

## Vilhjalmur Stefansson, Robert Bartlett, and the *Karluk* Disaster: A Reassessment

by Janice Cavell\*

### Introduction

The sinking of the Canadian Arctic Expedition (CAE) ship *Karluk* near Wrangel Island, Siberia, in January 1914 has long been the subject of controversy. The ship's commander, Robert Bartlett, was initially hailed as a hero for his journey over the ice from Wrangel Island to the mainland. Bartlett was able to bring help that saved most of the crew, but eight men had been lost on the way from the wreck site to the island, and three more died before the rescuers arrived.

The expedition leader, Vilhjalmur Stefansson, did not share the prevailing favourable view. Instead, he severely criticized Bartlett in several private letters. After the CAE ended in 1918, Stefansson insinuated in his publications that Bartlett was to blame for the tragedy, while continuing to discuss Bartlett's alleged responsibility in private. Decades later the CAE's meteorologist, William Laird McKinlay, responded to these insinuations in his book *Karluk: A Great Untold Story of Arctic Exploration* (1976). In McKinlay's view, Stefansson alone was responsible. Historians have been divided on the subject; Stefansson's biographer William R. Hunt was the most negative about Bartlett, while more recently Jennifer Niven has written scathingly about Stefansson while extolling Bartlett as a great Arctic hero.

Much of the difficulty in evaluating this episode stems from the very complicated circumstances leading up to the *Karluk*'s unplanned drift from the north coast of Alaska to Siberia, and from the almost equally complicated circumstances that prevented Bartlett from responding publicly to Stefansson's innuendoes. As Stefansson wrote in 1916, no one knew the full facts about the *Karluk*'s voyage except Bartlett and himself.<sup>1</sup> Neither man ever gave an entirely accurate account.

Bartlett appears to have spoken or written plainly on this subject to only a few people. During the expedition, he sent an exceptionally frank letter to his former commander Robert Peary; this letter has not previously been considered by historians. After the expedition was

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<sup>1</sup> Stefansson to George Fred Tilton, 21 January 1916, Stefansson Collection, Dartmouth College Library (hereafter cited as SC), MSS 196, box 2, file 40. All quotations from material in the Stefansson Collection are by kind permission of Dartmouth College Library.

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over, Stefansson became embroiled in a controversy with the commander of the expedition's Southern Party, Dr Rudolph Anderson, and other members of the scientific staff. Bartlett kept in close touch with Anderson and confided his side of the *Karluk* story to Anderson and his wife, Belle. The Anderson papers accordingly contain much relevant material that has not fully been utilized. Using the Peary papers, the Anderson papers, and other sources, this article takes a fresh look at the loss of the *Karluk* and the subsequent disputes. It concludes that while Bartlett bore greater responsibility than McKinlay, Niven and his other admirers admit, he was also the victim of extensive misrepresentations by Stefansson.

To properly understand the decisions that led to the disaster, it is necessary to piece together evidence from various sources, and to consider the life stories and ambitions of Stefansson and Bartlett. They each felt an intense craving for accomplishment and fame, and they believed in the theory that there was an undiscovered 'Arctic continent' north of the Beaufort Sea.<sup>2</sup> Dazzled by the hope of finding this new land, they took excessive risks. It is, then, not really a question of whether the expedition leader or the ship's captain was the more culpable; rather, the key fact is that Stefansson and Bartlett were both allured by the same false geographical theory and by the prospect of lasting fame that it seemed to hold out to them. Despite the later intense hostility between the two men, in 1913 they shared the same goal.

### **Stefansson before the CAE**

Stefansson was the child of Icelandic immigrants and grew up in the Dakota Territory. His academic aptitude offered him a way to escape the relative poverty of his origins. After receiving a bachelor's degree from the University of Iowa, he went on to Harvard University. However, as a doctoral student and teaching assistant in anthropology he was not very favourably viewed by members of the department. His supervisor, Professor Roland B. Dixon, later recounted that Stefansson was 'only fairly efficient' at his work; far worse, he 'borrowed money right and left from [undergraduate] students ... and spent money rather lavishly.' Finally, in the spring of 1906 Stefansson was involved in 'a rather nasty scandal involving marks' in the course for which he served as teaching assistant. The department nearly recommended Stefansson's open dismissal from the university.<sup>3</sup>

At this juncture, another way to resolve the problem presented itself when Frederic Ward Putnam of Harvard's Peabody Museum received a letter from explorers Ernest de Koven Leffingwell and Ejnar Mikkelsen. Leffingwell and Mikkelsen were looking for a

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<sup>2</sup> The great importance of the supposed Arctic continent to Stefansson's plans was first noted in Trevor H. Levere, 'Vilhjalmur Stefansson, the Continental Shelf, and a New Arctic Continent', *British Journal for the History of Science* 21, 2 (June 1988), pp. 233–47. However, Levere's research did not include the archival sources that reveal the full extent of the risks Stefansson was prepared to take in his search for the supposed land.

<sup>3</sup> Dixon to Edward Sapir, 17 November 1911, Canadian Museum of History, Edward Sapir Correspondence, I-A-236M, box 622, folder 39. Another Harvard professor, William Curtis Farabee, wrote in 1912 that Stefansson 'does not enjoy the full confidence of any member of our anthropological faculty.' Quoted in Richard Diubaldo, *Stefansson and the Canadian Arctic* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1978), p. 51. The Andersons later learned that Stefansson's offence was selling exam questions to students. See Belle Anderson to Helen Crawford, 21 March, 27 May, and 6 December 1924, LAC, RMA/ MBAA, vol. 9, files 17 and 18.

young anthropologist to join their Anglo-American Polar Expedition. Putnam recommended Stefansson for the position.<sup>4</sup> Dixon and Stefansson's other Harvard critics were, Dixon reported, 'very glad to get rid of him.'<sup>5</sup>

Stefansson set off for Herschel Island, Yukon, that summer. While there, he learned from trader Christian Klengenber about a group of Inuit on Victoria Island who did not appear to have come into previous contact with whites.<sup>6</sup> Stefansson accomplished little during his first northern trip, and he returned south determined to visit Victoria Island on a new expedition. Because he left the Arctic before Leffingwell and Mikkelsen, he was able to publish before they did. To Leffingwell's enduring resentment, Stefansson earned a considerable sum of money with an article in *Harper's Magazine*.<sup>7</sup>

During the Stefansson-Anderson Expedition of 1908–12, Stefansson did reach Victoria Island. He subsequently disclaimed responsibility for sensational press stories about the likelihood that the island's inhabitants, the Copper Inuit or Inuinnait (whom he dubbed the Blond Eskimos) were descended from the lost Norse Greenland colonists. However, it is clear that Stefansson was not in fact averse to the publicity that these stories gained for him.<sup>8</sup> He returned to the United States eager to mount a new expedition that would enable him to make a more intensive study of the Inuinnait. However, he soon learned that the search for an Arctic continent had become the most popular goal of explorers. It was not long before Stefansson was proclaiming the discovery of the continent as the primary goal of his new venture.

### **The Arctic Continent**

From the time when white men first visited Alaska and eastern Siberia, they recorded indigenous traditions about land to the north, along with alleged sightings of such land. In 1849 Henry Kellett of the Royal Navy landed on Herald Island north of Siberia and saw what would later be known as Wrangel Island. North and east of these two islands and north and west of the Canadian archipelago were wide stretches of unmapped ocean. In 1903 Robert E. Peary mused on the possibility of finding 'an isolated island continent, an arctic Atlantis ... as completely isolated from the world as if it were on Mars.'<sup>9</sup> Less than a year later, Rollin A. Harris of the United States Coast and Geodetic Survey put forward the theory that such a continent did indeed exist north of the Beaufort Sea, basing his arguments on data about the currents and tides.<sup>10</sup> After returning from his 1905–06 expedition, Peary expressed his

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<sup>4</sup> David L. Browman and Stephen Williams, *Anthropology at Harvard: A Biographical History, 1790–1940* (Cambridge, MA: Peabody Museum Press, 2103), p. 309.

<sup>5</sup> Dixon to Sapir.

<sup>6</sup> Stefansson to Putnam, 14 August 1906, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, 07-08-00/1.

<sup>7</sup> Stefansson, 'The Anglo-American Polar Expedition', *Harper's Monthly Magazine* 116, 693 (February 1908), pp. 327–42. Leffingwell was particularly outraged because Stefansson used his photographs without permission. See statement by Rudolph Anderson, undated, ca. December 1921, LAC, RMA/MBAA, vol. 11, file 7.

<sup>8</sup> See J. J. Underwood to Rudolph Anderson, 14 December 1921, Canadian Museum of Nature Archives (hereafter cited as CMN), 1996-077 Series A – R.M. Anderson (hereafter cited as RMA), box 70, file 16.

<sup>9</sup> 'New Atlantis at Pole: Peary Says There May Be Continent Waiting for "Old Glory"', *New York Times*, 25 October 1903, p. 9.

conviction that there was land between northern Ellesmere Island and the pole.<sup>11</sup> When his narrative of the expedition was published in 1907, it included a claim to have seen ‘the faint white summits of a distant land’ to the northwest of Ellesmere – an incident that was strangely absent from both Peary’s diary and the statements he made immediately after his return.<sup>12</sup> Peary gave his alleged new discovery a name: Crocker Land.

