

BOOK REVIEW

Review of *Expedition relics from High Arctic Greenland—eight decades of exploration history told through 102 objects*, by Peter R. Dawes (2023). Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press. 500 pp. ISBN 987 87 635 46867.

Books about polar expeditions are usually stories of an explorer, an expedition, a vessel, a geographical discovery or a tragedy. In *Expedition relics from High Arctic Greenland—eight decades of exploration history told through 102 objects*, Peter R. Dawes takes a different starting point: the artefacts found long afterward. Through these objects and Dawes' descriptions of how they came to northernmost Greenland, the reader meets the explorers and their ships, feats and tragedies, as well as the Inuit people who contributed to the success of the expeditions.

A decisive event for Dawes occurred in 1965, when he watched the eminent Danish archaeologist Eigil Knuth (1903–1996) excavate a whaling boat, dating to 1875. “From then on I was hooked on polar exploration history, intrigued by a region where intrinsic remains of dramatic events lay undisturbed in their hiding places for almost a hundred years” (p. 41). Dawes, a geologist, joined the Geological Survey of Greenland in 1965, and was then with its successor, the Geological Survey of Denmark and Greenland. It was during Dawes' fieldwork for these organizations, in the period 1965–2001, that the artefacts featured in the book were collected. They were collected opportunistically by Dawes and his co-workers as a secondary pursuit spurred by an interest in exploration history rather than in the systematic manner that characterizes modern archaeology, in which investigations are structured to answer particular questions and are typically backed by a university, museum or government agency. One might even say that the objects were collected as souvenirs. But whereas tourist souvenirs remain private, the objects in Dawes' collection are being made available to the public. They were exhibited at the Danish Arctic Institute's Arctic House, in Copenhagen, from 14 December 2022 until mid-March 2023. Upon the book's general release (scheduled for May this year), the objects will be given to the Greenland National Museum and Archives (Nunatta Katersugaasivia Allagaateqarfialu), in Nuuk. (The group of objects that are referred to in the book as the “22 relics” are already in public collections.) Moreover, the objects are—in contrast to most souvenirs—exceptionally well described and their history painstakingly presented.

Correspondence

Per Kyrre Reymert, Tromsø, Norway. E-mail: p-reyme@online.no



The discoveries were made at 32 “historic sites”, some of which were marked by building foundations or other fixed remains, whereas other such cultural heritage sites had only loose artefacts that lay on the surface or were partially visible in the ground. (Object 3 was lifted out with the “gentle use of a geological hammer” [p. 162].) Not all of the objects at a site were collected. For example, just two ship fittings were taken “from the many metal objects” that were found at one overwintering site (p. 192). Some artefacts were seen one year and collected another. Amateur archaeological excavation methods, carried out by Dawes, were used in a very few cases, including “the excavation of ruined igloos and associated stratified deposits (ceramics, glass, metal, rubber, wood)” (p. 92).

The “102 artefacts” in the book's title consist of two groups. One is a group of “80 Objects.” Thirty-five of these 80 objects were found in Northeast Greenland National Park (Nationalparken i Nord- og Østgrønland), which, starting in 1980, prohibits interference with permanent cultural remains, and artefacts associated with those remains, that predate 1900. From what this reviewer can determine, eight of the objects that predate

1900 were collected after 1980, but Dawes doesn't explain if he was granted special permission for this. The second group comprises "22 relics" collected at the same time as the 80 described here. What sets the 22 relics apart is that they have already been handed over to museums and other public collections.

The 102 items include personal effects, field equipment, provisions and documents and are made of material such as bone, glass, ivory, metal, wood, leather and paper, preserved by North-west Greenland's dry climate; its harshness and remoteness, which has severely limited human visits, has also helped. Eighty-eight of the objects are European or American, six are of Inuit origin and eight are of mixed origin. The objects are associated with 19 US, British and Danish expeditions to north-east Greenland from the years 1853–55 to 1934–35. The northernmost find was made at 83°30'N, merely 700 km shy of the North Pole. The region is truly High Arctic, the northernmost dry land on the globe. The expeditions' purposes were discovery, mapping, research, searching for lost expeditions and occupying territories for a nation. According to Dawes, the geographical area of the book was a "geopolitical void" and the flags of the USA, Great Britain and Denmark "were unfurled ceremoniously in acts of territorial possession" (p. 23).

Dawes' project began as a set of brief descriptions of the type conventionally found in a museum—"a straightforward listing of the various objects in my possession, with as much information as could be written on a standard docket label" (p. 46). But as Dawes elaborated on the history of each of the discoveries, his "simplistic plan soon needed modification. Determining the provenance, age and functionality of some of the artefacts turned out to be compelling and indeed more fascinating than foreseen" (p. 46).

