

Seventy-seven years ago a tragedy took place in the Norwegian Arctic which shook the international community—especially Norwegians—and led to the public condemnation of the Italian explorer and airship builder Umberto Nobile. Steinar Aas, historian and author of a book on Nobile, has perused a trove of “new” material recently donated to the Norwegian Polar Institute and the Polar Museum in Tromsø, Norway. In this (unreviewed) piece, Aas explains why he finds the new collection a fascinating subject for further research.



## New perspectives on the *Italia* tragedy and Umberto Nobile

Steinar Aas

*Dept. of History, University of Tromsø, NO-9037 Tromsø, Norway, steinara@sv.uit.no.*

The summer of 2005 marks 77 years since the dirigible *Italia*, skippered by Umberto Nobile, crashed on the ice north of Svalbard. This not only set off the largest and most comprehensive search and rescue mission the world had yet seen; it also led to the disappearance of the Norwegian polar explorer and national hero Roald Amundsen. While searching for Nobile and his companions, Amundsen and the French crew of the seaplane *Latham* disappeared somewhere between Tromsø and Spitsbergen. The Italian had been unpopular in Norway before this; public sentiment now went from bad to worse. The disapprobation was strengthened when Nobile emerged safely after 40 days on the drift ice; Amundsen was never seen again. A newspaper reviled Nobile as a gilded fascistic court jester, whose “insane enterprise was the cause of the whole tragedy” (*Friheten* 1928). When the rescued men arrived at the northern Norwegian seaport of Narvik the public mood was malevolent (Cross 2000).

One reason for the antipathy was that Norwegians had been fed with a smear campaign against Nobile since 1927. “The Amundsen–Ellsworth–Nobile trans-polar flight” flew successfully across the North Pole from Rome to Alaska with the dirigible *Norge* in 1926. After that, Amundsen and Nobile fell out with each other, and the Norwegian polar hero publicly showered insults on Nobile: he was a vain, arrogant and conceited boaster, a silly dreamer with vulgar and bad taste. He was crazy about uniforms, nervous, ridiculous and spoiled, and totally

lacked self-control. Amundsen's views (Amundsen 1927) remained undisputed until the late 1970s.

The hatred towards Nobile was underlain by nationalism and expansionism. Norwegian imperialism in the Arctic seas brought Svalbard under Norwegian rule, and Norwegian nationalists felt that Greenland ought to be next in line. A Communist newspaper in northern Norway (*Friheten* 1928) opined that exploration was part of an "imperialistic colonization policy", the *Italia* expedition "had the intention of enhancing the prestige of Italian imperialism" and Nobile's expedition was a result of "arrogant chauvinism and idiotic fascist agitation". The discovery of coal deposits in Svalbard showed that the areas around the North Pole might be economically exploited. Would oil be found there too? A Swede described the anti-Italian mood in Norway at the time: Norwegians wanted the poles to themselves and the Italians should direct their exploration towards warmer, more southerly regions (Lundborg 1928).

Norwegian chauvinism and racism lurked in the background. The Norwegian public had a great appetite for anything that savoured of masculine intrepidity in the polar regions. Polar explorers like Nansen were public heroes in Norway after their skiing exploits in the Arctic and the Antarctic (Berggård 1958). What business did someone like Nobile, with his non-Nordic physique and who didn't even ski, have in the far north? In Amundsen's view it was ridiculous to believe that men of "half tropical breed" could make any headway in the polar regions, and his friend the Tromsø pharmacist Zapffe was contemptuous about the participation of Italians in polar exploration after the *Norge* expedition. "Those black gypsies should never have gone along. They do not fit in among Norwegians", he wrote (Norwegian National Library, letter collection).