Leffingwell and Mikkelsen were among the first explorers who attempted to test Harris’s theory. However, because their ship was damaged, they were able to make only limited investigations north of Alaska. Sledging over the ice, they passed the limit of the continental shelf and found deep water, proving that if there was unknown land, it was nowhere near Alaska.<sup>13</sup> The great Norwegian explorer and oceanographer Fridtjof Nansen expertly debunked Harris’s theories in 1907,<sup>14</sup> but the prospect of finding Crocker Land held enough allure for other explorers that Nansen’s objections were cast aside by most. Peary made no further claims about sighting new land on his 1908–09 expedition, but his rival Frederick Cook alleged both that he had reached the pole a year before Peary and that he had glimpsed what he called Bradley Land during his northern journey.<sup>15</sup> In 1903 Peary had written: ‘Think of writing upon that land some name to endure indelibly ... Believe me, there is room yet in this prosaic world for a new sensation.’<sup>16</sup> A new sensation and an indelible name were indeed powerful incentives. In 1911 two of Peary’s former subordinates, Donald MacMillan and George Borup, organized an expedition in quest of the continent. The Crocker Land Expedition, as it was called, was scheduled to depart in the summer of 1912. However, the start had to be postponed for a year because of Borup’s untimely death. The delay presented Stefansson with the opportunity to mount a rival attempt in 1913.

### **Stefansson’s Evolving Plans, November 1912–July 1913**

Stefansson returned from his 1908–12 expedition in early September 1912; just over two months later, he announced an exceptionally ambitious new venture whose chief goal was to find the Arctic continent. The main base, he declared, would be on the mainland at Cape Bathurst. A gasoline-powered schooner would ferry supplies north to Banks Island or perhaps as far as Prince Patrick Island; journeys would then be made over the ice to the west, northwest, and north.<sup>17</sup> (These plans were almost identical to those formerly outlined by

<sup>10</sup> R. A. Harris, ‘Evidences of Land Near the North Pole’, *Report of the Eighth International Geographic Congress, Held in the United States, 1904* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1905), pp. 397–406. This is an expanded version of an article first published in the June 1904 issue of *National Geographic*.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Peary to Try Again’, *New York Sun*, 10 December 1906, p. 6; ‘Commander Peary Lectures on His Latest Attempt to Reach the North Pole’, *Quebec Chronicle*, 10 December 1906, p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> Robert E. Peary, *Nearest the Pole: A Narrative of the Polar Expedition of the Peary Arctic Club in the S.S. Roosevelt, 1905-1906* (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1907), pp. 202, 207; Wally Herbert, *The Noose of Laurels: Robert E. Peary and the Race to the North Pole* (New York: Atheneum, 1989), pp. 196–7.

<sup>13</sup> Ejnar Mikkelsen, *Conquering the Arctic Ice* (London: William Heinemann, 1909), p. 17.

<sup>14</sup> Fridtjof Nansen, ‘On North Polar Problems’, *Geographical Journal* 30, 5 (November 1907), pp. 469–87 and 30, 6 (December 1907), pp. 585–601.

<sup>15</sup> Frederick A. Cook, *My Attainment of the Pole* (New York: Polar Publishing, 1911), p. 243.

<sup>16</sup> ‘New Atlantis at Pole.’

<sup>17</sup> ‘Stefansson to Seek Arctic Continent’, *New York Times*, 15 November 1912, p. 5. On Stefansson’s negotiations and relations with his US sponsors in late 1912 and early 1913, see Diubaldo, pp. 58–60.

Leffingwell and Mikkelsen.)<sup>18</sup> Stefansson would thus try to find Crocker Land from the west, while MacMillan intended to use Peary's old route in the eastern Arctic. Despite this geographical division, Stefansson's aim of forestalling MacMillan was clear.

In January 1913 Roald Amundsen, fresh from his triumph at the South Pole, visited the United States and revealed that in 1914 he intended to attempt a north polar drift.<sup>19</sup> The plan to drift across the polar basin while frozen into the ice had been originated by Nansen years before. Nansen's 1893–96 expedition in his specially built polar ship, the *Fram*, was inspired by the tragedy of the American exploring ship *Jeannette*. The *Jeannette* expedition was based on the belief that a warm current flowing northward through Bering Strait created a relatively ice-free pathway to the North Pole. The ship was indeed caught in a transpolar current near Wrangel Island, but there was no ice-free pathway. Instead, the *Jeannette* was crushed in heavy pack ice; many of the men did not survive the retreat to the Siberian coast. A few years later, wreckage from the ship emerged in the North Atlantic.<sup>20</sup>

Nansen's great innovation was to build a ship designed to resist ice pressure. He deliberately put the *Fram* into the pack north of Russia, hoping to drift to the pole. However, the current turned the *Fram* towards the North Atlantic in a more southerly latitude.<sup>21</sup> Nansen's drift had begun in the Laptev Sea; he and others theorized that a start from Bering Strait instead would produce the desired result. In 1899 casks were set adrift on Alaska's north coast; one was later recovered in Iceland.<sup>22</sup> Many explorers therefore dreamed of succeeding in a drift from Bering Strait; Amundsen intended to use the *Fram* for such an attempt.<sup>23</sup>

By February 1913, Stefansson's plans had evolved again to include a possible drift. In an outline presented to the Canadian government, he stated that the ship would sail as far north as possible. If new land was found, the main base would be established on it; if not, then his choice was Prince Patrick Island.<sup>24</sup> After the prime minister, Robert Borden, had agreed that Canada would become the expedition's sole sponsor, Stefansson remarked to a reporter that if his ship became caught in the ice on the northern voyage, 'nothing could be done except to let it drift.' But Stefansson did not have a ship like the *Fram*. Instead, he had purchased the *Karluk*, an old whaler. The *Karluk*, Stefansson freely admitted, was 'not built to withstand the pressure of ice on such a passage, and it might be wrecked.' In that event, he thought the men could simply travel back to their base over the ice.<sup>25</sup> According to what he

<sup>18</sup> See Mikkelsen, *Conquering*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>19</sup> 'Give \$45,000 to Aid Stefansson's Trip', *New York Times*, 14 January 1913, p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> See Edward Ellsberg, 'The Drift of the "Jeannette" in the Arctic Sea', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 82, 5 (June 1940), pp. 889–96.

<sup>21</sup> Nansen, *Farthest North*, 2 vols (New York: Harper, 1897).

<sup>22</sup> Nansen, 'On North Polar Problems', p. 597.

<sup>23</sup> Amundsen's 1914 plans were made impossible by the outbreak of war, but in 1918 he set out in another specially built ship, the *Maud*.

<sup>24</sup> Stefansson, 'Plan of a Proposed Arctic Expedition', enclosed in Stefansson to Robert Borden, 4 February 1913, in Janice Cavell, ed., *Documents on Canadian External Relations: The Arctic, 1874–1949* (Ottawa: Global Affairs Canada, 2016) (hereafter cited as *DCER: Arctic*), doc. 198.

<sup>25</sup> 'Stefansson Accepts the Offer of Canada', *New York Times*, 27 February 1913, p. 7.

later told Bartlett (see below), not only was Stefansson not particularly worried about getting caught in the ice, he expected it to happen and hoped in this way to forestall Amundsen as well as MacMillan.

To Canadian officials, Stefansson downplayed this possibility. Instead, he assured them that the ship would return south after carrying the men to their base. But, he admitted disingenuously, it might accidentally be caught in the ice. The *Karluk* would then ‘no doubt be launched upon a polar drift which ... would probably take her in a great curve to the west or northwest so that she would eventually pass somewhere between the Pole and the mainland of Asia and finally emerge into the North Atlantic between Norway and Greenland.’<sup>26</sup> Such a development would open up the possibility of three exceptionally newsworthy achievements: finding the Arctic continent, reaching the North Pole by a relatively short sledge journey from the ship, and passing from Pacific to Atlantic over the top of the world. Of all the explorers who dreamed about the second and third of these achievements in the early twentieth century, only Stefansson ever contemplated doing so in a ship that was even less strongly built than the *Jeannette*.

Stefansson’s agent for the purchase of the *Karluk* was whaling captain Theodore Pedersen, who believed that Stefansson wanted a vessel to carry men and supplies. Pedersen was initially supposed to be the *Karluk*’s skipper, but Stefansson may have doubted that a conservative whaler would be willing to take the risks he had in mind. In March and April 1913 Stefansson was in Europe to buy equipment, hire scientists, and attend the tenth International Geographical Congress in Rome. There he met Peary, who strongly recommended Bartlett on the grounds that Bartlett would always obey orders without question.<sup>27</sup> Stefansson returned to New York in late April and immediately cabled an offer to Bartlett.<sup>28</sup> Pedersen, meanwhile, had become suspicious because Stefansson had not yet made a formal agreement with him. Rightly anticipating that Stefansson ‘might ditch’ him when it was too late to find other employment for the summer of 1913, Pedersen agreed to command a whaling ship instead.<sup>29</sup> On 14 May Bartlett accepted Stefansson’s offer.<sup>30</sup>

### **Bartlett before the CAE**

Like Stefansson, Bartlett grew up in a remote area and in relative poverty. But unlike Stefansson, he had no opportunity to forge a career through education. Instead, his opportunity came from Peary, who frequently hired Newfoundlanders to man his ships. In 1898, at the age of twenty-two, Bartlett joined the crew of Peary’s ship *Windward*.

Over the years, Peary came to rely on Bartlett more and more. Bartlett served as ship’s captain on Peary’s 1905–06 expedition, during which Peary unsuccessfully attempted to reach

<sup>26</sup> Stefansson to J.D. Hazen, 1 June 1913, enclosed in Hazen to Robert Borden, 11 June 1913, LAC, MG26 H, Robert Borden Papers, vol. 234, file 2117.

<sup>27</sup> Stefansson to Desbarats, 19 May 1913, LAC, RG 42, vol. 468, file 84-2-5 sub 11.

