



A Review of “In the Kingdom of Ice”

In our age, the [very concept of heroism](#) has been so watered down by a lackadaisical application of the label “hero” that it can be hard to spot the genuine article. In Hampton Sides’ new book, *In the Kingdom of Ice*, readers encounter genuine American heroes: the brave crew of the U.S.S. *Jeannette*, one of the most significant exploratory voyages of the Arctic during the 19th century. It is an account of bravery in service of country, and often it is a story of selfless devotion to one’s shipmates. It is an exploration of the character of the men who exemplified the best of the American spirit in the 19th century.



The *Jeannette* expedition, under the command of a young naval officer named George Washington DeLong, is presented by Sides as the meeting point of some of the major social and technological trends of the latter half of the 19th century. The expedition was funded by one of the largest media outlets of the day. The *New York Herald*, owned by eccentric publisher James Gordon Bennett, Jr., spared no expense outfitting the two year expedition — a fact that made the expedition all the more palatable to both the U.S. Congress (which authorized the expedition) and the Department of the Navy. From Bennett’s perspective, the whole point of the expedition was to “make news” and therefore sell newspapers.

The expedition also took with it some of the most “cutting edge” technologies available at the time: Alexander Graham Bell’s telephones (for use across the ice with hunting expeditions miles from the ship) and Thomas Edison’s electric lights (for use during the months of winter darkness) were taken to the Arctic. Both technologies were a complete failure. And the entire expedition relied upon scientific theories of the Arctic that would prove to be utterly fallacious (belief in a cross-polar continent and an ice-free sea in the high Arctic).

However, the *Jeannette* expedition is not an account of the triumph of technology or the rising influence of the media. It is not a story of the insights of scientific prognostication by the most respected scientists of the age. It is the story of 33 men who faced 21 months aboard a ship trapped in the ice, who then traversed a thousand miles of ice and open water using nothing more than sledges and small whaling boats, to reach the frozen shores of the Lena Delta in Siberia. It is the story of a commander and his men who refused to despair, and rarely complained, when their lives were in constant danger because of circumstances beyond their control. It is an account of Americans who paused to mark the Fourth of July when their lives hung in the balance, stranded on an ice flow beyond any hope of rescue and who ventured on foot across miles of ice to lay claim to barren islands on behalf of the nation they had sworn to serve. And it is the history of men who did not lose faith in their God in the face of death, and who fought to save one another in the midst of growing peril. The final months of the expedition, from the sinking of the *Jeannette* to the landfall and travel of the expedition across the Lena Delta, is a



Written by [James Heiser](#) on November 21, 2014

testament to the fortitude of the officers and crew of that expedition:

From the place of the *Jeanette's* sinking, they had covered nearly a thousand miles — though most of the men, having backtracked multiple times across the ice cap to haul belongings, actually had trekked a distance in excess of twenty-five hundred miles. Their odyssey had ended one phase and was now beginning an entirely new one. Whatever obstacles might lie ahead, salt water and ocean ice pack would not be among them. Their metamorphosis was complete. Having been creatures of the ice, then of the sea, they were now creatures of the land.

The labors which DeLong and the crew undertook to preserve the scientific records of the expedition — including the discovery of three previously unknown Arctic islands — demonstrated a shared commitment to the goal of the expedition. There was never a collapse into a mentality of “every man for himself.” And the survivors labored for years after the expedition to ensure that a faithful record of the discoveries was upheld.

In the assessment of this reviewer, Sides’ book has not supplanted *Icebound — The Jeannette Expedition’s Quest for the North Pole*, Leonard Guttridge’s 1986 account of the expedition. However, when Sides’ *In the Kingdom of Ice* is read in tandem with Guttridge’s *Icebound*, a much more comprehensive understanding of the historical context of the *Jeannette* expedition emerges.

However, areas in which Sides’ work is manifestly superior to Guttridge’s is in setting DeLong’s life and expedition in the context of its times and in his treatment of the relationship between DeLong and his wife, Emma. Sides fills out aspects of the life of DeLong and the character of his times that is less thoroughly examined in Guttridge’s earlier work.

An inexplicable and inexcusable oversight in the publication of *In the Kingdom of Ice* is the absence of any index. The lack of an index undermines the academic value of the book as a whole.

Also, Sides does not offer as complete of an account of the history of Wrangell Island — the intended initial goal of the DeLong expedition — as this reviewer would have preferred. Given the controversies that have surrounded the various national claims to Wrangell Island, Herald Island, and the three DeLong Islands (i.e., the three islands discovered by the *Jeannette* expedition) a more complete historical context would have been of benefit to readers.

Nevertheless, Sides’ account of the *Jeannette* and her crew is a worthy addition to the literature of that expedition. The heroism of DeLong and his men stands as an example to the ages. A generation of Americans who now weigh the merits of further human exploration beyond the confines of our world have much to learn from the *Jeannette*: Exploration requires bravery and sacrifice. Technology and “good public relations” are no substitute for principle and commitment to one’s shipmates. And fulfilling one’s duty to one’s nation and keeping faith in one’s Redeemer are more important than personal success.”

Hampton Sides, *In the Kingdom of Ice — The Grand and Terrible Polar Voyage of the USS Jeannette*, (New York, London: Doubleday, 2014). Hardcover. 454 pages. \$28.95.



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