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BOOK REVIEW

Review of *The greatest show in the Arctic: the American exploration of Franz Josef Land, 1898–1905*, by P. J. Capelotti (2016). Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press. 624 pp. ISBN 978-0-8061-5222-6.

The real tale of the American capitalist assault on Franz Josef Land 1898–1905

Franz Josef Land (FJL) is the world's northernmost archipelago, at the last count comprising 192 Arctic islands belonging to the Arkhangelsk Oblast in Russia. In 1994, after the dissolution of the former Soviet Union, the archipelago and its surrounding territorial waters were declared the FJL Conservation Area, a protected land and marine nature reserve with a diminished military presence (Barr 1995). In 2011, it was loosely incorporated into the Russkaya Arktika National Park that had been created in 2009, originally only covering the northern parts of Novaya Zemlya and adjacent waters. A rationale for adding the FJL Conservation Area was to upgrade the level of nature conservation and to preserve cultural heritage sites, while promoting tourism and international scientific collaboration but therewith also implicitly enhancing national sovereignty as can be seen more recently with border control at Alexandra Land (Zemlya Aleksandry), FJL's westernmost island, to process admission of foreign visitors. In a new situation of rivalry in the present day scramble for future natural resources that has emerged over the Arctic sea basin, Arctic ports and infrastructures are being revitalized and the Northern Sea Route is being boosted. Responding to new geopolitical pressures, Russia has also since 2012 made operational again the formerly dilapidated northernmost airbase Nagurskoye and is expanding it into a major strategic military complex on Alexandra Land.

Alexandra Island was given its name by the British explorer Benjamin Leigh Smith in 1880 to honour the Princess of Wales, Alexandra of Denmark, who later became queen consort of the UK. Interestingly, most of the historic place names from the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th remain intact. They were kept and transliterated by the Soviet Union and continue as such today on Russian maps. This also goes for a wave of names of late 19th century American venture capitalists, tycoons,

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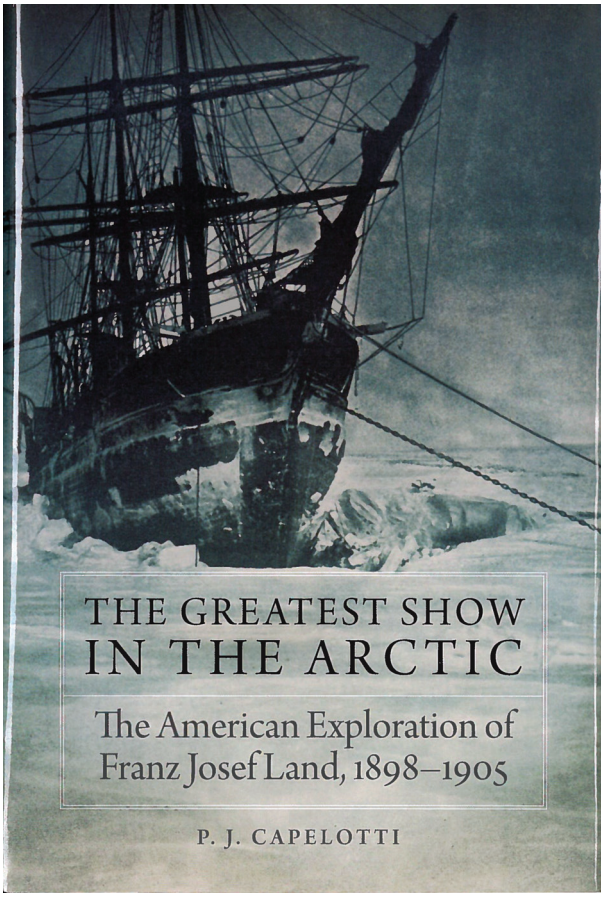

robber barons and Washington politicians. These men belonged to what Samuel Langhorne Clemens (alias Mark Twain) and Charles Dudley Warner, in a satirical novel, called "the Gilded Age" (Twain & Warner 1873), a term also used by Peter Capelotti in the book under review here.

