

American Spirit and the Polar Dream

Ava Ryan

Faculty mentor: Andrea Sutherland
History

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Ava Ryan is a Senior student graduating in May of 2026 from Northern Kentucky University with a Bachelor's in History and a minor in Anthropology. She presented at NKU's Spring Celebration 2024 and was included in the President's Honor List for the Fall 2024, Fall 2025, and Spring 2025 semesters. She is grateful for the support of NKU'S History Department, and the continued guidance of her faculty mentor, Dr. Andrea Sutherland. She plans to pursue her Master's degree in Public History at Northern Kentucky University following her graduation.

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Abstract

Polar exploration is often perceived as a solely European endeavor, but American involvement tells a different story. This investigation examines American participation in polar exploration to highlight three core tenets of the "American Spirit": individuality, competition, and idealism. By examining the Americans involved in the global saga of polar exploration, we can see how their identity as Americans distinguishes their exploits from their European counterparts. Additionally, this exploration reveals how a nation's spirit can shape and be shaped by its people, contributing to a unique national identity.

Introduction

The abandoned *HMS Resolute* was found alone in the Arctic ice in 1855 by an American whaling vessel, the *George Henry*, and returned to a grateful England as a show of goodwill. When in 1879 the *Resolute* was decommissioned, Queen Victoria sent one of three desks built with the deconstructed wood to then-president Rutherford B. Hayes. The “Resolute Desk” was placed in the White House’s Oval Office and services an American president to this very day.¹ This part of the desk’s origin story is no great mystery to the American public, though the reason for the *Resolute*’s imprisonment in the ice is rarely expounded upon. She was one of many ships that departed in search of Sir John Franklin’s lost 1845 expedition for the Northwest Passage once it had become clear that Franklin and his men would not be returning to England without assistance, victorious in their quest or otherwise.² The search for the mythical Passage, then, intertwines with the history of the United States of America down to seemingly innocuous details—from the desk of the president crafted from an Arctic vessel to the Hudson River, named after a Canadian explorer seeking the Passage in America. America is often excluded from recountings of polar exploits, as if the involvement of the U.S. is so inconsequential as to be unworthy of mention. It is worthwhile to posit, however, that American involvement in polar exploration as compared to other theatres of polar conquest worldwide is emblematic of the core tenets of the American Spirit: individuality, competition, and idealism.

What eventually became a worldwide race for the Passage began as a primarily European affair. The “Old Guard” of British explorers like John Ross, John Barrow, William Edward Parry, and John Franklin all experienced their fair share of hardship at the hands of the sea, the ice, and scurvy, though none would acquire such infamy as Franklin and his lost expedition.³ These were the early days of the golden age of polar conquest, beginning just after the Napoleonic Wars and the War of 1812 had come to a close. The rumblings of polar exploration touched even these seemingly disparate events; John Franklin fought at Trafalgar in 1805 and New Orleans in 1815, and the *HMS Terror*, which he later commanded as an ice-breaking vessel in 1845, participated in the 1814 assault on Fort Mchenry and inspired Francis Scott Key to pen “The Star-Spangled Banner.”⁴ American involvement at this time was not, however, exclusively tangential. Thomas Jefferson selected Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to lead an expedition into the newly acquired Louisiana Purchase of 1803, to explore the untamed land and, hopefully, to find a Northwest Passage via the Missouri River. They did not find the Passage, though they made strong headway into uncharted areas that were now officially parts of America, and proved that overland travel in the continental United States to the Pacific Ocean was possible.⁵

