

## **Charles Francis Hall**

### **Essay prepared for The Encyclopedia of the Arctic**

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Few arctic explorers were as enigmatic in both life and death as Charles Francis Hall. A newspaper publisher from Cincinnati, Ohio, Hall had no prior training in cold-weather survival, navigation, or any other skills that might be useful to an arctic explorer. He nonetheless sold his business on impulse, abandoned his wife and children, and spent the rest of his life pursuing arctic quests. His motive, it appears, was an uncontrollable passion. He claimed that God had called him to explore the arctic and search for John Franklin.

By 1859, most of the world was satisfied with the news that Franklin and his men had long since perished after their ships foundered off King William Island. But not Hall. Hall convinced himself that more information, and perhaps Franklin survivors, would be found among the Inuit natives of the area. He lacked the money to mount his own expedition, but in 1860 managed to gain passage on a whaling ship whose captain promised to drop him off on Baffin Island and pick him up at the end of the whaling season. Hall's plan, unprecedented among arctic explorers, was to live alone with, and learn from, the natives.

In November 1860, with the ship anchored near Cumberland Sound, Hall met Tookolito and Ebierbing -- known as "Hannah" and "Joe" to the whalers -- the Inuit husband and wife with whom Hall would spend most of the rest of his life. Tookolito and Ebierbing had lived in London for two years and learned English and some British customs before returning to Baffin Island.

With Tookolito and Ebierbing's help, Hall quickly picked up and seemed to revel in the native way of life. He adopted native clothing, learned to travel with the Inuits, and lived for extended periods in snow houses. In 1861 Hall traveled with six Inuits to the head of Frobisher Bay and discovered relics of Martin Frobisher's sixteenth century expeditions to the area. Until Hall's discoveries, Frobisher's claims of landfall in the area had remained in doubt. Hall also determined that Frobisher Strait, as it was then known, was really a bay.

Traveling most of the time with Tookolito and Ebierbing, from 1864 to 1869 Hall explored the Melville Peninsula, Gulf of Boothia, and King William Island. Much of this area previously had been explored, most notably by John Rae. But in encounters with the indigenous peoples Hall recovered numerous artifacts from the Franklin expedition. He also recorded new accounts of previous white explorers in the area. These tales probably came from a smattering of previous expeditions, but Hall was convinced that they related to Franklin and that some of Franklin's men remained alive in the area.

A prickly and volatile man, Hall's views of the Inuit people changed dramatically during these years. At first he had admired the Natives and their seeming freedom. Increasingly, however, he became frustrated with Native customs, which he regarded as uncivilized, and the Natives' lifestyle, which to him was and capricious and unreliable. This was despite the unwavering support he continued to receive from Tookolito and Ebierbing.

Turning to non-Native help, in 1867 Hall arranged for five men from a nearby whaling ship to accompany and assist him for a year. But this did little to alleviate Hall's frustration with his slow progress, and if anything increased his paranoia. He became convinced that the men were considering mutiny, and when two of them infringed on what he considered his domain – by interviewing some Natives about a tale of two ships (possibly Franklin's) trapped in ice – Hall snapped. A quarrel ensued and Hall pulled out a gun and mortally shot a man named Patrick Coleman. He experienced immediate remorse, and later defended his action as necessary to quell a rebellion. A more plausible explanation, however, is that Hall acted with impulse and emotion, as he did in many things.

Upon his return to the United States, Hall obtained U.S. federal government support for an expedition to the North Pole. A U.S. Navy ship was refitted for the voyage and renamed the *USS Polaris*. From its start in 1871, however, the *Polaris* expedition was plagued by strife. For all his charisma, Hall's leadership skills left much to be desired. To be fair, however, his crew would have tested the best of leaders. An old whaler and former friend of Hall's named Sidney Budington served as captain, but unlike Hall, Budington had no taste for exploration and was reluctant to take the risks necessary to push into new territory. Budington also spent much of the expedition bad-mouthing

Hall and raiding the ship's liquor supplies. Second-guessing Budington much of the way was the ship's assistant navigator, George Tyson. Tyson had at one time been offered the captaincy of the voyage, but had declined because of other commitments. When those commitments fell through Hall made room for Tyson on the expedition, but the effect was to have two captains on board.

