IN SEARCH OF A STAR: A KENTUCKY CLAY GOES TO THE ARCTIC

Lindsey Apple

In the spring of 1880, the prosecuting attorney of Louisville shocked the city by announcing that he would resign his elected office to join Henry Howgate on an expedition to the Arctic. A rising star in the rough-and-tumble politics of Kentucky's largest city, he had won the office in a hard-fought campaign. He had shown considerable political energy, a quick wit, and oratorical ability in overcoming campaign rhetoric attacking his family and its prominence. Charles D. Jacob, the mayor of Louisville, was surprised at the announcement and perhaps a little embarrassed since he had helped the young man, his nephew, in the 1878 canvass. No doubt his law partners and associates, such as Basil Duke, A.E. Richards, and John Baskin, were equally surprised. The young man had shown remarkable talent as a criminal lawyer, reminiscent of another famous Kentuckian to whom he was frequently compared. His mother was aghast. She thought he was throwing away his career, his life, and his soul as well.

The young man was not to be deterred. He intended to join Henry Howgate in an effort to establish a permanent colony on Lady Franklin Bay and to explore the Arctic. Ambitious, restless, and perhaps reckless as well, he was in search of manly adventure, fame, and fortune. But what role could a slightly built, inexperienced landlubber from Kentucky play on an Arctic expedition? Why would a young man with a bright future in law and politics want to go to the Arctic in the first place? The answers to these questions reveal a great deal about nineteenth-century Arctic exploration and about the burdens carried

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by young men bearing the names of great men.

The prosecuting attorney turned Arctic explorer was the grandson of the Great Compromiser, the Kentucky statesman Henry Clay. Born Henry Independence Clay, but called Harry to distinguish him from the other Henrys in the family, he was compared, favorably or otherwise, to his grandfather from childhood. His uncle, Henry Clay, Jr., wrote in his diary, "How difficult it is for a young tree to grow in the shade of an aged oak!"[1] Many descendants of famous men—Adamses, Roosevelts, Kennedys, and, closer to Kentucky, the Breckinridges—have faced the same dilemma to a degree. Descendants of successful men are expected to succeed. If they fail, they are accused of squandering their birthrights. The path to success, however, is filled with charges of unfair advantage based on the family name. The Great Compromiser cast a long shadow. One of the charges made when Harry Clay first ran for prosecuting attorney in 1876 was that he had no qualifications for office, only ambition and a famous name to exploit.[2] In the courts where he practiced his profession, he always competed against a second opponent, his own grandfather, because everyone watched and compared. Wherever he turned, there were comparisons. They followed him to his grave.[3]

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1 Quoted in Clement Eaton, *Henry Clay and the Art of American Politics* (Boston, 1957), 162. Harry Clay was born aboard the USS *Independence* because his father, James B. Clay, was the chargé d'affaires in Portugal at the time of his birth. Given family ambitions, it is possible that the site was chosen to assure his eligibility for the presidency.

2 *Louisville Ledger*, 25 July 1876.

3 Jefferson County Circuit Court, Case # 10245 *Commonwealth v. Andrew Wepler*, 6 October 1884; *Louisville Commercial*, 23 September 1884, 30 September 1884; *Louisville Courier-Journal*, 23 September 1884 (hereafter *Courier-Journal*); See eulogy by General Basil Duke in *Courier-Journal*, 28 September 1884. Harry Clay was shot to death by city councilman Andy Wepler, a saloonkeeper. The defense made the issue one of class, arguing that Wepler was a German saloonkeeper charged with killing a member of a prominent family. The same arguments were made immediately after the trial when some Louisville leaders sought a pardon for Wepler from Governor J. Proctor Knott. See J. Proctor Knott, Kentucky Department of Libraries and Archives, Frankfort, Kentucky, Petitions for Pardons, Remissions and Respites, June 1885, folder 508. The following letters are from this file collection. T. L. Burnett, the Louisville city attorney, argued that Wepler was persecuted because he was a barkeep. T. L. Burnett to J. Proctor Knott, 26 June 1885. P.B. Muir, a Louisville attorney, wrote, "The great name of Clay had undue influence upon the trial." P.B. Muir to J. Proctor Knott, 26 June 1885. Edward Hughes,

The pressure from within the family was as great as that from without. The years since Henry Clay's death in 1852 had not been kind to the Clays. The Civil War divided the family, as it had many families. Harry's father, James B. Clay, was a southern sympathizer. In an attempt to leave Kentucky to join Confederate forces, he was captured by Home Guards and marched through Lexington to the derision of former friends and neighbors. James Clay went into exile in Canada, but Harry's mother, Susan Mariah Jacob Clay, remained at Ashland where Yankees, Rebels, and disease threatened her family. She buried three children, victims of typhoid fever, before going to Canada where her husband was dying of tuberculosis. After the war, she was forced to sell the Clay ancestral home, Ashland, and lost a large portion of her father's sizable legacy as well.[4]

Susan M. Clay developed a siege mentality about her family. Bright, cultured, optimistic, and ambitious before the war, tragedy, humiliation, and financial reversals left her pondering what might have been. She resented the loss of prominence. She had suffered the scorn of Lexington's Unionist citizens during the war, and she believed, not without reason, that many in Lexington secretly enjoyed the losses she had suffered.[5] Because of her own discomfiture, Susan

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chief of the Louisville Fire Department, wrote, "I am well aware that it will require courage to do this [pardon Wepler], courage of no mean order; for a descendant of a great family is on one side, and an ignorant unfortunate German without family or fortune on the other." Edward Hughes to J. Proctor Knott, 26 June 1885.

4 Elizabeth Clay Blanford, interview by author, 7 June 1984 (hereafter Blandford interview). Mrs. Blanford, the niece of Harry Clay, has given me access to the family papers as well as the benefit of her memory. Although her interpretations often arise from a commitment to the family similar to that of her uncle, the facts have been proved accurate through other sources. Susan M. Clay blamed her brother, Charles D. Jacob, for mismanaging her estate. John Jacob, their father, had left an estate in trust for his children. Known for poor financial management as mayor of Louisville, Charles D. Jacob bares some responsibility for Mrs. Clay's financial reversals, but her own impatience certainly contributed to the problem. Against the advice of another brother, Thomas Prather Jacob, she sold property that eventually recovered its value. The hard feelings within the family added an interesting dimension to Louisville politics in the period from 1876 to 1884. See also Susan M. Clay to Harry Clay, 24 September 1873, Thomas J. Clay Papers, box 46, folder 1, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress (hereafter Thomas J. Clay Papers).

