

FROM THE
WINNER OF
THE SCOTIABANK
GILLER PRIZE

ELIZABETH HAY THE ONLY SNOW IN HAVANA

THE ONLY SNOW IN HAVANA

ELIZABETH HAY



Cormorant Books

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for Mark

PREVIEW NOT FOR RESALE

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REAL SNOW

PREVIEW NOT FOR RESALE

IN THE SMALL Connecticut museum the smell of musty books is as strong as the heat outside. Hannah's things are in a blue cardboard box, loose and in no particular order.

She has a beautiful hand. I find some of her letters, an account book with a few entries, a sample of her tatting, a photograph of Punney in an elaborate tasselled chair.

Hannah in the same chair — her hair in braided loops, a small flowered bonnet on her head, and those intelligent eyes looking out.

Joseph in the same chair, looking vague.

Browned envelopes addressed to "Esquimaux Joe and Hannah." Clippings from the *Groton Standard*. "They toured Great Britain attracting great crowds ... in the hot crowded rooms Hannah caught cold and Johnny contracted pneumonia."

I keep looking for the diary. I ask, and to my enormous disappointment it turns out to be the nearly empty account book.

Punna 3 Dollars.

Hannah 4 Dollars.

punna boots 2 Dollar 70 Cents

8 socks 1 D. 20

July 23 1873 — Old Man give me 9 Dollars.

From Joe 5 Dollars.

She left so little evidence behind, unlike the men whose fate she helped discover. The members of the Franklin Expedition dragged boats behind them as they stumbled overland into cannibalism and death. They left behind a kid glove, a copy of *The Vicar of Wakefield*, a grass-weave cigar case, a pair of blue sunglasses in a tin case, a pair of calf-lined bedroom slippers, blue and white delftware teacups, a sixpence, dated 1831.

On Route 12 outside Groton, Connecticut, the Starr Cemetery lies under a blazing sun. (“Hot not hurt me now,” she wrote in one of her letters.) Circles of green lichen cover the tombstone.

Joseph Eberbing [sic]

Hannah, His Wife, Died Dec. 31, 1876

Aged 38 years.

I look for Johnny’s grave and can’t find it. Nearby, a small weathered tablet, some of its words illegible, indicates where Punney was buried.

PUNNA

adopted daughter

HANNAH (INNUIITS)

Born Igloodik, July 1866

Survivor of the Polaris

arctic Canada

Chas. Francis Hall

with nineteen others

ice floe, April 30

adrift on the

of 190 days

over 1200 miles

Born as Tookoolito, buried as Hannah, she learned English, dined with Queen Victoria, shook hands with Ulysses Grant. Survived nearly seven months on an ice floe only to die three years later in Groton at the age of thirty-eight.

There was the child who died in New York. Another in the Arctic. The last in Groton.

The lecture tour through New England.

And that image of her final days — alone, surrounded by furs, sewing for the women of Connecticut.

They brought Hannah's hair down from the third floor, a black braid looped around in a small box with a note attached: "Hannah Ebierbing's hair. She was an Eskimo interpreter for Charles Hall's Arctic Expedition."

When the curator stepped out I lifted the cellophane off the small white box and touched the braid — like dry grass (against my sandalled feet in the cemetery), a bit coarse and all the oil gone. Pure black, 110 years old. An odd way to stroke someone's head.

I imagined the shape of her life — the first meeting with a white man when she was twelve and dressed in fur. The next meeting when she was fifteen and so curious and clever that she caught the attention of a merchant, Mr. Bolby. He invited her and Joe to come back with him to England, where they stayed

two years, toured England and Scotland in native costume, dined with Queen Victoria in Buckingham Palace, officially got married. When they returned to Baffin Island Hannah brought dresses, hats, knitting needles, tea.

And then the next meeting, the most important one of all. “I heard a soft, sweet voice say, ‘Good morning, sir.’ The tone in which it was spoken — musical, lively, and varied — instantly told me that a lady of refinement was there greeting me. I was astonished ...” She stood in the doorway of Charles Hall’s cabin on board a whaler, dressed incredibly in “a crinoline, heavy flounces, an attenuated toga, and an immensely expanded ‘kiss-me-quick’ bonnet.”

A few days later he returned the visit. They sat in her igloo, she brewed tea over an oil lamp and they shared the same cup because she had only one.

Hall was the key influence in her life, the one who took her south, “employed” her as translator, loved her, he said, as a daughter. An American eccentric, a mystical dreamer who rhapsodized about God and fell in love with the north, he had thrown over his life as an engraver in Cincinnati (daughter and pregnant wife) and begun to train for the Arctic in the late 1850s. He met Hannah in 1860 and spent the next two years living and travelling with her and Joe.

