

*Polaris: The Chief Scientist's Recollections of the American North Pole Expedition, 1871-73.* By Emil Bessels. Translated and Edited by William Barr. Volume 19, Northern Lights Series. University of Calgary Press, 2016. 643 pages.

Reviewed by Jennifer Schell

In June 1871, Charles Francis Hall embarked as the commander of an ill-fated expedition to the North Pole on the *Polaris*, the first of its kind launched by the United States. Over the next few months, Hall experienced numerous difficulties, such as dangerous weather, unpredictable ice, fuel shortages, and personnel conflicts. Although he persevered through these problems, he did not live to see the new year. In October 1871, Hall set out with two sleds to explore the terrain around the *Polaris*, which was frozen into the icepack off the coast of northern Greenland. When he returned, he drank a cup of coffee and fell violently ill, suffering from headaches, vomiting, and dizziness. As his symptoms waxed and waned, Hall came to believe that he was being dosed with poison, but he never substantiated his suspicions. He succumbed to his mysterious malady on 8 November 1871.

Although the remainder of the expedition proved to be disastrous—the survivors suffered shipwreck, separation, and starvation—Hall's death proved to be its defining event, at least insofar as twenty-first-century writers have been concerned. Most recent accounts of the expedition scrutinize the circumstances of Hall's death, focusing especially on Chauncey Loomis's exhumation of Hall's body in 1968 and his subsequent discovery that the commander of the *Polaris* ingested significant amounts of arsenic in the two weeks prior to his death. In addition to Loomis's *Weird and Tragic Shores* (1971), the list includes Richard Parry's *Trial by Ice* (2001) and Bruce Henderson's *Fatal North* (2001). Despite struggling to elaborate a motive, these books all posit that Hall was murdered by Emil Bessels, the German doctor who served as the expedition's chief medical and science officer.

While readers seeking retrospectives on Hall's final expedition have several options, far fewer first-hand accounts of the expedition exist. Just two of the *Polaris*'s crewmen, George Tyson and Emil Bessels, published narratives of the voyage. Tyson's *Arctic Experiences* first

appeared in the United States in 1874, and Bessel's *Die Amerikanische Nordpol-Expedition* first appeared in Germany in 1879. The latter remained unavailable to English readers until the twenty-first century when it was translated by William Barr and republished as *Polaris: The Chief Scientist's Recollections of the American North Pole Expedition, 1871–73*.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Bessels's narrative takes up the majority—530 pages, to be precise—of Barr's book. To his credit, Barr does not abridge Bessels's primary text; rather, he includes all of its digressions, most of which involve scientific and ethnographic subjects, such as the existence of an open polar sea and the design of Inuit hunting implements. Barr also furnishes readers with all of the illustrations, diagrams, tables, charts, and lists from the original text. These, too, tend to address a wide array of scientific and ethnographic topics. Although this inclusivity results in a somewhat cumbersome text, it renders Barr's translation of Bessels's narrative an excellent resource for scholars, especially those interested in the history of Arctic science and anthropology.

Despite its digressions and its unwieldiness, *Polaris* is an entertaining book, in part because Barr manages to capture Bessels's sense of excitement in passages that describe polar bear hunts, ice disasters, and whaling expeditions. He also manages to convey Bessels's sense of humour in passages that address the quirks of Newfoundlanders, the deterioration of frozen foodstuffs, and the antics of the *Polaris* crew. Below, Bessels describes a shipmate's fascination with collecting fossils:

[he] happened to bring aboard a petrefact embedded in ice. Eager to separate the fossil from its matrix, he laid it on the hot plate on the stove. As ammonia and other fumes penetrated from below into the premises of the geographical group, our attention was drawn to the fossil. But nobody suspected the worst, since at many locations around the harbour the limestone was strongly bituminous and emitted a distinct smell as soon as one rubbed it or struck it with a hammer. Great was the chagrin of the zealous collector when an expert

came in, spotted the object, and immediately identified it as a coprolite, derived from none of the formations between the Lias and the Cretaceous, but of a much younger age, and which provided tangible proof of the excellent metabolism of the Eskimo dogs. (246–247)

If these humorous scenes stand out from the remainder of the narrative, then so do the ethnographic ones. Compared to other nineteenth-century Arctic travellers, Bessels tends to be fairly generous in his descriptions of and ruminations on Inuit culture. Although he displays a hefty amount of racial prejudice throughout the narrative, he often admires the abilities of the expedition's Inuit employees. In the chapter "An Ethnographic Sketch," he attempts to debunk the idea that "the Inuit are the nearest blood relatives of paleolithic man" (365).

Naturally, Bessels's status as the prime suspect in Hall's murder endows his narrative with special significance. Readers looking to discover evidence and/or a motive in the primary text will be disappointed, however. Insofar as conflicts among the crewmembers are concerned, Bessels practises restraint, preferring instead to represent the voyage as running mostly according to plan. For information about the mystery surrounding Hall's death, readers must rely on Barr's extensive editorial materials, which include a forward, epilogue, bibliography, endnotes, maps, and appendices. Though meticulously researched and illuminating, this apparatus could have been a bit better organized. For example, the forward could have been expanded to include information from the biographical sketches, and the maps could have been marked to indicate the travels of the *Polaris*. Whatever their flaws, these materials provide important context for and yield new insights into Bessels's narrative and, by extension, the *Polaris* expedition. They also reveal a possible motive for Hall's murder. For this and more, readers interested in the history and literature of Arctic exploration will be indebted to William Barr for many years to come.

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