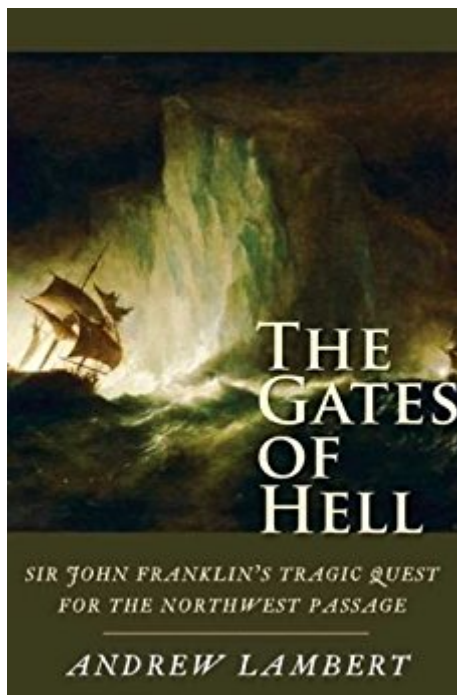




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The Gates Of Hell: Sir John Franklin's Tragic Quest For The North West Passage



Synopsis

Andrew Lambert, a leading authority on naval history, reexamines the life of Sir John Franklin and his final, doomed Arctic voyage. Franklin was a man of his time, fascinated, even obsessed with, the need to explore the world; he had already mapped nearly two-thirds of the northern coastline of North America when he undertook his third Arctic voyage in 1845, at the age of fifty-nine. His two ships were fitted with the latest equipment; steam engines enabled them to navigate the pack ice, and he and his crew had a three-year supply of preserved and tinned food and more than one thousand books. Despite these preparations, the voyage ended in catastrophe: the ships became imprisoned in the ice, and the men were wracked by disease and ultimately wiped out by hypothermia, scurvy, and cannibalism. Franklin's mission was ostensibly to find the elusive North West Passage, a viable sea route between Europe and Asia reputed to lie north of the American continent. Lambert shows for the first time that there were other scientific goals for the voyage and that the disaster can only be understood by reconsidering the original objectives of the mission. Franklin, commonly dismissed as a bumbling fool, emerges as a more important and impressive figure, in fact, a hero of navigational science.

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Customer Reviews

So educational. Intriguing to know that two other explorers almost made it to where Franklin's ships were, in 1849. Those men were all heroes, exploring a "final frontier" of that era. Lambert does a great job in presenting the facts.

Lambert is a great author and historian. This account is complete. Worth reading with "Resolute". A great story of exploration and Discovery. I can't imagine a more difficult journey.

The book is an encomium to Franklin. Fair enough. It is singularly devoid of maps. To tell the tale of Franklin's tragic quest in the absence of any maps is a travesty. Very frustrating read.

Another take on the Franklin disappearance. The facts are the same in every book I have read about the lost expedition, this one gives many more details and is quite well researched. The author paints Sir John Franklin and Lady Jane in a much better light than most accounts do and seems to discount other opinions put forth by other writers. The Franklin mystery will never be solved, which leaves the door wide open for conjecture. This book can be a slow read, and while the photographs are nice, I would have liked to see more maps other than just the two photographs of maps. A welcome addition to the Franklin lore.

This is my first book by Lambert, & I'm going to be generous and assume that he fell in love with Franklin at history's remove & decided to "rehabilitate" the heck out of his reputation, at the risk of his (Lambert's) own reputation as a writer & historian. There is not even a hint of a measured view or neutral tone here; the whole book is nauseatingly sycophantic. Lambert even manages to make failure sound like victory: at one point he actually says (of Franklin's first over-land expedition) "But [Franklin's] performance had not been about competence, it had been about leadership, motivating men who believed themselves as good as dead." I was immediately reminded of the Duke of Wellington's sole requirement for his lieutenants; that they be brave. Lambert doesn't care about competence, which is a good thing, given his subject matter, since many of Franklin's most savage critics excoriate him for lacking that rather crucial trait. One of the key ways which Lambert makes Franklin out to be a perfect hero is by drastically glossing over details of his various expeditions, even the last. He goes into utterly excruciating detail about the political scene, scientific infighting, and power squabbles of the time, but if you're interested in really learning about actual polar expeditions, look elsewhere for anything but the barest of summary. He gets through Franklin's first

