

Correspondence

Robert E. Peary and Bob Bartlett: a response.

Lord Shackleton

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In her paper 'Robert E. Peary: a medical assessment' (*Polar Record* 28(164): 71–72, 1992), Dr A.C. Bonga alleges that 'Bob Bartlett and others were willing to fake their findings' (concerning Peary's North Pole journey).

I am greatly surprised by this allegation. Where is the evidence for it? I knew that great Newfoundland seaman Captain Robert A. Bartlett, who died in 1946, and I knew him as the soul of honour. I cannot believe that he would in this manner have prostituted himself, who wrote in his book (*The log of Bob Bartlett*, New York and London, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1928: 196): 'It was an easy jaunt to the Pole from where I left him [in latitude 87° 47'N], and conditions were improving right along.' The 'others' in Dr Bonga's paper included George Borup, Matthew Henson, and Donald B. MacMillan, all long dead and all of whom in their respective books left no doubt that in their views Peary reached the North Pole.

It beggars my belief that there was a concerted cover-up on the outcome of the North Pole journey, and that, more than 80 years later, such an allegation should be made for the first time (to my knowledge) through the research of Dr Bonga. If 'Captain Bob' were alive, he would have refuted the allegation in unprintable terms. But, if he were alive, it probably would not have been published.

I have discussed this letter with Geoffrey Hattersley-Smith, who fully shares my view.

Robert E. Peary and Bob Bartlett: a rejoinder from the author.

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I wish to thank Lord Shackleton for his interest in my note. A review of the literature shows that some Peary-doubters accepted Bartlett's observation of 87° 47'N, while others did not. For instance, Captain Thomas F. Hall in his 1917 book *Has the North Pole been discovered?* (Boston, Richard G. Badger) points out inconsistencies in Peary's narrative involving Borup as well as Bartlett.

Although Lord Shackleton knew him as 'the soul of honour,' there is evidence that Bob Bartlett stretched the truth a little on other occasions. See, for instance, Harold Horwood's account of the Karluk expedition (*Bartlett, the great explorer*, Toronto, Doubleday, 1977: 29–30). According to the New York historian Frederick J. Pohl

(1890–1991) in his unpublished 'Dual biography of Cook and Peary' (1970), Bartlett and he had often chatted about Peary at their sailors' club. Bartlett had repeatedly said that 'Peary was never interested in getting to the North Pole.' Rather, Peary had wanted to conduct his thriving fur trade with the Inuit without interference from others. Thus, by denying Peary's motivation to reach the North Pole, Bartlett himself casts doubt on the validity of Peary's improbable claims. That Bartlett's precise role on the Peary expeditions may remain a matter of conjecture does not diminish his stature as a sailor and Arctic explorer.

Lead poisoning and the Franklin expedition

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I would like to comment briefly on the letters by Derek Fordham (*Polar Record* 27[163]: 371, 1991) and Ann Shirley (*Polar Record* 28[164]: 73, 1992) relating to lead poisoning and the deaths of Sir John Franklin and his men.

First, the lead concentration in the bones of the crewmen buried on King William Island is higher than that of the bodies on Beechey Island; not proportionately it is true, but there is no reason why it should be. There is not a linear relationship between lead concentration and time.

Second, regarding the quality of cans supplied to different expeditions: without knowing details of production in the factory (for example, uniformity of the composition of the solder, variation in amounts used per can, the supervision exercised, the nature of production runs), and the product allocation to different expeditions, it is not possible to assert that the quality of cans supplied to one expedition, even if judged from the health record of the crew, throws any light on the quality supplied to others.

Third, turning to Ann Shirley's letter, I wonder if too much significance is given to the 'perfectly satisfactory' comment on the cans opened in 1926, for only recently have the hazards associated with heavy metals in food and drink been studied closely and evaluated (Sherlock, J.C. In: Gibson and Walker [editors]. 1985. *Food toxicology*. London, Taylor & Francis). The source mentioned by Ms. Shirley (Watt, J. and others [editors]. 1981. *Starving Sailors*. London, National Maritime Museum) makes no reference whatever to food toxicology.

Derek Fordham implies that the major factor in the death of the crewmen was the hostile environment, and Ann Shirley supports the view that it was scurvy. I believe that their conclusions are over simple. Towards the end of their lives, the crewmen must have been suffering from