who had been demoted as mate) led a mutiny. Seizing Hudson and his son, they cast them adrift on Hudson Bay in a small open lifeboat, along with seven other men who were suffering from scurvy. Hudson was never heard from again.

In 1881, artist John Maler Collier, painted "The Last Voyage of Henry Hudson", an oil painting depicting a forsaken Henry, his son, and a crew member after they were set adrift in the harsh environment of northern Canada.

One of the most intrepid explorers of his age, he was not a man who easily gave up. Historians agree that was Hudson's steely nature to press on and meet his objective that led to his demise, whatever that may have been.

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the world, and to link the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans.

In 1608, Munk bought an old ship with his savings. He went in a partnership with Jens Hvid, and together they set sail on May 21, 1609, for Novaya Zemlya, one year after Henry Hudson was there. For Munk, was this his appointment with destiny, his chance to regain his stature in society?

While Munk was retracing Henry Hudson's voyage to Novaya Zemlya, Hudson was sailing around the southern tip of Greenland, continuing west, where he discovered Hudson Bay, a body of water twice the size of the Baltic Sea. Henry thought he had found the Northwest Passage. They got caught in the ice at James Bay, where they had to winter over. With food supplies perilously low, the next spring his crew mutinied and put Henry, his teenage son, and seven others who were sick, on a small boat with a few provisions. They were never seen again.

As Munk and Hvid approached the White Sea, Hvid opted to head to the mainland to do some bear hunting, somewhere near Kanin Noss, and Munk pressed on toward Novaya Zemlya. Charts were non-existent, and the maps were useless. Clouds and fog impeded the making of astronomical calculations, and the high magnetic latitude compromised their compass readings.

They had to grope their way through with visibility no greater than the length of their ship. With the advent of spring, the top three feet of land surface melted, with no drainage and impassable marshes. Many of the seamen who managed to survive the ice reached land only to drown in the muck. With high vapor content in the air and gray, dreary, monotonous skies overhead, and almost no sun, the voyagers could only judge time by their clocks.



MAP: WIKIMEDIA

Map of White Sea, where Munk and Hvid groped their way through dense fog with visibility no greater than the length of their ship.

The sound of the ice grinding against the ship's side was terrifying, and it became even more so when the noise stopped. They put on more sail to maneuver in the ice, and with the canvas as taut as steel, the ship either didn't move, or it moved independently of the rudder. Munk's old ship could not withstand the pressure from the ice. "Rivet sickness," when the nails in a wooden ship below the water line rust through all at the same time, signaled the end. Water came pouring into the hold, where they kept all of their stores. Munk gave the order to abandon ship.

They spent the next two weeks rebuilding the small lifeboat from the sunken ship, with high sides, a single sail, and planks held together with reindeer sinew. Sixteen men piled in and rowed over 200 kilometers through ice-filled water, and succeeded in a rendezvous with Hvid at Kanin Noss. Jens sat at the tiller with his compass and brought them through the fog to their destination. By September, they were all back in Copenhagen. Jens

Munk had proven himself an excellent navigator, and a captain who brought his men safely home. However, he was broke once again.

In 1610, King Christian IV, having heard of Jens Munk's bringing his crew back from certain death, provided him with two royal ships to try again to find the elusive shortcut to China, and again Munk returned without results, blocked by ice.

Jens Munk's role in the Kalmar War 1611-1613

Christian IV was temporarily distracted by a short war with Sweden called the Kalmar War. As a naval squadron leader, Munk's role in the capture of the critical fortress Älvsborg brought him into close contact with Christian IV. Before the war came to an untimely end due to the plague that decimated the ranks of both the Swedes and the Danes, Munk distinguished himself in battle, successfully attacking under heavy fire.

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When he was immobilized by the disease that ravaged the entire region, the king sent him medications, but his counterpart, the leader of land forces, was given property and knighted. Once again Jens Munk's greatest wish was denied him while it was awarded to one of his peers. Christian IV felt obliged to avoid confrontation with the powerful nobles who were the unforgiving enemies of the Munk family name.