<sup>28</sup> Stefansson telegram to Bartlett, ca. 29 April 1913, LAC, RMA/MBAA, vol. 1, file 12.

<sup>29</sup> Pedersen telegram to Stefansson, 5 May 1913, LAC, RMA/MBAA, vol. 1, file 13.

<sup>30</sup> Stefansson telegram to Bartlett, 14 May 1913, LAC, RG 42, vol. 475, file 84-2-29.

the North Pole from a base on northern Ellesmere Island. From this time until the end of his life, Bartlett repeatedly demonstrated what a friend would later describe as an ‘almost religious’ devotion to his commander.<sup>31</sup>

Bartlett’s devotion was not entirely disinterested. In 1905 Peary broached the idea that once he had reached the North Pole, his next project would be an American expedition to the South Pole. Bartlett was convinced that while Peary would organize and support the expedition, he would not personally lead it. Instead, Bartlett would be the leader in the field. ‘It was my big chance’, Bartlett recalled in his autobiography. ‘For the first time in my life I felt I was going to do something big and run the show myself.’<sup>32</sup> As captain of Peary’s specially built new exploring ship, the *Roosevelt*, Bartlett battled the ice of Nares Strait (the passage between Greenland and Ellesmere Island), thus allowing Peary to make his base much closer to the pole than would otherwise have been possible. Unlike the *Fram*, the *Roosevelt* was designed to break through ice, not to drift in it. Going against what Peary later called ‘all the so-called canons of Arctic navigation in this region’, Bartlett repeatedly drove the ship into even the thickest pack ice.<sup>33</sup>

After the 1905–06 expedition was over, Bartlett filed a declaration of intention to apply for United States citizenship. No doubt his purpose was to forestall questions about whether a foreigner should lead the South Pole expedition. The Antarctic venture was now expected to begin after Peary’s 1908–09 northern expedition, on which Bartlett again served as ship’s captain. He received his certificate of naturalization in April 1911.<sup>34</sup> But by that time, Bartlett’s dream of polar leadership had been shattered.

On 31 March 1909 Peary, Bartlett, and seven others were approximately 133 geographical (153 statute) miles from the North Pole. Bartlett had expected to be in the final group going forward, but instead Peary sent him back in command of the last supporting party. ‘If we get there’, Peary assured him, ‘it will be the South Pole next and you as leader.’<sup>35</sup> Bartlett accepted the decision with apparent stoicism<sup>36</sup> and returned to the expedition’s base on Ellesmere Island. Only three days later, Peary also reached the base. Bartlett immediately said, ‘I congratulate you, sir, on the discovery of the Pole.’ Peary responded, ‘How did you guess it?’<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> George Palmer Putnam, *Mariner of the North: The Life of Captain Bob Bartlett* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1947), p. 65.

<sup>32</sup> Robert A. Bartlett, *The Log of Bob Bartlett: The True Story of Forty Years of Seafaring and Exploration* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1928), p. 239.

<sup>33</sup> Peary, *Nearest the Pole*, p. 39.

<sup>34</sup> Naturalization records, New York Eastern District, roll 135, vol. 20, Ancestry.com.

<sup>35</sup> Bartlett, *Log*, 196. According to Bartlett’s diary, Peary definitely offered Bartlett the South Pole command on 30 March 1909. Deirdre C. Stam, ‘Interpreting Captain Bob Bartlett’s AGS Notebook Chronicling Significant Parts of Peary’s 1908–09 Expedition’, *Geographical Review*, Advance Access, 8.

<sup>36</sup> In newspaper interviews published immediately after the expedition’s return, Bartlett reportedly expressed bitter disappointment, but in later accounts he denied such feelings. See Harold Horwood, *Bartlett: The Great Canadian Explorer* (Garden City, NY and Toronto: Doubleday and Doubleday Canada, 1977), pp. 87–9. It is of course possible that the journalists involved exaggerated Bartlett’s comments.

<sup>37</sup> Bartlett, *Log*, 197. Bartlett’s congratulations are in italics in the original.

Many historians and others have wondered how Bartlett could possibly have believed Peary's story, given the speed at which Peary would have had to travel to reach the pole and return so quickly.<sup>38</sup> But perhaps Bartlett, eager to move on to the south polar attempt, had deliberately offered his congratulations as a way to push Peary into making a claim, whether he had actually reached his goal or not. If so, the strategy did not work. For the next few years, Peary's energies were consumed by battling Cook's rival claim. As Bartlett recounted, Peary never made the lecture tour that they had expected to pay for their next venture. Instead, 'the financial and moral aid that would have backed up my Antarctic expedition went into stemming the tide of prejudice against Peary.'<sup>39</sup>

Bartlett then turned to the idea of a polar drift. It seems highly likely that he also hoped to reach Peary's supposed new land. In 1911 Bartlett tried to get support from wealthy Americans, but he was warned by one of them, Paul Rainey, that the 'polar game is all off' because of Cook's fraud.<sup>40</sup> In 1912 came the news that Amundsen had reached the South Pole. 'Good God it might have been otherwise', Bartlett reflected gloomily. Unable to find a job in New York, he reluctantly went back to Newfoundland and captained a sealing ship in the spring of 1913.<sup>41</sup>

This was the situation when Stefansson's offer arrived. According to what Bartlett later told the Andersons, when the two men met Stefansson made it clear that he wanted 'to buck the ice and if the ship got caught to make the drift.' He assured Bartlett that the *Karluk* was almost as good a ship as the *Roosevelt*.<sup>42</sup> Stefansson did not appear worried about being caught in the ice; on the contrary, Bartlett understood that the plan was 'to drift and beat Amundsen to it.'<sup>43</sup> Bartlett must have studied the details of the *Jeannette* story while making his own plans for a drift. Nevertheless, he apparently felt no initial qualms about facing the ice in a ship not specially built for polar exploration. He assured Stefansson that he would 'faithfully carry out orders even in cases where he personally does not believe in their wisdom.'<sup>44</sup> To the press, Stefansson reported that Bartlett 'is a man who is not afraid of hurting his ship, and not eager to save it at the expense of the expedition. He goes cheerfully into such a hazard.'<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> For example, see Denis Rawlins, *Peary at the North Pole: Fact or Fiction?* (Washington and New York: Robert B. Luce, 1973), pp. 157–60; Herbert, *Noose of Laurels*, p. 256; Robert M. Bryce, *Cook & Peary: The Polar Controversy, Resolved* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1997), pp. 519–20, 920; Stam, 'Interpreting Bartlett's AGS Notebook', pp. 11–12.

<sup>39</sup> Bartlett, *Log*, 240.

<sup>40</sup> Bartlett, *Log*, 241–253; quotations on 248 and 249.

<sup>41</sup> Bartlett to Peary, 4 February 1913, National Archives at College Park (hereafter cited as NACP), Robert Edwin Peary Papers (hereafter cited as REP), box 49, folder Bartlett 1913.

<sup>42</sup> Belle Anderson, undated memo, ca. February 1924, Library and Archives Canada (hereafter cited as LAC), Rudolph Martin Anderson and Mae Belle Allstrand Anderson Papers (hereafter cited as RMA/MBAA), vol. 9, file 17.

<sup>43</sup> Bartlett to Rudolph Anderson, 6 February 1922, LAC, RMA/MBAA, vol. 3, file 4.

<sup>44</sup> Stefansson to Desbarats, 19 May 1913.

<sup>45</sup> 'Stefansson Gets Peary's Captain', *New York Times*, 21 May 1913, 1; see also 'To Map Out Last Land', *New York Times*, 27 May 1913, p. 3.



## **Bartlett and the *Karluk*: from Victoria, BC to Harrison Bay, Alaska, August–September 1913**

Bartlett's cheerfulness came to an abrupt end when he first saw the *Karluk*, which was being refitted in the naval yard at Esquimalt, near Victoria, British Columbia. Extensive repairs had been made, and dockyard officials considered the ship was good enough 'for ordinary work' in the Arctic.<sup>46</sup> Knowing what Stefansson's actual plans were, Bartlett was hardly reassured. On 26 May a telegram to Ottawa warned that Bartlett 'considers ship absolutely unsuitable to remain winter in the ice. *Karluk* could take expedition and leave them, ship returning South for winter.'<sup>47</sup> Stefansson was still in Ottawa, and he evidently told G. J. Desbarats, the deputy minister of the naval service (the official in charge of expedition matters) that the *Karluk* had wintered in the Arctic before – which was true – and that it would likely return south in the autumn of 1913 – which was not true. Desbarats' reply to Bartlett was: 'Understand *Karluk* wintered several times in Arctic intention is that if feasible ship should return south for winter.'<sup>48</sup> There was, of course, a considerable difference between wintering in a sheltered harbour and wintering in the pack ice, but Desbarats does not appear to have considered this factor.

Desbarats' formal orders to Stefansson, issued on 29 May, said nothing about a drift. Instead, they specified that after establishing the base on Prince Patrick Island, the *Karluk* should be sent back south if possible. However, the orders contained a further passage about the ship, the wording of which was no doubt inspired by Stefansson.<sup>49</sup> Desbarats wrote that Stefansson should 'bear in mind the necessity of always providing for the safe return of the party. The safety of the ship itself is not so important.'<sup>50</sup> In a press interview the next day, Stefansson returned to the theme that the *Karluk* might accidentally be frozen in, but claimed inaccurately, 'When a ship is crushed it is forced up upon the ice, and will not sink. We would not sink.' He added insouciantly, 'Of course we may dare too much, in which case, well – we won't talk about that.'<sup>51</sup> When these statements brought no rebuke from Desbarats, Stefansson went farther, declaring in another interview that

So fully has the Government entered into the true aims of exploration that they have specifically provided in a letter of instructions that the attainment of the purpose of the expedition is more important than the bringing back safe of the ship on which it sails. This means that, while every reasonable precaution will be taken to safeguard the lives of the party, it is realized, both by the backers of the expedition and the members of it, that even the lives of the party are secondary in the accomplishment of the work.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>46</sup> P.C.W. Howe to Desbarats, 22 April 1913, LAC, RG 42, vol. 464, file 84-2-3.

