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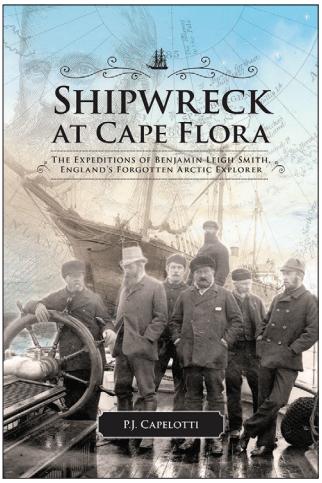

SHIPWRECK AT CAPE FLORA: THE EXPEDITIONS OF BENJAMIN LEIGH SMITH, ENGLAND'S FORGOTTEN ARCTIC EXPLORER

P.J. Capelotti

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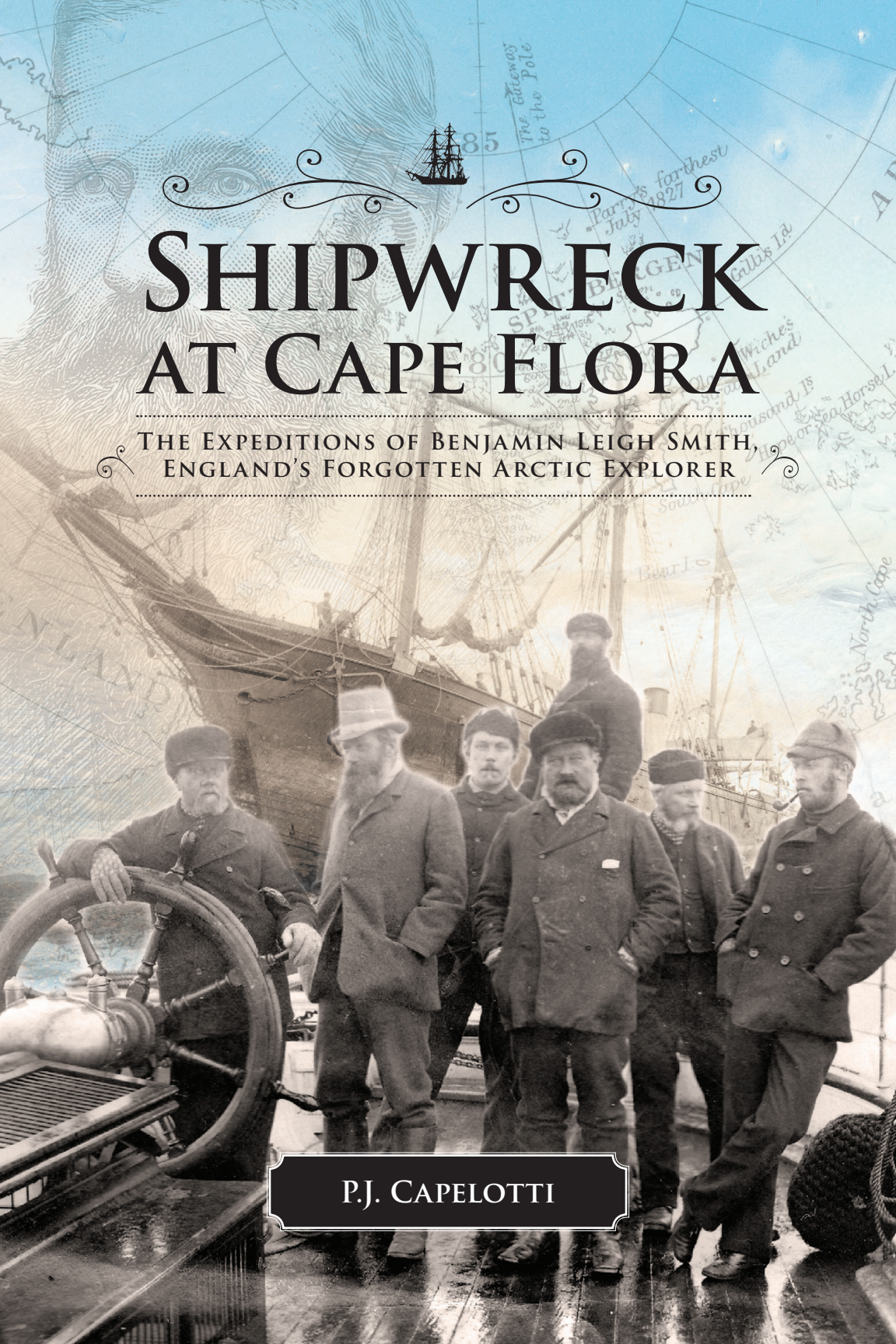
Shipwreck at Cape Flora

