

## Chapter 5. Evelyn Briggs Baldwin and Operti Bay<sup>21</sup>

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### Abstract

During the second Wellman polar expedition, to Franz Josef Land in 1898, Wellman's second-in-command, Evelyn Briggs Baldwin, gave the waters south of Cape Heller on the northwest of Wilczek Land the name 'Operti Bay.' Proof of this is found in Baldwin's journal around the time of 16 September 1898. Current research indicates that Operti Bay was named after an Italian artist, Albert Operti. Operti's membership in a New York City masonic fraternity named Kane Lodge, as well as correspondence between Baldwin and Rudolf Kersting, confirm that Baldwin and Operti engaged in a friendly relationship that resulted in the naming of the bay.

### Keywords

Franz Josef Land, historic place names, historical geography, Evelyn Briggs Baldwin, Walter Wellman, Albert Operti, Operti Bay, polar exploration, Oslo NSF workshop

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7557/5.3582>

### *Background*

Albert Operti was born in Turin Italy and educated in Ireland and Scotland and graduated from the Portsmouth Naval School before entering the British Marine Service. He soon returned to school to study art (see Freemasons, n.d.). He came to the United States where he served as a correspondent for the New York *Herald* in the 1890s who accompanied Robert Peary on two expeditions to Greenland.

### *Artwork*

Operti was known for his depictions of the Arctic which included scenes from the history of exploration and the ships used in this exploration in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He painted scenes from the search for Sir John Franklin, including one of the Royal Navy vessels *Erebus* and *Terror* under sail, as well as the abandonment of the American vessel *Advance* during Elisha Kent Kane's Second Grinnell expedition. For the last six or seven years of his life, Operti painted stage backdrops, as well as murals for exhibitions at the American Museum of Natural History. During this time, Operti lived in an apartment provided by the Explorers Club in New York, which is where he died in 1927.

Possibly the most influential of Operti's many scenes from the history of polar exploration, is a painting depicting the rescue of Adolphus Greely and the survivors of the *Lady*

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Franklin Bay expedition in 1884. The painting is a meticulous commemoration of the 1884 rescue of Greely and five survivors of the U.S. Army's doomed 25-person Arctic expedition during the First International Polar Year.

The painting was only attempted after extensive research by Operti that included interviewing the survivors of the expedition as well as those who were part of the rescue team. He sought minute details about the tents and other materials that formed Greely's final encampment at Cape Sabine. Operti even studied pre-expedition portraits of the deceased crew members. The painting of the Greely rescue formerly hung in the U.S. Capitol Building, and is now at the Explorer's Club in New York City.

Many of Operti's paintings were featured on a cigarette trade-card set titled "Arctic Scenes" and issued by the Hassan Oriental Cigarette Company. The only text on the card fronts is the title of the card and the artist's name "A. Operti." The backs of the cards feature an attractive serpentine rectangular border with a vertical stack three basic elements: (1) the card title, (2) a descriptive text, and (3) advertising copy. The cards are unnumbered, and are all collected and displayed on-line at: <http://www.skytamer.com/T30.html>.



Fig. 1. Albert Operti in Arctic kit (from <http://www.kanelodge454.org/#!/history/c1115>).

Operti worked with a variety of mediums in addition to paint. An example of this is the work completed when he accompanied Peary in 1896 on his Greenland expedition. His assignment on the expedition was to illustrate the recovery of three enormous meteorites that were located the year before. This is where he made the first plaster cast of native Greenlanders. The casts were made of plaster, Vaseline, modeling clay and salt, as well as quill toothpicks, cotton batting, twine, tissue paper, tape measure, calipers and modeling tools.

Operti describes this experience in Kersting's *The White World* (an on-line, digitized copy of Kersting's book reveals an inscription from 1911 by Operti, in which he identifies himself as: 'Arctic Historical Painter;' see Fig. 3).