over-land expedition --which was by no means a success-- in a few very general paragraphs, topping those off with the aforementioned boot-licking observation that competence didn't matter, Franklin was a great leader because a few starved skeletons managed to stagger back alive. Lambert did manage to open the book with an arresting and vivid scene of cannibalism, thus vindicating those writing classes where they teach you to use a "grabber" as an opening sentence, but alas, that's the first and last time the adjectives "vivid" or "grabber" can be applied to this book. Thereafter "turgid" and "bogged down in details" are much more fitting descriptors. This book, as with so infuriatingly many polar exploration books, suffers from a severe dearth of maps. I don't know why this is so, but at least it's consistent. There are 8 pages of photos, including 2 maps: the major map in this book is of the various searches for Franklin and manages to cram 15 expeditions into one smeary gray rectangle. The other is half the size, a grey-on-grey-on-grey micro-snarl of the entirety of northern Canada with 7 different attempts to find The Passage, which Lambert captions by saying that "Franklin had mapped much of the North West Passage, and realised that it was no more than a geographical curiosity." Thus Lambert manages to imply that Franklin did all that exploring and that he figured out that the NWP was a pipe dream two decades before his last trip....curious scholarship, to say the least. The rest of the photos are pictures of paintings of the arctic done by people who never got anywhere near it, or portraits; the traditional "portrait of the explorer as a fat man" and Lady Jane as a teenager, plus a couple of actual photos. One comes away with the impression that the total of all British expeditions & explorations in the 19th century had nothing to do w/geography, territories, or colonialism; the real reason British ships went all over the place was to study magnetism. That was the real impetus behind Franklin, & Lambert laments that apparently they even "forgot" the real reason at the time. Apparently the man behind the magnetism, Sabine, was such a cunning fellow that he got all this exploration going (including the "rescue" missions) for the purpose of collecting magnetic data without anyone realizing it beforehand, and faded so completely into the shadows afterward that they didn't figure it out after the fact, either, & all historians (except Lambert) have never figured it out, either. Quite the shadow driver behind 19th C exploration! This is a new concept to me, so I don't feel qualified to really judge the truth of the matter, but any time anyone comes up with a completely successful Grand Conspiracy Theory my eyebrows automatically go askew. Not helping my skepticism is the fact that Lambert has an interesting relationship to facts, to say the least. He sneers at earlier theorizers who proposed scurvy or other reasons for the failure of the Franklin Expedition because they had no proof. He then argues that he has conclusive proof that scurvy was the ultimate cause, because of Inuit testimony that described symptoms of the band of stragglers that sounded a lot like scurvy.

Then he mentions Beattie's research that proved conclusively that the three bodies buried on Beechey Island had very high levels of chronic lead poisoning --something that basically guaranteed ill health, poor decision making, and death. And he goes on to dismiss all possibility that lead could even have contributed to the disaster (along with botulism, or TB, though there is excellent evidence for both) with the curious "logical" conclusion that since he knows the definitive reason for the disaster --Inuit-described scurvy-- it is unscientific & ridiculous to pose any other causal possibilities, however strong the physical evidence. Though it is refreshing to have a European not dismiss the Inuit as absolute lying savages who probably ate the Franklin members themselves, this tortuous "reasoning" is outrageous. It does, however, follow in the grand tradition of refusing to admit that there could've been more than one cause behind any given polar disaster. I spent many years in scientific research and well know the perils of academic tunnel vision, but polar historians raise it to an art. I have read other books that attempted to portray Franklin's last expedition as a great success tragically cut down, to the point of going down the list of the insane crap they dragged over the ice (curtain rods, silver hairbrushes, etc) and making up ludicrous "uses" for them. I have never read one that so clearly was written with a portrait of the subject hanging over the author's desk, wreathed in halos and aglow with soft golden light. This book would be more properly defined as a hagiography....though (ironically) Lambert spends some time at the end bemoaning the way Lady Franklin & other apologists came to portray Franklin as a Victorian Gentleman Hero, which he decides led directly to the tragedy (& incompetence) of the Scott Expedition and even to millions of British lads dying in WWI (!!). This last is a leap of deduction that ends the book on a thoroughly confounding note, at least for yours truly. His complaint is not that they made of him a saint, but that they made of him the wrong kind of saint. But he was not any kind of saint, he was a polar explorer who (like many of them) did thoughtless, determined, stupid, and brave things.

This is, by far, the most civil, sedate book about cannibalism I've ever read. It's focused on the expedition of Sir John Franklin, doomed British explorer seeking the famed Northwest Passage through the arctic ice, and perhaps some magnetic navigational data. The set up was gruesome and gripping: "We don't know when it started, or who took the decision, but some time in May 1848 British sailors from HMS Erebus and HMS Terror began butchering and eating their comrades. We do not know if they killed the living, picking out the weak, the young and the expendable, or whether they confined their attentions to the dead. But make no mistake they ate their shipmates, not one or two, but forty or fifty." That's the first paragraph of the prologue, and "understandably" I was hooked. But from that grim

and fevered promise, the book slowed down dramatically, focusing on the minute details of Franklin's career, the history of and impetus for (mostly) British Arctic exploration and the search for the Northwest passage, the key scientific and political players shaping the exploration landscape of the day and the ramifications of the disappearance of the Franklin expedition. Not that it wasn't interesting, it just wasn't riveting, like other books on exploration I've read. And certainly not as riveting as one would expect for a book about a party of hale and hearty explorers doomed to the worst imaginable icy privations followed by scurvy-ravaged cannibalism. Instead, it was a fine-grained, meticulous and scholarly look at the era and what seemed like an overly eager effort to rehabilitate the reputation of a possibly great man and reasonably good explorer who may have ended his career as someone's supper. I will say that, frozen environment aside, the turn-of-the-century men of science inhabited a brutal landscape different only by degrees from the Arctic in which fortunes rose and fell on capricious whim, and they often seemed to eat their own. Also, Franklin's widow was clearly an amazingly focused and tenacious driven woman. She dedicated her life and vast amounts of resources and political capital to first trying to rescue him, then trying to find his remains, then tamping down the ugly smear of cannibalism and, finally, by trying to carve out and preserve his place in history. She was able to shape the press and bend the political world of her day with a fierce determination and canniness that make even the most seasoned of today's public relations professionals seem like underprepared amateurs. A long slog of a read, but worth the time (bring snacks).

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