

# One of the Best and Purest Men: Jerome J. Collins and the Jeannette Tragedy

BY KAREN DALY

Among the men who perished on the ill-fated 1881 Arctic expedition of the U.S.S. *Jeannette* was an Irish-American journalist and scientist, Jerome J. Collins. The *Jeannette* had sailed from San Francisco on a quest for the Northwest Passage, the long-sought sea route across North America joining the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. The voyage had been initiated and funded by *New York Herald* publisher, James Gordon Bennett, Jr., son of the legendary newspaperman. The younger Mr. Bennett hoped to reap reflected glory from discovery of the Passage and, not incidentally, get a thrilling exclusive story that would sell newspapers. The headlines, however, were ultimately tragic: the *Jeannette* was caught and crushed in the ice—and two-thirds of her crew drowned or otherwise died in the Arctic gloom.

As a civilian on the voyage, Jerome Collins had the roles of meteorologist and *Herald* reporter. He was a multi-talented and charming man with a restless intellect. Prominent among the nineteenth-century Irish in New York, he founded the military-style Fenian society, Clan na Gael, although his involvement in the Irish nationalist cause was not revealed in the publicity following his death.

This article looks at Collins' personality and final years as revealed through his newspaper columns and notes recovered from the Arctic. Additional sources include the *New York Herald's* extensive coverage of the *Jeannette* tragedy, and the transcripts of subsequent U.S. Navy and Congressional investigations of that unfortunate occurrence.

## COLLINS' EARLY LIFE

Jerome Collins was born in 1841 in Dunmanway, County Cork, where his father was a merchant and member of the town council. Educated by the Fathers of St. Vincent and show-



ing an aptitude for science, he was apprenticed at age sixteen to Cork's harbor engineer, Sir John Benson. Eventually, young Collins was named assistant engineer of the city, which recognized his service by inscribing his name on the North Gate Bridge.

Needing greater opportunity, however, Collins soon moved on. He went to England in 1864 where he took employment as a railroad surveyor in the Midlands. Arriving in New York in 1866, he worked initially for a railroad company, but soon switched to civil-engineering jobs that primarily dealt with reclaiming marshlands in New Jersey and New York. For a time he served as Street Commissioner for Hudson City, New Jersey.

In the 1860s Collins joined the Fenian Brotherhood in New York, where he found that

## Illustration:

A portrait engraving of Jerome Collins as meteorologist for the U.S.S. *Jeannette* and correspondent for the *New York Herald*. Courtesy of U.S. Naval Historical Center.

Roundtable member Karen Daly decided to learn more about Jerome Collins after finding an article about him in the library of the American Irish Historical Society. A native New Yorker, she is a book editor and reviewer.

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groups within the organization were fighting each other instead of concentrating efforts on their common cause. As an engineer, he believed that a revolutionary movement should be organized on

a more precise and focused basis, declaring that a debating society would never free Ireland. In June 1867, representatives of several Fenian groups met in a house on Hester Street in Manhattan to plot the kidnapping of a British prince.

The meeting resulted not in the kidnapping but, due in large measure to the influence of Collins, in formation of the oath-bound revolutionary organization, Clan na Gael (Family of the Irish). Collins found ready recruits for the secret organization from Irish workers in the

marshlands and, under the leadership of John Devoy, Clan na Gael became the most significant Irish nationalist organization in America. Devoy described Collins as “one of the best and purest men I ever knew...and no Irishman of his time had a finer intellect.”

#### THE NEW YORK HERALD

Collins began writing about science for the press, especially on meteorology and weather. In 1875, after joining the *New York Herald* as “Clerk of the Weather,” he pioneered in sending storm predictions to Europe. Though his work was based on careful study of storm patterns, many European readers who curiously blamed him for causing storms did not welcome his warnings. He achieved a measure of respect when he was invited to present a paper at the Meteorological

