

THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

An Anthology of the Finest Writing on the
Arctic and the Antarctic

THE ARCTIC



Edited by Elizabeth Kolbert

BLOOMSBURY

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INTRODUCTION

ELIZABETH KOLBERT

IN THE SPRING of 1888, the Norwegian doctor-cum-explorer Fridtjof Nansen set off for Iceland. He boarded a whaling ship in Isafjord and sailed to the east coast of Greenland. Once there, he strapped on a pair of skis and headed out across the ice sheet, a trip of some five hundred miles. Save for some problems with the pemmican—the dried meat, which he had ordered from an outfitter in Copenhagen—was too lean, leading “to a craving for fat which can scarcely be realized by anyone who has not experienced it”—the journey went off without incident. Nevertheless, to get from Christiania—now Oslo—to Godthab—now Nuuk—and back again took Nansen over a year.

In the spring of 2001, I set off for a research station known as the North Greenland Ice-core Project. I boarded a cargo plane in Schenectady, New York, and disembarked in Kangerlussuaq, on the island's west coast, six hours later. Another two-hour flight—this one on board an LC-130 equipped with skis and, for extra propulsion, little rockets—took me to North GRIP, at the very center of the ice sheet, 75° 06' N. In this way, I completed the first half of Nansen's journey (albeit from the opposite direction) in less than a day. Perhaps if I had spent several weeks at the camp, I would have developed a craving for something; honestly, though, I can't imagine what. The afternoon I arrived, coffee and cake were served in the geodesic dome that doubled as the camp's dining hall. In the evening, there was a cocktail party held in a chamber hollowed out of the ice. Dinner was lamb chops slathered in tomato cream sauce, accompanied by red wine. As I recall, I skipped dessert that night; I was just too stuffed.

At least twenty scientists were living at North GRIP, and at no point did I wander far enough from the camp to lose sight of the tents. Yet if Arctic travel isn't quite what it used to be, now that the danger, hardship, and solitude have been sheared away, it is still an other-worldly experience. The white, the cold, the three A.M. sun—the scene was unlike anything I had ever encountered before. Of course, I came home and wrote about it.

This is a book of *writings* about the Arctic, which is not quite the same thing as a book about the Arctic. Almost all the selections are by outsiders to the region—explorers, adventurers, anthropologists, novelists. The predominance of non-natives reflects the fact that Arctic people have traditionally transmitted their narratives orally, and also the fact that those who have been drawn to the area have, to an astonishing degree, felt compelled to record their impressions. Even today, the number of people who have traveled to the far north is tiny compared with the number who have traveled to Birmingham, say, or Philadelphia. Yet the literature of the Arctic is immense. Trying to choose the selections for this book, I sometimes felt as if everyone who had ever visited the Arctic had left behind an account of his or her (usually his) experience. In one of his many Klondike tales, “An Odyssey of the North,” Jack London compares the Arctic whiteness to “a mighty sheet of foolscap and a dog team racing across the snow to a line drawn in black pencil. For a writer, the image is reversible, so that the blank page—and all its terrors—can also become a metaphor for the ice.

The Arctic is difficult to define. As Barry Lopez notes, “There is no generally accepted definition for a southern limit” to the region. To use the Arctic Circle as the boundary means including parts of Scandinavia so warmed by the Gulf Stream that they support frog life, while at the same time excluding regions around James Bay, in Canada, that are frequented by polar bears. (The Arctic Circle is designated as 66° 33' N; however, owing to a slight wobble in the earth's axial tilt, the real circle of

polar night shifts by as much as fifty feet a year.) The works collected here touch on travels as far south as Iceland, which, except for the tiny tip of a tiny island, lies entirely below the Arctic Circle and as far north as the pole itself—if, that is, you accept Robert Peary's claims to have made it there.

Though speculation about a mysterious, frozen island known as Thule dates all the way back to the Greek geographer Pytheas, this collection begins in the early nineteenth century. By that point, the search for the Northwest Passage was already well under way and had already claimed dozens of lives. It is sometimes suggested that this search was motivated by commerce and sometimes by nationalism. But neither force seems quite adequate; as the historian Glyn Williams has observed, the quest "became almost mystical in nature, beyond reasonable explanation." I have chosen to focus on the most celebrated—and most disastrous—attempt to find a passage, that led by Sir John Franklin in 1845. Franklin's disappearance prompted a string of rescue missions, many of which also ended badly, and one of which, organized by a Cincinnati businessman named Charles Francis Hall, may have culminated in murder. In the 1960s, Hall's biographer, Chauncey Loomis, traveled to the shore of Thank God Harbor, in northern Greenland, where Hall had been buried, and had his body exhumed. He was in remarkably good shape, demonstrating the cold, hard truth that in the Arctic nothing is ever really lost.

The next generation of explorers was interested in only one direction: due north. I have included accounts of three efforts to reach the pole—those led by Nansen, Peary, and Salomon August Andrée. Nansen's attempt involved spending a year in an icebound boat—the *Fram*, or "Forward"—and two more traversing the ice by dog sled. The farthest Nansen reached was as 86° 14' N. This was 270 miles short of his goal, but at that point—1895—the highest latitude anyone had ever attained. Nansen's Swedish rival, Andrée, came up with the daring if impractical notion of besting him by balloon. With two companions, Andrée set off for the pole from Spitsbergen on July 11, 1897. Three days later, after having drifted some 200 miles to the northeast, the balloon—the *Eagle*—crashed and had to be abandoned. The three men spent the next ten weeks trekking across the ice, trying—unsuccessfully—to reach first one and then a second food cache that had been left for them. Their bodies were finally found more than thirty years later on the island of Kvitøya, roughly at the same latitude from which they had departed.

In their writings, explorers like Franklin and Andrée tend to treat the Arctic as a set of problems: unfordable rivers, blinding snow, drifting ice. (Peary's accounts of his adventures barely mentions the cozier sort of adventures that would lead, among other things, to at least two half-Inuit offspring.) But even before the race to the pole was over, a different sort of interest in the Arctic had begun to produce a different sort of literature. Though the Arctic comprises some of the most inhospitable terrain on earth, people have been living there for thousands of years. The fact that native communities flourished in an environment often fatal to non-native travelers challenged conventional notions of progress. Starting in the late nineteenth century, the Arctic became a favored destination for what might be called explorers of human nature.

Knud Rasmussen is one of the few indigenous authors included in this volume. Born in Ilulissat to a Danish father and Greenlandic mother, Rasmussen was both a prolific writer and a prolific traveler; he participated in eight Arctic expeditions—the so-called Thule expeditions—which studied the region in archeology, ethnography, geology and botany. *Across Arctic America* is Rasmussen's chronicle of the most famous of these expeditions—the fifth—condensed into a few hundred pages. (The scientific report on the 20,000-mile journey ran to ten volumes.) "Some archeologists have made bold to assert that the Eskimos are surviving remnants of the Stone Age we know, and are, therefore, our contemporary ancestors," Rasmussen writes. "We don't have to go so far to claim kinship with them, however, for we recognize them as brothers." Rockwell Kent, the American artist, went to live

northern Greenland for a year in the early 1930s; Gontrans De Poncins, a French count, spent fifteen months among the Canadian Inuit in the second half of the decade. Both men were drawn to life in the Arctic because it was remote and dangerous and other. (A similar attraction would later prompt Tété Michel Kpomassie to make his way from Togo to Greenland's west coast and Gretel Ehrlich to follow Rasmussen's trail.) Their narratives of discovery are just as significantly stories of self-discovery.

