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



Synopsis

"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.

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Customer Reviews

By the mid-19th century, after decades of polar exploration, the fabled Northwest Passage seemed

within reach. In 1845 the British Admiralty assembled the largest expedition yet, refitting two ships with steam engines and placing the seasoned if somewhat lackluster Sir John Franklin in command of the 128-man expedition. After sailing into Baffin Bay, they were never heard from again. Drawing on early accounts from relief expeditions as well as recent archeological evidence, Scott Cookman reconstructs a chronicle of the expedition in *Ice Blink*. Cookman, a journalist with articles in *Field & Stream* and other magazines, excels when firmly grounded in the harrowing reality of 19th-century Arctic exploration. When he speculates about what happened to the Franklin expedition, however, he is on less solid ground and his writing suffers. Particularly overwrought is the promised "frightening new explanation" for the expedition's demise. Cookman suggests that it was caused by the "grotesque handiwork" of an "evil" man, Stephan Goldner, who had supplied its canned foods. This is hardly new. As early as 1852, investigators determined that the expedition's canned goods were probably inferior and canceled provisioning contracts with Goldner. How a hundred men survived for nearly three years despite lead poisoning and botulism remains a mystery. In the end, as Cookman himself acknowledges, the expedition was ultimately doomed by its reliance on untested technology such as the steam engine, armor plating, and canned provisions. These criticisms aside, *Ice Blink* is an interesting narrative of this enduring symbol of polar exploration and disaster. --Pete Holloran

In 1845, Captain Sir John Franklin sailed into Arctic waters, the latest of many navigators to seek a "Northwest Passage" from the Atlantic to the Pacific. With him were 128 stalwarts of the Royal Navy; up-to-date maps and sophisticated tools; three years' worth of ample provisions; and two advanced ships, iron-clad, steam-heated and steam-powered. The ships were never seen again. In 1859, Lieutenant William Hobson, sunburnt and frostbitten, trekked across remote King William Island and found the last remains of the expedition: two notes attached to a cairn, a small, stranded boat and human bones, some showing evidence of cannibalism. Freelance writer Cookman's ably researched, sometimes eloquent account follows the doomed voyage, then proposes to solve the enduring mystery. Stuck in the ice, the men of the H.M.S. *Terror* and *Erebus* lasted months with barely a look outdoors; when cooking fuel ran short, something sickened the men. Cookman identifies the culprit as botulism, conveyed by the canned goods furnished by contractor Stephan Goldner. "Pinching pennies and cutting corners," Goldner defrauded the Navy by giving Franklin's men canned meats and vegetables "shoddily made and improperly sealed." Cookman drapes his central story with short accounts of the people involved, including Captain Franklin ("plodding, sober," and "fame-hungry" but steadfast) and Goldner, whose record of defaults and frauds

(delivering ruptured cans, missing deadlines, packaging bones as meat) led the Navy to cease doing business with him in 1852. Hard-bitten readers who last year clamored over Shackleton's adventures will take to this grimmer tale of unscrupulous contractors, diligent historians and brave British explorers who never made it. (Mar.) Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc.

This book on the Franklin expedition is the first, of all that I have read about Franklin, that answers my question: "What about the food preparation itself, before the food was put into Goldner's cans?" "This book goes into great detail in answering what happened to the food, when, where, how and why. The answers? I won't tell you here what the answers are- but be glad you did not eat in those days- whether on ship or ashore. Upton Sinclair could have written about The 1840s Jungle in England.

OK, if you happen to read *The Terror* by Dan Simmons, you will likely download/buy this book and others. The missing Franklin expedition, 1845, may have been a test question in school (sounds familiar) but I didn't become aware of the magnitude of the event until inhaling these books. FASCINATING FACT, unfort. found in still another book (*Frozen in Time*, Owen Beattie), the HMS *Terror*, star of these books and OMG, what GREAT READING ALL (I've read *The Terror* multiple times) MAY HAVE BEEN one and the same as a ship named "Terror" that participated in the Battle of Baltimore, firing the bombs mentioned in the US National Anthem... um, wow? PS, person I would love to have dinner with, currently dead, FRANCIS RAWDON MOIRA CROZIER, captain HSM *Terror*.