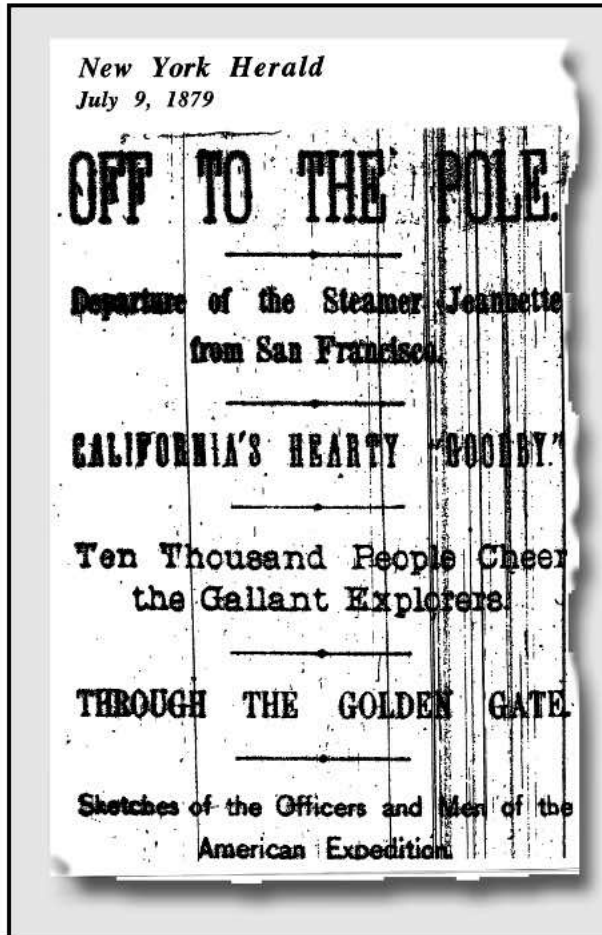
Congress in Paris in 1878. While there, he toured above the city in a helium balloon and was lavishly entertained by his hosts.

#### SPONSORSHIP OF THE JEANNETTE EXPEDITION

James Gordon Bennett, Jr., was not averse to paying for headline-making exploits. It was Bennett who dispatched Henry Stanley to Africa in search of the missing explorer, David Livingstone. Bennett, who had a lifelong interest in naval affairs and exploration, had sponsored one unsuccessful Arctic expedition in 1875. Bennett's investment in the *Jeannette* expedition would prove his last major effort to manufacture and pay for news. He had lobbied Congress to authorize the detailing of naval officers under a veteran arctic explorer, Lt. George Washington De Long. With De Long's guidance, he purchased a bark-rigged steamer yacht that had been a gunboat in the Royal Navy. Renamed *Jeannette*, she was outfitted at a Navy yard in San Francisco for her arctic voyage.

Jerome Collins fit most—but not all—of De Long's requirements for the crew: the men were to be strong, healthy, cheerful, literate, and unmarried. However, De Long wanted Norwegians, Swedes, and Danes. He gave specific orders against signing Irish, Scots, and English crew members. But, because of his direct appointment from James Gordon Bennett, Collins joined the *Jeannette's* company and was soon bound for the Arctic.

At time of sailing, Collins was thirty-eight years old, unmarried, tall and physically imposing and described by colleagues as being determined and self-possessed. In addition to science and writing, his talents and proclivities included sketching, music, and singing. On the voyage, he often sang the libretto from Gilbert & Sullivan's *H.M.S. Pinafore*, which had opened in London the previous year. His jovial personality and frequent punning would sometimes annoy shipmates, especially when the *Jeannette* was locked in ice. Throughout the expedition, it was understood that Collins and two other civilians on the expedition (a surgeon and a naturalist) would be subject to naval laws and discipline. Each of the three would have the status of a crew member or “man before the mast.”



*Illustrations: Departure of the Jeannette from San Francisco in July, 1879 was reported in detail by the Herald in its pages. Courtesy of Karen Daly.*

# ON THE PACIFIC

## Voyage of the Steamer Jeannette from San Francisco to Oonalaska.

### MAT DE MEER.

#### TEN THOUSAND PEOPLE CHEER THE GALLANT EXPLORERS

The *Herald* relentlessly covered every aspect of the *Jeannette's* voyage, trumpeting her departure from San Francisco on July 9, 1879. In his first dispatch from sea, Collins describes his thrill at seeing "masses of citizens cheering, ten-gun salutes" and tenderly captures the captain and his wife in a public good-bye kiss. Collins' characteristic humor comes through in some coy comments about seasickness, he being the most seriously affected. Of the Chinese cook, Ah Sam, he declares that his "conceptions are often superb in theory, but the very opposite in practice." Collins good-naturedly showed Ah Sam how to make coffee, but reports that the man goes back to his "abominations."

