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978-1-108-07674-6 - Through the First Antarctic Night, 1898–1899: A Narrative of the Voyage of the “Belgica” among Newly Discovered Lands and Over an Unknown Sea about the South Pole

Frederick A. Cook

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In this illustrated 1900 publication, Frederick Cook (1865–1940) gives a detailed account of his experiences on the Belgian Antarctic Expedition, the first to endure the harsh winter of the Antarctic. The goal of the expedition was scientific discovery, and Cook, the ship’s doctor, tells an engaging story of ‘new human experience in a new, inhuman world of ice’. Boarding the *Belgica* in Rio de Janeiro, he joined a crew that included Roald Amundsen, who would later lead a Norwegian expedition to the South Pole. Cook describes the challenging conditions in the Antarctic Circle, where the ship became ice-bound for almost a year, with over two months of total darkness.

When crew members developed scurvy, Cook took over command from the Belgian naval officer Adrien de Gerlache. Notably, he helped save lives by promoting the consumption of penguin and seal meat at a time when Vitamin C had yet to be discovered.

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# Through the First Antarctic Night, 1898–1899

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FREDERICK A. COOK



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An Antarctic Iceberg

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# THROUGH THE FIRST ANTARCTIC NIGHT

1898–1899

A NARRATIVE OF THE VOYAGE OF THE “BELGICA” AMONG  
NEWLY DISCOVERED LANDS AND OVER AN UNKNOWN  
SEA ABOUT THE SOUTH POLE

BY

FREDERICK A. COOK, M.D.

SURGEON AND ANTHROPOLOGIST OF THE BELGIAN ANTARCTIC EXPEDITION  
*WITH AN APPENDIX CONTAINING A SUMMARY OF THE SCIENTIFIC RESULTS*

Illustrated



WILLIAM HEINEMANN

LONDON

1900

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and *McClure's*. Though this material has been much changed  
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TO THE LITTLE FAMILY,  
THE OFFICERS, THE SCIENTIFIC STAFF, AND  
THE CREW OF THE “BELGICA,”  
WHOSE FORTUNES AND MISFORTUNES MADE  
THIS STORY OF THE FIRST HUMAN EXPERIENCE  
THROUGHOUT A SOUTH POLAR YEAR ;  
TO THESE MEN,  
WHOSE CLOSE COMPANIONSHIP AND STURDY  
GOOD-FELLOWSHIP MADE LIFE ENDURABLE  
DURING THE STORMS, THE  
DARKNESS, AND THE MONOTONY  
OF THE ANTARCTIC,  
THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED.

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## INTRODUCTION.

For three hundred years explorers have been active in pushing aside the realms of the unknown towards the north pole; but the equally interesting south pole has, during all this time, been almost wholly neglected. There have been expeditions to the far south, but compared to arctic ventures they have been so few and their work within the polar circle has been so little that the results have been largely forgotten. It is not because valuable results have not been obtained in the antarctic, but because the popular interest in the arctic has completely overshadowed the reports of the antipodes. The search for the North-west and the North-east passages, which commerce demanded to reach the trade of the Orient during the seventeenth and the early part of the eighteenth centuries, fixed the public eye persistently northward. This extended effort to find an easy path to the wealth of Asia was fruitless, but it was followed by a whale fishery, a sealing industry, and a fur trade, which has proven a priceless boon to mankind. As a result of these two periods of trade exploration, we have now entered upon a third stage, a period of scientific research which will not, and should not, end until

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the entire area is outlined in the growing annals of exact knowledge.

