

**A BOY'S-EYE
VIEW OF THE
ARCTIC**

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Kennett L. Rawson, June, 1925.

TO MY MOTHER
Bravest of them all.

INTRODUCTION

TO the lecturer the introduction is the most interesting part of his lecture, in that it is generally so complimentary that his feeling of guilt and a sense of his own inferiority mars somewhat his whole discourse. My cabin boy, Kennett Rawson, suffers no handicap in this respect. His work is finished. Whatever I may write will not affect its status. His narrative stands as a testimonial of the influence of good and much reading. Very few will believe that such language is natural for a fourteen-year-old boy. But we knew “Ken” in the forecastle of the little *Bowdoin*, and teachers at Hill School who have watched his progress for two years can assure you that the book is his own.

How fortunate that a boy in his early teens could visit the scenes of our early explorers, the headquarters of the great Peary, who, by his work, has placed before American youth the finest example of persistency, determination, and clean grit in all Arctic history. What a privilege for young Rawson to stand where the immortal Elisha Kent Kane stood with lifted ramrod and fluttering cap lining, the first to step foot on historical Littleton Island, and to enter the Basin which bears his name!

From the heights about Etah he has looked across to the ice-covered hills of Ellesmere Land and Cape Sabine where Greely and his men lay dying in 1884 and where Peary fought a losing fight in 1900-1902. He has seen the last of the *S. S. Polaris*, which steamed farther north than ship ever steamed, now strewn about

the beach rusting, rotting away. But memories of her Commander, the most enthusiastic of all Arctic explorers, will always live.

Something more than pure sentiment. No boy can look upon such things, can dwell upon the deeds of such men as Kane, Hayes, Hall, Greely and Peary, without standing a little more erect, without visualizing his own future and determining to have that future count for something beyond material gain.

With mingled feelings of apprehension, doubt as to the wisdom of my decision, I signed Kennett Rawson on the ship's papers as "Cabin boy, Chicago, age 14," the youngest white lad ever to go into the Far North.

Under starlit skies and unruffled sea; in the semi-darkness of his 10-11 watch, I watched him as he stood at the wheel "giving her a spoke" now and then to keep her on her course, his small sheepskin-covered form outlined against the black of the ocean. In howling winds and with the *Bowdoin* plunging and bucking head seas, decks awash and life lines stretched, the same huddled form, eyes on the compass card, doing his best, with never trace of quit, I, a shipmate for four months, knew him. Young Rawson made good. For that reason he goes back again with me in the Northland one week from to-day, back to the big grey hills of Labrador with their outlying, breaking reefs, to the inner reaches of its green bays, to its simple, sincere people; to Greenland, once the home of the Norsemen, now the land of the Dane and smiling half-breed; to Baffin Island, the Meta Incognita of Martin Frobisher, the objective of many an old New England whaling ship.

May he enjoy this fourth cruise of the *Bowdoin* as he did her third. “The thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts,” and when those thoughts or dreams are realized, doubly fortunate is youth.

DONALD B. MACMILLAN.

Freeport, Maine.

June 12, 1926.

A BOY'S-EYE VIEW OF THE ARCTIC



The journey of the *Bowdoin*, 1925.

I

HERE ENDETH THE LESSON

ONE warm June evening I was sitting up in my room supposedly studying, but actually all thoughts of study had long since gone where most good resolutions go. Who can study on a mild June evening anyway? I can study almost any other time, but on such occasions my thoughts go flue, and I am off to Treasure Island or with Jules Verne. I was somewhere in those latitudes when a rap sounded on my door. I thought just retribution had overtaken me in the form of a master; so I opened a text book, scattered a few papers about for realistic effect and then went to the door.

“Long distance for you at the exchange,” said the messenger, who after all was not a master.

I slipped into my bathrobe and reported to the master on the hall.

“Sir, long distance wants me at the exchange,” I said.

“All right, here’s your permission slip. Get it signed when you are through. And Rawson—don’t loaf on your way back.”

“No, sir,” I said, and with this parting injunction I was off.

I took down the receiver, got my connection and yelled “hello.”

“Hello, Ken, that you?” It was Dad, and there was a note of excitement in his voice. “Do you want to go to the Arctic with MacMillan this summer?”

I leaned against the panel. Was I still with Jules Verne?

“What, Dad? Say it again.”

Dad laughed. “Do you want to go to the Arctic with MacMillan this summer?”

“With MacMillan? With MacMillan?” I gasped! What was he trying to put over? Well, at last it got across, and it didn’t take me long to say yes. He then told me how it all happened, and my surprise and wonderment increased at every word. At last he had to hang up, and I went back to my room in a haze. I could hardly grasp the significance of what I had just heard. A few minutes before I was merely a student at The Hill; now I was an explorer. Well of course not quite that, but something along that line, and anyway I was going on an Arctic expedition and that’s all that mattered.

I returned to my hall and reported to the master in charge.

“Where is your slip?” he said rather shortly.

“My slip? I forgot to have it signed. Oh, sir, MacMillan and I are going exploring in the Arctic regions!”

