

of the *Newfoundland* disaster, the book does this with little, but poignant text. To get a better, indeed, tangible experience of that time, the book contains numerous photographs, reproductions of maps and logbooks, telegrams and other materials which are inserted in the book in envelopes or as unfoldable ‘goodies’ (for lack of a better word). With this in mind, it would even appear reasonable to assume that the target audience of the book are school children who are supposed to get an interest in sealing history.

Not surprisingly, the lively design and make-up of the book earned the author the *Democracy 250 Atlantic Book Award for Historical Writing* in 2014, a prize to ‘to honor an outstanding work of non-fiction that promotes awareness of, and appreciation for, an aspect of the history of the Atlantic Provinces’ (Atlantic Book Awards 2014). Indeed, I would fully support this book as falling under these criteria and, this may sound slightly polemic and somewhat out of place in a journal such as *Polar Record*, I several times caught myself thinking while going through this book: ‘Wow, this is just cool.’ This reaction is particularly interesting in this context, simply because the book deals with two very serious issues at the same time: the disaster with significant human loss and the seal hunt – one of the most controversial hunts in the world. But be that as it may, it shows that the author has managed to get the reader enthralled, to get him or her captivated by the seal hunt and to paint a picture of the sealers that goes way beyond notions of ‘barbarism’ or ‘cruelty’.

In fact, the book deals exclusively with the people, a very rare thing to find in the context of seal hunting.

Let me conclude by saying that even though I would consider myself being very familiar with the Newfoundland seal hunt, this book was a special experience. Not because of the information it held, but because of the way the basic information on the seal hunt and the *Newfoundland* disaster was conveyed. For research purposes scholars should, however, turn to works such as Shannon Ryan’s *The ice hunters* (Ryan 1994). For educational purposes, Higgins’ work is indispensable. (Nikolas Sellheim, Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge, Lensfield Rd, Cambridge CB2 1ER, UK ([nps31@cam.ac.uk](mailto:nps31@cam.ac.uk))).

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**A wretched and precarious situation.** David Welky. 2017. New York: W.W. Norton. 502 p, illustrated, hardcover. ISBN 978-0-393-25441-9. US\$28.95  
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‘Do not draw a veil over the whole voyage’, Captain George Comer advised, ‘bury it deeply and cover it with concrete’. Comer, a crusty arctic veteran, was speaking of the Crocker Land Expedition, of which he had become an unwilling participant. It had been sent out under the sponsorship of the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) in 1913 to explore the most northerly land on earth, which Robert E. Peary claimed to have sighted from the tip of Axel Heiberg Island in 1906. In his new book, David Welky, a professor of history at the University of Central Arkansas, does not take Comer’s advice; quite the opposite. He resurrects the Crocker Land Expedition and reanimates its participants, both willing and unwilling.

Judging from *A Wretched and Precarious Situation*’s text, whose informal language is peppered with modern colloquialisms, the book is aimed squarely at a general audience. It also contains a number of asides on diverse topics that seem designed to add to reader interest. Some of these work well as effective bridges between topics; others, frankly, fall flat and simply seem irrelevant. But none of this should draw a veil over the fact that, overall, Welky’s book is a solid piece of original research that makes a major contribution to the scholarship of polar history and, in total, his writing shows the author’s passion for his subject to the extent that it allows him to bring together related bits from diverse sources in a telling way. That’s because Welky bases his narrative largely on original sources, many of which have never been touched by other scholars, and he has read them so carefully that these connections come naturally, as only they can to one who has taken such a thoroughgoing approach. Nevertheless,

there are also reasons for some reservations as to everything in Welky’s narrative being gospel truth.

The history of the expedition goes back to at least November 1909, when Donald MacMillan, one of Peary’s assistants on his last attempt to reach the North Pole that year, broached the idea of an expedition of his own to Herbert L. Bridgman, Secretary of the Peary Arctic Club, Peary’s association of millionaire backers (MacMillan 1909). He proposed exploring Peary’s “Crocker Land” and also suggested such an expedition would allow him to gather evidence against Peary’s rival for polar honors, Dr. Frederick A. Cook. But MacMillan’s lobbying didn’t stop there. He, along with fellow 1909 expedition member George Borup, developed detailed plans, eventually obtained Peary’s blessing, and gained the financial assistance of the AMNH, long a locus of Peary’s institutional support.