The Expeditions of Benjamin Leigh Smith, England's Forgotten Arctic Explorer



P.J. Capelotti

Shipwreck at Cape Flora

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Shipwreck at Cape Flora

The Expeditions of Benjamin Leigh Smith, England's Forgotten Arctic Explorer

P.J. Capelotti

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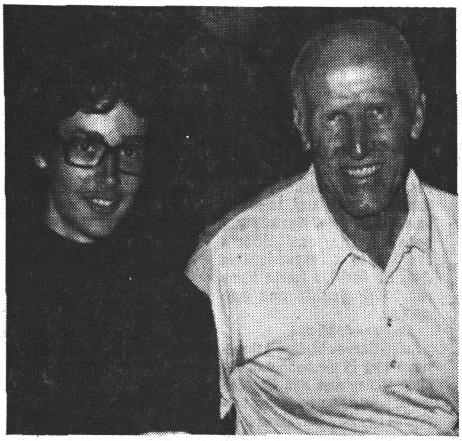
To the memory of Harry 'Red' Caughron (1922–2010) of Woodberry Forest, Virginia, a gentle giant of a man and every bit the equal of the Appalachian mountains he introduced me to, this volume is inscribed with love, affection, and remembrance.



HIKING'S THE TOPIC! Peter Capelotti of Brockton and Harry 'Red' Caughron, former All-American at William & Mary and now head athletic Director at Woodberry Forest Prep School in Virginia, share stories about eastern mountain backpacking with students in a shelter atop Blue Ridge Mountains in the Shenandoah National Park, Va.

On Loft Mountain, Virginia, July 1976

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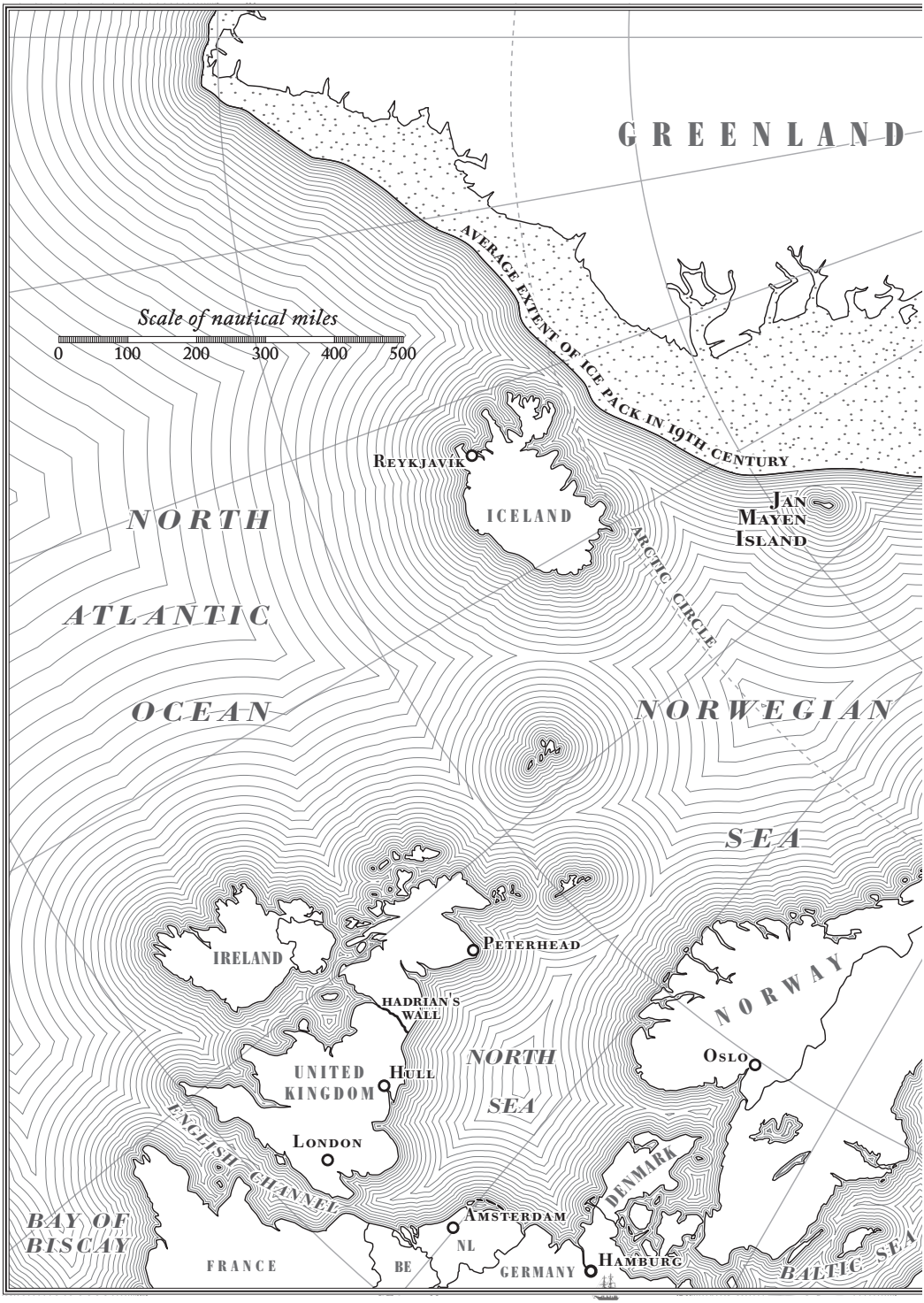
GREENLAND
AVERAGE EXTENT OF ICE PACK IN 19TH CENTURY
Scale of nautical miles
0 100 200 300 400 500
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ICELAND
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ARCTIC CIRCLE
NORTH ATLANTIC OCEAN
NORWEGIAN SEA
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PETERHEAD
HADRIAN'S WALL
NORWAY
OSLO
UNITED KINGDOM
HULL
NORTH SEA
ENGLISH CHANNEL
LONDON
DENMARK
BAY OF BISCAY
AMSTERDAM
NL
FRANCE
BE
GERMANY
HAMBURG
BALTIC SEA