5 Blanford interview. Three generations of Clays believed Lexington's gentry treated them unfairly.

M. Clay trained her children in a rigid system of values and responsibilities. The families of great men, she claimed, often suffered from the slights and petty jealousies of lesser men. She taught her children to hold their heads high, have confidence in their name, and live to the standards of gentlemen. She frequently used Henry Clay, dead long enough for any blemishes to have faded, as an example to her sons. Henry Clay would have been president if not for rumors and falsehoods spread by jealous or small-minded men. They were privileged to bear his name. They had a noble heritage and a calling to serve their nation as he had served it. But there were also responsibilities attached to the name. Her sons learned the principles of noblesse oblige. Honor, manliness, and duty were required of them all. Their primary duty, however, was to restore the fame and fortune of the family. "The Clay star," she wrote one son, "is not in the ascendancy just now." Implicit in the statement was the belief that it should be, would be some day, and that it was the duty of every member of the family to see that ascendancy achieved.[6]

The death of another son, John, in 1872 increased the burden of family responsibility for the rest, and for Susan M. Clay the importance of the responsibility was too great to leave to chance. She constantly recalled to Harry the need to pursue his goals diligently. She instructed, corrected, and severely scolded all her sons into their middle age. She frequently accused Harry of extravagance, procrastination, and lack of perseverance. She railed continuously against drinking and gambling, urged manliness, and encouraged active Christianity.[7]

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6 Susan M. Clay to Charles Clay, 24 December 1901, Susan Clay Sawitzky Papers (hereafter SCS Papers). Susan Clay Sawitzky was the sister of Elizabeth Blandford. She willed the papers in her possession to Mrs. Blandford who has allowed the author unlimited access.

7 On one occasion she wrote to Harry saying God had told her not to scold him. Then she proceeded to scold him: "Your fault my son is I fear a want of stability and perseverance. You must acquire both or you will never succeed—and remember the old adage-'a rolling stone gathers no moss'—Don't lose courage. Be a man and a Christian and persevere in well doing." Susan M. Clay to Harry Clay, 24 September 1873, Thomas J. Clay Papers, box 46, folder 1. In another letter she wrote "The love of drink and extravagance is the Scylls [*sic*] and Charybdis of the Clay family and I have seen many fair young lives wrecked upon them." Susan M. Clay to Harry Clay, 3 October

Given such pressures, a trip to the Arctic was not only a means of fulfilling responsibility to the family but a way of escaping it. Like most sons, Harry Clay accepted some of his mother's advice but not all of it, and like most mothers, Susan M. Clay knew her son rather well. He felt keenly the obligation to restore family fame and fortune and worked diligently at appearing manly. However, he did not avoid drinking or gambling (though doing neither well, he should have heeded his mother's advice), remained only nominally Christian, and he refused to cancel his trip to the Arctic.

Making a fortune seemed uppermost in Harry Clay's mind. Educated at Washington and Lee, he studied law with General Basil Duke after the Civil War. He then headed west, purchased nearly a thousand acres of land in partnership with his brother John, and opened a law office in San Francisco. When John died in 1873, he sold the land and closed his law office. He toyed with the idea of pursuing law or other careers in Chicago, St. Louis, Louisville, and even England. In a period of three years he practiced law in Denver, Provo, and St. Louis before returning to Louisville.[8]

Clay had learned other lessons as well. He practiced criminal law and began signing his name "H. Clay" as his grandfather had done. His oratorical style and mannerisms seemed patterned after those of his grandfather.[9] He also harbored political ambitions. From Denver he wrote to his mother that while the city was dominated by Republicans, a fledgling Democratic party perhaps offered the means by which "my political ambitions will be gratified."[10] He did not stay in Denver long enough to find out. Back in Louisville, he barely had time to establish residency before he ran for prosecuting attorney in 1876.

1876, ibid., box 46, folder 2.

8 See letters from Harry Clay to his mother in Thomas J. Clay Papers, box 46, folders 1 and 2, and in SCS Papers.

9 Ibid., box 61, folder 1, newspaper clipping, box 61, folder 1; *Courier-Journal*, 6 April 1884.

10 Harry Clay to Susan M. Clay, 25 August 1873, Thomas J. Clay Papers, box 46, folder 1.

If Arctic travel was a test of Clay spunk, it was also a forceful statement regarding his manliness. Harry Clay's political opponents frequently touted their war records and his lack of one. Like young men of any generation too young to fight in the last war, he and other men of the 1870s and 1880s seemed intent upon appearing manly. Others have suggested a variety of causes, but the Victorian era emphasized masculinity and feared the loss of it.[11] Families which practiced southern values accepted that code of conduct easily; the Clays believed in it even more so.

Harry Clay took his manliness very seriously. He had two brothers in the U. S. Army, a nineteenth-century bastion of the cult of manliness, and one, Thomas J. Clay, served in the Apache campaign with General Nelson Miles and Leonard Wood, the very symbols of military masculinity.[12] Harry Clay was much smaller and more frail than his brothers. Small-boned, only one hundred thirty pounds, and of delicate features, he did not present a picture of robust masculinity. Clay seemed compelled, however, to present as masculine an image as possible. He talked a great deal about honor, honesty, and valor, and, in fairness, sought them as successfully as most men. He took a very aggressive stance in his campaign of 1876, accusing his opponent, Mike Boland, of sacrificing principle for political office, virtually inviting a challenge. When called a windbag from the audience, he suggested that he was willing to back his words with action, though he made no effort to do so.[13] His words sounded bold, noble, and principled, but there was a hollowness to them. In Greenland, he surprised himself by his ability to withstand the cold and to trek for miles through heavy snow as easily as the natives. He also took chances he should not have taken. On a hunting expedition alone, which he took against the advice of Greenlanders, the ice broke

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11 E. Anthony Rotundo, "Learning about Manhood: Gender Ideas and the Middle-Class Family in Nineteenth Century America" in J. A. Mangan and James Walvin, eds., *Manliness and Morality: Middle-class Masculinity in Britain and America, 1800-1940* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), 35-51.

