INTRODUCTION

by Lawrence Millman

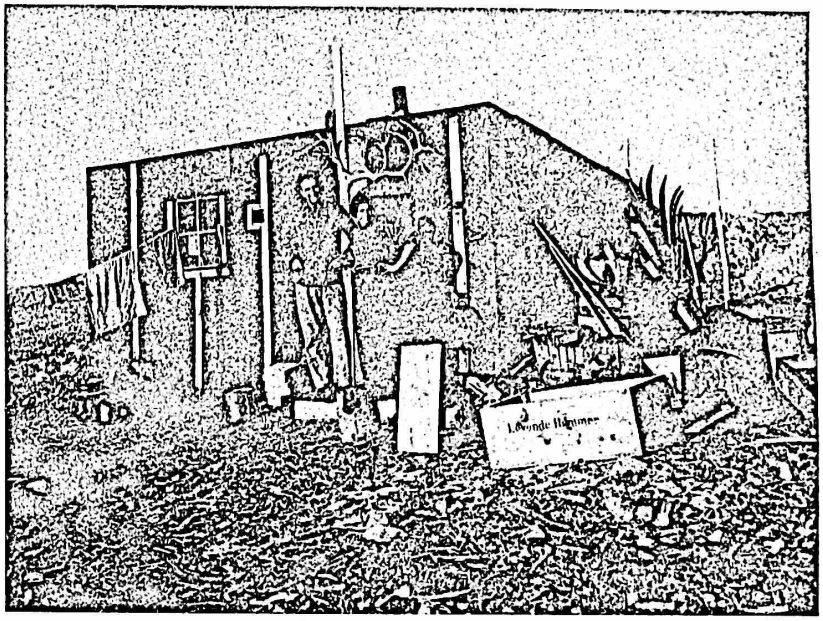
I've never been particularly attracted to the luminaries of Arctic exploration. Sir John Franklin, Commodore Robert Peary, Frederick Cook, Vilhjalmur Stefansson, Adolphus Greely—they've always struck me as an unpleasantly obsessive bunch, and with the exception of Cook, who was a convicted felon, a rather humourless bunch as well. At least one of them, Peary, had the disposition of a predacious corporate tycoon. "Mine at last!" he exclaimed upon attaining (or not attaining) the Pole, as if he'd just engineered a hostile takeover.

Christiane Ritter was neither an explorer nor a luminary. Instead, she was a well-to-do Austrian *hausfrau* who, prior to her year in Spitsbergen, had never strayed far from her comfortable surroundings. Yet perhaps because she had no interest in an Arctic Grail, whether

the Pole, the Northwest Passage, or just an Unknown Land, she could appreciate the Arctic in ways that the aforementioned luminaries, wrapped in their Grail-oriented blinders, could not. And in appreciating the Arctic, indeed thriving in it, she gave the lie to the notion that women do not belong at the ends of the earth.

A less likely person to visit the Arctic, much less develop a passion for it, would be hard to imagine. The thirty-six-year-old Christiane had agreed to join her husband, Hermann, in Spitsbergen mostly, she wrote, in order to "read thick books in the remote quiet and, not least, sleep to my heart's content." Her friends and, later, the passengers on the cruise ship that brought her to Spitsbergen were appalled: a woman's place is, if not in the home, at least not in a geography so lacking in the usual amenities. They would have been only slightly less appalled to learn that the only other women who'd spent time in Spitsbergen all had some sort of previous experience in the North.

A few words about Spitsbergen or, to use its Norwegian name, Svalbard. Although situated more than four hundred miles north of Norway, it was still close enough to Europe that it could be pillaged by Europeans far more easily than, for instance, Arctic Canada. By 1934, when Christiane arrived, wildlife had become relatively scarce, and the taking of animals was strictly regulated by Norwegian law. For Scottish naturalist Seton Gordon, writing only a few years earlier, Spitsbergen possessed "the silence that broods ceaselessly about the lands that approach the Pole." That silence is all the more haunting, or maybe all the more sad, when you realise that human rapacity helped to create it.



Hermann and Christiane Ritter at Grey Hook in the summer

Still, this was (and still is) the largest wilderness area in Europe, and—if you get away from Longyearbyen, the capital, whose shops are awash with polar bear kitsch, and whose cuisine features tacos and burritos, not necessarily northern specialties—a place where the human footprint is minimal. Even the casual visitor to Spitsbergen can't help but be inspired by its primal quality. Certainly, Hermann Ritter was inspired by it, so much so that he made repeated trips there, first in 1913, as a youthful deckhand on the Prince of Monaco's yacht, and later as a hunter-trapper. In fact, it's hard to say which was greater, his love

The hut at Grey Hook, buried under the winter snow

for Spitsbergen or his love for his wife. In any event, those two loves combined in his desire to have Christiane join him in a place called Grahuken (Grey Hook), so named because of the grey Devonian rocks in the area.