North Pole
ARCTIC
OCEAN
GREENLAND
Danes Island
FRANZ JOSEF LAND
Eira Harbour
Cape Flora
SEA
SVALBARD
KARA
Bear Island
BARENTS
NOVAYA ZEMLYA
SEA
Matochkin Strait
SEA
Tromsø
SWEDEN
RUSSIA
FINLAND
GULF OF BOTHNIA
WHITE SEA
ESTONIA
St. Petersburg
THE EXPLORING WORLD OF
BENJAMIN LEIGH SMITH

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PROLOGUE: TWILIGHT

On Christmas Eve, 1909, the British explorer Benjamin Leigh Smith was nearly eighty-two years old and increasingly confused. To his large and extended family, he was still the formidable 'Uncle Ben,' or, much more distantly, 'The Explorer,' but amid the new millennium chaos of his London surroundings, his name and fame were all but forgotten. Now he was in the middle of an inexorable slide into dementia that his family attempted to legally recognize.

The relentless contractions of his memories had distilled down to one last small icy harbor where his brain could still find firm holding ground. Everything around him that had once been familiar – even down to the names of his children – was fading from his mind, but his life as an explorer endured as the one firm spot on his mental map. A man born into wealth, he had personally financed and led five expeditions to the Arctic that defined the geographic limits of two major Arctic archipelagoes. He had discovered dozens of new islands and named them after expedition companions, favored relatives, and some of the major visionaries of British science in the nineteenth century. He had pioneered deep-ocean research in Arctic waters and, in true Victorian fashion, had returned from his voyages with the holds of his ships groaning with carefully preserved specimens of birds, fossils, and rocks, and even a live polar bear or two.

