

Cook & Peary: The Polar Controversy Resolved. Robert M. Bryce. Stackpole: Mechanicsburg, PA 1997. 1133 pages. \$50.

The literature of polar exploration, unlike that of climbing, is known for its historical tomes. Yet Robert M. Bryce's *Cook & Peary: the Polar Controversy Resolved* is the lengthiest and perhaps, the most painstakingly researched of all the voluminous polar exploration titles, including Pierre Berton's *Arctic Grail*, Roland Huntford's *Scott and Amundsen*, and *Shackleton*. Bryce's behemoth (the first 998 pages is followed by 135 pages of Bibliography and Source Notes) is about two explorers who both claimed to first tag the North Pole.

Frederick Cook and Robert Pyres' dealings with the North Pole should be of no small interest to the readers of the *AAJ*. Cook was one of the founders of the American Alpine Club, and conquering the Pole was all the rage with explorers and alpinists alike at the turn of the last century. And it is in the nuances of Cook's life, more so than Pyres', that the book comes alive. The details of Cook's marriages, frauds, and legitimate explorations are unveiled through a litany of footnoted events, congressional investigations, newspaper stories, lawsuits, tedious correspondence, and telling anecdotes.

I was initially compelled by the story, then several hundred pages later, somewhat inundated, unlike in *Arctic Grail* or *Scott and Amundsen*. Bryce was clearly aiming for an Arctic version of Huntford's dualistic Antarctic biography. Yet unlike those other two books of human tragedy and crafted profiles, Bryce dismisses Peary to the extent that we don't get to know him, and Cook is revealed only by sifting through Bryce's considerable research tailing piles. A skillful editing (even those other voluminous polar histories are half the page length of this) would have made Cook more accessible.

By the time we learn all about Cook's 14-year jail sentence for mail fraud, halfway through the book, an odd portrait of the man emerges. If he were alive today, it would not be hard to like the man, described by a contemporary as "a child and a foolish, head-strong one when it came to dealing with worldly realities. His enemies made him a victim of his own naive honesty." Cook's personality, in a word, was irresistible.

Initially, the author seems to be an objective biographer, and we are made aware of a plethora of minutiae about Cook. We feel his sorrow after his first wife dies. Then we wonder how Marie, the second wife, hangs on through all of Cook's lengthy departures and fraudulent dealings. After digging long enough, we read one of her letters about how she was "hypnotized" by him. And we merely learn that she divorced him after finding him naked in a room with another woman. End of story there.

His cell mates in Leavenworth, of course, revered him (it took the paroled Cook an hour to exit the prison yard through the throng of well wishers). *The New York Times* wrote about the same release (and explained his fraudulent claims on Denali, the North Pole, and his bilking of thousands of similarly charmed people through mail fraud): "It was only when left to his own devices and fancy that his moral principles took a queer twist, his imagination led him astray, and he fell."

Cook is indeed a fascinating study and it is to Bryce's credit that he tracked his subject's life so assiduously. Bryce shares one of Cook's notes for a planned posthumous book that would clear his name: "After this [posthumous] document appears in print it should be followed promptly by a book an elaboration of same with the appeal of a bleeding heart all thou for a little understanding for a life intended as a service to humanity." This is one precious lodestone in which the biographer actually holds up the mirror to Cook's face.

But Bryce's investigation of the Denali climb of 1906, like Cook's own claim, made me

question the book's credibility. The author spends a lot of time on an aging gardener's theory about how Cook really did make the climb. The author also elevates men like Walt Gonnason, one of the few Denali climbers who actually believes that Cook made the summit. Gonnason summited once on a well-traveled Denali route, then, sponsored by the Frederick Cook Society in 1956, failed on Cook's supposed East Buttress route—and still maintained that Cook did the climb.

The vastly more experienced pioneer, Bradford Washburn, is given short shrift in the text. We learn in the Source Notes that Washburn probably spurned Bryce because of his absurd pro-Cook theories. Bryce similarly dismisses most of the respected sources in Denali history in order to keep Cook's claim afloat. He proposes that the Sourdoughs could have faked their climb in 1910, and that Belmore Browne's memory and motives are suspect. Bryce, in fact, systematically deflates all the most credible pioneers of Denali: Washburn, Browne, and Hudson Stuck (alleging pedophilic tendencies) and others. He then infers that they, like Peary, all came from the same sort of political or societal fabric that would defrock Cook. Bryce reveals more negativities about the nay-sayers of Cook in the Source Notes than he does about Cook in the text.

The author's endless postulations might make fine filler for a historical novel, but not for a historical biography. The sad thing is that to Denali amateurs, and to Bryce himself, his theories might seem logical. To any alpinist who is a student of the mountain and its history, Cook was an audacious pioneer for his 1903 circumnavigation, and then, in 1906, a bald liar. Cook's claim to have climbed up the wildly corniced East Buttress and to the summit, all in eight days without crampons (Bryce refers to them as "ice creepers"), was not possible for the luminary alpinists of the day, let alone an amateur climber like Cook. The East Buttress route that Cook attempted was not finally climbed until 63 years later. And traversing over to Karstens Ridge from the East Buttress (which Bryce claims was Cook's probable route) has never been done, let alone attempted. Certainly Cook, for all of his brash optimism as an explorer, didn't even get high enough on the mountain to try this unappealing and difficult traverse.

