

Reviews

A FRENCHMAN IN SEARCH OF FRANKLIN: DE BRAY'S ARCTIC JOURNAL 1852–1854. William Barr (Translator and editor). 1993. Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press. xxii + 339 p, illustrated, hard cover. ISBN 0-8020-2813-6. £23.00; US\$40.00.

A Frenchman in search of Franklin is yet another fine effort by William Barr to make available the voices of the many individuals committed to the exploration of the Canadian Arctic. As he had done with *Overland to Starvation Cove: with the Inuit in search of Franklin, 1878–1880*, Barr has provided a carefully annotated translation of the journals of a subordinate member on an important expedition to ascertain the fate of Sir John Franklin and his ships *Erebus* and *Terror*. Emile Frédéric de Bray, an officer in the French Navy, had been seconded at his own request to serve in the search for the missing Franklin expedition. He sailed aboard the ship *Resolute*, commanded by Captain Henry Kellet, which was one of five ships under the general command of Sir Edward Belcher on the Admiralty's 1852–1854 search for Franklin.

As a result, de Bray was present when Captain Robert McClure — having some claim to being the first man to negotiate a Northwest Passage — was ordered by Kellet to abandon his ship *Investigator* and to return to England under Belcher's supervision. In fact, a list of de Bray's companions on that important milestone in the search both for Franklin and for the Northwest Passage reads like a 'who's who' in nineteenth-century Arctic history. In addition to McClure, Kellet, and Belcher, de Bray's journal records experiences with such prominent figures as George S. Nares, Francis Leopold McClintock, and Sherard Osborn.

There are, of course, numerous other official accounts of this grand search under Belcher's general command, a command that closed with Belcher's court martial and acquittal. Why, one might ask, is yet another record necessary? For one thing, historians, influenced by post-modern thinking that tends to undermine notions of authoritative readings of history, have sought documents that stem from less-official sources. Hence, records kept by subordinate officers on an expedition have held special interest for today's reader. Heinrich Klutschak's journal, kept while Klutschak accompanied Frederick Schwatka on his search for Franklin documents, is one such example, one Barr has already made available to Anglophones. Leslie Neatby's translation of the journal that the Moravian missionary Johann Miertsching kept aboard McClure's *Investigator* is another. C. Stuart Houston's recent editions of journals by 1819–1822 Franklin expedition members Robert Hood, John Richardson, and George Back are further manifestations of modern interest in the voices of other individuals, and not only in the official account of the

officer in charge. One suspects this interest grows out of a desire to view history as a more egalitarian and evolutionary process, and not simply as a sequence of official, state-supported, imperial events, which was the view Hegel took of history.

De Bray's account, however, plays no role in any sort of revisionist history. He is certainly not critical of his commanding officers or companions. Rather, what his rendering offers the student of Arctic history is an alternate way of viewing the experience, and, while the end result is not revolutionary, as might be the record of a disgruntled guide or subordinate officer, the subtle variations in de Bray's voice lend depth and fullness to one's comprehension of this period of geographical discovery. Amplifying this aspect of how the journal is valuable, Barr provides 63 pages of notes that frequently enhance our appreciation by showing parallel passages from the accounts of other members of the Belcher expedition. Barr's notes encourage the notion that history — like a diamond — is multifaceted.

The text from which Barr works was written well after the conclusion of the expedition. Hence, it is not a true day-by-day journal, with entries made at the end of each day. What, then, does de Bray's voice add to our understanding? Perhaps more than anything else, de Bray's perspective is of interest because it is a foreign voice. A Frenchman aboard an expedition mounted by the British Admiralty, de Bray brings a freshness of vision to what he describes, and the reader in turn benefits from those descriptions. For example, de Bray's account of preparing *Resolute* for wintering in the Arctic is not the work of an old hand experienced and somewhat jaded by the process. Of particular interest is the description of setting up telegraph lines so that the crews of *Resolute* and *Intrepid* could keep in instantaneous contact even while frozen in the ice during the winter. Similar freshness of detail is present in de Bray's explanations of the mechanics of cutting ice harbours, of rigging sails on man-drawn sledges, of the perils of pack ice, and of winter funerals in the high Arctic.