Several of the works in this collection are explicitly fictional. "Kasiagsak, the Great Liar," is one of the many native legends collected in the late nineteenth century by Heinrich Rink, a Danish official serving in Greenland. In *The Adventures of Captain Hatteras*, Jules Verne invents a polar explorer as easily as obsessed as Peary and Andrée. In *The Voyage of the Narwhal*, Andrea Barrett adds a made-believe ship to the long list of actual ones that went off searching for Franklin and his men. *Independent People*, by the Nobel laureate Halldór Laxness, tells the story of Bjartur Summerhouses, a sheep-farming, poetry-loving Icelander who endures hardships of an almost comically monstrous variety.



The immediate inspiration for this collection is the 2007-2008 International Polar Year, which, to accommodate researchers in Antarctica, actually lasts until March 2009. This is the fourth International Polar Year—previous ones were held in 1882-3, 1932-3, and 1957-8—and, like its predecessors, the current IPY is supposed to direct international attention (and resources) toward polar research. The 2007-2008 IPY differs from earlier ones, however, in that its focus is on the disappearance of its subject matter.

The impact of global warming, increasingly evident all over the world, is most apparent in the Arctic, thanks to an effect sometimes known as the Arctic amplification. While average global temperatures have risen by about .6 degrees C (1 degree F), in the Arctic they have gone up by roughly twice that amount. The change is particularly striking during the coldest months of the year; in Siberia, for example, wintertime temperatures have risen by as much as 4 degrees C (7 degrees F). Since visiting Greenland in 2001, I've made four more trips to the Arctic to report on how the region is changing. Most of those trips were made in the company of scientists, but along the way I also met many native people who spoke eloquently about what is happening. An Inuit hunter named Job Keogak, who lives on Banks Island, in the Inuvik Region of Canada's Northwest Territories, told me that he and his fellow-hunters had started to notice that the climate was changing in the mid-1980s. Then a few years ago, people on the island began to see robins, a bird for which the Inuit in his region have no word.

"We just thought, Oh, gee, it's warming up a little bit," he recalled. "It was good at the start—warmer winters, you know—but now everything is going so fast. The things that we saw coming in the early 1990s they've just multiplied.

"Of the people involved in global warming, I think we're on top of the list of who would be most affected," Keogak went on. "Our way of life, our traditions, maybe our families. Our children may not have a future. I mean, all young people, put it that way. It's not just happening in the Arctic. It's going to happen all over the world. The whole world is going too fast."

The warming that has occurred has by now been sufficient to shrink the Arctic ice cap by almost five hundred thousand square miles, to bring millions of acres of permafrost close to the thawing point, and to cause devastating pest outbreaks in the spruce forests of Canada and Alaska. But this is only the beginning. If current trends continue, temperatures in the Arctic will rise by as much as 10 degrees C (9 degrees F) by the end of this century. Sometime before that point, much of the landscape described in these pages will have vanished. For example, current forecasts suggest that a Northwest

Passage could be ice-free, at least in summer, by 2025. The North Pole itself could be open water in summer by 2050. Perhaps most ominously of all, the Greenland ice sheet, which at its center is tens of thousands of feet thick, could begin to disintegrate. While it might take centuries for the ice sheet to disappear entirely, once the process of disintegration gets under way, it will start to feed on itself, most likely becoming irreversible. (The Greenland ice sheet holds enough water to raise global sea levels by more than twenty feet.) In this way, the claim of the Arctic on our imagination has been inverted. A landscape that once symbolized the sublime indifference of nature will, for future generations, come to symbolize its tragic vulnerability.

THE EXTREME MISERY OF THE WHOLE PARTY

from *Narrative of a Journey to the Shores of the Polar Sea* (1823)

John Franklin

Sir John Franklin, an officer in the British Royal Navy, led three Arctic expeditions in the first half of the nineteenth century. The last of these, which resulted not only in his own death, but in the deaths of all 120-plus members of his crew, is the most famous; it prompted several rescue missions, some of which ended no less disastrously. This excerpt is from the increasingly disjointed diaries Franklin kept during his first Arctic expedition (1819—1822), which took him from Hudson Bay to the Coppermine River. Nine of Franklin's men died on the journey—one was shot under mysterious circumstances—and the rest endured desperate privation. Included below is the famous October 4th episode in which Franklin and his men dine on their shoes. (Tripe de roche, which Franklin refers to several times, is a kind of lichen.)

IN THE AFTERNOON we had a heavy fall of snow, which continued all night. A small quantity of *tripe de roche* was gathered; and Cr dit, who had been hunting, brought in the antlers and back bone of a deer which had been killed in the summer. The wolves and birds of prey had picked them clean, but there still remained a quantity of the spinal marrow which they had not been able to extract. This, although putrid, was esteemed a valuable prize, and the spine being divided into portions, was distributed equally. After eating the marrow, which was so acrid as to excoriate the lips, we rendered the bones friable by burning, and ate them also.

On the following morning the ground was covered with snow to the depth of a foot and a half, and the weather was very stormy. These circumstances rendered the men again extremely despondent; a settled gloom hung over their countenances, and they refused to pick *tripe de roche*, choosing rather to go entirely without eating, than to make any exertion. The party which went for gum returned early the morning without having found any; but St. Germain said he could still make the canoe with the willows, covered with canvas, and removed with Adam to a clump of willows for that purpose. M. Back accompanied them to stimulate his exertion, as we feared the lowness of his spirits would cause him to be slow in his operations. Augustus went to fish at the rapid, but a large trout having carried away his bait, we had nothing to replace it.

The snow-storm continued all the night, and during the forenoon of the 3rd. Having persuaded the people to gather some *tripe de roche*, I partook of a meal with them; and afterwards set out with the intention of going to St. Germain to hasten his operations, but though he was only three-quarters of a mile distant, I spent three hours in a vain attempt to reach him, my strength being unequal to the labour of wading through the deep snow; and I returned quite exhausted, and much shaken by the numerous falls I had got. My associates were all in the same debilitated state, and poor Hood was reduced to a perfect shadow, from the severe bowel complaints which the *tripe de roche* never failed to give him. Back was so feeble as to require the support of a stick in walking; and Dr. Richardson had lameness superadded to weakness. The voyagers were somewhat stronger than ourselves, but more indisposed to exertion, on account of their despondency. The sensation of hunger was no longer felt by any of us, yet we were scarcely able to converse upon any other subject than the pleasures of eating.

We were much indebted to Hepburn at this crisis. The officers were unable from weakness to gather *tripe de roche* themselves, and Samandré, who had acted as our cook on the journey from the coast, sharing in the despair of the rest of the Canadians, refused to make the slightest exertion. Hepburn, on the contrary, animated by a firm reliance on the beneficence of the Supreme Being, tempered with resignation to his will, was indefatigable in his exertions to serve us, and daily collected all the *tripe de roche* that was used in the officers' mess. Mr. Hood could not partake of this miserable fare, and the partridge which had been reserved for him was, I lament to say, this day stolen by one of the men.

October 4.—The canoe being finished, it was brought to the encampment, and the whole party being assembled in anxious expectation on the beach, St. Germain embarked, and amidst our prayers for his success, succeeded in reaching the opposite shore. The canoe was then drawn back again, and another person transported, and in this manner by drawing it backwards and forwards, we were all conveyed over without any serious accident. By these frequent traverses the canoe was materially injured; and latterly it filled each time with water before reaching the shore, so that all our garments and bedding were wet, and there was not a sufficiency of willows upon the side on which we now were, to make a fire to dry them.

[...]

It is impossible to imagine a more gratifying change than was produced in our voyagers after we were all safely landed on the southern banks of the river. Their spirits immediately revived, each of them shook the officers cordially by the hand, and declared they now considered the worst of their difficulties over, as they did not doubt of reaching Fort Enterprise in a few days, even in their feeble condition. We had, indeed, every reason to be grateful, and our joy would have been complete had it not been mingled with sincere regret at the separation of our poor Esquimaux, the faithful Junius.