12 Donald J. Morzek, "The Habit of Victory: The American Military and the Cult of Manliness," in Mangan and Walvin, *Manliness and Morality*, 228.

13 *Louisville Ledger*, 25 July 1876.

on the trail behind him, nearly leaving him stranded without provisions.[14] Certainly, his trip to the Arctic was an opportunity to prove his manliness to his constituents and to himself.

Clay's intellectual curiosity provided another reason for his excitement. Arctic exploration received enthusiastic support in the late 1870s across the United States and Europe. A special International Meteorological Congress, meeting in Hamburg, Germany, in October 1879, urged the participating nations to establish eight base stations for exploration of the Arctic beginning in 1881. This would be the origins of the International Polar Year. A second conference delayed the plan for a year, but thoughts of a new frontier captured the public imagination. In an age of expansionism each nation wanted to get to the Pole first and would-be pioneers played the nationalism card to tempt Congress into funding their proposals. Harry shared that enthusiasm. Probably more suited to a scholarly career anyway, he read widely, making himself familiar with the history of Arctic exploration, theories about Arctic phenomena, and the plant and animal life of Greenland. He studied the ships that had gone into the Arctic region, kept notes on the commanding officers and their crews, and detailed the successes and the reasons for failure of each expedition. He studied the geography of the region carefully and corresponded with authorities regarding Arctic phenomena, agreeing to make observations about some theories.[15]

The greatest obstacle to Clay's decision was the opposition of his mother. She argued that he was throwing away a promising career for a reckless idea. She complained about his lack of perseverance. It was "a characteristic of your father's family to be in the beginning too sanguine, then too despondant [*sic*]... you start out viewing every thing through rose colored glasses and when the glare and the heat and the

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14 Harry Clay Diaries; undated letter from Harry Clay to Teetee Clay, his sister, SCS Papers; *Courier-Journal*, 7 November 1881.

15 John Edwards Caswell, *Arctic Frontiers: United States Explorations in the Far North* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956), 97; Susan M. Clay to Charles Clay, 16 May 1880, Thomas J. Clay Papers, box 46, folder 3; Harry Clay Notes, SCS Papers.

dust of the journey face you to put on green goggles."[16] She urged him to remain in Louisville where his career would "through energy and determination and courage and endurance" undoubtedly prove successful. Expeditions to the Arctic seemed always to end in death or broken health.[17]

Three weeks later she wrote to her son Charles that Harry was so headstrong that he paid no attention to her objections. But she was not finished. She turned from aggressive opposition to using her own fear and foreboding to convince him not to go. Having buried four of her ten children, no doubt her fear was real, but she was not above using it to inspire a sense of guilt. She had faced so much personal loss in her life, she complained, that she was not sure she could survive the worry associated with such a venture, much less the loss of another son. The obvious implication was that Harry was putting a burden on an already over-burdened mother.[18]

When Mrs. Clay realized she had not deterred her son, she turned to another issue. She prepared fourteen long letters and told Harry if he had any love for her, he would read them. As in so many human issues, the emotions defy a clear and consistent interpretation. Better defined as sermons than letters, they constituted a serious effort to save her son's soul. Borrowing heavily from the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer* and popular church writers, she urged upon him the necessity of a moral and Christian life. She also depended upon her own reading of the Old and New testaments, noting that because she had studied the Bible in more depth than he had, she wanted to draw his attention to "God's merciful plan for man's salvation." She had, she said, "hurriedly written" the letters from material she had gathered "for the benefit of all my dear children." "I meant them to be a sort of supplemental teaching to that of their childhood when they gathered around Mother to be taught the words of truth and life." She revealed her fears for his safety. "Now you are to leave me for years

16 Fragment of a letter from Susan M. Clay to Harry Clay, [n.d.], Thomas J. Clay Papers, box 45, folder 3

17 Susan M. Clay to Harry Clay, 26 April 1880, ibid., box 46, folder 3.

18 Susan M. Clay to Harry, 21 April 1880; Susan M. Clay to Charles Clay, 16 May 1880, ibid.

and perhaps we shall never meet again in this world." But the coup de grace was reserved until last. She reminded Harry that his brother John had died unbaptized and pleaded with him not to risk the same fate.[19]

Mrs. Clay's plea appears both heartfelt and calculating. She wanted Harry to cancel his plans, but she was also genuinely afraid. Her son refused to be drawn into a discussion of religion or family obligation. He mentioned once that such a trip would help his career when he returned but made no other defense. Harry Clay intended to go to the Arctic.[20]

Henry Howgate appointed Clay observer and secretary of the expedition. His letters expressed delight in Clay's desire to join his crew. Ironically, Howgate may have been most interested in the Clay name. Henry W. Howgate was an intriguing mixture of soldier, salesman, and hustler. A property and disbursing officer for the Signal Corps, he had been interested in the Arctic for many years. However, like many of the time, his enthusiasm far exceeded his knowledge or experience. When the House Committee on Naval Affairs in 1877 recommended an appropriation to send an expedition, Howgate decided to prepare his own plan to lead a party to the Arctic.[21]

Howgate's *Polar Colonization: Memorial to Congress and Action of Scientific and Commercial Associations* called for the establishment of a permanent colony at Lady Franklin Bay to facilitate polar exploration. A party of fifty men organized under military discipline would remain three years, then be replaced by another party. They would even take with them prefabricated structures to house the party, provisions, and equipment. More than half of Howgate's proposal, as the title implies, consisted of letters of support from scientific associations, Chambers of Commerce interested in the economic exploitation of the region, and persons of reputation but with little knowledge of Arctic exploration.[22] Though his plan called

19 Susan M. Clay to Harry Clay, [n.d.], ibid., box 46, folder 3. Her notes for the letters are also in the Thomas J. Clay Papers, box 46, folder 3.