<sup>47</sup> Telegram, 26 May 1913, LAC, RG 42, vol. 464, file 84-2-3.

<sup>48</sup> Desbarats telegram to Bartlett, 28 May 1913, LAC, RG 42, vol. 464, file 84-2-3.

<sup>49</sup> Rudolph Anderson objected to several provisions that Stefansson managed to have inserted into the orders after Anderson had left Ottawa for Victoria. See Anderson, 'The Canadian Arctic Expedition, 1913–1918: Preliminary History', LAC, RMA/MBAA, vol. 10, file 4.

<sup>50</sup> Desbarats to Stefansson, 27 May 1913, in *DCER: Arctic*, 315.

<sup>51</sup> 'Stefansson Talks of Arctic Plans', *Globe* (Toronto), 30 May 1913, p. 1.

<sup>52</sup> 'Stefansson Hopes to Achieve Success', *Globe* (Toronto), 18 June 1913, p. 1.

Either Desbarats never saw this interview or, believing that it was too late to rein Stefansson in, he decided to ignore it.

Bartlett, meanwhile, had resigned himself to the *Karluk*'s failings. Another member of the expedition, Dr Alister Forbes Mackay (a veteran of Ernest Shackleton's Antarctic expedition) told a reporter that Bartlett had said the *Karluk* was 'not fit for the trip, and more suited to exhibition in a museum.' The reporter concluded that Bartlett was going forward 'only to make the best of the position in which he finds himself.'<sup>53</sup> After Stefansson arrived in Victoria on 7 June, however, Bartlett told the press that the *Karluk* was 'a good ice ship ... She cannot stand ramming ice at full speed, but will go into ice as far as she can break her way.'<sup>54</sup> The naval dockyard carried out further work, and a few weeks later Bartlett announced that the *Karluk* had 'been made ready for all she may be called upon to endure.'<sup>55</sup> His real feelings, however, were revealed in a letter to Peary. He raged that the ship was 'rotten as a pear' and gave a detailed list of its defects. His report to Ottawa, he recounted, had merely given the government the impression that he had 'cold feet', so there was 'no use to kick.' The ship would 'never come back', but Bartlett was determined to 'do all I can and I shall never say come back no by God ... It's the New Land or bust. I will be skipper then, to hell with Ottawa now. I would love to Land on Crocker Land[.] Hope to God she stays afloat long enough to get near it.'<sup>56</sup>

The *Karluk* left Victoria for Nome, Alaska on 17 June. In Nome Stefansson began to worry that he might not have enough supplies for a drift, and he badgered Rudolph Anderson (who was to lead a scientific party to the Coronation Gulf region in two other ships, the *Alaska* and the *Mary Sachs*) into giving up most of his pemmican and other condensed food. As Anderson later disdainfully wrote, Stefansson 'whin[ed] that I would feel sorry if I didn't let him have all the condensed food and he should have to drift for five years.' Anderson 'told him right then' that if the *Karluk* was caught, he would not need five years' supplies.<sup>57</sup> James Murray, the oceanographer, who unlike most of the scientists was to go with the expedition's northern party in the *Karluk*, became intensely worried when Stefansson 'strongly intimated' that the ship would deliberately be put into the ice and Bartlett confirmed that if ordered to do so he would obey.<sup>58</sup> Other members of the northern party joined Murray in asking for 'a strong base on shore.' Stefansson then attempted to oust Murray by asking another scientist, Frits Johansen, to take his place on the *Karluk*; Johansen prudently declined.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>53</sup> 'Dislikes Stefansson Ship', *New York Times*, 4 June 1913, p. 2.

<sup>54</sup> 'Stefansson Party on Hand for Start', *New York Times*, 9 June 1913, p. 3.

<sup>55</sup> 'Stefansson Ship Ready for Arctic', *New York Times*, 15 June 1913, p. 4.

<sup>56</sup> Bartlett to Peary, 16 July 1913, NACP, REP, box 49, file Bartlett 1913.

<sup>57</sup> Anderson to Bartlett, 19 November 1921, LAC, RMA/ MBAA, vol. 3, file 3. See also Stefansson to Desbarats, 23 June 1913, LAC, RG 42, vol. 476, file 84-2-29.

<sup>58</sup> Kenneth Chipman diary, 11 July 1913, LAC, MG30 B66, Kenneth Gordon Chipman Papers (hereafter cited as KGC), vol. 1.

<sup>59</sup> Chipman to W.H. Boyd, 18 July 1913, LAC, KGC, vol. 1, file May-August 1913; see also McKinlay to Rudolph Anderson, 30 March 1922, and enclosed copy of a letter from McKinlay to a friend, 12 July 1913, LAC, RMA/ MBAA, vol. 3, file 5.

From Nome the expedition proceeded to Teller. The *Karluk* and *Mary Sachs* left Teller together on 27 July; the *Alaska*'s departure was delayed by the need for a few final repairs. The immediate goal of all three ships was Herschel Island. The CAE had been so rapidly organized that the supplies and scientific equipment were haphazardly stowed on one ship or another without any regard for their ultimate destination.<sup>60</sup> Until the ships rendezvoused at Herschel and these matters were sorted out, the *Karluk* could not proceed to the north. Normally, a ship heading from Alaska to the whaling grounds would stick close to shore and work its way between the mainland and the islands that fringed the coast. To go offshore was to risk the ice and the powerful current that swept away to the west and north. But the CAE ships were very heavily laden and might go aground if they kept close to shore; for the *Karluk*, which was the largest of the three, this danger was particularly acute.<sup>61</sup> From Bartlett's point of view, the worst that could happen if he ventured away from the coast was merely that the *Karluk* would begin its drift earlier than planned. The former owner of the *Mary Sachs*, Peter Bernard, had been retained as skipper. Bartlett and Bernard discussed questions of navigation; unaware of the reason for Bartlett's willingness to take risks, Bernard considered him arrogant and foolhardy. When the time came, Bernard disregarded Bartlett's instructions to follow the *Karluk* closely after leaving Teller. Pursuing his slower and more cautious way, Bernard soon fell well behind.<sup>62</sup>

Pack ice was sighted from the *Karluk* on 1 August, about 75 miles (120 km) southwest of Point Barrow. The next evening Bartlett began 'some hard bucking of the ice';<sup>63</sup> the ship's engineer, John Munro, wrote to a friend that the violent collisions 'nearly scared the life out of me at first.' Soon the ship was surrounded and immobilized by the pack. At Cape Smythe Stefansson went ashore and purchased two umiaks (large, light skin boats, which could be carried over the ice and used by a retreating party if they met open water). He also hired John Hadley, an Englishman with long Arctic experience, and two Inupiat hunters, Kuraluk and Kataktovik.

They finally passed Point Barrow and continued along the northern coast in open water less than ten miles from shore. By this time, Bartlett had become disillusioned with Stefansson. When Peary wanted Bartlett to take risks, he had given clear instructions to that effect. Stefansson, in contrast, declined to give definite orders, leaving Bartlett to make the final decisions. Stefansson often spoke vaguely about caution, but never forbade a more daring course. In Bartlett's view, this behaviour proved that Stefansson lacked true manliness. 'Served a great man Peary and supposed this Stefansson was the same doing all I could to get along', Bartlett later confided to Anderson. 'I knew 24 hrs. after leaving Teller that Stefansson

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<sup>60</sup> McKinlay, *Karluk*, pp. 14, 19.

<sup>61</sup> Bartlett to Anderson, 6 February 1922, LAC, RMA/MBAA, vol. 3, file 4.

<sup>62</sup> Will E. Hudson, 'Canadian Expedition in the Arctic Regions', *Globe* (Toronto), 31 January 1914, p. 15. Hudson, a Seattle photographer and journalist, was on board a whaling ship that became frozen in near the Alaska-Yukon border. Returning to Point Barrow overland, he encountered Bernard at Collinson Point in October 1913.

<sup>63</sup> McKinlay diary, 1 and 2 August 1913, LAC, RMA/MBAA, vol. 10, file 27; Bartlett, *Log*, 258; Munro to Maude Owens, 6 August 1913, printed in 'Arctic Explorer's Early Adventures', *Victoria Times Colonist*, 22 November 1913, p. 3.

was no man. But I just kept hoping that I could get to Herschel.’<sup>64</sup> Bartlett must have known that Stefansson intended to shirk responsibility for any accident to the ship, but he held to his determination that it was ‘the New Land or bust.’

Unfortunately, 1913 was one of the worst years for ice ever recorded in the western Arctic. None of the whaling ships reached Herschel Island that year. At Cross Island, near the mouth of the Colville River (less than halfway between Point Barrow and Herschel), the ice near shore became heavier; moreover, on 10 August the ship, as Bartlett had feared, went aground.<sup>65</sup> According to Stefansson’s later accounts, he then advised Bartlett that in his opinion they should continue along the coast, sounding carefully, but gave no order to that effect. Stefansson went to sleep, and on awakening found that Bartlett had headed out to sea. He did not insist on a return to the coast, and soon the ice had closed in once again.<sup>66</sup> The ship drifted a little eastward, then back to the west. On 10 September it returned to the vicinity of Cross Island, ‘not far to seaward from where we had gone temporarily aground about a month before.’<sup>67</sup> The *Karluk* stopped in the outer part of Harrison Bay and was stationary for several days, until it seemed possible that they would remain in this spot for the entire winter.