Another important way that Barr's translation of de Bray adds to an appreciation of this period of Arctic history is more aesthetic. De Bray often hits on exactly the right phrasing in his evocations of his experience, phrasing that creates not only a solid sense of place, but of the author's personality through which the reader can, in turn, better view the experience. For example, describing being towed by the steamship *Intrepid* through waters shared with two enormous icebergs, de Bray speaks of his pleasure in getting out of the way of 'these awkward neighbours' (page 38). Similarly, he describes an accidental fall through the ice while hunting as 'a detestable bath' (page

32), and later writes:

I had occasion to take a bath today, which was far from pleasant under the circumstances. We were on quite thin ice and Mr Hamilton, who was walking ahead, called to me to ask my opinion on a spot which he had noticed ahead and which did not seem safe to him. I walked forward a few paces trying the ice with a pike, when suddenly I disappeared from Hamilton's sight. He had just time to throw himself backwards to avoid following me in my submarine excursion. (page 59)

One final example of de Bray's pleasantly dry understatement warrants comments. Describing the busy scene of activity as the men prepared to stage one of the theatrical performances that amused them during the long Arctic winters, de Bray tersely remarks that at '4 o'clock, after a hurried dinner, everyone got busy dressing; the ladies shaved and put on their wigs and hair pieces' (page 81). With a pleasing sense of style, de Bray knows when he has said exactly the right amount — 'the ladies shaved,' and no more. Such an artistic sense is often sadly missing in the many naval accounts of Arctic exploration, and de Bray's more subtle voice is much welcomed.

As one has come to expect from William Barr, *A Frenchman in search of Franklin* includes a complete 'Translator's introduction' and 'Postscript' that assist the reader in understanding the larger context into which this document fits. Barr also describes the evolution of the specific text from which his translation is made (Barr works from a polished draft in which the experience is 'recollected in tranquillity' and, consequently, lacks some of the immediacy of a daily record) and provides useful biographical information about de Bray himself. In addition to the 63 pages of notes, Barr includes a substantial bibliography, four appendices, and a useful index. The production level of the book is generally high, with good illustrations and maps and extremely few printer's errors. Any aficionado of this period of Arctic history will be pleased with Barr's new book. (Richard C. Davis, The Calgary Institute for the Humanities, The University of Calgary, 2500 University Drive NW, Calgary, Alberta T2N 1N4, Canada.)

THE NORTHEAST PASSAGE: FROM THE VIKINGS TO NORDENSKIÖLD. Nils-Erik Raurala (Editor). 1992. Helsinki: John Nurminen Foundation and the Helsinki University Library. 287 p, illustrated, hard cover. ISBN 952-9745-02-8. FIM 275.

This superbly produced volume somewhat belies its title. Adolf Erik Nordenskiöld, the first man to navigate the Northeast Passage, is the peg on which it hangs, but the text ranges far beyond the Northeast Passage. It might be more accurate to call it simply a history of Arctic exploration, but there was a good reason to bring in the distinguished name of Nordenskiöld, because the story does centre round that impressive figure and his manifold achievements in more ways than one. This great scholar-explorer of the late nineteenth century assembled a very large collection of relevant objects — not just books and papers,

but pictures, artefacts, scientific specimens — and these are in the care of the University Library at Helsinki (Nordenskiöld was a so-called Finlander, born in Finland but by temperament and personal predilection a Swede). In 1992 an exhibition was arranged that sought to draw public attention to this collection, and this book is in effect a guide to the exhibition. It is what may be described as 'popular-scholarly': easily readable, but with enough of the apparatus of scholarship to allow the non-specialist to identify the source of important statements and the whereabouts of important objects. There are a great many illustrations, and they constitute the chief glory of the book. But it is not the sort of catalogue the visitor carries around with him, for it weighs two kilos. It will give pleasure and instruction long after the exhibition has ended (which it now has).

The table of contents shows the scope of the book. Edwin Okhuizen, a historian at the University of Utrecht, covers the early history from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries. As befits a Dutchman, he covers ground of which other western historians know little. Esko Häkli, director of the Helsinki University Library, has a special interest in the mapping of Spitsbergen, as well as in charting its waters. Cristoffer Ericsson is the man for how people crossed Atlantic waters under sail, whether whaling, fishing, or exploring, and at whatever period. Juha Nurminen, in addition (one supposes) to giving generous financial support to the venture, has a particular interest in navigational techniques in the pre-radio age. There follow three articles directly related to the collection: Nurminen collects and displays pictures taken during the great voyage of *Vega* through the Northeast Passage in 1878–1879; Wilhelm Odelberg, chief librarian of Stockholm University, discusses articles of material culture, including archival material that he ferreted out; and Leena Pärssinen, of the Helsinki University Library, shows more of this from the 'other place.'

Just as was the case with Nordenskiöld's own collection, there is a strong emphasis on maps. The map-oriented reader will be aware of Nordenskiöld's 'Facsimile-atlas' (1899), in which he brought together reproductions of a large number of the most important, and most attractive, maps illustrating European history. The present volume does something of the same thing. It is only possible to attempt this if the highest standard of colour printing is attained, and this is the case. A credit is quite rightly given to the type of paper used and its maker.

As has been indicated already, the subject matter of the book wanders rather far from the Northeast Passage of the title. The reader may feel that he is being led away from his expected subject, but perhaps will not mind much if he finds himself in the Northwest Passage. But if he discovers he is following Darwin's track in *Beagle*, he may get restless. The difficulty arises from the character of the book — a combination of scholarly contributions to the history of Arctic exploration with a detailed guide to a rich and varied collection of artefacts.