In detailing the expedition’s genesis, Welky reveals how MacMillan was displaced from the leadership job by the charismatic Borup, who had become the protege of the AMNH’s powerful curator of geology, Edmund Otis Hovey, and that MacMillan was nearly bounced from its rolls entirely. He was saved only when Borup lost his life in a boating accident in June, 1912. This set back the expedition’s sailing date a year and made its sponsors reluctantly accept MacMillan as its new leader, only because any other alternative would have further delayed the project. Even so, Hovey forced his own conditions on MacMillan, most telling being the assignment of US Navy Ensign Fitzhugh Green and Elmer Ekblaw, a professor of geology at the University of Illinois, to the expedition without consulting MacMillan. Rounding out the expedition staff were Maurice Tanquary, an entomologist and friend of Ekblaw’s, Harrison Hunt as surgeon, a Navy wireless operator named Jerome Allen, and Jot Small, MacMillan’s friend, as cook.

From his research Welky brings forward little known or previously unknown facts about the inside preparations and

inner workings of the expedition. We learn not only of MacMillan's disfavor with Dr. Hovey, but also that Borup nearly abdicated his leadership position to pursue his courtship of Peary's teenaged daughter, Marie, and that Peary's long-time manservant and companion, Matt Henson, applied to join but was vindictively rebuffed by Borup and MacMillan, who accused him of 'disloyalty' and 'treachery' because he had undertaken a series of lectures in 1909 against the expressed wishes of Peary. We also learn that Peary pledged \$500 to the expedition, then reneged, discouraged the AMNH's even going forward with it after Borup's death, and refused to contribute a penny towards its relief.

Diverse manuscript sources, including some original diaries, are used to draw portraits of the six expedition members, each proportional to their importance, with the possible exception of Elmer Ekblaw, who was probably the savior of the expedition in terms of gathering what meager scientific data it produced. His crossing of Ellesmere Island in 1915 and return to headquarters via Greely Fiord, Lake Hazen and Smith Sound gets less attention than MacMillan's later desultory wanderings, although it was the outstanding sledge trip of the entire expedition, easily eclipsing in length and geographic discovery even the attempt to reach Crocker Land in 1914 by MacMillan and Green.

Dr. Hunt shows himself to be a rugged and devoted character, at times overwhelmed by his regret at abandoning his wife and young daughter for the call of the North and increasingly bitter at the conflict between his sense of duty to the expedition and his dislike for its leader, for whom he had no use.

But it is Fitzhugh Green who seems to fascinate Welky most. Although outwardly a man of magnetic physical charm as well as diverse and real ability, his arctic experiences tended to bring out a darker, hidden side. Green had many pretensions, among them, literary ones; he wrote poems, features, novels and the first, romanticized, sycophantic biography of Robert Peary. But he emerges from his tortured private diaries as an insecure, self-doubting sociopath and perhaps even a borderline psychopath. These tendencies apparently contributed to what is probably the most remembered incident of the expedition, Green's murder of his lone Inuit companion after being sent down Axel Heiberg's coast by MacMillan to search for one of Otto Sverdrup's cairn records. Even Green's own published accounts of this incident make gruesome reading and one wonders at his sanity. Although Welky tries hard, in the end it's impossible to explain the inexplicable or rationalize the irrational, and Green, neither in the Arctic or in his subsequent career, ever comes clearly into focus.

Nor, curiously, does MacMillan. Despite Welky's sympathetic attempt, MacMillan never is seen as a full, rounded character or competent leader. He seems always aloof, reluctant to take control, ignoring issues he should probably have easily seen as needing to be addressed, rather careless in scientific matters outside of ornithology, and so focused on writing and rewriting material that would eventually be published as his 1918 narrative, *Four Years in the White North*, that his obsession with it became the butt of expedition jokes. MacMillan's monomaniac self-absorption can be seen extended in his subsequent career. He never got over the case of 'Arctic Fever' he contracted on Peary's expedition, returning North 27 times between 1921 and 1959.

MacMillan might not have been a strong or charismatic leader, but he learned from his experience with Peary how an expedition should be organized, and it was largely through his efforts that the Crocker Land Expedition regrouped after Borup's death and was able to sail from Brooklyn on 2 July 1913.

