

HENRI BEUCHAT (1878 – 1914)

When the Canadian Arctic Expedition set sail from Esquimalt, British Columbia, in mid June 1913, two anthropologists were among the scientists aboard its flagship *Karluq*: New Zealander Diamond Jenness and Frenchman Henri Beuchat. Neither had been in the North before, although Beuchat was an accomplished Eskimologist. Jenness specialized in New Guinea, but he possessed one qualification of equal (and perhaps greater) value than familiarity with Arctic peoples: experience as a field researcher. Meeting for the first time just days before the ship's departure, the two men quickly developed an easy camaraderie. Their good relations, combined with their complementary areas of interest and expertise—language and social and intellectual life on Beuchat's part, anthropometry and material culture on Jenness's—promised a productive collaboration in documenting the life of the Copper Inuit, then a little-known population thinly scattered around Coronation Gulf, east of the Mackenzie. Sadly, Beuchat would never realize his dream of living “among the peoples with whom his imagination had dwelt for so long” (Barbeau, 1916:109), falling victim, as had many polar explorers before him, to the fatal intersection of human error and the mighty forces of nature.

Born in Paris to Swiss parents, Henri Beuchat left school at 13 to apprentice with a printer. Enamored of learning from an early age, he studied classical languages, physics, and literature, tutored by his father. These studies laid the foundation for Beuchat's subsequent reputation as “un véritable ‘autodidacte’” and polymath, whose passions ranged from astronomy to ancient writing systems (Rivet, 1919:619–620). His education was not entirely informal, however; forced at 18 to take employment as an accountant to support his widowed mother, he would have to wait six years, the last spent in the French army, before he could enter l'École pratique des hautes études at the Sorbonne. Studying comparative religion, history, and philology, he earned a diploma with a thesis entitled “Religion and Social Ceremonies of the Kwakiutl Indians.” This work reflects Beuchat's attraction to the brand of comparative sociology then flourishing at the university: a school of thought closely associated with the eminent theorist Emile Durkheim and his nephew and intellectual heir, Marcel Mauss. Because the “ruts and regulations” of French higher education prevented him from obtaining an academic position (Barbeau, 1916:107), he resorted to a succession of jobs to pay the bills, first working in the anthropological branch of Paris's Museum of Natural History, then managing historic and prehistoric monuments for the Ministry of Fine Arts. Meanwhile, he remained part of the thriving Durkheimian circle, an affiliation that resulted in numerous papers and reviews in the field of Americanist studies, as well as his magnum opus: the 725-page *Manuel d'archéologie américaine* (1912), the most comprehensive treatment of the subject to that time.

Of his various scholarly achievements, none influenced his plans for Coronation Gulf more than an early



A.F. Mackay, H. Beuchat, and R.A. Bartlett onboard *Karluq*, 1913. (Photograph by K.G. Chipman, Library and Archives Canada 1974-325)

collaboration with Mauss in researching *Essai sur les variations saisonnières des sociétés Eskimos: Étude de morphologie sociale* (1904), still recognized as a landmark of social theory. Drawing on evidence scattered throughout a sizeable body of published accounts, most from the pens of 19th century explorers and scientists, the work examines the effect of material conditions at different times of the year on organizational patterns and cultural rhythms in diverse groups from Greenland to Alaska. When invited to join the Canadian Arctic Expedition a decade later, therefore, Beuchat jumped at the chance to put Mauss's ideas to the test. Just as his 1904 *Essai* broke new ground, so, too, would his investigations, mounted during a period in French anthropology when fieldwork was still a novelty, of an Inuit population largely overlooked in the extant literature.

In certain respects, Beuchat was an unlikely Arctic explorer. He spent the better part of his adulthood immersed in bookish pursuits, and despite military service, he lacked outdoor survival skills. According to his mother, Elisabeth, with whom he shared a residence and a very deep (“fort intime”) emotional attachment, he was also prone to bouts of despondent brooding brought on by work-related stress (E. Beuchat to Barbeau, 10 June 1913). Marius Barbeau, the Geological Survey of Canada anthropologist who recommended him (and Jenness) to expedition commander Vilhjalmur Stefansson, would later write that beyond scholarly considerations, the man embraced the opportunity as a means of liberation from “libraries, museums, and the exacting trivialities of his Parisian environment” (Barbeau 1916:109). Even so, the fact that he carted more than 100 books with him bespeaks a certain ambivalence toward quitting the workaday world entirely (E. Beuchat to Barbeau, 12 February 1916). For his own sake, and no less his mother's, Beuchat put on a brave face, assuring Barbeau that “I am in excellent health, and my physical abilities allow me—I believe—to tackle adventure. Moreover, my eyesight is ...

above average, and I am not clumsy.” At 34, he added, his age was “exactly that when a man acquires his maximum fatigue strength” (H. Beuchat to Barbeau, 5 March 1912).

Karluk's passage to Nome took 21 days. It was there that the eight scientists of the expedition's southern party, Beuchat and Jenness included, were to board the schooner *Alaska* for the voyage to Coronation Gulf. During the lay-over, meanwhile, Beuchat was thrilled to be with Inuit for the first time. The people he met, who came from King Island in the Bering Strait, were one of several groups that converged on the bustling gold rush town in summer to sell ivory carvings and trade. With a few days at their disposal, or so they thought, the anthropologists planned to get a head start on learning the native language by enlisting Père La Fortune, an Iñupiaq-speaking Franco-Canadian priest, as interpreter. But not for the first time, or the last, the mercurial Stefansson did the unexpected, issuing last-minute orders that they, and a third southern party member, magnetician William McKinlay, re-board *Karluk* for imminent departure. The flagship was bound for a rendezvous with *Alaska* at Herschel Island, off the Yukon coast. “We never know in the morning what we will do at night. Tension is very high,” Beuchat observed, referring to the scientific staff's discontent with the commander's questionable management of so large an undertaking; “I long to arrive in Herschel Island . . .” to rejoin *Alaska* for the voyage's concluding leg to the Gulf (to Barbeau, 15 July 1913).

