

## BOOK REVIEW

Review of *How Peary reached the pole: the personal story of his assistant*, by Donald B. MacMillan, with an introduction by Genevieve M. LeMoine, Susan A. Kaplan & Anne Witty (2008). Montreal & Kingston: McGill Queen's University Press. 305 pp. ISBN 978-0-7735-3450-6.

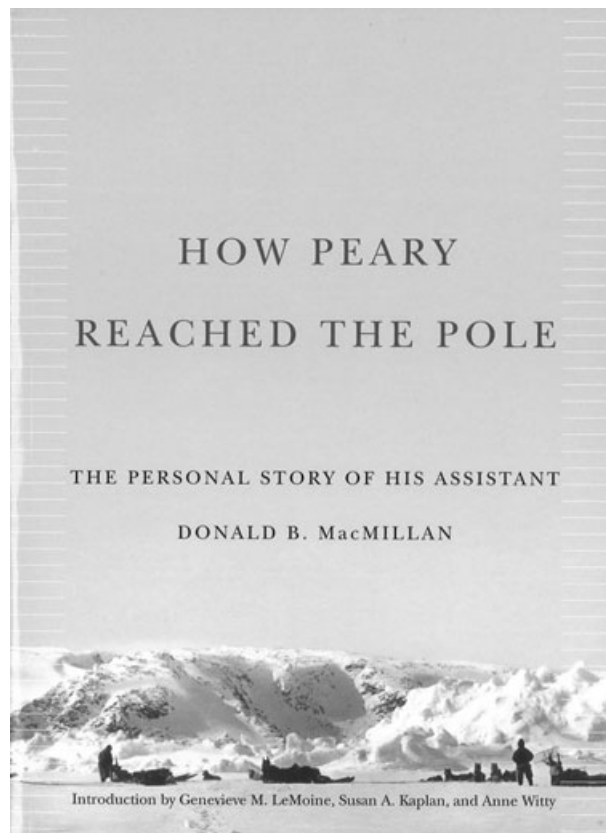
This beautifully produced reprint edition of Donald B. MacMillan's 1934 paean to his mentor Robert E. Peary arrives just in time for the centennial of Peary's claim to have reached the geographic North Pole on 6 April 1909. As the writers of the concise introduction point out, it also arrives in the middle of a growing international focus on how climate change is altering both the environment of the Arctic and the human responses to this change. It could even be argued that there is more sustained attention being paid to the High North at this moment than at any time since Peary's famous feud with fellow American claimant to the North Pole, Frederick A. Cook.

The introduction also provides a mini-biography of MacMillan, a man who enjoyed a very long life and had an underappreciated career introducing generations of researchers to the Arctic while developing deep friendships with the natives of Greenland. Born in 1874 to a seafaring family in Provincetown, Massachusetts, Donald MacMillan moved to the state of Maine as a boy after the death at sea of his father and the early death of his mother. He worked his way through Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine, studying geology and participating in numerous sports. Running a summer camp on Casco Bay, Maine, brought him into contact with Peary, the much-disputed heavyweight champion of American polar exploration. Peary invited MacMillan on his 1905/06 polar expedition, but a contractual obligation forced MacMillan to decline. When Peary failed to reach the pole in 1906, he again invited MacMillan north, and so at the age of 33, MacMillan found himself as a member of Peary's last great attempt to reach the goal of his lifetime.

In this volume, Peary looks every bit the Cheshire walrus in a remarkable photograph taken at Battle Harbour, Labrador, in September 1909, polar exploration's wildest and most argued-over month. Unfortunately, we do not get the precise date of this image: whether, for example, it was taken before or after Peary's public-relations disaster of a telegram accusing Cook of handing

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the world a gold brick. Reams of psychoanalysis could be produced if this man was putting on this face even in the knowledge of Cook's claim and Peary's awkward dismissal of it, to say nothing of Peary's self-knowledge of the truth, or lack of it, of his own claim to the pole. Or, if one believes MacMillan's account—and so far as it goes it is highly convincing—Peary merely looks as confident as he should have been in the knowledge that no one could seriously believe that Frederick Cook could have crossed a thousand miles (1600 km) of pack ice with little more than the shirt on his back. The idea was indeed laughable, but Peary—the eternal anti-Cook—never possessed the ability to get other people to laugh along with him.

Through his friendship with President Theodore Roosevelt and the patronage of, among many others, the National Geographic Society, Peary's crag of a face became a central icon of Roosevelt's muscular new America. Frederick Cook was too much of an enigma; Walter Wellman too much of a technological dilettante; and Evelyn Briggs Baldwin too much of a failure. As the



authors of the introduction correctly point out, when Peary went to the Arctic, with all the force of American corporate and government power behind him, and then returned claiming that the “‘Stars and Stripes [had been] nailed to the Pole’” (p. 264), “he became an emblem of what the country aspired to be” (p. xxiii). Or, as National Geographic’s Gilbert Grosvenor more nakedly put it in 1920, Peary possessed a “rugged integrity, and [a] love for everything American” (Grosvenor 1920: 322).