Perversely, his personal deterioration was occurring at the very moment in history when other explorers were claiming to have completed the work he once believed might crown his own life: the attainment of the North Pole. Just outside the windows of his London townhome, newspaper barkers filled that entire fall and winter with hyperventilated arguments over suddenly momentous issues of polar priority – whether either,

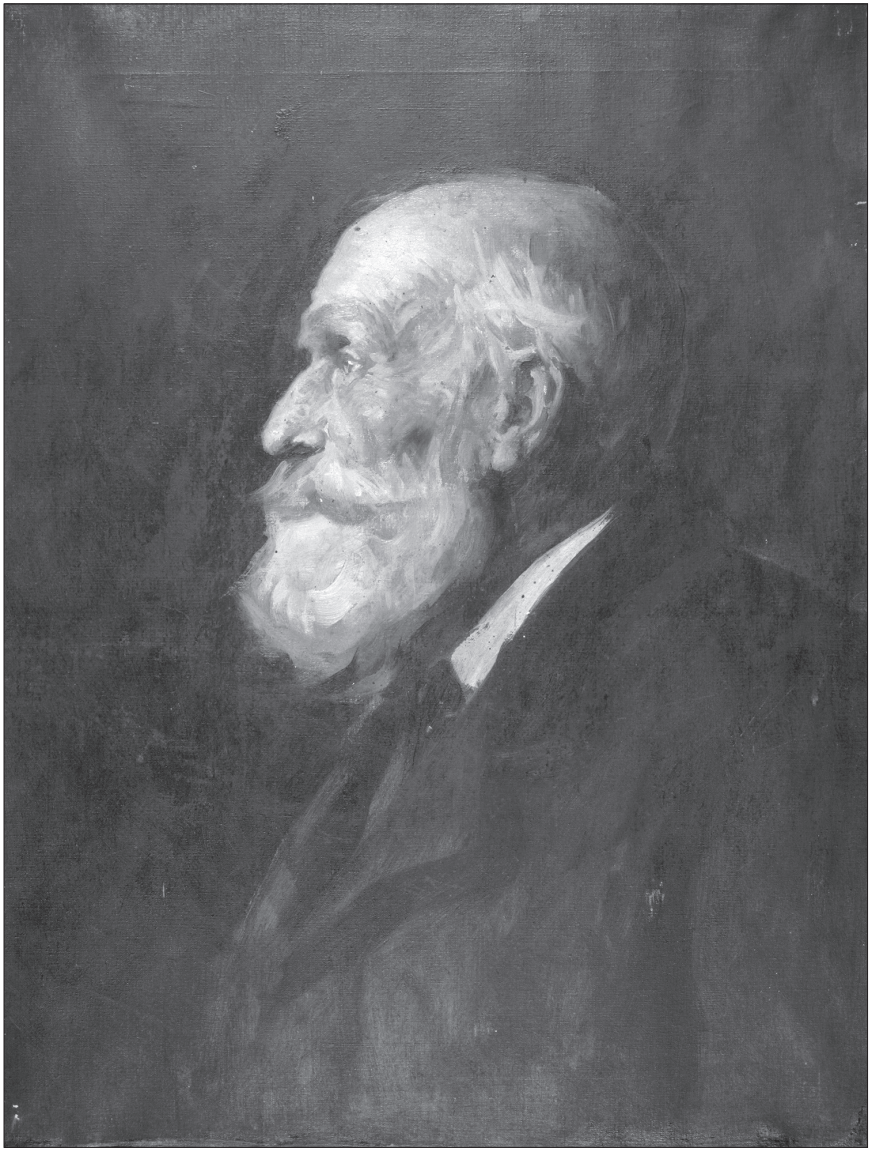

Fig. 1. Benjamin Leigh Smith at the end of his life; oil painting by Reginald Eves, ca. 1911 (courtesy Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge).

neither, or both of the Americans Robert Peary or Frederick Cook, had, in fact, reached the North Pole; whether the Anglo-Irish Ernest Shackleton would return to finish his work at the South Pole or would he be superseded by British naval officer Robert Falcon Scott; whether or where the Norwegians Fridtjof Nansen or Roald Amundsen would return to the field; would any of the cast of lesser international lights such as Evelyn Briggs Baldwin, Walter Wellman, Ejnar Mikkelsen, Jean-Baptiste Charcot, Douglas Mawson, or Ernest de Koven Leffingwell steal the spotlight.

In such an environment of bitter personal rivalries and screaming national intensities, amplified each day by a new and rapidly expanding era of newspaper hype, Benjamin Leigh Smith was very much an antique from a long-vanished boutique of gentleman explorers. A relic. Yet nearly forty years earlier, serious observers had suggested that Benjamin Leigh Smith would be the first human being to stand at the North Pole. He himself was so confident of it that he had sent a brief note to his favorite niece, Amy, the eleven-year-old daughter of his brother Willy.[1] It is a profound and beautiful letter, a kind of illustrated prose poem, written from the Arctic port of Tromsø, Norway. In it, Leigh Smith describes his first experiences with the sense-altering summer environment of northern Norway, where the endless daylight plays tricks on the body clocks of all visitors from more southerly latitudes.