An American whaler discovered the *HMS Resolute*, but America had more stake in the search for Sir John Franklin and his men than merely picking up after other nation’s failed efforts. Two of the most well-known polar explorers who combed the Arctic for news of Franklin’s fate were Americans Charles Francis Hall (born in 1821) and Frederick Schwatka (born in 1849).⁶ Hall was a contemporary to the expedition, searching for evidence of their whereabouts within years of Franklin’s disappearance, while Schwatka would perform much of his search between 1878 and 1880, long after the expedition set sail.⁷ Even though it had been decades since Franklin and his men were last seen alive, global interest in their fate had hardly waned. Both men were born and raised in the United States, yet chose to explore the vicious Arctic in search of England’s lost expedition, and made historic discoveries in the process. Schwatka was considerably more successful than Hall in discovering tangible relics of the expedition they both sought, though the greatest accomplishment shared by these explorers was proof of white Western men surviving in the Arctic for greater periods of time and with greater comfort when adopting the habits of survival employed by the local Inuit people of the Canadian Arctic. The indigenous people of the region had suffered from a poor relationship with European interlopers for many years, and when the Scottish Dr. John Rae returned to England in 1854 after his own excursion to King William Island with the grim tidings of cannibalism among Franklin’s men, the Western opinion of the Inuit soured even further.⁸ Hall and Schwatka’s adoption of Inuit techniques, then, was somewhat radical. The superiority of these technologies, like dogsledding, was noted by famed Irish explorer Leopold McClintock, also known as the “father of modern sledging.” Even though the dogsled was noticeably swifter than the typical heavy man-hauled sledge (a small boat set upon runners attached to harnesses), McClintock continued to insist upon cumbersome traditional sledges on later expeditions, which indicates the negative European attitudes towards adoption of non-Western technologies.⁹ The Americans involved in this conflict approached with a mind that, while perhaps not truly *open*, was certainly not as rigidly closed off as their European brethren. It is important to note here that this seemingly progressive phenomenon does not indicate the typical American treatment of indigenous people, which has been consistently deplorable since the discovery of the North American continent by Europeans.

The Franklin Expedition was England’s claim to polar infamy and by far the most well-known, but America had her own fair share of Arctic misfortune. The taint of supposed cannibalism colors not only Franklin’s crew but the crew of American captain Adolphus Greely, who was one of only seven survivors out of a crew of twenty-five from the 1881 Greely Expedition—also known as the Lady Franklin Bay Expedition—though all survivors denied the accusation of cannibalism and maintained this position fiercely.¹⁰ The reason for Greely’s departure is not dissimilar to many of the expeditions taking place at this

point, including the also ill-fated American venture of the *USS Jeannette*.¹¹ What was most valuable at this time was not any material gain—hopes of a profitable Northwest Passage had sunk, for the most part, with John Franklin—but rather scientific knowledge and data collecting. There was also the search for the magnetic poles, though that quest increased in ferocity during the 20th century. A contemporary article published in the *Scientific American* on the departure of the *Jeannette* stated: “The grand object of the expedition is to add to our knowledge of the unexplored regions in the neighborhood of the North Pole—if possible to attain to that long sought and apparently unapproachable geographical position.”¹² There seems to be a great American discomfort concerning the “great blank which covers our maps...,” which rings true when considering the drives of Manifest Destiny and similar forces upon the collective American psyche.¹³

Individuality

Other nations financed their polar ventures differently than the typical American expedition, which can be indicative of national values and attitude towards exploration. The English Admiralty was tasked with financing and managing exploratory expeditions. For American nonmilitary operations, many captains seeking a ship, crew, or financier had to source their own funding and assistance as an individual; one such financier was the American philanthropist Henry Grinnell, who fully funded the first American effort to find the Franklin Expedition in 1850.¹⁴ Divisions like the U.S. Antarctic Program (USAP), which is run by the U.S. National Science Program, would not be formed for years after the Heroic Age of Antarctic Exploration (ending in 1922). USAP was formed in 1959, marking one of the clearest divides between private and governmentally funded exploration in America.¹⁵ This is not a firm rule; famed Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen was funded by through private financiers as well as funds raised on the lecture circuit often worked by explorers, and he often borrowed his fellow explorer and friend Fridtjof Nansen’s ship the *Fram* when money was an obstacle, though he is one of the more notable outliers.¹⁶ For example, the Belgian Antarctic Expedition (more commonly known as the *Belgica*, for the ship used), on which Amundsen was a crewmember early in his career, was funded by the Royal Belgian Geographical Society and approved by the royal family of Belgium.¹⁷ Two of the most captivating American figures in the polar sphere, Robert E. Peary and Frederick Cook, were funded by multiple independent associations and casino moguls, respectively.¹⁸

