

CHAUNCEY CHESTER LOOMIS Jr. (1930–2009)

Chauncey Chester Loomis Jr. died in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, on March 17, 2009, after a courageous fight against lung cancer. He will best be remembered by Arctic historians as the author of *Weird and Tragic Shores: The Story of Charles Francis Hall* (Loomis, 1971) and an extended essay, *The Arctic Sublime* (Loomis, 1977). His older brothers, John (Jack) and Stanley Loomis predeceased him. Never married, he leaves a nephew, Craig Loomis, of Princeton, New Jersey; a grandniece, Vivian Loomis; a step-niece Claudine Scoville; and step-nephews Reginald, Thomas, and Thayer Gignoux, and their children.

Chauncey was born on June 1, 1930 in New York City to Chauncey and Elizabeth McLanahan Loomis. Having completed his schooling in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, and at Philips Exeter Academy, New Hampshire, he received a BA from Princeton in 1952, an MA from Columbia in 1955, and a PhD from Princeton in 1966. After serving overseas with the U.S. Army during the Korean War, he taught briefly at the University of Vermont before beginning his long career teaching English and American literature at Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire, from which he retired as Professor Emeritus in 1997.

Though solidly literary, Chauncey's professional interests were far more varied than his education might indicate. An outstanding photographer, he developed a passion for exploratory travel, seeking traces of the lost Inca civilization in Peru. He photographed the native people and wildlife of Kenya, and in the late 1970s, he traveled with friends to Sikkim in the Himalayas. In 1964 he made a motion picture of the muskoxen of Nunivak Island, Alaska, which became a CBS special entitled *Wild River, Wild Beasts*.

Five expeditions to the Arctic helped to inspire his best-known work, *Weird and Tragic Shores*, which focuses on the mysterious death of Charles Francis Hall on the west coast of Greenland in 1871. Hall, a Cincinnati journalist and businessman, mounted an expedition to find the grave of Sir John Franklin and learn, if possible, the cause of his death. Did the 50-year-old Hall die of natural causes, or was he perhaps murdered?

With the aid of a Smithsonian grant, Chauncey organized and led an expedition to Thank God Harbor, Greenland, in 1968. The purpose was to disinter Hall's body and take samples of his hair and fingernails to a forensic laboratory in Toronto to determine whether Hall had been poisoned. Although the analysis did show an abnormally high level of arsenic, the question of murder was inconclusive, and it remains so to this day.

First published by Alfred Knopf in 1971, then by the University of Nebraska Press in 1991 and The Modern Library in 2000, Chauncey's study is now a classic in its field. Writing in the *New York Times* in 2001, the popular polar historian Sara Wheeler (2001:3) declared that, better than any subsequent writers on the subject, Chauncey Loomis "unravels the expedition brilliantly and also offers a concise intelligent introduction to the history of Arctic



Chauncey Loomis at his home in 2009.

exploration...Refusing to be decisive about whether Hall was murdered, he states only that poisoning was among several possible causes of death. And why not? Thrillers might always have neat answers, but history usually doesn't. That's why it's interesting, isn't it?"

Weird and Tragic Shores became the subject of a CBC televised documentary soon after it was first published and has been translated into several languages.

Another indication of the book's importance is that the National Geographic Society gave it lasting recognition in its 1981 *Atlas of the World*, marking Hall's grave on the map of Greenland (p. 225) and stating:

A dissension-plagued U.S. expedition to the North Pole was disrupted when leader Charles Francis Hall died here in 1871. Permafrost preserved his body which was exhumed in 1968 by Chauncey Loomis, who found that Hall had been poisoned with arsenic.

Almost certainly Chauncey's second most important contribution to Arctic studies was his seminal essay "The Arctic Sublime," published in *Nature and the Victorian Imagination* (Loomis, 1977). The essay was perhaps the first to examine the watercolours and drawings of the explorer-artists of the 19th century and earlier, and their relationship to their journals and narratives. As Loomis persuasively

demonstrates, their artistic renditions were not only technically polished and highly expressive, but also strongly influenced by the dominant aesthetics of the period and by the philosophical concept of the Arctic Sublime, popularized in the early 19th century and still current at the time of Franklin's death.

Nevertheless, by the end of the 19th century, as Chauncey notes, "although the North Pole had not yet been reached, the Arctic had been thoroughly explored, studied, and mapped....The mystery was gone in fact if not in fiction. The Sublime cannot be mapped" (Loomis, 1977:12).

A lifetime member of the Arctic Institute of North America, Chauncey became a visiting Fellow when he travelled to the University of Calgary in 1987 and gave a talk, entitled "The Unsolved Arctic Murder?" based on his expedition to uncover the grave of Charles Francis Hall. He also wrote many critical essays on Arctic subjects for *The London Review of Books*, including reviews of Barry Lopez's *Arctic Dreams* and Pierre Berton's *Arctic Grail* (Loomis, 1986, 1989).

I knew Chauncey in grammar school in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, and we remained friends throughout his life. His friendship and influence expanded my limited intellectual territory and finally led me to Arctic studies. Chauncey's academic career as a professor of English at Dartmouth College followed in the footsteps of his friend and mine, Alan Cooke of McGill University. A polar historian, Cooke, like Chauncey, believed in the preservation of small, specialized polar libraries modeled on the Scott Polar Research Institute at Cambridge, such as the Stefansson Collection at Dartmouth College and the library of the Arctic Institute of North America. When I was searching for a suitable MA thesis topic in history and art history in 1975, Chauncey brought to my attention the move of the AINA library, including its collection of Arctic exploration watercolours, drawings, photographs, and artifacts, from McGill University to the University of Calgary. From that time on, he became not only my friend but my mentor, and we worked together on various projects dealing with the "Arctic of the Imagination." One such collaboration was an illustrated edition of Elisha Kent Kane's *Arctic Explorations* for R.R. Donnelley & Sons' Lakeside Classic series (Kane, 1996).

In his retirement, Loomis enjoyed alternating annual fishing trips to Tierra del Fuego, New Zealand, and Canada. He served on the boards of various institutions, including Philips Exeter Academy, The Hotchkiss School, the Norman Rockwell Museum, and Chesterwood, the home of sculptor Daniel Chester French. As part of the Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation, Chauncey established a fund to help Berkshire County Massachusetts high school students attend college.

He also had a memorable sense of humour. Asked by a former student how he managed to hold his temper after he had presented a paper, with so many critical questions being fired at him, he replied, "It's easy these days; I just turn off my hearing-aid!"

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