

Josephine Diebitsch Peary (1863–1955)

The genre of Arctic literature is heavily populated with male adventure-hero protagonists, but the role of women in 19th-century Arctic exploration has usually been overlooked. One exception, of course, was Lady Jane Franklin, a woman whose force of persuasion moved hearts and fleets of ships as she strove to locate her missing husband (e.g., McGoogan, 2005). Then there were countless Inuit women among the region's inhabitants whose names the explorers often failed to record, although their expertise in tailoring and food preparation saved more than a few expeditions. The historical presence and contributions of these women were largely obscured by the prejudices of the day (e.g., Schultz-Lorentzen, 2008). One woman whose role has been largely overlooked is Josephine Diebitsch Peary, one of the first non-Inuit women to establish, somewhat reluctantly, a high profile as a female Arctic explorer.

Josephine was born in 1863 on a farm in Maryland. Her father, Hermann Diebitsch, was a military officer in the Prussian army, who left his war-torn country with little more than a solid education and considerable linguistic skills. Ironically, he ended up in another Civil War, this time an American one. The destruction of their farm during the war, Hermann's dismal track record as a farmer, and the Smithsonian's interest in his intellect led Josephine's family to relocate to Washington, D.C. Hermann's employment at the Smithsonian (in the Exchange Department) meant that the Diebitsch family's social network included some of the intellectual leaders of the 19th century in the American capitol, such as Joseph Henry and Spencer Baird.

Forging a rather progressive career route for a woman of her day, Josephine attended Spencerian Business College, where she graduated as valedictorian in 1880. This business training, combined with her skills in the German and French languages, prepared Josephine to work at the Smithsonian and the U.S. Department of the Interior in positions such as copyist, clerk, and tallyist. Shortly thereafter, she met Robert Peary. By then, Josephine had already decided to follow an unconventional path. On one hand, she rejected the growing movement to achieve broader rights for women and embraced the ideology that a woman's duty was devotion to her husband and children. Yet on the other hand, she advocated the intellectual cultivation of women, including the pursuit of first-hand knowledge of a wider world.

While Josephine was developing these convictions, the realm of Arctic exploration remained dominated by the cult of masculinity that complemented American imperial aspirations (Bloom, 1993; Robinson, 2006). Furthermore, the disastrous outcomes of several prior Arctic expeditions made the idea of a white woman in the Arctic appear preposterous to the American public and gentlemen explorers alike. Nonetheless, in 1891, three years after Josephine married Robert Peary, she embarked on the *Kite* with Robert and five other male members of Peary's expedition, despite public criticism that the expedition was too dangerous for her.



Cabinet card with a photograph of Josephine Peary taken in a Philadelphia studio, circa 1891; courtesy of the Josephine Diebitsch Peary Collection, Maine Women Writers Collection, University of New England, Portland, Maine.

Like other colonial women in places considered as “wilderness” or “frontier,” Josephine significantly bolstered the expedition's domestic, subsistence economy. Once the expedition base was established at McCormick Bay, she assumed food preparation and cleaning responsibilities, which she shared with Matthew Henson when Henson wasn't sledging across the Greenland Ice Cap with Robert (Counter, 2001). (Henson, an African-American employee of Peary's, participated in all but one of his Arctic expeditions and became one of the few to stand with the explorer at the North Pole.) She also shared with Inuit women the task of designing and sewing sleeping bags and clothing from seal, fox, and other furs. As Josephine upheld the race-based perspectives typical to her time, she barely tolerated the presence of these other women.

Less predictably, Josephine helped manage tasks critical to the expedition's flow of goods, tasks that Peary entrusted to precious few. She managed the undoubtedly unpopular job of food rationing during Peary's several-month absence

as he crossed Greenland from west to east and back again (Peary, 1898). She also bartered trade goods with the Inuit in order to acquire their essential skilled labor, as well as their personal possessions that Peary had been commissioned to collect for ethnographic collections in the United States (VanStone, 1972). When Peary and Frederick Cook (the expedition's physician and Peary's future rival) photographed their Inuit employees and gathered anthropometric measurements, Josephine served as their secretary, recording the ethnological data.

Josephine's hunting efforts also established an active role for her on the expedition. Attempting to secure adequate furs and meat, she tracked deer, trapped fox, and shot eider. And, in a notorious walrus attack episode, she reloaded rifles for the party of men, who discharged them as quickly as they were reloaded (Peary, 1893). For those museums, scientific societies, and other financial patrons who coveted zoological specimens, she joined other expedition members in shooting narwhal.

