

SELENE

100 EAST 53

VISIONARY RESIDENCES BY PRITZKER-PRIZE WINNER NORMAN FOSTER

EXPLORE

BOOKS & ARTS | BOOKS | BOOKSHELF Follow

'Battle of Ink and Ice' Review: Cook and Peary's North Pole Race

In 1909, two rivalrous explorers each claimed to be the first to reach the top of the world. In the end, neither could convince the public.

By Edward Kosner June 4, 2023 at 4:22 pm ET

Gift unlocked article Listen (7 min)



Frederick Cook (1865-1940) claimed to have been the first person to reach the North Pole. PHOTO: BETTMANN ARCHIVE

If New York's media elite of the late Gilded Age ever sat down for a banquet at Delmonico's, you might find Horace Greeley of the Tribune, Adolph Ochs of the Times, Joseph Pulitzer of the World, William Randolph Hearst of the Evening Journal and Charles Dana of the Sun gathered at the table. They'd be washing down their oysters with champagne and dishing on their conveniently absent rival James Gordon Bennett Jr., publisher of the mighty Herald, off cruising the Med in his 314-foot superyacht, the Lysistrata.

After that they'd spar over whose sponsored explorer would get to the North Pole first—and prove it. The Spanish-American War was over, and triumphant Americans had set their sights on putting a man on top of the world—their equivalent of the mid-20th century's race to the moon.

Now, Darrell Hartman, a journalist and member of the Explorers Club, has combined the saga of the jostling press lords with the narrative of the sometimes-deadly competition to plant a banner at 90 degrees North latitude, 0 degrees longitude.

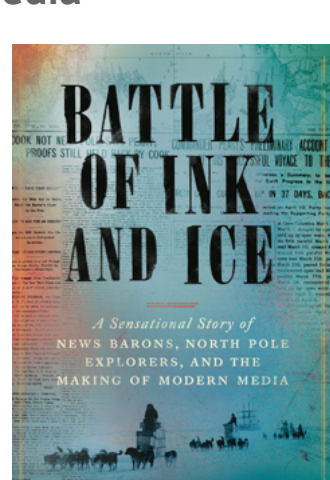
GRAB A COPY

Battle of Ink and Ice: A Sensational Story of News Barons, North Pole Explorers, and the Making of Modern Media

By Darrell Hartman

Viking We may earn a commission when you buy products through the links on our site.

BUY BOOK



NEWSLETTER SIGN-UP

Books

Be the first to find out what's new and what's good. Get the weekend book reviews before the weekend.

Preview

Subscribe

the pole on April 21, 1908. He was being acclaimed after a long journey back to civilization when, eight days later, Peary, also long-unheard-of, cabled that he'd reached the pole, too.

Tall and imperious, Bennett was one of the most flamboyant figures of a gaudy age. At 26 he'd inherited the rambunctious Herald—then the most profitable paper in the country—from his Scottish-immigrant father. Junior scored his greatest triumph early: In 1869, he'd dispatched the intrepid Henry Morton Stanley to find the "lost" Dr. David Livingston in deepest Africa—the scoop of the century.

A yacht-racing clubman, young Bennett would get plastered on a couple of glasses of champagne and make a spectacle of himself. In 1877, he scandalized his fiancée when he weaved into her New Year's Day open-house reception, promptly peed in the fireplace (or piano, the reports conflict), and was later beaten up by her brother.

The disgraced bachelor soon abandoned New York for France, from where he ran his paper with a firm hand and huge cable budget. When not messing about in boats, Mr. Hartman writes, "Bennett oversaw operations... with all the whimsy and grandiosity of a fairy-tale monarch." "Uncowed" by organized religion, he once denounced the pope, who had yet to name an American cardinal, as "a decrepit, licentious, stupid, Italian blackhead." By contrast, Bennett's principal adversary in the polar wars was the modest Jewish family man Ochs, who came to New York from Chattanooga, Tenn. Ochs had bought into the Times in 1896, made it a model of serious journalism, and founded the dynasty that still controls the paper today.

The Cook-Peary race to the pole started amid hoopla and ended in squalid controversy. In 1906, Cook claimed to be the first to scale the tallest mountain in North America, the 20,300-foot Mount McKinley (now Denali) in Alaska. Not long after, he cut an exclusive deal with Bennett's Herald, set off for the pole across Greenland, and wasn't heard from directly for two more years. In 1907, the better-financed, better-equipped Peary headed north again, this time under the aegis of Ochs's Times. On previous forays, he'd lost eight toes to frostbite and established a base 200 miles from his goal.

On his final dash to the pole, Cook's only companions—and witnesses—were two young Inuit, Etukishuk and Ahwelah. Cook described the pole as "a cheerless spot" and took some pictures. But he left his sextants and other instruments, his location calculations and daily diary, handed his sextants in a camp structure and started the long journey to Denmark, which then governed Greenland. In Copenhagen, Frederick VIII hailed him, as did the scientific authorities charged to certify his feat once he turned over his data. Cook cabled a long account to the Herald, which splashed it all over page one and paid him the equivalent of \$1 million in today's money.