Stefansson was intensely frustrated, knowing that even if the ship broke free they would not reach Herschel Island that year. He decided to go ashore, ostensibly to hunt caribou, even though the Inupiat were providing plenty of fresh seal meat and Stefansson knew from his experiences on his previous expedition that there were few caribou on that part of the coast.<sup>68</sup> Several of the ship’s company would later recall that Stefansson had been reading about the *Jeannette* expedition just before he left, and they speculated that fear had driven him away.<sup>69</sup> However, it is far more likely that Stefansson was irritated by the prospect of making no progress in any direction, and that he wanted to know what had happened to the other expedition ships.

Before he departed, taking a small party and 12 days supplies, Stefansson gave Bartlett written instructions: if the ship began to drift again, as soon as it stopped Bartlett should erect beacons to guide the hunting party. These instructions said nothing about the possibility that the ship would start drifting and not stop.<sup>70</sup> But according to what Stefansson reportedly later told Rudolph Anderson, he gave clear verbal orders that Bartlett should ‘push on as long as

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<sup>64</sup> Bartlett to Anderson, 6 February 1922. Peary himself wrote that when the *Roosevelt* started up Nares Strait in 1905 he told Bartlett ‘to give her full speed and I would be responsible.’ Peary, *Nearest the Pole*, p. 33.

<sup>65</sup> Stefansson, *Friendly Arctic*, p. 43; Robert A. Bartlett and Ralph T. Hale, *The Last Voyage of the Karluk*, 3rd edn (Boston: Hale, Cushman and Flint, 1928), p. 22.

<sup>66</sup> Stefansson to Desbarats, 4 January 1914, SC, MSS 98, box 4, file 2; Chipman to Boyd, 6 January 1914, LAC, KGC, vol. 1, file January–July 1914; Stefansson to Belle Anderson, 19 January 1914, LAC, RMA/MBAA, vol. 7, file 13; Stefansson to Peary, 19 January 1914, SC, MSS 196, box 2, file 36. According to an oral account by Diamond Jenness, Stefansson was not asleep at all while Bartlett was taking the ship out into the ice. Jenness knew this because he could hear Stefansson pacing back and forth in his cabin. Stuart E. Jenness, *Stefansson, Dr. Anderson and the Canadian Arctic Expedition, 1913–1918: A Story of Exploration, Science and Sovereignty* (Gatineau, QC: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2011), p. 37, n.8.

<sup>67</sup> Stefansson, *The Friendly Arctic* (New York: Macmillan, 1921), p. 53.

<sup>68</sup> Stefansson to Peary, 10 February 1911, NACP, REP, box 46, folder S 1911.

<sup>69</sup> Bjarne Mamen diary, 7 October 1913, LAC, RG 42, vol. 466, file 84-2-5 sub 1.

<sup>70</sup> Stefansson to Bartlett, 20 September 1913, in Bartlett, *Last Voyage*, pp. 36–8.

the *Karluk* would float.<sup>71</sup> Bartlett himself never mentioned such orders, but his subsequent behaviour strongly suggests that Anderson's account is correct.

### **Stefansson on Shore: September 1913–January 1914**

According to anthropologist Diamond Jenness, who was with Stefansson's party, Stefansson made only a perfunctory attempt to hunt, devoting about half a day to this effort.<sup>72</sup> On 22 September a strong wind came up and sent the *Karluk* westward. Stefansson's group headed back to Point Barrow by dog sledge, arriving on 12 October. There was mail service at Barrow (now Utqiagvik), and there Stefansson dispatched his first accounts to the outside world.

His reports to Desbarats in Ottawa and to the press contained no criticism whatever of Bartlett. Of the crucial decision to leave the coast at Cross Island on 12 August, he wrote simply: 'we commenced working our way out into the pack again.' He claimed that because winds from various quarters initially had no effect on their position in Harrison Bay, 'we thought the ship was there to stay for the winter.' As for the *Karluk*'s probable fate, Stefansson described the ship as strong and sound, and as proof of this assertion he cited the fact that it had received 'not a scratch' from Bartlett's attempts to force a way through heavy ice. There was not the slightest suggestion that these attempts had been unwise. However, 'if a ship is fairly caught she is bound to go, no matter what her strength. ... It is therefore a matter of good or evil fortune whether she survives.' But, Stefansson insisted, even if the ship sank, there was no 'particular danger' to the men on board. He himself, meanwhile, was determined to get to the northern Canadian islands by other means.<sup>73</sup>

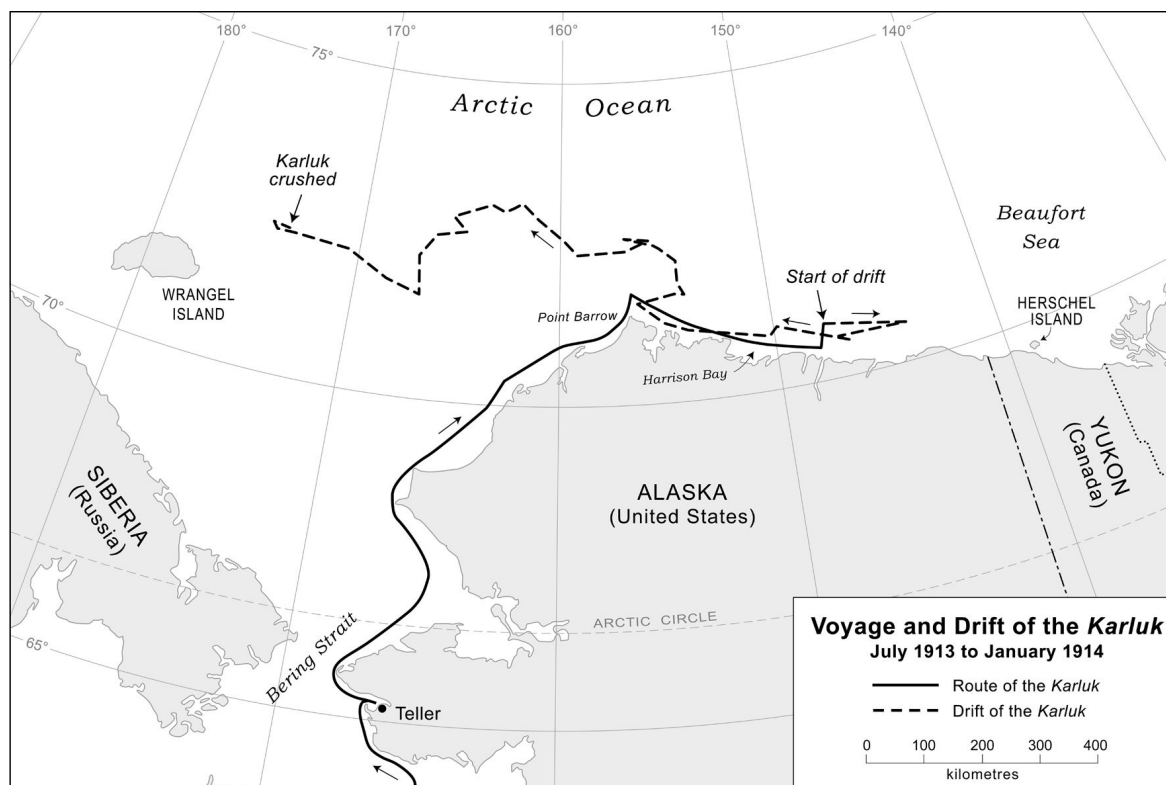
Stefansson's disregard for the *Karluk* was reinforced by the news that the *Alaska* and *Mary Sachs*, although they too had been unable to reach Herschel, had travelled well to the east and were both safe at Collinson Point near the Alaska-Yukon border. In a second report to Desbarats, Stefansson repeated his statement that even the strongest ship could be crushed, and he requested additional supplies to outfit the *Alaska* and *Mary Sachs* for northern work in case the *Karluk* was 'lost or held fast in the ice another year.' It was clear that Stefansson was no longer much interested in either the *Karluk* or its ultimate fate: he wrote that if the ship was sighted and he was able to visit it he would do so, but it was unlikely he would stay if there was no possibility of doing 'useful work.' Rather, 'it would seem to me unwise that anyone should remain aboard beyond the crew.' His own duty, as he saw it, was to try to reach Prince Patrick Island.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Rudolph Anderson to Belle Anderson, 28 June 1914, LAC, RMA/MBAA, vol. 7, file 11.

<sup>72</sup> Rudolph Anderson to Charles S. Elton, 13 December 1928, CMN, RMA, box 68, file 38.

<sup>73</sup> Stefansson to Desbarats, 18 October 1913, LAC, RG 42, vol. 476, file 84-2-29. This report was received in Ottawa on 11 February 1914. A very similar report was printed in the *Globe* on 21 February and in the *New York Times* on 22 February.

<sup>74</sup> Stefansson to Desbarats, 24 October 1913, LAC, RG 42, vol. 476, file 84-2-29.



Stefansson then set out for Collinson Point; he arrived there on 15 December and had the opportunity to speak to Bernard. Moreover, three whaling ships (*Belvedere*, *Polar Bear*, and *Elvira*) had been frozen in not far east of Collinson Point; one of the captains had previously glimpsed the *Karluk* in the pack. ‘The whalers ... shake their heads in discussing Capt. Bartlett’s views on the ice question, as [they] always keep on the shoreward side of the pack ice, while Bartlett went offshore into the ice’, Anderson had reported in October. When Stefansson arrived with the news that the *Karluk* had disappeared entirely, it is easy to imagine the condemnation Bartlett received.

