



Ice Blink: The Tragic Fate of Sir John Franklin's Lost Polar Expedition

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Absorbing artfully narrat[es] a possible course of events in the expedition's demise, based on the one official note and bits of debris (including evidence of cannibalism) found by searchers sent to look for Franklin in the 1850s. Adventure readers will flock to this fine regaling of the enduring mystery surrounding the best-known disaster in Arctic exploration.--Booklist

"A great Victorian adventure story rediscovered and re-presented for a more enquiring time."--The Scotsman

"A vivid, sometimes harrowing chronicle of miscalculation and overweening Victorian pride in untried technology.a work of great compassion."--The Australian

It has been called the greatest disaster in the history of polar exploration. Led by Arctic explorer Sir John Franklin, two state-of-the-art ships and 128 hand-picked men----the best and the brightest of the British empire----sailed from Greenland on July 12, 1845 in search of the elusive Northwest Passage. Fourteen days later, they were spotted for the last time by two whalers in Baffin Bay. What happened to these ships----and to the 129 men on board----has remained one of the most enduring mysteries in the annals of exploration. Drawing upon original research, Scott Cookman provides an unforgettable account of the ill-fated Franklin expedition, vividly reconstructing the lives of those touched by the voyage and its disaster. But, more importantly, he suggests a human culprit and presents a terrifying new explanation for what triggered the deaths of Franklin and all 128 of his men. This is a remarkable and shocking historical account of true-life suspense and intrigue.

Ice Blink: The Tragic Fate of Sir John Franklin's Lost Polar Expedition Details

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Erica says

Not great. Writing style ricocheted between pedantic and overwrought. Lots and lots of speculation -- "most likely because" is not a phrase I seek in my nonfiction at this rate of use. I wanted very badly to enjoy this book, but couldn't.

William Battersby says

This book is a curate's egg - good in parts.

On the positive side it is a powerfully written and well illustrated book and its wide readership has served to 'hook' many readers into the mystery and horror of the Franklin Expedition, challenging them to find out more.

However, its flaws are considerable. Perhaps it does not matter that it is riddled with errors of detail, but more seriously it depends far too much on secondary sources. The most serious flaw is that it takes one unproven hypothesis to explain the demise of the Expedition - an epidemic of botulism caused by eating ill-prepared tinned food - and then flogs it to death. It is a fact that there is no primary evidence at all to corroborate this hypothesis but this does not stop the author presenting it with great enthusiasm.

There is also far too much imaginative reconstruction in the book, to the point where long passages are in effect fiction. While this is not necessarily a fault, it is certainly confusing to the lay reader and scholastically unsound. And some of it is distasteful in the extreme - the prurient fantasy of the Erebus's scientist, Harry Goodsir, happily preparing a 'cannibal soup' is genuinely disturbing.

So read this book by all means and appreciate the commitment and goodwill of its author, but bear in mind that it is probably closer to a work of fiction than a history-book.

'Aussie Rick' says

This is the story of a fateful 1845 polar expedition that went terribly wrong. This was a British enterprise led by Captain Sir John Franklin to find the Northwest Passage using the most advance ships and equipment at that time. Now I am a complete novice when it comes to this subject matter however I found this book very interesting and it offered a compelling story of misadventure, bravery, corruption, and suspense.

I found that the author, Scott Cookman, presented his story in such an easy manner that the narrative just raced along and I lost track of time reading about this terrible drama. It must be stated from the beginning that the author has no direct testimony of what actually happen to this expedition since all involved died.

However Cookman has utilised the accounts of many other polar explorers to support his theory of what may have happened and to give graphic examples of the conditions these men laboured under during this expedition. Overall I found it a gripping account and although he may not be 100% correct in his deductions

I found that it was quite believable.

Cookman has used a wide range of sources including material from the Public Records Office and the Admiralty in London. He takes the time to fully explain the means and methods used at the time for polar exploration and I fully enjoyed his account of the men and ships involved. This is a great story and the book has prompted me to learn more about the brave men who charted the Arctic and Antarctic regions before modern technology made all too easy.

