

Going to Extremes

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THE ARCTIC GRAIL

By Pierre Berton.

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The view from space has made familiar the image of the world; but within living memory, its surface was still imperfectly known. The polar regions were the last great blanks upon the map, and the 19th century was haunted by the drive to fill them in. Since the Arctic was more accessible, that is where attempts were concentrated first. These events coalesce into an intricate saga which it is the purpose of this book to relate.

Pierre Berton, a Canadian historian and the author of "The Mysterious North," takes the quest for the North Pole and the Northwest Passage as a theme to unify the tale of Arctic exploration from the end of the Napoleonic wars to the first decade of this century. He dovetails the various expeditions to bring narrative order to a complex succession of events. He has produced a highly readable compendium of northern exploration, and a much-needed one, too.

The North Pole and the Northwest Passage represented the conquest of the unknown. Both captivated the public at the time. The North Pole was an obvious symbol of the ultimate. The Northwest Passage had a more convoluted significance. It was a route between the Atlantic and the Pacific, around the top of the North American continent, sought since the 16th century by northern Europeans as a shortcut to the East. By the time of its 19th-century revival, the quest for the Northwest Passage had become an end in itself — a romantic harking back to the glories of the Elizabethan age. In Mr. Berton's words, his book is "as much about explorers as it is about exploring." And rightly so. They are all there, the assorted rogues, idealists, escapists, heroes, bunglers and occasional man of talent who trooped into the snows.

There is kindly old Sir John Franklin, seeking the Northwest Passage in 1845 and innocently leading his men to death, every one. There is his indomitable wife, Jane, consummately playing the role of Victorian widow, seeing that expeditions went out to search for her husband. There is Elisha Kent Kane, the American doctor who went on one of those searches and whose twin obsessions were the Arctic and Margaret Fox, probably the original medium. "Remember then," he wrote her, "that Doctor Kane of the Arctic Seas loved Maggie Fox of the spirit rappings." In that direction, at least, Kane had no illusions; Miss Fox produced her effects by cracking her double-jointed toes. Far from the world of spirit rappings, there is the Norwegian, Roald Amundsen, finally navigating the Northwest Passage in 1903 with a minimum of fuss.

What drove these disparate characters to high latitudes? Mr. Berton sensibly does not give an answer pat. He does give one hint in the title of the book. The symbolism of the Holy Grail is connected with the power of illusion in driving men on. Mr. Berton also implies that an obsessive personality may be part of the pattern.

In the background, more easily identifiable motives lurk. For the first half of the 19th century, Arctic exploration was virtually a British preserve. Most expeditions were naval ones. Partly, it was to find work for redundant officers after the Napoleonic wars. Partly, too, it was to promote the westward march of Empire, for the Northwest Passage lay largely in the Canadian Arctic. Above all, it was to keep Russia in check. For Russia held Alaska then and, whatever her regime, was proceeding, as usual, with her organic drive to expand.

The Royal Navy secured British and, later, Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic. It was accompanied by staggering ineptitude and unnecessary loss of life. That holds the moral of this book. The Royal Navy stumbled from one debacle to the other because it clung to unsuitable methods and refused to adapt to an unfamiliar environment.

“Badly and hastily organized with a smugness and an arrogance that in hindsight seem almost criminal,” Mr. Berton writes of one naval expedition, “this band of amateurs set off blithely, as so many had before it, without any real idea of what they were facing.” In half a century, the Navy learned almost nothing in the snows, repeating the same old mistakes. There was no attempt to learn from the Eskimos, who clearly had learned how to survive in a barely habitable environment. Dogs were not used, and man-hauling was the order of the day. Clothing was tight, stiff, unsuitable and made of broadcloth and wool instead of fur. Innovation was despised. Mr. Berton quotes one member of a naval expedition who brought snowshoes and suffered “laughter and derision from the gallant but very inexperienced officers.” Scurvy ravaged expedition after expedition, despite the example of the native peoples who were manifestly exempt.

It is a familiar tale. In the heyday of Empire the British, wherever they went, somehow contrived to live as uncomfortably and unhealthily as they possibly could. Their tragedy was that they dragged their environment with them, and staunchly refused to adapt. Worse still, among them, they did number polar travellers without equal. There was, for instance, Dr. John Rae (Amundsen’s hero), an Orkneyman working for the Hudson’s Bay Company, who had learned from the native peoples. But Rae and his like were ignored by the polar establishment. It was one outcome of a depressing worship of mediocrity. It is a disturbing echo of larger issues. Britain was sinking into intellectual isolation. The Royal Navy, which after Trafalgar stood supreme, was decaying from within. Flair and initiative, the backbone of the Nelson tradition, were rapidly being bred out. The culmination in the snows, as Mr. Berton repeatedly points out, was Scott’s disastrous rout by Amundsen at the South Pole — predictable, and predicted, even at the time. It was a paradigm of the collapse of British power.

