

Nova Zembla and drifts the Polar ice upon the east coast of Spitzbergen, blocking it up with ice during most seasons, and rendering navigation, in this direction, dangerous, and frequently impossible. On the other hand, the Gulf Stream strikes the south end of Spitzbergen and divides itself into two branches, one of which flows on to the Nova Zembla coast, where it mingles with the Polar current, while the other flows up the west coast of Spitzbergen and keeps it comparatively free of ice and renders navigation easier. Here it is that the Gulf Stream also meets the Polar current, and the former having a greater specific gravity in consequence of containing more salt than the Polar water, plunges into the depths, and, for a time, becomes a submarine current flowing in a contrary direction to that of the Polar current. Slowly and gradually it mixes with the colder current and is eventually lost in it. These great oceanic movements render navigation along the west coast of Spitzbergen comparatively easy, and have rendered this route specially interesting to Arctic explorers. Hitherto, however, no great success has attended their efforts to break through the ice-belt, with the view of reaching the Pole: and even the most enthusiastic are now inclined to abandon this route in despair.

While adventurers have been trying to force there way Pole-ward, along western Spitzbergen, others have been exploring the more difficult eastern shores and their outlying islands. The history of the various expeditions which, during the last three hundred years, have succeeded each other in this quarter, is one of absorbing interest, and contains some of the most thrilling records of human courage and endurance. None of them, however, surpasses in interest the story of the gallant Dutchman, William Barents, who discovered Spitzbergen, in 1596. While endeavoring to sail round Nova Zembla his ship was beset by ice, and, in consequence, he was compelled to winter in that desolate and frozen country. The journal of Barents and his companions, during that terrible winter of 1596, is one of the most touching tales ever written; while their escape, in two open boats, from that dismal country, after a perilous and painful voyage of eleven hundred miles, is among the most marvellous events on record. Barents, however, was overcome by the severity of the climate and died. Two hundred and seventy eight years afterwards, in the year 1871, Captain Carlsen found Barents's ancient winter quarters in Nova