20 Susan M. Clay to Harry Clay, 26 April 1880, ibid., box 43, folder 3.

21 Caswell, *Arctic Frontiers*, 89.

22 Henry E. Howgate, *Polar Colonization: Memorial to Congress and Action of*

for trained personnel, the inclusion of a grandson of a very famous American certainly would not hurt his cause in Congress.[23]

In early June 1880, Harry Clay's friends in Louisville saw him off with a rousing banquet as a show of support. Approximately thirty people attended. Most of them, including W.L Jackson, Judge Henry Stites, Judge A.J. Pope, Basil Duke, and John Baskin, were from Louisville's legal community. A series of toasts captured both the excitement and the amazement that he really intended to go to the Arctic. There was, as well, the inevitable reference to family. John W. McGee offered the following toast:

> Young Harry Clay; he will truly deserve the title of Discoverer when he finds a race of people who never heard of the fame of his ancestor.

Noticeably absent from the banquet was his uncle, Charles D. Jacob.[24]

Clay left Louisville to join Howgate in Washington around 10 June 1880. His enthusiasm exceeded or stifled his good judgement. The Howgate expedition was a disaster from the beginning. Howgate purchased a small steamer named the *Gulnare* and Congress authorized its use if the Navy declared it seaworthy. Howgate allegedly overhauled the vessel to assure its safety in Arctic waters, but the Navy refused to accept it. Clay was upset by the news but recovered his enthusiasm when Howgate sent him a telegram which read "Report Unfounded."[25] Evidently, he was not completely satisfied, however, because when he arrived in Washington he investigated further. Assured that the vessel was safe, the "sanguine" Clay chose to believe it. Later, in a speech delivered in Louisville he admitted in a humorous vein his own gullibility.[26]

Scientific and Commercial Associations (Washington, DC, 1877).

23 H.W. Howgate to Susan M. Clay, 6 July 1881, SCS Papers.

24 Thomas P. Jacob to John Jeremiah Jacob, 16 June 1880, Jacob-Johnson Papers, manuscript department, The Filson Club Historical Society, Louisville, Kentucky. The letter included a newspaper article from the *Courier- Journal*, 11 June 1880 giving details of the banquet.

25 *Courier-Journal*, 11 June 1880.

26 Harry Clay Notes, SCS Papers.

The *Gulnare* sailed in August 1880. The expedition would have been comic had it not been so serious. The 120-ton *Gulnare* proved anything but seaworthy. Storms damaged the ship before it reached Newfoundland. The prefabricated housing, lashed to the deck, was swept overboard, and the crew jettisoned other provisions to keep the *Gulnare* from sinking. The party spent three weeks at St. Johns, Newfoundland, making repairs, but the vessel suffered further damage on the voyage to Godhaven, Greenland. Harry noted in his diary that the *Gulnare* was storm-battered and disabled, "her bulwarks were all stove in, her sides were scarred and disfigured, and there was a hole in the starboard quarter through which a man could have crawled." The little ship, he noted, had fought an unequal battle with the deep. "Why we were not all sent to the bottom of the sea is a mystery that can only be accounted for upon the assumption of an [illegible] and protecting Providence."[27]

His descriptions of the crew were less sympathetic. They were a hard lot, harsh, independent, misfits to a man. There was not, he said, a Christian among them. Sundays passed like any other day of the week, and their behavior inspired no confidence.[28] Arctic adventure attracted such men. More than one expedition had difficulty maintaining discipline, but most commanding officers chose their personnel more carefully than Captain Howgate.

When the party reached Greenland, even Howgate had to admit the inadequacies of his ship. He aborted the mission and returned to the United States, intending to return the following year. Harry Clay, however, remained in Greenland along with Dr. Octave Pavy, the physician and naturalist on the expedition. They intended to study the plant and animal life and negotiate contracts to supply the returning party which they would join the following year.

The change from the rough-and-tumble world of Louisville politics to the long winter of Greenland seemed to suit Harry Clay. Establishing a base at a small island village about fifty miles from Upernavik called Ritenbenk, Clay and Pavy worked consistently on

27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.

their assigned tasks.[29] Clay kept notes detailing hourly temperature readings, observations on the plant and animal life, and accounts of their explorations. With the help of native guides they made a number of trips to remote Eskimo villages, islands along the coast, and into the interior of Greenland. Clay, however, was in a world of his own. He read widely from books borrowed from his new Danish friends and in his fine, delicate hand took volumes of notes. He walked alone thinking about the irony of his being in that place, pondering philosophical issues he had little time to consider at home.[30]

He was delighted to find himself physically capable of withstanding the temperature. In fact, he found the climate quite agreeable. Though some of his enthusiasm may be attributed to his desire to relieve the anxiety of his mother, he claimed in letters home that the climate was no worse than a cold Kentucky winter.[31] He wrote his sister that he had never been healthier and had gained about twelve pounds. He actually returned nearly twenty pounds heavier. Clay trekked through the snow proclaiming himself as fit for the arduous activities as anyone in the party. He expressed his own surprise that he could spend cold Greenland nights in a sleeping bag and walk miles to hunt ptarmigan and other game. In his notes he wrote that he lived "as innocently and as happily as I ever lived anywhere else in the world."[32]

Like other sportsmen of his era, Clay took little note of the need to preserve animal life. He bragged of killing six auks with one shot, and killed others because they were within range of his rifle. He also shot at a whale and at a polar bear, wounding them, but failing to complete the kill.[33]

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29 The name of the town is spelled differently from one source to another. David Brainard, a member of the Greely party, spelled it Ritenbenk. See Bessie Rowland James, ed., *Six Came Back, The Arctic Adventure of David L. Brainard* (Indianapolis, 1940). The Louisville newspapers spelled it Rittenbenk, Rittenhink, and Rittenbinck. In his notes Clay spelled it Ritenhink.

