

BOOK REVIEW

Review of *Shipwreck at Cape Flora: the expeditions of Benjamin Leigh Smith, England's forgotten Arctic explorer*, by P. J. Capelotti (2013). Calgary: University of Calgary Press. 269 pp. ISBN 978-1-55238-705-4.

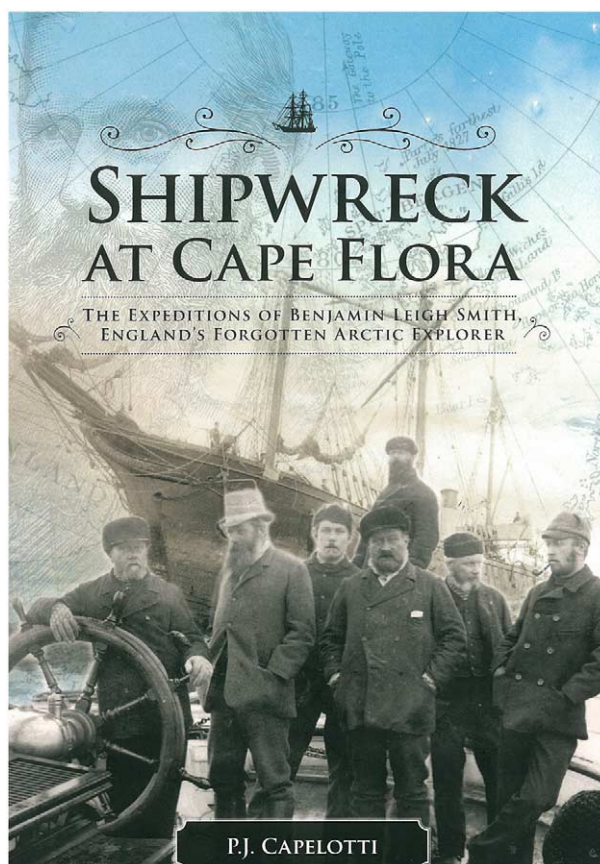
Research for this biography has taken the author from the United States to various parts of the United Kingdom and to Franz Josef Land, as well as drawing on his field experiences from Svalbard. His thoroughness in digging up material has produced a detailed account of the rather amazing life of the British eccentric Benjamin Leigh Smith.

Leigh Smith's life story has two distinctive themes, which both separately exceed the bounds of normality and both would merit a detailed and separate study of their own. On the one hand, there is his experience as an Arctic explorer. Superficially, he can easily be placed together with other British gentlemen yachters and hunter/explorers, such as James Lamont (*Seasons with the sea-horses, Yachting in the Arctic seas*) and Lord Dufferin (*Letters from high latitudes*), who have contributed through their highly readable expedition accounts to the history of Arctic exploration. Sadly, Leigh Smith never wrote his own accounts of the five expeditions he made between 1871 and 1882 to Svalbard, Jan Mayen and Franz Josef Land. Unlike most other explorers, he shunned the public eye, refused to personally hold presentations, receive accolades or publish any accounts. It was left to others to accept honours and medals on his behalf and to write of the exceptional exploratory voyages he devised and led. In this way, he can partly be compared with the silent and stoic Otto Sverdrup who in 1898–1902 led his own very successful scientific and exploratory expedition to what are now Canada's High Arctic islands. Sverdrup, however, did manage to have an account of the four-year expedition published (*New land*).