At the same time, however, the whalers viewed Stefansson’s departure from his ship with cynicism. According to Anderson, ‘Mr. S’s reputation in the North would have been much better if he had stayed on the *Karluk* a little longer. People wonder why it should have been considered necessary to hurry ashore over thin ice as early as Sept. 20th, to hunt caribou with his papers, private secretary, and cinematographer.’<sup>75</sup> Stefansson knew that several whalers had made their way from the stranded ships back to the Alaskan settlements and from there to the south, and that opinions similar to those recorded by Anderson might appear in the press – as in fact they quickly did. Following the arrival of Pedersen (whose ship, the *Elvira*, had been crushed by the ice) and Louis Lane (the captain of the *Polar Bear*), in Seattle, the *New York Sun* reported that ‘Just why Stefansson went ashore ... seems to be a mystery to the men of the Arctic. Stefansson told those aboard the vessel that he came ashore to hunt, but he

<sup>75</sup> Rudolph Anderson to Belle Anderson, 16 May 1914, LAC, RMA/MBAA, vol. 7, file 11. The secretary was Burt McConnell and the cinematographer was George H. (later Sir Hubert) Wilkins. In fairness to Stefansson, it should be noted that he left many papers, including his diary, on the ship.

had been along that coast both on foot and in a small boat and he knew there was no hunting. He was accompanied by the men who had been his best friends.’<sup>76</sup> Moreover, this article and others like it pointed out that many whaling ships had been swept away to the northwest but only one, the *Navard*, had ever returned to shore.

When whalers were caught in the drift, they abandoned their ships and struggled back over the ice; in many cases, some of the men were lost in the attempt. A published letter from Captain Stephen Cottle of the *Belvedere* recounted his hope that ‘the [*Karluk*’s] crew has been able to make a place of safety to the west of us, there being so much heavy ice in shore as to make it feasible all right.’<sup>77</sup> Anderson informed his wife that the whalers and the members of the Royal North West Mounted Police were ‘practically unanimous’ in the belief that although the ship was doomed, the men might get ashore safely.<sup>78</sup> But Stefansson knew that because of his verbal instructions, Bartlett would never give the order to abandon the ship until it actually went down. The likelihood, then, was that there would be a tragedy and that Stefansson’s own timely departure from the ship would seem like desertion in the face of danger.

Stefansson’s comments about Bartlett soon took a highly critical turn, likely as a way to exert a countervailing influence on opinion in the south. In several letters written in January 1914, he admitted his own failure to give definite orders about keeping close to shore, but claimed that he had been intimidated by Bartlett’s arrogance. There was no hint that Bartlett was merely doing what Stefansson had hired him to do; instead, Stefansson claimed that Bartlett took such pride in his successful battles with the ice in the *Roosevelt* that, against Stefansson’s own inclination, he had insisted on attempting to repeat his triumph.<sup>79</sup> Stefansson informed Desbarats that ‘I never saw anyone who had such a case of Big Head in matters connected with arctic work.’ He provided several probably spurious or exaggerated examples of Bartlett’s alleged rejection of local knowledge and indeed of any advice whatever from anyone. On 12 August, Stefansson claimed, he would have ordered Bartlett to turn back if he had not happened to hear one of the sailors say ‘that it was a fortunate thing we had a skipper who knew more about ice than the commander.’ Stefansson admitted only to having ‘lacked the assertiveness, or moral courage, or whatever one would call it, to carry my opinion against

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<sup>76</sup> ‘Capt. Bartlett Lost in Arctic’, *New York Sun*, 19 December 1913, p. 1; see also ‘Draper Back from Arctic’, *New York Times*, 19 December 1913, p. 1.

<sup>77</sup> ‘“Last of the *Karluk*”, Arctic Whaler Writes’, *New York Sun*, 29 December 1913, p. 2. Arctic expert Adolphus W. Greely expressed a similar opinion. See ‘Peary is Hopeful of Stefansson Ship’, *New York Times*, 10 December 1913, p. 4.

<sup>78</sup> Rudolph Anderson to Belle Anderson, 28 June 1914.

<sup>79</sup> Chipman to Boyd, 6 January 1914, LAC, KGC, vol. 1, file January–July 1914. Chipman added: ‘Stefansson says that he has had the feeling that Mr. Desbarats in Ottawa may have said to Bartlett, that he had confidence in him, and through this V.S. conveys an impression of interference on the part of the Naval Service, and a portion of the moral responsibility having been taken out of his hands.’ Chipman had previously written to the same correspondent that ‘In a long talk with me Stefansson is quite ready to assume ... blame but it is very easy to see that in a public discussion of such a thing there will be loopholes by which he will be freed.’ Chipman to Boyd, 15 December 1913, LAC, KGC, vol. 1, file September–December 1913.

that of the Captain and ship's company.'<sup>80</sup> He thus managed to minimize his responsibility, although at the cost of portraying himself as a weak leader.<sup>81</sup>

### **Bartlett and the *Karluk*: from Harrison Bay to Wrangel Island, September 1913–March 1914**

From 22 September until 3 October the *Karluk* drifted westward parallel to the Alaskan coast at a rate of 45 to 60 miles (72 to 96 km) a day.<sup>82</sup> Land was frequently in sight; on 28 September the ship was so close to shore that the crew worried about going aground.<sup>83</sup> Yet Bartlett made no effort to get anyone to safety. On 4 October, as the ship was being swept inexorably past Point Barrow toward the open sea, the young Norwegian assistant topographer, Bjarne Mamen, reflected cheerfully that they might 'meet Amundsen up here next year'; the next day Mamen was calculating how long it would take them to reach the pole.<sup>84</sup> Mamen, who hoped to lead his own expedition one day, clearly shared Bartlett's 'New Land or bust' philosophy. He ridiculed his comrades when they expressed their fears about meeting the same fate as the *Jeannette*. Mamen recorded that that Mackay, Murray, McKinlay, anthropologist Henri Beuchat, and geologist George Malloch were 'thinking seriously of taking themselves ashore' but that Bartlett 'dismissed' their concerns.<sup>85</sup>

Although Mamen listed McKinlay among those who thought about leaving, McKinlay's own accounts suggest otherwise. His diary implies, and his narrative clearly states, that McKinlay was satisfied by Bartlett's assurance that they might yet get free of the ice, and that if they did not, the best course was to winter in the pack. The diary and the narrative both recount that following this statement, Bartlett refused to discuss the matter further.<sup>86</sup> McKinlay believed it was his duty to be loyal to Bartlett; Mamen's hope of a triumphant outcome slowly faded, but he was convinced that for honour's sake they must stick to their ship until the end. Mackay, Murray, and Beuchat remained intensely dissatisfied, but there was little they could do.<sup>87</sup> After the *Karluk* sank on 11 January, Mamen recorded that Mackay 'gave both McKinlay and me hell [because] we had spoiled all his chances and allied ourselves with Captain Bartlett.'<sup>88</sup>

Bartlett's behaviour can be explained by nothing except orders from Stefansson not to abandon the ship while it was still afloat. Certainly his own ambitions must have played some

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<sup>80</sup> Stefansson to Desbarats, 4 January 1914. See also Stefansson to Brock, 5 January 1914, SC, MSS 98, box 4, file 3; Stefansson to Belle Anderson, 19 January 1914; and Stefansson to Peary, 19 January 1914.

<sup>81</sup> Stefansson left Collinson Point saying he was going to visit the *Polar Bear* and would be back in a week; instead, he was gone for three months. Stefansson travelled to Fort McPherson and mailed his letters and reports from there. See Chipman to Boyd, 27 April 1914, LAC, KGC, vol. 1, file January–July 1914.

<sup>82</sup> McKinlay diary, 24 September 1913; Bartlett, *Last Voyage*, pp. 42, 48, 49.

<sup>83</sup> Mamen diary, 28 September and 3 October 1913, LAC, RG 42, vol. 466, file 84-2-5 sub 1.

<sup>84</sup> Mamen diary, 4 and 5 October 1913.

<sup>85</sup> Mamen diary, 7 and 8 October 1913.

<sup>86</sup> McKinlay diary, 8-10 October 1913; McKinlay, *Karluk*, pp. 37–8.

<sup>87</sup> McKinlay diary, 22-24 October 1913; Mamen diary, 5 November and 29 December 1913, 4 and 5 January 1914.

<sup>88</sup> Mamen diary, 14 January 1914.



part; indeed, he later admitted that after the *Karluk* had survived a few months in the pack, he began to hope that their adventure would end successfully with ‘books and lectures and a lot of other money-making products.’<sup>89</sup> One of the southern party scientists, Kenneth Chipman, observed in December 1913 that ‘if the *Karluk* should achieve anything the public credit is bound to go to Bartlett and I believe that knowing this he is as happy as may be.’<sup>90</sup> However, it never occurred to Chipman that Bartlett would prevent anyone who wished to leave from doing so.<sup>91</sup> Considering the great danger, if Bartlett had not been constrained by orders he would surely have taken his men into his confidence and given them option of trying to get ashore before the ship drifted away from the Alaskan coast.