Complicating things further was a mixed and fractious crew of Americans, two Inuit families (including Tookolito, Ebierbing, and their daughter), and nine Germans. One of the Germans was Hall's chief scientist, Emil Bessels. Hall first wanted someone else for the job, but was persuaded to take Bessels by the government's chief overseers. (With the government funding also came government meddling in Hall's plans.) Bessels and his assistant, Frederick Meyer, caused trouble from the beginning.

The weather was on Hall's side, and the *Polaris* pushed farther north into Smith Sound and Kane Basin than any previous ship, into what is now known as Hall Basin, until harboring near the Greenland coast. After the ship was iced in, Hall and three others spent two-weeks scouting a route northward for a spring attempt at the Pole. Upon returning, however, Hall became ill. Over the next several days he became delirious, accused others of poisoning him, rallied again, and then relapsed and died.

The cause of Hall's death is one of the arctic's enduring mysteries. Hall thought someone was trying to kill him, and was especially suspicious of Bessels. A subsequent Navy board of inquiry concluded that Hall died of a stroke. In 1968, however, Hall's body was exhumed and a hair analysis indicates that he almost certainly died from arsenic poisoning. Here the plot thickens, for although Bessels is the prime suspect, Budington and Meyer also suffered little remorse and motives for Hall's death. It also is possible that, instead of murder, Hall mistakenly overdosed on the poison himself. Regardless, just like Hall never had to account for his murder of Patrick Coleman, so too did Hall's death avoid prosecution. The arctic proved beyond the reach of the law, or at least beyond civilization's willingness to apply its standards to events there.

Despite the drama of Hall's death, the saga of the *Polaris* expedition was just beginning. Order on-board disintegrated, and when in 1872 the ship broke free of ice, Budington turned it toward home. But then a powerful storm rose up. As the ship was rocked and squeezed between huge ice floes, some crew jumped onto the ice to collect

the food and equipment that was being tossed overboard. In a blink of an eye, the ship separated from the ice and disappeared into the storm, stranding George Tyson, the two Inuit families (including five children), seven German crewmembers, the African-American cook, and an English steward – 19 people in all – on the ice. In one of the greatest arctic survival stories ever, the Tyson party survived for six months on a series of disappearing ice floes until all of its members were rescued by whalers near the coast of Labrador. The *Polaris*, with Budington and Bessels aboard, limped to Etah on the Greenland coast, where it was scrapped. Amazingly, the only member of the *Polaris* expedition not to survive this series of hairraising journeys was Charles Francis Hall himself.

*Further reading:*

Berton, Pierre. *The Arctic Grail: The Quest for the Northwest Passage and the North Pole, 1818-1909*. New York: Penguin Books, 1988.

Holland, Clive (ed.). *Farthest North: The Quest for the North Pole*. London: Robinson, 1994b.

Loomis, Chauncy C. *Weird and Tragic Shores: The Story of Charles Francis Hall, Explorer*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991 (Reprint. Orig. published: New York: Knopf, 1971).

*Brief biography:*

Charles Francis Hall was born in Rochester, New Hampshire. He never finished high school, and worked as a blacksmith, journalist, stationer, and engraver before settling in Cincinnati, Ohio. Hall became proprietor of the Cincinnati News, married, and had two children. He then sold his newspaper, left his family, and sailed north as a passenger aboard a whaling ship on May 29, 1860. He returned in 1862 and coauthored a

book, *Life with the Esquimaux* (London: 1864), before heading north again from 1864-69. Hall then commanded the U.S. government-funded Polaris expedition that left in 1871 seeking the North Pole. He died aboard the Polaris on November 8, 1871.