In the Far North, during the second half of the 19th century, the British, symbolically enough, faded from the picture, to be replaced by the Americans. That also brought drama, but of a different kind. There was, for example, Charles Francis Hall, a high school dropout and owner of the little *Cincinnati News*, who sold out, tried to reach the North Pole and suffered death by arsenic. There was Adolphus Washington Greely who, in 1882, wrested the record for the Farthest North from the British, after they had held it for three centuries; they were never to recover this distinction. But on

Greely's expedition, only 6 of 23 men survived, he executed one man for stealing food and there was cannibalism, too.

Technically, there was little wrong with these Americans. They were adaptable. They learned from the indigenous tribes — Hall was one of the few white men deliberately to live like the Eskimos. They admired success and were alien to the British cult of the glorious failure. Their flaws were impetuosity, impatience, a desire for quick results, so that their technical virtuosity was almost to no avail. It all ended with Cook and Peary, both masters of polar travel, each claiming to have conquered the North Pole for the United States, but neither of whom Mr. Berton happens to believe.

Mr. Berton reserves his admiration for the Norwegians. Their achievements were out of all proportion to their numbers. There was Fridtjof Nansen, who in 1888 made the first crossing of Greenland and, a few years later, achieved a sensational Farthest North by allowing his ship to be frozen in and drifting with the pack. There was Otto Sverdrup, who in four seasons discovered 100,000 square miles of new territory in the Canadian Arctic. There was Roald Amundsen, whom Mr. Berton calls the Norwegians' "crowning ornament": double victor of the Northwest Passage and finally the South Pole.

These men were notably efficient and achieved what they did with little loss of life. They were, in Mr. Berton's words, "a different breed from the hidebound British and the impetuous Americans. They were, after all, a subarctic people, used to cold weather and high winds, familiar with skis, sledges, and dogs. They were also immensely practical." They were also, he it added, individualists to a man, but free of the heroic delusion.

In the end, Mr. Berton's real heroes are the Eskimos. They are not commemorated on the maps, but the European explorers are. "The squat little men," as he puts it, "who fed John Ross's company in the Gulf of Boothia ... who taught Rae, Hall, and Peary how to exist under polar conditions, gave no thought to such white concepts as fame, ambition or immortality." There is in this an all-too-familiar note of Western self-abnegation.

Implicit in "The Arctic Grail" is yet another chapter, for better or worse, of the Western European conquest of the globe. It is the movement that began with the blaze of the Renaissance in Italy five centuries ago and spread out in all spheres of human endeavor. Exploration, in the sense of sheer restlessness to find out what lies over the horizon, is a Western phenomenon. Those men who, with varying success, pitted themselves against the hostile polar environment were the heirs of the Renaissance, the heart of which was the promotion of the individual and the discovery of the world. They represent our kind of civilization, of which, in spite of everything, we should still be proud. This book suggests as much. BY STAGECOACH IN THE KLONDIKE

Pierre Berton claims not to identify with the swaggering explorers in his latest book, "The Arctic Grail." But his life has been a great adventure. Born in 1920 and raised in the Yukon, he worked as a boy on a pipeline in the isolated Klondike mining camps. "From October through June," he said in a telephone interview from Vancouver, "the only way to get out or in was by sitting up in an open stagecoach for six days and

nights, in 60-below temperatures. We rarely left to go Outside, as we called it, which tells you what kind of place it was.”

After graduating from the University of British Columbia, Mr. Berton wanted only to be a newspaperman and by the time he was 21 he was the youngest city editor in the country. But after he became a daily columnist for The Toronto Star, he turned solely to books, mostly popular histories of Canada, and his work began to gain a wide reputation. The author of 34 books in 34 years, he has been called one of Canada’s foremost popular historians. He has been the host of a successful TV show. He has composed a musical set in the Klondike gold rush days. And, with his children, has traveled by the Yukon River to revisit his past, and written a memoir about his trip home.

Though he laughs at the colonizing British for refusing to adapt to new climates, he admits to the same mulish nature. “I write with two fingers and a portable Smith-Corona,” he said defiantly, adding, “I spoke to Michener the other day. I was glad to find that he still used an upright. Not even an electric.”

Of his own work, his favorite is “The Secret World of Og,” a children’s novel he wrote in 1961. “I get 30 letters a week from children who liked it. I got one that said, ‘I’m six years old and this is the best book I ever read in my whole life.’ ”

Roland Huntford is the author of “The Last Place on Earth” and “Shackleton.” He is at work on a biography of the Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen.

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