The war was considered a tremendous Danish military success, and there was great jubilation in Copenhagen and celebration all around. It was to prove Denmark's last.

Jens Munk as a pirate hunter 1614

Munk and his friend Jorgen Daa were assigned by Christian IV to seek out and capture a famous pirate. They chased him to the White Sea, where Jens Munk outsmarted him and militarily outfought him. Munk and Daa came back to Copenhagen with three pirate ships loaded with treasure chests of gold and silver, and three whaling ships. At a time when Christian IV was devaluing the Danish currency to afford his spending habits, this was a huge financial success, without even considering putting this menace to Danish commerce out of business! In an effort to prove that whatever the commoner Jens Munk could do, the nobles could do better, they persuaded Christian IV that this rogue marine terrorist had brothers and much other treasure that could yet be seized, and the king sent them out in a ridiculous search for nonexistent pirates with twice the ships and three times the manpower. They took twice as long as Jens Munk had, and they came back without ever laying eyes on the mast of a pirate ship. To add insult to injury, Munk was required to go with them, but demoted to a humiliating post on an expedition led by incompetent, partying noblemen who considered themselves his betters. No loot and no rewards.



PHOTO: COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG

Munk distinguished himself in battle during the Kalmar War, successfully attacking under heavy fire to capture Sweden's critical fortress Älvsborg. The original fortress was located on the mainland, on the southern shore of the estuary, above modern day Klippan. Few ruins are visible today.

Captain Jan Mendoza was a Spanish pirate, whose career in the North Sea caused serious problems for Denmark's king Christian IV because of the economic damages Mendoza inflicted. To counter these acts of aggression, the king sent two pirate hunters after him—Admiral Jørgen Daa, and explorer-adventurer Jens Munk.

They chased Mendoza from England to the coast of northern Russia, and back, with two battleships, "Victor", and "Jupiter". They finally caught up with him, and Munk chased Mendoza into a small fjord.

Captain Daa hoped to solve matters peacefully, and suggested a meeting where they would discuss surrender. Mendoza rejected his invitation unless Daa was willing to offer Jens Munk as insurance. Munk didn't mind, but the second he set foot on Mendoza's ship he was bound and treated like a prisoner. Mendoza reneged on his promise and remained on the ship.

Munk stayed the night, knowing Captain Daa would signal him with a cannon shot when they came to help him. In addition, because Jens had seen the pirate's defense, he thought of a better strategy for dealing with his captors. He threatened Mendoza with such calm firmness that Mendoza set him free.

Munk and Captain Daa attacked the pirates shortly thereafter, coming from three sides: from the "Victor," the "Jupiter", and from the beach. After a lengthy battle, where one-third of Mendoza's crew were killed, all three ships were almost blown to pieces. Captain Mendoza surrendered, and his crew members were executed by drowning.

Mendoza and his first mate were sent to Copenhagen to be hanged. In Mendoza's ship, Daa and Jens Munk found riches worthy of a great pirate: ten chests loaded with gold, all so heavy that it took ten men to carry just one of them. — Source: Listverse

Jens Munk in the whaling business 1617-1618

In most years, explorers were far outnumbered by the whalers. Between the 17th and 19th centuries, there were over 29,000 whaling voyages to Spitzbergen, Davis Strait, and Hudson Bay. Hundreds, probably thousands of unknown whalers were crushed or otherwise lost in the ice. Explorers often found whalers and fur trappers a source of valuable information, but few of them left written records behind.

Whaling was a complicated business that required experience and organization. The Basques, from the mountainous border region between Spain and France, were the best in the industry. The English and the Dutch were trying to run the Basques out of business, by attacking their whaling ships with their big warships. The Basques were in temporary retreat, in hiding.

It was Jens Munk who took six months traveling all over France looking for the Basques, negotiating with them, and persuading them to come work under the Danish flag, and teach the Danes the business. In this manner, Jens was critical to the establishment of the fledgling Danish whaling industry.