Peary, who claimed to be the first man at the North Pole, was often lambasted by the press and public after his return from his 1908 expedition for his choice in travelling companion. On his final push to the “Pole,” he chose his longtime colleague and friend Matthew Henson, a Black American sailor with an extensive history at sea and in the Arctic, and who was described by other expedition members as being extremely

capable and handy.¹⁹ Henson was Peary’s only American witness to his supposed polar feat (the others being four Inuit men, who hardly registered in the American mind). This was not the only reason for the doubt surrounding Peary’s achievement, but it was one of the most salacious and opined upon. Why, the skeptics asked, would Peary not bring along one of the white men who accompanied him on the expedition, who would be deemed more trustworthy by the public and government alike? Did he command Henson to lie for him, or to falsify measurements?²⁰ Peary himself wavered on the subject, professing at first in his 1910 book that he only took Henson along with him because he was afraid that, if left alone back at the camp, Henson would die due to his own weakness and incompetence.²¹ This was both outlandish and, naturally, attributed to his race. Peary changed tactics very quickly in 1911 when called before a congressional investigation committee, charged with proving the legitimacy of his claim on the Pole. He then stated, in the interest of proving his witness reliable, that, “The man I took with me was more effective for the combined demands of extended work than any white man I have ever had with me.”²²

There have been a number of explanations put forward as to Peary’s reasoning for choosing Matthew Henson as his second for his final polar expedition. The first and most obvious being that Peary and Henson had a longstanding professional relationship and friendship, and that Henson had proven himself more than capable, further disproving Peary’s slander of him in his book. Henson saved Peary’s life on more than one occasion, and Peary is quoted as having said of him, “[Henson] is my most valuable companion. I could not get along without him.”²³ Another proposed explanation is that Peary was intent on having only Americans at the Pole (Inuit guides notwithstanding.) The probable second choice for Peary’s right hand on the expedition was a white man by the name of Bartlett, who was often put forward in the time following Peary’s return as the man he should have chosen over Henson. Peary, however, was intensely patriotic, and Bartlett was Canadian.²⁴ For Peary, perhaps patriotism eclipsed racial prejudice in this instance.

The final explanation, and the one most aligned with the tenet of individuality, is that Peary believed in some sense that—were he to bring Henson—he would not have to share any of the honors for his feat.²⁵ This is because, for all intents and purposes, Henson would not count as his own individual. In the white American mind, Peary was Henson’s natural superior, a man with his own individuality, who commanded Henson’s labor as a tool. Henson would not be his collaborator, or a co-discoverer. There would be no “Peary and Henson at the Pole,” the achievement would be Peary’s and Peary’s alone. Henson wouldn’t, essentially, “count.” Peary could benefit from his expertise and make use of Henson’s skillset, while maintaining his image as the sole discoverer of the Pole, the figure worthy of all of the accolades associated with such an achievement,

the summiteer of one of the last great masculine individual trials left unconquered. The American idea of the individual is therefore extremely important, but not all individualism is made equal. Robert E. Peary, on account of his race, is allotted more agency and individuality than Matthew Henson, who was by all accounts more capable and well-rounded than Peary. Henson, to accrue his own due portion of the acclaim given to Peary, had to first prove the irrelevancy of his “racial inheritance” in order to be thought of as an individual.²⁶