> Tromsø
> June 9th
>
> Dear Amy
>
> Here I am in a place where the sun never goes to bed in the summer, and I am writing to you by daylight or rather nightlight at midnight. The sun looks rather stupid about this time as if it has made a mistake and felt ashamed of himself. It has been snowing today so the summer is a sort of winter. As I came here we passed through a place where we had a sunset and a sunrise all at once and yet there was only one sun. Next Monday we are going to sail round the North Pole and then hoist a flag on the top of it.

At the end of the note, Leigh Smith sketched the Earth with a line drawn straight through it from South Pole to North Pole. There, at the top of the world, next to a St. George's Ensign planted in the ice, stood Uncle Ben, The Explorer. From that mysterious point he waved ecstatically to Amy, who stood off to the south and west, astride England and Ireland. Given a choice of whom he would rather meet should he return triumphantly from the North Pole in the fall of 1871, a choice between, say, his favorite niece Amy on the one hand and on the other hand Her Majesty Victoria, by the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland Queen, Defender of the Faith, Empress of India, it seems clear who The Explorer would have preferred.

Now, with all of the optimistic gleams of his exploring years long past, Benjamin Leigh Smith awaited with an irritable dread as a doctor arrived who would administer a competency examination on behalf of his family. They were increasingly anxious over control of his considerable money and property. He had inherited a fortune in both from his father, which he then controlled with a rigidity that was in direct contrast to the flexibility with which he had taught himself to explore the Arctic. A half of a century of tightly-wound control over his family's legacy, over the many lives that depended on his properties and finances, over every servant and crop, gander and swine, tree and twig, had now led him inevitably into family confrontations over money, property and status, and these were all now accelerated by the legal urgencies of his encroaching senility.

Preoccupied by managing his inherited estates and accounts and then for more than a decade by his polar explorations, he had delayed a domestic life until it was all but too late. He finally married a beautiful French woman by the name of Charlotte Sellers in 1887 when he was fifty-nine and her an impossible forty years younger. His young wife was as vigorously Catholic as he was almost foppishly sexual. By 1909, they had lived apart for years, arguing over allowances. His two boys, born when Leigh Smith was already in his sixties and then coming of age when The Explorer was in his mid-seventies, were now as distant from him in temperament as they were in age. There are hints that one of the boys tended towards a form of high-functioning autism (though it would not have been possible even to recognize such a condition for another half century) that perhaps led him to be sent down from Cambridge, while the other boy's artistic

aspirations led to curt dismissals by his father almost as if he not had been his at all.

If his family had long since drifted from his orbit, the public that once took note of the restrained celebrations of his work as a polar explorer, or his generosity toward expeditions both at their start and in their times of peril, had by 1909 moved into another galaxy altogether. What is almost certain, as he neared the end of his earthly life, is that this fact hardly troubled Leigh Smith, if he thought of it at all. He had never desired, much less needed a public persona. As a man of inherited wealth whose shrewd investing had only made him richer, he never possessed a need for the publicity that virtually all later explorers of the Heroic Era of Polar Exploration would absolutely require in order to finance their expeditions.

Comfortable finances were not the only reason Leigh Smith avoided publicity. He was descended from a family of political radicals, a heritage carried on by his famous sister Barbara Bodichon. His other siblings added to the cacophony of challenging personalities. Then there was Leigh Smith himself, a middle-aged man with a fascination if not a fetish for much younger women. The blazing scrutiny later directed at explorers like Peary, Cook, Scott, and Shackleton could have made for Leigh Smith an unwelcome level of discomfort in the polite, rigidly structured, and highly mannered society Victoria's subjects had created for themselves and in which tightly-regulated circles Leigh Smith moved. Either of these situations – his wealth and family and its burdens or his array of women and their temptations – would have been enough on their own for someone to think it in his best interests to avoid public recognition and the potential inspection that might have attached to it.

Whether from one or some combination of these factors, Benjamin Leigh Smith wrote virtually nothing of his often brilliant Arctic adventures. He left behind no books or articles and always let others keep his logbooks, draw his charts, and deliver his results to scientific societies. When it came time to accept the occasional medal for his achievements, either from a foreign government or before one of the great geographical societies of the age, he always begged off, sending someone else in his place. When the Swedish King wanted to honor his effort to save the Swedish polar explorer Adolf Erik Nordenskiöld's expedition in Spitsbergen in 1873, the decoration had to be sent to Leigh Smith in the mail.