Peary cabled his claim on Sept. 9, 1909, and returned to New York. The Times headlined his dramatic story, and the National Geographic Society celebrated him. But soon, Mr. Hartman writes, Peary broke the explorers' code of honor and accused Cook of faking his discovery of the pole.

The controversy dragged on for years. The Herald and the Times backed their champions and spread dirt on their adversaries. Inevitably, it all turned political, with ex-President Teddy Roosevelt and his fellow Republicans staunchly for Peary-Ochs and William Jennings Bryan and the Democrats firmly in Cook-Bennett's corner. Under questioning, Etukishuk and Ahwelah said that they turned west with Cook 200 miles short of the pole. Cook's documentation turned out to be so flimsy that the Danish authorities withheld certification. Peary's was thin, too, and his claim was generally discredited, the consensus being that he missed his goal by 30 to 60 miles. His reputation in tatters, Cook went into the oil business—and ultimately to prison for a Ponzi-ish scheme out West. Peary died in 1920, at age 63.

In the end, the only unchallenged claim to be first to the pole went to the daredevil Norwegian Roald Amundsen, who'd been the first to reach the South Pole, in 1911. Fifteen years later, on May 12, 1926, Amundsen flew over the North Pole with a group of other explorers in the airship Norge and was lavishly lauded by, yes, the New York Times.



MOST POPULAR NEWS

- 1. Bearish Bets Against S&P 500 Are Surging. Despite Love for Big Tech
2. The New Math on Inheriting Your Parents' House
3. Ultralong-Range Electric Cars Are Arriving. Say Goodbye to Charging Stops.
4. iOS 17 Is Coming. Here's What iPhones, iPads and Apple Watches Are Missing.
5. 'There Were Fists Everywhere': Violence Against Teachers Is on the Rise.

MOST POPULAR OPINION

- 1. Opinion: Biden's Trip and Fall: 'I Got Sandbagged!'
2. Opinion: Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s Candidacy and What Might Have Been
3. Opinion: Work Requirements and the Lost Lessons of 1996
4. Opinion: The Downside of the Debt Deal Is a Weaker Military
5. Opinion: North Carolina Upgrades a College Accreditor

RECOMMENDED VIDEOS

- 1. Popocatepetl Volcano: Drone Footage Shows Close-Up View of the Crater
2. Watch: Senate Passes Bill to Suspend the Debt Ceiling, Avoid Default
3. Why Ukraine Might Struggle to Maintain U.S. MI Abrams Tanks
4. May Hiring Remains Resilient, Despite Interest Rates and Inflation
5. Blinken: Russia's Military Is a Case Study in Failure'

Advertisement: Charter a Jet Anywhere in the World Seamlessly and in Seconds. Includes a 'View Details' button and a 'Book Now' button.

Mr. Kosner was the editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News. Appeared in the June 5, 2023, print edition as 'North Pole Or Bust!'.

SHOW CONVERSATION (0)

WHAT TO READ NEXT...

Opinion | ESG Movement Fails at the Scene of Its Greatest Triumph. 2 days ago.

16 Books We Read This Week. 2 days ago.

Opinion | Celebrating Fresh Ideas in Business. PAID PROGRAM: T-MOBILE FOR BUSINESS.

Opinion | Chris Christie and the Republican Party's Peril. 3 days ago.

Opinion | Evan Gershkovich and Our Brave New World. 3 hours ago.

'George' Review: For the Love of a Mischievous Maggie. 3 days ago.

Don't plan on getting old? Read these books on aging better. 5 days ago.

Henry Cobb, Architect of New England's Tallest Tower, Lived for Decades in This N.Y. Duplex Steps from the Met. 1 year ago.

Advertisement: oianomi. Includes a 'View Details' button.

Advertisement: Stretch Every Retirement Dollar with These 12 Dividend Paying Stocks. Wealthy Retirement.

Advertisement: Hands Down One of the Best Cards for Good Credit. The Motley Fool.

Advertisement: New York: The List Of The Top Financial Advisor Firms Is Out smartasset.

Advertisement: Iconic Investor Details #1 Sector to Own for 2023. Stansberry Research.

Advertisement: Cryptocurrencies: What Are They? Charles Schwab.

Advertisement: The 4 Dumbest Things We Keep Spending Too Much Money On. The Penny Hoarder.

Advertisement: Office Depot & OfficeMax: One Link, All Office Depot Coupons.

Advertisement: VistaPrint: 25% off first purchase with VistaPrint promo code.

Advertisement: Walmart: 20% off your order with Walmart promo code.

Advertisement: TurboTax: Save up to \$15 with TurboTax coupon May 2023.

Advertisement: The Motley Fool: Epic Bundle - 3x Expert Stock Recommendations.

Advertisement: H&R Block Tax: 15% Off DIY Online Tax Filing Services | H&R Block Coupon.