Jens invested his considerable savings with an experienced whaling partner, Mikkel Vibe in 1617. In the first year of the business, he doubled his profit. Everyone likes to touch the sleeve of a winner, hoping it will rub off. So when Christian IV planned a great colonial expedition to the East Indies, he selected Jens Munk to personally lead the 1,000 man force. Jens immediately went to work on intense preparations, with attention to every detail. Six months into the plan, Christian IV changed his mind. Munk would not be the admiral. He wouldn't even go on the trip. He was replaced by a 24-year-old novice, without any naval experience or the tropics. However, he was a noble.

Some sources indicate Jens Munk



ARTIST: JOHN STOBART - ARCTIC WHALING



ARTIST: ABRAHAM STORCK - DUTCH WHALERS NEAR SPITZBERGEN, 1690

asked to withdraw from the expedition. If this is so, it is doubtless because he had already experienced a lifetime of loyally supplying the experience and expertise but being denied the authority, and routinely cheated of recognition. He recognized the game, and he didn't want to play anymore.

While Jens had been preoccupied with the preparations for the massive colonial expedition, fate conspired against him. Expecting a whaling season similar to the previous one, he

was stunned to learn that enormous amounts of Arctic ice had prevented whaling that season. The two ships returned to port without even one barrel of whale oil.

Jens Munk had no reserves and no credit. He was financially ruined, and he had to withdraw from the company formed with Vibe. The whaling industry, organized around the Basques he had brought in, flourished in future decades, but without Munk.

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A race to the finish

Munk knew the route his replacement would have to take to get to East India, and he knew that if he could find the storied Northwest Passage first, he could cut the distance in half and arrive in East India ahead of his rival, the 24-year-old nobleman Ove Giedde. What a sweet triumph that would be! He approached Christian IV, and perhaps overtaken by some temporary guilt for having previously abused Munk, Christian gave him two ships, the Unicorn and the Lamprey, and 65 men. The race was on!

Munk and his crew found their way to the Hudson Bay that had already claimed its namesake, Henry Hudson, in 1619. They did not find the Northwest Passage or East India.

During the following winter near what is now Churchill, Manitoba, every single member of his crew except two died of starvation, exposure, or scurvy. Thinking himself the only one left, Jens Munk sat down and penned his Last will, on June 4, 1620. As he prepared his final thoughts, two more survivors showed up. Together they modified the smaller ship, the Lamprey. Then Jens Munk performed the near impossible, and brought the three of them past Greenland and across the stormy North Atlantic, and with precision, to Bergen, in just two months! Three emaciated, exhausted men in a small ship designed for a crew of 16. Jens Munk may not have been the master of his fate, but he was undoubtedly a master and courageous mariner.

Jens Munk returned to the service of Christian IV, who had led Denmark into the disastrous Thirty Years War. Munk died of injuries on June 26, 1628, according to one source, inflicted by Christian IV with a wooden stick in one final disagreement with his loyal servant.

As for Christian IV, he died 20 years later, on February 28, 1648, lonely, bitter, and broke. Denmark and its many institutions were bankrupt, and even the king's crown was in hock.



PHOTO: ROAYL MUSEUMS GREENWICH

1619-1620 Jens Munk's route to the Hudson Bay, to present day Churchill, Manitoba, Canada, in a futile search for the fabled Northwest Passage to India.

The day after Christian IV's funeral, a merchant demanded payment for the fabric to line the king's coffin. They had to buy his shroud on credit. His family was not there to comfort him as he lay dying of stomach cancer. His longtime lover was with another man; his favorite daughter had married a traitor to the throne, and his eldest son and heir to the throne was dead of drink and dissipation the year before.

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy was about whether the anguish, heartache, and setbacks of an exhausting life were worth the effort, the constant striving:

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,

Or whether death should be welcomed as relief from such suffering: To die: to sleep...

In conclusion

Death was the great equalizer for Jens Munk and Christian IV, and now, belatedly and posthumously, Jens Munk is getting the recognition he deserves, for his out-of-this-world big ideas, and his death-defying resolve to test them. He never saw failures as reasons to quit, and he refused to be intimidated by those who thought an accident of birth made them superior to him. He was educated, multi-lingual, a highly skilled mariner who often

brought his men home against all odds. He was ambitious and persistent, but with the humility to eventually accept what he could not change. He was considered a commoner, but he was a most uncommon man.



