

Elisha Kent Kane (1820-1857)

The first American arctic explorer of note, Elisha Kent Kane was a man of broad interests and varied talents. Although he died when he was only 37 years old, he distinguished himself as a career naval officer, medical doctor, scientist, author, and artist, and his death inspired a funeral procession by train from New Orleans to the home of his birth in Philadelphia. Eulogies hailed Kane as America's "Arctic Columbus".

Well-travelled prior to his mid-century arctic voyages, Kane had journeyed through South America, Africa, Europe, and the Far East. Small of stature and physically frail as a result of a rheumatic heart, the naval doctor nevertheless sought challenges of physical endurance, which led to his volunteering for the arduous U.S. polar expedition in 1850 as ship's surgeon and again in 1853 as leader.

American whalers had long navigated arctic waters, but the serious search for a Northwest Passage had been a predominantly British enterprise. Not until President Zachary Taylor and Henry Grinnell, the wealthy New York shipbuilder, responded to Jane Franklin's appeal for aid in finding her missing husband and his crew did the United States officially enter into the exploration of the Arctic.

The fate of the *Erebus* and *Terror* had captured the American imagination. Motivated by humanitarian interests, Congress and Grinnell co-sponsored two searches. Politically, the undertaking allowed the United States to participate with Britain in exploration within the territory of North America. There was a further justification as well. U.S. Navy oceanographers were intrigued with the theory of an Open Polar Sea, and although Britain's experience in the ice-choked Arctic had dampened her enthusiasm for such a theory, the fresher and more idealistic Americans — including the scientifically trained Kane — justified the extravagant and risky search expeditions as an altruistic quest for geographical knowledge.

The first voyage gave no evidence of an Open Polar Sea; Kane, undaunted, sought command of another. He accomplished this by lecturing and publishing his analysis of the Open Polar Sea theory for the American Geographical Society and by energetically preparing a popular account of the *Rescue and Advance's* 1850 voyage. Published in 1854, his *U.S. Grinnell Expedition in Search of Sir John Franklin, 1850-'51* was enhanced by steel engravings based on Kane's own skilled drawings and watercolours.

The first voyage had attempted a passage through Lancaster Sound and north into Wellington Channel. The second, under Kane's leadership and including only one ship, sailed due

north up the west coast of Greenland to latitude 78°N, where the *Advance* was icebound and never released. Two of Kane's crew continued by sled and on foot to 81°22'N, "the northernmost land ever trodden by a white man," where they saw "open water stretching to the northern horizon. The unending shore line was washed by shining waters without a sign of ice." Kane, believing this to be the scientific culmination of their journey, declared: "The great North Sea, the Polynia has been reached."

By the spring of 1855, after three summers and two winters that proved far harsher and more impoverished than the men's most pessimistic fears, Kane and his crew faced imminent starvation. Consequent unrest and disloyalty, coupled with the belief that they had met their scientific objective of sighting the Open Polar Sea, led Kane to abandon the search for Franklin; he began planning the dangerous escape by small boat and sled. Brilliant organization and meticulous rationing of their remaining supplies proved Kane a leader of great resource, and he led his men to safety and rescue at Upernavik 1300 miles to the south.

Kane returned a hero and was soon preparing his second popular account of the Arctic. More ambitious than the first, *Arctic Explorations: The Second Grinnell Expedition in Search of Sir John Franklin, 1853, '54, '55* was extremely successful, selling 65,000 copies the first year and 145,000 copies by the third year. More elaborate in every way, the book described the adventure in vivid prose and visually illustrated the enterprise with 21 full-page engravings and 256 woodcuts. Kane's health, however, had been broken by the deprivations of the expedition and by his exertions on the account, and he exclaimed that "this book has been my coffin." He died soon after, while trying to regain his strength in the warmth of Havana.

Kane never found Franklin or the Open Polar Sea, but the Grinnell expeditions had made important advances. The first voyage discovered "Grinnell Land" [Grinnell Peninsula] in Wellington Channel, and the second had mapped the narrow passage between Ellesmere Island and the west coast of Greenland to 78°N. During the lengthy second journey, Kane and his crew learned much about survival from the Eskimos, and their contact established good relations that would benefit such later explorers as Isaac Hayes and Charles Francis Hall.

In spite of his small stature and gentle demeanour, Kane stands out in this period of arctic history for his idealism and daring. William Parker Snow remarked on this same paradoxical quality of Kane's personality:

Of an exceedingly slim and fragile form and make, and with



Portrait of Elisha Kent Kane, M.D., by Thomas Hicks, 1858. Courtesy of the New York Historical Society, New York City.

features to all appearances far more suited to a genial clime, and to the comforts of a pleasant home, than to the roughness and hardships of an Arctic voyage, he was yet a very old traveller by sea and land.

Kane's frail health adds still another dimension to his accomplishments, which he described with considerable aesthetic skill in his journals.

FURTHER READINGS

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