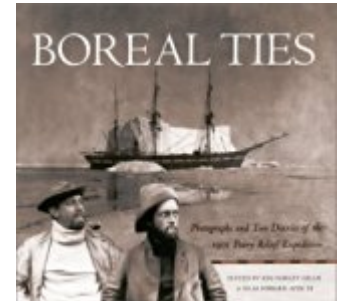


Kim Fairley Gillis, Silas Hibbard Ayer III, eds.. *Boreal Ties: Photographs and Two Diaries of the 1901 Peary Relief Expedition*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002. xiii + 232 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8263-2810-6.



Reviewed by David Calverley

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Gillis and Ayer concede they are not "experts in the history of exploration, the history of photography, or Arctic cultures" (p. ix). One wonders why, then, they decided to undertake this project. Clearly this is not a book for those with a scholarly interest in any of these subjects: it lacks a strong theoretical grounding in the topics that it does explore (via the diaries), and the diaries are not related to what has already been written and published regarding arctic exploration or cultures. A more popular press, as opposed to an academic publisher, would seem a better fit for this particular work. However, *Boreal Ties* is not entirely satisfying for those with an armchair interest in the far north, either. While the photographs are interesting, the diary itself is not particularly gripping, and the book is ultimately unsatisfying.

Concerned with the Arctic explorer Robert Peary and his mission to reach the pole, this work outlines the effort made to reach him in 1901 in order to provide him relief and, if necessary, rescue. An earlier expedition, on the SS *Diana*, found Peary in 1898 and reported him well, apart from the loss of seven toes to frostbite. Hobbled, but determined, Peary refused to leave the north and his

goal of reaching the arctic pole. Peary's wife, Josephine, and daughter, Marie, left in July 1900 with another expedition to bring Peary supplies. When this expedition failed to return, the Peary Arctic Club organized one further mission.

This work documents that undertaking. Reprinting the diaries of Clarence Wyckoff, a millionaire who inherited his father's business and fortune, and Louis Bement, a well-to-do salesman, it relates the successful attempt by the crew and passengers of the SS *Erik* to reach Peary who was already on the northwestern corner of Greenland. All of these expeditions were the work of the Peary Arctic Club which was created by Peary to fund northern exploration and, more specifically, get him to the North Pole. Each member paid \$1,000 to join the club, which was no small sum in the 1890s. To take part in this final expedition Wyckoff, Bement, and three others (amongst whom was Alfred Church, the inventor of the process to condense milk and founder of the Borden Milk Company) paid an additional \$500.

After a difficult voyage, during which much of the food on board was infested with maggots and it became apparent that both the *Erik* and its crew

were less than seaworthy, Peary was found on the Greenland coast, just east of Ellesmere Island. However, Peary was apparently in good health considering the conditions he was living in and being seven digits short, and thus the *Erik* returned without the explorer but brought back his wife and daughter. Well-stocked with hundreds of pounds of walrus meat, caught with the assistance of Inuit hunters, the *Erik* eventually docked in Sydney, Nova Scotia, bringing Wyckoff, Bement, and the others back to the "civilized" world.

Gillis and Ayer's introduction offers some interesting glimpses into arctic exploration. It outlines the preparations made for the expedition and the problems encountered by the crew and passengers of the *Erik*, and reveals something of the secrecy surrounding arctic exploration at the turn of the century. Bement, Wyckoff, and the others were instructed by the Arctic Club to use code words in telegrams to their friends and family lest competing explorers learn of Peary's fate and use it to their advantage. Gillis's training in photography is also apparent in her discussion of the different photographic styles of Wyckoff and Bement—with the latter preferring shots of Inuit life-style as opposed to posed pictures. Considering Gillis's background (a master's degree in Fine Arts) one wonders why there was not greater analysis of the photographs in this book. There is a treatment of the various cameras and types of film used by both Wyckoff and Bement, but not much else.