Brian says

Usually I don't comment on books like this but I wanted to also bring up what (few others) have said. While the book is interesting and definitely made me want to read more on the subject this book falls very short. The authors hypothesis of the cause of almost everyone's death is completely unproven and I became quickly annoyed that the author hammered home that his was the reason without mentioning basically any other possibilities. There was no sources in the actual text to check and after a while it would up making me hurry up to read through the rest of the books so I could find a better book on the subject.

In addition the authors recreations of what likely happened and how different individuals did this or that, thought this or that, made this more of a work of fiction in several of the chapters. Hopefully nobody will read this book and think that everything contained in the book is a work of non fiction. While interesting, large parts of the book are based on scant evidence and most likely the authors imagination. A good book to get one interested in the subject but for me I consider it largely a book of fiction.

Inder says

A page-turning account of the Franklin Expedition's failed attempt to find the Northwest Passage. There is lots of good history here, and some very compelling explanations for the the Expedition's failure. This is an interesting read, and my largest complaint is that I would have liked to know more about the relief expeditions and the archeological evidence behind the author's conclusions. This is not the best-written book, but it is generally acceptable. However, it does happen to contain the worst metaphor I have ever read, as follows:

"He hovers in gaslight, a shadowy figure known for nothing but the catastrophe he fathered like a rapist, coldly taking his compensation and leaving behind the seed that caused it."

Dear Editor, metaphors involving rapists and seed are never, ever a good idea. Thank you.

Gennifer says

Stepping into this book knowing next to nothing about the Franklin Polar Expedition, I came out with a basic knowledge of what happened and an exemplary knowledge of nasty canning techniques.

I would have given this book 5 stars but after two or so chapters on Goldner's just abhorrent canning systems and procurements, it really made me nauseous and wonder how the crew didn't die sooner.

I really would have liked to read more about the efforts to rescue the expedition as well as a more in depth look at what happened after they abandoned the Erebus and Terror, but I feel like Ice Blink just touched on a lot of different aspects of the expedition that I think didn't deserve the time that it received.

Ice Blink was a good jumping off point for the person that doesn't know much about this great tragedy but I think there are probably better books out there that analyze the disaster more in depth.

[well Cookman was pretty in depth and analytical about Goldner's cans of Clostridium botulinum]

11811 (Eleven) says

I read this as a fact-check on The Terror to see how much liberty Dan Simmons took with the actual event. He covers nearly all of the facts covered in this book which isn't all that shocking given the nearly obscene length of The Terror and Simmons' tendency for extreme research habits in his historical fiction.

I'd recommend skipping this one and just read The Terror. History is much more fun when people are being hunted by a giant monster on the ice.

C.J. Ruby says

I found this a highly readable account of the Franklin Expedition. I'd always wondered why men went on these polar expeditions, since the glory only went to the leaders. Turns out it was the money. And even the money wasn't enough for men to return. Only 8 men were veterans of the Discovery Service on the Franklin Expedition. One time facing the terror of the north (or south) seems to have been enough for most sailors.

The book has its flaws as noted by other reviews. It deals in a great bit of undocumented speculation. Read with the more scientific sources it's a good addition to books about Franklin's doomed voyage. imo

Phil Ford says

I found this book after seeing Dan Simmons fictional tale "The Terror" being based on the incident. A tragic and very interesting read. Ice Blink is the story of Sir John Franklin's doomed expedition to find the Northwest Passage in 1845. There is a lot of founded speculation as to the behavior and thoughts of the ill fated men, but backed by other examples of similar tragedies. Though Cookman clearly sites Beattie and Geiger's "Frozen in Time" as an inspiration, he never heavily relies on it. An intense telling of over a hundred men trapped on two ships in the winter arctic, stuck, desperate and diseased. Despite all the greatness of "modern technologies", ego and greed can bring downfall. Recommended for those fascinated with stranded isolationism and Polar Expeditions. (

Susan says

I'm fascinated by the Franklin expedition and was happy to have found this book which I enjoyed. The first few chapters explain some interesting back history of the main players: Sir John Franklin, Sir John Barrow, Francis Crozier, James Fitzjames, etc. The book contains a few maps which help to place the ships en route near King William Island. There are also illustrations of the ship's layout, and photos showing artifacts, contracts, and provision lists.

