# NINETY DEGREES NORTH

## THE QUEST FOR THE NORTH POLE

"[A] superb history . . . A fable of men driven to extremes by the lust for knowledge, as epic as a Greek myth."—TIME

FERGUS FLEMING

AUTHOR OF BARROW'S BOYS

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*The Quest for the North Pole*

Fergus Fleming

GROVE PRESS
*New York*

First published in Great Britain in 2001 by
Granta Books, London, England

*Published simultaneously in Canada*
*Printed in the United States of America*

FIRST GROVE PRESS PAPERBACK EDITION

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Fleming, Fergus, 1959–
Ninety degrees North : the quest for the North Pole / Fergus Fleming.
p. cm.
"First published in Great Britain by Granta Books 2001"—T.p. verso
Includes bibliographical references (p. )
ISBN 0-8021-4036-X (pbk.)
1. North Pole—Discovery and exploration. 2. Arctic regions—Discovery and exploration. I. Title: 90 degrees North. II. Title.

G620 .F58 2002
919.804—dc21 2002021469

Grove Press
841 Broadway
New York, NY 10003

03 04 05 06 07 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

'God gave man "dominion over *all* the earth" and made no exception of the North Pole.'

*Sir John Barrow, 1846*

'But what is the Pole? A point without magnitude, one extremity of the axis on which the terrestrial sphere revolves, without length, breadth or thickness.'

*Blackwood's Magazine, 1875*

'Is it the struggle towards the goals which makes mankind happy? What is the value of having goals for their own sake? . . . they all vanish . . . It is merely a question of time.'

*Fridtjof Nansen, c. 1900*

'The Pole at last!!! The prize of 3 centuries, my dream and ambition for 23 years. *Mine* at last.'

*Robert Edwin Peary, 1909*

# PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Seven years ago, I decided to write a two-volume history of the Arctic. Like many grand plans, mine fell apart almost immediately. The first volume became *Barrow's Boys*, a history of British exploration in the first half of the nineteenth century which encompassed not only the Arctic but the Antarctic, Australia and West Africa. The second became the book you are now holding. Both books stand on their own, but they can still be read sequentially, for the exploits described in the first lead directly to those in the second. It was Sir John Barrow who promoted nineteenth-century interest in the Arctic; and it was the search for one of his 'boys', Sir John Franklin, who disappeared in the North-West Passage, that set later explorers on their quest for the North Pole. Indeed, so long was the shadow of Barrow's programme that in 1927 Roald Amundsen, conqueror of both Poles, still cited Franklin as his inspiration.

As a narrative of North Pole exploration this is aimed at those who are new to the subject. Of necessity it includes episodes that will be recognisable to Arctic buffs. Tomes have been written about American explorers such as Kane, Hall, De Long, Greely and Peary; and books similar to this have been published in the past, the best and

most comprehensive being Pierre Berton's *The Arctic Grail* of 1988. Alongside the familiar, however, there is much that I hope will be new. The Austro-Hungarian and Italian expeditions, for example, have been ignored by most historians; the story of Germany's expedition has hardly been told since its return in 1870; the Russian attempt of 1913–14 is all but unknown; and a book could be written about Britain's 1875–6 expedition, the heroic failure of which was to be replicated in Antarctica by Captain Scott – the *éminence grise* in both cases being Sir Clements Markham (who, as it happens, was an admirer of Sir John Barrow). In addition, the story of the Pole ends habitually with its 'conquest' in 1909 by Robert Peary – or by his competitor Frederick Cook, if the fancy takes you – but as most authorities now accept that both men falsified their findings, I have included Sedov's 1914 attempt, the Amundsen–Ellsworth flight of 1925, the Byrd flight of 1926 and the Amundsen– Ellsworth–Nobile expedition by airship of the same year, the last of which was indisputably the first to reach the spot.