On Thursday 26 July 1928 the shipwrecked crew of the *Italia* arrived at Narvik on the warship *Città di Milano*. Nobile was on board, depressed, billeted as though he were a prisoner, with orders not to make contact with any of the hun-



Umberto Nobile on the deck of the *Città di Milano*, summer 1928. (All images courtesy of the Norwegian Polar Institute Picture Library, except where otherwise noted.)

dred or so people who had gathered on the quay. As the ship headed towards land, the people of Narvik played the part of the chorus in a Greek tragedy. The local papers had instructed the crowd on how to receive Nobile. The pompous general should have followed the example of Judas. He should have hanged himself for his transgression. Others preferred to receive him in icy silence: “If the general is to pass from the harbour to the railway station, we should at the very most allow ourselves to air our feelings by shouting ‘Down with the general’ or—so that the dagos would understand—‘*Abasso Nobile! A morte Nobile!*’ (Down with Nobile! Death to Nobile!)” (*Fremover* 1928). Nobile was “a fool of a general” whereas Amundsen was “a stalwart figure”. The gangway was placed so it led directly from the ship into the railway wagon “so the passengers did not have to set foot on the quay”; Nobile was not allowed to “defile Norway’s soil by setting his damned feet on it” (*Fremover* 1928). The humiliation did not stop at that. After Nobile’s return to Italy the Fascists appointed a committee to investigate the case, which resulted in degradation and exile until 1943 (Nobile 1946).

After the fall of Mussolini, Nobile was rehabilitated in his native country and abroad (Nobile 1946). In Norway, however, little happened. Now and again, usually in connection with memorial events for the *Norge* journey or to mark Amundsen’s death, there were fresh attacks against Nobile. Only scattered voices were heard in his defence. Foremost among these was the polar scientist, professor Adolf Hoel, who played a central role when Svalbard became part of the kingdom of Norway and in establishing what later became the Norwegian Polar Institute. He was an authoritative figure in Norway. Compromising his credibility, however, was Hoel’s conviction for treason after he took the



Nobile disembarking from the *Città di Milano* to the waiting train at the Narvik harbour. The gangway led directly to the railway car so that Nobile would not “defile Norway’s soil by setting his damned feet on it”. (Photograph courtesy of the Narvik Municipality Picture Collection.)