The antarctic has a history somewhat similar, but it is almost forgotten. Until 1772 the south frigid zone was pictured by fiction writers in flowery phraseology. They placed here a fertile country, projecting far northward into the Atlantic and the Pacific. This land was supposed to be inhabited by a curious race of people who possessed a superabundance of gold, precious stones, and other material wealth. To learn the truth of this new “land of promise” Capt. James Cook was sent out in 1772. Cook, with a thoroughness which characterised all his efforts, circumnavigated the globe close enough to the antarctic circle to convince the world that if land of large extent existed around the south pole it must be far beyond the usual ice-limits. Sixty years later, through the efforts of American and British sealers who had searched every known rock of the southern seas for fur-seals, and sea-elephants, the United States, England, and France, fitted out rival expeditions. The combined work of these expeditions marked the second period of antarctic exploration and resulted in the re-establishment of a great polar continent on the Austral chart. Sixty years again passed before another expedition was sent to press beyond the southern barriers of ice. The voyage of the *Belgica* is the beginning of a third revival of antarctic exploration which has been brought about by determined efforts, made almost simultaneously in England, Germany, Belgium, and the United States.

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This third period of antarctic research, like the third stage of arctic exploration, is wholly in the interest of science.

The first country to complete the outfit of a modern expedition was Belgium. England and Germany now have expeditions in preparation, but the honour of being the first to send a scientific venture, with trained specialists and appropriate equipment to the antarctic, belongs to Belgium.

For the origin of the Belgian Antarctic Expedition we are indebted to the energetic efforts of Lieutenant Adrien de Gerlache. By soliciting private subscriptions and finally by securing the financial aid of the Belgian Government, Gerlache succeeded in collecting the sixty thousand dollars which were barely sufficient to fit out the enterprise. The vessel selected for the mission was the Norwegian sealer *Patria*, which was rechristened *Belgica*. She is a strong vessel, of about two hundred and fifty tons, built some ten years ago. She was not strengthened or altered on the plan of Nansen's vessel, the *Fram*, as has been so often stated. Nevertheless, she proved herself a craft of extraordinary endurance, withstanding the thumps of rocks, iceberg collisions, and pressure in the pack-ice, in a manner perfectly marvellous. Owing to a scarcity of funds, the accoutrements of the ship and the outfit for polar exploration were somewhat imperfect. If we had been compelled to stay longer, or if it had been necessary to make a forced overland journey, or a retreat homeward on the ice, we should have found our equipment inadequate.

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The members of the expedition were from many lands, as the following list will show:

Commandant, Adrien de Gerlache (Belgian).

Captain, Georges Lecoinge (Belgian), Executive Officer and Hydrographer.

Roald Amundsen (Norwegian), 1st Mate.

Emile Danco (deceased) (Belgian), Magnetician.

Emile Racovitza (Rumanian), Naturalist.

Henryk Arctowski (Russian), Geologist, Oceanographer and Meteorologist.

Antoine Dobrowolski (Russian), Assistant Meteorologist.

Frederick A. Cook (American), Surgeon Anthropologist and Photographer.

### ENGINEERS.

Henri Somers (Belgian).      Max Van Rysselberghe  
(Belgian).

### SAILORS.

#### BELGIANS.

Jules Melaerts.

Jan Van Mirlo.

Gustave Dufour.

Louis Michotte.

Carl Augustus Wiencke (deceased).

#### NORWEGIANS.

Adam Tollefsen.

Hjalmar Johansen.

Johan Koren.

Engebret Knudsen.

Altogether we numbered nineteen when leaving Punta Arenas — seven officers, housed in the cosy little cabins, and twelve marines, including Dobrowolski, housed in the forecastle. Thus divided, we were two happy families, and as such we tried to

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extract from the frozen south polar surroundings such rare comforts as regions of perennial snows afford.

The *Belgica* left Antwerp at the end of August, 1897. She steamed and sailed down the Atlantic to Madeira, then across to Rio de Janeiro, down to Montevideo, and into the Strait of Magellan to Punta Arenas. After spending some time in the Fuegian channels and among the Cape Horn Indian tribes, we took our departure from the known world, at Staten Island on January 13, 1898. We sighted the South Shetland Islands a week later, where, during a violent tempest, we lost by an accidental fall overboard, the young and faithful Norwegian sailor, Wiencke. We next crossed the ever-foggy and ever-tempestuous waters of Bransfield Strait, and on the afternoon of January 23, 1898, came in sight of the outer fringe of a new land, the Palmer Archipelago. Entering this, we discovered a new highway, which in size compares favourably with Magellan Strait. To the east and west of this strait, we charted about five hundred miles of a land which had never before been seen by human eyes — part of a great continental mass which probably surrounds the south pole. It is buried even in midsummer under a ponderous weight of perennial ice. Passing out of the strait, we entered the South Pacific, and after skirting the western border of Grahamland to Adelaide Island and then to Alexander Island, we attempted to enter the main body of the pack-ice westward.