Josephine's participation on her second expedition to Greenland in 1893 garnered even more notoriety when she gave birth to their daughter, Marie Ahnighito, at 77°44' North latitude. Marie would be known as "the Snow Baby" for the rest of her life. In her new role as both mother and twice-over explorer, Josephine returned to the United States in 1894 as an Arctic celebrity. This status enabled her to make some of her greatest contributions to Peary's career while she was far from the Arctic Circle.

Josephine's personal archives reveal her struggle to balance her support for Peary's career with her desire to eschew public life. Despite her insecurities, in 1894, Josephine leveraged her popularity and successfully raised expedition funds. She embarked upon a lecture tour with J.B. Pond, during which she illustrated her experiences in the Arctic with photographs. At one of these lectures, Josephine's brother, Emil, rushed back to the projectionist to request that he slow down the projection; the images were flying by the audience too quickly. The profusely sweating projectionist blustered in response, "Slow down! I can barely keep up with her!" Josephine had found an outlet for her nerves in the clicker for the magic lantern. She was an equally nervous, yet effective, fundraiser when, on Peary's behalf, she approached some of the major philanthropists of her era, such as Morris Jesup, president of the American Museum of Natural History. A handwritten account of her visit to Jesup recounts that, as she stood outside his door, she felt "all the courage ooze out of her shoes." Josephine later published an account of her daughter's experiences in the North (Peary, 1901); the significant proceeds from her successful writing career were another source of funding for Peary's expeditions.

In this year of the centennial commemoration of Peary's discovery of the North Pole (see <http://www.bowdoin.edu/arctic-museum>), it is an appropriate time to revisit the Peary polar quest through Josephine's eyes. By doing so, we can discover the impact of a woman's participation on the history making of these expeditions (Erikson, in press). The roles that were considered feminine and acceptable for Josephine

included those of seamstress, hostess, family historian, and author of literature for women and children. Nonetheless, like other women, Josephine negotiated the boundaries set before her. Out of her proscribed roles, Josephine stitched together an influential presence in the national imagination and in popular constructions of an Arctic landscape. She authored a feminine version of an American Arctic narrative, mobilizing her agency as a woman who monumentalized an explorer as a national hero (Erikson, in press). In this task, she employed not only written accounts, but oral ones.

For example, when Josephine returned to the United States after her second expedition in 1894, she exoticized the Pearys' private living space with Arctic memorabilia. Josephine incorporated artifacts from their Arctic expeditions into a late 19th century fad that "domesticated" objects considered exotic by using them as parlor decorations (Grier, 1988). At their apartment on Remsen Street in Brooklyn in 1896, 25 rare fur rugs and skins were arranged in two little parlors. Narwhal tusks and furs were interspersed with silver tea sets and tassled portieres; a custom-made eiderdown quilt and a polar bear skin were arranged with a seat to create a "cozy corner" in a Turkish style, popular beginning in the 1880s. The bust of an Inuit man, fashioned from a plaster cast of the man's face, juxtaposed with more narwhal tusks, comprised elements of the Pearys' personal cabinet of curiosity. From her parlor, surrounded by material evidence of the Arctic landscape and people, Josephine positioned herself as a family oral historian, sharing accounts of her experiences in the Arctic with distinguished guests, or the members of the press who regularly sought her audience. In this sense, her parlor was arranged as an authentic tableau for performative historiography (Erikson, in press).

While the role of businessmen, politicians, and philanthropists in forging Peary as a national icon has been documented skillfully (Dick, 2004), Josephine's role as a business partner has remained largely unrecognized. When Josephine married Robert, she provided him with a ready-made, Washington, D.C. social network and home base. Throughout the many years of his absence, she cultivated his crucial social contacts, handled his correspondence, carefully archived media reports of his endeavors, and handled transportation and shipping details and several aspects of fundraising for his relief expeditions. Despite strong literary and social conventions that circumscribed strict masculine and feminine spheres—the space of adventure and the home—Josephine challenged and transgressed these boundaries. Indirectly she paved the way for other women, such as Mina Hubbard and Miriam MacMillan, by showing that breaking these rules was possible. By the time she passed away in Portland, Maine, in 1955, she had distinguished herself as a First Lady of the Arctic, a veteran of six Arctic expeditions, and a successful author in her own right.

Women generally have been considered either absent from or powerless on the landscape of Arctic adventure. Much work remains to excavate the significance of their participation. Closer attention to women such as Josephine Peary—and others, both Inuit and non-Inuit—will reveal

how their participation significantly influenced the political, economic, and cultural processes, as well as the public's perception, of Arctic exploration.

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