30 Harry Clay Diaries, SCS Papers.

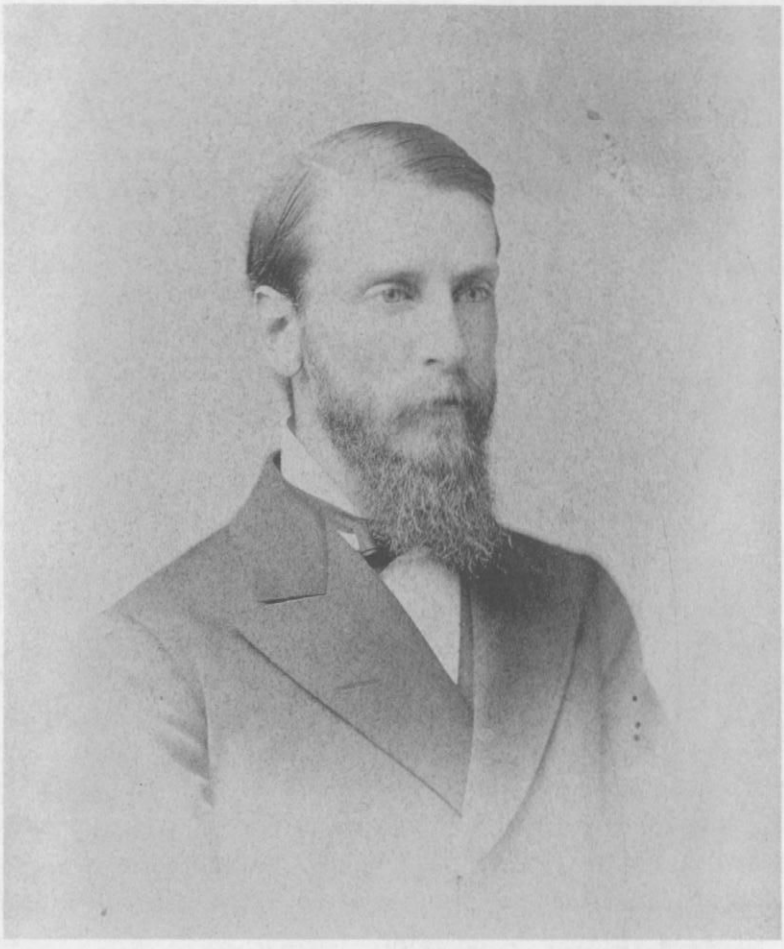
31 H.Clay to Lucretia Clay, [n.d.], SCS Papers.

32 H.Clay Diaries, SCS Papers.

33 Ibid.

Harry Clay
Susan Clay Sawitzky Papers, Courtesy of Mrs. Elizabeth Clay Blanford

Clay did not desert the other side of his personality while coping with the wilderness. He kept notes on Greenland's history, writing letters of twenty to forty pages to his mother and sister explaining the settlement by the Danes, the early conflicts with the Eskimos, and the Christianization of the native peoples which, according to him, led to peace and a most wonderful society. He studied the native language, making elaborate lists of Eskimo words compared to English and



Harry Clay

Susan Clay Sawitzky Papers, Courtesy of Mrs. Elizabeth Clay Blanford

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Latin words with similar meanings, and he recorded his observations of the people.

Clay was delighted by the company of the Danish residents in Greenland. Their hospitality stunned him to such a degree he considered it superior even to that of Kentuckians. Each community had a Danish commercial class. Americans called the semi-official head of that group the governor, at least in part out of appreciation for the friendliness of those officials for visitors. Through the long, dark winter Clay enjoyed conversation, a game of cards, and the governor's brandy with local businessmen and government officials. The governor's wife was equally charming. She introduced him to the polite company of a number of young women. Usually somewhat uncomfortable in the presence of women, Harry proved quite the dashing young gentleman in Greenland. Letters exchanged after his return to the United States indicate he discussed with them topics few Victorian gentlemen would broach with women in Kentucky. For example, they talked about the presidential campaign which he was missing, and one of the women later noted his affinity for political lost causes, a fact they would not have known had he not told them. They knew enough American history to know the importance of Henry Clay, but they no doubt learned of Harry's ancestry from Harry as well. They became familiar with his sense of obligation to his family and his political ambitions. One young woman, probably the wife of the governor, urged him a few years later to return to Greenland, then gave reasons why he probably would not:

> [Y]our political friends will employ all their powers of persuasion to induce you to stay at home. You certainly have family traditions to keep up as in Europe always an important cause and I understand very well that your friends want you to represent their opinions.[34]

His letters to his mother and sister reveal both his excitement and his naivete. Although he was aware of his mother's morbid concern, he could not contain his excitement at proving himself hearty and

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34 Fragment of a letter to Henry Clay, SCS Papers. There is no date, but four pages of the letter are intact.

robust against the elements. He loved to tell them of his long treks and successful hunts. He wrote of hunting seals, walruses, musk-oxen, polar bears, and a variety of fowl. He informed his sister that all the reports concerning the "ferociousness" of the polar bear were "nonsense." Upon his first encounter with a polar bear, the creature turned and ran like "a whipped dog." "They may fight when they are starved nearly to death or a female may fight in defense of her cubs, but they have no natural ferocity and are miserable cowards." Fortunately for him, he obviously encountered few polar bears during his Greenland experience.[35]

His naivete was also apparent in his descriptions of the people:

> I used to think that the French were the most polite people in the world, and the Kentuckians the most hospitable. Without meaning to detract in the slightest degree from the politeness of the one or the hospitality of the other, I must concede to the Danes of North Greenland the palm of excellence in both.[36]

Occasionally, Clay's thoughts turned to his own country and events there. The absence of the sun for nearly three months tempered his enthusiasm for Greenland and gave him time to think about home. He wrote letters asking about family and friends and economic and political conditions. In his diaries he recorded his own speculations on the presidential election. He believed Hancock would defeat Garfield, speculating incorrectly that Hancock would prove victorious by carrying Oregon or reconciling the "discordant factions of New York." In a long diary letter, his sister Lucretia wrote to tell him what really happened, but, indicating the isolation of the northern winters, he received the diary only as he returned to the United States.[37]

Clay proved remarkably open and accepting in his attitude toward the Eskimo people. In Kentucky, though inclined by position and upbringing to maintain the attitude of noblesse oblige, he raised the racial issue against his opponent in his campaigns for prosecuting

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35 Draft Letter to Teetee Clay, [n.d], SCS Papers.

