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Iceblink: The tragic fate of Sir John Franklin's lost polar expedition ¹

by
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It has been called the greatest disaster in the history of polar exploration. Led by Arctic explorer Sir John Franklin, two state-of-the art ships and 128 hand-picked men - the best and the brightest of the British Empire - sailed from Greenland on July 12, 1845, in search of the elusive Northwest Passage. Fourteen days later, they were spotted for the last time by two whalers in the Baffin Bay. What happened to these ships - and to the 129 men on board - has remained one of the most enduring mysteries in the annals of exploration. Drawing upon original research, Scott Cookman provides an unforgettable account of the ill-fated Franklin expedition, vividly recreating the lives of those touched by the voyage and its disaster. He has faithfully reconstructed the voyage, from its ships, its Commanders and the men of the Discovery Service, to the factors that ultimately decided their fate. Some of these factors could be, and were, expected and suitable preparations made. These include the extreme weather and being trapped in ice (although possibly not for 18 months). Others factors were not and Cookman suggests a human culprit whose activities may have been integral in triggering the deaths of Franklin and all 128 of his men.

The North-West Passage exists or rather the North West Passages exist. They exist, however, in one of the most inhospitable parts of the planet. The first successful passage did not occur until 1906, some 60 years after Franklin's attempt. Indeed, Cookman notes that, while humankind has made 8 successful trips to the moon, it has only traversed the North-West Passage 7 times. Against this backdrop, Cookman describes a voyage of idealism, national pride, endurance and, at times, amazing bravery. He also captures the atmosphere of a ship trapped in ice for over a year and a half, with coal and food supplies dwindling, with underpowered engines, with officers and fit sailors dying rapidly and mysteriously, and the last desperate bid across the ice and frozen seas to the outposts of northern Canada - a bid destined to fail. In his final Afterword, Cookman notes that 'No disaster is a bastard. Most, in fact, have many fathers' (pp. 198). He summarises the many factors that were to doom this voyage to failure - from its overriding focus on the technology of the time, its large crew, an unknown bacteria called *Clostridium botulinum*, and to Franklin's luck (or lack of it).

This book was loaned to me by an Army colleague with a passion for arctic exploration. As this was not usually an area of strong interest for me, I approached this book with some trepidation. Rather than a rehashed pastiche of old Scott stories, this is a fascinating look at the Discovery Service of the Royal Navy in the mid-19th century, its interaction with the environmental challenges and the role of military medicine and preventative health in ensuring these voyages were, generally, successful. It is well worth reading and there are a number of important lessons to take home, from not going necessarily with the lowest contractor to personnel selection for operational duties. Ice Blink is the name 19th-century sailors gave polar mirages, caused by light reflected off polar ice.