

*Antarctic Pioneer – The Trailblazing Life of Jackie Ronne*. Joanna Kafarowski. 2022. Dundurn Press. 285pp, paperback. ISBN 9781459749535. GBP17.99

In achieving its primary objective of proving Antarctica to be one landmass, the Ronne Antarctic Research Expedition contributed hugely to science and geography. However, as Joanna Kafarowski's latest book amply demonstrates, the historical interest of the expedition may lie more in the controversy surrounding leader Finn Ronne's decision to include two women – one of whom was his wife Edith "Jackie" Ronne.

When in the late 1960s, the US Board on Geographic Names deemed it appropriate to redesignate Edith Ronne Land, renaming it in the process to the Ronne Ice Shelf in recognition of the Ronne family more broadly, Finn Ronne was in agreement. Says Kafarowski, "This erasure of Jackie's first name, and by extension, her accomplishments, is symbolic of the treatment of women's history in Antarctica" (p. 3). From the outset, it is clear that Kafarowski has a score to settle.

The wives and widows of polar explorers have become the source of great interest in recent times and rightly so. Polar history is all the richer for Kari Herbert's excellent "Heart of the Hero" (2013), a hymn to the forbearance of women who devoted themselves to the men whose grand polar ambitions took them far from hearth and home.

Having journeyed to Antarctica herself, Jackie Ronne does not fit the definition of a grass widow; yet neither should she be considered an explorer in her own right. In fact at the outset, Jackie was a rather reluctant adventurer. Nevertheless, Kafarowski's biography makes a convincing case for celebrating the experiences of Jackie; her story is indeed intriguing.

Despite playing a vital role in the planning of the Ronne Antarctic Research Expedition (RARE) 1946-48, Jackie had always intended to bid farewell from shore and to return to her high-powered job at the Department of State. A suitcase containing nothing more than a suit, a pair of heels and nylons is testament to her disinclination to spend a year on Stonington Island. Yet her husband had other ideas. Kafarowski tells us it was not a sentimental decision. Rather it seemed a deliberate ploy to obtain greater press coverage for his exploits in the south. "From a media perspective, having the first female Antarctic expedition member along was better than gold dust." (p. 71)

Jackie's initial refusal softened. Her one condition was that another young wife should also accompany the men. A former dance instructor, Jennie Darlington, was not qualified for such an undertaking yet agreed, despite her own husband's vehement opposition which culminated in his circulating a petition.

While a potential mutiny was narrowly avoided on the voyage south, tensions ran high throughout the year that the group spent on Stonington Island, itself a zone of contention between the US and the UK at the time. It was not simply a case of "women disturbing men" (p. 58). The rupture that occurred between Finn Ronne and Harry Darlington worsened, and others were drawn into disputes with the leader. "I never came so close to killing somebody in my life" (p. 108) an expedition member was later to comment.

One of the great delights of Kafarowski's work is the insight she offers when it comes to the interplay of professional relationships in the polar sphere. Of note is the couple's pre-departure wrangling with the faux-supportive Admiral Byrd, Finn's former expedition leader and mentor, whose game-playing and backstabbing at times borders on sabotage.


In her portrayal of Finn Ronne, Kafarowski does not gloss over his faults either. In fact while he is shown to be driven and impressive, he is at times a rather unlikeable fellow. It can be surmised that Jackie's talent for smoothing was in high demand. Certainly, she proved herself a capable adjunct and Finn clearly trusted her judgement in all things, even appointing her as his official replacement while in Antarctica should disaster strike in the field.

Indeed her influence was felt around the world. Her media despatches were critically important in generating public support for their collective endeavours and would ultimately ensure the expedition's place in history; most would carry Finn's by-line. On their return, Finn's official account would be largely written by Jackie. Lecturing also played a crucial part in publicising the expedition and supporting her husband's professional legacy. One cannot help but feel aggrieved that her contributions were never adequately recognised.

The dynamic between Jackie and Finn is thoughtfully and comprehensively rendered. However, Kafarowski might have been a little less coy in her treatment of the marital issues that inevitably arose in later life when Jackie finally took umbrage with her husband's selfish pursuit of his career to the detriment of her own. It is a biographer's duty to press boldly into uncomfortable territory. Kafarowski favours a gentler approach. This may have been in deference to Jackie's daughter Karen Ronne Tupek, with whom the author worked but a fuller examination of the marriage challenges would have provided valuable context for how Jackie herself felt about her polar achievements and advocacy work in later life.

Both scholars and the non-academic enthusiast will find much here to stimulate discussion as will social historians and feminist historians interested in the role of women in early Antarctic operations and 20th century exploration more broadly. Kafarowski has

a strong interest in bringing the lives of lesser-known polar women to the fore. Her previous biography which chronicled the life of Louise Arner Boyd offers a highly readable account of a life lived to the full.

It is regrettable that primary resources relating to the experiences of women involved directly or on the periphery of polar exploration are notably harder to access than those relating to their male counterparts. A comprehensive bibliography delivers much in the way of reading material for those who wish to delve deeper. Kafarowski's determination and scholarship in recording the experiences of a peripheral figure are to be applauded. Long may her work continue. (Joanna Grochowicz  Independent Scholar, London, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland ([joanna.grochowicz@gmail.com](mailto:joanna.grochowicz@gmail.com)))

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