36 Ibid.

37 Teetee Clay Diary, SCS Papers. His sister wrote nearly two hundred pages, shipping him small sections on a regular basis.

attorney.[38] He was not immune to racial stereotyping in Greenland either, but he developed a respect for the Eskimos because of their "noble savage" style of existence. He praised the Eskimos as hunters and lauded the women for the sharing of labor required to survive. He was also impressed by the sharing of all food among all villagers. The Eskimos were, he said, immensely curious people whose character had been "misrepresented, slandered and maligned." He attributed an excellent disposition to the influence of Christianity, another indication perhaps of western prejudices, but he suggested that they practiced the Christian virtues more effectively than many who were supposedly more civilized.[39] There was virtually no crime in Eskimo society, he proclaimed, though in his diary he wrote that he had been forced to dismiss a servant for stealing and vandalism.[40]

Clay's sense of noblesse oblige endeared him to the Eskimo people and them to him. He carried gumdrops for the children, whom he described as "delightfully behaved." His music box provided a treat for children and adults alike. He shared the bounty of his hunt and frequently his expedition provisions as well, exhibiting a democratic spirit he hardly would have expressed at home.[41] He criticized the Eskimo practice of throwing trash into the snow around their residences. All was well until the end of winter revealed a dwelling in the midst of a garbage heap. He also expressed some concern over a diet which included dog meat and seal blubber, but he later stated that he understood why the Eskimos ate such things even if they did not appeal to him.

Miscegenation did not bother him, at least in Greenland. A number of the political leaders and their wives traced their ancestors to the Eskimo and Danish communities. Clay claimed that these

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38 *Louisville Ledger*, 25 July 1876. Clay accused Boland of attending an African-American social function in order to win the black vote.

39 Harry Clay, Notes for a speech, SCS Papers. His comments were also reported in the major Louisville newspapers. See the *Louisville Commercial*, 24 November 1881; *Courier-Journal*, 1 January 1882. The *Louisville Post* opposed Arctic travel because of the heavy losses in lives and did not cover his speeches.

40 H. Clay Diaries, SCS Papers.

41 Fragment of a letter from Greenland after Harry's return. See also Margarethe Smith to Lucretia Clay, 13 July 1885, SCS Papers.

people had acquired the most endearing traits of both peoples. In describing the governor of one small town, Clay suggested that he had "all the politeness and hospitality of the one, combined with the good nature and peaceful disposition of the other."[42]

Henry Howgate did not return in 1881. Financial improprieties had caught up with him and he was running from the law. Lieutenant Adophus W. Greely led the expedition back to Godhaven in July 1881 aboard the *Proteus*. Clay joined the party, establishing a rapport with the New England-born Greely very quickly. He seemed delighted to be continuing the expedition he thought he had joined with Howgate. His diary described the conditions encountered in a confident and curious tone. Leaving Ritenbenk on 22 July the *Proteus* moved into Baffin Bay in a heavy fog. Arriving at Upernavik on 24 July, Clay enjoyed five days of hunting with Lieutenant Frederick Kislingbury and other members of the party. They killed more than four hundred auks in two trips. From Upernavik they sailed for Cape York. Further north Clay described floating icebergs and marvelled, along with the crew, that they had not encountered what was called the middle pack, a mass formed when the ice from Smith, Jones, and Lancaster sounds broke to move south. The crew saw it as a favorable sign; Harry worried that it meant the ice would block their journey further north. On the Cary Islands they found a depot left by an English expedition in 1875 and helped themselves to things they needed.

If Clay kept a diary on the trip from the Cary Islands to Fort Conger on Lady Franklin Bay, it has unfortunately disappeared; in recounting the journey later he praised the *Proteus* and Greely's party, describing them in glowing terms compared with the *Gulnare* and Howgate's company. The *Proteus* was "a different order of vessel from the poor little *Gulnare*."

> She was built expressly for ice navigation and was undoubtedly one of the staunchest ships that ever put into the Arctic Ocean . . . It was wonderful what hard knocks she could receive from the ice with apparent impunity. I have seen her run at full speed into ice thirty feet thick; I have seen her nipped between two heavy floes that would

42 Harry Clay, Notes, SCS Papers.

> have crushed the *Gulnare* like an egg shell, but she escaped unharmed.[43]

The men of the *Proteus* were more professional and more willing to participate in the work required of the party. They conducted themselves with more gentility. Sundays were observed as holy days, and Lieutenant Greely "never went to bed without reading his Bible."[44]

Despite his appreciation for Greely and his men, Clay did not remain with the Greely party. On the voyage north from Upernavik to Fort Conger, Clay informed Greely that he felt it best for the expedition that he resign his place. Given his career to that time, one is inclined to suggest that he had again become bored and was ready to try something new. His papers, however, suggest a different reason, one closely tied to his family background and to the eccentricities of nineteenth-century Arctic exploration.

Clay wrote to his mother on 29 July 1881 from the *Proteus* that he might leave the expedition for "certain private reasons" he could not disclose until later.[45] The private reasons revolved around a serious disagreement between Clay and Dr. Octave Pavy which had occurred several months before Greely arrived. In a detailed memoir dated 8 March 1881, Clay left his account of the events which led him to despise Pavy. Clay and Pavy had been in a small community named Umanak when a young boy, the child of the governor, Mr. Moldrup, became seriously ill. Pavy treated the child, but fevers resumed each evening. Moldrup repeatedly sought Dr. Pavy's help. Clay noted:

> Dr. Pavy told me that he was disgusted on account of the trouble they [the Moldrups] gave him about the child, and he was determined to cease [treatment] as soon as possible.

Pavy began to seek excuses to be away, even replacing Clay on a research trip. Clay took exception to Pavy's attitude. That sense of noblesse oblige learned in Kentucky required him to champion those

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43 Harry Clay, Memoir, [n.d.], SCS Papers.

