

## BOOK REVIEW

Review of *Five journeys through the Arctic and a new Russia in search of Willem Barents*, by JaapJan Zeeberg (2023). Soesterberg, Netherlands: Aspekt Publishers. 372 pp. ISBN 978-9-46462-914-9.

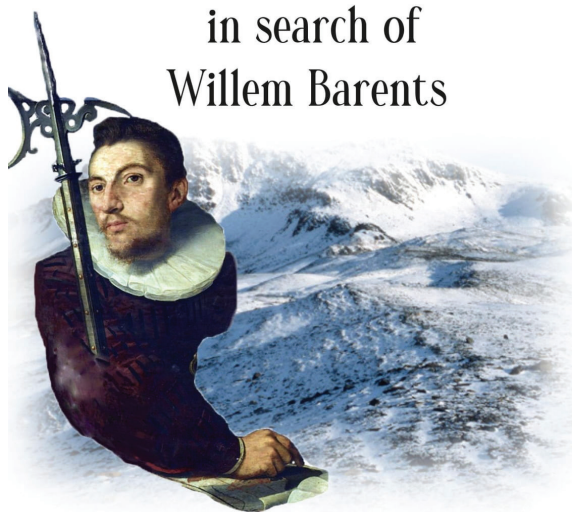
There are a number of decidedly iconic cultural heritage sites in the High Arctic that are connected with European exploration in the 16th to 19th centuries. Many of these were protected from serious human impact up to the late 20th century when climate change and increasing access possibilities opened up the area. One such site is the remains of Willem Barentsz' wintering house on the north-eastern tip of Novaya Zemlya. This was in addition protected by visitor restrictions to the area during the Soviet Union period. After the break-up of the Soviet Union, the 1990s offered a window of opportunity for western scientists to approach the site and investigate the remains of the wintering house known as *Het Behouden Huys* (The Preserved/Remained House). The stated aim of this book by JaapJan Zeeberg is to present the Dutch–Russian expeditions to Novaya Zemlya in 1991, 1993, 1995, 1998, and 2000 that were intended both to document the house site and to search for remains of Barentsz' ship and his grave. Curiously enough, one of the most important of such expeditions occurred in 1992 and is passed over in complete silence in Zeeberg's account.

Willem Barentsz (1550–1597; Zeeberg uses the anglicised name *Barents*, which is less usual now) was a Dutch navigator who was sent on three expeditions from the Netherlands to search for a north-east passage from Europe to Asia. In 1594, the expedition met favourable ice conditions and reached as far east as Novaya Zemlya and the Kara Sea. The following year, the Vaigatch Strait was blocked by ice. The final expedition in 1596 is the most famous owing to the first recorded discovery of western Svalbard and the unfortunate trapping of Barentsz' ship in the ice off northern Novaya Zemlya. Barentsz, who was the navigator and cartographer, captain Jacob van Heemskerck, and the 14-man crew built a wintering house of drift logs and wood from the wrecked ship. In June 1597, the group started southwards in two open boats. Barentsz died on the 20th, and a burial site has never been found. The wintering became internationally famous through the published diary of crew member Gerrit de Veer, which was quickly translated into several languages

### Correspondence

Susan Barr, Snarøya, Norway. E-mail: snbarr@gmail.com

# FIVE JOURNEYS through the Arctic and a new Russia in search of Willem Barents



JAAPJAN ZEEBERG

ASPEKT

and contains detailed and apparently reliable descriptions of the wintering and escape southwards.

Norwegian skipper Elling Carlsen was in 1871 probably the first to discover and certainly to describe the wintering site and to gather artifacts. In 1875 and 1876, two other western visitors collected more artifacts, and in 1933, 1977, 1979, and 1980, Russian visits occurred that also documented and collected artifacts. Zeeberg's book describes both the history behind the wintering and the visits and results mentioned above. He himself steps into the picture in the 1990s and his book becomes a mixture of excerpts from his own diaries and from other Dutch participants on the expeditions where he was not present.

This reviewer is probably biased with regard to the day-by-day diary entries that describe the often spontaneous, sometimes ridiculous, and at times hazardous experiences of traveling to the High Arctic with Russians during the 1990s. Having done it myself, I enjoyed

reliving the experiences and could thoroughly visualize the camping, the cold, and the frustrations but also the gratitude for the opportunities to gain access to iconic historical sites on the islands north of the Russian mainland. The various diary entries contain evocative descriptions of scenes and events and references to other relevant experiences and comparisons, and they document how much time on such expeditions is wasted on logistics—just arriving at the site can take most of the allotted time. A disadvantage of basing much of the story on diaries is that it can at times be confusing as to whom, what, where, and why. It is not until the final acknowledgments at the end of the book that much of the missing information is revealed, such as surnames for people otherwise referred to by only first names and more of the context of the described expeditions. The final expedition the author undertook was in 2000 to Vaigatch Island “to see what we could find there” (p. 305) but who his companions were and why they went there is not particularly clear. Again, the descriptions from the diary are detailed and interesting, but this expedition seems to have nothing to do with the titled search for Willem Barents. It resulted in a lot of hanging around waiting for permissions or transport and a final 10 days—described over 18 pages—alone in a soggy tent waiting for the pick-up helicopter. For readers not so interested in daily updates from the tents, the book can feel overly focused on the author’s personal trips to the detriment of analyses and contexts concerning the Barentsz site.

All in all, the book has interesting qualities, particularly the vivid descriptions of how fieldwork in the Russian High Arctic in the ‘happy-go-lucky’ period of the 1990s could be—and, according to this reviewer’s own experience, usually was. It also presents an overview of Willem Barentsz’ expeditions and associated events as well as the history of *Het Behouden Huys* and its fate after the Barentsz expedition left in 1597. This history shows clearly how much the site has been disturbed by human activity since its rediscovery in 1871, the large number of

artifacts that have been removed both with and, most often, without professional archaeological recording methods, and how the artifacts have ended up in various museums and institutes.

However, it is with regard to this latter history that the book has one large failing that reflects negatively on the rest as a faithful and honest account. This reviewer is well aware of what was perhaps the most professional archaeological study of the Barentsz house site and which is well documented, for example, in an article in the peer-reviewed, multidisciplinary, scientific journal *Arctic*, published by the Arctic Institute of North America in 1995. Zeeberg has himself published in *Arctic* concerning the search for Barentsz’ grave, so the journal is not unknown to him. Nor is it possible to imagine that the distinguished Dutch Arctic archaeologist and author of the 1995 paper, Professor Louwrens Hacquebord, would be unknown to Zeeberg. If the expedition in 1992 that he omits from his history of the site was unknown to him, it would be a hard job to explain why. As he in addition briefly mentions the multi-disciplinary expedition to investigate the Dutch whaling station of Smeerenburg in Svalbard in 1979–81, which was led by Hacquebord, it could seem to be a deliberate slight to mangle the latter’s name (“Laurens Hakbord”). All this is unfortunate as it sabotages the otherwise useful chronology of investigations of the Barentsz house site and negatively colors the impression of the book as a whole.

The publisher offered only a digital version of the book for review. This saves them money but makes the book project less tangible for the reviewer. In the digital version, pages 260–263 are mixed up. Hopefully they are not in the printed book as well.

## Reference

- Hacquebord L. 1995. In search of *Het Behouden Huys*: a survey of the remains of the house of Willem Barentsz on Novaya Zemlya. *Arctic* 48, 248–256, doi: 10.14430/arctic1246.