Collins' writing displays grace in describing an ocean swell looking like "slowly agitated blue mercury...so dense and sluggish were its rollings." His practical and scientific perspectives are displayed in assessing the *Jeannette's* engine capacity and propeller function. He brags about the quality of her spars and rigging and of the meticulous preparation for the voyage. In describing his small bunk, where he keeps an armory that included a double-barreled shotgun, rifles and revolvers, he notes eerily that, if compelled "to abandon our ship and take to dwelling on the ice, I will regret the comforts of this little 'dungeon.'" And he has the highest regard for his thirty-two comrades, the officers and men of the *Jeannette*.

Unfortunately, Collins' easy association with the *Jeannette* officers would be short-lived. Even before departure, De Long fomented tension in a press interview when he called the

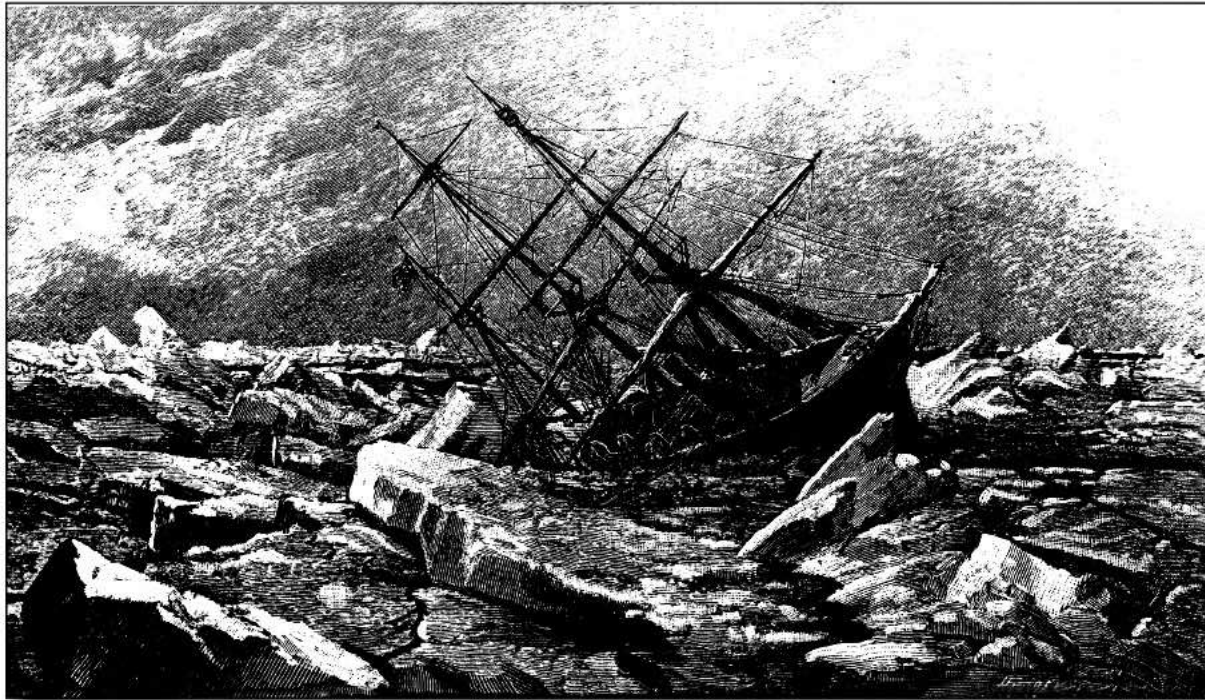
civilians on the voyage mere accessories. The second-in-command, chief engineer George W. Melville, might have harbored a dislike for newspapermen that dated to his Civil War experiences. Both officers were said to resent outsiders participating in what was destined to be a matter of glory to the U.S. Navy.

#### THE VOYAGE AND THE ICE

Initially the voyage of the *Jeannette* proceeded without incident. The crew adapted to its routine and to each other as she headed north. The ship had orders to patrol the Siberian coast for a missing Swedish vessel, the *Vega*. Later, a Navy inquiry would cite this delay, as well as her departure relatively late in the season, for her misfortune.

