

STARVATION SHORE. By LAURA WATERMAN. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2019. ISBN 9780299323400. 384 p., maps, b&w illus. Softbound. US\$27.95.

On 26 August 1881, 25 men were dropped off at Lady Franklin Bay on northern Ellesmere Island to conduct research in the High Arctic. Only six returned home. Nineteen died of starvation. This is the story that Laura Waterman tackles in her novel, *Starvation Shore*.

The Greely Expedition is renowned for being one of the most miserable, grisly episodes in Arctic exploration. For all the reasons it went wrong—a myopic autocratic commander, ill-prepared men, severe Arctic climate, failed resupply attempts, lack of supplies, cannibalism, an execution, and an eleventh-hour rescue—it makes a compelling story.

Officially titled the Lady Franklin Bay Expedition, the Greely Expedition was one of two contributions by the United States to the first International Polar Year. Eleven countries were part of this ambitious scientific operation to study the polar regions from 1 August 1882 to 1 September 1883. The American research station on Ellesmere Island at latitude 81°44' N was the most northerly of the 12 stations established in the Arctic. As well, it was the only one planned to operate for two years.

The expedition was organized by the U.S. Army Signal Corps, which operated the Weather Bureau. Thirty-six-year-old signal service officer Major Adolphus Washington Greely was given command of the expedition, although he had no previous Arctic experience.

Waterman captures the serious issues that emerged almost immediately, arising from Greely's poor leadership and interpersonal skills. She highlights his obstinate insistence on adhering to rigid army regulations. His inexperience and inflexibility under extreme, isolated Arctic conditions ultimately compromised the health and safety of his men.

As inept a leader as Greely was, he was not solely to blame for the expedition's tragic finale. Incompetent government organizers, inexperienced commanders, ignorance of Arctic conditions, and political indifference led to botched resupply and rescue attempts.

It was a fluke that the SS *Proteus* was able to get into Lady Franklin Bay in the summer of 1881. The following year, the ice in the region was impenetrable and the resupply ship could not reach them. It returned south, caching limited supplies. The second summer, the ship sent to retrieve the men was crushed in the ice and sank.

When no ship arrived in 1883, Greely made the arguably poor decision to abandon their food supply and decent shelter at Fort Conger, their research post. They headed south in open boats through ice-clogged waters to a predetermined spot where they hoped to be picked up. Waterman does a fine job re-creating the harrowing boat trip from Fort Conger to Cape Sabine where they waited to be rescued. Her ability to conjure the Arctic environment

is impressive, considering Waterman had not visited the region she wrote about.

Waterman writes poetically on page 205, “A frantic wind began to sweep the surface of Smith Sound, searching for weakness in the pack, prying open fissures until the solid ice was rent apart as efficiently as a seamstress tears cloth in strips.” Tuques off to Waterman for portraying an environment that is at once beautiful and foreboding.

Her vivid descriptions of the wretched atmosphere of Camp Clay where the men slowly starved to death are likely to stay with the reader for some time. The detail she incorporates demonstrates not only imagination but the thoroughness of her research. Waterman's sources include the many nonfiction accounts of the Greely expedition, as well as original reports, journals, and newspaper clippings. Waterman had great material to draw on. With such incomprehensibly true events and larger-than-life characters, it seems there is little to invent but the men's thoughts and conversations. However, this is where the novel is sometimes less believable.

The story unfolds through conversations, letters (written by Greely and Dr. Pavy), journal entries (written by Private Henry), and newspaper clippings. Surprisingly, the men don't reveal much about themselves in their journals or letters that hasn't already been discussed by the other characters. As a result, they often come across as two-dimensional, leaving the reader unsympathetic. But, it is through Lieutenant David Brainard's thoughts that the story is propelled. He is also the most developed character. Henrietta Greely was also well-rounded, though her appearance is limited in the novel.

Before the prologue, Waterman provides a roster of expedition men. Along with the men's names and ages, she gives brief character sketches. For instance, “Sergeant David C. Ralston, meteorologist, aged 32, went through his wife's money” (p. xviii). Such information seems gratuitous and somewhat prejudices the reader instead of letting them form their own opinion. Having a list of expedition men to refer to was helpful, but the added details were not.

Waterman's naming convention was inconsistent. She refers to the expedition men by their last names. They call each other by first name mainly in conversation. However, it was confusing that she referred to the character of Private Charles Henry as Henry, Charlie, and Private Henry.

Two of the expedition men were Greenlandic hunters, Jens Edward and Frederik Thorlip Christiansen. Christiansen was most often called Eskimo Fred. As Inuit (plural) or Inuk (singular) is what the Indigenous northern people call themselves, this was surprising to read in a newly published book. In Canada and Greenland, the term Eskimo is outdated and often considered pejorative. It was unclear if Waterman used this term because that was how the expedition members had referred to the Greenlanders. However, this should have been explained in the foreword.

The book was split into three parts, Fort Conger, Camp Clay, The Rescue, and then further divided into chapters and subchapters. The first part also contains “Interludes,”

which provide important information about the rescue efforts being organized in the south.

Waterman starts each chapter with a seemingly related quote. However, in the second part of the book, she begins each shorter subchapter with a quote. These quotes interrupt the flow and take the reader out of the story, particularly when a modern writer or an unrelated work is quoted, such as the one by Marcus Aurelius on page 269. But, these are minor irritations.

For anyone who doesn't know the story of the Greely Expedition, this book is a compelling introduction. The story is not a pleasant one, and Waterman doesn't soften it, but the reader is left with a sense of the horrors through which these men lived. *Starvation Shore* is an interesting glimpse into what life might have been like for the men as they struggled to survive in one of the harshest environments on the planet.

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