

Frederick A. Cook (1865-1940)

In the earlier years of what is called "the Great Polar Controversy", General A.W. Greely, leader of the ill-fated Lady Franklin Bay Expedition, gave this ringing testimony to other explorations that, like his own, would invoke bitter passion: "Rarely, if ever, would they be equalled and never surpassed for their extent, duration and experience." Greely was alluding to the achievements of the Cook North Polar Expedition of 1908-09. Its commander, Dr. Frederick Albert Cook, nevertheless spent almost half of his life surrounded by such controversy that his real field work has been largely overlooked. While self-serving, Cook's own words, written in the twilight of an amazing career, may best express the depth of his personal torment: "Few men in all history...have ever been made to suffer so bitterly and so inexpressibly as I because of the assertion of my achievement."

Cook caught the polar wanderlust only a year after his graduation from the College of Physicians and Surgeons at New York University in 1890, obviously influenced by the death of his first wife in childbirth. Hardened by a youth spent in the Catskill Mountains (he was born in Hortonville, N.Y., to an immigrant German physician) and later supporting his widowed mother in Brooklyn while securing his education, Cook had ambition and enormous energy. Over the next two decades, he earned a reputation as a doctor afield, interrupting a sporadic medical practice to offer himself as surgeon or leader of eight expeditions "Poleward," a term he often used.

First going north with the young naval civil engineer Robert E. Peary on his North Greenland Expedition in 1891, Cook earned Peary's praise for "unruffled patience and coolness in an emergency". After returning to an erratic general practice, Cook went north again in two arctic commands on the *Zita* (1893) and the *Miranda* (1894). When near-disaster struck the *Miranda*, the 29-year-old Cook navigated an open boat across 90 miles of polar sea to obtain rescue. The Arctic Club of America was born out of this voyage, and Cook became its first president. He would later preside over the prestigious Explorers Club as well.

After a four-year stint of practice and lecturing, the polar quest drew him again, this time to the Belgian Antarctic Expedition. The party became locked in the ice of the Bellingshausen Sea, and its survival was largely attributed to Cook. Roald Amundsen, the first mate, credited Cook with "unfailing hope and unfaltering courage" in his scheme to free the ship.

Peary's 1902 attempt to reach the Pole from Cape Hecla on northern Ellesmere Island was forced back at 84°17'N; Cook had been with him as the expedition's doctor. The trip convinced Cook that the so-called "American route" through Kane Basin was unsatisfactory, and that, in any event, he would never again serve under Peary. Soon Cook mounted expeditions to Alaska's Mount McKinley, being the first to circumnavigate it in 1903 and making the first ascent of North America's highest peak in 1906. At a dinner sponsored by the National Geographic Society — with a seething Peary in atten-

dance — President Theodore Roosevelt hailed Cook as the conqueror of McKinley and the first American to explore both polar regions.

None of Cook's first seven expeditions ventured into the Queen Elizabeth Islands. But his eighth — his longest, most celebrated, and most controversial — took him into that region for two years. He sailed north on the schooner *John R. Bradley* in 1907. Leaving his base camp at Annoatuk in February 1908 with Rudolph Francke, his German assistant, 10 Eskimos, 11 sledges, and 105 dogs, he followed Sverdrup's game lands through Ellesmere and Axel Heiberg islands, reached Cape Stallworthy, and went over the sea due north. His last supporting party turned back after three days' march, and with two Eskimo companions, Cook fought pressure ridges and ice floes to reach what he determined to be the geographical North Pole on 21 April 1908. "We were the only pulsating creatures in a dead world of ice", he wrote in his diary.



The return journey was an epic in sledge travel — in terms of pure survival, a classic experience. After living in an ancient Eskimo cave on Devon Island through the polar night of 1908-09, Cook and his party returned to Greenland, whence he sailed to the adulation of the world, first in Copenhagen,



later in New York. Cook's wire that he had reached the Pole was sent on 1 September 1909; Peary's announcement followed five days later. The great controversy that began then is still simmering today.

Cook disappeared from public view after a bitter media campaign that did little for the reputation of either antagonist and even less for historical geography. Until he died in 1940, still maintaining his achievements, Cook was championed more in Europe than in North America. Since 1960 a revival of literature on the question has favoured Cook. Such arctic experts as Herbert, Zavatti, and Treshekenov have elevated Cook's claims to "probable and possible" attainment, and advocated them at last November's international polar conference in Paris sponsored by the Centre for Polar Studies at the Sorbonne.

Cook's unquestioned prior physical description of conditions at the Pole and his apparent descriptions of then-unknown ice islands weigh in his favor, and his non-discovery of Meighen Island (Stefansson found this "impossible to explain") gives credence to his reporting a westward drift of the polar ice. A troubled later life (imprisonment for promoting

Texas oil lands which subsequently produced the largest pool of oil in the United States) did not contribute to any public vindication for the explorer, termed "the American Dreyfus of the North." Ultimate rehabilitation may yet come as the claims of the once-discredited Cook are given a more dispassionate examination.

FURTHER READINGS

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