The want of *tripe de roche* caused us to go supperless to bed. Showers of snow fell frequently during the night. The breeze was light next morning, the weather cold and clear. We were all on foot by daybreak, but from the frozen state of our tents and bed-clothes, it was long before the bundles could be made, and as usual, the men lingered over a small fire they had kindled, so that it was eight o'clock before we started. Our advance, from the depth of the snow, was slow, and about noon, coming to a spot where there was some *tripe de roche*, we stopped to collect it, and breakfasted. Mr. Hood, who was now very feeble, and Dr. Richardson, who attached himself to him, walked together at a gentle pace in the rear of the party. I kept with the foremost men, to cause them to halt occasionally until the stragglers came up. Resuming our march after breakfast, we followed the track of Mr. Backhouse's party, and encamped early, as all of us were much fatigued, particularly Crédit, who having to-day carried the men's tent, it being his turn so to do, was so exhausted, that when he reached the encampment he was unable to stand. The *tripe de roche* disagreed with this man and with Vaillant, the consequence of which, they were the first whose strength totally failed. We had a small quantity of this weed in the evening, and the rest of our supper was made up of scraps of roasted leather. The distance walked to-day was six miles. As Crédit was very weak in the morning, his load was reduced to little more than his personal luggage, consisting of his blanket, shoes, and gun. Previous to setting out, the whole party ate the remains of their old shoes, and whatever scraps of leather they had, to strengthen their stomachs for the fatigue of the day's journey. We left the encampment at nine, and pursued our route over a range of black hills. The wind having increased to a strong gale in the course of the morning, became piercingly cold, and the drift rendered it difficult for those in the rear to follow the track over the heights; whilst in the valleys, where it was sufficiently marked, from the depth of the snow, the labour of walking was proportionably great. Those in advance made, as usual, frequent halts, yet being unable from the severity of the weather to remain long still, they were obliged to move on before the rear could come up, and the party, of course, straggled very much.

About noon Samandré coming up, informed us that Crédit and Vaillant could advance no further. ~~Some willows being discovered in a valley near us, I proposed to halt the party there, whilst Dr. Richardson went back to visit them. I hoped too, that when the sufferers received the information of the fire being kindled at so short a distance they would be cheered, and use their utmost efforts to reach it, but this proved a vain hope. The Doctor found Vaillant about a mile and a half in the rear, much exhausted with cold and fatigue. Having encouraged him to advance to the fire, after repeated solicitations he made the attempt, but fell down amongst the deep snow at every step.~~

THE RETURN OF LIGHT

from *Arctic Explorations* (1856)

Elisha Kent Kane

Elisha Kent Kane served as the medical officer on an 1850 American expedition that went in search of John Franklin and his crew. Three years later, he captained a second expedition. Kane was, by all accounts, an ineffectual leader. After spending two winters on their boat, the Advance, which had frozen into the ice off the west coast of Greenland, he and his men slogged 1,300 miles to the town of Upernavik; amazingly, all but three made it. In this excerpt from Kane's diaries of 1854, spring has just arrived, and with it a profusion of game. This leads Kane to meditate on the hidden richness of the Arctic and on the possibility that some members of Franklin's crew might still be alive.

WE HAVE MORE fresh meat than we can eat. For the past three weeks we have been living on ptarmigan, rabbits, two reindeer, and seal.

They are fast curing our scurvy. With all these resources,—coming to our relief so suddenly too,—how can my thoughts turn despairingly to poor Franklin and his crew?

... Can they have survived? No man can answer with certainty; but no man without presumption can answer in the negative.

If, four months ago,—surrounded by darkness and bowed down by disease,—I had been asked the question, I would have turned toward the black hills and the frozen sea, and responded in sympathy with them, “No.” But with the return of light a savage people come down upon us, destitute of any but the rudest appliances of the chase, who were fattening on the most wholesome diet of the region, on forty miles from our anchorage, while I was denouncing its scarcity.

For Franklin, every thing depends upon locality: but, from what I can see of Arctic exploration thus far, it would be hard to find a circle of fifty miles' diameter entirely destitute of animal resources. The most solid winter-ice is open here and there in pools and patches worn by currents and tides. Such were the open spaces that Parry found in Wellington Channel; such are the stream-holes (stromhol) of the Greenland coast, the polynia of the Russians; and such we have ourselves found in the most rigorous cold of all.

To these spots, the seal, walrus, and the early birds crowd in numbers. One which kept open, as we find from the Esquimaux, at Littleton Island, only forty miles from us, sustained three families last winter until the opening of the north water. Now, if we have been entirely supported for the past three weeks by the hunting of a single man,—seal-meat alone being plentiful enough to subsist us till we turn homeward,—certainly a party of tolerably skilful hunters might lay up an abundant stock for the winter. As it is, we are making caches of meat under the snow, to prevent its spoiling on our hands, in the very spot which a few days ago I described as a Sahara. And, indeed, it was so for nine whole months, when this flood of animal life burst upon us like fountains of water and pastures and date-trees in a southern desert.

I have undergone one change in opinion. It is of the ability of Europeans or Americans to inure themselves to an ultra-Arctic climate. God forbid, indeed, that civilized man should be exposed f

successive years to this blighting darkness! But around the Arctic circle, even as high as 72° , where cold and cold only is to be encountered, men may be acclimatized, for there is light enough for outdoor labor.

Of the one hundred and thirty-six picked men of Sir John Franklin in 1846, Northern Orkney men, Greenland whalers, so many young and hardy constitutions, with so much intelligent experience to guide them, I cannot realize that some may not yet be alive; that some small squad or squads, aided or not aided by the Esquimaux of the expedition, may not have found a hunting-ground, and laid up from summer to summer enough of fuel and food and seal-skins to brave three or even four more winters in succession.

I speak of the miracle of this bountiful fair season. I could hardly have been much more surprised to find these black rocks, instead of sending out upon our solitude the late inroad of yelling Esquimaux, had sent us naturalized Saxons. Two of our party at first fancied they were such.

The mysterious compensations by which we adapt ourselves to climate are more striking here than in the tropics. In the Polar zone the assault is immediate and sudden, and, unlike the insidious fatalities of hot countries, produces its results rapidly. It requires hardly a single winter to tell who are to be the heat-making and acclimatized men. Petersen, for instance, who has resided for two years at Upernavik, seldom enters a room with a fire. Another of our party, George Riley, with a vigorous constitution, established habits of free exposure, and active cheerful temperament, has so inured himself to the cold, that he sleeps on our sledge-journeys without a blanket or any other covering than his walking-suit, while the outside temperature is 30° below zero. The half-breeds of the coast rival the Esquimaux in their powers of endurance.

There must be many such men with Franklin. The North British sailors of the Greenland seal and whale fisheries I look upon as inferior to none in capacity to resist the Arctic climates.

My mind never realizes the complete catastrophe, the destruction of all Franklin's crews. I picture them to myself broken into detachments, and my mind fixes itself on one little group of some thirty men who have found the open spot of some tidal eddy, and under the teachings of an Esquimaux or perhaps one of their own Greenland whalers, have set bravely to work, and trapped the fox, speared the bear, and killed the seal and walrus and whale. I think of them ever with hope. I sicken not to be able to reach them.

It is a year ago to-day since we left New York. I am not as sanguine as I was then: time and experience have chastened me. There is every thing about me to check enthusiasm and moderate hope. I am here in forced inaction, a broken-down man, oppressed by cares, with many dangers before me, and still under the shadow of a hard wearing winter, which has crushed two of my best associates. Here on the spot, after two unavailing expeditions of search, I hold my opinions unchanged; and I record them as a matter of duty upon a manuscript which may speak the truth when I can do so no longer.