The question of priority is a thorny one. Did Peary reach the Pole? There are scientists who have spent years on floating ice stations and who have seen conditions so smooth that Peary's exaggerated mileage may have been possible. Some Polar explorers, too, have been reluctant to dismiss his claim. In 1988 the National Geographic Society studied his photographs and produced 'evidence' that he had reached the Pole. Other, less partisan, bodies in the US studied his readings and concluded that he had not. Did Cook do it? There are die-hards who insist that he did, despite overwhelming evidence that he was a fraud. Did Byrd do it? Once again the camps are split – some saying he did, others saying he was a publicity-seeker who lied throughout and a third, more generous faction saying that although he did not do it he genuinely thought that he had. All one can say for certain is that Amundsen, Ellsworth and Nobile were the first to see the Pole; that the first to set foot on it were a twenty-four-strong team of Cold War scientists under Alexander Kuznetsov, who flew there in 1948 on the orders of Joseph Stalin; and that an expedition led by British explorer Wally Herbert became, in 1969, not only the first to

reach the Pole by sledge but the first to traverse the Arctic pack – an astonishing feat. By rights, Kuznetsov and Herbert should feature prominently in this book. That they do not is due solely to narrative constraints. As the Arctic historian Christopher Pala has pointed out, it was the dream of centuries to stand at the North Pole; but those who did the standing were not those who did the dreaming. This story is about a dream, and it stops in 1926.

Hitherto, the North Pole has been treated pictorially as a poor cousin of its southern counterpart. This is a shame, because every Arctic expedition had something unique to record, albeit in different ways: early explorers, like Kane and Hayes, took sketches and gave them to the best available painter with instructions to get on with it; later expeditions brought along at least one illustrator, sometimes also a photographer, and in later cases, simply a camera; some explorers, such as Julius Payer, were artists in their own right. Here, therefore, reproduced at Great Personal Expense (Joanna: I know you would be disappointed if I didn't say that) are a selection of their works, some of which have not been aired in more than a century.

In writing this narrative I have used, wherever possible, the original journals of those involved. Nevertheless I owe a debt to the groundwork of previous authors who have written extensively on individuals and/or expeditions which are here covered in mere chapters. I urge anybody who is interested in Arctic history to read them. To name but a few: Wally Herbert's *The Noose of Laurels* provides a definitive analysis of Peary and his controversy with Cook; Roland Huntford's *Nansen* is a work of unimpeachable scholarship that should be read by anyone wanting to know about this great and enigmatic man; Beau Riffenburgh's *The Myth of the Explorer* is a goldmine of carefully annotated material; Leonard Guttridge's *Icebound* tells the full story of De Long, and his *Ghosts of Cape Sabine* does the same for Greely; Chauncey Loomis's *Weird and Tragic Shores* reveals all about Hall; George Corner and Oscar Villarejo have separately plumbed the journals relating to Kane's expedition; and Pierre Berton's *Arctic Grail*, as mentioned above, is required reading for all enthusiasts.

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I would like to thank: my agent Gillon Aitken; my editor and publisher Neil Belton, whose attention to the manuscript was masterful; Eugene Rae, Caroline Hoyle and Janet Turner of the Royal Geographical Society library, for their tireless assistance; Joanna Scaddon who went out of her way to provide access to the RGS picture collection; Andrew Tatham who gave me access to the RGS archives; everybody from the Scott Polar Research Institute, in particular Lucy Martin who provided photographs and Robert Headland who pointed me in the right directions and scoured the manuscript for its many errors; Dr Peter Broucek of the Österreichisches Staatsarchiv, Vienna; Mick Conefrey of the BBC who generously provided material from his *Icemen* documentary; also the staff of the British Library; the Kensington and Chelsea Library; the London Library; the National Maritime Museum; the National Portrait Gallery; the National Register of Archives; the Library of Congress, Washington, DC; also Sajidah Ahmad, Clare Alexander, Charlie Fletcher; Tora Fost; Sally Riley, Jane Robertson, Angela Rose, Leslie Shaw; plus Claudia Broadhead, Sam Lebus and Milly Simpson.

## A note on the text

*Measurements.* In their journals, explorers usually described distance in nautical miles. One degree of latitude = 60 minutes = 60 nautical miles – each mile being about 2,026 yards or 1.85 kilometres. They also used statute miles (which are smaller, at 1,760 yards or 1.609 kilometres), German miles (which are approximately three times the length of a nautical mile), kilometres and occasionally Russian versts (1,167 yards or 1.067 kilometres). For temperature they used Fahrenheit, Celsius and Reamur (convertible to Celsius by a multiplication of 1.25). Ideally, all these measurements should be translated to metric. Perversely, I have stuck with imperial. All temperatures are therefore in Fahrenheit, and all mileages are nautical unless they relate to minor forays, in which case they are statute.