I believe that Bryce, for all of his careful research, was drawn in by the inexorable charm of the long-dead Frederick A. Cook. In the Preface, Bryce refers to feeling the "spell" from one of Cook's books, as the writing "whispered" aloud to him. This is *Cook & Peary's* power: through its comprehensive treatment of Cook (if you had never set out on an uncrowded flank of Denali or dragged a sledge on broken sea ice) you too would be swayed up out of your basket. This is how Cook worked his eerie magic. Like thousands of other Cook supporters, Robert M. Bryce, for all of his erudition, cannot help himself from buying, then selling, Cook's snake oil.

By page 802, my suspicions had been sufficiently aroused to turn to the Acknowledgments, pages 977-978. Sure enough, the first person acknowledged is a staff person of the Frederick Cook Society (dedicated to restoring honor to that family's besmirched name). And in the entire last paragraph of this section, thanks are given "to the many stout supporters of Dr. Cook," ending on a note of apology that they might be disappointed by the book.

It seems there are other omissions or short treatments in this otherwise lengthy treatment of the high latitudes, such as Cook's theft of the Fuegian language dictionary, or his purported Eskimo mistresses and children (Bryce mentions Pyres' Eskimo children, but only in brief; Bryce seems leery of sexual scandals throughout). Finally, Bryce comes to the same conclusions of most arctic historians: Cook did not make the pole; Peary might have made it. This is, as the book's subtitle claims, *The Polar Controversy, Resolved?*

We are given a scholarly treatment of Cook's extraordinary achievements outside of his frauds, such as his year adrift in the Antarctic, his remarkable sledging journeys in the Arctic,

and his ethnographic accounts of the Eskimo. The book could be retitled: *An In-depth Study of the Movements of Doctor Cook*, which from my perspective is the best reason to read it. Yet the wealth of this Cook and Peary material, in the hands of a Roland Huntford (or a good editor), could have made a classic book.

Meanwhile, the Cook saga lives on. Washburn was invited to a debate in Fairbanks two years ago about the Denali climb, but the Cook Society's representative canceled at the last minute. In 1994, some experienced Denali climbers again were financed by the Society to climb Cook's route. They failed, and none of them had the heart publicly to admit that Cook also failed, or that he executed the greatest lie in Denali history. It's a tribute to his charm, 58 years after his death, that flowers, condolences and donations are still being accepted.

JONATHON WATERMAN

The Climb of My Life: A Miraculous Journey from the Edge of Death to the Victory of a Lifetime. Laura Evans. Harper: San Francisco, 1996. 268 pages. \$22.00.

The *Climb of My Life* is a truly inspirational book, not just for women but for anyone who is faced with what may seem to be insurmountable odds. The book is interwoven with Evans' reflections on her mountaineering experiences, its influence on her psyche and the almost-overwhelming impact of breast cancer. Unlike many mountaineering accounts, wherein the reader is gripped by the adventure of predictable danger, the attitude of this story is summarized eloquently with the passage, "The Mountain before me is one I did not choose to climb. I woke up instead at its base, looking up at its towering peaks, anticipating the unknown hardships that lay ahead."

Evans' story begins with her diagnosis of breast cancer, then switches back and forth between her diagnosis and incidents that apparently flashed through her mind during her initial discovery of a lump and her diagnosis. The transitions between the two are abrupt, making it difficult to follow, and I sometimes had to reread to determine where we were. This pattern of shifting from thought to thought without connection continues throughout the book until she begins her description of the actual climb of Aconcagua. Here her focus is much clearer.

The book has some very good ideas regarding mental attitude and motivation. My favorite was an exercise she did with the self-help group she started, in which everyone makes a list of the things that make them smile. When they examined the lists, they found that most of these things were easily obtainable. (I actually did this with my disgruntled teenage students—and it works.)

There are other feelings and thoughts the significance of which might be more obscure to those who have never been there. But I have been there, and I think I understood the significance of her story about Buster only because I had a similar experience. I prayed that I might have several years at the end of my chemotherapy to enjoy life and, a few days later, a dear friend who had become one of my guardian angels during my treatment was killed. I felt he had somehow taken my place in death.

The Climb of My Life is by no means a captivating, "can't-put-it-down-until-I'm-finished" mountaineering account, like a *Touching the Void*. Evans' story is better appreciated as a motivational novel. The conversational passages I found somewhat dry and the jumps from one train of thought to another annoying at times. But her story of fighting back against the odds of survival to climb the highest peak in the Western Hemisphere to raise money for Breast Cancer Research is truly inspirational. When you are told you have breast cancer, for which