MURDER IN THE ARCTIC?

from *Weird and Tragic Shores* (1971)

Chauncey Loomis

In the 1860s, Charles Francis Hall, a Cincinnati businessman-turned-explorer, made two voyages to the Arctic in search of Franklin expedition survivors. Not surprisingly, he found none; nevertheless, his exploits made Hall a popular hero. In 1871, Hall set out on a government-sponsored voyage to the North Pole and within months had died mysteriously. Nearly a hundred years later, his biographer, Chauncey Loomis, traveled to Greenland and exhumed his corpse in the hope of clarifying the circumstances of Hall's death.

FOR FIVE YEARS after the *Polaris* weighed anchor and steamed through the ice of Thank God Harbor out into Hall Basin, Charles Francis Hall's grave was undisturbed by any human. Eskimos had once hunted the area, but the rings of stone that marked their camp sites were paleolithic; hunting parties had not ventured so far north for hundreds of years. Wind-driven snow and silt blasted the headboard of the grave, but it remained upright, and Hubbard Chester's deep-cut inscription remained sharp and clear. Lemmings burrowed into the mound of the grave, and foxes pawed at its surface, but the coffin beneath was untouched, and the ground willow above remained rooted among the rocks.

In May 1876 Hall's grave had its first human visitors since the departure of the *Polaris*. Members of the British North Polar Expedition led by Captain George Nares arrived with a brass tablet that they had brought from London, knowing they would pass by the gravesite. The tablet was inscribed:

SACRED TO THE MEMORY OF
CAPTAIN C. F. HALL
OF THE U.S. SHIP POLARIS,

WHO SACRIFICED HIS LIFE IN THE ADVANCEMENT OF
SCIENCE
ON NOV^r 8th 1871

—
THIS TABLET HAS BEEN ERECTED
BY THE BRITISH POLAR EXPEDITION OF 1875
WHO FOLLOWING IN HIS FOOTSTEPS HAVE PROFITED BY
HIS EXPERIENCE

While twenty-five members of the expedition stood solemnly by, an American flag was hoisted and the tablet was erected at the foot of the grave. The Nares Expedition, like the *Polaris* Expedition, was not destined to reach the Pole; not long after the ceremony, two of its men, dead of scurvy, were buried only a few hundred yards away from Hall.

Six years later, the grave was visited again. The Greely Expedition, spending the winter thirty miles across Hall Basin at Lady Franklin Bay, came to check on supplies that the *Polaris* Expedition had

cached and to see what was by then known as Hall's Rest. Sergeant William Cross, while rummaging in the wreckage of Bessels's observatory, which had been crudely dismantled before the *Polaris* left, carved his name on one of the boards that lay scattered about. A year later Cross was dead, the first of nineteen men to die in the terrible ordeal of the Greely Expedition. Between 1898 and 1909 Robert Peary passed Thank God Harbor several times aboard the *Roosevelt*, but, with a singlemindedness Hall himself would have admired, did not take time to go ashore. Knud Rasmussen, on his Thule Expedition, arrived in 1917. He found the original headboard lying face down on the ground, perhaps cuffed by the same bear that had bitten deep into the posts supporting the Nares tablet; Rasmussen could plainly see the marks of the animal's teeth in the wood. After Rasmussen's departure, forty years passed before Hall's grave was visited again. In 1958 an American team led by geologist William Davies and assisted by Danish explorer Count Eigel Knuth landed from the icebreaker *Atkafik*, the first ship to anchor in Thank God Harbor since the *Polaris*. The purpose of "Operation Groundhog" was to locate ice-free aircraft landing sites as emergency alternatives to the bases at Alert and Thule. For a few weeks the sound of a Jeep was heard on Polaris Promontory. Then the area was returned to its accustomed silence. That silence was broken very briefly a few years later when British geologist Peter Dawes spent a few days in the area.

In August 1968 I arrived at Hall's Rest with three companions. Doctor Franklin Paddock, William Barrett, Thomas Gignoux, and I were flown from Resolute, far to the south in the Arctic Archipelago, by one of Canada's finest bush pilots, W. W. Phipps. The day we arrived was clear; as Weldy Phipps flew his Single Otter low across the hills that border the plain of Polaris Promontory, we could see ahead the deep blue of Hall Basin, the shoreline of Thank God Harbor, and, as we lost altitude, the wreckage of Bessels's observatory close to the beach. We circled, looking for the grave. We could not see it, but knew that it was near the observatory, so Weldy landed on a smooth stretch of plain a mile south of the wreckage. After we had unloaded our equipment, Weldy took off immediately, leaving us standing alone on the plain, dazed in sudden awareness of how isolated we were. He was due to return in two weeks, after he fulfilled some other contracts.

In the course of preparing this biography I had read the government's book on the Polaris Expedition, the journals of its men, the ship's log, the official dispatches, the transcript of the Department of the Navy's inquiry, and masses of other material. My conclusion was, not that Hall certainly had been murdered, not even that he *probably* had been murdered, but only that murder was at least possible and plausible. The conclusion of the Board of Inquiry that he had died of "natural causes, viz, apoplexy," also was possible and plausible, but it had been reached hastily and only by ignoring much of the evidence that the Board itself had wheedled out of witnesses. Secretary Robeson had been under considerable pressure to end investigation; scandal was in the making. That the government was eager to play down the ugly aspects of the affair is indicated by the official book on the expedition, *Narrative of the North Polar Expedition*, written by Rear Admiral C. H. Davis a year after the inquiry. Davis gave the impression that the expedition had been a Boy Scout Jamboree—a brough, of course, but enlivened by good cheer and boyish high jinks. The original source materials that Davis had used and distorted show how false that impression was.

I had applied to Denmark's Ministry for Greenland for a permit to travel to Polaris Promontory, arguing that if the case were recent, a court presented with the evidence would order an autopsy, and I requested permission to disinter Hall's body and have Frank Paddock perform an autopsy on it. Given the high latitude of its burial, there was a good chance that the body would be well preserved. Approval of my application came only after many letters and finally a trip to Copenhagen, where I met Count Eigel Knuth. An archeologist and old-time sledge traveler, Knuth was one of the last men to have seen the grave. He also was an adviser to the Ministry on proposed projects in Greenland, and without his agreement I would have no chance of receiving permission. At first it appeared that I

would not agree. Hall's grave, he said, was a hallowed place; its remoteness intensified the sense of mystery and beauty associated with any lone grave. The idea of having it disturbed repelled him. After I assured him that I would leave the grave in the condition in which I found it, however, he finally approved.

On the day we arrived at Polaris Promontory we set up camp near the place where Weldy had landed us, about a mile south of the observatory and the grave. We decided not to begin the exhumation until the next day, but after the camp was completed we walked to the gravesite. We could see the Nares tablet first, some distance away across the stony flats. As we approached it, we could see the shape of the mound, covered with large rocks; then a crowbar strangely jutting from the head of the grave; then, finally, Chester's headboard lying face down in the dirt. Change is slow in the cold, dry air of the High Arctic; the tablet shone as if it had just been taken from a furnace, and the willow still grew on the mound. Under the benign blue of the sky that day, the place was peaceful—and profoundly still.