The rule is: if it's north-south progress, it's nautical; if it's so many miles around a headland, or similar, it's statute.

*Names*. Eskimos are now known by their own appellation – Inuit. However, as most explorers of the time called them Eskimos, I have kept the term. Place names have been treated similarly – Spitsbergen instead of Svalbard, Prince Rudolf Island instead of Ostrov Rudolfa, and so on.

*Scurvy*. This disease crops up in all polar histories and without much explanation is generally accepted as being a Bad Thing. The Appendix explains just how bad it was. Reproduced from the *Scurvy Report* on Nares's 1875–6 expedition, it describes the symptoms, pathology and (as far as was known at the time) the causes.

# Chronology of Major Expeditions

**1845** Sir John Franklin RN steers the *Erebus* and *Terror* into the North-West Passage. Neither he, his ships, nor his crew are ever seen again. Subsequent rescue missions resurrect the centuries-old quest for the North Pole.

**1852** While searching for Franklin, Commander Edward Inglefield RN discovers Smith Sound to be navigable. His 'Peep into the Polar Basin' suggests that ships might be able to sail through Smith Sound to a theoretical Open Polar Sea and from there to the Pole itself.

**1853–5** Elisha Kent Kane commands a US expedition aboard the *Advance* up Smith Sound, purportedly in search of Franklin but also to find the North Pole. He survives mutiny, the loss of his ship, and a perilous boat journey home to announce that he has found the Open Polar Sea. In reality he has found only a stretch of water that happens temporarily to be ice-free.

**1860–61** One of Kane's officers, Isaac Israel Hayes, takes another expedition up Smith Sound aboard the *United States*. He too sees the Open Polar Sea. He, too, is mistaken.

**1860–69** Cincinnati printer, Charles Francis Hall, makes two journeys into the Arctic in search of Franklin. Returning with Eskimo testimony as to the fate of the survivors, he turns his attentions to the North Pole.

**1869–70** Germany launches a polar expedition under the command of Captain Karl Koldewey. The *Germania* and *Hansa* reach the east coast of Greenland whereupon they become separated. Sledgers from the *Germania* explore the coast, reaching 77°01′N. The *Hansa* is crushed and its crew drift south on a floe for 600 miles before reaching safety.

**1871–3** Hall reaches a farthest north of 82°11′ via Smith Sound aboard the *Polaris*. After his death – or possibly his murder – the expedition disintegrates. The *Polaris* is subsequently wrecked. Half the crew drift south on an ice floe, to be rescued six months later.

**1872–4** Captain Karl Weyprecht and Lieutenant Julius von Payer of Austria-Hungary explore the possibility of the Gulf Stream creating a 'thermometric gateway' to the Pole. Their ship, the *Tegetthoff*, becomes trapped in the ice. They drift north to discover a group of islands which they name Franz Josef Land. Threatened by scurvy, they abandon ship and drag their boats south until they meet open water.

**1875–6** Captain George Nares RN leads the *Alert* and *Discovery* through Smith Sound. His man-hauled sledge teams

chart the north-west coast of Greenland, and much of the north coast of Ellesmere Island. Travelling over the pack one group reaches 83°20′N. Crippled by scurvy, the expedition returns a year before schedule.

**1878–9** In command of the *Vega*, Baron Nils Adolf Erik Nordenskiöld of Sweden successfully traverses the North-East Passage.

**1879–82** Sponsored by the US press magnate James Gordon Bennett, Lt. George Washington De Long takes the *Jeannette* through Bering Strait in search of a second 'thermometric gateway' to the Pole. The ship sinks. Twelve men, including De Long, perish in the Lena Delta.

**1881–4** On Weyprecht's instigation, Europe and America adopt 1882 as the First Year of International Polar Cooperation. Adolphus Greely of the US Army sets up post at Fort Conger on Ellesmere Island. One of his lieutenants reaches a new farthest north of 83°23.8′. When supplies fail to arrive, Greely evacuates his men overland. By the time they are rescued only six of the twenty-four-strong team are alive, some of them having resorted to cannibalism.

**1883** Nordenskiöld tries and fails to cross Greenland.

**1886** Robert Edwin Peary, a US civil engineer, makes an unsuccessful attempt to cross Greenland.

**1888** Fridtjof Nansen, a Norwegian neuro-scientist, makes the first crossing of Greenland. In doing so he introduces skis as a tool of Arctic exploration.