Seeing a white circle of frostbite on his face, she instantly applied her warm hand. Sensing how cold he was in the igloo, she took his frozen feet and pressed them against her naked side. When he set off on an expedition and failed to return, she climbed a hill day after day to look for him. And when he finally got back, “She gave me one look, and then the face I beheld was buried in hands trembling with excitement.”

Hannah remained loyal to Hall until he died his bizarre death ten years later.

Flipping pages in the middle of the night — “a kind of hopeless anguish in the measured breathing of the wild creatures” — I think again of the movie *Bye Bye Brazil*, in which a small and dusty troupe of circus performers wanders the back roads of Brazil. Under a tent, a magician makes it snow on hot, delighted, upturned faces.

Hannah’s face. Wide, strong features; neat hair pulled back; throat with its tidy collar and brooch; arresting eyes. Hannah was real snow. “In hot furs in hot rooms” she was the memory of it falling and the loneliness of its melting.

In 1862, in a sad migration, Hannah, Joe and the baby, Johnny, went south with Hall. He looked after them, put them on exhibit at Barnum’s Museum in New York for a week. They were so popular they stayed two. They spent another two weeks on view at Cotting and Guay’s Aquarial Gardens in Boston. And they travelled on his lecture tour to Providence, New Haven, Norwich, Hartford, Hudson, Elmira.

Lecture on Life Among the Esquimaux, by C.F. Hall Esq., lately returned from his Explorations in the ICY NORTH, bringing with him specimens of the Native Tribes, and their Dogs. The Esquimaux Family Consists of E-BIER-BING (MAN), TUK-OO-LI-TO (WOMAN), TUK-ER-LIK-E-TA (CHILD) dressed in full NATIVE COSTUME, attended by their FAITHFUL DOG, BAR-BE-KARK, and exhibiting some of their Hunting Implements.

Usually, partway through his lecture, Hall brought them out to gasps from the audience, who plied them with questions while they stood on stage with fish spears, dog harnesses, bows and arrows. Hannah was a favourite: her soft voice, her good English.

The New York Herald claimed they “created quite a sensation.”

Five months later they were ill, the baby seriously so. Another month and Hall was writing, “The loss was great to both of them, but to the mother it was a terrible blow. For several days after its death she was unconscious, and for a part of the time delirious. When she began to recover from this state she expressed a longing desire to die, and be with her lost Tuk-er-lik-e-ta.”

The baby had died in New York at the age of eighteen months.

Only a few clues appear in the smeared, crossed out, tortured yet beautiful handwriting: she spent the first summer in the United States looking for cool breezes, she had tremendous affection for Sarah Budington — the whaling captain’s wife who nursed them when they were sick — she brooded for years about Johnny’s death, and, at least during her first stay in the south, she wanted to go home. “I wish this. Come home again this winter sometime.”

Her words wander over the page. “I sometime down Hearted and worry, and worry, poor my little Johnny I lost ... I like to have you take care my Johnny things till I come back. I know you do and no use cry. And cry mother than little Johnny. Cry an cry.”

Some weeks after Johnny’s death, Hannah “collected all his playthings and put them upon his grave. Visiting the spot some time after, she found that one article, a gaily painted little tin pail, had been taken away, and her grief was severe at the discovery.”

Moved by their unhappiness, Sidney Budington, the whaling captain, offered to take them home on his next voyage. When Hall found out, he was enraged. “I trust neither I nor the Esquimaux will ever trouble your house again.” *His Eskimos*, after all.

He moved them into furnished rooms in New York, and from there Hannah wrote to Sarah Budington. “I been very hard time live New York ... no like black eyes dark face and fat face. All time sick. Two winter I live New York sick. I no like this city.”

In the spring of 1864, finally tired of his efforts to raise money for a more elaborate expedition, Hall booked passage for himself and the Inuit on a whaler. Before leaving he spoke to the Long Island Historical Society. Dressed in sealskins, Hannah and Joe sat behind him.

I’m struck by how neat Hannah’s writing is sometimes, how crazily it veers over the page other times. She must have been writing when sick, or unsupervised — or sad.

“So good to me, so good to John, I think you, I loves my little John, I think him very much, some time you two. I never forget you. Thank you all things. Hannah.” She signs her name variously Hannah, Hannah-li-to, Tookoo-li-to.

On July 16th, 1864 her writing is different again — blown across the page with huge gaps in the middle, and signed Tookoolito. She is back in the north.