Following introductory chapters that offer the author's personal reflections as well as background information about Arctic archaeology, how cultural remains fare over time, various kinds of historic sites and other pertinent matters, the objects are presented, organized chronologically by expedition. The dimensions and condition of each object are provided, along with its place and date of discovery, the collector's name, historical events associated with the site, information about other cultural remains there, Dawes' interpretation of the object and whether any objects were left behind. The "80 Objects" are described in greatest detail. Descriptions of the "22 relics" are shorter; the reader is referred to information in the museums and other collections where they are kept.

The book's approximately 600 illustrations are nicely printed and well captioned. For each artefact there are old and new photographs, drawings and maps that richly illustrate the location, the expedition and its participants.

Roberto Fortuna's photographs of the objects are outstanding and include close-ups that show details that are discussed in the text. In my view as an archaeologist, the documentation of the objects would have benefitted from photographs taken in situ in the field, before they were removed. The geographical coordinates of the discovery sites should also have been provided, although they can be roughly determined from the large map at the end of the book, which marks the location of each find.

Devoted to discoveries dating from the mid-19th century to the early 20th century, the book falls under what is called historical archaeology. Why should one bother with archaeological objects from a period that is amply documented by archival resources and contemporary published accounts? Bjarne Grønnow, professor of Arctic archaeology at the National Museum of Denmark, explains in the book's foreword that historical archaeology may "provide entirely new perspectives on past events":

inconspicuous finds of fragmented tools, implements, containers, clothes, personal possessions, and the like ... form 'windows' into aspects of past human life which rarely have found their way into written accounts and archives. Many events of contemporary interest were simply considered too common to be described. (p. 14)

Objects used in the daily lives of expedition members were often not considered important enough to be mentioned in written records, but they were left behind by shore parties or at overwintering sites and shed light on the everyday lives of the people who used them. Artefacts can also provide insight into interactions between those in lower positions on the expedition ships and the Inuit, something that is often omitted from expedition reports. Some objects in the book were made by Inuit and were then reused and adapted across ethnic boundaries. Such objects—Dawes calls them "hybrids"—are intriguing evidence of cross-cultural encounters under extreme conditions. Object 71, an Inuit oil lamp made of copper, is one such artefact. Through an exciting and knowledgeable exposition, Dawes links the object to a specific expedition among several possible expeditions. This is a cultural-historical investigation of the best kind.

Many Inuits are depicted in the text and in a gallery of photographic portraits, since their practical help and work, as paid dog-sled drivers, for example, were often decisive for the expeditions' completion. The people of the region—mainly Inughuit—moved to the expeditions' campsites or the expeditions overwintered where the Inuits were. Boat Party Hut is at one such site; others include the remains of fixed structures at Etah, Thank God Harbour and Polaris Beach. During his

many years of fieldwork in north-east Greenland, Dawes came to know the Inuit well and gained great respect for their knowledge of the land and how to travel on it.

Another interesting aspect of the book is that it covers the graves of expedition members. Approximately 40 graves were known from the period 1849 to 1917, but Dawes has managed to find information that boosts the number above 50. Also fascinating is the section on cairns. As a field geologist in Greenland, Dawes has seen many of these. They served as way or landmarks, look-out points or memorials, marked depots or were used for mapping or signalling. Some cairns had several of these functions and all could be used as a place to leave messages. The “22 relics” were collected from cairns.

Expedition relics from High Arctic Greenland is a thick book in a format nearly as tall as an A4 sheet of paper and somewhat wider. The text is arranged in two columns, with good margins, and only a handful of spreads lack illustrations, which makes the book easy to read. Two large overview maps are located inside the front and back covers. There is a nine-page list of European and Inuit

place names, as well as an eight-page list of personal names. The bibliography is a full 13 pages and very good.

The book has few defects. In addition to a couple of flaws that have already been mentioned here, there is the somewhat confusing use of the terms “Object”, “artefact” and “relic”. As counted by this reviewer, the “80 Objects” actually comprise 130 individual objects (e.g., one “object” comprised 18 iron nails; another was six wooden buttons), and the “22 relics already in safe-keeping” are, in fact, 36 items. Some gaps and discrepancies in pagination mar an otherwise very handsomely put-together book.

The reader curious about the Western exploration of north-west Greenland and the Inuit who played a role in this endeavour during the 19th and early 20th centuries will find nothing more gripping, more thoroughly researched or better illustrated than Dawes’ *Expedition relics from High Arctic Greenland*. Dawes argues that collecting the artefacts, through which he tells the stories of the expeditions, was necessary and urgent on account of the Far North’s rapidly changing climate in the North, which raises the risk of the artefacts’ degradation. Rising human traffic, especially by tourists, is also a danger.