44 Ibid.

45 Harry Clay to Susan M. Clay, 29 July 1881, Thomas J. Clay Papers, box 46, folder 1.

in need of help but unable to help themselves. Moreover, Dr. Pavy "having commenced [treatment]" he was "bound by every principle of professional honor, of morality and decency, to continue it." Pavy told Clay that he had medicine at Ritenbenk with which to treat the child, but he refused to go for it. Clay offered to go for the medicine himself, but Pavy refused to let him go. Pavy then reversed himself, offering to go to Ritenbenk, but he would only send the medicine back rather than return with it. Clay insisted that they had an obligation to help the people who had been so kind to them, but Pavy remained obstinate. When the child died, Clay was livid. In his twenty-one-page account of the incident, his sense of frustration, helplessness, then outrage grows with each page. He wrote as if his most sacred principles were being violated. He voiced his contempt several times, then concluded the account in resignation: "I repeat—I am thoroughly disgusted."[46]

Clay later told his family he became more incensed every time he saw Pavy. He implied that he might be inclined to challenge him if he remained in his presence. Acknowledging that Pavy was more important to the mission than he was, Clay chose to resign. Adolphus Greely accepted his resignation and in a letter expressed great respect for Clay's decision. Greely also wrote to Harry's sister Lucretia about the incident, praising Clay's sense of honor and again expressing his respect.[47]

When Greely wrote to Lucretia Clay he had even greater reason to sympathize with Clay's decision than when the resignation was

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46 Harry Clay, Memoir, 8 March 1881, SCS Papers. In a speech given later in Louisville, Harry indicated that his anger had diminished very little. "He [Pavy] has no particular love for me, nor I for him . . . He is an enthusiast, almost a monomaniac, upon the subject of arctic exploration, and to discover the North Pole, he would sacrifice everything he has on earth—friends, home, wife, life itself—he would consign his soul to perdition, if he believed in perdition." Harry Clay, Speech Notes, SCS Papers.

47 A.W. Greely to H. Clay, 16 August 1881, Thomas J. Clay Papers, box 46, folder 2. Greely noted Harry's sacrifice for the good of the expedition in a letter written to Lucretia after Harry's death in September 1884. David Brainard also noted the trouble between Clay and Pavy in his memoir. See James, *Six Came Back*, 23. A.L. Todd supports the contention of Clay and Greely that Clay's action involved a question of honor and constituted a significant sacrifice by Clay. See A.L. Todd, *Abandoned: The Story of the Greely Expedition 1881-1884* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), 21-22.

offered. Pavy proved to be a consistent problem for Greely throughout his expedition. Arctic travel seems to have exaggerated difficult personality traits. Arguments, mutinies, and petty disagreements were all too common on Arctic expeditions.[48] Perhaps such disagreements occurred because virtually any decision could mean life or death. Differences in personality may also have become more pronounced in such close living conditions. What appears most plausible in the case of Pavy, however, is that Arctic exploration attracted those more individualistic personalities, somewhat akin to what some have called a frontier mentality, who found it difficult to live and work with others as closely as the circumstances required.

Octave Pavy was born to Creole parents in Louisiana but spent most of his youth in France. Interested in Arctic exploration from an early age, he was to be a part of a French expedition until the Franco-Prussian War forced its cancellation in 1870. After serving in the French army during the war, he left a wife and son penniless to return to the United States. Another Arctic expedition fell through, and Pavy apparently suffered a mental breakdown, living for a time as a vagabond on the banks of the Mississippi River. Rehabilitated by a minister, Pavy married again, completed his medical training, and revived his interest in the Arctic, signing on as the physician with the Howgate expedition in 1880. In Greenland, Clay noted, without particular emphasis, several incidents of difficulties between Pavy and the natives before his own clash with him. Increasingly, Pavy avoided contact with Clay or the others, preferring to move from one settlement to another, staying briefly in each.

Joining Greely at Upernavik, his sociability did not improve. Pavy was not pleased to learn that Greely would command the expedition. He believed that he had superior knowledge of the Arctic and made this conviction apparent. During the mission he encouraged discontent created by Greely's abruptness and at one point plotted a mutiny to place Lieutenant Kislingbury and himself in command. Pavy also petulantly refused to renew his enlistment, conducted his duties

48 Caswell, *Arctic Frontiers*, 27, 51, 61. Caswell notes disagreements of varying intensity on expeditions led by Elisha Kane, George Tyson, and Charles F. Hall.

as expedition naturalist poorly, and threatened to withhold medical treatment if he did not get his way.[49] His first confrontation with Greely, however, was over Clay. He presented the commander with an ultimatum that he choose either Clay or himself to remain with the party. The incident might well have been a warning to Greely of what he could expect of Dr. Pavy.

Harry Clay relieved the tension by offering his resignation, and his Arctic adventure thus came to an end. His involvement with Arctic exploration, however, continued. He returned to Lexington, then to Louisville where he gave a series of lectures about his travels at the invitation of the Democratic Executive Committee. He later gave similar lectures in Frankfort and Lexington. Increasingly, he became the quotable authority in Louisville and something of a national celebrity as concern for the safety of the Greely party and the struggle over plans for its rescue captured national attention.

The Greely party remained at Fort Conger, exploring and conducting experiments. The party collected a great deal of information and journeyed farther north than any group to that time. Thick ice thwarted all attempts to resupply the party in the summer of 1882, but there was little cause for alarm because Greely had provisions for a second year. On 23 July 1883, however, the *Proteus*, the ship praised so highly by Harry Clay, was crushed by ice in an effort to reach Lady Franklin Bay, and the *Yantic*, a second supply ship, failed to cache provisions even though it sailed as far north as Littleton Island.[50]

Greely's party, complying with orders issued by the Signal Corps at the beginning of the expedition, broke camp and headed south on 10 August 1883. Fighting shifting ice, adverse currents, and the destruction of their boats, they travelled nearly two hundred and fifty miles before making winter camp on a neck of land halfway between Cape Sabine and Cocked Hat Island. Unable to cross Smith Sound, they struggled to survive until a rescue mission reached them.