When they returned it was not to their own people around Frobisher Bay but to Hall’s destination hundreds of miles distant, at the northern end of Hudson Bay. Making his headquarters near Wager Bay and almost always accompanied by Joe and Hannah, Hall spent the next five years in arduous and unsuccessful attempts to find survivors of the Franklin Expedition. In 1865 Hannah gave birth a second time. Hall named the child King William after the island they were trying to reach.

King William’s life was even shorter than Johnny’s. At seven months he fell ill. Hall tried his medicines and they had no

effect. One of the party then assumed the role of shaman and pointedly instructed Hannah to stop using white man's medicines, and to adhere to all taboos.

As Hannah watched her child die, Hall pressed his medicines upon her, the shaman his cures. The baby got weaker and weaker. Desperate to save him, she finally tried an old Inuit remedy for a very sick child and gave him away to another couple. He died on May 13th, eight months old. For an hour Hannah carried him in her arms before finally being persuaded to give him up.

In 1865 the first flowers were seen on June 16th. Purple saxifrage. That summer — the summer she was pregnant with King William — Hannah had pneumonia, and “raised blood direct from her lungs.”

Joe smelled snow. He cut through it with a knife, “repeatedly smelling the snow until he satisfied himself that the seal had been there within a short time.” He scraped down to the icy crust over the breathing hole, made a cut and waited. On a piece of fur, so as not to make a sound, he sat for hours. Waiting in silence on silence for a “softly-breathing noise beneath the snow.”

When King William died, Hannah dressed him in a suit made of young caribou fur, wrapped him in a caribou blanket tied with thongs, “having a loop in it to go over the neck of the mother, who must carry the corpse,” and climbed to the burial spot on a hill. She wouldn't wear her double jacket to protect herself from the storm, though “she had already borne for some days the inconvenience of wet feet; neither could her wet stockings be dried, nor the rips in her boots repaired ... for one year her husband and herself must be very careful what they should eat, and that the same be not raw.”

Earlier, the natives of Pelly Bay had given her two pairs of scissors, a cap-box and some shot that came from Ross's *Victory*, done up in the skin of a deer's heart. Omens of her little one's death, and her own broken heart.

Hall was not without charm. He writes about combing the hair of a little Inuit girl, hair that had never been combed before. "She had but little that was long, the back part from behind her ears having been cut short off on account of severe pains in her head. How patiently she submitted ... her hair was filled with moss, seal, and reindeer hairs, and many other things too numerous to call them all by name. Poor thing! Yet she was fat and beautiful."

It took an hour before he could draw the coarse end of a coarse comb through her hair.

"Her little fingers quickly braided a tag of hair on each side of her head. Then I gave her two brass rings (which is the fashion among the Eskimaux women) through which to draw the hair."

Hall's initial "uncontrollable joy" at being in the Arctic deteriorated after several winters into irritation and paranoia. In 1869 he returned south, taking Hannah, Joe, and Punney, the daughter they had adopted after King William's death. When Hall went north again it was for the last time.

In 1871 he embarked on his most ambitious and most doomed undertaking. Supplied with a crew and ship by the U.S. government, he set off for the North Pole — only to lose his life four months later. He fell suddenly and violently ill. Accusing his crew of having poisoned him, trusting no one but Hannah to prepare his food, he rallied briefly and then died.

He was buried on the morning of November 11th, 1871. Quiet, except for Hannah's sobbing.

The crew overwintered — fractious, unhappy, undecided about what to do. Ice prevented them from returning home that summer and they faced another winter in the same spot on the coast of Greenland.

On the night of October 12th, 1872, surrounded by icebergs and in the middle of a gale, the ship was “nipped” and thrown on its side. Some of the crew scrambled overboard while others threw down supplies. Hannah was on the ice hauling boxes away from the open water when the ice exploded and the ship broke free. Blown by the wind, it swung out to sea leaving Joe, Hannah, Punney and sixteen others stranded.

For seven months they drifted south. In his diary, *Wonderful Drift on the Ice-Floe*, George Tyson noted how alarmed Hannah and Joe were for their own safety — not because they were poorly clothed and nearly starving, but because of “the look out of the men’s eyes.” Joe redoubled his efforts to get seal.

On March 12th, as they approached warmer waters, the floe shattered into hundreds of pieces. What remained was a chunk seventy-five by a hundred yards. Piling into a boat designed for at most eight people, they all made their way twenty miles to a larger piece of ice. On April 5th that piece shattered directly underneath them, splitting an igloo in two. So little ice remained that it was impossible to lie down. Again they took to the boat and found a larger floe.