Capelotti is one of a few authorities on the history and geography of FJL. In an earlier book (Capelotti 2013), he tells the story of the sympathetic Benjamin Leigh Smith, who shipwrecked at Cape Flora. Before that, he edited and published the journal Evelyn Briggs Baldwin kept as second-in-command of Walter Wellman's expedition to FJL, a journal that for over a century was tucked away, finally in archives in Washington D.C. (Baldwin 2004). Parallel to this over the past 20 years or so, on and off, the author has conducted intensive research on three American expeditions to FJL, beginning with Walter Wellman's 1898–99, continuing with the Baldwin–Ziegler expedition of 1901–02, and concluding with the Fiala–Ziegler expedition of 1903–05. What we have before us is

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the outcome of this project. A step along the way has been a toponymic research project, conceived about 10 years ago, subsequently developed with some funding from the US National Science Foundation. It concerns the construction of a comprehensive international database of Historic Place Names of Franz Josef Land, explaining their origins and connections and tying them with (and between) the various expeditions that explored the islands. Emphasis has been on the period between initial discoveries in 1873 and until 1905 (Capelotti 2015; also compare World Heritage Encyclopedia n.d.)

The book affords the first comprehensive treatment of the three US-American expeditions, led successively by Walter Wellman, Evelyn Briggs Baldwin and Anthony Fiala. These were all non-governmental operations mostly funded by private financiers. They were neither backed by the US government nor entailed any publicly authorized agenda of claiming land on behalf of that country. Even though there was much waving of the Stars and Stripes, the main object was driven by an obsession, the social construction of fame by sticking names of financial and political elites on islands, capes, channels and straits. The ultimate goal was more of a symbolic kind, the philosophy behind it being that everything has a price and can be bought if enough money is poured into an enterprise. The first prize was linked to a "dash to the Pole," and secondarily a place-naming strategy was meant to add extra lustre to and immortalize already famous super-rich patrons and other influential figures. Expedition leaders for their part basked in the limelight, for better or worse by virtue of image enhancing practices and high visibility in the mass media of the day.

The book is divided into three sections, simply called Expedition One, Expedition Two and Expedition Three, each with its own telling subtitle. Section I, entitled "The great American act of hustling," runs 187 pages. It introduces the main character, Walter Wellman, explains the Gilded Age mindset, reviews the man's earlier exploits and then goes on to detail his FJL adventure. Wellman was a correspondent for the *Chicago Times–Herald* owned by Chicago banker John R. Walsh, who was pleased to provide some financial credit in return for symbolic kudos that might embellish his name. The expedition was brought to the FJL archipelago in late July 1898 by the Norwegian sealer *Frithjof,* which then left. The men were picked up again in August the following year by another Norwegian sealer, the *Capella*. A main base was established at Cape Tegetthoff, where Wellman settled in while Baldwin with three Norwegians was sent with a large contingent of dogs, two sledges and two boats, a canvas and a wooden one, to hustle as far north as possible to build an advance base from where the next year's intended dash to the Pole could begin. This proved to be a gruelling operation involving hazardous rowing and shuttling back and forth over dangerous waters, ice floes, slush and debris-filled beaches, with occasional attacks by walruses.

Ultimately, Cape Heller was reached at the north-west end of Wilczek Land, only about 75 km north of the base camp and far short of Cape Fligely (81°52′ N), the hoped-for northern tip of the northernmost island, Rudolf Island, from where the North Pole is still another 900 km away. At Cape Heller, a hut was built, fashioned from stones and driftwood logs plus walrus hides. Baldwin bombastically graced it with the name Fort McKinley after the then incumbent US president. Here, two tough Norwegians, Bernt Bentsen and Paul Bjørvig, were left to guard the depot. They were instructed to take care of the overwintering dogs and stick to a regime of strictly limited rations for themselves while they waited for Wellman and Baldwin and the presumptive "polar dash party" to appear. When the latter finally did arrive, in late February 1899, they found Bjørvig there alone with Bentsen's frozen corpse kept inside the extremely cold hut in a sleeping bag. Bentsen had become sick at the end of October and with neither dry clothing nor medicine available he suffered terribly, began to hallucinate and eventually died shortly after New Year's Day; Bjørvig had promised to prevent his body from being scavenged by wild animals. Based on his reading of different primary sources, Capelotti does not mince words: "Baldwin's manifest lack of leadership skills had thoroughly poisoned his relations with his Norwegian comrades and led directly to the death of Bernt Bentsen" (p. 230); and again, Bentsen had been "killed through sheer negligence" on Baldwin's part (p. 238).