PHOTO: ALOVELYWORLD.COM

In 1628, Jens Munk took his last breath in Copenhagen, and was buried in the Saint Nicholas Church in the same city. Sadly, if there was a headstone or plot marker identifying where he was laid to rest, it has disappeared, and all information about the location of his burial plot has been lost forever.

His legacy lives on, however, and in 2019-2020, we celebrate The 400th Anniversary of his days in Canada.

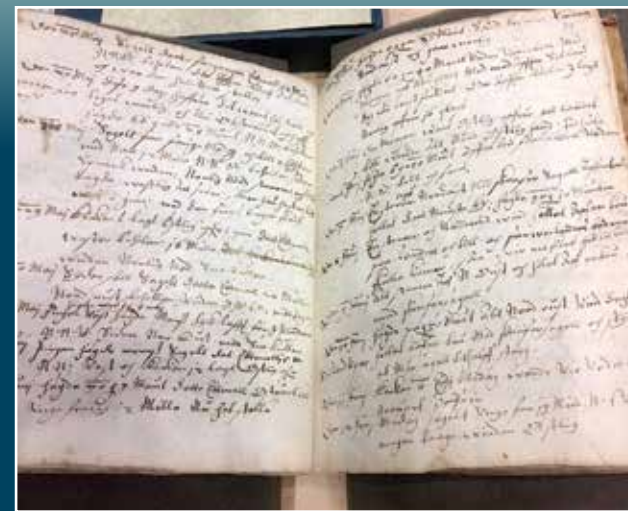


PHOTO: ANNETTE LILLEVANG KRISTIANSEN

There is no image of Jens Munk, but his original 400-year-old diary has survived the ages, and is today displayed in the Royal Library in Copenhagen. It is handwritten and very well-preserved. How fortunate that the diary still exists today, when it could easily have been lost, as his burial site has been.

Nordvest Xpediten

Northwest Expedition

400 years after the Jens Munk's expedition to the Hudson, Danish filmmaker Ole Japp, trained as an advertising photographer, has created a film that took more than seven years to complete. The film, *Nordvest Xpediten*, has been Japp's dream for decades, and was first shown in 2015 in Denmark.

"I remember, I first read about Jens Munk back in school, and I've been fascinated with him ever since. He's always been in my heart. I simply couldn't let go of the story about



PHOTO: ANNETTE LILLEVANG KRISTIANSEN

Japp with ship models used in film.

him..." said Japp.

The film's screenwriter and cinematographer also plays the main character, Jens Munk, in the movie.

Following the events listed in Munk's diary, the crew set up sets and scenes in the sequence in which Munk described them.

When little is known about the expedition it was necessary to interpret a number of episodes in the film. Today, nobody knows exactly how the ships *Unicorn* and the *Lampray* looked, so Japp studied a number of paintings of ships from the same era to get the right look.

When the movie had its debut in 2015, it was quite well received by the Danish audience. Seventeen cinemas in Denmark showed the film.

"We were very proud, because our movie had a bigger audience than the movie *Hidalgo*, starring the famous Danish-American actor, Viggo Mortensen, for a period of time. Of course that's great to experience. The *Jens Munk* film was a true passion project, and of course, it's great to see

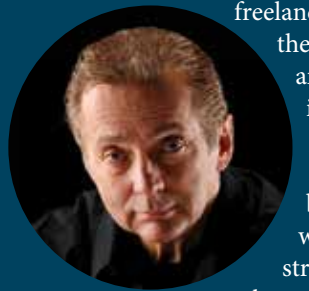


PHOTO: JAPP PRODUCTION

that the audience liked it", said Japp.

Today, there is little remaining of Jens Munk's expedition. A couple of cannon balls and a piece of iron from the frigate *Unicorn* were unearthed in 1964, during an expedition to the mouth of the Churchill River. Scientists are almost certain the cannon balls and other artifacts are from the *Unicorn*, but the ship was destroyed by the strong ice packs.

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