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The Greatest Show in the Arctic: The American Exploration of Franz Josef Land, 1898-1905 (American Exploration and Travel Series)

P. J. Capelotti

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In Gilded Age America, Arctic explorers were fabulous celebrities—assured of riches and near-immortality so long as they reached the North Pole first. Of the many attempts to meet that goal, three American expeditions, launched from the Russian archipelago of Franz Josef Land, ended in abject failure, their exploits consigned to near-oblivion. Even so, these ventures—the Wellman expedition (1898–99), the Baldwin-Ziegler (1901–2), and the Fiala-Ziegler (1903–5)—have much to tell us about the personalities, politics, and economics of exploration in their day. In *The Greatest Show in the Arctic*, the first book to chronicle all three expeditions, P. J. Capelotti explores what went right and what, in the end, went tragically wrong.

The cast of colorful characters from the Franz Josef Land forays included Walter Wellman, a Chicago journalist and bon vivant running from debts, his mistress, and an illegitimate daughter; Evelyn Briggs Baldwin, a deranged meteorologist with a fetish for balloons and a passion for Swedish conserves; and Anthony Fiala, a pious photographer in search of God in the Arctic. Featuring an international cast of supporting characters worthy of a three-ring circus, *The Greatest Show in the Arctic* follows each of the three expeditions in turn, from spectacular feats of financing to their bitter ends. Along the way, the explorers accumulated considerable geographic knowledge and left a legacy of place-names.

Through close study of the expeditions' journals, Capelotti reveals that the Franz Josef Land endeavors foundered chiefly because of poor leadership and internal friction, not for lack of funding, as historians have previously suspected. Presenting tales of noble intentions, novel inventions, and epic miscalculations, *The Greatest Show in the Arctic* brings fresh life to a unique and underappreciated story of American exploration.

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