

## Robert Bartlett (1875-1946)

Although he was indisputably one of the world's greatest arctic mariners, Captain Robert A. Bartlett's name and accomplishments are relatively obscure. As a sealer, arctic explorer, ice captain, and scientist, Bartlett made over 40 voyages in more than half a century at sea. He was decorated by the American Congress, the Explorers' Club, and geographical societies on two continents. He survived two shipwrecks and, thanks to his skill and perseverance, prevented a number of others, and he saved the lives of many shipmates. An eccentric who could play Chopin records as his ship was about to sink below the arctic ice, a man frequently inconsistent in accounts of his own voyages, a man blessed with incredible good luck when at sea, a known drinker who professed to be a teetotaler, Bartlett was, nevertheless, an exceptional leader of men.

Bob Bartlett was reared in Brigus, Newfoundland, a community with a strong seafaring tradition. Born in 1875 into a family of eminent captains and ice navigators, he never really seriously considered any other occupation. Bartlett's nautical apprenticeship was served primarily on sealing and trading ships. While his skills as an ice navigator were developing, the actual sealing was never very successful for Bartlett. He returned to it frequently over the years, but his real love and accomplishments lay in voyages farther north.

From the perspective of the late twentieth century, three periods loom pre-eminent in Bartlett's life. The first was the decade between 1898 and 1908 during which he accompanied Robert Peary on three separate attempts to reach the North Pole, the second was his captaincy of the *Karluk* on the Canadian Arctic Expedition in 1913 and 1914, and the third, his scientific voyages on the *Morrissey* from 1925 to 1945.

Robert Peary encountered Bartlett in 1898 when Bartlett was the first mate on the *Windward*, the flagship of Peary's first unsuccessful journey to the North Pole. On Peary's subsequent expeditions Bartlett played critical roles. On the 1906 trip — Peary's second attempt — Bartlett literally chopped ice and broke trail over pressure ridges and contorted ice formations to allow Peary to try for the Pole. Although the attempt was unsuccessful, without Bartlett Peary would have been too distant to make any attempt at all. The arduous six-month voyage south from the north end of Ellesmere Island was a series of disasters, with the *Roosevelt* being constantly battered by heavy ice and storms. Only countless ingenious temporary repairs by Bartlett prevented complete catastrophe. On Peary's third attempt in the winter of 1908-1909, Bartlett, again breaking trail for the sledge-ridden Peary, reached latitude 87°40'N, about 240 km from the Pole — at that time, the highest confirmed latitude reached by anyone. Yet Peary denied Bartlett a part in the final dash for the Pole and reserved this privilege for himself. Peary purported to have attained the Pole on about April 6, 1909. Soon after began the famous controversy between Peary and Dr. Frederick Cook, who claimed to have reached the Pole a year before in 1908. The controversy is well known, but without the efforts of Bob Bartlett, Peary would not have been a party to the debate.

The *Karluk*, under Bartlett's captaincy, was to be the main vessel in the Canadian Arctic Expedition of 1913. The expedition to the Western Arctic is famous for the anthropological and geographical work conducted by Vilhjalmur Stefansson and Diamond Jenness; however, the real hero of the venture has surely to be Robert Bartlett. When Stefansson left the *Karluk* in September 1913, ostensibly for a brief hunting foray on the mainland, she had been held fast in the ice for a number of weeks northeast of Point Barrow. But soon after Stefansson's departure, a gale carried the *Karluk* far to the west, still firmly fixed in the ice, and upon returning, Stefansson gave the ship and crew up for lost. Eventually, in January of the next year, the ship succumbed to ice pressure and sank about 400 km from the coast of Siberia.

Under Bartlett's leadership, the crew passed the next few months in an ice camp before the captain led the remnants of his party to Wrangel Island. From there, Bartlett and an Inuit companion travelled through incredible ice fields 320 km to Siberia, and a further 650 km to the Bering Strait and thence over to Alaska. By virtue of Bartlett's exertions, the survivors were picked up on Wrangel Island nearly a year after the *Karluk* had become entrapped in the ice. Bartlett's journey through incomparably tough ice conditions to save his crew is an event of epic dimensions, similar to Shackleton's heroic journey from Elephant Island to South Georgia in his small boat. Such raw courage and determination to discharge responsibility in the toughest of physical circumstances is rarely witnessed now. Modern communications have made unnecessary such feats of leadership, strength, and endurance in remote situations.

In 1925 Bartlett purchased the *Morrissey*, which he was to captain for the next 20 years. In these two decades Bartlett explored both northeast and northwest Greenland and various remote parts of the Canadian Arctic. He gathered botanical specimens and Inuit relics for many museums and societies and brought back numerous live arctic mammals for zoos. It was a phenomenal achievement for a man with little formal scientific training. Not only did he make a sizable contribution to scientific and geographic knowledge, but he piloted the *Morrissey* through countless storms, adventures, and close calls in what was by now vintage Bartlett style — a unique mixture of determination, bravado, skill, leadership, and luck. In 20 voyages on the *Morrissey*, not a single man was lost. One of his most ambitious projects, a three-year drift across the Arctic Ocean while locked in the ice, was never undertaken. Yet the scope of his proposal and the understanding of the information that could potentially be gathered reveal a keen scientific mind thirsting for knowledge and capable of correlating and synthesizing it.

The exigencies of remote northern travel and exploration prior to World War II demanded a range of skills, knowledge, and leadership that, in today's era of specialization, are rarely demanded of one person. In this sense Bartlett was a product of the time in which he lived. He was the complete explorer: navigator, adventurer, scientist, and leader of men. It does not



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seem just that men whose ships Bartlett captained, such as Peary and Stefansson, and whose expeditions Bartlett personally saved have received so much more historical and popular attention than has Bartlett.

Although he was first and foremost a Newfoundlander, after World War I Bartlett spent most of the time when he was not at sea in New York City. Much of the financial backing for his voyages over the years had come from American sources, and he received far more recognition in the United States than in Canada. It was in New York, a stark and cosmopolitan contrast to his beloved Arctic, that Bob Bartlett died in April 1946, just five months after his last voyage on the *Morrissey*.

#### FURTHER READINGS

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