We wandered on to the observatory. Here was the litter of man, which is widely strewn throughout the Arctic, all the more noticeable because of the vast inhuman spaces around it. The building no longer stood; its siding lay broken, scattered around its floor as if it had burst from within. Rusty cans, brass nails, iron stoves, a huge davit, an ice saw, shattered glass, and pieces of sailcloth spread out from the observatory like a cancerous growth. Throughout the area were the bowling-ball shapes of ice grenades, packed with black powder that still could explode. While poking through the rubble Tom Gignoux turned over a board, and there was Sergeant Cross's name, carved more than seventy years before when he had been doing the poking. Bill Barrett found a broken blue bottle on which the word POISON still could be seen molded into the glass. After momentary, laughing excitement, we realized that it was of little significance: bottles marked POISON could, after all, be contained in a scientific observatory without ominous implications. On the beach I found a Danish shotgun shell, perhaps discharged by Eigel Knuth in 1958. Such sites in the Arctic usually contain layers of history: a hundred yards away were the graves of the two Nares sailors, and not far from them was a paleolithic Eskimo tent-ring.

During the night, under the unsetting sun, the weather changed. When we set out early in the morning to do the job for which we had come, the sky was suitably lowering, the land suitably bleak. The day before had been too bright for such a morbid piece of work.

For a year I had wondered how I would feel when the coffin was opened. Hall might well have become a skeleton—but in the Arctic air, lying on the permanent frost that had prevented his grave diggers from digging deep, he might have been perfectly preserved. It was impossible to know what was in the coffin, and much as I dreaded finding only a skeleton from which nothing could be proved, I also dreaded finding the man himself, just as he had been. Having spent three years violating his mind by reading his private journals, now I was going to violate his body. I had been haunted by the vision of a rather offended face peering out of the coffin, a face asking, "Is there no limit to what a biographer will do?"

While Frank Paddock, Bill Barrett, and I stood nervously by, Tom Gignoux, not long back from a tour of duty in Vietnam as a Marine, did most of the digging. All of us wanted to be properly solemn, but our nerves short circuited our sense of awe, and we found ourselves making absurd jokes. As Tom scraped earth off the long coffin lid, revealing pine that was still pale and fresh, Frank looked down at it and said cheerfully, "They didn't build it for the short Hall, did they?" We laughed immoderately. We stopped laughing a minute later when we caught a whiff of decay from within the coffin. During the next ten minutes, while Tom pried carefully at the lid, we stood silent. A piece of the lid broke off, and inside we could see a flag—part of the field of stars—and ice.

I removed the lid after Tom had done all the work, and we stood by the edge of the grave looking down. The body was completely shrouded in a flag. From the waist down, it was covered by opaque ice, but at the base of the coffin a pair of stockinged feet stuck abruptly through it. The front of the torso was clear of the ice, but we could see that its back was frozen into the coffin.

Frank carefully peeled the flag back from the face. It was not the face of an individual, but neither was it yet a skull. There were still flesh, a beard, hair on the head, but the eye sockets were empty, the nose was almost gone, and the mouth was pulled into a smile that a few years hence will become the grin of a death's head. The skin, tanned by time and stained by the flag, was tightening on the skull. He was in a strangely beautiful phase in the process of dust returning to dust. The brown skin, mottled by blue stain and textured by the flag that had pressed against it for almost a hundred years, made his face somehow abstract—an icon, or a Rouault portrait.

The autopsy took about three hours. We decided not to try to remove the coffin from the grave or the body from the coffin, embedded as they were in ice. Frank Paddock had to straddle the coffin and lean over to do his work, an agonizing posture to hold for that length of time.

It was very discouraging. At first we thought that the body, still well fleshed, was perfectly preserved, but Frank's scalpel revealed that the internal organs were almost entirely gone, melded into the surrounding flesh. Frank persisted in a meticulous search, but found little that held any hope for analysis. A fingernail and some hair, to be tested for arsenic, were the best samples we had. At last exhausted, Frank gave up. We put the lid back onto the coffin, and Tom Gignoux shoveled earth back into the grave. After we had piled the rocks back onto the mound, I shoved the strange crowbar into the earth where it had been; later I was to be thankful that I remembered to do it. When we left, Hall Rest appeared the same as it had been, with only one change that disturbed me: the ground willow planted by the men of the *Polaris* was no longer rooted amid the rocks.

We had almost two weeks to wait before Weldy was to return. We whiled away the time roaming the *Polaris* Promontory, realizing only later that most of our roaming was to the south—the grave lay to the north, and we tended to avoid it. The beach made the best walking. Inland, the shale plain stretched out forty miles deep, depressing in its lifelessness, but along the beach there were life, movement, and sound. Sanderlings, sandpipers, and plovers picked at the waterline; fulmars flew offshore. Occasionally we would disturb nesting Arctic terns, to be delighted by their wheeling and darting attacks on us, their excited and exciting screams. One day when a high wind was blowing on the plain I found a group of clucking ptarmigans strutting down the protected beach, ridiculous birds having a ladies' club meeting. Our rations were meat bars and dried potatoes; the Danes had forbidden us to live off the land, and only great self-discipline prevented mayhem on the beach that day. Every morning we found the tracks of a fox along the edge of the water, challenging us to catch a glimpse of him. Day after day the little creature eluded us; then one evening while I was sitting quietly, hoping to see him on his nightly route, out of the corner of my eye I saw something move behind me. Foolishly I jumped up to look. The fox had been stalking me while I was waiting for him. He moved away, not running or even trotting, but keeping his dignity in a stately pace, pretending not to be frightened by what must have been the only human being he had ever seen.

The sky and the light constantly change in the Arctic, because weather systems move rapidly there. Leaden clouds would settle, wind would blow, snow would fall; in a few hours the sky would clear to deep blue and the wind would calm; then there would be a show of mare's tails and mackerel skies forecasting another storm; and the cycle would begin again. Local fogs inexplicably would blow in or blow out; we would be walking down the beach in clear air, able to see the mountains of Ellesmere Island thirty miles across Hall Basin, when suddenly we would be plunged into clammy murk, able to see only the ghostly shapes of nearby icebergs.

Hall Basin was clear of ice the day we arrived, but two days later a south wind drove ice up from Kennedy Channel—both floe ice and bergs that had been spawned from glaciers to the south, especially the great Humboldt. Looking at and listening to ice was one of our best diversions. If we stood still and stared out across the basin, we could see it move with the currents, very slowly, very steadily. Many of the small bergs along the beach had eroded into fantastic shapes that changed as we saw them from different angles; some were so smooth that they appeared machine-tooled, others rough-textured; some were in strange animal and birdlike forms, others almost geometrically round, square, trapezoidal. As delightful as the sights of the ice were its sounds. Along the beach, we could hear many: the one that the wind makes when it blows uninterrupted by trees or grass, the lapping of the water on the sand, the cry of birds. But the sounds I remember best were of water steadily dripping from thawing icebergs, and the occasional crack and rumble of big ice breaking out in the bay.

Our two weeks of roaming were well spent. They were lifegiving, images of the beach helping to purge images of the grave from our minds. After those two weeks, I also better understood the man who lay in the grave, and others like him who have felt impelled to travel to the Arctic, yearning for its cold beauty.



Weldy picked us up on schedule, and a few days later we were back in the United States. After consultation with specialists in pathology and toxicology, Frank Paddock sent the fingernail and the hair to Toronto's Centre of Forensic Sciences, where they were given a neutron-activation test, a highly sophisticated method of analyzing tiny amounts of material. For some reason I was not optimistic about our chances of receiving any significant information from the tests, so it came as a surprise when the Centre reported that they had revealed "an intake of considerable amounts of arsenic by C. F. Hall in the last two weeks of his life."

