

**Starvation Shore.** Laura Waterman. 2019. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press. 384 p, hardcover. ISBN 9780299323400. USD 27.95.

The oft-called “heroic age” of polar exploration may be long over, but accounts of 19th- and early 20th-century Arctic exploration continue to fascinate scholars and the wider public alike. In the last decade, a number of accounts of Arctic expeditions written for broad audiences, such as *In the Kingdom of Ice* by Hampton Sides and David Welky’s *A Wretched and Precarious Situation*, have proved that the history of this period continues to have wide appeal for readers. Laura Waterman’s new novel *Starvation Shore* is a welcome addition to this list.

Waterman’s book is a fictionalised account of the Lady Franklin Bay Expedition of 1881, widely known as the Greely Expedition after its leader, United States Army Signal Corps Lieutenant Adolphus Greely. Greely and 24 men travelled to northern Ellesmere Island in the summer of 1881, planning to take scientific measurements as part of the US contribution to the first International Polar Year. As the first American expedition tasked primarily with scientific fieldwork in the Arctic, the group established Fort Conger as a base for astronomical, magnetic, and meteorological study. Several members of the expedition also ventured north with sledges, reaching a latitude of 83° 24 N’ to successfully beat the previous record of “furthest north,” held by the British. But interpersonal tensions marred the group’s scientific and exploratory successes, particularly tensions regarding Greely’s inflexible adherence to military discipline and protocol. When two summers passed and promised resupply ships failed to arrive at Fort Conger – they were held off by dense pack ice – Greely made the decision in the late summer of 1883 to follow his original orders from Washington D.C. and travel south with the men to a previously agreed-upon rendezvous point. The expedition’s members expected to find cached supplies or an American ship waiting to take them home. Instead, they spent an increasingly desperate winter on the rocky beach of Cape Sabine on Ellesmere Island’s eastern coast, eventually resorting to cannibalism when food supplies ran low. When rescue finally came, it was too late for three-quarters of the expedition’s members.

Waterman is a prolific author of books on mountaineering and environmental issues together with her late husband Guy Waterman, and this is her first foray into fiction. She has grounded her narrative in historical research, primarily in the surviving writings from the expedition’s members, as well as a voluminous amount of secondary literature. Throughout *Starvation Shore*, the author mixes excerpts from the original historical sources and her own literary imagination into fictional diary entries and letters written by expedition members to loved ones back home. These letters and diaries provide a way for Waterman to muse on the men’s inner thoughts and motivations, to explore the interpersonal conflicts that Greely’s poor leadership failed to keep in check, and to delve into the psychology of starvation and extreme cold.

With many characters to introduce, the first section of Waterman’s book proceeds a bit slowly and leans heavily on exposition. It also spends little time on the history behind the International Polar Year as the expedition’s *raison d’être*, focusing more on the back stories of the various expedition members. Yet once Greely orders his men into the boats to proceed south from Fort Conger, the pacing picks up. Then, the conflicts between the men and the breakdown of leadership and authority amongst them, exacerbated by their dwindling supplies, take a satisfying central role. About half of the book covers the expedition’s time at their makeshift shelter at Cape Sabine, which they named Camp Clay. In this section, Waterman’s literary talent shines, as she gives voice to the hungry, isolated men’s experiences. Her passages describing the psychological effects of starvation are particularly harrowing. As the men succumb they begin to fantasize about food, and Waterman gives readers a number of heartbreaking passages where the characters deliriously list favorite meals out loud as they slide towards their deaths. At other times, certain individuals hoard the most meager portions of food – tiny shrimp, crumbs of bread – or snatch them from sick comrades. These passages in particular showcase Waterman’s skill as a writer, conveying the men’s desperation in these mundane lists of meals or small acts of cruelty.

Another high point of the book is Waterman’s depiction of Adolphus Greely’s wife, Henrietta Greely, who tirelessly campaigned for the American military to send a rescue

expedition in search of her husband. In the last 20 years, there has been an increasing amount of scholarship on the role of women in sustaining polar exploration during the long 19th-century, including individuals such as Jane Franklin, Kathleen Scott, and Josephine Peary. It was satisfying to see Waterman explore Henrietta Greely's role in the expedition; working every political and media connection she had in an effort to get an indifferent government to look for her husband and his men.

*Starvation Shore* is a fictionalised take on one of the more horrific episodes in Arctic exploration, grounded in historical fact and engagingly written. Waterman seems to understand that histories of polar expeditions do not just have academic appeal, but that they are also stories with emotional power. They continue to fascinate a

wide swathe of readers because they prompt readers to speculate on how they may have behaved were they in a similar, seemingly hopeless situation. By exploring the innermost thoughts of Greely and the members of his expedition, Waterman taps into this emotional appeal. She gives readers an imagined, but powerful and intimate, glimpse into the minds of individuals facing almost unthinkable circumstances. *Starvation Shore* will be a welcome addition to the reading lists of both the casual history buff and the seasoned Arctic reader. (Sarah Pickman, Department of History – Program in History of Science and Medicine, Yale University, New Haven, CT ([sarah.pickman@yale.edu](mailto:sarah.pickman@yale.edu)))

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