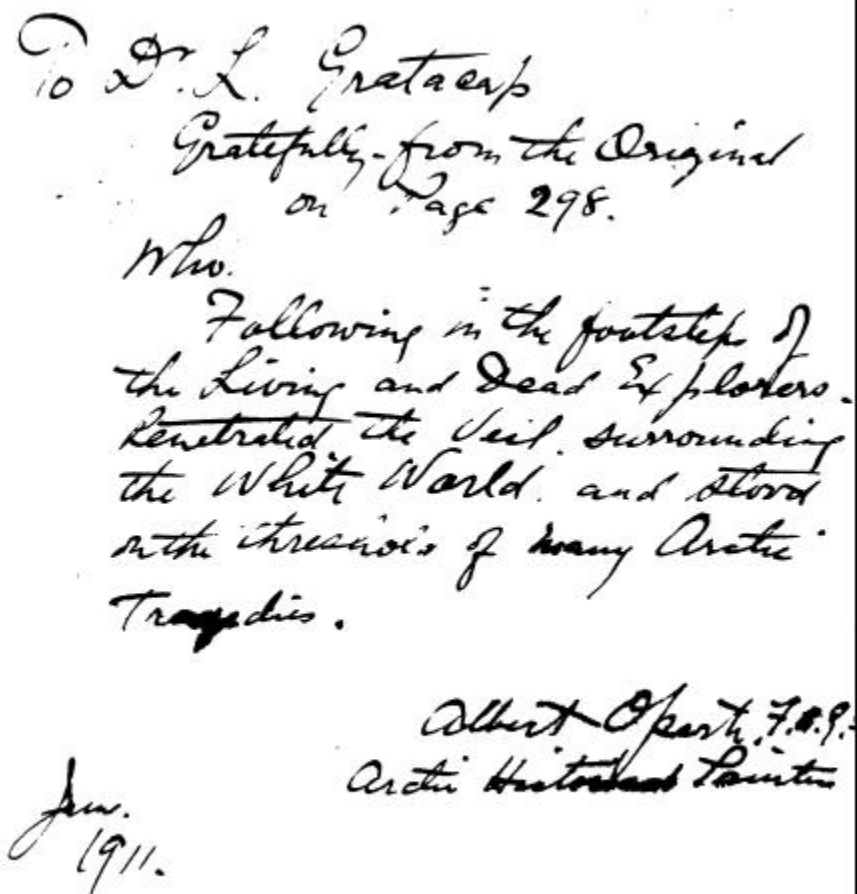
Fig. 2. "Rescuing Greely and his Comrades at Cape Sabine," by Albert Operti (from <http://www.kanelodge454.org/#!history/c1115>).

#### *Operti, Baldwin, the 'Kane Lodge' and Operti Bay*

The goal of this research was to attempt to find a direct connection between Evelyn B. Baldwin and Operti Bay thought to be named after Albert Operti. Two strong connections were found.

The first is Operti's painting titled *Advance* that hangs in the Masonic Lodge No. 454, called 'Kane Lodge' and also in New York City. It is this location that plays an important role in the connection between Operti and Evelyn Briggs Baldwin and the naming of Operti Bay in Franz Josef Land.

An excerpt of a report of the executive committee in charge of a reception held at the Kane Lodge in New York in April of 1896 shows the purpose of the committee meeting as well as the date it was held. This report can be found in the New York Public Library and on page six we find Albert Operti's name under the membership list of the *Committee of Decorations and Relics*. At the top of page twelve, we find Evelyn Briggs Baldwin's name on the list of invited guests, followed by his title as 'Meteorologist on the Peary Expedition in 1893-1894.'



To Dr. L. Gratacap  
 Gratefully - from the Original  
 on Page 298.  
 Who  
 Following in the footsteps of  
 the Living and Dead Explorers -  
 Penetrated the Veil surrounding  
 the White World, and stood  
 on the thresholds of many Arctic  
 Tragedies.  
 Albert Operti, F.R.S.  
 Arctic Historical Painter  
 Jan.  
 1911.

Fig. 3. An inscription by Albert Operti in a copy of Rudolf Kersting's *The White World* shows his self-identification as an "Arctic Historical Painter" (source: Google Books).

It is not clear from this whether Baldwin in fact attended the event, but it does attest to his standing in the wider community of Arctic exploration, and further, if he did attend, of an early connection with Albert Operti.

In addition to this, a more direct connection was found by my colleague, Alex Cruz, in his research (this volume). On May 5th, 1898, Baldwin sent a letter to Rudolf Kersting which, in addition to the main content to the letter, inquired of Kersting after Operti's address. The letter is shown in Alex's paper.

### *Conclusions*

While we do not know why Baldwin asked Kersting for Operti's address, the letter is dated in the same month as Baldwin was making his final preparations to join Walter Wellman on the latter's upcoming polar expedition. During this second Wellman polar expedition, to Franz Josef Land in 1898-99, Baldwin was named Wellman's second-in-command, and during an advance sledge journey in the fall of 1898, gave the waters south of Cape Heller on the northwest of Wilczek Land the name 'Operti Bay.' This is found in Baldwin's journal around the time of 16 September 1898 (see Baldwin 2004).

