

Title: **The Watkins Boys**

Author: Simon Courtauld

Publisher: Michael Russell UK

Website: michaelrussell@waitrose.com

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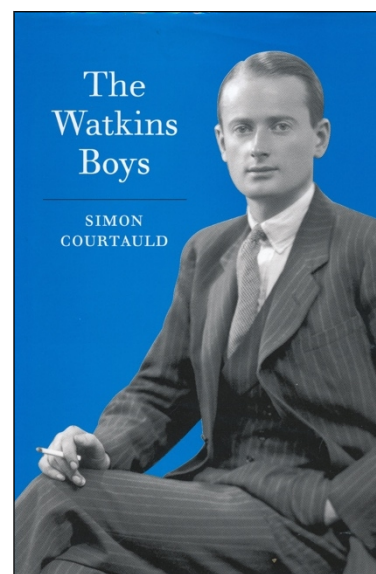
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Review: Paul Caffyn



In 1930 a charismatic young Cambridge undergraduate raised financial backing for an expedition of 13 equally young men to the Angmagssalik region of East Greenland with the principal aim of establishing weather stations both on the coast and on the Greenland icecap for a proposed trans-Atlantic commercial air route. It was called the British Arctic Air Route Expedition, or BAARE. The young bloke was leading his third Arctic expedition – Gino Watkins was only 23 years old.

Given a long history of disastrous British polar expeditions - the era of heroic failure when some or all of the participants died through ineptitude and/or poor planning – the outstanding success of BAARE was such a positive breath of fresh air to the British public, who were still suffering from the post war shortages and calamitous loss of British manhood from the First World War.

Simon Courtauld, nephew of August of the ‘stranded on the ice cap fame’, has written a long overdue book on seven of the key figures of BAARE, how they came to be invited to join this expedition and how their time in East Greenland so influenced the rest of their lives.

Following two preliminary chapters, the book summarizes the lives of six of the key members of BAARE who went on to lives of outstanding achievements; August Courtauld, Martin Lindsay, Quintin Riley, John Rymill, Jimmy Scott and Freddy Spencer Chapman; while the final chapter describes the charismatic leadership and short life (25 years) of Gino Watkins.

Publicity in the British media of the plight of August Courtauld, who was stranded at the ice cap weather station, 120 miles west of the coastal expedition base, significantly raised public attention of BAARE. Buried in his tent by winter snows, August Courtauld was totally reliant on his own resources for five months and, having left his shovel on the surface, was entombed in the ice cap for the last six weeks, with successive re-supply trips unable to find the buried tent. A three man relief attempt, led by Jimmy Scott, suffered atrocious conditions on the ice cap and unable to locate the buried tent, Jimmy blamed himself for failing to rescue Courtauld, ruining his confidence so much that he never again returned to the polar regions. The subsequent relief trip, utilized the survey skills of the only Antipodean member of BAARE, John Rymill, to locate the ventilator tube marking the top of August’s tent.

The 1934 published expedition accounts by Freddy Spencer Chapman, *Northern Lights* and *Watkins’ Last Expedition*, were sanitized for the British public. Any salacious material, such as the sexual shenanigans and the native progeny of Gino and Freddy, down to the labelling the steep glacial grunt up to the ice cap as ‘Bugbear Bank’ instead of what it was actually called, ‘Buggery Bank’, was removed.

My library now has upwards of 32 books on the two Gino Watkins-lead east Greenland expeditions and accounts by its team members; autobiographies by Lindsay, Courtauld and Spencer Chapman, biographies of Scott, Rymill, Riley, Courtauld, and Spencer Chapman, several with chapters on the leadership style of Gino, and a recent account of the 1986 Australian expedition led by Earl Bloomfield.

I had always felt there was a need for a book which described the influence that BAARE had on the later lives of the expedition members, what they got up to in their waning years, if they kept in touch with each other, what contribution they made to inspiring younger folk and how they fell off their perches, whether by their own hand or the ageing process. Simon has satisfied all my demands for such a book with *The Watkins Boys*. A select bibliography of 28 titles and comprehensive index complete the book.

The photo section is very disappointing, with only eight pages of photos; most of which are commonly seen in other books; pictures such as Gino hunting in his 'white kayak', and the 14 vignette portraits of the BAARE team. I would have liked photos of the six 'Watkins Boys' in later life, on their subsequent expeditions, during the war years or ageing gracefully. A full-page photo of Margy Graham is a strange inclusion. Although Gino asked her to marry him in June 1932, she is not one of the key figures in the book. The last photo has not reproduced well but it shows two Kiwi paddlers in 2007 (Paul Caffyn and Conrad Edwards) by the Watkins Memorial cross in Lake Fjord.

In summary, an engrossing and inspiring read, with my only niggle the choice, quality and number of photographs.

Paul Caffyn