In early September 1879, two months into her voyage, the *Jeannette* got caught in pack ice. Unable to follow her own course for the next twenty-one months, she drifted helplessly northwest until she was stuck on the ice in the Arctic Ocean. While in the ice, De Long maintained discipline through strict routine and order. Aside from their duties maintaining the ship, the men hunted, exercised on the ice, played cards, read, and attended a weekly "Divine Service" conducted by the captain. The scientific work in which Collins was involved continued: meteorological and astronomical observations were made; natural specimens were taken; ice characteristics were studied.

However, Collins' relationships with the captain and the chief engineer deteriorated while the *Jeannette* was ice-bound. He and the captain waged a war of nerves and slights. De Long charged him with ignoring authority and, in



*Illustration: The breakup and sinking of the Jeannette in June, 1881 as rendered in an engraving of the period. The ship and its crew were held by pack ice in the Arctic Sea for almost two years. Courtesy of Karen Daby.*

December 1880, he officially relieved Collins of duty for disrespecting orders. Collins, in turn, claimed that DeLong prevented him from making meteorological observations and tampered with his papers. Some speculate that this rivalry stemmed from the fact that each man planned to write a book about the expedition. In fact, De Long's diary, edited and published posthumously by his wife, was a major source of public knowledge about what transpired on the *Jeannette*. Adding to the difficulties was the attitude of chief engineer Melville, who was particularly belligerent toward Collins. Melville constantly insulted him with "Irish" remarks, making his life even more difficult. If there is a particular incident, or exact source of Melville's antipathy, it is not apparent in the records of the *Jeannette* expedition.

At the end of 1880, despite the tension of nearly fifteen months of captivity in the ice, the crew observed the holidays with a Christmas entertainment. Declaring a need for fun, Collins created a lengthy tribute in light verse for every sailor except, of course, the officers. He praised their skills lavishly, engaged in good-natured teasing, and strained to rhyme proper names. The poem may be seen as a sign of bravado, hope, perhaps naivete—but it unquestionably was a

generous effort to cheer the men. Some lines from Collins' prologue illustrate the point:

*And though our efforts here may  
fail to reach  
The heights of comedy, yet they  
will teach  
Our audience that the bound  
Jeannette's good crew  
For Arctic dangers and the floe's  
worst jam  
Don't care a single continental damn.*

#### THE JEANNETTE SINKS

On June 12, 1881, pressure from the ice finally began to crush the *Jeannette*. Her crew unloaded provisions and equipment onto the ice pack. As the ship broke up and began to sink, the men began a trek hauling boats and supplies toward Siberia. They reached some unpopulated islands, naming one Bennett Island. In early September, the crew divided into three small boats and set out on the Arctic Sea in hope of reaching the Siberian coast. One boat capsized immediately and sank in a violent storm. In one of the last notes that Collins left, he describes the growing desperation of the crew following the storm and its effects: "I hope never to know a similar case of utter misery.

Wet by every sea, trembling with cold, hopeless except in the mercy of Almighty God, we sat jammed together for nearly 72 hours. I make no attempt to describe what we experienced....”

De Long and Melville commanded the surviving boats. Collins was in De Long’s party. Separated in the gale, the boats landed widely apart on a Siberian delta. The Melville party reached a native settlement. De Long’s party landed at an uninhabited place, though a settlement was some twenty-five miles away. Collins wrote: “When we sighted the low coast...we were five nights and six days in the boat, cold and wet. Even now a new trial of endurance had to be met....”

The new trial was that the men had to wade a mile and half in the cold shallow water to reach land. By then the crew was continually wet, frost-bitten, and exhausted—and although they still had food they were failing badly. By the end of September, however, the food was gone. Unable to catch fish or hunt, they began to dream about food. They also began show more extreme effects of the Arctic cold: in Collins’ note of September 30, 1881, he records simply: “Erichsen’s (a sailor) toes cut off from both feet.”

De Long sent his two strongest men, Swedish sailors, to look for help. Bidding them goodbye, Collins reportedly said “Remember me when you get to New York.” The men reached a settlement, but they were too exhausted to guide a rescue party back to De Long. Melville searched for DeLong’s party.

But by the end of October 1881 (two weeks after Jerome Collins’ fortieth birthday), when Melville found them, the remaining members of the De Long party were dead from exposure and starvation. DeLong’s diary reported that they suffered intensely, but faced death with calm.