The American focus on individuality indicates the importance of personal glory as compared to the goals of shared victory in other countries. The American view of glory is that of bringing victory home through your own personal exploits, whereas elsewhere there is greater collaboration between members of formal institutions in the hopes of association with someone who has or might one day accrue fame, glory, or victory. It is also a decidedly masculine pursuit, the attainment of the pole would be “...the ultimate test of manhood.”²⁷ The American man has no sense of diluted or shared victory; it is all or nothing, even as it relates to matters of international interest. This factor also heightens the perceived accomplishments performed by Americans in the eyes of their fellow countrymen—if a feat achieved by a singular figure is wildly impressive, such as being the first man to navigate the Northwest Passage, or to step foot on a magnetic pole of the Earth, and Americans view accomplishment as the outcome of an individual’s effort and not the sum of all other combined efforts that it took to get them there, how much more elevated would that make the accomplished American explorer in the public opinion? This also has an unfortunate inverse; just as Americans are willing to ascribe all individual victory to the singular summing figure, they are equally willing to lay blame on the failed individual.²⁸ A competition between two parties will inevitably, at least in the American worldview, result in the existence of a “winner” and a “loser.” These two labels are not necessarily set in stone, and the popular consensus on who “won” in a competition between individuals can be subject to change, but the one-time loser will have an extremely difficult time of clawing their way back into the good graces of the American people. Winning is an individual moral victory, which implies the inverse to be true as well. Losing is an individual moral failure. There is no way for the American who has “lost” to effectively pass on this ire to another party; for better or for worse, the American’s deeds are ascribed entirely to them and them alone. In the case of the scramble for the North Pole, this would result in two unsalvageable reputations, and an intense period of infighting between two of America’s most famous (or infamous, depending on who is asked) polar explorers.

Competition

The American focus on acclaim won through competition is best exemplified in the great Polar Controversy of the early 20th century; a battle fought on the ice and at home

between explorers Frederick Cook and Robert E. Peary. Both men were vying to be the first to set foot on the North Pole, and both claimed to be victorious. What ensued were two rivalling smear campaigns that eclipsed what Cook calls the “Polar achievement” entirely, instead shifting focus onto the newspapers that took sides and defended their candidate *ad infinitum*.²⁹ When Cook published an account of his expedition, he took every opportunity to malign Peary as a jealous, untrustworthy miser, who could not stand to see Cook overtake him in their rivalry.³⁰ Peary, when told of Cook’s rival claim, stated in a telegram sent to the New York Herald: “Cook has simply handed the public [a] gold brick. He’s not been at the pole April 21, 1908, or any other time.”³¹ Cook himself had much to say on the topic of Peary’s character in his account, writing: “To destroy the advantage of priority of my conquest, and to establish himself as the first and only one who had reached the Pole, was now the one predominant effort to which Mr. Peary and his coterie of conspirators set themselves. To this end the cables were now made to burn with an abusive campaign...”³² Even though the public was immediately swayed by Cook’s smooth persona and swagger, the government favored Peary and presented him with a promotion to rear admiral for his exploits at the supposed pole. Peary filled the much-needed role of national hero for the still-young American nation. It is logical for America, a country so focused on aggressive growth and expansion, to have a need for a heroic explorer archetype. After Americans such as Lewis and Clark had successfully established themselves within their own country, they needed to prove themselves to the rest of the world as a key player in the games of national expansionism.³³ Robert E. Peary was this national hero for a while, though in retrospect many researchers hold that neither man ever truly reached the pole. Peary’s diary was originally held back by his family from the public for fear of misuse or the twisting of words by the press who had previously slandered him, but was finally released, examined, and found to hold marginally more water than Cook’s own account. On page 83 of his journal, he writes, “The Pole at last!!!”³⁴ The Polar Controversy was an irreparably ugly affair and tainted the reputations of both men, though Cook attracted the worst of it in retrospect, and his career never recovered. Cook, establishing somewhat of a decided penchant for running cons, was imprisoned for mail fraud concerning a Texan oil rig investment scheme later in life and would remain incarcerated until 1930. With his reputation as an explorer in tatters, he turned to scams and grifting to make a living.³⁵ Americans, as seen in Cook’s case, are not prone to forgiveness after a slight.