No trip to Stockholm for him. Even members of his own family had to root out and circulate second-hand accounts in order to keep up with his adventures. He once told his brother-in-law that if Queen Victoria herself asked to see his Arctic photographs, he would send his expedition photographer around to the palace with them.

If his inherited wealth allowed Benjamin Leigh Smith both the freedom and immunity from such bourgeois notions as publicity and fame, there is nevertheless no record of any energetic disputation of his place as a pioneer of polar exploration. During his 1873 expedition, when he would save from a horrible fate the expedition of the much more experienced Nordenskiöld, the *Saturday Review* noted that "it seems pretty clear that a successful exploration of the polar mystery can be only a question of time. Possibly the prize may fall to the lot of some bold adventurer, such as Mr. Leigh Smith, who is now running similar risks on his own responsibility."[2]

It was thirty-six years later, on the morning of Christmas Eve, 1909, with such promise and hope long vanished, that the doctor arrived. The morning's newspapers were filled with the exploits of a new generation of explorers, each of whom – quite unlike Benjamin Leigh Smith – grabbed hungrily at publicity wherever and whenever it could be found. These were media celebrities who readily posed in Neanderthal-like furs in photographic studios filled with fake polar scenery and stuffed Arctic polar bears jumbled together with Antarctic penguins all for the entertainment of a stupefied public that believed they were all fighting over a place of permanent ice and snow inhabited by Sinterklass, Santa Claus, Saint Nicholas, and Father Christmas.

The doctor was an ingenious and widely-respected man by the name of Norman Moore. In a remarkable turn of fate, Moore was about to assess the mental competency of an elderly polar explorer who nearly forty years earlier had done his level best to destroy the doctor's prospects. As a promising young physician, but without title or capital or promise of inheritance, Moore had unwittingly set a collision course with Leigh Smith over Amy, the same favored niece to whom Leigh Smith had written his poem from the Arctic. Amy was now sixteen, determined and lovely. Moore, a brilliant, driven man and multi-disciplinary scholar of the highest order, had conquered every challenge set before him. Already at the age of twenty-seven he had earned the post of Warden at St. Bartholomew's

Hospital Medical College in London, at a time when the hospital treated over 100,000 patients a year. Despite his deep spirituality, he became both friends and a medical advisor to Charles Darwin (converting to Roman Catholicism only after Darwin's death); despite his broken family and absent father he rose in his field to become President of the Royal College of Physicians; and his lack of political connections was no barrier to being made a baronet in 1919. He was the prototype of a man who would have risen to the top in any kind of meritocracy one cared to design.

Leigh Smith came to despise him. For all his gifts, Norman Moore at the time he met Amy was not gentry, landed or otherwise. So when Moore forthrightly made his intentions clear, Leigh Smith's reaction was little short of volcanic. The novelist and essayist Charlotte Moore is Leigh Smith's great-great-grandniece and great-granddaughter of Norman and Amy. As she delicately and correctly writes, Leigh Smith's "devotion to his pretty niece might nowadays be seen as unwholesome."[3]

Leigh Smith's place as the eldest son of inherited wealth in Victorian England made both his position and his proclivities virtually unassailable. It was largely through Leigh Smith's furious reaction to Norman Moore's courtship that Moore and Amy were kept apart for five full years before they were eventually allowed to marry. In the interim they could neither see nor even correspond with one another, a separation Moore had marked with an unposted letter to Amy every day. Moore had learned the price to be paid for encroaching on territory to which The Explorer had already staked a claim.

The couple reunited and married as soon as Amy turned twenty-one in 1880. Benjamin Leigh Smith celebrated the union by sailing to a part of the Arctic so remote no one had ever seen it before. But the marriage survived and thrived until Amy's early death twenty-one years later. Only then did her ill health soften Leigh Smith's resentments towards her, if not towards Norman Moore.

After Amy's death, in a twist so bizarre it was all but predictable, Moore married another of Leigh Smith's nieces, though by this time Leigh Smith was in his seventies and had his own young wife and small children to worry over. Perhaps by then Leigh Smith could also see, grindingly, grudgingly, what had long been evident to almost every other observer:

that Norman Moore was well on his way to his eventual position as one of the pre-eminent physicians in England.

