

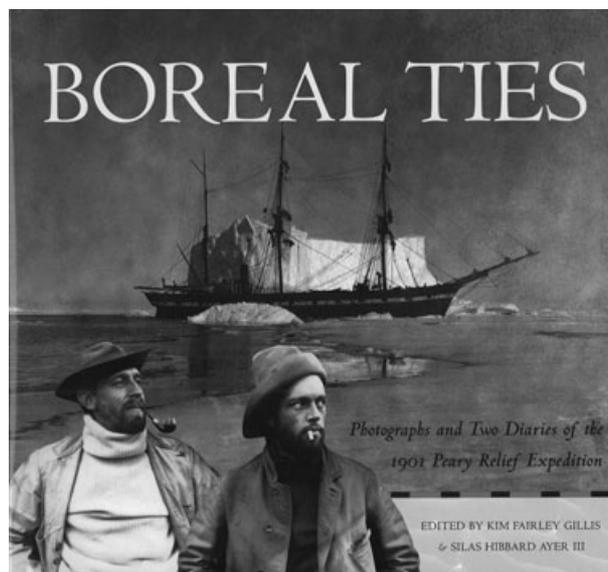
## BOOK REVIEW

Review of *Boreal ties. Photographs and two diaries of the 1901 Peary Relief Expedition*, edited by Kim Fairley Gillis and Silas Hibbard Ayer III (2002). Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press. 232 pp. ISBN 0826328105.

In *Boreal ties*, the famously crusty and imperious Robert Peary is referred to as “a peach”. At first this representation might appear to be flagrantly inaccurate, somewhat like calling Dr Frederick Cook—Peary’s not always truthful North Pole adversary—“a bastion of honesty”. But within the context of the book, the description is wholly apt.

In the early years of the 20th century, the Peary Arctic Club was the explorer’s financial lifeline. The club’s members, who were mostly wealthy businessmen, donated money and provisions for Peary’s Arctic sojourns, in return for which the explorer peppered various geographical features with their names. On one occasion, however, the club donated two of its members to the Peary cause. Having paid the then not inconsiderable sum of \$500 apiece, Clarence Wyckoff and Louis Bement—two affluent young men from New York—joined the 1901 Peary Relief Expedition and sailed north on the steamer *Erik*, accompanied by, among others, Dr Cook himself. The purpose of the expedition was to locate Peary and attend to his medical needs (Cook’s job), as well as to resupply him for his seemingly endless assaults on the Pole.

The text of *Boreal ties* consists primarily of Wyckoff and Bement’s diaries of the trip. Written casually (colloquialisms like “peach” abound), these diaries show two privileged young men engaged in a sort of offbeat holiday. Not surprisingly, the two men’s responses to what they experience tend to be conditioned by their backgrounds. Thus, Wyckoff writes: “Halifax bum town like Kingston and most Canuck towns. Bum hotel, bum everything” (p. 45). Their attitude to the Greenland Inuit, whom they call Huskies, is more or less typical for the time: frequently condescending or racist. Bement compares the eagerness of the Inuit when receiving gifts to “the feeding of chickens” (p. 86). Of their personal hygiene, he writes: “I



did not suppose human beings could live and stink so . . .” (p. 75) and “. . . it must be worse than a dog’s life they lead” (p. 113). Of an apparently too proud young Inuk, Wyckoff says: “Jollied him into carrying [my] bag back to ship . . . and think it did him good” (p. 157). He does not record what the Inuk thought of this “jollyng”.

Amid such observations Peary himself plays only a subsidiary role, perhaps because he is less than forthcoming about his discoveries or lack thereof. Upon meeting him, Wyckoff grumbles: “. . . we got no news . . . All is very secret . . . Think it is damn rotten that I was left out of everything” (p. 127). Cook, by contrast, is at least sociable, although he doesn’t talk much about his polar exploits either. The result is that the diaries do not provide a window on Arctic exploration, so much as give voice to the sensibilities of a pair of greenhorns venturing into the Arctic for the first time.

In addition to keeping diaries, the two men took photographs, a number of which are reproduced in the book. Although many of these photographs are set up like studio portraits, many others seem to be taken on a whim. Thus we see Dr Cook washing himself on the deck of the *Erik*, crewmen playing chess, and Peary checking an Inuit woman for head lice. In spite of this, or perhaps because these photographs were not taken by professionals

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(several are in fact overexposed), they have a genuine documentary value. Caught at random moments, Peary appears to be in poor physical health, a fact that he himself denied. And a picture of four crew members taking their leisure during a caribou hunt also includes their Inuit guide seated in the background, a depiction of the local status at once dramatic and unintentional.

The images of the Greenlanders are especially revealing, for Wyckoff and Bement are obliged to capture what they're actually seeing, rather than what their prejudices tell them they're seeing. In other words, an Inuk's putative smell does not take priority over his sealskin garments or dignified gaze. An Inuit camp with a heap of rocks extending across the foreground, and steep snowy slopes in the background, suggests a subsistence carved out of a harsh environment using great human ingenuity, rather than "a dog's life". Likewise, an Inuit child looks at

the camera with a wry grin, as if to say: "White Men have such peculiar toys". The child is dirty and dishevelled, but that's not significant. What is significant is that the child isn't inured to having her picture taken, and at the same time isn't astonished by the idea of photography.

However dubious Peary's claims to the Pole were, his charisma and flair for self-promotion put the Arctic firmly in the public consciousness during the early years of the 20th century. In turn, this led to discoveries arguably more important than any Peary made himself. The 1901 Peary Relief Expedition accomplished little beyond its original goals, although the two young men who participated in it did discover—at least temporarily—that there's more to life than the comforts of home. Handsomely produced, but less than handsomely edited (among other errors, "deer" is indeed a synonym for caribou), *Boreal ties* is a testimony to this fact.