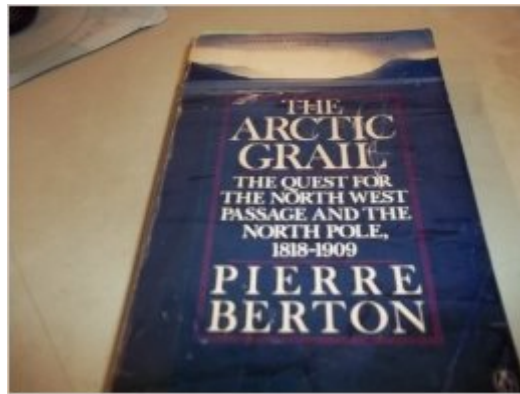


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The Arctic Grail: The Quest For The Northwest Passage And The North Pole, 1818-1909



Synopsis

Scores of nineteenth-century expeditions battled savage cold, relentless ice and winter darkness in pursuit of two great prizes: the quest for the elusive Passage linking the Atlantic and the Pacific and the international race to reach the North Pole. Pierre Berton's #1 best-selling book brings to life the great explorers: the pious and ambitious Edward Parry, the flawed hero John Franklin, ruthless Robert Peary and the cool Norwegian Roald Amundsen. He also credits the Inuit, whose tracking and hunting skills saved the lives of the adventurers and their men countless times. These quests are peopled with remarkable figures full of passion and eccentricity. They include Charles Hall, an obscure printer who abandoned family and business to head to a frozen world of which he knew nothing; John Ross, whose naval career ended when he spotted a range of mountains that didn't exist; Frederick Cook, who faked reaching the North Pole; and Jane Franklin, who forced an expensive search for her missing husband upon a reluctant British government. Pierre Berton, who won his first Governor General's award for *The Mysterious North*, here again gives us an important and fascinating history that reads like a novel as he examines the historic events of the golden age of Arctic exploration. --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

Book Information

Paperback: 672 pages

Publisher: Penguin Books; Reprint edition (December 1, 1989)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 014011680X

ISBN-13: 978-0140116809

Product Dimensions: 7 x 1 x 5 inches

Shipping Weight: 1 pounds

Average Customer Review: 4.8 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (45 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #1,095,675 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #20 in [Books > History > Americas > Canada > Exploration](#) #361 in [Books > History > Arctic & Antarctica](#) #1114 in [Books > History > World > Expeditions & Discoveries](#)

Customer Reviews

This excellent book, first published in 1988, stands as a fitting memorial to the prolific and accomplished writer Pierre Berton, who passed away at age 84 as recently as November 31, 2004. It details the events and personalities of Arctic exploration over nearly a century, beginning in 1818 with the first British naval expedition of John Ross and Edward Parry, and the related disastrous first

naval land expedition led by the oddly ineffectual John Franklin. It concludes with the strange twentieth century tales of Robert Peary and Frederick Cook, both of whom claimed to have reached the North Pole, though neither could prove actually to have done so (nor had they). Along the way we meet a host of players, including the indomitable Lady Jane Franklin, Admiralty puppeteer John Barrow, the underestimated arctic masters Edward Penny and John Rae; Robert McClure, M'Clintock, Charles Francis Hall, Sabine, Nares, Greely, Elisha Kent Kane, Nansen, Amundsen, a number of memorable Inuit personalities and a host of others. The great strength of this account is the repeated demonstration that the outcome of almost every event in the drama depended ultimately on the characters and personalities of the major players, their strengths, weaknesses, flaws and ambitions, and their capacities to learn from the experiences of their predecessors and their Inuit contacts. This gives a Shakespearian, if not biblical, dimension to the history, which is ably exploited by Berton. The book is as much about explorers as exploration. Berton's well-detailed sources include the numerous accounts of the explorers themselves, their biographers and ghost writers, and much archival material - letters, original field notes, official reports etc, all woven together in a skilful and compelling synopsis.

A good overview of much of the history of the Arctic explorations, Berton is *mostly* straightforward, but in a couple of cases his prejudice seems awfully clear. I've read several really good reviews of this, so I'm going to just point out where I thought the author showed considerable prejudice of viewpoint. One was in his descriptions & attitude toward John Rae, one of the lesser known Arctic explorers...possibly because he did it so well. He totally bucked the (insanely) British refusal to learn from the people who lived all their lives in that unforgiving climate. Most of the Brits of his day thought he'd "gone native" & so scorned him & were disgusted by him, & discounted his claims & assertions. Berton seems to share this attitude: for one instance, another book written solely about Rae indicates he probably didn't know about the reward offered for info on Franklin's party's fate; Berton really sneers at this idea & excoriates Rae for being a money grubber; Berton's evidence for this claim seemed no stronger than the other's claim to the contrary. Considering the guy voluntarily spent most of his life wearing furs & eating blubber, the assertion that he was wild for wealth seems a tad unlikely. Berton also downplays the basic stupidity of some parts of the Franklin expedition, providing 'reasons' that range from possible to spurious to utterly ludicrous for their insistence on dragging through the trackless wastes such items as curtain rods, silver brushes, crystal, great wadges of silverware, multiple servants for their nearly useless officers, etc.

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