The fingernail had provided the best evidence. Doctor A. K. Perkons of the Centre had sliced it into small segments, working from tip to base, then submitted the segments to the neutron-activation test. The "read-back" from the neutron bombardment indicated increasing amounts of arsenic in the basal segments. At the tip, the fingernail contained 24.6 parts per million of arsenic—at the base it contained 76.7 ppm. Assuming a normal growth rate of 0.7 mm a week, Doctor Perkons concluded that the large jump in Hall's body burden of arsenic occurred in the last two weeks of his life. The fact that his arsenic content was high even before the jump could be explained in several ways. Arsenic was often used medicinally in the nineteenth century, and it also was used in hair-dressings, so many persons then had a relatively high content. The normal content today is only 1.5—6.0 ppm. Also, the soil near the grave contained fairly large amounts of arsenic (22.0 ppm); according to Perkons, some could have "migrated" from the soil to the body. "However," Perkons went on in the report, "such migration would not explain the differentially increased arsenic in the sections of both hair and nail toward the root end."

We checked with other authorities, all of whom accepted the accuracy of the Centre's report and agreed with its conclusion: Charles Francis Hall had received toxic amounts of arsenic during the last two weeks of his life.

What conclusions can be drawn? Excited by the report, after I received it I studied my material on the Polaris Expedition in light of the new information, testing various explanations for the arsenic contained in Hall's body. The trouble, as I soon discovered, was that several explanations were possible.

The following list of symptoms of acute arsenic poisoning is quoted from Gleason, Gosselin, Hodge, and Smith, *Clinical Toxicology of Commercial Products* (Baltimore, 1969):

1. Symptoms usually appear ½ to 1 hour after ingestion.
2. Sweetish metallic taste; garlicky odor of breath and stools.
3. Constriction in the throat and difficulty in swallowing. Burning and colicky pains in esophagus, stomach and bowel.
4. Vomiting and profuse painful diarrhea.
5. Dehydration with intense thirst and muscular cramps.
6. Cyanosis, feeble pulse, and cold extremities.
7. Vertigo, frontal headache. In some cases (“cerebral type”) vertigo, stupor, delirium, and even mania develop.
8. Syncope, coma, occasionally convulsions, general paralysis, and death.
9. Various skin eruptions, more often as a late manifestation.

As one looks down the list, one sees many of Hall’s symptoms: the initial gastrointestinal troubles, the difficulty in swallowing, the dehydration, the stupor, delirium, and mania—even the late manifestations of skin eruption noticed by Chester the day before Hall died. Given the results of the neutron-activation test, this should be no surprise. There is no doubt that Hall received a large amount of arsenic during the period that he showed these symptoms. The question is, How did he receive it?

Arsenic would have been available aboard the ship; in the form of arsenious acid, it was commonly used as a medicine in the nineteenth century. “Arsenious acid,” comments the *Dispensatory of the United States* of 1875 in one of its longest entries, “has been exhibited in a great variety of diseases. It was used in the treatment of headaches, ulcers, cancer, gout, chorea, syphilis, even snakebite. In the form of “Fowler’s Solution,” it was a very popular remedy for fever and for various skin diseases. It was a standard part of any sizable medical kit, and obviously the Polaris Expedition had a large medical kit.

Hall may have dosed himself with it. With such a man, suicide is almost inconceivable, but it would not have to have been suicide; he might have died a victim of the capacity for suspicion that had so often erupted in his life. Platt Evens of the percussion-seal-press lawsuit, William Pomeroy, William Parker Snow, Isaac Hayes, Sidney Budington, Patrick Coleman, and nameless others had aroused his fear of jeopardy and his wrathful self-righteousness. From the beginning, he did not like or trust Emil Bessels. In his sickness, which may indeed have been a stroke, might not he have treated himself rather than put his faith in the “little German dancing master”? Even during the period when he allowed Bessels to treat him, he may have been taking medicine on his own. Bessels testified that Hall had a personal medical kit, containing among other things “patent medicines.” Some nineteenth-century patent medicines contained arsenic; although its quantity was not great in any of the medicines that have been tested, Hall might have dosed himself heavily. Or perhaps he gained access to Bessels’s kit and took arsenious acid from it. Tookoolito would have helped him do such a thing, and, quiet Eskimo woman that she was, would not have said a word about it later.

But murder also is possible. The coffee that Hall drank when he boarded the ship after his sledging journey could have been poisoned. Although arsenic is usually tasteless, it can leave a “sweetish metallic taste.” Hall complained to Tookoolito about the coffee. “He said the coffee made him sick,” she testified. “Too sweet for him.” About one half hour after he drank it, he felt pains in his stomach and vomited, symptoms that suggest poisoning.

But the pain and the vomiting could have been caused by a stroke, as could many of the other symptoms listed in *Clinical Toxicology*. If Bessels was telling the truth when he said that Hall also suffered partial paralysis, then a stroke is as satisfactory an explanation of many of them as arsenic

poisoning. There is also a possibility that Hall suffered both a stroke and arsenic poisoning. The initial attack could have been a stroke, then the arsenic could have been administered later, during the two weeks of his illness. It should be repeated: there is no doubt that the arsenic was administered. The question remains, How was it administered—and by whom?

The persons who had the most access to Hall during his illness were Sidney Budington, Tookoolito, Ebierbing, Hubbard Chester, William Morton, and Emil Bessels. Others could see him, especially those who shared the cabin with him, but these are the persons who were often with him, treating him or feeding him.

Budington, undergoing a psychological ordeal, drinking heavily, apparently afraid of being so far north, is a suspect, but he actually had less access to Hall than the others. Apparently he seldom approached the sick man or did anything for him. Tookoolito, Ebierbing, Chester, and Morton frequently attended, nursed and fed him, but there is no indication of any possible motive for the doing him injury. Like Budington, they cannot be entirely dismissed as suspects, but they are highly unlikely ones.

If Hall was murdered, Emil Bessels is the prime suspect. A trained scientist, he had the knowledge and, as ship's surgeon, the material needed to administer arsenic. He had access to Hall much of the time—and when Hall refused Bessels access, his condition improved. Joseph Mauch made a note in his journal on November 1, several days after Hall first refused treatment by Bessels: "Capt. Hall much better this morning—for the last 2 days he has taken no medicine & today his health is greatly improved, although yet very weak."

When Bessels treated Hall, he gave him some medicines orally, especially cathartics; arsenic could have been mixed with such medicines. He also gave him injections of what he said was quinine; arsenic also could have been injected, as it sometimes was in the treatment of cancers. When Bryant saw Bessels prepare the injections, the process involved the heating of "little white crystals," precisely the way that quinine was usually prepared. But arsenic could be in the form of a white powder, easily mistaken for crystals or mixed with them, and it, too, can be prepared by such heating.

When one considers Bessels as a possible murderer, one notes little things in the transcript of the inquiry that are subject to various interpretations. There is the uncertainty about whether he was in the observatory while Hall was drinking the coffee, as he said he was, or aboard the ship, as Morton and Mauch believed that he might have been. There is his refusal to administer an emetic when Hall was first taken ill; if indeed Hall had suffered a stroke, an emetic would have been dangerous—but an emetic also might have emptied his stomach of poison. There is the persistence of his quinine treatment when Hall's fever had been allayed. And one night, according to Budington's testimony, Bessels came to him complaining that Hall was refusing to take any medicine. Budington volunteered to take the medicine first in front of Hall, like a parent with a child. Bessels refused to let him do so. Small things, straws in the wind.

Bessels had the opportunity, the skill, and probably the material, but why would he do it? He had no apparent rational motive; he would gain nothing concrete by Hall's death. Unlike Budington, for example, he was not afraid of their situation and did not want to retreat south, and therefore Hall's passion to go north was not a threat to him. In fact, Joseph Mauch and Henry Hobby testified that when the *Polaris* was run aground at Etah, Bessels secretly tried to bribe some of the men to return north with him—an ambitious act, and perhaps ambition could be motive enough. With Hall's death the command actually fell to Budington, but Bessels had more power and independence because Budington was a far weaker man.