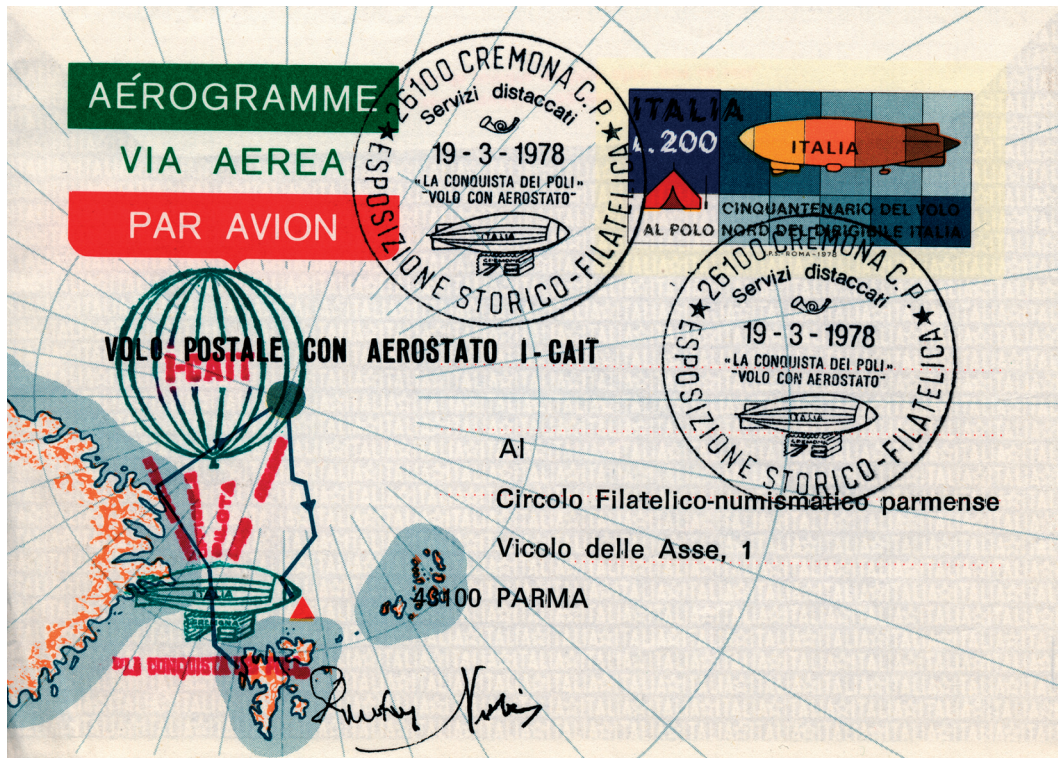


Above and opposite page: postcard and envelope commemorating the 50th anniversary of Nobile's polar expedition with the airship *Italia* in 1928. Both are signed by Nobile.

position as dean of the Nazified University of Oslo during the German occupation of Norway.

Hoel found the Norwegian reaction to the loss of Amundsen hard to understand and felt that Nobile had been unfairly maligned both in Norway and internationally. In 1959 he wrote: "As recently as this summer and autumn there have been several attacks in the press against general Nobile in Norway. In other countries the tragic fate of Nobile and his companions is being dealt with in an understanding manner" (Norwegian Polar Institute Library, Umberto Nobile file). Hoel continued: "There must be something wrong with the Norwegian mentality if one never ceases to attack Nobile and his companions, 'these swarthy orange-pickers', as a Norwegian paper so tastefully phrased it after the catastrophe".

Fifty years have gone by since Hoel wrote this. Could it be that Norwegians have now come far enough to reject this kind of attitude? The time had not yet come in 1976, when the Norwegian polar research community erected a memorial in honour of the *Norge* expedition in Ny-Ålesund, Svalbard: a



bust of Roald Amundsen was placed on a marble pedestal with the inscription: “Roald Amundsen 1872–1928. In memory of the airship *Norge* and its journey across the North Pole in 1926.” A corresponding monument was erected in Nome, Alaska. The monuments bear both the Norwegian and the American flags. There was no room for the Italian flag, nor for Umberto Nobile. This was noticed in Italy, and the leading Italian newspaper, *Corriere della Sera*, asked the natural question: “By coincidence or on purpose?” (Norwegian Polar Institute Library, Umberto Nobile file).

It took the Italian Air Force to correct the oversight, if that is what it had been. In 1983 a plaque was added to the monument in Nome, and the following year to the one in Ny-Ålesund, in memory of “the Amundsen–Ellsworth–Nobile transpolar flight”. At the bottom it reads, “Placed here by the Italian Air Force”. When the Norwegian embassy in Rome discovered that awkward questions were being asked in Italy regarding how Norway was handling this aspect of its polar history, an express telegram went to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Governor of Svalbard, so that the latter, at least, formally received the Italian contingent who travelled to Ny-Ålesund to unveil the plaque in 1984. (Norwegian Polar Institute Library, Umberto Nobile file).

Umberto Nobile lived nearly half his life after 1948. He died in Rome on

30 July 1978, a good 93 years old. The old man had then achieved more than any person can normally expect during a lifetime. Despite his negative press in Norway, he had received gold medals from both the Swedish and the Italian geographical societies. He had received a gold medal from the US Congress

Story published on 21 September 1980 in the *San Benito News* (San Benito, Texas), annotated by Ove Hermansen. He received the photocopy from Nobile's widow, Gertrude, during the early 1980s. This is one of numerous newspaper articles in the collection which Hermansen donated to the Norwegian Polar Institute.

6A SAN BENITO NEWS, SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 21, 1980

# Monument Ignores Polar Hero

## Italy Wants Explanation

By CM. ROBINSON III  
Managing Editor

In 1926, the airship Norge made history's first transpolar flight. The trip from Rome, Italy, to Nome, Alaska, not only proved such a flight was feasible, but established the existence of a vast polar sea, completely devoid of land.

The Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen provided his reputation and experience on the expedition.

Lindaco Ellsworth, an American millionaire, put up the front money. Italy provided the ship, the technology and most of the crew.

But more than that, Italy provided leadership with Gen. Umberto Nobile, a 41-year-old Air Force engineer.