Sometime in March, Wellman set out from Fort McKinley with Bjørvig and two other Norwegians and made good time over smooth ice in Austria Sound. They soon reached a cape on the eastern side of Rudolf Land that Wellman named Cape Arthur Wellman, after his brother, but there luck changed. Wellman slipped on the ice and was partly crippled in an accident; he was forced to make a hasty retreat, dragged by the Norwegians on a sledge all the way back, first to Fort McKinley and then to the base camp at Cape Tegetthoff. Later, towards the end of April, Second-in-Command Baldwin rose to the occasion and set out with Bjørvig and three other Norwegians, Daniel Johansen, Emil Ellefsen and Olaf Ellefsen. They sledged north-eastward, eventually crossing a strait to be named after the wealthy banker, J.P. Morgan, and discovered a large island not yet on the map. Wellman later dubbed it Alexander Graham Bell Island after the famous inventor who was also the

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president of the National Geographic Society. Upon the exploring party's return to the base camp, the rough chart Baldwin turned over to a still bedridden Wellman also included dozens of new places to which the latter "could attach the names of his patrons" (p. 197).

On the basis of a close reading of the diaries and journals left by several of the actors involved in Wellman's expedition to FJL, plus some of their correspondence and other archival material, Peter Capelotti has managed to puzzle together the intricacies, drama and conflicts that permeated and paralysed this expedition. In his attention to complex detail, he revises the historical record and reinstates the real heroes: the Norwegians who distinguished themselves from the play-acting American explorers in command. It was essentially their practical knowledge and physical efforts that allowed Wellman and Baldwin to at least recoup some honours. In an issue of the present journal, Capelotti (2006) calls it "the American–Norwegian discovery and exploration of Graham Bell Island."

Section II of the book, comprising 162 pages, is entitled "Cigarette-smoking dudes." It deals with the Baldwin–Ziegler expedition and now Baldwin takes front stage. We learn about his background and some of his obsessions, like the one regarding S.A. Andrée and fantasies that if the basket of the Swedish engineer's balloon had been bigger Baldwin would have been up there with him. In his later life, he told other versions of how he had raced to Danskøya in Spitsbergen but "just missed the balloon." Actually, it was two weeks after Andrée's departure that Baldwin arrived on the tourist and cargo ship S/S *Lofoten* on its weekly passenger run, promoted as the "The Sportsman's Route," between Hammerfest and Adventfjorden. Capelotti discusses how Baldwin succeeded in creatively reinventing his own leadership qualifications, persuading the multimillionaire William Ziegler to give him a book of blank cheques to stage a gigantic expedition. Ziegler, an enterprising chemist who had made his fortune as America's "baking powder king," believed there was no problem (not even reaching the North Pole) that could not be solved by American capital.

The storyline follows Baldwin on his spending spree. When all is told, the equivalent of three and a half million dollars, measured in the buying power of 2011, was mobilized. Separate chapters are devoted to the purchase of masses of equipment, food stocks, clothing and other provisions, plus messenger balloons, as well as enrolling participants for a land exploration party and chartering a steam whaling barkentine in Dundee, Scotland, the *Esquimaux*, deftly renamed *America*. The ship was to be managed by 17 Swedes, including a shipmaster, Carl Johansson from Göteborg, whose line of duty and realm of responsibilities were never strictly outlined vis-à-vis the role and powers of Baldwin himself as expedition chief. This and other elements of vagueness, together with Baldwin's irascible and pretentious character, lack of realism, inability to plan and erratic decisions, combined with Johansson's pride and drinking habits, made for friction and rows with Baldwin that ultimately split the expedition into several factions, deteriorating morale.

The ship departed from Dundee on 28 July 1901, reached Tromsø in mid-July, meeting up with the renowned ship the *Belgica* (Verlinden 2011) that was sent off to the north-eastern coast of Greenland to lay caches of supplies in the event Baldwin returned in that direction after reaching the North Pole. The *America* then went on to Honningsvåg, on the north-eastern corner of Norway's Arctic coast, to rendezvous with the ship *Frithjof* that was chartered to assist and deposit a large depot of supplies in FJL. The two ships travelled on together to Archangelsk in northern Russia, taking on board 428 dogs, 15 ponies and—as Capelotti tells it—six Siberian Russians to take care of the lot. (Note here that Larsson [2011: 167], in a brief rendering of the same expedition, using other primary sources, refers to "seven Russians and Hungarians," whom he also names.) Thereafter, the *America*, after a brief return to Vardø in Norway, eventually arrived at Cape Flora on 12 August; the *Frithjof* was already there. Now the point was to proceed as far north as possible to set up a base camp, but relevant channels were blocked by ice, so Baldwin settled for Alger Island, one of the most southerly islands. Here Camp Ziegler was set up, whence the *Frithjof* returned to Norway. Strangely, Baldwin stayed in his cabin several days and then instead of trying again to push northward went southward to Cape Tegetthoff, probably moved by his wish to find new islands and spots to label with names.

