

Ebierbing (ca. 1837-ca. 1881)



Photo from *Narrative of the Second Arctic Expedition made by Charles F. Hall, 1864-69*, J.E. Nourse, ed., Washington, D.C., 1879.

Ebierbing, called "Joe" by the many whaling men and explorers who knew him, was a small and diffident man, but in the course of a hard life he consistently displayed remarkable strength, courage, and fortitude, as well as unswerving loyalty to those non-Inuit "kabloonas" who came to depend upon him.

Foremost among those who benefited from Ebierbing's loy-

alty was the American explorer Charles Francis Hall. Hall first met Ebierbing and his wife Tookoolito, known as "Hannah," at the mouth of Frobisher Bay in the autumn of 1860. Some years earlier, Ebierbing and Tookoolito had been taken to England by a whaling captain. There they had learned some English and had converted to Christianity; there also they had enjoyed brief

celebrity, even meeting Queen Victoria and Prince Albert at Buckingham Palace. ("A fine place, I assure you sir," Tookoolito told Hall.) For Hall, a neophyte explorer on his first venture into the Arctic, they were God sent. In the two years that followed they introduced him to the ways of the Inuit and taught him how to survive in the far North.

Hall was a touchy and profoundly suspicious man who made many friends but kept few. Ebierbing and Tookoolito were to remain loyal to him for the rest of his life, although he often strained that loyalty. They accompanied him when he returned to the United States after two years in Frobisher Bay. The country was torn by the Civil War, but Hall ignored it to gather funds for the next expedition, and he used the Inuit couple to his advantage. They and their infant son, who had been born just before they left Baffin Island, often appeared on the lecture platform with him, and he even arranged for their appearance at Barnum's Museum in New York. Both Tookoolito and her infant became ill, and in the spring of 1863 the baby died. Tookoolito was to lose another baby during Hall's second expedition, and finally she and Ebierbing adopted a child, but that child also died in infancy.

When they were not on the road with the remorselessly energetic Hall, they were able to find peace and quiet at the home of whaling captain Sidney Buddington and his wife at Groton, Connecticut. They came to consider Groton their home, in fact, and when they returned with Hall from his second expedition, Ebierbing bought a house and land there.

Hall's second expedition, like his first, was a futile search for supposed survivors of the Franklin expedition almost twenty years after it had disappeared. In five arduous years of roaming in the areas of Roe's Welcome Sound, Repulse Bay, Igloodik, and King William Island, he accomplished little but his own survival, and in that accomplishment Ebierbing and Tookoolito again were his mainstay. Rightly or wrongly, he often felt betrayed by other Inuit and by the whaling men whom he hired to assist him, but always he could depend on Joe and Hannah.

Once more they accompanied him when he returned to the United States in 1869. This time, while he gathered funds from the U.S. government to support his projected attempt at the North Pole, they were able to live quietly in Groton. But they willingly left their new little house to join him on his last, fatal venture.

The *Polaris* expedition was a disaster. Hall died early on, possibly murdered by its chief scientist, and with his death the morale of the expedition collapsed. In the spring of 1873 the ship's captain, Sidney Buddington, headed the *Polaris* southward. Caught in ice during a storm, he ordered abandonment of the ship. Nineteen members of the expedition, including Ebierbing, Tookoolito, and their adopted child, found themselves marooned on a floe when the partly unloaded ship suddenly drifted away. According to George Tyson, the ranking officer in the marooned party, in the incredible six-month drift on the ice that followed, everyone depended on Ebierbing. "We survive through God's mercy and Joe's ability as a hunter," he wrote in his journal.

At the official investigation of the expedition held after both Tyson's party and the men aboard the *Polaris* had been rescued, Ebierbing and Tookoolito were questioned, and in the verbatim transcript of that interrogation we can, if we use our imaginations, almost hear their voices — Tookoolito speaking English with more confidence than Ebierbing, but both of them understated, shy, and subdued. And during his interrogation Joe

revealed the depth of his feeling about Hall, saying at the end: "Captain Hall good man. Very sorry when he die. No get north after that. Don't know nothing more."

But he did go north again — twice more in fact. While Tookoolito remained in Groton grieving the loss of their adopted child, Ebierbing sailed with Captain Allen Young on the *Pandora* in 1876, a British expedition in search of the northwest passage. The journalist J.A. MacGahan, who wrote about the expedition, devoted a chapter of his book to "Eskimo Joe," and in it we learn a few things about Ebierbing. He did not speak English well — he was small and self-effacing but he had "a quiet dignity and gravity about him" — he was a heavy smoker — he had not been fully paid for his services on the *Polaris* expedition — he liked Sidney Buddington partly because he was so kind to Tookoolito, but he virtually worshipped Charles Francis Hall.

Ebierbing returned from the *Pandora* expedition to discover that his beloved Tookoolito had died. He remained in Groton briefly, then set out north again, this time with Lt. Frederick Schwatka in his search for records of the Franklin expedition. He guided Schwatka's small expedition overland from Repulse Bay to King William Island, doing for them what he had done for Hall — teaching them the Inuit ways of surviving in the Arctic. He was aging and infirm, however, and he did not join them in their exploration of King William Island.

When Schwatka returned to the United States, Ebierbing stayed in the North. Tookoolito had been buried in Groton. The stone on her grave is marked: "Hannah Eberbing [sic], wife of Joseph. Died 31 December 1876 age 38." Also on the stone, above Hannah's name, is Ebierbing's; obviously it was assumed, probably by the Buddingtons, that he would be buried beside her, but he is not. He died somewhere in the Arctic soon after the conclusion of the Schwatka expedition.

Ebierbing and Tookoolito were known by many people and even became moderately famous in their time. But they lived in a limbo between their own culture and language and the culture and language of another world that they only partly adopted. Although they sometimes were quoted in writing by men who knew them, they are quoted only in their groping English rather than in their native language. For us, and perhaps even for those who knew them, they remain distant and blurred. We can only speculate about what went on in their minds, but we know their strength, decency, and loyalty because they constantly displayed them — and we can at least sense their mute suffering and stoic courage in the face of the adversity that was their lives.

FURTHER READINGS

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