Nobile had originally designed the ship for use in the Mediterranean area, and supervised its modifications for polar flight. During the final 71 hours from Spitzbergen, north of Norway, to Alaska, he was up almost constantly, monitoring every aspect of the flight. He slept only in catnaps.

Yet in a statue of Amundsen, erected in Nome in 1976, does not mention either Nobile or Italy. And the Italian government is making inquiries.

The matter was brought up last March, when Gen. Giuseppe Pesce, superintendent of the Italian Air Force Museum at Vigna di Valle, mentioned it in a letter to the Italian-American magazine "L'Am."

Although Pesce originally speculated a plaque noting

Italy's achievements could be bought from private subscription, the Italian government has since taken a hand. "The Italian Air Force and the Italian government are willing to participate in modifications to this statue or the erection of another statue," Brig. Gen. Giorgio Santucci told the News this week.

In a letter to Nome city officials, Santucci wrote, "It is universally recognized that the flight was organized and conducted by Nobile, who also built the dirigible, 'Norge'." On the commemorative plaque," he continued, "it appears on the contrary, that the flight was conducted by Amundsen, thus contradicting even the official affirmations of the great Norwegian explorer himself."

Santucci was also displeased that only the Norwegian and American flags appear on the plaque, even though the Norge dropped flags of all three countries on the North Pole.

"The failure to mention the Italian contribution, besides being an objective distortion of history, offends and displeases the Italians," he continued, and repeated Italy's offer of assistance.

Where did all this begin? Airplanes were still frail little craft in 1925, and it was generally accepted long flights should be made by the big, gas-filled, steel-reinforced airships.

That year, Amundsen and Ellsworth had made an abortive attempt to reach the North Pole in a plane. Although he had never met them, Nobile followed reports of the expedition and wondered whether a flight could be made in an airship. But because the ships could be handled more easily than airplanes, Nobile was not content with just a polar flight. He wanted to explore the entire arctic region.

Amundsen apparently had

the same idea, because he contacted Nobile about using an Italian airship. The Norwegian Aero Club and Ellsworth put up much of the money, and the dirigible N-1 was renamed "Norge," the Norwegian word for "Norway." She was 317 feet long and 65 feet in diameter and powered by three 250 hp engines, with a top speed of 70.2 mph.

The Norge left Ciampino airport in Rome on April 10, 1926. In a series of steps, she flew to England, Norway and the USSR, finally coming down in Spitzbergen in the Arctic Ocean. There, preparations were made for the final run

across the top of the world. At 8:30 a.m. May 11, she took off and headed North.

Everyman was in his place. The engineers were in the gondolas, checking the machinery, the wireless operator in his cabin and the meteorologist making his observations. Others checked the hull and the gasbags, and examined the ship for ice formation.

In addition to command, Nobile also kept the critical post of elevator helmsman, controlling the ship's up or down movements.

At 1:30 a.m. May 12, the Norge reached the pole.

Amundsen dropped the Norwegian flag and Ellsworth, the American. Nobile dropped the same Italian tricolor that had flown from the stern of the ship for two years.

Now they were in unexplored area. No one knew what lay beyond, and as big as it, there was the threat of crashing into some unknown mountain. But as it was, there was only ice on a vast ocean. Ice began forming on the ship as well.

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GEN. UMBERTO NOBILE  
...Neglected Hero



POLAR FLIGHTS — A mural at the Italian Air Force Museum shows the arctic expeditions of General Amundsen (right center). However a plaque in Nome, Alaska, where the flight ended, makes no mention of either Italy or Nobile.

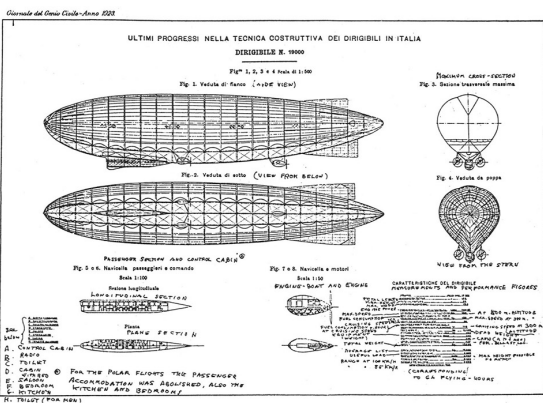
## Nobile

(Continued from Page 6A)

Norwegian was moved to praise Nobile's leadership in his subsequent book. Discussing the landing in heavy winds, Amundsen wrote, "It was splendidly done and we take of our hats to the skipper of the ship for the quiet, neat manner in which he accomplished it."