“April 22nd ... Fearful thoughts go through my brain,” wrote Tyson, “as I look at these eighteen souls, without a mouthful to eat. Meyers is actually starving. He cannot last long in this state. Joe has been off on the soft mushy ice a little way, but cannot see anything. We ate some dried skin this morning that had been tanned and saved for clothing, tough and difficult to sever with the teeth.”

Washed over by waves, they huddled on each piece of ice until able to move to one slightly larger.

On April 30th, at five in the morning, a steamer spotted them through the Labrador fog. The crew of the sealer *Tigress*, out of Conception Bay, Newfoundland, “got out on our bit of ice and peeped curiously into the dirty pans we had used over our blubber fire. We had been making soup out of the blood and entrails of a last little seal. They soon saw enough to convince them that we were in sore need.”

The survivors had drifted over 1,200 miles, the longest drift in history. A photograph taken in St. John’s, Newfoundland, shows them in black suits and ties, Hannah in a black bonnet, all posed around their tiny boat against a backdrop of icicles. Two years later Punney was dead at the age of nine, her health broken by the long ordeal. The following year Hannah died from tuberculosis. Consumption, they called it; the body consumed the way ice is consumed.

After the ice floe Hannah never went north again. All the survivors were taken back to the United States. They appeared before a government commission investigating Hall’s death. When Hannah was questioned — she wept.

“Were you with him when he died?” she was asked.

“Capt. Budington called me in the morning; he said ‘Capt. Hall very near dying; most dead.’ Then I got up and go see; his breath gone. (Joe and Hannah much affected). It was very hard at that time; our friend gone.”

With Joe and Punney she moved into a farmhouse in Groton bought for them by Hall with money borrowed from a patron. Joe worked as a carpenter, and at sea. Punney went to school. Hannah sewed. One resident remembered her sitting on the

floor chewing skins to soften them — feeling the north, and tasting it, but at a safe distance and with a full stomach.

Punney's death was the final blow. Writing to Sarah Budington, she said that Punney had been sick "34 todays," a description that captures the immediacy and eloquence of time running out.

The navy prepared an official account of the expedition. Its author, a Professor Nourse, wrote that only after finishing his report did he learn how strenuously Hannah and Joe objected to being called Eskimos. They were Inuit. Nourse attributed their aversion to a dislike of Greenland Eskimos; their racism, in other words, not his.

Hannah isn't even indexed. Tookoolito — see Ebierbing. And under Ebierbing — only Joe.

Winner of the Edna Staebler Award for Creative Non-Fiction

Praise for The Only Snow in Havana

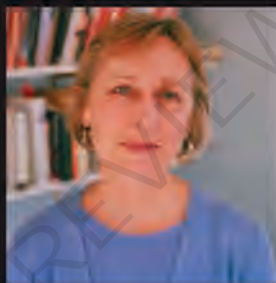
“Imaginary, inventive, filled with its own light in rather a similar way to an Impressionist painting. It has a unique gleaming quality.” — George Woodcock

“The writing is a constant joy, alive with simple images that strike to the heart, a clarity of expression that is like clean air, observations that stop on the page. The book floats in the mind after it is read, like poetry.” — *Canadian Book Review Annual*

“Through Elizabeth Hay, a unique and provocative intensity is brought to bear ... She is exploring aspects of character not being explored by others, and the results are both wonderful and haunting. Her voice is one we have waited for — and here it is.”

— Timothy Findley

From settings as diverse as Yellowknife, Mexico City, New York, and Havana, Elizabeth Hay writes about the idea of being Canadian — what it means, who we are, how we act, how we live — and compares it to the worlds that surround her. In carefully chosen and evoked detail, she draws together the disparate locations by their connections to the history of the early Canadian fur trade and our hearty adoration of snow. She writes of the heart of this country, of a people that live on the brink of identity. Blending memoir, biography, travel writing, and history, Elizabeth Hay's early style illuminates the talent that would lead to her 2007 win of the Scotiabank Giller Prize.



ELIZABETH HAY was born in Owen Sound, Ontario. Hay has worked as a CBC broadcaster in Yellowknife, Winnipeg, and Toronto; and as an author, writing in Mexico, New York, and Ottawa. She has been nominated for the Governor General's Literary Award twice: in 1997 for *Small Change*, a collection of short stories, and in 2003 for *Garbo Laughs*, a novel. She is the 2002 recipient of the Marian Engel Award, recognizing her illustrious body of work, and is the winner of the 2007 Scotiabank Giller Prize for her novel *Late Nights on Air*.

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