On the other side of the world, there was a race happening for the South Pole near-concurrent with the height of the Polar Controversy. This, differently from the Cook-Peary conflict, was a competition between separate countries as well as individual men. Even though one might assume that—in dealing with intra-national issues on top of interpersonal conflict—the

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viciousness between opponents would be enhanced, this was not the case. The Norwegian Roald Amundsen and the Englishman Robert Falcon Scott's competition for the Pole seems to inhabit an entirely different realm than Cook and Peary's verbal brawl. Amundsen eventually took the South Pole, while Scott and a small party of his men perished in the pursuit. Nowhere in this odyssey were the hallmarks of the Cook and Peary debacle seen; Amundsen did not flaunt his victory by speaking ill of his fellow explorer, even offering him supplies when they both were on the trail and in direct competition to one another. Scott did not slander Amundsen in his private journal, and his last recorded words were concerned with his own men and no other petty earthly grievances.³⁶ He is described favorably by those who knew him; crewmember on the Terra Nova Expedition Apsley Cherry-Garrard chief among them in his own published account of the ordeal. Even stranger is the fact that Roald Amundsen and the infamous Frederick Cook were very good friends. They both served on the *Belgica* during her trials in Antarctica and formed a fast bond through the miseries of the long polar night, scurvy, treacherous ice flows, and cowardly commanders.³⁷ These men appear to be opposites, but both were driven, ambitious, and creative. These qualities are what drew them to each other early in their respective careers, and these qualities are what propelled each man into his own sphere of fame. The difference, then, does not lie in base characteristics. It must be noted that one man is American, and the other is not. There are also the interesting implications of one of the largest and ugliest controversies in polar exploration history happening between two Americans, when America was anything but the dominant power in that realm. There must be something unique to America, then, that causes such volatility in her children. This can be and has been called many things, but here will be described as the American Spirit.

Idealism

Americans are volatile, as discussed above. Americans are also idealists, and dreamers, and revolutionaries. It is not possible to dream when centered fully in reality, and this is where the American attachment to fiction manifests. Fiction is important to American idealism in the way that blood is important to the body. The U.S. has a relatively small pool of domestic folklore and folk heroes compared to other, older nations, which seemingly might discourage the religious attachment Americans have to the realm of stories. America is a young country, descended from old powers with established lore. The earliest Americans did not abandon these stories when they left their place of power; rather they clung to the tales of their motherland as a grounding force. The localized tales of King Arthur and the Loch Ness monster were not abandoned by the Pilgrims and Puritans in their flight to America; they were grandfathered into the newer stories being generated inside of the fledgling colonies. When America severed official political ties to its European masters, the newly independent Americans

still circulated these stories. Post-American Independence, the European interest in American folklore never rose, while American attachment to European fiction never waned. These stories remain important to the American mythos in ways that the new American stories will never become important to, say, the Russian or Welsh mythos. The fiction created *within* America seemingly has an even greater power; the phrase "my white whale" spawns from American author Herman Melville's 1851 novel *Moby Dick* and is commonly understood to mean something sought but virtually unattainable. Even if the person on the receiving end of this phrase has never read the novel, they more than likely will know what the idiom means, such influence did this work have. Melville himself seemed uncomfortably aware of his own power as the vessel through which a story passes—after the publication of *Moby Dick*, he became afraid that "Art [was] powerful enough to raise monsters from the deep."³⁸ On the subject of polar exploration, the American author Walt Whitman penned his 1871 poem "A Passage to India" on the mythologization of the quest for the Northwest Passage. He writes, "O you fables spurning the known, eluding the hold of the known, mounting to heaven!... A worship new I sing/ You captains, voyagers, explorers, yours/...You, not for trade or transportation only/ But in God's name, and for thy sake O soul."³⁹ Here the religious fervor for the explorer is on full display. The quest is not outlined in material or practical terms, but rather as a spiritual undertaking worthy of worship. The myth of the explorer is America's favorite fiction, the crusade for knowledge like the crusade for God, and the unknown the worst thing imaginable. Refer again to the coverage of the departure of the USS *Jeanette*, and the national discomfort with the "great blank which covers our maps..."⁴⁰ Whitman above speaks of *worshipping* captains, voyagers, and explorers.⁴¹ This religiosity, the appeal to a higher purpose, is a microcosm of the American Spirit's focus on idealism as a core tenet of American identity.

