

## BOOK REVIEW

Review of *The last of the Arctic voyages. Being a narrative of the expedition in H.M.S. Assistance. Vol. 1–2*, by Edward Belcher (2011). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 383 and 419 pp. ISBN 978-1-108-02888-2 and 078-1-108-02889-9.

Of all the polar heroes of the 19th century, Sir John Franklin might be regarded as the most tragic one. He was appointed the commander of a well-organized Arctic expedition in 1845, equipped with all that should be needed for surviving in the frozen wilderness, included two ships loaded with a thousand books and three years' worth of food supplies. His order was to sail through and to map the North-west Passage. But he never returned with his men. Their fate will forever be a mystery. Though there were reports on some of his men from indigenous people in the years after, the greatest mystery is what caused the deaths of Franklin and his men. One hundred and forty years later, in 1997, one of many discovery expeditions concluded that blade-cut marks on the bones of some of the crew found on King William Island proved the rumours to be true, that the Franklin expedition ended in cannibalism (Lambert 2009).

The first one to launch the theory of cannibalism was the adventurer John Rae upon his return to England in 1854 from an expedition to the Canadian Arctic. The year after, Rae's report was included in the two-volume voyage report of Sir Edward Belcher's rescue expedition for Franklin, one of a number of rescue expeditions that ended in fiasco, though Belcher at least returned to England. Cambridge University Press has now brought out the two volumes as a facsimile reprint.

Edward Belcher got his command in 1852 from the Admiralty with the order to carry out the search for Franklin with no less than five ships to the icy fjords north of Canada. A great deal of the exploration was done by man-hauled sledges, searching for remnants of Franklin's expedition, while the ships became trapped in the ice in the Wellington Channel again and again. At last—during the spring of 1854—Belcher ordered the evacuation of four of the five ships and returned to England, where he had to go through a court martial as he had left his ships. He was cleared, but never had another command.

In his voyage report we do not, however, meet a broken man, but a man of wide interests and considerable ability

**Correspondence**

Roald Berg, Department of Cultural Studies and Languages, University of Stavanger, NO-4036 Stavanger, Norway. E-mail: roald.berg@uis.no

who took pleasure in narrating the story of his expedition in all details. The re-publication is therefore good news for all readers with a nose for Arctic adventurism, but also for those that are interested in the grey and ethnographic side of Arctic expeditions.

It is a narration on extreme sufferings and drama in the icy waters during an impossible rescue operation. But first and foremost Sir Edward's account is a collection of level-headed, bordering on dry, descriptions of daily life during the endurance of monotonous labour, "or battle", as the author formulates it, against "the enemy frost" (vol. 1, p. vi). It starts and ends with the Admiralty Instructions, lists of officers, supplies, instruments, ship library, winter fittings, observations of ice crystals and temperatures. Sir Edward triumphantly states that it is due to his systematic compliance to his orders and his orderly organization of the daily routines that he did return to England. And he was proud to claim that, in addition to his primary task of finding Franklin, "the general pursuit of science had not been disregarded" (vol. 2, p. 261).

Indeed he was right, regardless of his comment during the wintering of the expedition that he will not report any more—as nothing happens except "matters too tedious ... and too heavy for the general reader" (vol. 1, p. 151). The two volumes are storehouses of knowledge and—above all—on the perceptions of knowledge and of culture in the first part of the 19th century.

The narration of encounters with the native Inuits (which "cannot prove interesting" in Sir Edward's opinion, vol. 1, p. 66) is obviously exciting for students of both 19th century Inuit culture and European colonialism and attitudes to "others". Birds, geography and topography in the desolated areas are registered, and the registrations might be illuminating for both students of these different subjects as for our understanding of the history of sciences. And the narrative gives lively reports on how new islands and territories were taken possession of "for our Gracious Queen". After naming one island "North Cornwall" in compliment of a member of the royal family, Sir Edward ironically expresses the hope that "Duke of Arctic North Cornwall" might be added to his titles. And of course "we drank the health of His Royal Highness" (vol. 1, p. 111): thus are demonstrated respect for royalty as well as the attitudes to both the ruled and the rulers—in the British nation as well as onboard the ships of the expedition.

The search for the North-west Passage was, of course, motivated by science and the need for navigation knowledge, which also motivated the rescue expeditions

for those who did not return. But there was also an emotional call, even in the Arctic, to civilize and to “Europeanize”—expressed in toasts for the queen and the naming of barren islands.

During the long, boring, dark winter, reading and discussion meetings were organized onboard the ships. Shakespeare was performed by some of the seamen. The performance was good “as far as we could *hear*”, but the condensation of the breath of the audience in the freezer-like theatre saloon made it hard to *see* the actors, notes the author with more than one smile (vol. 1, p. 186).

Personally, Sir Edward found most pleasure in small-scale experiments on freezing water. He tried to determine the amount of vapour while cooking water, noting his results in lengthy tables. But like all passionate scientists he occasionally added to his experimental documentation notes about the beauty of them, for example, how liquid water metamorphoses to vapour and changes from milkiness to opaqueness. Even for a scientifically incompetent historian—like me—it is easy to become drawn into the text of a man who struggled so successfully against tediousness and the grave responsibility of the lives of his men in the completely dark ice-covered ocean.

But although it should be true that *The last of the Arctic voyages* is most valuable for researchers that are interesting in the rational and factual sides of adventurism, Sir Edward is highly present in his narration with his very personal and *English* voice of dry sarcasm and under-

statement. He delineates the carefully laid plans for evacuating his ships “in the most orderly manner” in case of emergency, for instance “in the event of getting nipped by the ice” (each man was supplied with a bag of clothes including underclothing), adding that he can perceive “the curl of lip of some fastidious friends, who may deem these matters absurd” (vol. 1, p. 51).

The two volumes were illustrated when first published in 1855 with drawings and maps of the islands and the fjords from the strait between Canada and Greenland and well into the North-west Passage, and of the tools and instruments—and even with the programmes for the onboard entertainment, such as the Shakespeare plays. The Cambridge Library Collection has kept these artistic illustrations in the new edition, and they are indeed small pieces of art.

The publisher has done a nice service in giving us the opportunity to encounter the Belcher report again without having to locate it in its original edition. It is well worth the read to enjoy Sir Edward Belcher’s classic English narration of his great Arctic voyage on an impossible mission: to find the greatest tragic hero in the Arctic, Sir John Franklin.

## Reference

- Lambert A. 2009. *Franklin. Tragic hero of polar navigation*. London: Faber and Faber.