

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor:

In his review of my book, *Cook & Peary, the Polar Controversy, Resolved*, Russell Gibbons seems more interested in telling his readers what is not in the book than what it contains. And well he might be. As Executive Director of the Frederick A. Cook Society, which, in the words of its charter, strives “to gain official recognition for the scientific and geographic accomplishments of ... Dr. Frederick Albert Cook,” he clearly recognizes that if the content of my book is accepted as true, then the society of which he is a leading officer has no further need to exist.

Given Gibbons’s oblique approach, any reader of his review must logically ask: “If so much important material has been overlooked, what fills the book’s 1133 pages?” What fills them is a fully documented and objective examination of all known primary evidence that bears directly on the Polar Controversy. Significantly, Gibbons’s reluctance to address any one of the many substantive issues the book raises does not allow him to mention a single piece of what he calls “information never before made available about the controversy” that the “patience and attention to detail of a meticulous researcher” unearthed. And for good reason, since this evidence includes absolute proof that the photograph Cook represented to the end of his life as the summit of Mt. McKinley was taken on a tiny hillock of rock 19 miles from that summit. It also explains why the content of the original diary that Cook kept on his journey toward the North Pole, unknown to the scholarly world until now, brands his polar claim as a fabrication (and, therefore, his assertion that he attained the North Pole in 1908 as a knowing fraud). Gibbons’s readers might have also been interested in knowing that my book also contains the first analyses of Cook’s long-hidden 1906 McKinley diary and his other polar diaries, which he kept between 1907–09.

I was able to find and place in context these and the hundreds of other important, previously unpublished pieces of documentary evidence that fill all those pages precisely because “I am not a historian, but a librarian” and also a scholar of this one small historical incident for the last 23 years. When I said that, it was not a “defense of my research.” It was merely a statement of fact. But Gibbons even tries to turn my honesty against me.

As a librarian, I am also a professional researcher. The advantage of being a professional researcher becomes clear when you consider that all of the “historians” of the Polar Controversy found none of these primary sources, any one of which deserves precedence over all of the largely uninformed and sometimes biased speculations of secondary authors, who had no access to these primary materials. Not one of the other writers cited by Gibbons, who he implies are so critical to consult for a balanced view, had professional credentials as a historian in any sense of the word, either. Their occupations ranged from

ordained cleric (J. Gordon Hayes) to manufacturer of agricultural equipment (Thomas F. Hall). This being a fact, if it is necessary to be a “historian” to have authority, as Gibbons insinuates, then under his own thesis there is no more reason for anyone to consult any of these authors’ books than mine.

In any case, all of the items he says I ignored are actually mentioned in the pages of my book. Yes, some are given short shrift, but only because they have small merit. The Cook Society seems to view history as some sort of democratic exercise: as though if enough people can be found who out of ignorance or intent profess belief in an erroneous idea, that makes the idea less false. But history can never rest on uninformed opinion. It must rest only on solid documentation and on careful scholarship, which allows logical inferences to be drawn from that documentation. The “European literature” Gibbons says I ignored is based only on opinion, some of it scandalously uninformed, and the speakers at the conference he cites by no means made a documentary or logically inferred case for Cook’s veracity. Some of them, like Herbert and Rawlins, rejected it outright. Shoemaker and Malaurie, perhaps unwittingly, undermined it, while others, like Joe Fletcher, did not take any public position on it whatsoever.

To understand the level of objectivity of the Cook Society, your readers should know that its officers’ opinions of my qualifications were not always so low. At a time when they had convinced themselves that my conclusions would support Cook’s claims (although I never said they would), Warren B. Cook, Sr., Cook’s grandnephew and president of the society, wrote to me, “The Society is very appreciative of your meticulous and unparalleled research of Dr. Cook’s life and achievements... You know more about him than does his Grandnephew.” Gibbons, himself, seconded this statement in personal correspondence to me and does so again in this very review. Yet, in the end, he tries to convince his readers that this “meticulous researcher,” who knows more about Frederick Cook than his closest living relative, has produced a biography of him that is not worth acquiring until it hits the bargain book bin at ten cents on the dollar.

In a word, this is nonsense. Over the past year, *Naval History* said, “Simply, Bryce separates fact from fiction” and called my book “perhaps...the definitive work on Cook and Peary.” *The Washington Post* called it “riveting” and “a prodigious attempt to settle...the controversy... raised to a new level of formidable research and exactitude.” *Library Journal* called it “this brilliant book of exploration research” and rated it “a magnificent effort.” Gibbons doesn’t agree, because, in the words of *The New York Times Book Review*, “Mr. Bryce demolishes Cook’s evidence.”

Gibbons seems far more interested in innuendo than evidence, however. He hints at some ill-defined deceptiveness in my choice of a title. He misquotes my publicist’s press release, then holds up his own misquotation as my false claim. What my publicist actually said was: “He

is one of only a few persons outside of the explorer's family to have been granted access to all of his personal papers, the only one who has studied them in detail, and the only scholar with the right to publish excerpts from the unpublished diaries and papers without restriction," and I have the permissions signed by the president of the Frederick A. Cook Society to prove it. The Cook Society had so little idea of what the papers in its own custody contained that Gibbons himself hired me in 1994 to evaluate them for content and preservation. After I finished my work, the president of the society wrote to a colleague: "We have just concluded a consultative visit to the Museum by Bob Bryce, whose qualifications as Historian, Librarian, Archivist and Author are highly respected, and Russ is sending us a report of his findings." Upon receiving my 33-page report, Warren Cook said, "I have never seen anything to equal the depth, the accuracy and the logical guideline steps...depicted in Bob's report."

Finally, Gibbons says what is "most troubling" about my book is that it claims to have resolved the Polar Controversy, but declares "the reader must decide this." Indeed. And all who do read *Cook & Peary* will see that I have no need to defend my research or my authority to write about the Polar Controversy; the book's integrity speaks for itself. When they have finished it, they will have realized why Russell Gibbons was so afraid they would pick it up—because it *does* resolve the Polar Controversy, but not in the way he, as a Cook partisan, would like it resolved. Instead, he recommends that you wait until the book is safely out of print before attempting to add it to your collection, since the Polar Controversy "will likely remain unresolved into the next century."

The next century is less than three years away, and if you are not a partisan, the only way the Polar Controversy will still be unresolved for you by then is if you take Gibbons's advice.

For partisans like Gibbons, the Polar Controversy will never be resolved, because they do not want it to be resolved. Their personal fantasies mean more to them than impersonal truth. As one editor predicted in 1909, "There will be a 'Cook party' to the end of time, no matter how strong the evidence brought against him in the future, no matter if he made public confession of fraud." Scholars must rely on documentary evidence and careful research alone to support their conclusions, but partisans have many means. Partisans are never satisfied with any study, no matter how carefully made and documented, that does not reach the conclusion they desire. But I did not write *Cook & Peary* to satisfy the partisans. I wrote it for everyone else for whom truth matters, no matter what the truth might be.

In the end, however, people will believe what they want to believe. Therefore, I don't ask you to read *Cook & Peary* so that you will believe what I believe. All I ask is that you read it before you decide what to believe for yourself.

Sincerely yours,
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