

SHIPWRECK AT CAPE FLORA: THE EXPEDITIONS OF BENJAMIN LEIGH SMITH, ENGLAND'S FORGOTTEN ARCTIC EXPLORER. P. J. Capelotti. 2013. Calgary: University of Calgary Press. xxix + 269 pages, softcover, illustrated. ISBN 978-1-55238-705-4. \$39.95 CAD

Arctic exploration is often connected with prominent names such as Barents, Frobisher, Franklin, Nordenskiöld, Parry or Nansen and a lively body of literature exists surrounding these men, who, driven by pride, patriotism or self-adulation have sketched and created cartographic images of the geography of the far north. But one man has never received that much public attention, although his contributions to the understanding of the Arctic have not been less influential – Benjamin Leigh Smith, 1828–1913. Capelotti's account of 'England's forgotten Arctic Explorer' aims to change this and to shed light on a man who 'never desired, much less needed a public persona' (page xxi).

This book is a very modern and factual attempt to do so, as it is not about a hero or about glorifying a man that was born into a wealthy English family of political radicals and who had a 'fascination, if not fetish for much younger women' (page xxi). It is about giving credit to Leigh Smith's achievements as a polar explorer, three expeditions to the Svalbard archipelago, and two to Franz Josef Land, in times when the English government did not have polar exploration high on its agenda. It, however, is not an evaluation of his personality and the given quote does not have any further relevance for the course of the book and therefore does not serve a clear-cut purpose.

The book holds eight chapters. Chapter One, Five and Eight provide biographical data on Leigh Smith and contextualise his Arctic ambitions into a larger context, both in reference to other, non-English Arctic expeditions and the socio-economic conditions in Victorian England. It is in these chapters that Capelotti gives very detailed accounts on Arctic expeditions relevant for Leigh Smith that show the hardships and dangers involved when venturing to the pack ice in search for the suspected open waters surrounding the North Pole and of course the Pole itself.

And it is especially these chapters that unveil the difficulties in evaluating this book. This is due to two factors. Although the descriptions of for example Weyprecht's and Payer's voyages to Franz Josef Land are extremely interesting to read, opening a well of knowledge about the archipelago, the conditions of exploration and the cooperation between seafarers, they tend to shift the focus away from the core figure of the book, Benjamin Leigh Smith, and aggravate the re-entry into Leigh Smith's life and achievements. This, however, is necessary to be able to identify Leigh Smith's place in his times and I can therefore merely state that this is problematic and makes it difficult to keep track, without however being able to provide a solution. Notwithstanding, Capelotti makes reference to an important figure in Arctic exploration, August Petermann, on several occasions throughout the book and Petermann's hypothesis about open water around the North Pole are a guiding narrative in the book. Yet, a more detailed description of Petermann, his hypothesis and his journal starts only on page 127 making earlier references to Petermann difficult to comprehend and contextualise.

Although I am not a historian, I would be cautious in establishing direct cause-and-effect relationships, as Capelotti does on page 20, where he writes: 'With men serving overseas in the military or emigrating in higher numbers than women [...] there existed an appalling bias against women in nineteenth-century English law that all but forced on women a kind of legalized prostitution.' This is a rather generalised and simplistic statement and does not correspond to the complexity the common law tradition in England displayed (Glenn 2005: 237–287).

In the five chapters describing Smith's voyages to the Arctic Capelotti shows great skill in the analysis of the given sources and provides a great account on the routes, achievements and conditions of these expeditions. Here it becomes clear what makes Leigh Smith different to other polar explorers: Yes, he was driven by patriotic pride, but he had the capability to adapt to Arctic conditions and to recognise and appreciate the dominant Arctic environment. Moreover, he engaged in scientific enquiry, especially deep-water temperature measurements that revealed that contrary to common belief deeper waters around Svalbard are warmer than surface waters. His scientific ambitions and rather modest attempts to break through the pack ice to find the mystical open waters sketch a picture that he was not primarily driven by prestige, but rather by empathy for knowledge.

But yet another interesting feature rises to the surface when reading Capelotti's description of Leigh Smith's voyages: the interdependency between economy and exploration. This is particularly true in the case of marine mammal hunting that is a constant, accompanying feature of Smith's expeditions. For example his providing Scottish whaler David Gray with a deep-ocean sounding device to measure water temperatures (page 86). Or in reference to the crews who showed disappointment that in the 1871 voyage to Svalbard only a small number of marine mammals was killed, an error that Leigh Smith corrected in his Jan Mayen/Svalbard expedition one year later, when a much larger number of marine mammals was hunted (page 83).

Capelotti's choice of words makes the book a rather personalised depiction as it reflects the choice of words in the used sources. This happens on many occasions with direct citations or with indirect reference. Yet, this creates a problem that should have been addressed in the Preface, namely the utilisation of the word 'Lapp' (page 104, 107) which is outdated and considered discriminatory toward the indigenous population, the Sámi, of northern Europe. While in Leigh Smith's time the term was commonly used, Capelotti should have used quotation marks when referring to it.

In conclusion, Capelotti's account of Benjamin Leigh Smith is filled with picturesque descriptions of the voyages, environment, and conditions in the high north, but abstains from including the physical and psychological hardships the crews had to undergo when working their way through the ice or being stuck in the ice, especially, as the title suggests, in Cape Flora on Franz Josef Land. This is understandable when taking into consideration that the used sources obviously do not include these. It therefore is a rather dry, factual and therefore primarily historical account of Leigh Smith and his voyages that provides fascinating insights into his as well as other explorers' achievements.

But here lies also one of the main deficits of the book. It takes great detours and seems to lose focus, while offering

countless names of places and persons that make it hard to follow. While numerous historical maps are used, their sometimes small, black-and-white printing makes them difficult to interpret. A coloured, detailed map of Leigh Smith's routes would have been beneficial. The detailed descriptions, the sometimes loss of focus but the interesting and invaluable generation of knowledge make this book a read that indeed sometimes needs to struggle through the ice, but suddenly

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Reference

Glenn, H. Patrick. 2010. *Legal traditions of the world*. New York: Oxford University Press.