

**KARLUK: THE GREAT UNTOLD STORY OF ARCTIC EXPLORATION.** BY WILLIAM LAIRD MCKINLAY. London: *Weidenfeld and Nicolson*, 1976. 170 pages, illus.

This book comes to us like a voice from the past. At 88, the author is one of the very last survivors of the Canadian Arctic Expedition of 1913-18, led by Vilhjalmur Stefansson, and his book is a first-hand account of the drift and sinking of the *Karluk* and the experiences of the survivors on Wrangel Island. It is the last such account we shall get, and the only one of the Wrangel Island period, because the only other published account was written by the captain of the *Karluk*, Bob Bartlett, and he left the party soon after they reached Wrangel Island. We are therefore lucky that Mr. McKinlay has provided such a straightforward and readable narrative.

The bare bones of the story are well known. The *Karluk* was the largest of three vessels which carried the expedition and its supplies north. Heading for Herschel Island, where the parties were supposed to reorganize, the ship was caught in the ice, and drifted west towards Siberia and finally sank. Four men decided to strike out on their own and perished in the ice; four more were lost on a reconnaissance trip; the remainder succeeded in reaching Wrangel Island across the moving ice and there spent a miserable nine months in appalling conditions while the captain and one Eskimo, Kataktovik, made a long and arduous journey to Siberia, and finally Alaska, to organize a rescue party. Of the fifteen left on Wrangel Island, twelve survived to be picked up by ship in September 1914.

William Laird McKinlay was a young Glasgow school teacher who had no Arctic experience when he accepted an eleventh-hour invitation to join the expedition. Full of enthusiasm for his coming work as magnetician and meteorologist, he was instead precipitated into a year of stress, danger, and hardship enough to crush the spirit of a much more seasoned hand. In this test he displayed a toughness and strength of character that, had he been slightly older and more experienced, might have made him the leader so sorely needed and so conspicuously lacking on Wrangel Island. As it was, he seems to have done more than anyone else to hold the party together in an extremely difficult situation.

The difficulties arose not only from the external hardships of inadequate clothing and shortage of food, but also from the personalities of the men themselves. The crew, who had expected to be back in Victoria by the

end of the summer, had been engaged without any thought to their suitability for Arctic work and were a motley, and in many cases unprepossessing, lot; and the scientists, without a recognized leader, were all pulling in different directions. The result was a very unhappy party, totally lacking in that spirit of comradeship and cooperation that alone could make this sort of experience bearable. Captain Bartlett, the splendid ice navigator of Peary's expeditions, did not quite have the leadership to dominate such a disparate company, and as there was no one else who could have successfully undertaken the rescue mission, he was forced to leave them in the charge of a young and inexperienced chief engineer.

In the light of this terrible experience, it is small wonder that the author feels resentful against the leader of the expedition, to whose poor organization he attributes many of their problems, and who he believes abandoned them at a crucial time and subsequently tended to sweep the whole *Karluk* affair under the rug. Stefansson was of course a very controversial figure, and there was much ill feeling and bitterness that came out of the expedition, quite apart from the *Karluk* incident. It is greatly to McKinlay's credit that, while he pulls no punches in his comments on Stefansson, neither does he allow himself to become vindictive or unfair.

This is as it should be. Although the chief actors in the drama that followed the Canadian Arctic Expedition are all dead, their immediate families are not, and the time has not yet come to raise the sleeping dogs in a re-examination. That should be left to another generation, which can be more objective. It is however good to have all the evidence available, and the story of the *Karluk* survivors is an important part of it.

It is perhaps desirable to make one point in Stefansson's defence. The crucial question is whether or not he intended to return to the ship when he left on a hunting expedition shortly after the ship was beset. In the event, he had no choice because the ship was carried away before he could have got back; but many, including McKinlay, are convinced he had no intention of returning. They may well be right, and there is now no way of knowing for sure. However, assuming for the moment that it is so, it must be looked at in the light of conditions at the time he did it, not with the hindsight of what happened afterwards. Stefansson left a ship that was stuck in the ice, not one that was being swept to its destruction. With our present knowledge of ice drift patterns we know that there was a high probability that it

would be carried westward, but in 1913 this knowledge was not available, and it would not have been unreasonable to suppose it would stay where it was or perhaps move east closer to its destination, or, better still, be released and able to proceed under its own steam. For the leader to leave a ship in such conditions was undoubtedly improper, but it was not criminal.

The book is written in an easy, very readable style, and is well illustrated with interesting contemporary photographs. Although reduced almost to starvation level the party apparently did not run out of film, and this must be the only survival camp to be so well documented photographically. An intriguing oddity is a picture of the ship's cat, an ordinary black and white pussy which McKinlay describes as "the only member of the expedition to survive the whole affair sleek and unscathed". It certainly looks fat and sassy, an interesting example of the survivability of cats and the curiousness of human nature. Among all those ravenous, and in many cases

unscrupulous, men apparently no one thought of committing puss to the pot.

To those of us who knew Stefansson in his later years as a gentle and rather shaggy intellectual, a photograph of a slim young man in a stiff collar and rakishly tilted bowler hat is piquante and delightful. Equally charming are a very young and rather elegant Diamond Jenness and, best of all, Hubert Wilkins handling his cumbersome camera among an untidy litter of expedition equipment, presumably during the loading, dressed like a London businessman in pinstripe, black coat and bowler. Missing is only the rolled umbrella, and one feels he has just put that down to enable him to use both hands.

Even the maps, frequently a cause for complaint in books of this kind, are quite adequate to follow the action. Mr. McKinlay has done an excellent job and made a fine contribution to the literature of Arctic exploration.

*Maira Dunbar*