

BOOK REVIEW

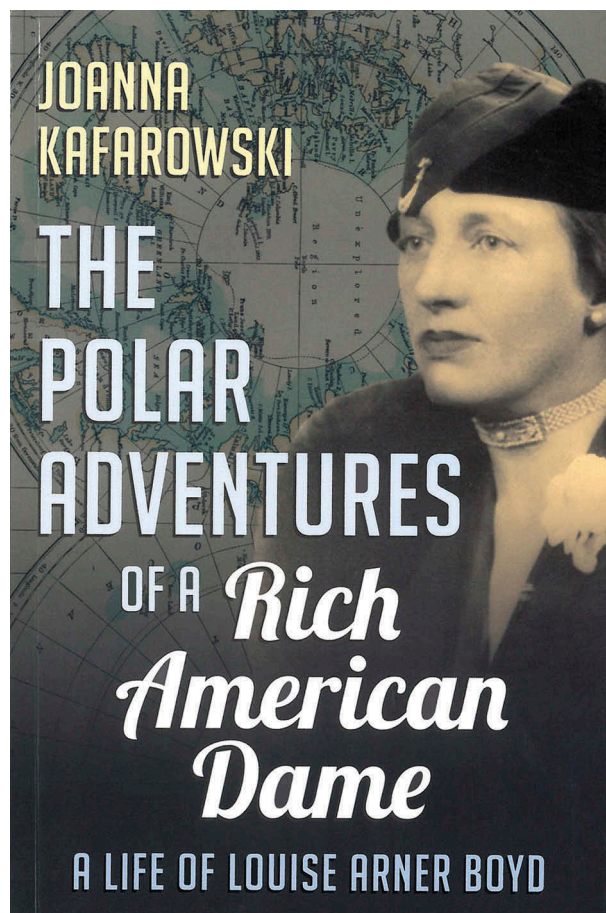


The polar adventures of a rich American dame: a life of Louise Arner Boyd, by Joanna Kafarowski, Toronto, Dundurn Press, 2017, 367 pp., 15.99 GBP (paperback). ISBN 978-1-4597-3970-3

As polar explorer, Louise Arner Boyd (1887–1972) represented, on the one hand, a long tradition of female adventure and amateur practice; on the other, professional modern science and field research. A native of California and sole heiress of a large fortune, she started travelling to Europe as a tourist. In 1924 she had her first taste of the Arctic when she took a summer cruise along the Norwegian coast to the North Cape and on to Svalbard, where she saw the edge of the pack ice. Two years later she arranged her first real Arctic voyage, a trophy hunting expedition to Franz Josef Land, which she followed with another, in 1928. But this took a different direction when she placed her ship and crew at the disposal of the effort to locate and rescue Roald Amundsen after he disappeared on a flight to Svalbard. During the long, fruitless search that put her in contact with many experts on the Arctic, Boyd obviously “found her calling”, as Audrey Amidon phrases it. “What began as an expensive hobby had evolved into a serious undertaking” (Amidon 2010: 43).

From then on, Boyd turned her attention to exploration and organized—and paid for with her own money—four expeditions from Norway to north-east Greenland, in 1931, 1933, 1937 and 1938. They all had a scientific purpose, primarily documenting and photographing glacial recession and mapping uncharted areas, and earned her a place in both the history of glaciology and the annals of the American Geographical Society, which in 1939 awarded her its prestigious Cullum Gold Medal. It is inscribed: “The dauntless leader of scientific expeditions into the Arctic, she has captured the spirit of the polar world in photographs of rare beauty”. During the Second World War she made her seventh and final polar expedition under the auspices of the US Bureau of Standards. Finally, in 1955, she chartered an aeroplane to fly her over the North Pole. These extravagancies, combined with the domestic and sartorial indulgences of a wealthy socialite, took their toll on her purse. When she died in a nursing home in San Francisco two days before her 85th birthday, she was almost penniless.