Melville recovered the *Jeannette’s* official log and other records. Jerome Collins’ notes were found, but his larger diary, never located, was a subject of dispute. Melville even attempted to find the remains of *Jeannette’s* third boat that had disappeared in the storm. The Navy would honor Melville for his courage. In 1882, the Navy convened an investigation into the disaster and ordered the *Jeannette’s* dead to be retrieved, once again giving the *Herald* occasion for dramatic headlines as it covered the transport back to New York.



NEW YORK HONORS

After Melville found the deceased members of the DeLong party in 1881, he left them in place and returned to the United States. In 1883, following Navy orders, he went back to Siberia to retrieve the remains. Traveling through Russia and Germany, and sailing to New York, he did not return to the United States until early in 1884. Just as the *The Herald* reported on the *Jeannette’s* departure, it gave intense coverage to the funerals that followed. It reported the pomp and pageantry, the crowds, the displays of mourning along the route, and the floral arrangements.

A public memorial in New York City for the *Jeannette* victims was held on Washington’s

*Illustration: On February 24, 1884 the Herald published one of its last articles on memorial services for the crew of the Jeannette, reporting that the body of Jerome Collins would be buried in Ireland. Courtesy of Karen Daly.*

Birthday, 1884. With thousands of New Yorkers in attendance, the remains of the *Jeannette* dead were given a heroes' procession up Broadway, from the Battery past City Hall and over the Brooklyn Bridge to the Navy Yard. The paper reported that a "frightful human crush at the Bridge" was kept in check only by the "savoir faire" of the municipal police.

The *Jeannette* survivors, including Melville, marched in the procession, which was accompanied by the Marine Band and an artillery contingent. In honor of Jerome Collins, also marching were the Sixty-Ninth Regiment (where he had been a captain), the *New York Herald* Club, and hundreds of members of the Ancient Order of Hibernians. The procession was viewed by government officials including New York Mayor Franklin Edson, Brooklyn Mayor Seth Low, the Secretary of the Navy, a U.S. Senator, the Russian Consul, and Secretary of War Robert Lincoln. De Long's funeral was at Trinity Church, and his burial was at Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx.

#### COLLINS' FUNERAL

Jerome Collins' two brothers, Daniel, a physician who graduated from Bellevue Medical College, and Bernard, who followed him on the *Herald's* weather desk, remained with his body during the New York ceremonies. Angered by reports of Collins' mistreatment by DeLong and Melville, they removed the letters "U.S.N." from his coffin plate. (John Devoy heard similar stories from John P. Jackson, a *Herald* correspondent who had gone with Melville to retrieve the bodies from Siberia.)

Collins' funeral mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral on Fifth Avenue was a major event for Irish New York. Eulogized by his confessor as a "Martyr of Science," his coffin bore the Sixty-Ninth Regiment's "Irish flag of Irish silk" and a floral arrangement portraying the *Jeannette* sinking in the ice. Pallbearers included John Devoy, former Mayor William Grace, *Herald* colleagues, and other Irish Americans. His employer James Gordon Bennett, in whose service he had died, was not in attendance. Collins' body was returned to Ireland. Following a massive funeral in Cork, he was buried alongside family members in a graveyard near the village of Curraghkippane.

#### JEANNETTE INQUIRIES

The Navy Court of Inquiry that was to investigate the *Jeannette* tragedy had convened in 1882. It reviewed survivors' testimony, the captain's log-book, the *Jeannette's* records and transmissions, including DeLong's complaints about Jerome Collins. The Navy Court found that the *Jeannette* suffered a series of misfortunes in timing and inadequate speed. Outraged that Navy proceedings in the 1882 inquiry portrayed his brother as uncooperative, and seeking the truth about his clash with the officers, Dr. Daniel Collins, acting through his Minnesota Congressman, forced a hearing in the House of Representatives in April, 1884 to clear Collins' name and to pinpoint responsibility for the disaster. The hearing lasted a few weeks, and advocates for Collins and for the Navy questioned witnesses—but no judgment or finding was ever rendered.

The *Jeannette* story receded from the front pages of newspapers, as other explorers sought Arctic glory.

### For Further Reading

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Golway, Terry. *John Devoy and America's Fight for Irish Freedom* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998). This biography provides an excellent narrative on Clan na Gael politics, and Jerome Collins is discussed briefly in chapter six. Devoy's description of Collins used in this article is taken from an undated edition of the *Dublin Independent*.

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