Weeks later, *Karluk* became jammed in heavy floes east of Point Barrow and started a slow, northwestward drift that ended in the ice-choked Chukchi Sea, where she was crushed on 10 January 1914. According to a first-hand account, the ship's precarious situation made Beuchat “plumb crazy.” Unable to warm himself despite donning heavy shirts and coat, he rarely left his bunk, and he suffered frayed nerves from the sound of ice grinding against the wooden hull (Niven, 2000:53, 110). As it happened, months earlier, while the vessel was still within hailing distance of shore, Stefansson had dispatched him and Jenness landward in an attempt to reach Herschel Island on foot. But the pair was forced to turn back by ice that could not bear the weight of their fully loaded sleds. Shortly thereafter, Stefansson led a second shore party that succeeded in making land, ostensibly to restock the ship's larder with fresh meat. Jenness was with him. His French colleague remained behind, as did 25 others. Before the hunters were able to return, *Karluk* had drifted out of sight, leaving all aboard to face whatever fortune the gathering polar winter held.

All hands survived *Karluk*'s destruction, taking shelter at Shipwreck Camp, a cluster of tents erected where the ship went down at 73° N latitude. Since they were well supplied with provisions and equipment, Captain Robert Bartlett, a seasoned Arctic navigator, recommended they stay put until returning daylight made it possible to negotiate some 120 km of frozen sea en route to safe haven on Wrangel Island, a goal eventually attained in mid March. Three weeks into the wait, however, surgeon Alistair

Mackay and oceanographer James Murray, both veterans of Ernest Shackleton's 1909 Antarctic expedition, resolved to jump the gun. They announced their intention, against all sensible advice, to strike out for the island as soon as possible. Frantic with anxiety, Beuchat chose to accompany them, as did Thomas Morris, a seaman. Bartlett reluctantly supplied gear and provisions for 50 days. In turn, each man endorsed a letter to the captain stating that “we undertake the journey on our own initiative and absolve you from any responsibility whatever” (cited in Bartlett and Hale, 1916:128). On the morning of 5 February, the four headed out in calm, clear weather. Ten days later, a scouting party returning to Shipwreck Camp came upon Mackay, Morris, and Murray. Despite exhaustion and the accidental loss of provisions, the trio resisted pleas to turn back. Straggling far behind, Beuchat was hypothermic, delirious, and in the estimation of Ernest Chafe, the sailor who found him, near death. Said to have confessed that leaving camp had been a terrible mistake, the Frenchman, like his mates, insisted on remaining behind. None of the quartet was seen again. It is likely that Beuchat died on that very day, 15 February 1914 (McKinlay, 1976:79; Niven, 2000:164–165).

Eleven lives were lost following *Karluk*'s destruction: the three scientists and eight crewmen. Thanks to the heroic efforts of Bartlett and Kataktovik, an Inuk from Barrow, in reaching the Siberian shore, the survivors were rescued from Wrangel Island the following autumn (Bartlett and Hale, 1916). In the expedition's aftermath, Rudolph Anderson, head of the southern party, laid all of the blame for this tragic affair, and much else, on Stefansson's shoulders, accusing him of gross (possibly criminal) negligence in putting his jealously guarded reputation as an explorer and his love of headlines before his companions' welfare. His choice of *Karluk*, ill-suited to service in heavy ice, was a case in point, and hiring Beuchat was another. Despite his “agreeable personality and great ambition and willingness,” Anderson wrote, what justification could Stefansson offer for recruiting someone with “no experience at all in field or outdoor work, very unhandy in picking up ship, sledge, and camp technique, and unskilled in caring for himself under difficult circumstances”? (Anderson, n.d.:10).

Nearly a year elapsed before the full story of events on the Chukchi Sea reached the outside world. For Elisabeth Beuchat, the wait for word of her beloved son proved an ordeal, her frame of mind in thrall to speculative front-page coverage and near silence from Canadian officials responsible for the expedition. What little solace she found came in letters from the spouses of Rudolph Anderson and James Murray. “They are true explorers' wives,” she told Barbeau: “they never lose hope!” (11 June 1914). Making a bad situation worse, the outbreak of war in August 1914, followed by the unexplained failure of Henri's pay cheques to arrive, as per his instructions, plunged the widow into dire financial straits. “My son-in-law left [for the battlefield] . . . and my daughter, who is not working, came to live with me,” she wrote to Barbeau; “I do not know what to do and to whom to turn” (26 January 1915).

Offended by the government's callousness in the face of Mme. Beuchat's "irreparable personal loss," Edward Sapir, chief of the Geological Survey's anthropological division, urged his superiors to provide an annual pension of \$500, equivalent to the late anthropologist's expedition pay. "As [he was] a former scientific employee of the French Government [and] in a sense a guest of the Dominion Government," he reasoned, "neglect...of his surviving mother would not be calculated to put us in a very enviable light in the eyes of our French allies" (to R.G. McConnell, 17 November 1914). No pension was authorized. Midway through 1916, however, Ottawa finally issued a cheque covering a portion of Henri's back pay. On learning of the widow's distress months later, Stefansson, still in the Arctic, sent her \$100, and later he organized a benefit at New York's Explorers Club that raised another \$635. "If there ever was an unselfish devotee of science," he wrote to club members, "it was Henri Beuchat." The man was "a soldier of peace and died in the work of exploration..." (Stefansson to E. Beuchat, 1 October 1917; to Explorers Club, 1 October 1917).

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