But ambition for what? To make major scientific and geographical discoveries and be given full sole credit for them? This does not seem motive enough for murder. Here we enter the underground

streams of mind, the darkness that the Board would not probe. When one of its members asked George Tyson if he thought that “there was any difficulty between Captain Hall and any of the scientific party that would be an inducement for them to do anything toward injuring him,” Tyson replied firmly, “No, sir.” Then he paused and said, “Unless a man were a monster, he could not do any such thing as that.” The Board, not wanting to consider the possibility of monstrosity, moved on to other matters, but perhaps the truth lay precisely in monstrosity.

Joseph Henry had warned Hall that Bessels was “a sensitive man.” He must have been very sensitive to justify Henry’s making such a comment in a letter that is remarkable for its dry, official tone, and Bessels’s behavior on the Polaris Expedition, his quarrels with both Hall and Budington indeed suggest that he was at least difficult to deal with. Little is known about his later career, but enough is known to indicate that he remained difficult, perhaps abnormally so. For more than ten years he maintained a connection with the Smithsonian. Part of that time was spent compiling the scientific results of the expedition, and he sometimes received needling letters from Baird suggesting that he hasten his work. There is evidence that the Smithsonian was eager to get rid of him.

One reason was his involvement in a controversy in 1880. An International Polar Year was planned for 1882-3, and in 1880 the scientific community in the United States was much concerned with what the country should do about it. Among those who spoke out was Captain Henry Howgate, who had some rather far-fetched ideas about colonizing the Arctic. On February 16, 1880, an interview on the subject with Emil Bessels appeared in the *New York Herald*, an interview that reveals much about the man. The reporter devoted some time to the difficulty of finding Bessels’s office in the Smithsonian. “To discover this apartment without a guide would be almost as great an act as reaching the North Pole itself.” Then he commented: “When the portals are entered, passing under the heavy folds of green drapery which nearly hide the entrance, the visitor would suppose he had been suddenly translated into the retreat of Faustus.” As Bessels was interviewed, he indeed acted like Faustus in his worst manifestations—self-assured to the point of arrogance, scornful of others, convinced that his knowledge was his. He laid down for the reporter what the United States should and should not do during the Polar Year. That much of what he said was correct does not mitigate his irritating condescension:

“What do you think of the plan originated by Captain Howgate?”

“Howgate’s plan? Why, Captain Howgate did not originate any plan whatever. He merely appropriated the ideas of Dr. Hayes and probably those of Lieutenant Weyprecht. As far as these are concerned Captain Howgate is all right; but with regard to the rest—well, I would prefer to talk about something more rational.”

Bessels read aloud a passage of Howgate’s writing about the possibility that a superior Eskimo culture already existed somewhere near the Pole; then he made passing reference to the Polaris Expedition. “This even beats Dr. Newman, who wrote for the Polaris Expedition a prayer to be read at the North Pole, consecrating the Pole to liberty, education and religion. I am only astonished that Captain Howgate did not quote him as an Arctic authority.” Bessels was hardly being tactful, as Newman was still Chaplain of the Senate.

When the reporter asked him another question, he said: “Let me light a fresh cigar before I answer this question.” One can see him, small, natty, his eyes bright with self-assurance, lighting the cigar and leaning back to say, “It amused me to find that a man writing such bombast [Howgate] should have the insolence to point out what caused other expeditions to fail in reaching the Pole, and in what manner they were mismanaged.”

When Bessels was asked about an Arctic expedition that Howgate had organized not long before, he snapped, “~~The sole aim of the thing was to gain cheap reputation and to lay a snare for Congress~~ appropriate the means for a *real* Arctic expedition.” The interviewer asked Bessels why he thought Howgate’s expedition had been a failure. The doctor referred to the scientists who had accompanied the expedition without pay “for the mere love of science.” Possibly he was thinking of his relationship with Hall when he said, “They had to submit to the orders of an incompetent, harsh skipper, who more seriously interfered with their duties.” It should be noted that Howgate was not the skipper—by a wide coincidence, the skipper was George Tyson.

Bessels was right to distrust Captain Howgate. Some years later it was proved that he had taken advantage of his position in the Signal Corps to swindle large sums of money. But the intemperance of Bessels’s attack might be explained by something other than his belief that Howgate was a fraud. Henry Howgate had been a member of the Board of Inquiry that investigated the *Polaris* Expedition. There is no indication that he said or did anything during the inquiry to earn Bessels’s enmity, but there is at least a possibility that the doctor held a deep-seated grudge against him for his membership on the Board.

Whatever the cause of Bessels’s intemperance, it brought the wrath of Spencer Baird down on his head. Baird wrote him an icy letter, castigating him for his loose mouth. Bessels remained at the Smithsonian for a few more years, but apparently under a cloud. Past trouble obviously lies behind the terse note that he received from Baird’s secretary in 1883:

Dear Doctor:

We need immediate possession of the room now occupied by you near the north entrance, as we find it necessary to make improved toilet arrangements for visitors. Please therefore remove your property and greatly oblige.

Yours truly
Wm. J. Rhe

The tone indicates that this was not the first attempt to dislodge him, but it apparently was the last; his Smithsonian salary soon was stopped, and, presumably, the “retreat of Faustus” became a toilet. Bessels soon after returned to Germany. He died there in 1888—ironically, of apoplexy.

A difficult man—but a monster? Bessels did not seem a monster in the ordinary course of his life, but perhaps he had monstrosity latent within him. The close atmosphere of a wintered-in ship was a test of anyone’s mind. Ambitions, dislikes, abnormalities of any kind could be unbearably magnified and intensified, as the whole history of Arctic exploration reveals. On the *Polaris* Expedition Budington and others drank, Tyson brooded, the carpenter went insane, young Joseph Mauch, Noah Hayes, and probably most of the men aboard drifted miserably toward paranoia. Hayes’s assertion is the conclusion of his journal rings of hard experience and honest self-awareness: “I believe that no man can retain the use of his faculties during one long night to such a degree as to be morally responsible.” Bessels scorned Hall, as he apparently scorned many men. Hall was an uneducated boob, but he, Emil Bessels of Heidelberg and Jena, had to serve under him and take his orders. The relations had been strained at the outset, and Bessels faced at least another year, probably another two years, on that tiny ship, suffering the humiliation of an arrogant man in a subservient position.

Perhaps Bessels murdered Hall. Perhaps. The only certain truth that can be found in this case is our knowledge of the inevitable and final elusiveness of the past. What happened aboard the *USS Polaris* between October 24 and November 8, 1871, can never be entirely known. What went on in the minds of Hall, Bessels, and the others aboard that ship, and what they did furtively on their own, is done

gone, past. The questions that the Board of Inquiry did not ask can be asked today, but many of them cannot be answered.

One way or the other, Charles Francis Hall died, as his friend Penn Clarke said he would, a victim of his own zeal. If a stroke was the primary cause, then he drove himself into it, trying to reach the North Pole at the age of fifty. If Bessels murdered him, then his zeal, which made him strong, also made him an unbearable threat to the doctor's ambitions or a hateful object of the doctor's fears. If he poisoned himself, then it was because the zeal that had made him fiercely independent had also made him fiercely suspicious. The dark side of his independence was his distrust of anyone who seemed any way to threaten him, his integrity, his desires. Independence is often loneliness, and Hall was a lonely man. Treating himself rather than trusting someone else for treatment would have been characteristic, almost a symbolic, act.