The delay meant that by the time the *America* was back at Alger Island the ice north of there proved impenetrable; a second camp was now set up further east on the island—thus there was both a Camp Ziegler West and a Camp Ziegler East. On 17 September, Baldwin left on the *America* to head back to Norway, leaving a party of eight men to overwinter and take care of the camps, forcing them to sign a personal contract with him that overrode their general contract with Ziegler. Five days later, the ship turned up again at Alger Island; Baldwin had gotten drunk and changed his mind, probably deciding to spend more time in the middle of the archipelago and get more place names for his map. By October 17, the *America* was ice-locked into her frozen winter berth just offshore of Alger Island.

As time went on, Baldwin became increasingly isolated, a process Capelotti traces, continually citing from various diaries and journals; further he uses these sources for eyewitness accounts of twists and turns in the expeditioners' struggles with the surprises nature too sprung on them. Scenes include many days over March, April and May the next year spent on extensive sledge hauling of equipment and provisions northward, finally ending up at Cape Auk on the south-western coast of Rudolf Island, and then rapidly retreating back to Kane Lodge, which had been established earlier at 80°56′ N as a midway house on Greely Island in the very heart of the archipelago, only 26 km north of Fort McKinley. The chance of a dash to the Pole had been forfeited.

Now Baldwin was consumed by an idea he had all along of finding Fritdjof Nansen's message left on Jackson Island six years before. This move fortunately facilitated further mapping carried out by the steadfast and seasoned cartographer Russell William Porter and allowed Fiala to photograph and film landscapes and activities on this side trip. It was in any case a valuable spin-off from Baldwin's dream of enacting a symbolic bonding with the world famous Nansen. Capelotti sums it up nicely: "Baldwin's program, such as it was, included back-breaking sledging exercises in search of new sites to which he might attach place names, a side expedition to the site of Nansen's hut on Jackson Island, and a search for places and situations where he could be photographed as the doughty polar explorer he conceived himself to be" (pp. 326–327).

Towards the end of Section II of the book, we also get some interesting sidelights on experimentation with launching hundreds of unmanned balloons with strings of messenger-carrying buoys that were eventually dispersed far and wide with calls for help since the ship's coal bunker was nearly empty. Finally, after depicting several more erratic decisions and curious adventures, the author recounts how the ship reached open water in late July and ultimately reached Norway on 1 August. We learn how word soon got out that the expedition had failed to accomplish its mission and that Baldwin was largely responsible for the debacle. Ziegler, finding that Baldwin had followed an agenda of his own and worse, gone behind his back, promptly dismissed the man from the expedition and replaced him with Fiala as leader of a new effort to reach the pole, starting in 1903.

In Section III of the book, comprising 131 pages, Capelotti spins further on the character sketch of Fiala begun in Section II. Anthony Fiala had a pleasantly mild albeit sometimes nervous disposition. He was a devout Christian, had military experience in the US Cavalry during the Spanish–American War and worked as an artist and photo-engraver for a popular Brooklyn afternoon newspaper before joining the expedition led by Baldwin. In that expedition, he gained Arctic experience and was generally well liked by everyone. Other players in this next Arctic episode are successively introduced by the author, and the pattern of the plot again with drama, adventure and the mismatch between plans and realities gradually unfolds in 20 brief chapters; this is followed by a longish chapter devoted to some of the aftermath as well as the short- and longer term legacies of all three American expeditions and their main characters.