Instead, the resentment of Bartlett’s secretive, authoritarian attitude felt by Mackay, Murray, and Beuchat had deadly consequences. After the ship sank, Bartlett announced that he would lead the party to nearby Wrangel Island, then to the mainland of Siberia. (After the first sledging attempts, Bartlett decided that because most of the men had no Arctic experience, it would be best for him to make the journey to Siberia with the hunter Kataktovik as his only companion.) For reasons that are not adequately explained in the survivors’ accounts, Mackay, Murray, Beuchat, and seaman Stanley Morris decided to strike out on their own, even though Murray and Beuchat were among the least physically fit members of the CAE.<sup>92</sup> The plan was certain to prove fatal – as Bartlett later brutally put it, they ‘were dead when they left the camp’<sup>93</sup> – but the captain did little to dissuade them. The party’s exact fate remains unknown. Four other men were lost on the way to Wrangel Island; ten years later their bodies were found on nearby Herald Island. To reach Wrangel, the remaining men had to cross pressure ridges as high as 100 feet. The effort left them exhausted and suffering from various minor injuries.<sup>94</sup> Only essential stores were taken; the umiaks were left behind, likely because they would have been damaged on the way.<sup>95</sup> On the island Mamen, Malloch, and crew member George Breddy died during Bartlett’s absence.

### **Stefansson versus Bartlett, 1915–18**

Stefansson had arranged with a clipping bureau to send him press commentaries on the expedition whenever possible.<sup>96</sup> When he received such a package in August 1915, there was much to give him pause. For example, an editorial in a Victoria newspaper noted that although Bartlett had been ‘reticent’ about the *Karluk*’s defects to reporters, ‘he was not so reserved in

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<sup>89</sup> Bartlett, *Log*, p. 264.

<sup>90</sup> Chipman to Boyd, 15 December 1913, LAC, KGC, vol. 1, file September–December 1913.

<sup>91</sup> See Chipman to Boyd, 6 January 1914. In this letter, Chipman gave his opinions on whether various expedition members would choose to stay or go.

<sup>92</sup> Bartlett later stated that Mackay had been ‘crazy from the effects of drugs.’ Grace Malloch to Belle Anderson, 30 November 1914, LAC, RMA/MBAA, vol. 7, file 12. Mackay had previously battled with alcoholism, and his abuse of the drugs to which he had access as the ship’s doctor is confirmed by Mamen’s diary (19 October 1913). However, Mackay could hardly have persuaded the others to accompany him if he had only ‘crazy’ reasons for leaving.

<sup>93</sup> Grace Malloch to Belle Anderson, 30 November 1914.

<sup>94</sup> McKinlay, *Karluk*, pp. 84–91.

<sup>95</sup> One of them had already been badly damaged during a short trip. McKinlay, *Karluk*, p. 27.

<sup>96</sup> See LAC, RG 42, vol. 474, file 84-2-16.

discussing them with his friends and associates.’ The author praised Bartlett’s heroism and suggested there should be an official inquiry into the fitness of the ship.<sup>97</sup> Even more worrisome was an interview with Pedersen. Pedersen had picked Bartlett up at Emma Harbor (now Komsomolskaya Bay), Siberia, and taken him to Alaska. The two obviously discussed the *Karluk*’s voyage, and Pedersen later commented that what Stefansson had required of Bartlett was unreasonable. ‘What do you suppose I ‘required’ of Capt. Bartlett? And who told you what I “required” – Bartlett himself?’ Stefansson demanded in a letter to Pedersen, written from Banks Island in January 1916. ‘The substance of my instructions to Bartlett was: Keep the ship safe ... Was that unreasonable – he thought so, for he told me it would be a cold day when MacMillan got to Crocker Land ahead of him.’<sup>98</sup> Stefansson did not acknowledge that he himself had been equally set on finding the new land before MacMillan.

In December 1915 and January 1916 Stefansson penned complaints about Bartlett that far exceeded his comments in January 1914. His alleged reason for doing so was that he had realized the extent of Bartlett’s misdeeds only after encountering John Hadley, who had rejoined the expedition in the summer of 1915.<sup>99</sup> In a long confidential report to Desbarats, Stefansson accused Bartlett of having lied about the precautions he took to ensure the safety of his men. Bartlett, he wrote, could have used the umiaks but did not. Even more seriously, Stefansson alleged that ‘his leaving the crew on Wrangell Island ... was a “grand stand play”. It gave him a chance to pose as their savior.’ He insisted that Bartlett could easily and safely have taken everyone with him, but chose not to because then his feat of crossing the ice to Siberia ‘would not have looked so marvelous to the uninitiated.’<sup>100</sup>

Considering the inexperience of almost all the men on the *Karluk* and the difficulties they encountered in getting from the spot where the ship went down to Wrangel Island, this criticism was absurd. Whether it originated with Hadley or Stefansson is difficult to say. The CAE’s photographer, George Wilkins, later told Anderson that Hadley appeared to have a grudge against Bartlett.<sup>101</sup> This observation was confirmed in letters written decades later by the *Karluk*’s second engineer, Robert Williamson. According to Williamson, Hadley was initially on exceptionally good terms with Bartlett, but became resentful when the captain refused to take him on the trip to Siberia. Williamson also alleged that after rescue had arrived Hadley (who was an experienced hunter) attempted to convince Bartlett that he alone was mainly responsible for ensuring the party’s survival; Williamson himself gave the main credit to Kuraluk.<sup>102</sup> It seems likely that Stefansson made it clear he wanted information to use

<sup>97</sup> ‘The Stefansson Expedition’, *Victoria Daily Times*, 5 September 1914.

<sup>98</sup> Stefansson to Pedersen, 12 January 1916, SC, MSS 98, box 4, file 13.

<sup>99</sup> Hadley was first mate of the *Polar Bear*, which Stefansson purchased from Lane in 1915.

<sup>100</sup> Stefansson to Desbarats, 12 January 1916, SC, MSS 98, box 4, file 12.

<sup>101</sup> Anderson to Bartlett, 3 February 1922, LAC, RMA/ MBAA, vol. 3, file 4. See also Stuart E. Jenness, *The Making of an Explorer: George Hubert Wilkins and the Canadian Arctic Expedition, 1913–1916* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2004), p. 318. According to Wilkins’s diary, Hadley alleged that in private, McKinlay was highly critical of Bartlett. This unlikely claim seems to establish that Hadley’s accounts in 1915 and 1916 were not accurate.

<sup>102</sup> Williamson to Stefansson, 30 April and 17 May 1959, LAC, MG30 B44, Robert John Williamson Papers, vol. 1, file 2. Williamson’s account of Hadley’s claim to heroism is borne out by a letter Hadley wrote in October 1914, in which he asked for a government job as a reward for having kept the party alive. Hadley to Desbarats,

against Bartlett and that Hadley, angry because Bartlett had not shared the limelight with him, and also possibly lured by the material rewards offered by Stefansson to some of his men at this point,<sup>103</sup> willingly obliged.

Bartlett, once back in the United States, published a book (*The Last Voyage of the Karluk*, 1916), in which he avoided criticism of Stefansson and described the ship's drift as the accidental result of unfortunate circumstances. The book did, however, repeatedly make comparisons between the *Roosevelt* and the *Karluk*, emphasizing the latter's deficiencies for exploration work.<sup>104</sup> Bartlett then began campaigning for a new polar drift expedition. In December 1917 Stefansson's grievances against Bartlett were augmented when he received clippings about Bartlett's plan.<sup>105</sup> 'I assumed that the etiquette of the past would hold and no expedition would enter our part of the Arctic so long as I intended to continue the work', he complained.<sup>106</sup> Nothing came of Bartlett's efforts, but Stefansson nevertheless returned south in the autumn of 1918 in no friendly frame of mind.

### **Stefansson versus Bartlett after the CAE**

Even before Stefansson returned to British Columbia in mid-September 1918, Anderson warned Bartlett that Hadley 'had been filling Stefansson up with stories, and that S. was encouraging Hadley to start something.'<sup>107</sup> Hadley in fact did nothing, but Stefansson criticized both Bartlett and Anderson in various press statements. Anderson, infuriated, wrote to Isaiah Bowman at the Explorers Club in New York.<sup>108</sup> Bowman – a prominent geographer who exercised considerable power in academic and exploration circles – immediately warned Stefansson and Bartlett against controversy. 'Whatever mistakes either of you has made is a matter of no concern to the Club for we feel that your achievements far outweigh all other considerations. We propose to stand by you and back of you – both of you', Bowman informed the two men.<sup>109</sup> This warning was sufficient to prevent any open attack by Stefansson on Bartlett. However, Stefansson continued to make indirect attacks. For example, he convinced Pedersen to issue a public statement that the *Karluk* had been fit for Arctic work.<sup>110</sup> While preparing his narrative, *The Friendly Arctic*, Stefansson obtained a written statement to the same effect from the Canadian naval service.<sup>111</sup> With these accounts in hand,

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29 October 1914, LAC, RG 42, vol. 470, file 84-2-5 sub 27.

<sup>103</sup> For example, the *Mary Sachs* and *Polar Bear* crews were allowed to trap furs and keep the profits for themselves, even though the original members of the expedition were forbidden to do so. See Anderson to Desbarats, 11 January 1916, LAC, RG 42, vol. 478, file 84-2-33. In 1917 Stefansson made Hadley captain of the *Polar Bear*. Jenness, *Stefansson, Dr. Anderson*, p. 202.

<sup>104</sup> Bartlett, *Last Voyage*, pp. 2, 25, 41–42, 94.

<sup>105</sup> Stefansson diary, 17 December 1917, LAC, MG30 B81, Vilhjalmur Stefansson Papers.

<sup>106</sup> Stefansson to J.W. Phillips, 24 December 1917, SC, MSS 98, box 4, file 16.

<sup>107</sup> Anderson to Bartlett, 6 September 1918, LAC, RMA/MBAA, vol. 2, file 12.

<sup>108</sup> Anderson to Bowman, 6 November 1918, enclosed in Stefansson to Desbarats, 7 January 1919, LAC, RG 42, vol. 477, file 84-2-29.

