

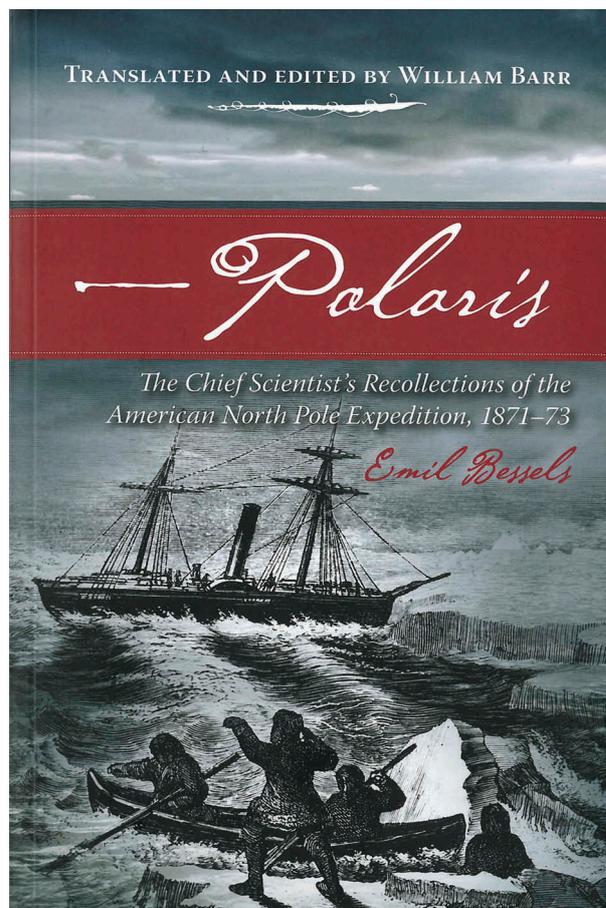
BOOK REVIEW

Polaris: the chief scientist's recollections of the American North Pole Expedition, 1871–73, translated and edited by William Barr, Calgary, Canada: University of Calgary Press, 2016, 643 pp., 44.95 USD (hardback), ISBN 978-1-55238-875-4.

This important translation places German scientist Emil Bessels' own account of the ill-fated American *Polaris* North Pole expedition in the English language for the first time. With the publication of Chauncey Loomis' seminal *Weird and tragic shores: the story of Charles Francis Hall, explorer in 1971*, Bessels assumed a status as the primary villain in an Arctic drama that resulted in the still-mysterious death of expedition leader Hall and the separate and miraculous retreats and rescues of the *Polaris* crew. Prior to Hall's death and the dissolution of the crew, the expedition had successfully blitzed northwards through Melville Bay, Smith Sound, Kane Basin and into Robeson Channel, to a point far more northerly than any ship before. Hall, an almost mystical Arctic vagabond who, when required, could put on 'impressive display[s] of chutzpah' (pp. xix–xx), was in early September of 1871 less than 475 miles from the North Pole, a stunning achievement and one that left him in excellent position to make a brilliant strike for the Pole the following spring. Yet, as Bessels notes in his fascinating account, once Hall refused to force the *Polaris*' ice-master Budington further north: 'Fortune, which had accompanied us thus far, became ill-disposed to us and never smiled on us again' (p. 149).

Polaris, the book, is a beautifully produced volume, with excellent maps at the fore, with reproductions of 46 illustrations that accompanied Bessels' German original scattered throughout, and with the editor's skilful scholarly impedimenta. All these add to the successful translation of a critical primary source into English. Somewhat surprisingly, especially as secondary sources of the expedition portray Bessels as something of a dull martinet, Bessels' account itself is an excellent read, in almost every segment full of detail without being pedantic. From the details of the ship and its provisioning, to Inuit anthropology and scientific recording, the secreting of alcohol stores on a publically identified 'temperance ship', all are rendered with both detail and, unexpectedly, humour. Excellent descriptions are provided of St. Johns and the western settlements of Greenland and the inhabitants of these places that even today lie on the fringe of civilization, yet are central to the examination of global climate change.

The account is also a very early and comprehensive destruction of the latitudes, the geography and the 'open polar sea' claimed by another American Arctic explorer, Isaac Israel Hayes, and here Bessels' conclusions could



not be more direct: 'Where Hayes claims to have sighted his open polar sea, there is land...' (p. 209), and, undoing 20 years of accumulating dogma, much of it due to Hayes' mismeasurements and enthusiasms, 'we viewed this open water not as an open polar sea, whose existence was dictated by thermal conditions, but as a local phenomenon provoked by winds and currents' (p. 254).

Bessels' observations of the variety of geologic uplift and subsidence along the west coast of Greenland are also fascinating and point to a new generation of scientists who increasingly viewed the planet and the life upon it as inherently unstable. These, combined with the detailed accounts of the logistical issues with scientific data collection in extreme environments, make the volume even more valuable. The descriptions of the ship and the sounds that snapped through it during an Arctic storm are first rate. Bessels refreshingly makes scientific observations without simultaneously stretching them to accommodate some geographic theory. There is also a wealth of scattered and rewarding vignettes, such as archaeological notes on previous exploring camps and shipwrecks such as the Hayes observatory and Sonntag's disturbed grave site, to say nothing of the Shakespeare-quoting whaler

captain Adams. Appendix 4 furthermore contains biographical sketches that are particularly well written and detailed with excellent research.

Despite the amount of attention that has been fixed upon Bessels as the chief suspect in Hall's death, Bessels' narration of Hall's sudden incapacitation and lingering death occupies only three pages, offering nothing in the way of personal insight into Bessels' thoughts or actions during these critical days. Given that Hall had just returned in apparent splendid health and optimism from a difficult two-week sledge journey and that Tyson pronounced him amazingly fit, his extreme and extremely sudden illness after drinking a single cup of coffee remains as mysterious as ever. As the translator–editor points out, one has to read between the lines and any implied criticism.

As for a motive Bessels might have had, the editor makes a brief but persuasive case, based upon materials recently uncovered by the Arctic historian Russell Potter, of an unrequited affair between Bessels and the young sculptress Vinnie Ream. Ream liked to cultivate older influential men and her apparent attentions to the famous Hall could have tipped Bessels into a fit of jealousy that led to him administering lethal doses of arsenic to Hall when he had the opportunity. If one adds romantic jealousy to Bessels' ambition for polar glory, as

well as Bessels' natural academic distaste for Hall's distinctly un-academic personality, and then combines these with other highly suspicious facts (Bessels not allowing Budington to sample the medicine he was administering to Hall; Hall recovering somewhat when not being treated by Bessels), then one perhaps gains a comprehensive foundation for a case to answer in the often alleged murder of Charles Francis Hall.

Taken together, this finely edited translation will become a standard acquisition of all English-language libraries with polar research and reference collections.

Reference

Loomis C. 1971. *Weird and tragic shores: the story of Charles Francis Hall, explorer*. New York: Random House.

P. J. Capelotti
*Division of Social Sciences, Abington College,
Pennsylvania State University, Abington, PA, USA*
 pjc12@psu.edu

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/17518369.2017.1310805>