The utter wretchedness of their hut ("a small, bleak, bare box") disturbed Christiane, at least at first. Although she doesn't actually admit it in her book, I suspect she was even more disturbed that another person—a Norwegian hunter named Karl Nicholaisen—would be sharing the cramped hut with her and her husband. For his part, Karl expected Christiane to go crazy sooner or later, probably

sooner, and he figured that the various manifestations of this craziness would provide him with (as he later told explorer Willie Knutsen) "some mid-winter entertainment." Later, he changed his opinion of her. Christiane, he said to Knutsen, was "one hell of a woman." This is not a gendered or sexist remark, but—to this blunt hunter—a blunt truth.

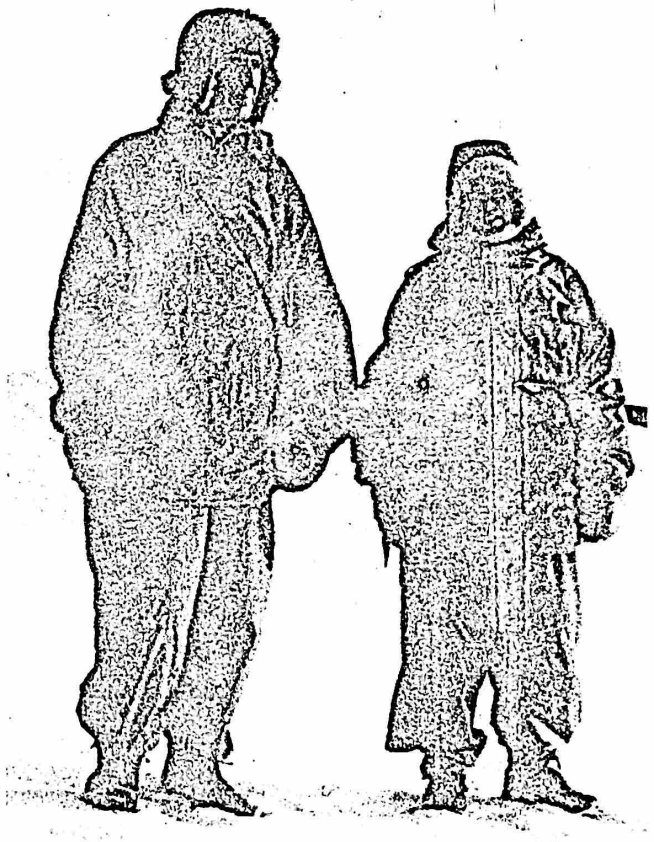
Stuck in the hut by herself during an epic snowstorm, Christiane almost did go crazy. At the same time, she realised that, however tough the circumstances, she could survive them. And from then on, she did not think of the Arctic as an enemy. Rather, it was a realm "where everything goes its prescribed way . . . without man's intervention." Such was her transformation that she could even suggest that "in centuries to come, men will go to the Arctic as in biblical times they withdrew to the desert, to find the truth again." I can't imagine any polar explorer making a statement like this . . .

A Woman in the Polar Night was first published in German in 1938 as *Eine Frau erlebt die Polarnacht*. Before she wrote it, Christiane had never written anything of consequence. But if "mad Ireland" (in W.H. Auden's phrase) hurt Yeats into poetry, frigid Spitsbergen seems to have had the same effect on Christiane, although it did not so much hurt as invigorate her. "Poetry" is perhaps the operative word here. For Christiane's book describes the polar night, not to mention the polar day, in a style so quietly ecstatic and so lyrical that it would make most actual poets green with envy. Rather than death-defying heroics, the bread-and-butter of so many polar narratives, her book abounds in passages like this one:

> No, the Arctic does not yield its secret for the price of a ship's ticket. You must live through the long night, the storms, and the destruction of human pride. You must have gazed on the deadness of all things to grasp their livingness. In the return of light, in the magic of the ice, in the life-truths of animals observed in the wilderness . . . lies the secret of the Arctic and the overpowering beauty of its lands . . .

Christiane left what she called "the Arctic wilderness" in June of 1935, never to return. Hermann himself did return to the Arctic several years later when the Wehrmacht forced him (he was by now regarded as an expert in the North) to command a German weather station in northeast Greenland during World War II. Northeast Greenland resembles Spitsbergen in many respects, but Captain Ritter, who was neither a Nazi nor a supporter of the Nazi cause, could not have been more miserable. Ironically, one of his mandates was to capture a Dane named Henry Rudi, a trapper he'd known in Spitsbergen. Even more ironically, the Norwegian government banned Hermann from Spitsbergen for the rest of his life because he'd been a German officer, albeit an unwilling one, during World War II.

As for Christiane, she didn't really need to return to the Arctic wilderness, since she brought it home with her, or at least brought home a radically different way of looking at the world. A short while after she got back from Spitsbergen, the Ritter family estate burned to the ground. But rather than go into mourning over the loss



Christiane and Hermann Ritter at Spitsbergen

of her home and virtually all of her possessions, Christiane was more or less grateful, according to her daughter Karin. For she could now live simply, without a surfeit of ballast, just as she'd lived in the hut in Grahuken.

"A year in the Arctic should be compulsory to everyone," she would say to friends and family, in fact almost everyone she knew, adding: "Then you will come to realise what's important in this life and what isn't." Her year in the Arctic seems to have had a quite salubrious effect on Christiane's own life. Alert and active until the very end, she died on December 29, 2000, at the remarkable age of 103.

A WOMAN IN THE POLAR NIGHT