<sup>109</sup> Bowman to Stefansson, 13 November 1918, SC, MSS 98, box 4, file 20. Bowman indicated that he would send a similar letter to Bartlett.

<sup>110</sup> 'Explorer was Misquoted', *New York Times*, 29 March 1919, p. 3; 'Explorers Smooth Out "Death Trip" Wrinkles', *Spokane Daily Chronicle*, 29 March 1919, p. 2.

<sup>111</sup> George Phillips, memo for Desbarats, 30 August 1920, LAC, RG 42, vol. 480, file 84-2-35.

he was able to write with confidence in his book about the *Karluk's* suitability.<sup>112</sup> Neither naval officials nor his readers, of course, knew what Stefansson's real intentions for the ship had been, and Stefansson may have persuaded Pedersen that Bartlett's confidences on this point in 1914 were misleading.

Hadley died of influenza in January 1919,<sup>113</sup> but in 1918 he had provided Stefansson with a long statement containing many criticisms of Bartlett. When *The Friendly Arctic* was published in late 1921, an edited version of this account was included as an appendix.<sup>114</sup> As for the fatal decision to head out to sea from Cross Island in August 1913, Stefansson related in the main part of the narrative that Hadley, on whom he relied for local knowledge, had commented: 'It may be safe, *but I don't think so*', while everyone else on board 'seemed delighted' with the decision to follow 'what they considered the bolder and more sportsman-like policy.'<sup>115</sup> The passage contained no criticism of Bartlett, and indeed the captain was not even mentioned in it by name. Stefansson later informed a Canadian official that this account was false in that he himself had been asleep when the decision was taken by Bartlett. He attributed the falsehood to generosity towards Bartlett, but fear of crossing Bowman was likely the real motive.<sup>116</sup> In any case, Stefansson knew that even the censored version of the Hadley account was enough to cast doubt on Bartlett's own narrative. As he later explained, 'I handled it in such a way that no one will see this as a rebuttal or a part of a dispute except those who have read Bartlett's book and know he tells a different story. The Hadley story as published is not damaging to Bartlett in anything except that it contradicts him.'<sup>117</sup>

Bartlett evidently understood this strategy. He denounced Hadley's version as 'a lie ... written to suit Stefansson', while furiously describing Stefansson himself as 'a God damn liar a Poltroon and a sneak.'<sup>118</sup> Anderson and the other scientists were eager to have an official inquiry into the entire expedition.<sup>119</sup> At first Bartlett claimed he would join them in asking for one, but he soon backed out. 'Don't be mad with me', he pleaded to Anderson.<sup>120</sup> Bartlett's

<sup>112</sup> Stefansson, *Friendly Arctic*, p. 47.

<sup>113</sup> See LAC, RG 42, vol. 470, file 84-2-5 sub 27.

<sup>114</sup> Stefansson, *Friendly Arctic*, pp. 704–22; for the unedited version, see LAC, RG 42, vol. 465, file 84-2-3. Both in style and content, this account differs considerably from Hadley's original diary (now in LAC, MG30 B25, William Laird McKinlay Papers, vol. 2). Louis Lane told Belle Anderson in 1925 that although Hadley said 'unprintable' things about Bartlett, the account in *The Friendly Arctic* did not 'sound like Hadley.' Memo on Lane's visit to Ottawa, 2 February 1925, LAC, RMA/ MBAA, vol. 12, file 4. It is therefore likely that Stefansson played a large role in shaping the so-called Hadley account.

<sup>115</sup> Stefansson, *Friendly Arctic*, p. 48; emphasis in original.

<sup>116</sup> See Stefansson to Charles Camsell, 5 May 1923, LAC, RG 45, vol. 67, file 4078C.

<sup>117</sup> Stefansson to Percy Hutchinson, 2 September 1928, SC, MSS 196, box 21, file 34.

<sup>118</sup> Bartlett to Anderson, 1 February 1922, LAC, RMA/ MBAA, vol. 3, file 4.

<sup>119</sup> Bartlett's biographer Harold Horwood states that in 1914 an 'admiralty commission' found Bartlett at fault for putting the ship into the ice and for letting Mackay's party leave. Horwood, *Bartlett*, 114. I have found no record of such an inquiry, and indeed in the 1920s the Andersons often referred to the fact that no official investigation had ever been held. For example, in 1922 Rudolph Anderson wrote: 'If it had not been for the war, there would undoubtedly have been an inquiry on the KARLUK, and it is just as well it did not happen, as at that time, the facts would probably not have been brought out fully.' Anderson to Bartlett, 20 March 1922, LAC, RMA/ MBAA, vol. 3, file 5.

<sup>120</sup> Note by Bartlett on Richard B. Aldcroft to Anderson, 17 March 1922, LAC, RMA/ MBAA, vol. 3, file 5. Aldcroft was a lawyer associated with the Explorers Club, who detailed various reasons why Bartlett could not

decision can be accounted for both by Bowman's prohibition of controversy and by Bartlett's awareness that an inquiry might raise uncomfortable questions about his own conduct. He never told Anderson about Bowman's letter to him, pretending instead that he had a subtle, long-term plan for revenge. But no such plan emerged, nor did Bartlett ever write down a full version of the story for posterity. Stefansson's criticisms and the full Hadley account, meanwhile, remained in the archives, to eventually be used by historian William R. Hunt to vilify Bartlett.

### Historians and the *Karluk* Disaster

Hunt described Bartlett as 'bull-necked, bull-headed ... stubborn and self-confident.' He considered that Bartlett's complaints about the ship were unfounded and 'amounted almost to malfeasance and damaged the morale of the ship's company ... [Bartlett's behaviour] also undermined Stefansson's leadership – little wonder that [Stefansson] lashed out in his correspondence. ... Bartlett should have refused command if he considered the *Karluk* unfit.'<sup>121</sup> While Hunt repeatedly excused Stefansson's conduct, he thus judged Bartlett very harshly.

A more judicious, but still generally pro-Stefansson, evaluation was offered by Richard Diubaldo. Diubaldo wrote that Bartlett had acted 'contrary to Stefansson's instructions and contrary to the experience of whalers in the waters north of Alaska.' He rightly pointed out that Stefansson truly believed the ship would likely remain all winter in Harrison Bay, but argued less convincingly that it was merely 'Stefansson's misfortune to be away' when a storm came up. Diubaldo further recounted that Stefansson 'indulged in some grievous soul-searching over the *Karluk*'s disappearance and there is strong evidence to suggest that he wished he had never left her.'<sup>122</sup> In making this assessment, Diubaldo appears to have been overly influenced by comments Stefansson made after the *Karluk*'s fate was known, ignoring his earlier determination not to rejoin the ship even if it drifted back within reach.

In the most scrupulously researched and carefully balanced account to date, Stuart Jenness gives full weight to Bartlett's concerns about grounding, but also seems to accept Stefansson's claim that he was intimidated by Bartlett. Jenness writes that after stating his preference for staying close to shore, Stefansson 'retired to his cabin' because he did not want to 'argue with the fiery-tempered Newfoundlander.'<sup>123</sup> Here Jenness is perhaps too cautiously neutral, since it is unquestionable that Bartlett would immediately have obeyed a direct order.

In contrast, Jennifer Niven is wholeheartedly on Bartlett's side. Basing her account largely on Bartlett's 1916 narrative and McKinlay's narrative and papers, Niven excuses Bartlett's failure to resign over the *Karluk*'s defects with the explanation that his 'itch' to go

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become involved in an inquiry.

<sup>121</sup> William R. Hunt, *Stef: A Biography of Vilhjalmur Stefansson, Canadian Arctic Explorer* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1986), pp. 75, 187–8; see also pp. 190–91.

<sup>122</sup> Diubaldo, *Stefansson and the Canadian Arctic*, p. 83.

<sup>123</sup> Jenness, *Stefansson, Dr. Anderson*, pp. 36–7.

exploring again overrode other considerations. She asserts that the *Karluk* went aground ‘repeatedly’, when in fact there was only one grounding. Niven rightly emphasizes the contradiction in Stefansson’s urging Bartlett both to make quick progress and to keep the ship safe, but she suggests that Bartlett was willing to take risks only because he was ‘frustrated’ and ‘tired of running aground.’ Bartlett’s decision at Cross Island was, she writes, ‘a chance call based on his desire to get Stefansson where he wanted to go.’ As for Stefansson’s departure from the ship, Niven does not mention the extenuating circumstance that he expected the *Karluk* to remain in Harrison Bay for the winter.<sup>124</sup>

Neither the partisan accounts of Hunt and Niven nor the more balanced analyses by Diubaldo and Jenness consider the possibility that both men may have been deeply at fault. But the evidence brought forward in this article strongly suggests that in spite of their differences they colluded to take the *Karluk* on a course for which it was entirely unsuitable and with which neither their government sponsors nor most of the men under their command would have agreed. Stefansson’s underhandedness makes him the less attractive figure of the two, but that Bartlett shared in the responsibility for the deaths of eleven men cannot be denied. Indeed, if the *Karluk* had remained afloat long enough to drift away from Wrangel Island, the entire ship’s company would almost certainly have perished. Bartlett was far more concerned about his men than Stefansson (not content with notifying the world about their plight, he accompanied the rescue ships himself), but he still took them into dangers about which they had not been informed before they joined the expedition. On the CAE, the lure of the Arctic continent ruled the captain’s decisions as well as the commander’s.

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<sup>124</sup> Jennifer Niven, *The Ice Master: The Doomed 1913 Voyage of the Karluk* (New York: Hyperion, 2000), pp. 9, 37–8, 45.