But none of this is mentioned in the monument at Nome, which states, "The flight was carried out by Roald Amundsen and his men including an American, Lincoln Ellsworth."

In both his letter to Nome officials and in a conversation with the News, Santucci said Italians are not the only ones offended. "Many American citizens, of Italian descent and those who are not, have noticed this and feel something should be done about it."



AIRSHIP — A drawing from a 1923 Italian engineering magazine shows specifications of the "N-1" series airships designed by the late Gen. Umberto Nobile. The ship "N-1" was later renamed "Norge" and used in the world's first transpolar flight, from Rome, Italy, to

Nome, Alaska. Although Nobile commanded the expedition, neither he nor Italy are mentioned in the monument. Notes in English were inserted at Nobile's direction, shortly before his death in 1928.

and military distinctions in Italy. He was even bestowed with the Order of St. Olav from the Royal House of Norway after the *Norge* expedition in 1926, and he got distinctions from the Emperor of Japan and France's Legion of Honour. A mountain south of Kongsfjorden, the fjord on which the research village of Ny-Ålesund, Svalbard, is located, was named after Nobile, and an area at Rome's international airport, Fiumicino, bears his name. In Milan a large public square was named after Kongsfjorden (Baia del Re) in memory of the *Italia* expedition in 1928, and roads and squares have been given Umberto Nobile's name in Anchorage, Alaska, as well as in Berlin, Eboli, Lauro and Salerno (Aas 2002).

In recent years, several Norwegian sources have given more balanced presentations of the events in 1928. There are now film and print biographical portrayals of Roald Amundsen which reveal the less heroic aspects of his character and life (Larsen 1995; Gynnild 2002; *Frosset hjerte* 1999) and I have authored a biography of Nobile in Norwegian (Aas 2002). The tendency has been towards an increasingly critical view of the Norwegian heroes, while Nobile's achievements have been assessed in a more nuanced and objective way.

Recently, more historical material has emerged that may put the events of the *Italia* expedition and the rescue missions in a new light. The Danish air traffic controller Ove Hermansen has put his private archives—a treasure trove of manuscripts, letters, clippings and photographs relating to Nobile—at the disposal of the Norwegian Polar Institute. Much of the material was written by Nobile himself. As of this spring, researchers may access this material at the Norwegian Polar Institute's library, in Tromsø. It may provide new knowledge and new opportunities for research projects linked to the dramatic polar misadventures of 1928.

Among other things, Hermansen's collection includes an extensive personal correspondence between himself and Nobile, written between 1966 and the Italian's death in 1978. The Dane is extremely interested in aircraft and polar history. Thus the issues that have been of particular interest to Hermansen are naturally linked to the events of 1928, but the archives also show Nobile's views concerning other issues related to those events. From the Norwegian scientists' point of view, it is a bonus that the material is mainly in languages that are more accessible than the material at the Centro Documentazione Umberto Nobile at the Museo Storico dell'Aeronautica Militare Italiana in Vigna di Valle, Italy. In other words, you do not need to understand Italian to do research with these sources. Hermansen's Nobile collection is also of great importance for those who want an exact presentation of the occurrences in 1928. The positions of aircraft and ships, dates, times, events and activities have all been registered, crosschecked and arranged in the correct sequence—a gargantuan undertaking on Hermansen's part. Secondary literature has been checked against prima-



General Nobile (left) and Vice Admiral Vigliani at the unveiling of the Nobile monument in Tromsø, Norway, 22 June 1969. The monument, erected during the 175th anniversary of the establishment of Tromsø Municipality, was financed by the Nobile family and other Italian individuals and companies. Nobile was 84 years old at the time. (Photo bT. Gjelsvik, courtesy of the Norwegian Polar Institute Picture Library.)

ry sources and organized so that nothing is left uncorrected. In addition, Hermansen has compiled an archive of newspaper clippings with particularly useful material from Norwegian, Swedish and Danish papers, as well as from the non-Scandinavian press. There is also some new photographic material, mainly from the Dane Ludvig Varming, who took part in the search for the shipwrecked Italians.