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49 James, *Six Came Back*, 142, 153; Todd, *Abandoned*, 60-62, 89.

50 James, *Six Came Back*, 193; Caswell, *Arctic Frontiers*, 107.

Throughout Greely's ordeal Harry Clay had been involved in discussions about rescue efforts. In Washington, DC, during the winter of 1882 he called on General William Hazen, the chief signal officer, to express his concern for Greely and his men. The military was basing its plans on the ability of Greely's party to cross Smith Sound to Greenland. Clay tried to explain why he thought that would not be possible. He argued that the natural retreat for Greely's party was down the western shore from Conger to Cape Sabine. Hazen, however, believed the party would cross the ice to the eastern shore, so supplies would be left there. Clay claimed the supplies on the eastern side would be worthless if hard ice did not form. At best, air and water currents made the existence of hard ice anything but a certainty, particularly at that time of the year. Clay offered his advice and his services in an effort to relieve Greely's party.

Harry Clay was under no illusions about his chances of participating in a relief effort and pessimistic about being heard at all. The peacetime army was notorious for the size of officers' egos and the intrigue such vanity inspired. The Signal Corps staff, however, seemed particularly inclined to bicker and to protect their position. Secretary of War Robert Todd Lincoln found Arctic exploration a nuisance because it diverted efforts from his task of defeating the Indians in the west, and he disliked Adolphus Greely personally. Additionally, like Harry Clay, he carried the burden of a famous ancestor, but, unlike Clay, he resented anything that focused attention on him. On the other hand, General William Babcock Hazen, the chief signal officer, did encourage Arctic exploration and was a close friend of Greely, but he was highly egotistical and arrogant. He "preferred a fight to conciliation," frequently becoming deeply embroiled in disputes. He was also highly protective of his own territory. Investigation would later try to determine responsibility for the failure to relieve Greely, but there was more than enough blame to go around.[51]

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51 Harry Clay to Thomas J. Clay, 16 January 1884, Thomas J. Clay Papers, box 46, folder 6.

If Hazen squabbled with his fellow officers, he had only contempt for civilians, particularly those brazen enough to offer him advice. For a time Clay continued to correspond with Hazen, but on 20 May 1883, he published a major statement in the *Courier-Journal* arguing that the government plan was unsound and jeopardized the lives of Greely and his men. He also presented in the article a plan he believed would work.

That newspaper article had an ironic history of its own. On 21 October 1883 Greely's men discovered two caches of supplies left by the *Proteus* before it sank. In one of the depots lemons were discovered wrapped in an old newspaper. The headline, "Lady Franklin Bay Expedition," caught the eye of one of the men. The lemons were wrapped in a copy of the *Courier-Journal* containing Harry Clay's article. Pleased by the efforts of his former comrade, Greely immediately named the base on Cape Sabine Camp Clay in his honor. The party would await rescue at Camp Clay!

Back in Louisville Clay continued his efforts to influence relief planning. Frustrated by the lackadaisical efforts of the Signal Corps, however, Harry submitted his own rescue plan and a copy of the newspaper article in February 1884. His plan, obviously the effort of one who had studied the Arctic carefully, was extremely detailed. If Hazen had little respect for civilians, Clay had less for Hazen's knowledge of the Arctic, and it showed. Clay also sought the support of Kentucky's senator, J.C.S. Blackburn, and gave interviews with the *Courier-Journal* and the *New York Post*. General Hazen rejected his advice. In a letter to Clay, Hazen bragged that the military's plans were "sufficient against any calamity to Lieutenant Greely's party."[52]

General Hazen's letter to Harry Clay is a monument to military arrogance. The fate of the Greely party can only be described as a calamity and an example of military bungling. The *New York Evening*

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52 W.B. Hazen to Harry Clay, 21 February 1883, SCS Papers; A copy of Harry Clay's plan for the rescue of Greely's party can be found in the Thomas J. Clay Papers, box 46, folder 6; J.C.S. Blackburn to Harry Clay written on a letter from General William Hazen to J.C. Blackburn, 3 May 1883; J.C.S. Blackburn to H. Clay, 30 March 1882, SCS Papers; Harry Clay to Thomas J. Clay, 16 January 1883, Thomas J. Clay Papers, box 46, folder 6.

Post stated emphatically that if the advice of Harry Clay had been adopted not a life would have been lost. Instead, seventeen Americans and two native scouts died. Both Greely and David Brainard, two of the survivors, wrote letters to Clay after their rescue thanking him for his efforts and expressing confidence in his plan.[53]

Harry Clay, a slightly built, ambitious young Kentuckian, contributed little perhaps to the knowledge of one of the world's last frontiers, but his participation presents a clear picture of the enthusiasm, poor planning, and conflict that surrounded the earliest efforts in Arctic exploration. It also indicates the types of personalities drawn to such ventures and the difficulty of maintaining discipline. Certainly, the military could have been more open-minded as well. The loss of lives and subsequent charges of cannibalism against the six survivors increased opposition to Arctic exploration. Had General Hazen been less protective and defensive, a tragedy might have been averted and exploration continued at a faster pace.

From his perspective, Harry Clay went to the Arctic searching for the Clay star—prominence, fame, success. Attempting to turn his adventures into political success, Clay ran for the office of state representative from Louisville in August 1883. The icebergs of Louisville politics proved as dangerous as those of Smith Sound and Disco Bay. Or perhaps it was the Clay name and the sense of honor that went with it that proved treacherous. In September 1884 Harry Clay was shot and killed by Andy Wepler, a Louisville city councilman and saloonkeeper, allegedly over a four-dollar loan and a question of honor.[54]

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53 A copy of the *New York Post*, [n.d.] August 1884 article is in the Thomas J. Clay papers, box 46, folder 6. See also David Brainard to H. Clay, 11 August 1884 and A.W. Greely to H. Clay, [n.d.] in the Thomas J. Clay Papers.

54 A strong circumstantial case can be made that Clay's death was an episode in the development of the political machine of boss John Whallen. Clay had challenged Whallen publicly in the race for state representative. That, however, is another story.