It was against this backdrop of the most public of international polar spectacles and the most intensely personal of family rivalries, that Dr. Norman Moore arrived at the rooms of Benjamin Leigh Smith at 37 Bury Street in St. James, halfway between Green Park and Piccadilly. There is no reason whatever to suppose that Moore's errand was conducted in anything but a professional manner, just as there is no evidence to suggest that Moore, despite the ill treatment he had suffered from Leigh Smith, had ever held a reciprocal grudge.

Leigh Smith's wife Charlotte, who in 1909 was a still-young woman of forty-one, had asked the courts for control over The Explorer's finances. She maintained that he could no longer competently look after them. Norman Moore, with both his impeccable reputation yet undeniable conflict of interest, was asked to examine Leigh Smith and give a professional medical opinion as to his competency.

Moore arrived at 9:30 in the morning and was met at the door by Dr. William Neale. A naturalist and surgeon from Leigh Smith's 1880 expedition to Franz Josef Land (Zemlya Frantsa-Iosifa), Neale had remained a faithful retainer from the time of that successful expedition and would until the end of Leigh Smith's life. Neale took Moore up to Leigh Smith's rooms and introduced him, a quaint and no doubt extremely awkward custom given the circumstances and the bitter history between them. Neale and another visitor then left the room, leaving Norman Moore alone with The Explorer. Moore found Leigh Smith courteous, even to the point of offering him his own chair, which Moore politely declined.

They proceeded to converse for three-quarters of an hour, primarily through the use of a speaking tube, which consisted of two cones connected by an air tube through which Moore's voice could be amplified to overcome Leigh Smith's deafness. Moore began by asking him if it was true that he had seen several doctors lately.

The Explorer replied: "One afternoon in Scotland they went up a valley & they had a lunch & some speaking and singing went on & that is the principal thing. It didn't amount to anything but someone gave me my health & I had too much to drink."[4]

Leigh Smith could not remember how long ago that had been. Dr. Neale would remember. Moore asked him how long he had lived at his present address.

Leigh Smith responded that "we'll ask the landlord; I cannot tell you."[5]

Moore asked who the two gentlemen were who were in the room when he arrived. Leigh Smith had not noticed two, only the doctor. He asked the doctor's name but Leigh Smith said that he did not notice but that he had seen him often enough. He began to relate a conversation with his brother-in-law, General John Ludlow, as if it had just happened that morning. Ludlow had been dead for more than twenty-five years.

Moore asked him how old he was.

"Over 70 & nearer 80. It might be over 80."[6]

Leigh Smith had difficulty remembering his address, but knew the name of the estate in Sussex that he had inherited from his famous sister Barbara: Scalands. But he could not recall when he had last been there. He could not remember who looked after the property while he was away but was certain that he had just settled on a man to look after the cattle. He remembered that he had two boys but could not recall their ages or which one was older.

Moore asked where his wife lived.

Leigh Smith replied "the other side of the water; the river that goes into the Thames."[7] In any case, he had not seen her for more than a year and had forgotten how long she had been away from him.

Moore asked him who his solicitor was. Leigh Smith could not recall with any certainty. He did not know precisely who was acting on his behalf but thought there might be several. The name 'Woolcombe' came to his mind but he could not say if this was the man who was acting on his behalf or not. Perhaps that was the name of his wife's solicitor. There had been a difference between him and his wife, but it was one he would rather not go into. But he was certain that when they had formally separated he had given her an ample allowance, ample. He could not remember what sort of allowance he had fixed upon his sons. He thought that he often gave them money, but could not recall the last time he had done that, or how much it had been.

Norman Moore asked if there had ever been any question about his fitness to manage his affairs. Leigh Smith said that he "should not bother about a little thing like that but dared say there had been any amount of squabbling."[8]

Asked if he had signed any letter or paper opposing the current proceedings against him, Leigh Smith answered that he had forgotten all about it. In his notes of the meeting, Moore transcribes The Explorer's response: "He said he should not think anything of it because if you paid attention to that sort of thing you might always be worried."[9] Moore gave the names of several doctors who had examined Leigh Smith but he could not attach himself to any of them.

How much money did he have?

Leigh Smith answered that he might be able to tell within £1,000 but would not. He did not know what his balance was at the bank nor could he remember the name of the bank. Then he remembered that he had his passbook in his pocket and pulled it out and said that he could not help laughing at anybody wanting to know about his affairs. He then looked at the first page of the passbook in order to learn the name of his bank.

