

HEART OF THE HERO: THE REMARKABLE WOMEN WHO INSPIRED THE GREAT POLAR EXPLORERS. Kari Herbert. 2013. Glasgow: Saraband. vii + 318p, illustrated, soft cover. ISBN 978-1-908643-21-6. £14.99.

This book sets out the lives of seven women who might be called, in the words of the author, the “polar wives club”— a curiously isolated band of women whose focus was propelled to the far reaches of the known world by the force of their husbands’ ambition.’ They are Eleanor Anne Franklin, Jane Franklin, Eva Nansen, Josephine Peary, Kathleen Scott, Emily Shackleton and Marie Herbert, the author’s mother. The book is divided into four parts and elements of the story of many of the subjects appear in more than one part, which leads to a certain lack of coherence in the text jumping as it does from one subject to another and from one period to another.

However all sorts of questions arise from the basic contention of the book that ‘Driven by love, pride and a fierce loyalty, each developed a bond with her husband that transcended time, place and expectation.’ One wonders, for example, quite how much ‘love’ and ‘pride’ was left to Josephine Peary when she discovered that her husband had fathered a child on a young Inuit girl, who, moreover, was, with the child, on board the same vessel as that in which Josephine was proceeding north. In the case of the Franklin wives, there was clear wifely devotion up to a point, but in the case of the second, she certainly never let it get in the way of her travels, sometimes with other gentlemen in close attendance. This reviewer, who is admittedly of a cynical disposition, has long held the view that Jane Franklin would have greeted her husband’s return from the Arctic, if that had happened, with something like dismay because then she would have had to revert to second place in the relationship instead of being the grieving wife left behind with much of fashionable London paying court to her.

A significant point in assessing this book is that while the author makes rather serious and admirable efforts in the direction of objectivity with regard to the opinions and actions of the first six women to whom reference is made, it is surely pressing matters too far to expect such in the case of her own mother. In the writer’s opinion it would have been far better for that intimate family section to have been deleted altogether. A possible substitution, for example, could have been the tragic story of Anna Charlier, the fiancée of Nils Strindberg, of Andrée’s expedition and who insisted that, on her death, while her body was to be buried next to her husband, whom she had married after the disappearance of the expedition, her heart was to be removed and buried close to Strindberg.

The book starts with a section entitled ‘A restless companion’ and features Josephine Peary and the expedition of 1891.

We are roundly informed that she ‘was to be the first female member of an expedition to the Far North.’ This naturally begs another question and it requires very little research to reveal Maria Pronchishchev, the wife of Vasily Pronchishchev, the leader of one of the sections of the Great Northern Expedition, who accompanied her husband, on honeymoon (!), almost to 77° 29’ N near to what is now called Mys Chelyuskin and who died, in mid September 1736, some two weeks after he did.

But once one gets into the book the charm of the writer’s prose and the numerous insights she suggests concerning the relationships between each of the subjects and her man, make it difficult to put down. Unfortunately even though it is claimed that all quotations etc are taken from written sources, there are no references and so it is impossible for even a cursory check to be made. There is also no index and no maps and the latter is irritating particularly for those readers who might have limited knowledge of the geography of the polar regions. But one is continually pulled up short by what might reasonably be taken as special pleading. The feeling arises in several of the cases that the actual situation in the relationship between husband and wife was not as portrayed in the book and that especially towards the end of the male’s career as explorer the wife was becoming a problem rather than a source of inspiration. Cases vary of course. This reviewer is quite prepared to concede the point in the case of Franklin and both his wives, and to a lesser extent that of Scott, but in the cases of Nansen and, especially, Peary it seems impossible that they would amend their course of action simply because they had a wife. Indeed the writer admits this with regard to the latter. A possible further study might revolve around a comparison between those explorers who were married, the ones in this book for example, and those who eschewed matrimony, Amundsen being the classic case, to speculate on whether marriage made better or poorer explorers. Further thoughts present themselves. While there were examples of explorers who married after they had ceased exploration, Benjamin Leigh Smith being an example, were there any explorers who married in mid career and then decided to cease exploring and to ‘settle down’?

But as far as a good general polar ‘read’ is concerned this book could hardly be bettered. It is written in a lively manner and, as noted above, presents the reader with much to think about. Sometimes the reader’s conclusions might be different from the interpretations presented by the author but that is only to be expected. The amount of research that the author has completed is admirable and one puts the book down safe in the knowledge that one has learnt much, and, moreover, that one has been entertained in a satisfying manner. (Ian R. Stone, Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge, Lensfield Rd, Cambridge CB2 1ER (irs30@cam.ac.uk)).