The most consequential example of this relationship with fiction in the realm of polar exploration stems not from an American author, but from the French novelist Jules Verne. Verne's works often focused on the sea, the dangers posed by the vastness of the ocean, and his own awe of the water and its mysteries. His works did very well in America; tangentially, the first submarine to pass under the North Pole was named the *USS Nautilus* after the *Nautilus* in Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. Verne was admired for his ability to tell a compelling story, though this seems to have been the end of his tangible impact on the landscape of polar exploration. That was until 2003, when the Canadian environmental physicist and Arctic historian Randall Osceveski proposed a seemingly outlandish theory: Frederick Cook had fabricated his account of the attainment of the Pole based off of Verne's works.⁴² In the history of examining polar exploration, this was a new avenue previously unexplored. Cook's wild claims of seeing ice islands break away from the mainland and drift on the Arctic

currents are implausible and unfounded, though of course Verne wrote a novel about one such island when Cook was a child. Oszcewski posits that the somewhat unusual route that Cook took to the “Pole” could in part be a sightseeing mission; Cook was touring his favorite locations described by Verne to see how they compared, even if this did not make sense for pursuing his stated goal of attaining the Pole. This would make sense if, as many modern researchers believe, Cook knew that he had not actually reached the Pole, and had either a nonexistent or middling at-best intention of making a genuine attempt. His self-reported route has been described in the years after his expedition as nonsensical, and this may explain why he went about it in the way that he did.⁴³

Cook lost his father and was born into poverty, and therefore Oszcewski asserts that he could have found missing role models in the protagonists of Verne’s works. The similarities between Verne’s characters and Cook’s life are uncanny: Dr. Clawbonny of *The English at the North Pole* was a smooth talker, fast at making friends, a doctor who “practiced little,” and grew malcontented with his commander’s seeming ineffectiveness.⁴⁴ This parallels Cook’s time on the *Belgica*, when he struggled to convince commandant Adrien de Gerlache of raw penguin meat’s antiscorbutic properties and chafed at de Gerlache placing his standing with Belgium above his own men’s wellbeing. Oszcewski also points out that while on the *Belgica*, Cook used an ingenious and unprecedented technique to shield the ship from ice floes previously described in a Verne novel.⁴⁵ It is unproven whether or not Cook ever actually read any of Verne’s works, though the fact that the theory has been posed at all is perhaps indicative of the intense American relationship to fiction. The fantastical descriptions provided by Cook are reminiscent and as compelling as those of speculative fiction, and the American public of the time could not get enough. Other European explorer’s accounts of the Arctic were often seen as dry, but never Cook’s. The American public latched onto Cook like they had latched onto King Arthur and Robin Hood, and experts in the fields that Cook exploited were willing to back him up because he exhibited charisma, persuasive writing skills, and the knowledge of how to simply tell a good story. Melville’s fears of the fictional bleeding into the real, then, are not as odd as they appear on a first glance. This appeal to the power of fiction is the American tenet of idealism made manifest, but only one facet of the proverbial American Spirit.

America in the golden age of polar exploration was a loud, young country. She had burst onto the scene with cannon fire and declarations and demanded that she be known for what she was, even if she was new compared to these old powers. This is a mindset passed down to her constituents; the greatest known and most spectacular struggle in the entire history of polar exploration was between two Americans who exemplified these values to the maximum. Prior to the Polar Controversy, America had not established a good or even particularly

