

Correspondence

Robert E. Peary and Bob Bartlett: a response.

Lord Shackleton

11 Grosvenor Crescent, London SW1X 7EE

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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.

A.C. Bonga

769 George Street, Fredericton, New Brunswick
E3B 1K6, Canada

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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

Brian D. Powell

427 Heath Road South, Northfield, Birmingham
B31 2BB

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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

shortage of food, exposure, stress, lowered morale, vitamin deficiency, lead poisoning, and possibly other diseases as well, though in different degrees, one to another.

I therefore think that it is impossible to find a major cause for the disaster that befell the expedition as a whole. Clearly in the case of individual crewmen, there was a 'last straw,' and their deaths ensued. But even if the identification of the last straw could be made, it does not necessarily

make it the major factor. With most of the known remains already carefully examined (although there are two skeletons in the U.K.) and the findings well discussed, I feel that further progress is unlikely unless detailed records of the expedition are found or future discoveries in the sciences of nutrition or toxicology indicate hazards, currently unknown, to which the crewmen were exposed by their general health and way of life.

In Brief

FORTHCOMING ARCTIC ACCOUNTS. Professor Jean Malariaie, the director of the Centre d'Etudes Arctiques has reached the mandatory retirement age (67), but the research of his department will not simply end this year. In October, a new book, *1492–1992: first encounters between Europeans and natives from Greenland to Mexico*, will be published in cooperation with UNESCO. The study examines various aspects of contact, including exploration, colonization, Christianization, the impact of development, and the growth of the media. By the end of the year, the Centre also will publish the results of the First Soviet-French expedition to Tchoukotka (1990), which included eight researchers and five film makers. (Source: Sylvie Devers, Centre d'Etudes Arctiques.)

MAN AND THE BARENTS SEA ECOSYSTEM. The ninth International Symposium of the Arctic Centre of the University of Groningen will be held 19–20 November 1992 in Groningen. The focus of the conference will be the Barents Sea, and proposed topics will include geology and minerals, oceanography and plankton, the effects of the modern fishing industry, exploration and exploitation by the British and Dutch in early modern times, traditional coastal societies, and the impact of the oil industry upon local communities. For more information contact: Arctic Centre, PO Box 716, 9700 AS Groningen, The Netherlands. (Source: press release, Arctic Centre, University of Groningen)

AN EARLY PICTORIAL COMPOSITION. Members of the French archaeological research group Mission archéologique française de l'Arctique (MIAFAR) have discovered what they claim to be the oldest painting yet found in the Arctic. An anthropomorphic figure painted on the vertebral epiphysis of a Bowhead whale was found at a Thule site on Victoria Island in the Canadian Arctic. The combined typological and stylistic analyses of various artifacts at the site and a series of 15 radiocarbon dates place the occupation of the site between 1380 and 1450.



Fig. 1. Figure painted on Bowhead vertebral epiphysis.

The painting appears to be of a human figure in an upright position (Fig. 1). Pigment analysis has suggested that calcine bone material was most likely used as the basis of the paint. Although human representations have been found at other Thule sites, they have been of a fundamentally different nature, and have never been isolated, as was this painting, but have been associated with other representations. The only Arctic anthropomorphic paintings previously known were rock paintings from Tuksuk in Alaska. (Source: Jean-François Le Mouel, MIAFAR.)