Moore asked him again, since he now had his passbook in front of him, whether he knew how much money he had?

Leigh Smith would only say that it was rather difficult, and would not say what his income was. (It is unclear from Moore's notes whether the reason Leigh Smith would not say is that he could not properly read his own account book – whether from failing eyesight or mental deterioration – and therefore *could* not say.)

What seems clear is that the questioning went on in this manner for far too long, in a kind of repetitive hectoring that bordered on the faintly cruel. There could be no question that Norman Moore was performing his due diligence for the courts. But, given their tortured history, the affidavit now reads with more than a touch of unnecessary relentlessness. As if to prove the point, Moore even asked if Leigh Smith knew, on Christmas Eve, how far away they were from Christmas Day itself. Pitifully, Leigh Smith did not know. But he did know that it was the last month of the year.

At long last, the sad interview neared its end. Now, Moore reached for a topic completely unrelated to the family that Leigh Smith had largely

forgotten about or the finances that he refused to or could not recall. And it was only at this point that Leigh Smith finally demonstrated that his mind was not completely vacant.

Moore asked about his career as an explorer.

As if searching for some vestige of his former self, Leigh Smith pointed to a large chart that lay on a table nearby. It was labeled '*Polar Regions*.' He pointed out where he had been and now it was Moore's turn to seemingly reluctantly write that Leigh Smith could only find the locations "generally."[10] But it was clear that he knew that he had once been to faraway northern spaces.

Emboldened, Moore asked if Leigh Smith could give him the names of any of the explorers who had recently been discussed in the papers. He could not.

Leigh Smith had passed the point where he could remember such details. His condition, which left no room for anything but steady deterioration, only worsened until his death on the 3rd of January, 1913, little more than a year after the Norwegian Roald Amundsen reached the South Pole and drew a final curtain on four centuries of pole-seeking. In his gathering twilight, all the contradictory threads of his life were now hopelessly tangled and beyond any certain knowledge.

If his mind had allowed Leigh Smith to reach back with more than a sliver of clarity, he would have remembered that he had once been a man whose doughty leadership was so successful that the veteran Arctic whaling captain David Gray was moved to call him the very model of "quiet, cool, thoroughbred English pluck."[11] The Royal Geographic Society's Clements Markham referred to him as a polar explorer of the first rank.

Yet despite the active scientific research practiced on his polar expeditions, Leigh Smith published no personal account of his expeditions, leaving it to Clements Markham and others to write up the results of his explorations of Franz Josef Land for the proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society and the Zoological Society of London. John C. Wells, a Royal Navy captain asked by Leigh Smith to oversee the oceanographic stations of the 1872 expedition to Svalbard, described him in his published account of the expedition simply as "a friend,"[12] but otherwise did not identify him across 355 pages. Whenever the Royal Geographical

Fig. 2. Benjamin Leigh Smith at the time of the Eira expedition (courtesy Hancox Archive).

Society asked Leigh Smith to lecture on his expeditions or receive a medal for them, he always managed to find a reason why he couldn't attend.

Nevertheless, his leadership in the field was exemplary. As his purpose-built research vessel *Eira* sank off Franz Josef Land in August of 1881, Leigh Smith calmly directed his crew to salvage what they could. He then led his crew through an Arctic winter, all the while reserving enough champagne to allow his crew to raise a toast to Queen Victoria on her 63rd birthday on May 24th, 1882.

A month later, and ten months to the day after his ship went down, when the coastal ice finally offered an opening, he launched a voyage of escape south through hundreds of nautical miles of pack ice. Skillfully maneuvering small boats fitted with table cloth sails through ice and snow, amid soaking rains and treacherous seas, this remarkable Arctic journey was executed with no lesser grace than would be Ernest Shackleton's similarly stunning escape from Antarctica thirty-five years later.

It was after his dramatic escape from the Arctic that *The Times* wrote that the name of Benjamin Leigh Smith "would last as long as scientific men took an interest in Arctic discovery."[13] It was this reputation that became his last cogent memory. He had not forgotten that in his true self he had once been an explorer, even for a brief time The Explorer, one who had tried to plant his nation's flag at the top of the world.

No, he answered to Norman Moore's final question, he could not remember when he last went on an Arctic expedition.

"But if anyone asked him, *he would go again*."