The details of Peary’s final assault on the North Pole as witnessed by MacMillan are of primary interest to those seeking answers to that great mystery, to be sure, but more interesting are the contexts within which MacMillan places Peary’s polar exploration: his experience and the techniques gained from those hard-won trials. The arc of that experience, from the early days in northern Greenland learning to ski from Eivind Astrup to the growing expertise of Matthew Henson in dog-driving and in the cultural anthropology of the north-west Greenland Inughuit, MacMillan persuasively precludes any serious consideration of Cook reaching the pole or anywhere near it. MacMillan and Robert Bartlett had both left Peary well before he made his final dash for the pole, with Bartlett turning back two degrees from the goal. But, having confirmedly reached that high latitude, MacMillan finds it inconceivable that Peary did not go the distance, for by that point his refined techniques and remaining personnel had left him “stripped for action” (p. 208).

The introduction authors write that MacMillan began this account during an Arctic cruise in 1928, but had laid out much of the theme in his valedictory on Peary’s life in the *National Geographic* after Peary’s death in 1920. “Do not forget the great word *experience*”, he had written then (MacMillan 1920: 308), and it is this theme that he returns to again and again in his 1928 manuscript, some of which is taken word-for-word from the 1920 article. There are some strange alterations, however, in the eight years separating the two accounts. In 1920, MacMillan writes that Peary left for the final dash at “nearly the 88<sup>th</sup> parallel”, with “only 120 miles [193 km] to go” (p. 314). In this account, he writes that Peary was “within one hundred and thirty-three miles [214 km] of the pole” (p. 208), which MacMillan describes as “comparatively few miles to go”. In 1920, MacMillan writes that for the final dash Peary took with him “48 of the best dogs of [the remaining] 250” (p. 314). In this account, these become “forty of his best dogs of the one hundred and thirty-three remaining”. For those keeping score, that’s an 11% greater distance with 17% fewer dogs. It seems that not only did MacMillan’s worship of Peary grow with the years, his impressions of the distances that he believed Peary’s methods allowed him to cover also changed.

Moreover, MacMillan’s direct criticism of Cook centres on the difference between straight-line distances in the Arctic and the distances that a human being actually covers when forced to overcome pressure ridges, recalcitrant dogs, equipment breakdowns and so forth. He puts this extra distance at about 25% of the straight-line distance. If one applies MacMillan’s own standard to Peary’s final dash from 88°N and back, as laid out in this book (133 nautical miles  $\times 2 + 25\%$ ), one arrives at 332.50 nautical miles just for Peary to get from the point where he leaves Bartlett on 31 March or 1 April, depending on which source you believe, to the pole, and back to the point where he left Bartlett. The five or six days to travel to the pole, by MacMillan’s reckoning, would be 150 nautical miles or more depending on the condition of the ice and the endurance of the men. Either way you slice it, that’s 25–30 nautical miles a day over multi-year ice, and then even more on the return, because MacMillan claims they did that on the double and even quadruple march.

Maybe Peary, at the age of 53, did it. More likely, as Wally Herbert reasoned, Peary got to perhaps within 80 miles (128 km) of his goal, close enough to ensure through his spyglass that there was no towering new continent in the distance, and then turned around. What MacMillan convincingly demonstrates—within the context of Peary’s experience—is that he most certainly *could* have done it. A very different thing, of course, but it could go far in explaining Peary’s walrus smile at Battle Harbour. If he secretly knew that, he, Robert Peary, with all his vast experience on the ice, could not do it, then he knew absolutely that it simply could not be done—and certainly not by the likes of Frederick Cook. Recent experiments “proving” that Peary made it miss the point on numerous counts, not least the age of the experimenters: the leader was only 30, and could barely duplicate half of Peary’s claimed distances over the last five-days’ march. Find 10 rugged, dog-driving men, like Peary, aged 53, drop them at 88°N, and see how many get to the pole and back in 10 days.

Beyond the Peary–Cook debate, MacMillan’s book covers much other interesting ground. He gave Richard Byrd his first taste of polar flying in 1925, but the notion here that this expedition “demonstrated the possibility of such a flight [to the North Pole]” (p. xxxvii) is a bit too generous. A particularly fascinating chapter for polar archaeologists, anthropologists and historians of science and exploration occurs when MacMillan and two companions re-occupy Adolphus Greely’s base at Fort Conger in the summer of 1909 to follow up Greely’s tidal observations from 1881–83. The base, in “an excellent state of preservation”, held everything that that the starving International Polar Year group had left behind, from “boxes of stuffed birds, boxes of geological specimens,

sections of petrified trees, fossils, Eskimo skulls, and photographic plates [along with] epaulettes, long swallow tails, and a visored cap of the vintage of 1861" (pp. 229–230).

A final nod goes to the 11 colour plates reproduced here. These were hand-tinted to MacMillan's specifications and used in his public lectures. They are a tribute to the researchers who oversaw their restoration and to the university press that allowed them to appear in the

work in an age when such publishers more typically find ways to cheapen the publication process while raising prices.

### References

- Grosvenor G. 1920. Peary's explorations in the Far North. *National Geographic* 37(4), 318–322.
- MacMillan D.B. 1920. Peary as a leader. *National Geographic* 37(4), 293–317.