**1891–2** Peary attacks Greenland again, sledging with two men to Independence Bay which he believes – erroneously – to be Greenland's northernmost point.

**1893–6** Nansen puts the *Fram* – a ship designed to resist ice pressure – into the polar pack, hoping that it will drift from Siberia to the Atlantic. During the voyage, Nansen and a crew member, Hjalmar Johanssen, leave ship to ski to the North Pole. They reach a new farthest north of 86°10′ before retreating to Franz Josef Land where they are rescued by Frederick Jackson. The *Fram* completes its journey under Otto Sverdrup.

**1893–5** Peary repeats his sledge voyage over Greenland. He achieves little new.

**1894–7** Frederick Jackson leads the Harmsworth–Jackson Expedition to Franz Josef Land. Three years' meticulous surveying is interrupted by the arrival of Nansen and Johanssen. Inspired by their example, Jackson makes his own attempt on the Pole. He sledges no further than the northern limits of the archipelago.

**1897** Salamon Andrée flies from Spitsbergen for the Pole, aboard the balloon *Eagle*. At 82°93′N the *Eagle* is driven down by bad weather, forcing Andrée and his two companions to walk to safety. They nearly make it. Their remains are discovered in 1930 on a small island to the east of Spitsbergen.

**1898–1902** Otto Sverdrup takes the *Fram* up Smith Sound and successfully explores the area west of Ellesmere Island.

**1898–1902** Peary loses all but two of his toes to frostbite in an

effort to outstrip Sverdrup, whom he believes, mistakenly, is trying to steal his glory. From Ellesmere Island he travels over the pack to reach 84°17′N.

**1899** Walter Wellman, a US journalist, tries to sledge to the Pole from Franz Josef Land. He is brought home a near-cripple, never having left the archipelago.

**1899–1900** The Duke of Abruzzi leads an Italian expedition to the Pole via Franz Josef Land. Captain Umberto Cagni and three others sledge to a new farthest of 86°33′N before making a hazardous return journey. Three of their support team vanish in the ice.

**1901–2** On the direction of US industrialist William Ziegler, Evelyn Baldwin tries to reach the Pole from Franz Josef Land using dogs and ponies. He fails ignominiously.

**1903–5** The second Ziegler expedition, under Anthony Fiala, lands on Franz Josef Land. It fares little better than the first.

**1905–6** Peary sledges across the Arctic pack from Ellesmere Island, reaching 87°06′N. His readings are open to doubt.

**1906** Wellman tries again, this time by airship from Spitsbergen. He is unable to take off due to engine failure.

**1907** Wellman brings a more reliable airship to Spitsbergen. It crashes on a glacier.

**1907–9** Frederick Cook, Peary's erstwhile companion, travels

through the Arctic west of Ellesmere Island and states that he has, in addition, reached the Pole. Greeted initially as a conqueror he is soon shown to be a fraud.

**1908–9** Peary sledges to the Pole over the Arctic pack from Ellesmere Island. Unlike Cook, his claim is believed. His readings are later proved to be false.

**1909** Wellman arrives in Spitsbergen with a new and improved airship. It flies a few miles north before being forced back. Then it blows up.

**1913–14** Gregoriy Sedov, a Russian surveyor, steams towards the Pole aboard the *Foka*. Underfunded and underprovisioned, his expedition manages to survey parts of Novaya Zemlya and Franz Josef Land. Sedov dies on a sledge journey over Franz Josef Land leaving the *Foka* to limp home.

**1925** Roald Amundsen and Lincoln Ellsworth leave Spitsbergen on two Dornier flying boats. They reach 88°N before engine failure forces them down. They leave one flying boat on the ice and, after two weeks' repairs, escape (narrowly) on the other.

**1926** Robert Evelyn Byrd flies for the Pole from Spitsbergen. Later research suggests that he did not achieve his goal.

**1926** Roald Amundsen, Lincoln Ellsworth and Umberto Nobile fly from Spitsbergen to Alaska on the airship *Norge*. They are the first people to see the North Pole.

**1948** On the instructions of Joseph Stalin, a team of scientists fly north for scientific and strategic purposes. Led

by Alexander Kuznetsov, they are the first to set foot on the Pole.

**1968–9** British explorer Wally Herbert becomes the first man not only to reach the Pole on foot but to traverse the polar pack.