The work of the first three weeks in the new regions proved the discovery of a highway per-

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fectly free for navigation during the summer months from Bransfield Strait, two hundred miles south-westerly, through an unknown land to the Pacific. This highway has received the name of our ship. To the east of Belgica Strait we discovered a high, continuous country which probably connects with the land charted as Grahamland. This has been christened Dancoland, in memory of our companion, Lieutenant Danco, who died on the ship during the long drift in the pack-ice. The land to the west of the strait is cut up into islands by several channels, and is named Palmer Archipelago, in honour of Captain Nathaniel Palmer, the American sealer who was the first of all men to see the outer fringe of this land. Scattered about in the waters of Belgica Strait are about one hundred islands and several groups of islands. About fifty of these are of considerable size. The islands, the capes, the bays, the headlands, and the mountains have mostly received the names of Belgian friends of the expedition; but prominent outside workers have not been forgotten, as is evidenced by Nansen Island and Neumayer Channel. Each officer was given the privilege of bestowing some names. Hence two islands which fell to my lot are named after the city of my home and the first mayor of Greater New York—Brooklyn and Van Wyck Islands.

After passing out of the strait into the open Pacific, we strove to follow the mainland southward, but the pack-ice forced us away. Late in February we entered the main body of the sea-ice, intending



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to push southward and westward. After penetrating ninety miles we found ourselves firmly beset. Unable to extricate the ship, we drifted with the ice to and fro, but generally west, for thirteen long months. During the early part of the long polar night Lieutenant Danco died. Except for the depression of this melancholy bereavement, the health of the members of the expedition was fairly good; but the seventy days of continued darkness weighed heavily upon us. The scientific work was prosecuted throughout the year of the drift. Each department has reason to feel proud of its records. But all were happy when, on March 14, 1899, we were released from the icy fetters which had held us so long.

We left the pack from longitude  $103^{\circ}$  west of Greenwich, and latitude  $70^{\circ} 45'$  south. We had thus drifted from about  $85^{\circ}$  to  $103^{\circ}$  of west longitude and between  $70^{\circ}$  and  $72^{\circ}$  south of latitude. In March and April we drifted westerly to longitude  $92^{\circ} 25'$ , where we were on April 25th. From May to October we drifted back again to a place near our starting point. From November to the time we left the ice we drifted rapidly westward. The winter drift then is eastward, the summer drift is westward, and this is also the direction of the prevailing winds. Our farthest south was on May 31st, latitude  $71^{\circ} 36' 5''$  south, longitude  $87^{\circ} 40'$  west. It would not at any time have been possible to push farther poleward in our position. The various soundings which we took prove the existence of a sea where there was previously thought to be land. Through

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these soundings also we have discovered a submarine bank comparable to the bank off the coast of Newfoundland. The excellent series of magnetic observations by M. Lecoqte indicate the magnetic pole to be about two hundred miles east of its present assigned position. The hourly meteorological observations, under the direction of M. Arctowski, are of priceless value to students of weather. The painstaking zoölogical work by M. Racovitza, and the numerous other observations and studies of antarctic life and phenomena, are of a like value. As an American I can with due modesty say that the work of this, the Belgian Antarctic Expedition, will form the stepping-stone to future antarctic exploration.

In the following pages I have not attempted to elaborate on our experiences and observations. This I leave for a future work. My aim has been to select from my diary and notes such data as might prove of interest to the general reader. In my desire to condense this story into a single volume I have omitted much of the daily routine of life. I have also omitted a discussion of technical topics. There is no pretence made by me that this book contains all of the scientific data of the expedition. The observations, descriptions of specimens, and scientific deductions will be published in other channels. The Belgian Government has liberally set aside a sum sufficient to publish in proper form the scientific records, and a commission is at present occupied in making a preliminary study of the material with this end in view.

