

***Unchained Man: The Arctic Life and Times of Captain Robert Abram Bartlett.*** By Maura Hanrahan. Portugal Cove–St. Philip’s, Newfoundland: Boulder Books, 2018.

Reviewed by Danita Catherine Burke

The book *Unchained Man: The Arctic Life and Times of Captain Robert Abram Bartlett*, by Maura Hanrahan, attempts to “respond to Laura Nader’s call to study the colonizer” and the author hopes to add to this call through a deconstruction of Bartlett’s life and legacy (p. 4). Bob Bartlett is a world renowned early-twentieth-century Newfoundland sealing captain and Arctic explorer, most famous for his over-fifty-year career assisting and leading expeditions into the Canadian Arctic, and his decades long working relationship and friendship with American explorer Robert Peary, who famously claimed to be the first to reach the North Pole—a feat he managed with much assistance from Bartlett who captained the ship that took Peary and his team into the Canadian Arctic.

The book looks into the context within which Bartlett operated and the attitudes and legacies of prominent expedition leaders, such as Robert Peary and Vilhjalmur Stefansson, with whom Bartlett was associated. Its look at Bartlett’s life is descriptively rich, particularly of Bartlett’s family tree and homestead in Brigus, Newfoundland, but at times the book makes statements about Bartlett’s family, especially his father (e.g., pp. 100, 192, 210), with minimal explicit evidence to substantiate the claims.

There are also claims and suggestions about Bartlett’s character that may require more reflection. These include insinuating homosexuality (p. 254); suggesting he fathered children though little evidence supports this (e.g., pp. 71, 257); equating an introverted personality and desire for privacy as an “obsession with secrecy” (p. 257); suggesting admiration for colleagues was “hero worshipping,” which implies there is a right amount of admiration that is allowed to be conveyed but that Bartlett crossed this

line somehow (e.g., p. 28); and repeatedly calling him “ambitious” with the implication being that ambition is a problematic trait while criticizing him for lacking “the strong inner core and confidence necessary for social deviance” (p. 262).

To understand Bartlett, we much engage with what he represented for Newfoundlanders, their history and culture. Was he, as the author suggests, presenting himself as the everyday man while coming from a privileged background? Perhaps, to an extent, Bartlett did tap into the perception of himself as the humble captain, an average Newfoundlander making his way. And Hanrahan is right, Bartlett did have advantages that others did not have. His family had a degree of wealth where many others in Newfoundland did not. As a result, the Bartlett family had a nice house and access to things, such as more education and most likely more food, than a lot of people in poverty stricken Newfoundland at that time.

There are some things money can’t fix, though. For example, as the author acknowledges, loss in the Great War hurt the Bartletts like many families in Newfoundland (pp. 81, 191–2). The love of family and the infliction of disabilities and sickness, death in childbirth, and the dangers of shipping were also experiences of the Bartlett family. Bob Bartlett may not have been as average as he has been portrayed, but he may not be so far-removed from the experience of his fellow Newfoundlanders either.

The author broaches the subject of survivor’s guilt and implicitly suggests that he may have suffered post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) with her discussion (pp. 177, 180, 193, 200) of Bartlett’s descent into alcoholism in the early 1920s after the *Karluuk* disaster (which occurred in 1914 when a mixed crew of seamen, Inuit, and scientists were trapped in the Western Canadian Arctic after their vessel sank and Bartlett, as the ship’s captain for the Stefansson-led expedition [Stefansson survived having left the ship with a few crew before the disaster] walked approximately 700 miles to Siberia with Inuit hunter Claude Kataktovik to find help, resulting in Bartlett and Kataktovik saving some of the crew).

No doubt those who survived the SS *Newfoundland* sealing disaster in 1914 (p. 217) and the World Wars, for example, could relate to Bartlett’s experience. The issue of mental health is a line of inquiry that could be teased out and would make for a greater engagement with Bartlett’s legacy. Through exploring survivor’s guilt and PTSD and how evidence of such

issues manifests in people's lives, a more nuanced treatment of Bartlett, the other explorers, their colleagues, and those they encountered on their travels could perhaps be obtained.

Bartlett stands out because he is a compelling individual while never really trying to fashion himself as a hero. Others did that in their books, stories, and memories of their encounters with him—people such as David Clark Nutt, in his acknowledgement of the role Bartlett played in mentoring him in his Polar experience (pp. 228–233), and Gordon Spracklin, in his recount of Bartlett's generosity by giving away his own shoes to a poor old man with holes in his boots (p. 220). As Hanrahan notes, for Bartlett the media “was a means to an end, a way to boost his image and, in turn, propel his Arctic career,” unlike others, such as Stefansson with his book *The Friendly Arctic*, who sought fame and a place in history (p. 200).

Hanrahan also acknowledges a number of major books attributed to Bartlett were ghostwritten (pp. 218, 240). Despite this, the author does not substantially analyze: (a) the process of ghostwriting as it was done in Bartlett's time; (b) why Bartlett chose to have some books and articles ghostwritten when he was capable of writing; and (c) to what extent the ghostwritten materials have influenced Hanrahan's work and our ability to truly understand Bartlett's state of mind about work, home, colleagues, and himself.

Much is also made in the book about the disrespectful and colonial attitudes and behaviour of some of the explorers Bartlett associated with such as Peary, Henson, and Stefansson. This is well researched and documented by Hanrahan and she makes a convincing case about some of the worst abuses that stain the history of exploration and the experiences of Indigenous peoples as a result of it. The exploration of Peary's and Henson's treatment of Indigenous women, and the children the explorers had with them, cuts to the core of Indigenous mistreatment in society at that time (p. 55–6).

However, implicit suggestions that Bartlett accepted or condoned their behaviour are not convincing. At times the book reads like Bartlett's mistakes are those of being a White man (p. 244) and those of being associated with people who took pride for behaving in shameful ways. Periodically, the author presents evidence that Bartlett acted in a much more

outwardly supportive and acknowledging way toward Indigenous peoples and their role in exploration compared to many of his contemporaries (e.g., 166–8, 178). While Bartlett's actions fall short of current standards, no doubt they were progressive for their time and would have, perhaps, caused tensions with his colleagues (e.g., p. 158). Regardless, Bartlett's relative silence and lack of open condemnation of Peary's actions, in particular, is sometimes portrayed as guilt of acceptance when evidence to support this is lacking.

The *Unchained Man* has good research about the broader implications of colonial attitudes and prejudice regarding Indigenous peoples and the need to think critically about casting polar explorers as heroes. The exploration of Peary is a fine example of this research emerging to the forefront. In the end, the book leaves more questions than answers about Bartlett's legacy and status in Polar exploration, and skirts deep engagement with why Bartlett is an enduring symbol in his homeland, Newfoundland. A solid exploration of Newfoundland society, culture, and history is needed to bring the story of Bartlett to fruition as it is difficult to engage with Bartlett and his legacy in its present form.

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