Fridtjof Nansen
Scientist, polar explorer and international humanitarian
Belgrade, 19 September 2011
A summary of my lecture:
On the 17th of May 1930, the same day as we Norwegians each year celebrate our national constitution, a state funeral was taking place in Oslo. There was a two minutes’ silence, and flags were flown at half mast. The coffin was drawn by four black horses in procession through the city, where more than 100 000 people were lining the streets.

A foreign visitor might think that it was the funeral of a king, but it was not. The Norwegians were saying a last farewell to the 69 years old Fridtjof Nansen, the most famous Norwegian that has ever lived.

My purpose for this lecture is to answer two questions: What did Fridtjof Nansen mean to Norway and the world when he lived – and what is his legacy today, 150 years after his birth?

To do that I will introduce him through a short biography. I will tell about his upbringing, his family life, his scientific work as a zoologist, his polar explorations, his diplomatic contributions and his humanitarian work. Besides all this Nansen also was a very successful writer and an able painter.

In November 1922 the Nobel Committee announced that Fridtjof Nansen was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. The committee referred to “his work for the repatriation of the prisoners of war, his work for Russian refugees, his work to bring succour to the millions of Russians afflicted by famine, and finally his present work for the refugees in Asia Minor and Thrace”.

In 1926 Nansen was elected Rector of the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, the first foreigner to hold this honorary position. In his inaugural address to the students, he delivered a call to the youth of the next generation. He ended his speech with these words:

*We all have a Land of Beyond to seek in our life – what more can we ask? Our part is to find the trail that leads to it. A long trail, a hard trail, maybe; but the call comes to us, and we have to go. Rooted deep in the nature of every one of us is the spirit of adventure, the call of the wild – vibrating under all our actions, making life deeper and higher and nobler.*

On 13 May 1930 Fridtjof Nansen died in his home from a heart attack. In spite of his great triumphs, he probably died with the feeling of a life unfulfilled. There was still so much to do in order to ease suffering people’s lives. To day it is our responsibility to carry on Nansen’s work. But he will always be an inspiration for all people of good will.

*Inge Eidsvåg*