

Frederick A. Cook

Dr. Frederick A. Cook (1865-1940) is the most controversial figure in the history of polar exploration. His supporters maintain that Dr. Cook was the hero of the Belgian Antarctic Expedition, the first to climb Mount McKinley, the first to stand at the North Pole, and the victim of merciless and unrelenting persecution by Robert Peary and those who supported Peary's claim to have reached the pole first. Others believe that Dr. Cook faked his claims to both Mount McKinley and the North Pole and continued a career of deceit by using the mail to defraud investors in oil lands in Texas, for which Dr. Cook spent five years in federal prison (Cook eventually received a presidential pardon for this conviction).

In 1891 Dr. Frederick Albert Cook began his career as an explorer as a member of Peary's first expedition to North Greenland, where he served as Peary's surgeon and as ethnologist. In 1897, Cook volunteered for the Belgian Antarctic Expedition, and achieved international recognition in his role of surgeon and photographer. He made important scientific discoveries on this expedition, including the effect of eating raw meat in order to cure the ship's crew of scurvy. Cook also served a critical role on this expedition in his efforts to release the frozen *Belgica* by sawing a canal in the ice. In 1901, Cook joined the *Erik*, in a relief expedition for Peary, sponsored by the Peary Arctic Club.

In 1903 and 1906 successively, Cook embarked on his first and second expeditions to Mount McKinley, and in 1906 claimed to have reached the summit. In 1907, Cook made his quest to the North Pole, and claimed to have reached the Pole on April 21, 1908. However, drifting ice prohibited his southward return, and he was forced to spend the Polar night in a shelter with his two Eskimo companions. It wasn't until September 1, 1909 that Cook announced his discovery of the North Pole. A week later, Peary denounced Cook as a fraud and claimed that he, Peary, had in fact reached the North Pole first.

In October of 1909, Cook's Mount McKinley climbing partner, Ed Barrill published an affidavit in which he stated that Cook's Mount McKinley diary was false and that his picture of the summit was a fake. It should be noted here that Barrill reportedly received \$5000 for his statement (the exact amount of the payment to Barrill is unknown). Cook was unable to discredit the charges of Peary and Barrill. Although Cook continued to defend his claims, a downward spiral in Cook's career and reputation had commenced.

In 1917 Dr. Cook was hired by New York Oil to prospect for oil based on his knowledge of geology, and he eventually became president of Texas Eagle Oil Company in Fort Worth. However, in 1920, a slump in the oil business forced the company out of business. It was then that Cook formed the Petroleum Producers Association, which became one of the largest employers in Fort Worth. This success was not to last; in 1923 Cook was accused and indicted of mail fraud in relation to his oil business. He was sent to federal prison in Leavenworth, Kansas in 1925, where he served five years. During his time in Leavenworth, Cook served as physician in the hospital, as well as editor of the prison newspaper, *New Era*. Upon his parole, in 1930, Cook went to work on his memoirs and led a relatively quiet life, until his death from a cerebral hemorrhage in 1940. Cook received a pardon from President Franklin D. Roosevelt for his mail fraud conviction shortly before his death.

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