

Arctic Labyrinth: The Quest for the Northwest Passage

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For nearly 400 years, the possibility of an open shipping route above North America drew sailors to the top of the globe as surely the North Pole attracted their compass needles. A quicker alternative passage to the long, dangerous ocean voyage from Europe to the Orient promised huge rewards for the country claiming it first. Unlike the search for the North Pole, however, the hunt for such a route was not successful. The men who tested themselves against the Arctic's brutal conditions never found the clear passage they hoped for. In *Arctic Labyrinth*, Glyn Williams (author of *The Death of Captain Cook* and *Voyages of Delusion*) charts the major voyages of the North exploration. This is a chronicle of the thousands of men in hundreds of ill-equipped ships sent to freeze in the crushing maze of ice above Canada before it was realized that the passage could not be wished into existence.

The facts of the Arctic do not change. The cold is crippling, often taking limbs by frostbite or injury. Food supplies are hard to maintain and run woefully short. Scurvy is an ever-present adversary. The Inuit and Eskimo who live comfortably in the harsh conditions are alternately friend and foe. Only the men who challenge themselves against these elements provide narrative variety against this bleak background, and Williams uses extensive research into the journals kept, the maps sketched, and newspaper headlines that mark their expeditions to create vivid pictures of these larger-than-life explorers. Each planned to make the discovery of the Northwest Passage his mark on history. Generation after generation of remarkable men were alike inspired, obsessed, and ultimately defeated, chasing what turned out to be a red herring. Their legacies instead remain in the names of desolate coves, uninhabitable islands, and forlorn straights. The ultimate fate of the lost Franklin Expedition, one of the most ambitious and tragic ventures, offers an example of exactly how wrong even the most well-funded and optimistic expeditions can go.

The themes common to every expedition and repetitive journal entry could make for a dull read, but Williams avoids this. The book is enlivened with twenty-eight color illustrations and seventeen maps. The depth of Williams' research allows for narrative of each voyage, commentary on the politics behind each expedition, as well as a sly wink or two at the haughty, arrogant, and largely doomed ventures sent north. Britain intended to conquer the Arctic in the same way she expanded her empire, and often sailed North in woefully thin clothes, largely eschewing the customs of the natives who survived there. Ironically, it was only after adopting the light ships, dog sleds, and loose layers of fur favored by the Inuit guides that the Northwest passage was finally navigated and proven unreliable. In this way, William's book is at times a tale of the Arctic adventures, a commentary on the fading British Empire, and a lesson in the politics of exploration.

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