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### *Discussion*

Lockerby: For my future directions I don't know exactly why Baldwin wanted Operti's address. But there are a set of papers that do exist and they are at the Rauner Special Collections Library at Dartmouth College. I'd like to get into these

papers and the correspondence with several different Arctic explorers. That is the next step.

Forsberg: Is Kersting's name there on the event list at the Masonic Lodge? I couldn't see it.

Lockerby: No. I don't think I found him on there. But one of Operti's paintings, called 'Farewell,' hangs at the Kane Lodge (Masonic Lodge #454, in Manhattan, New York City, see: <http://www.kanelodge454.org/#!history/c1115>). It's big, bold, and beautiful. Clearly he had significance as far as his artistic ability goes.

Capelotti: Also, you'll see that the name of the committee that Operti was on is called the 'Committee on Decorations and Relics.' In the United States, after the Civil War, when there were so many casualties—well, today is called Memorial Day and the unofficial start of the American summer, at the end of May—but it was originally called Decoration Day. It's when people would go decorate the graves of the Civil War dead. The Kane Lodge in New York came to decorate the grave outside of Philadelphia of Isaac Israel Hayes, the year after he died. So this Kane Lodge has had an integral relationship with Arctic explorers for 125 years and it's still there in New York. They even refer to themselves as 'The Explorer's Lodge

Umbreit: What does 'relics' in this context mean?

Capelotti: Relics could mean, the things that people brought back from their travels. These were the kind of items they had at the lodge, and apparently have there still.

Lockerby: Towards the end of his life, for that last six or seven years, Operti was living in an apartment at the Explorer's Club in New York, where he had done a lot of murals and other paintings for museums. And he was into preserving all the art of the history of exploration.

Barr: So how did you find all these bits of information?

Lockerby: I started out just going through the different archives and digital newspapers. It was all digital research. I have all the pages from the dinner event report because it's has been digitized from its source at the New York Public Library. So I don't have to move from my little laptop and I can read this entire book. Beautiful.

Capelotti: One of the things that both faculty and students at our university have is access to something called the American Historical Newspapers database, which is a whole range of newspapers across the country that have to this point been digitized. It has as well a robust search engine. You can keyword search throughout about a 75, 80 years, from about 1860 through 1950 for American newspapers. The

interesting thing about that, as I did in the Franz Josef Land book, is because the United States is so big, that you see how explorers were portrayed in different parts of the country. That's a whole other subject that's wide open for study, just the regional differences in how people perceived the act, the process, of exploration. I'm sure it's very similar to, say, the difference between how somebody would be portrayed in Oslo to how they might be portrayed in Tromsø, for example.

The other thing that they used, which maybe many of you have used, is called NUCMUC, which is the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections and that's through the Library of Congress search engine site. That will tell you where the manuscript collections are, so you can go onto that search engine and plug in Baldwin, Evelyn Briggs Baldwin, and it'll tell you everywhere in the country where there is a recorded note of something related to Baldwin. It could be a letter to him, it could be a letter from him and so forth. That can help narrow down your search. Of course, so many of these searches come right back to the Rauner Library at Dartmouth because they've got such a massive collection of polar explorers there.

- Forsberg: Was it true that Stefánsson made this collection?
- Capelotti: Yes. Vilhjálmur Stefánsson formed the collection, but they also have an Arctic Center at Dartmouth and so the Rauner Library has been adding to the Stefánsson collection ever since Stefansson gave them the rough outlines to it.
- Barr: So you're going to carry on with it?
- Lockerby: I'd like to. I want to go to the Rauner Library. I'm curious because everything that we've found is from there so I'm curious what's in those papers and who he wrote to.
- Forsberg: I recall that that information, doesn't it state the number of names of the explorers he was in touch with?
- Lockerby: It says some, and then "and others." So who are the "and others"?
- Capelotti: That's why you have to go; you never know until you go.
- Magnus: In Sweden we are way behind. So you can access where the information is at least in newspapers, but because of the laws and fighting between the copyright holders, you cannot access stuff. You have to go to the library in Stockholm.

Capelotti: And of course it's different archive to archive. Library of Congress finding aids are usually very detailed, sometimes down to the letter level. So you will be able to say, "Okay. I know if I go there I'm going to find something." Rauner finding aids are much more general as Amanda said. It will say, "Correspondence with this person, this person, this person, and numerous others." It won't typically be down to the folder or the letter level. You have to actually go there and start poking through to see it.