This lack of scholarly treatment is the problem with the book: it fails to appropriately address the ideas and concepts pertaining to white/European contact and relations with Native peoples, nor does it place the diaries within any broader context. Race and racism are integral parts of almost any book on white-Aboriginal relations and the authors provide some consideration of this. Wyckoff and Bement were certainly products of the Victorian/Edwardian age: Inuits are referred to as "Huskies," with comments

about their appearance and odor found throughout the diaries. None of these comments by Bement and Wyckoff, however, are placed into a broader context. Why the term "Huskies" is used, for example, is never explained. Economic exchanges between the crew and the Inuit are also treated lightly. Like many who traveled to the north, or most other places of the world, the crew found that the local population were willing traders. Gilles and Ayers, however, note that such goods were obtained by the crew for very low prices, even by 1901 standards; neither author seems to appreciate that economic value is culturally relative. Crudely put, one man's trash is another man's treasure. This concept is a staple of most works on trading relations between Europeans and indigenous peoples, but it is lacking in *Boreal Ties*.

Other elements of the diaries are also not fully explored. Why, for example, is there no consideration of the sources themselves in the introduction? While it is common in cross-cultural exchanges for scholars to have only one side's perspective in the documents with which to interpret the event, that fact is not considered in this work. Gilles and Ayers also do not relate these diaries to what has already been published regarding the Arctic. As a result nothing is revealed to the reader about how these diaries contribute to this particular field.

The diaries themselves are part of the problem. Gilles and Ayer cannot be blamed for a set of diaries that are not particularly interesting, but some of the entries are not revealing of anything beyond the mundane events of the day. A good edit would have removed such entries as that of Tuesday, July 16, 1901: "Aboard all day developing pictures. Nothing doing" (p. 54). Considering that this entry was made in Newfoundland, not the high Arctic, one wonders why it was included. Any scholar would want an edited collection of documents to be as complete as possible; however, this particular work was not created with such

an audience in mind. While historical documents were not composed to interest later generations, this book has all the look and feel of a coffee table book. Bearing this in mind, the authors should have removed some of the less interesting passages.

The final sections of the book, Wyckoff's and Bement's lives following their northern sojourn, do not provide a sense of closure. It would seem that both men simply fell back into their lives. Only Dr. Dedrick, the physician on the trip, offers some sense of longing in a letter to Bement. Fitting a nervous woman with glasses, Dedrick remembered the "cool music of ocean's roll lapping on iceberg" and the "indescribable charm of the arctic" (p. 215). Apart from this, however, there is no sense of how the voyage north affected either Wyckoff or Bement. Wyckoff lost a great deal of money in faulty business ventures, tried unsuccessfully to sell his stories of the Arctic to publishers, and eventually went into life insurance. The entry regarding Bement (apart from Dedrick's letter) has nothing to do with the Arctic.

Photographs are this book's strong point, but not exploited by Gilles and Ayer to their full potential. Many of the photographs are very interesting in the vague way that old photographs often are. Sepia-toned pictures of massive icebergs with the SS *Erik* appearing small and fragile beside them provide a striking illustration of how dangerous arctic travel during this period was. The panoramic photographs are particularly striking. Various pictures of the Inuit provide portraits of their daily life and how, at the turn of the century, trade goods were mingling with traditional dress, as children with kerchiefs and sweaters stand alongside their elders dressed entirely in traditional dress. Pictures of the *Erik* crew, with Peary and his family dressed in suit and tie sitting down to dinner, illustrate how awkward and out of place whites looked in this environment as they tried to import and maintain their "civilized" life.

What, however, was the underlying theme behind some of these photographs? Today explorers of remote regions and extreme climates carry all sorts of equipment in order to survive in hostile environments. While the *Erik* expedition was well equipped for the period, Bement, Wyckoff, and the others still tried to maintain an air of civility in the Arctic that had little to do with the rigors of exploration. Their dinner picture is a surreal image: it appears no different than a group of people eating in a dining room in a town or city. Nothing, however, is offered in the text regarding this picture. An analysis of these photographs in relation to what has been written on the subjects of exploration, imperialism, and European/white depictions of Aboriginal peoples would have produced a much stronger book. There are references to some of the photographs of the Inuit in the introduction, for example, and the title of the book does note that it is concerned with the photographs and diaries, but the photographs are not well considered.

In the end, *Boreal Ties* is not entirely satisfying. For the scholar it does not provide real insight into arctic exploration. However, for the reader with a general interest in the north it is not particularly riveting, as the book relates the travels of a small expedition into the north to help a far more important and well-known explorer. While the photographs have an antiquarian appeal, they do not make up for the larger deficiencies in this book.

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