This review was skeptical at the start of reading "Ice Blink" since the author, Scott Cookman, admits to being introduced to the story of the Franklin Expedition in 1988 after picking up Dr. Owen Beattie and John Geiger's classic account "Frozen In Time." How much could this author add to a story that has been examined in numerous studies already? Well, it turns out, quite a bit. Cookman's main contribution is his impressive research into the Stephan Goldner's Preserved Provisions company. The details on how Goldner cut corners on the manufacturing of cans, the processing of "food" (including things that were never considered food), the preparation (or lack thereof) of the victuals, and the delivery of the goods is eye-opening. The book includes a photo of a Goldner brochure listing all the impressive and exotic foods he claimed to sell. Unlike other studies, Cookman does not concentrate on the lead content of the food that seeped in from the sloppy soldering of the cans. Instead, he focuses on other contaminants in the food resulting from poor food preparation. For this

reviewer, "Ice Blink" provides a new perspective on the loss of the Franklin Expedition. Cookman follows the Goldner story through the Admiralty's inquiry into Goldner's practices and its ultimate findings. Cookman also provides excellent background information on Sir John Franklin and, to a lesser extent, second-in-command Capt. Francis Crozier and Commander of the Erebus, James Fitzjames. The daily life inside the ships (including diet) is also described very well and includes an illustration of the living arrangements. Cookman uses the experiences of other expeditions (i.e. Shackleton's Endurance and Robert Falcon Scott's journey to the South Pole) in describing some of the details as to what Franklin's crew endured. Considering no one from the expedition lived to tell his tale or left journals behind that survived, Cookman also uses a lot of assumptions in his account of the events on the Erebus and Terror. For example, he has Franklin gathering his men around to inform them they would be spending another winter in the ice and then, ten days later, dies (pg. 138). Of course, it is impossible to prove this meeting ever occurred. Cookman also uses a lot of poetic license when describing what was going through Capt. Crozier's mind during the arduous march to find safety on King William Island. The topic of cannibalism is examined using the stories of the Donner Party and the Essex for reference, but the assumption Cookman makes that Franklin Expedition members eventually killed fellow crewman for food as opposed to waiting for death to occur naturally is not proven in this book (pg. 181). Other Criticisms of this book are that, at the start, Cookman often exhibits an informal and sarcastic tone. On his 1819-22 overland Arctic expedition, "Franklin set out like an unprepared summer camper" (pg. 19). Franklin's courtship with his first wife "contained about as much heat as afternoon tea" (pg. 23; no explanation is given for this statement). The author maintains that "not many high school graduates today meet [the] qualifications" for joining the Royal Navy (pg. 15). Fortunately, this style does not continue throughout the book. As other reviewers have noted, Cookman uses a lot of repetition in a book which is relatively short (under 200 pages not including appendices). Finally, the often misused phrase "begs the question" is used incorrectly (pg. 115). Despite these criticisms, "Ice Blink" is an important addition to the examination of the Franklin Expedition due to the information provided on Stephan Goldner and his canned provisions.

Another chilling true tale of historic Arctic exploration and disaster. A good but very sobering read.

The one certainty about Sir John Franklin's futile 1845 expedition in quest of a passage from the Atlantic to the Pacific through the Arctic is that all 129 who signed up for the voyage vanished and were ultimately proved to be dead. But what caused this unprecedented catastrophe? Cookman has

penned a lively account of what he believes is the probable culprit: the vast quantities of canned food on which the expedition relied for food and the botulism those food supplies caused among the crew. Although his approach is more journalistic than scholarly (so don't expect a detailed analysis of rival arguments), the narrative is both lively and compelling. Whether he is describing the gruesome process of preparing and preserving the canned supplies (described in such an appetizing fashion in the catalogs their provider produced and from which Cookman quotes) or calculating the mathematical impossibility of survivors abandoning their ship and being able to carry with them enough supplies, in terms of calories, to offset the energy expended dragging them across the ice, the result is a page-turner. There are no heroes in this story. The British navy tried to save money by dealing with the cheapest contractors when it came to procuring food. Franklin himself, intent on having a final chance to prove his merit after a backwater post guarding convicts in the South Pacific, probably disregarded prudence in key strategic decisions. The ship's designers relied too much on "modern" technology (circa 1845), ranging from heavy metal cladding to a reliance on steam engines, when the Navy and expedition planners would have done better to question whether this would be a help or hindrance in such a hostile environment. The most chilling part of the book -- literally and rhetorically -- comes when Cookman puts his imagination to work to interpret the final clues left behind by those who finally abandoned the doomed ships, stuck in the polar ice pack, and struck out for land far too far away to reach. These include a handful of bodies, cached goods and reports and tales from the native inhabitants of the land, who encountered some of these desperate survivors in their final days. Despite rumors that one of Franklin's senior officers, Francis Crozier, survived and lived out his days with one of these native tribes, it is likely that every one of those who survived the tainted canned food and started trekking halfway across what is now Canada ended up (after a few bouts of cannibalism) succumbing to starvation. I'm rating this four stars because, flaws aside, it's a gripping tale of how everything that could go wrong, did, with this expedition, and because Cookman delivers such an authoritative rendering of naval life in the mid 19th century.

So good I've read it more than once.

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