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We did not start out to mount the south pole, as we have been reported. Our aim was a less ambitious work of scientific exploration along the edge of the unknown. In this we were reasonably successful. My story, then, is not one of pole-chasing, with its many certain disappointments. It is a record of the first expedition to pass through the ordeal of the long antarctic night and its gloomy winter storms. It is, I hope, a contribution of new human experience in a new, inhuman world of ice.

The illustrations in this book are made, with but a few exceptions, from photographs, and since these are the first photographic reproductions of antarctic life and scenes, it is hoped that they will be of value as records of the unknown south. In the color plates we have aimed to give a few examples of the daily touches of colour, which serve to relieve the awful monotony and glittering whiteness peculiar to the south polar regions. The vivid complexity of delicate shades of most scenes is impossible of imitation by the present means of the printer's art, but the success attained by the artist, the engraver, and the printer in these reproductions has been an agreeable surprise to me.

In the notices of my return from the antarctic, and in the story of the Belgian Antarctic Expedition, as published in the American newspapers, it has unintentionally been made to appear as if I desired to claim a major share of the credit for the results of this expedition. This I wish to disclaim. The credit of organising the expedition belongs to its Commander, Adrien de Gerlache; the honour of sending out the

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venture belongs to the enterprise of Belgian citizens. The fame and honour, which are the results of a successful expedition, belong to every member of the expedition. Every one, from the highest officer to the cabin-boy, has done his share of the work nobly and faithfully. Everyone, then, from the cabin to the forecastle, deserves equally the honorable mention which is the explorer's only pay.

FREDERICK A. COOK, M.D.

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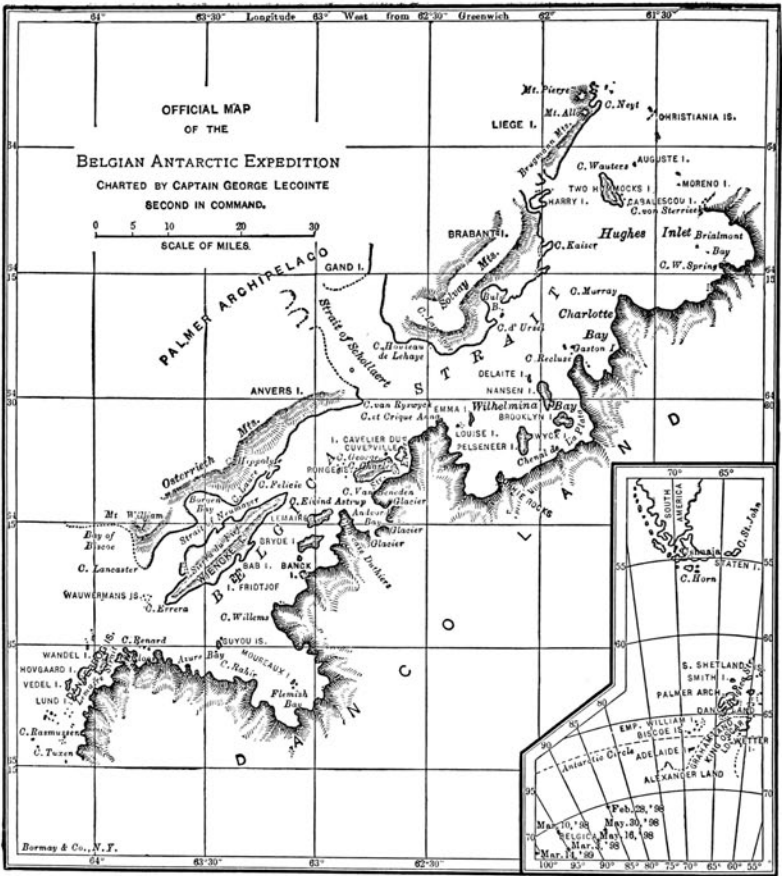
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