To continue with Leigh Smith's Arctic voyages before turning to his unusual private life, he was 43 years old before he decided that he would devote some of his extensive wealth and free time to voyages in the far north. During these expeditions, he did a considerable amount of scientific work, particularly concerning temperature soundings at various depths that was pioneer work within the field at the time. On his 1871 voyage to north-east Svalbard, he added 33 new place names,

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including 22 islands, to the map and later in Franz Josef Land he continued filling in the map of the south-west area of this complicated archipelago. It can be noticed that the original edition of the Norwegian publication *The place-names of Svalbard* credits the Norwegian captain of Leigh Smith's expedition ship, E. A. Ulve, with first reaching the summit of Tumlingodden, while perhaps the expedition leader, Leigh Smith, should have received the credit (Capelotti, p. 67). In 1873, he fulfilled a promise made to the Finnish–Swedish scientist and explorer Adolf Erik Nordenskiöld the year before and sailed to the north of Svalbard to offer assistance to Nordenskiöld's 1872–73 expedition if deemed necessary. It was indeed necessary and the large amounts of food and drink that Leigh Smith turned over to Nordenskiöld earned him a Swedish medal for helping to save the expedition.

Leigh Smith's final voyage, to Franz Josef Land for the second time in 1881, is what the title of Capelotti's book is all about. Leigh Smith's purpose-built ship *Eira* became icebound off Cape Flora and was crushed and sank just

off the shoreline—but not before the crew had managed to save a more than adequate amount of provisions and equipment. The 25 men built a wintering hut, Flora Cottage, of stones, spars and sailcloth and spent a not too uncomfortable winter before managing to repeat Payer's and Weyprecht's 1874 retreat from Franz Josef Land to Novaya Zemlya in small boats. The remains of Flora Cottage were still visible in 1996, but coastal erosion has now washed them into the sea.

Altogether Leigh Smith's voyages, scientific work, geographical exploration and place naming, relief of Nordenskiöld's expedition and shipwreck at Cape Flora place him high up on the list of solid and memorable Arctic explorers. As was said in the Royal Geographical Society in London in 1881 (Leigh Smith himself was as usual not present), "the name of Mr. Leigh Smith would be handed down to futurity as one of the great Polar explorers of the Victorian age" (quoted in Capelotti, p. 175). Yet the undertitle to Capelotti's book—*England's forgotten Arctic explorer*—is not without a ring of truth, even though book titles announcing one or other "forgotten" polar explorer are inclined to produce a large yawn in this reviewer. While mentioning the title, it is a mystery why the author (or perhaps the publisher?) has chosen to title this biography, which encompasses so much in the life of an amazing person, from just one event in his life, dramatic as it was. I wonder how many potential readers can place Cape Flora on the map before delving into the book. The front cover illustration is rather fussily composed of several superimposed images, but the vignettes which introduce each chapter are excellent.

And the other side of Leigh Smith's life? All will not be revealed here, but he had an extraordinary family life with some questionable relations concerning both his father, who seems to have conducted a social experiment with various families on the side, and concerning his own affection for the young girls in his family. It was interesting to learn that he was Florence Nightingale's cousin, and that his sisters were extraordinary in their own right. Much of the information about Leigh Smith's private life can seem a little gossipy, but the author has done his research and has a reasonable basis for the details he reveals.

Capelotti writes with an easy, interesting and at times humorous pen. He has an excellent literary style that

keeps the text flowing through the various episodes at home and out in the north. His obvious knowledge of Arctic exploration history has tempted him too far in relating in detail other previous expeditions such as those of Phipps, Parry, Kane, Lamont and Payer and Weyprecht, which should have been cut down to short outlines. It is easy for the reader to become absorbed in these other histories and almost forget the actual subject of the book. At the same time one can feel some impatience at wanting to get back to more details of Leigh Smith's home life!

Being the author of Jan Mayen's history (1991), I must point out one mistake I noticed on page 82. Leigh Smith in 1872 was not "the first British explorer to set foot on the island [Jan Mayen] since William Scoresby, Jr., in August of 1817." Lord Dufferin had managed to scramble ashore there in 1856.

I am delighted that this biography of Benjamin Leigh Smith has been researched and written so well and that the details of the life of this little-known (but perhaps not "forgotten") Arctic explorer are now made available to a wider public. The readership should include both polar aficionados and those interested in the eccentric lives of the British-landed gentry of the 19th century.

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