Will power, energy, and independence are the qualities that made him and perhaps broke him. Nineteenth-century America was filled with the rhetoric of will power, energy, and independence but, as scholars, beginning with Frederick Jackson Turner, have shown, it was an age that increasingly controlled energy and individual will, channeling them into the communal and the cooperative. For better or worse, Hall was the real thing. Pious and patriotic as he was, he had something of the mountain man in him. When he drifted west from New Hampshire, he was looking for wilderness though he may not have known it. When Cincinnati did not give him what he wanted, then he went north instead of west—not drifting then, but driving with relentless energy and concentrated purpose. In the North, too, he found that full independence was not possible, not among the Eskimos, not aboard the *Polaris*. Hall's voyages to the Arctic were not merely geographical explorations. They were a quest for the kind of independence that was gone from American life—or, closer to the truth, the kind of independence that never existed except in the minds of dreamers like Hall.



Just before we left Polaris Promontory after the exhumation, I returned alone to the grave. I had to fulfill Arctic ritual and bury a cannister there with an account of what we had done. After doing the job, I took a last look at the grave, hoping to feel some of the things that I believed I should feel and had not felt during the day of the autopsy. The biographer and the detective still dominated; in spite of myself, all I did was puzzle about the crowbar at the head of the grave—the crowbar that we had carefully put back in place. After we returned home, while rereading Noah Hayes's journal, I noticed something I had not noticed before; the Indiana farmboy solved at least one mystery and deserves the last word about his hero. The night they buried Hall, he wrote, was too cold, too miserable for them to mount a headboard, so they jammed the crowbar into the mound. "A fit type of his will," wrote Hayes "an iron monument marks his tomb."

SEE THE ESQUIMAUX

from *The Voyage of the Narwhal* (1998)

Andrea Barrett

The Voyage of the Narwhal is Andrea Barrett's 1998 fictional version of a Franklin rescue expedition. The captain of the Narwhal, Zechariah "Zeke" Voorhees, gets separated from his men and is presumed dead; months later he returns home with the Eskimos, Annie and Tom, who have saved him. In this passage, two old friends of Voorhees, Alexandra Copeland and Erasmus Wells, attend his public exhibition of the rescuers.

HERE IN THE THEATER'S gallery, near the prostitutes scattered like iridescent fish through the shoals of dark-clothed men, Alexandra felt drab in her brown silk dress. Two seats down from her, a woman in a chartreuse gown with lemon-trimmed flounces was striking a deal with a pleasant-looking man. They would meet on the landing, Alexandra heard them agree. Directly after the lecture. The man's voice dropped and the woman shook her head, shivering the egret feathers woven into her hair. "Twenty dollars," she said. The man nodded and disappeared, leaving Alexandra to marvel at the transaction.

"There must be a thousand people," Erasmus said, scanning the crowd. "Maybe more."

"It's frightening," she said. "How good Zeke is at promoting himself."

All around the city, on lampposts and tavern doors, in merchants' windows and omnibuses, posters advertised the exhibition. A clumsy woodcut showed Zeke holding a harpoon and Annie a string of fish, Tom peeping out from behind her flared boots. In the background were mountains cut by a fjord and above those a banner headline: MY LIFE AMONG THE ESQUIMAUX. A caption touted the remarkable discoveries made by Zechariah Voorhees:

Two Fine Specimens of the Native Tribes!

More Exotic than the Sioux and Fox Indians Exhibited by George Catlin in
London and Paris!

See the Esquimaux Demonstrate Their Customs!

Zeke had run a smaller version in the newspaper and mailed invitations to hundreds of his family friends and business associates—organizing this first exhibition, Alexandra thought, like a military campaign. Ahead of him lay Baltimore, Washington, Richmond, New York, Providence, Albany, Boston.

Erasmus said, "Can you see Lavinia?" and Alexandra, scouting the boxes on the second tier, finally spotted her dead center, flanked by Linnaeus and Humboldt and Zeke's parents and sisters. She was touching her hair then her cheek then her brooch then her nose, turning her head from side to side as the mood of the entire audience were expressing itself through her. Everyone, Alexandra thought, made nervous by this month's chain of disasters. Across the ocean, off the coast of Ireland, the telegraph cable being laid with such fanfare had broken. Two trains had crashed south of Philadelphia killing several passengers; last week a steamship on its way to New York from Cuba had sunk. Each

these seemed to heighten the financial panic set off by a bank failure in Ohio. Banks were closing everywhere; the stock exchange was in an uproar. The papers were full of news about bankrupt merchants and brokers. Alexandra's own family, who had no money to lose, hadn't been touched so far, and the engraving firm seemed stable. But Erasmus, whose income came primarily from his father's investments, had suffered some losses. And Zeke's father's firm was in trouble, which suddenly made Zeke's future—and Lavinia's as well—uncertain. Suddenly it mattered what Zeke charged for the exhibition tickets, and how many tickets were sold. The theater was full of people desperate for distraction.

In the glow of the gaslights Zeke strode out in full Esquimaux regalia, adjusted the position of two large crates, and took his place at the podium. The roar of applause was startling, as was the ease with which he spoke. If he had notes, Alexandra couldn't see them. Swiftly, eloquently, he sketched for the audience an outline of the voyage of the *Narwhal*, making of the confused first months a spare, dramatic narrative.

Their first sights of Melville Bay and Lancaster Sound, their encounters with the Netsilik and the retrieval of the Franklin relics; the discovery of the *Resolute* and their stormy passage up Ellesmere until they were frozen in; their long winter and the visit of Ootuniah and his companions; the first trip to Anokatok. No mention, Alexandra noticed, of Dr. Boerhaave's death, nor of the other men who'd died: nor of Erasmus. It was "I" all the time, "I" and "me" and "mine;" occasionally "we" or "my men." No names, only him. Beside her, Erasmus fidgeted.

Twenty minutes, she guessed. Twenty minutes for the part of the voyage involving the crew; the other fifteen for Zeke's solo trip north on foot and his return to the empty ship. "Now," Zeke was saying, "now began the most interesting part of my experience in the arctic. I was all alone, and winter was coming. I had to prepare myself."

From the crates he began to pull things. His hunting rifle, sealskins, a tin of ship's biscuit, a jar of dried peas. His black notebook, the sight of which made Erasmus groan. Into his talk he wove some stray lines from that, and then read aloud the section about the arrival of Annie and Nessark and Marumah. "The *angedkok* is the tribe's general counselor and advisor," he explained. "As well as a wizard. His chief job is to determine the reason for any misfortune visiting the tribe—and the *angedkok* of Annie's tribe determined that the cause of their children's sickness was me. So was my life changed by a superstition. From the day these people arrived I entered into a new life."

He described the journey to Anokatok and his first days there. Then he said, "But you must meet some of the people among whom I stayed." He stepped back from the podium and whistled.

There was rattling backstage, and the crack of a whip. Two dogs appeared—not his huge black hunting dogs but beagles, ludicrous in their harnesses, gamely trotting side by side. Apparently Zeke would not subject his own pets to this. Behind them they pulled a small sledge on wheels, with Tom crouched on the crossbars and Annie grasping the uprights and waving a little whip. Both Annie and Tom wore fur jackets with the hoods pulled up and shadowing their faces. When the sledge reached the front of the podium, Zeke gave a sharp command that stopped the beagles. They sat, drooling eagerly as Zeke held out bits of biscuit, and then lay down in their traces with their chins on the paws. Their eyes followed Zeke as he moved around the stage, but Annie and Tom stared straight on at the audience, shielding their eyes against the glare.

"These are two of the people who rescued me," Zeke said. "The names they use among us are Annie and Tom."

While they stood still he recited some facts. Annie and Tom belonged to the group of people John Ross had discovered in 1818 and called Arctic Highlanders—there were just a few hundred of them, he said, scattered from Cape York to Etah. Fewer each year; their lives were hard and their children

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