My main criticism of this book is that there are far too many chapters describing Goldner and his shady business practices. Interesting as it was, I felt the author belabored details of Goldner's tinned food and the diseases contracted from them. Yes, it was indeed deplorable on the part of Goldner to knowingly supply inedible tins of food, and yes, the Admiralty shouldn't have accepted the lowest bidder without inspecting the tins or Goldner's factory sight unseen. But in my opinion, these details could have been described in fewer chapters.

I'm on the lookout for other books about Franklin's expedition to get a more well-rounded account of events, but this book is a very good stepping off point.

Lynley says

I really enjoyed this, insofar as you can enjoy a disaster story.

I was expecting a man against nature story but in fact it's more like true crime. There's a very human villain in all of this, and I'm imaging he looked like illustrations of Dickens' Scrooge.

I spent the whole book riveted and disgusted.

Historically, there's more to it than the disappearance of the ships. It's about Franklin in Tasmania, Victorian medicine, London's poverty and the limitations of English technology, in an age where they felt very superior, having invented almost every big thing that powered the industrial revolution.

I'm guessing the builders of The Titanic hadn't read up on this story.

Not recommended as reading material for tourists enjoying an Arctic cruise.

Punk says

Non-Fiction. A sensationalist account of the Franklin Expedition, more interested in drama than accuracy, and full of misinformation. It also features rampant speculation, erratic footnotes, and the author's assumptions repeatedly presented as fact.

For example: "Miraculously in June of 1847, after ten months trapped in the pack ice, everyone was alive and well." We have no way of knowing that. But Cookman thinks he does! "There is no other explanation for Commander Gore's 'All well' message in the spring of 1847." (p.107)

This is the same note that neglects to mention they buried three men at Beechey Island and that the ships have been stuck in the ice for nearly a year. Now, for a 19th century arctic expedition that may very well be *all well*, but who's to say that four or five unnamed dead wouldn't still qualify as "all well." Maybe that only meant that the ships had no holes in them, or they weren't being attacked by a demonic polar bear. Or Cookman could be right and no one died during that time. The point is *we don't know*, yet the author persists in acting like his interpretation is established fact. And he does this over and over. Entire sections of the book are little more than fiction as Cookman attempts to reconstruct the decisions Franklin and Crozier were faced with while stuck on the ice, including a lovingly rendered cannibalism interlude that I could have done without.

It is very easy to read, as long as you know very little about the Franklin Expedition or, in fact, nothing at all about composing an argument, or can somehow ignore the number of inaccuracies and unsupported statements. The one thing the book might be good for is its bibliography with its list of government records and documents relevant to the expedition. It also has a nice biography of Sir John Barrow that helps put the search for the Northwest Passage into context, but its accuracy is drawn into question simply by virtue of it being written by Cookman.

One star. Not recommended for anyone. It's dangerously misleading for readers who are new to the subject, and probably too aggravating for everyone else. Could be read as fiction, but why not read Dan Simmons' *The Terror* instead, as it actually is fiction. If you want non-fiction about the expedition, try Beattie & Geiger's *Frozen in Time*, which is highly readable, a primary source, and written by authors who know how to formulate an argument.

Ryan Scott says

I really appreciated Cookman's ability to create a compelling narrative out of extensive research. Drawing comparisons between various historical incidents of circumstantial similarity gives us just enough context, while leaving the rest for our imaginations to fill in and infer.

VerJean says

Heard about this particular book from a client who had a family member searching by air for any remains/artifacts from this expedition.

It's of great interest and I have other books on the subject, also.

Started reading aloud with Winston - during the summer on the MI cottage sunny hillside. But, he still didn't want to hear anymore about just how cold it was and how these men suffered from the cold.

It is a bit gruesome at times.

So I finished and shared the highlights of rest of book.

Read in 2005.

David R. says

This is one of the very best studies of the doomed Franklin expedition in the Arctic in the 1840s. Cookman nails down the fate of the mariners, particular in a thorough review of the appallingly toxic food provided the

sailors. The story telling is quite good and the book becomes a genuine page-turner as the expedition fell apart.
