

Still poles apart

Derek Fordham

Hero In Disgrace: The True Discoverer of the North Pole, Frederick A. Cook. By Howard S. Abramson. Paragon House: 1991. Pp.249. \$21.95.

"COOK was a liar and a gentleman, Peary was neither", was the opinion expressed by Peter Freuchen, a Danish explorer and trader.

Cook was also an experienced polar traveller when, in an attempt to achieve "the thing that had haunted me for years", he left Anoritoq in North Greenland with ten companions, nine sledges and 103 dogs, a full year before Commander Robert E. Peary. Peary set off in 1909 from the north coast of Ellesmere Island. Both had the North Pole as their objective, although by different routes. Cook, having sent back all but two of his eskimo companions, claimed to reach the Pole on 22 April 1908, but because he was carried far to the west by drifting ice on his return, had to spend a tough winter with his two companions at Cape Sparbo on Devon Island. Having completed an arduous return to Anoritoq in the spring of 1909, he managed to reach civilization ahead of Peary, who maintained he had reached the Pole on 6 April 1909. Cook therefore became the first to have reached 'The Big Nail' — a whole year before Peary.

His claim unleashed against Cook the fury and vilification of the Peary Arctic Club, and the undying opposition of

such formidable bodies as the National Geographic Society, which spared no efforts, fair or foul, to establish the supremacy of their man, Peary.

Publication of a false confession, purporting to be by Cook, admitting that he had not reached the Pole was engineered. Objections were raised to many other aspects of Cook's claim and his earlier ascent of Mount McKinley. He was accused of not being able to supply conclusive proof of his presence at the Pole. Ironic, because this was exactly what Peary was also unable to provide, but in Cook's case it was because Peary had refused to allow Cook's equipment and notes to be brought back from Greenland on his ship.

The continuing warped tirades of Peary's influential backers had their effect and for the rest of Cook's life it was generally held that Peary had reached the Pole and Cook had not. But the one does not necessarily lead to the other. Even though it is now generally accepted by those with the ex-

perience to know that Peary did not get closer than about 90 miles to the North Pole, that fact in itself does not imply in any way that Cook did.

Since Cook's death in 1940, serious doubts have been cast on whether he reached the summit of Mount McKinley or the North Pole, and Abramson's decision to omit any serious discussion of most of these doubts diminishes the value of his rather partisan book as a comment on the Cook controversy.

As with Peary's equally disputed claim, no one at this distance in time can know for certain what events took place on the Arctic Ocean in 1908 and 1909. Did Cook press on across the lonely polar ice, or did he, as his companions Itukusuk and Aapilaq innocently state, go only one or two "sleeps" before turning back to Axel Heiberg Island? Did he lie in his tent, as Peary was to do a

year later, and allow the vision of the Pole that had haunted him to become a dream, a dream which then became reality on the pages of his notebook, and a dream which was then to become the nightmare that followed both men to their graves and beyond?

Either way, Cook was an enigmatic and talented man; doctor, ethnologist, designer of polar equipment and an accomplished polar traveller — a man who became embroiled in a world of

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Robert E. Peary — belligerent and opinionated.

machiavellian manoeuvring, engineered by the powerful backers of Peary, who in the end were too much for him. He was, as Freuchen said, a gentleman, a gentleman who it would be much easier to believe than belligerent, opinionated Peary. But Abramson's study does little to confirm Cook as the book's subtitle: *The True Discoverer of the North Pole*. Peary's claims are examined and rejected, but no new evidence is produced to harden the claim that Cook's flag was ever at the Pole. Nor does the book provide the essential clue as to whether it was Cook the liar or Cook the gentleman who wrote in his unpublished autobiography, "I reached the Pole. I climbed Mount McKinley. The controversy from my angle is at an end. I now have other, and still more important, exploration in hand. This will occupy my attention until the frost of the next world arrives."

The frost duly arrived for this unhappy man, and the winter of unproved claims lies on the Pole to this very day. □

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Frederick A. Cook — enigmatic and talented.

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