On the evidence of Joanna Kafarowski’s new biography, Boyd’s fortune was very well spent. Closely based on Boyd’s own published books and articles, as well as on her private papers, and supplemented with comments—public and private—by associates, collaborators and expedition members, the book provides a lively and well-researched account of her career. In spite of the trivializing title, it treats Boyd’s accomplishments with



the respect they deserve and is in every way more substantial than Durlynn Anema’s earlier biography (Anema 2013), which, somewhat surprisingly, has not been included in the extensive bibliography. Nor have important essays about Boyd’s films by Audrey Amidon (2010) and her photographs by Amy Rule (1998).

Apart from a dramatized prologue, Kafarowski narrates Boyd’s life from cradle to grave. The focus throughout is on external events. As a young woman Boyd had taken over the management of her father’s multimillion-dollar investment company, and Kafarowski shows that this experience served her well when she began organizing polar expeditions. Used to tackling difficult business issues and adept at enlisting the assistance of her social networks, Boyd chartered, refitted and equipped ships, hired crews, negotiated with scientists and secured abundant provisions—including generous amounts of alcohol. According to Kafarowski, the ship on Boyd’s 1926 trophy hunting expedition “was stocked with twelve bottles of claret, twelve bottles of sauternes, twelve bottles of champagne, four bottles of whisky, four bottles of cognac, twelve bottles of sherry, and sixteen bottles of beer”—all reserved for Boyd

herself and her guests (p. 76). Indeed, among the many grievances of one of the scientists on her 1933 expedition to Greenland, the geologist J. Harlen Bretz, was the lavishness of the on-board catering: “In the midst of this riot of Nature untamed, we sup in royal fashion, a highball for aperitif, port with the last of the meal” (p. 178). Clearly, Boyd’s luxurious private lifestyle spilled over into her polar expeditions.

Boyd’s wealth made her expeditions possible by enabling her to surmount the issues of gender and lack of scientific education and training. Sponsorship by the American Geographical Society gave her legitimacy and enhanced her reputation, but it was only achieved because she financed all her expeditions herself. She likewise paid for the publication of her two books on north-east Greenland. However, she was well aware that her gender was an obstacle. Kafarowski quotes from the text of a 1939 radio interview, in which Boyd states that at the start of her career she was told that, “the Arctic was a place only for men—that for me to go where I did was an eccentricity and hobby and not to be taken seriously” (p. 308). But Kafarowski also implies that Boyd was not fully aware of the extent to which some of the male scientists on her expeditions doubted her abilities and tried to undermine her authority. Several excerpts from Bretz’s journal and letters, in particular, give uncensored glimpses of a misogyny that Boyd’s leadership obviously did nothing to dispel. Yet Boyd trusted Bretz enough to confide to him that she had suffered from timidity and a lack of self-confidence, which probably did little to improve his opinion of her.

In spite of people like Bretz and the plant ecologist Henry J. Oosting, who, on Boyd’s 1937 expedition to north-east Greenland, complained of the “La femme atmosphere” on the ship (p. 205), she seems to have won the respect of most of the male scientists who accompanied her. Although she offered no remuneration and demanded full control over the dissemination and publication of their results, her expeditions gave them important all-expenses-paid fieldwork opportunities. According to Kafarowski, Boyd relished the camaraderie among the expedition members, as well as the fellowship of the mostly Norwegian crews on her hired expedition ships. She also maintained good relations with both Adolf Hoel, the powerful leader of Norway’s Svalbard and Arctic Ocean

Survey, and his Danish counterpart and adversary in the so-called Greenland issue, Lauge Koch. In terms of 20th century polar history, Kafarowski’s account indicates that Boyd, particularly during the 1930s, was a considerably more central participant than has been previously acknowledged.

Boyd herself, however, remains something of an unresolved mystery throughout the book. Kafarowski claims that she was initially motivated by a childhood fascination with the Arctic, as well as an admiration for Roald Amundsen. But she does not adequately explain why. Nor does she seem to have much material that goes below the public surface of Boyd’s adult life. Her speculations that Boyd’s involvement in Arctic research was a compensation for the absence of a spouse and children seem merely conventionally heteronormative. It is just as likely that the lack of family ties was viewed by Boyd as an opportunity to look for happiness and satisfaction elsewhere. In her conclusion, Kafarowski claims that Boyd paved the way for later female polar explorers, but that is surely not the case. She was far too singular—and spectacular in every way—to be a useful role model.

References

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