The voyage to winter quarters in *Diana* set the tone of the entire expedition. It ran aground on Barge Point, Labrador, had to be unloaded and reloaded, then replaced by *Erik* at St. John's. *Erik's* captain got his ship across Melville Bay alright and up to Etah, only to refuse to cross over the 30-mile wide Smith Sound to establish the expedition's winter base at MacMillan's preferred location, in Flagler Fiord, forcing its headquarters, Borup Lodge, to be built at Etah.

Over the winter some supplies were forwarded to Hayes Sound with the object of advancing in the spring to Cape Thomas Hubbard, the point from which Peary claimed to have sighted Crocker Land. From there MacMillan planned to travel across the arctic pack ice towards Crocker Land, which Peary estimated as lying about 125 miles to the northwest.

MacMillan had a copy of Dr. Cook's published narrative, *My Attainment of the Pole*, with him, and after reading Cook's account of his difficult experiences crossing Sverdrup Pass on his way to Cape Thomas Hubbard, he decided to take an alternate route across the Bietstad Glacier. The initial attempt that left on 14 February 1914 was forced back by bitter conditions and returned to Borup Lodge to regroup, only making a new start on 11 March.

The Bietstad route proved to have its own terrors, but with the invaluable help of his Inuit guides, MacMillan reached Cape Thomas Hubbard on 15 April. After an unsuccessful search for Peary's cairn there, he and Green set out northwest across the frozen sea with Ittukusuk and Piugaattoq (spelled Etookishoo and Peeawahto in MacMillan's book). After eight days' travel, they reached a point where they believed Crocker Land should lie, only to see nothing on the horizon. Two days earlier, they thought they had seen land, but the Inuit assured them it was only mist, and, indeed, it quickly had changed in outline before fading away completely.

There are at least three manuscript accounts of this journey written by MacMillan, plus the account he eventually published. In recounting it, Welky fails to note the differences among the accounts, especially between what appears to be MacMillan's original field diary, now at the AMNH, and his apparent 'revision', now at Bowdoin College. In so doing, he has missed the chance of clarifying the historical record. In the original, on 22 April, MacMillan rather matter-of-factly notes 'Thought we saw land this morning but think now it was mirage of ice. Nothing in sight'. In the revision, he sees it a day earlier, writes at length how utterly convinced he and Green are that it is actual land, but only reluctantly admits that it was a mirage and then immediately concludes that it must have been that same optical illusion which had deceived Peary eight years before. Additionally, Welky fills in some incidental details that are not recorded in any of the three manuscript versions and can't even be found in MacMillan's book, all of which are before me. Although Welky never succumbs to the modern trend of inserting fictional dialog in a 'non-fiction' book, one wonders, given this, what other details might be elaborated in his book's narrative.

For instance, Welky states that the convincing mirage of land stayed with them day after day and led them on until they reached well within the supposed position of Crocker Land. But even in MacMillan's book, he clearly says of the day of the original sighting, 'finally at night it disappeared altogether'. Welky says that on 22 April Green took a celestial observation that 'jibed with their dead reckoning'. But it didn't. In the AMNH diary MacMillan places them by dead reckoning 106 miles from land; Green's observation, which is worked out fully in the diary, makes it 120 miles, but Welky uses the stated 'reworked' results

from MacMillan's book, which puts them even farther offshore. And there are many other details where Welky chooses the book over the original diary, or even its manuscript 'revisions'.

Reading the AMNH diary, it seems MacMillan never seriously believed they actually sighted Crocker Land and that their continuance to the northwest was solely intended to reach a point far enough away from land to convince anyone that they had erased it from the map, at least where Peary had placed it. In fact, looking at the successive revisions of the distance from shore of their final position (106 miles by dead reckoning, 120 miles by celestial observation in the AMNH diary, 125 miles in a cairn record left immediately after returning to land, and eventually 150 miles in the 'reworking' made by the time MacMillan's book was published) suggests intentional enhancement towards this end.

Another curious statement at odds with the sources concerns MacMillan's recorded feelings upon seeing his dreams of discovery literally evaporate before his eyes. 'A great feeling of relief tonight', he wrote in his AMNH diary, 'My dream of 5 years is off'. Welky notes this 'strange choice of words, and one which he never retreated from or elaborated upon. Relief,—not resentment, outrage, or disillusionment'. Yet Macmillan wrote in his book of this moment, 'My dreams of the last four years were merely dreams; my hopes had ended in bitter disappointment'. Perhaps MacMillan's original 'relief', when read with his ever-increasing adjustment of his mileage, can be seen as an indication of his awe of the terrors of the arctic pack and his desire to escape them just as soon as he had made a good show of it.