The master looked incredulous, but as I still retained the air of being partly sane, he began to show real interest.

“How did you happen to choose MacMillan?” he queried.

“Oh, sir, I didn’t mean that, I meant that Commander MacMillan is going to take me with him this summer,” I replied, rather embarrassed by my outbreak.

“Well, just how did you get in on a thing like this?” he asked.

“For several summers I have sailed,” I said, “and I like the sea. Last summer I was engaged in the scientific work of the Bureau of Fisheries on a little schooner. We made a number of trips off shore, and I gained quite a bit of experience. I liked the work so well that I told father that I thought I should like to be an explorer instead of a banker—father’s business. A friend of father’s, Mr. Joseph MacDonald, being acquainted with these facts and also with Commander MacMillan, conceived the idea that I ought to go on the forthcoming expedition with the Commander. I fear he must have strained a point in telling of my qualifications for a berth on the ship, but he finally persuaded the Commander to take me. After this he broke the good news to father. Then the two of them had the difficult task of convincing Mother that I ought to go. My mother is like most mothers, only a little more so, and it was quite a job to show her that the undertaking was not too dangerous and that it would be a valuable experience. She was finally won over, and so that’s how I am going.”

“Well,” said the master, “some people do seem to have all the luck. Go to your room quietly, and remember that we’re still keeping school around here.”

“Yes, sir,” I said, and I went out. He had forgotten all about the slip!

If I worked hard, I had a chance of getting exempt from my examinations at the end of the term. That meant I could go home seven days earlier than otherwise. When I had calmed down, I made up my mind that no dust was going to collect on my books from then on. Too much depended on my plugging; so I tried to put away the thoughts of nice arctic coolness on a hot June night and bury myself in my books.

The days went quickly by. They were happy days filled with hard work between which came rosy dreams of the future—the prelude to the great adventure. But at last came the important day—the day on which the list of exemptions from examinations was to be posted. I parked myself outside the Dean’s office anxiously awaiting that list. No vacation ever had seemed so far away, and the minutes were ninety seconds long. At last a figure appeared from within, armed with the list and a handful of thumbtacks. There was a wild mob there by that time, but I was in the front row. I ran my eye down the alphabet. My fate was before me. It was there—my name. Exempt in everything! With a yelp of joy I rushed for my room feeling for my trunk key on the way. Somehow I got my trunk packed, did the things that had to be done before leaving, and that night at dinner I had everything ready for an early departure in the morning.

The next day, amid the good wishes of my somewhat envious school friends, I bade farewell to The Hill and started for home. There I would have a few days with my family and plenty of time to select my outfit before going on to Wiscasset, Maine, to join the expedition. On the train I did not buy any magazines. I just sat there and shot polar bears and dodged icebergs; and what a grand and glorious feeling it was!

The family were at the train to meet me, and we all had so much to say that nobody could wait for the other person to finish. Mother was so happy that I could go and so unhappy because I would not be home for the vacation, that she didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. Father was so enthusiastic that he wanted to go himself.

I had about a week before joining the expedition; this time I employed in getting my equipment ready. I needed all manner of

things, and without a list which the Commander had furnished, we should not have known what to get. Oilskins and rubber boots for wet weather were very necessary, as were all sorts of warm things such as knit socks, heavy underwear, flannel shirts, woolen trousers and a sheepskin coat, to name but a few of the items. I also laid in a big stock of five-and-ten-cent-store trinkets for trading with the Eskimos. The Commander had suggested rings, necklaces, beads, perfume, soap and various novelties, most of which certainly went like hot cakes with the Eskimos.

At last the day arrived on which I must leave home for the last time until my return from the north, probably in a few months, but very possibly not for several years, maybe never. The Arctic keeps one guessing if it does nothing else. One never can tell what successes or disasters the next day holds.

The family were not coming east with me now, as it was necessary for me to go on a few days early to help in the work of preparation. The family, however, were coming on for the official farewell which was not to be until a week later. On my way to Wiscasset, where the *Bowdoin* was being outfitted, I stopped in New York and joined forces with Dick Salmon, another member of the expedition. We continued our journey by steamer to Portland and there we caught a local to Wiscasset. The afternoon of the fifteenth, the day on which we were supposed to arrive, found us bumping along and wishing that the train would make more speed. But after what seemed years, the end of our trip hove in sight as we suddenly rounded a curve. With beating hearts we gathered our luggage and prepared to disembark. The train halted just opposite where the *Bowdoin* was anchored, and we stared with interest and admiration at our new home, for such she proved to be for the next four months. We hailed a passing launch and her skipper put us aboard

our ship. We at once reported for duty to the mate, Mr. Robinson, who was in charge of the loading. He seemed rather surprised when he saw me, and he said, "Why, I was told you were a great, big fellow weighing a hundred and sixty pounds." As I fell some pounds short of his expectation, I told him that somebody must have been kidding him. I think we both knew who it was. I had strong suspicions, anyway. He at last decided that if I could work, that would help matters quite a bit. So he told me to be ready for work early next morning and meanwhile to make myself at home and get acquainted with the members of the expedition who already had arrived.