notable track record in the polar sphere. Operations like the Greely and *Jeannette* expeditions were disasters, but not quite so salacious as Franklin’s doomed expedition. An American whaler discovered the *HMS Resolute*, but not as part of an epic decades-long quest like some other European vessels embarked upon. The Polar Controversy, then, was something new. Other polar dramas were insular to an organization or select group of people. When the British naval officer John Ross mistakenly sighted a cloud masquerading as a mountain and named it for one of his chief donors in 1818, turning back from what might have been a profitable voyage for fear of this illusory obstacle, he was embarrassed, certainly, but not ruined to the point of irrelevance. He did not go on another Arctic voyage after the incident but was never shy about instructing the younger explorers employed by the Admiralty in the proper way of doing things. He did not fade into obscurity or irrelevance, due to his connections to insular groups such as the Admiralty.⁴⁶ When Frederick Cook and Robert Peary took to the papers and publishing presses to declare their own respective victories, though, the public took sides and vehemently maligned the opposing faction. This tribal nature is engineered in America, where one man may claim individual glory but collective victory is near to meaningless, when a personal victory was possible. Americans love a celebrity. The American polar explorer Richard E. Byrd—who operated in the mid-twentieth century after the race for the North Pole—knew how to exploit the media to sensationalize his own story, rather than Cook and Peary’s desperate attempts to appeal to the fickle mob of public opinion. Byrd cultivated his own image consciously; he is a progenitor of what one might call a celebrity or even an influencer in the twenty-first century.⁴⁷ He understood how to promote a public image separate from the messy details of personal life, and he understood what exaggerated face his audience needed to see to admire and love him. His lurid claims about what he witnessed in Antarctica, including extremely flowery and vague prose which has been misinterpreted in years since as support for a flat earth, were marketed so excellently that they are still in circulation today.⁴⁸ His experiences are separate from Cook’s and Peary’s, though all three showcase facets of the American Spirit.

Conclusion

The goals of a society will reliably reflect its station and values, being an idealized projection of the trajectory of said civilization. Where a society wants to be is a very good indicator of what it believes in, or holds dear. In the case of American polar exploration, one of the greatest values on display is the worthiness of competition. America is a country of dreamers, but Americans are in conflict over who may achieve those dreams first.⁴⁹ One of the earliest, most sacred American values is that of Manifest Destiny—the idea that expansion and exploration by Americans is predetermined and inevitable.⁵⁰ This provided Western settlers with motivation and opportunity, while simultaneously irreparably harming

indigenous populations of flora, fauna, and cultures which are now lost forever.⁵¹ The explorer is a symbol of hope for America; the country's own namesake is Italian explorer Amerigo Vespucci, and the likes of Lewis and Clark are elevated to folk hero status even while the harmful aspects of their interactions with land that was not unoccupied or unclaimed at the time of "discovery" are discounted and played down in the popular mind. Christopher Columbus has a national holiday on the American calendar, when he is now widely believed to be anything but a role model. Monuments to the earliest colonists in the North American continent are regarded with near-religiosity; Plymouth Rock, Jamestown, and Roanoke are spoken about with biblical fervor. The inaccurate fable of the "First Thanksgiving" is taught in elementary schools and only briefly corrected if at all in higher education, and still the myths purported about early expansion and relations with indigenous populations are widespread and often purposefully serving an outside agenda. The cause of the explorer is the cause of the righteously white and masculine, the cause of the American is then the cause of the righteous, and the cause of the explorer is the cause of the American.⁵² When it comes to goals that have no true material value, such as the magnetic North or South Poles, the pipe-dream Northwest Passage, or the quest for the Open Polar Sea, the motivation of discovery is for nothing but national pride and self-determination. Americans may Manifest Destiny in any sea, any field, and any continent. Whitman writes: "Lo, soul, seest thou not God's purpose from the first?/ The earth to be spann'd, connected by network/... The oceans to be cross'd, the distant brought near/ The lands to be welded together."⁵³

American involvement in the widely woven tapestry of polar exploration burned bright and quickly, compared to the slower, sustained flame of European efforts. The creeds of individuality, competition, and idealism are easily identified in the case study of American polar exploration, especially when held in stark contrast to other contemporary efforts worldwide; this allows for a thorough examination of the mythological American Spirit. This spirit can be found in the competition of America's children, in the idealism of her dreamers, and the individuality of her people. The American Spirit is the spirit of exploration. The pioneer in the wagon train is the captain in the pack ice is the astronaut in orbit. Harm is done under this banner in the name of American values just as discoveries are made for the sake of American values. Lives are lost and lived for the rare chance to discover something beautiful. Lewis and Clark traversed the Missouri River, Henry Hudson charted his course through North America, and a small whaling vessel called the *George Henry* found an English ship, abandoned in the ice. Her bones live in the desk of the highest office in the United States of America, though few will know where they came from.

End Notes

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