Hermansen spent much of his spare time collecting this material. He corresponded with commander Gunnar Hovdenak, who led the search for Roald Amundsen. Tryggve Gran, who financed a private search expedition for Amundsen, was also part of Hermansen's network. Hermansen's collection of books on the subject numbered over 100, and he used them to construct an extraordinarily thorough and extensive day-by-day account of the summer of 1928. This allows us to follow the progress of each of the expeditions. Hermansen also communicated with many other writers who worked on the subject, seeking, for example, to clarify inaccuracies in their books. The extensive correspondence about the subject amount-

ed to 700 letters, which have been bound into seven volumes. His newspaper clippings on Nobile have been organized into five volumes.

The breakthrough in Hermansen's research came in September 1966, when he established contact with Nobile, who turned out to be living in Rome in the best of health. They soon developed a close friendship, and Hermansen visited Rome a number of times as a guest of the Nobile family. Hermansen's great interest and knowledge of the subject prompted Nobile to single him out to look after his historical interests after his death. For the 50th anniversary of the trans-polar flight with the dirigible *Norge*, Hermansen was asked to represent Den-



mark at the commemoration in Rome. The friendship lasted until Nobile died in 1979 and Hermansen stayed in touch with Nobile's family until around 1990. Unfortunately, Hermansen never realized his dream of writing the definitive book about the subject, but he became an inspiration to other writers, among them Alexander McKee, Anders Odsbjerg and Poul Larsen, who all published books on Nobile and gave credit to Hermansen for his great assistance.

What may prove especially interesting about the new material is how Nobile tried to improve his reputation in Scandinavia. Hermansen attempted to contribute to this through his network of polar enthusiasts in Norway, Sweden and Denmark. His collection contains a number of manuscripts, books, articles and historical presentations that shed light on diverse aspects of Nobile's character,

Record cover of Ennio Morricone's musical score to *The red tent*. The film was based on the crash of the *Italia*.



using material that would otherwise have been difficult to access. Hermansen has also compiled a lucid account of all the literature that has been published in the wake of the *Italia* tragedy. Combined with the wide selection of scientific literature at the Norwegian Polar Institute Library, the Hermansen collection will be of great interest to researchers who want to delve into the sources. The material will be of particular interest when it comes to research on the recollections of the people involved in the events of 1928—what they remember and how it was portrayed. Commemorations of Amundsen have often presented conceptions and pictures from out of the past, sometimes perpetuating the misconceptions that characterized the Norwegian media's view of Nobile that prevailed in 1928. In 1970–72 there was a major international discussion about *The red tent* (1971). Nobile himself had an opportunity to comment on the film and he reacted strongly to its tendentious presentation. The film contributed to the unfavourable impression of Nobile, and the Hermansen archives will give new perspectives on the debates that surrounded it.

Through this material one can get to know Umberto Nobile better: what he was like, how he thought and how he felt about himself and others when he had time and space to reflect upon his life from a certain distance. One of Nobile's last big projects was the dream of an autobiography which could also be published in English and which would be broader in scope than his Swedish memoir, *Nu kan jag berätta sanningen* (*Now I can tell the truth*). He had difficulty finding foreign publishers who were interested in the material, even though he had good contact with British publishers, among others. The unpublished manuscript—in English—that Nobile fought to have published is among the new archive material. Here Nobile presents his own views on his childhood and adolescence, career and politics, and naturally his unpublished version of the *Norge* and *Italia* expeditions and their aftermaths, as well as his relationships with Amundsen and Mussolini and the fight for his honour and reputation. In other words, a comprehensive and interesting body of material is ready and waiting to be used for research.

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