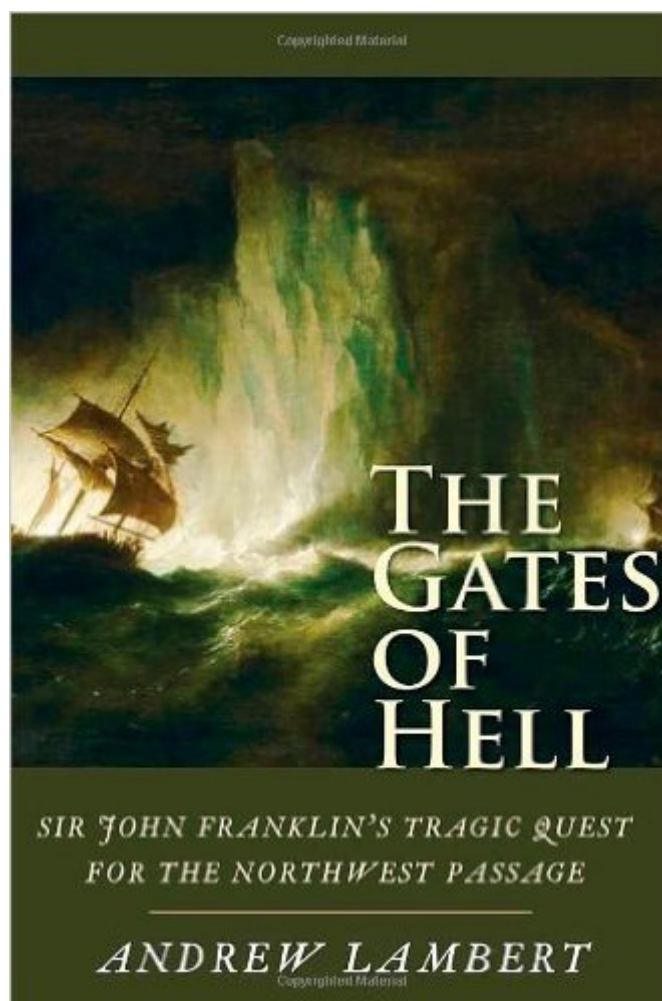


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The Gates Of Hell: Sir John Franklin's Tragic Quest For The North West Passage



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

This book was long on scholarship as it painstakingly lays out the background (political and scientific) surrounding the Franklin Expedition. As an academic, I can appreciate the scholarship involved. Author Lambert takes the reader through Franklin's early years, his time as administrator of Tasmania (Van Dieman's Land), and the rationale and buildup to the expedition that claimed the

life of him and his men. His main mission was to contribute to the collection of global magnetic data and, if possible, find (complete) the Northwest Passage. In telling the story of Franklin, Lambert also tells the story of many, many ancillary players involved in the drama, from scientists (Humboldt, Sabine, the RGS, etc.), to politicians and the British Admiralty, to his wife (Lady Jane), and other contemporary arctic explorers. At times, the story becomes tedious and keeping names and players straight is a daunting task, especially when the author uses first names for some actors who were introduced pages before. There is little in this book about the actual expeditions. Some of those preceding the Franklin expedition (including his own two early ones), or the many that went in rescue efforts, are summarized in a couple of sentences, or in a paragraph, or given passing reference in other sections. The final expedition is summarized in about ten pages at the end. Like other readers, I found the absence of maps a serious drawback to the book. There is one map (there are actually two, but one is a small map of his earlier voyages) of the final expedition; gray on mottled gray, with a dozen other routes displayed of other explorers, and contains few readable details of various important geographical locations that were mentioned in Lambert's brief descriptions. A magnifying glass was of little help.

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 exploration. 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.

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