I took a look around. The deck was piled high with boxes and barrels; the running rigging was all askew on the deck—in short, chaos reigned everywhere. This was far different from what I had pictured, and I decided right then and there that when it comes to actual work, getting the ship north was no more of a job than loading it. I also saw several dishevelled workmen busily engaged in stowing the cargo in various parts of the ship. I inquired from the mate who they were, and my disillusionment was complete when he told me they were two scientific experts with national reputations. I had always thought of scientists as not quite human, people who sat around looking into instruments and writing elaborate reports. But seeing them pitch in and work like normal human beings did much to restore my confidence that they were real he-men.

I looked the ship over from stem to stern. She certainly is a beauty with lines almost as clean-cut as a yacht. But her timbering would make a yacht's look like a melon crate. She has the most massive timbers of any ship I ever saw, and I think I may safely say that she is the strongest small vessel in existence. Another very excellent

feature for Arctic work is the way the hull is shaped. It is so rounded that the ship rises when squeezed by the ice. This is the only way that an Arctic vessel should be built; as no matter how strong the vessel may be, she cannot withstand the pressure of heavy ice unless she is made to rise. The bow also is sloping, so that she may rise a short way on a cake of ice and crush it with her weight. At the point of impact it is armored with a heavy iron plate to give additional strength. A rather unusual feature for Arctic vessels is also incorporated in the *Bowdoin*, namely, having the vessel reach its full beam a short way abaft the mainmast which, in a schooner, is quite near the stern. This serves to shunt the ice away from the propeller, and anything to protect the propeller is very helpful, as the breaking of a propeller in the ice is a disaster second only to having the ship crushed; without strong means of propulsion one cannot get very far, and sails are a poor substitute for a propeller. She has a semi-Diesel engine which will run on anything from whale oil to kerosene. If we ran out of fuel in the north, we would literally "harpoon our way home," to quote the Commander. In spite of all these features, she is only a small vessel, eighty-eight feet over all, fifteen tons net. She is, I believe, the smallest vessel ever to enter the Arctic.

By the time we had finished our inspection, it was quitting time, and our scientist-stevedores knocked off work and began to prepare to go ashore. Dick and I soon became acquainted with them. They were Lieutenant Benjamin Rigg, of the Coast and Geodetic Survey, and John Reinartz, famous short wave radio expert; our hydrographer and radio operator, respectively, both fine fellows, and we made a congenial crowd at the inn that evening. We four were the first ones to arrive, with the exception of the mate, the cook and the engineer. John Jaynes, the engineer, was

another very fine fellow, and we all liked John, as we soon came to call him. In a few days we were all calling each other by our first names and felt as if we had known each other all our lives. John certainly could make an engine behave when it didn't want to, and he also could render valuable aid and advice on nearly everything.

The cook had gone home for a couple of days to wind up his affairs, and he did not return until the day following. The mate, "Robbie," as we soon called him, was a real mate. His job was to get things done in a hurry, and he did it. But in addition to his capability as a mate, he was a real fellow, and no one had more of the respect and friendship of the expedition than Robbie. The Commander was still in Boston supervising the preparation of the *Peary*, the ship that was to carry the naval airplanes and aviators. He was not scheduled to arrive in Wiscasset till Wednesday night; so we had several days before his arrival. The rest of the personnel were coming up with the *Peary* from Boston.



Photo Brust.

The *Bowdoin* and her crew, Wiscasset, Maine, June 20, 1925.

Left to right: John Jaynes, Engineer; Commander Donald B. MacMillan; Ralph P. Robinson, Mate; Kennett L. Rawson, Cabin Boy; John Reinartz, short wave radio expert; Martin Vorce, Cook; Lieutenant Benjamin Rigg, U. S. Coast and Geodetic Survey; Onnig D. Melkon, moving picture photographer.

After a pleasant evening and a good sleep at the local inn, the sleeping accommodations on the vessel not yet being arranged, Dick and I repaired to the *Bowdoin* early the next morning. My illusions about life on the bounding billow had undergone a change since I had seen scientists acting as stevedores. But it was still somewhat of a surprise when the mate ordered Dick and me to go ashore and sort and remove the sprouts from thirty bushels of potatoes that were lying in a neighboring storehouse. We spread the potatoes on the dock under a broiling sun and set to work. How good an iceberg would have looked at that moment! Some ten bushels and five blisters later, as I attempted to straighten up to see if my back had assumed a permanent wave, the thought struck me that Gareth scrubbing pots in King Arthur's kitchen had nothing on me except that he gained immortality while I was getting an awful pain in the back. But the joke was on him; he had no Arctic expedition as a reward for his pains. At last, however, the potatoes were divorced from their sprouts and carefully resacked. We both decided that our shipmates should never know how much unbargained-for sweat they were consuming with their tubers. The mate, who later appeared, seemed to be satisfied with our labors, and this fact greatly reassured me. Thus, as the old ship's log might read: "This day came in with bliss and worked around into blisters. So ends this day." This, with the exception of a very pleasant

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