Welky starts his book with an account of Peary's 'discovery' of non-existent Crocker Land as if a matter of fact. This is probably another literary device to suspend the reader's belief. That's understandable, but there were reasons to doubt it even at the time. However, he ends his book's first section with a very thorough examination of the documentary evidence, first detailed by Dennis Rawlins (Rawlins 1973), and agrees with him and most other scholars who have studied the matter that Peary's belatedly announced discovery of Crocker Land in 1907 (neither his field diary nor any of his recovered 1906 cairn records mention his having seen it) was a deliberate lie intended to coax more money from former donor George Crocker, for whom he named it.

The book's second part deals with the tangled nightmare of failed rescue attempts that stretched the expedition to four years rather than two, and which ballooned its cost from an early estimate of \$25,000 to a final \$192,580.11. In an ironic twist, Dr. Hovey, who accompanied the first rescue attempt on the schooner *George B. Cluett* expecting nothing more than an exotic excursion of two months, gets marooned with the ship at North Star Bay and eventually ends up at Borup Lodge along with Captain Comer, who was *Cluett's* ice pilot. MacMillan found bunking with his boss decidedly unpleasant, and the two ended up loathing one another. The imperious Hovey constantly berated MacMillan for scientific bungling and unauthorized trade of expedition supplies in exchange for fox

pelts for his personal gain. Though stuck with him, MacMillan mostly ignored Hovey, and even Hovey eventually played down his animus for MacMillan and the relatively low scientific returns of the expedition to save the AMNH's reputation.

*Cluett*, when eventually extracted from the ice, didn't go north to bring the expedition off due to bitter dissension between Hovey and its captain. The next year, *Danmark*, sent out to rescue the rescuers, suffered a similar fate, being frozen in in Melville Bay. Finally, *Neptune*, under the redoubtable arctic veteran Bob Bartlett, finally succeeded in carrying away the remaining expedition members, MacMillan and Small, along with Comer, the others having gone south to the Danish settlements individually to reach a Europe now at war, and then eventually home. Welky does a good job of keeping what could be a tedious narrative of sledge trips South and rescue attempts North moving along, but this section naturally lacks the focus of the first part, once the dream of Crocker Land vanishes.

Welky's sources are well and professionally documented so that subsequent researchers should have no trouble locating them if desired. The bibliography is extensive and could serve as a guide for supplementary reading on the incidents described. The index is useful, although incomplete; some items get no entry, for instance, Barge Bay. Some personal name entries do not include all the mentions of the person that the book contains. For instance, Frederick Cook appears on nearly twice the number of pages listed there.

The illustrations have been well chosen to show the significant characters, places and ships involved, but there is only one inadequate map. It was produced for the book, but reflects, not modern geography, but what was known of the area at the time of the expedition and doesn't include any of the sledge routes taken by it. Reproducing the one from MacMillan's book that does, would have been preferable. The text is virtually free of typos, something unusual of late. A half dozen or so factual errors were noticed, but these are minor and probably only recognizable by the specialist.

Finally, the choice of title for the book is a bit puzzling. It comes from a passing statement made by Dr. Hovey regarding his own narrow personal dilemma at one particular moment, and wasn't meant to characterize the whole Crocker Land Expedition. Perhaps a better choice would have been: 'When every thing's gone dead wrong'. Those who read David Welky's book from front to back, and anyone interested in polar history or the Crocker Land Expedition in particular should, will understand why. (Robert M. Bryce, 12404 Linganore Ridge Dr., Monrovia, MD, 21770, USA ([robertm.bryce@gmail.com](mailto:robertm.bryce@gmail.com))).

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**Antarctica. The battle for the seventh continent.** Doaa Abdel-Motaal. 2016. Santa Barbara: Praeger Press. 320p, hardcover. ISBN 978-1440848032. \$60.00.

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Antarctica is undergoing a 'silent battle for its spoils that started with its discovery and has continued without interruption ever

since', says the book's author. 'The battle ...is about to intensify' and 'will be one of the most complex and truly international contests for habitable space (and mineral resources) of modern times.... in which .. [the]...entire continent will be up for grabs'. Dramatic stuff, indeed. But all is not lost. Abdel-Motaal argues that we can safely open up the seventh continent as a haven for climate refugees, and exploit its mineral resources, provided we