The new expedition was once more carried by the *America*, this time with an American whaling captain, Edward Coffin, at the helm. Again massive supplies and amounts of equipment were procured, 39 men enrolled, but now there was a smaller contingent of animals for pulling power, "only" 218 dogs and 30 ponies, some of them fetched in a sortie to Arkhangelsk before the heavily laden ship finally left Vardø on 10 July 1903, reaching Cape Flora on 12 August. Now no time was wasted. The ship pressed on through ice-cluttered waters until it was stopped by heavy pack ice just beyond 82°N latitude, well above the northern tip of Rudolf Island. Fiala decided to spend the winter on the east shore of Rupert Land at Teplitz Bay, a place extremely exposed to winds and offshore moving ice. The advance base was named Camp Abruzzi in honour of Luigi Amedo, the Duke of Abruzzi, who led the Italian expedition of 1899–1900 and had constructed a winter dwelling at this site as a base from where, in the spring of 1900, Umberto Cagni and three other men made a sledge run for the Pole and managed to set a new record of 86°34′ N, besting Nansen's furthest north. Fiala handily supplemented his own necessities with useful material and a depot of food plus equipment that the duke had left. A new camp was established, housing 15 men while the ship's crew remained 1.5 km offshore on board the *America*. This latter was a fatal decision made against the will of the captain, who wanted the ship to overwinter at a sheltered site by an island further south.

As it turned out, the *America* had to be abandoned, and everyone moved over to the base camp while finally the ship was crushed by the ice and disappeared in January together with a large store of coal plus a major stock of provisions that were stored on the ice. Still, during March 1904, two attempts were made towards the pole, both of which were quickly abandoned. In May, Fiala and 24 men sledged south to Camp Flora, which was reached in two strenuous weeks. Since the relief ship *Frithjof* dispatched from Norway that summer was unable to bash its way through ice to a point at sea 75 km south

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of the rendezvous site, everyone was forced to stay a second winter, now separated in two groups, the one at Cape Flora, where a chaotic situation and multiple conflicts festered, and then there were five men at Camp Abruzzi.

But Fiala had not given up hope. Towards the end of September, he set out northward with a small party, and after various adventures and delays, and some shuttling back and forth, a stop-off at the old East Camp Ziegler on Alger Island where an advance group with the capable topographer William Russell of the National Geographic Society had arrived four days before, a team of five now travelled onward in winter darkness with dog-sledges via Kane Lodge, finally reaching Camp Abruzzi on 20 November. From there around mid-March 1905, yet another "dash for the Pole"—with 59 dogs—was made, this time stopped after seven days by a wide lead of open water at a point just short of 82°N; behind them the northern coast of Rudolf Island was still clearly visible. Upon return to the base camp, there was a continuous shuttle of provisions and successive teams via various stopover points southward again to Cape Flora, where the relief ship S/S *Terra Nova* with Captain J. Kjeldsen arrived and on 1 August and in three hours everyone was on board bound for Norway. The robust *Terra Nova*, the last Dundee-built whaling vessel (taken in service 1884) had been bought specially for the task by William Ziegler; it was the same ship that was to bring Robert F. Scott to the Antarctic in 1910.

In Section III of the book, the maze of complex events, privations endured, dissension and splits and Fiala's role in the new expedition are traced over time and space as they evolved, again through the witnessing voices of a number of primary actors in their diaries, journals and other records. Further, justice is done to the good scientific work accomplished by William J. Peters and William Russell Porter.

Altogether, the book is an excellent read that has the makings of a script for a dramatic film. For the discerning scholar, it is an essential work for further research on an increasingly important region in the High Arctic all too frequently passed over or simplified in mainstream historiography of polar geography and exploration. The book includes an extensive note apparatus with references to primary archival and oral sources of various kinds as well as relevant secondary literature. The index at the end is very useful. Newspapers from the period covered are also cited, but in this respect the study is largely limited to American media. I can understand that a work like this might go on forever and the author wanted to draw a line, but Scandinavian readers will still be left wondering how the three expeditions were perceived and their legacies received in our part of the world.

Finally it might be noted that Bjørvig worked as an assistant on Gerard de Geer's Swedish expedition 1896 to Isfjorden, Svalbard, and the following year as a handyman on the tourist cruiser S/S *Lofoten* (captained by Otto Sverdrup on alternate cruises), helping transport hunting parties and their equipment on route to and from Svalbard. Further, in Antarctica, he participated not only in the first German expedition led by Drygalski, but also (as ice pilot) in the second German Antarctic Expedition, during which Wilhelm Filchner, the leader, found in him a steadfast support in turbulent situations.

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