

**THE GREAT POLAR CONTROVERSY: DR. COOK, MT. MCKINLEY, AND
THE QUEST FOR THE POLES**

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ABSTRACT: In September 1906, Dr. Frederick A. Cook announced to a receptive public that he and Ed Barrill had successfully climbed Mt. McKinley by a "new route from the North." It was a time of keen interest in exploration, particularly of the Arctic and Antarctic regions. While Cook's was initially hailed as the first ascent of North America's highest mountain, his report came under increasing scrutiny as details came to light (or failed to come to light, as the case may be.) The controversy surrounding Cook's Mt. McKinley climb assumed increasing importance in the context of his claim to have been the first to reach the North Pole in April, 1908. The Doctor's claim was disputed by Robert E. Peary, who announced that he himself was first to the Pole in April, 1909, and that Cook "should not be taken too seriously." The chain of events that followed affected the course of exploration at both poles.

This paper will examine the bases for Cook's claim to have been first on McKinley and first at the North Pole; the sequence of events that has led to general scepticism about Cook's claims; and the figures in Arctic and Antarctic exploration who were caught up in a dispute that continues to the current day. The paper will also report on recent computer-enhanced analyses of Dr. Cook's 1906 alleged Mt. McKinley summit photographs which he published to support his claim of a successful ascent.

KEYWORDS: Cook, Frederick A.; Peary, Robert E.; Mt. McKinley; North Pole; Alaska; Polar regions-- discovery and exploration

Introduction

"I reached the Pole. I climbed Mount McKinley," wrote Dr. Frederick A. Cook in his unpublished autobiography. "The controversy from my angle is at an end" (Abramson 1991, 226). But the controversy was not at an end for Dr. Cook. "More than three-quarters of a century has passed," wrote Beau Riffenburgh (1994, 1), "since the first week of September in 1909 when two men thrilled both the international scientific community and the public of the Western world by virtually simultaneously claiming to have attained what was considered the earth's most alluring geographical goal, the North Pole. For months the furor surrounding Dr. Frederick A. Cook, Robert E. Peary, and which, if either, first reached the Pole received unprecedented coverage in the world press. The issue remains a topic of debate even today."

The history of exploration on Mt. McKinley, highest peak in North America, plays a key role in this Polar dispute, and this paper will briefly look at the ". . . People and events which occurred in Mt. McKinley's early days, and their relation to the great Polar Controversy which so occupied men's minds in the early decades of this century" (Moore [1967] 1981, xiii-xiv). The paper also presents new photographic analysis that bears on Cook's McKinley claim.

In those days the public avidly followed accounts of exploration to the far-off and unknown regions of the planet (Moore [1967] 1981, xiii). This keen interest was followed, or perhaps led, by the newspapers of the day. ". . . The claims of Cook and Peary, and their rivalry, were turned into the media event of the year, particularly by two of the most important newspapers in the United States, *The New York Herald* and *The New York Times*. In fact, the North Pole controversy was as much a competition between these newspapers as it was a feud between the rival explorers" (Riffenburgh 1994, 1).

Personnae

Robert E. Peary was a civil engineer with the US Navy, who was later to use the title Admiral. Peary was an experienced explorer with a dark side. "He was perhaps the most self-serving, paranoid, arrogant, and mean-spirited of all nineteenth-century explorers. He was suspicious of and hateful to those he considered rivals either in actual geographical discovery or as heroic figures. He was condescending and insensitive to his subordinates, and he was ingratiating and servile to those he felt could help his quest for personal glory" (Riffenburgh 1994, 165).

The rival in this case was his earlier comrade Dr. Frederick A. Cook, who had joined Peary on his 1891 North Greenland Expedition as physician. ". . . The first volunteer to go on," Peary wrote of Cook. Cook "was always helpful and an indefatigable worker. . . ." Peary also thought well of the Doctor's "unruffled patience and coolness in an emergency" (Peary 1898:I 423-4, quoted in Riffenbergh 1994, 170).

Cook agreed to join Peary again in Greenland in 1893 but resigned when Peary would not allow him to publish medical and ethnographic studies Cook had written based on the earlier Peary trip (Riffenburgh 1994, 170). Cook returned to Greenland with several expeditions of his own, and began to acquire a reputation as a competent, energetic, resourceful explorer. In 1894, he sailed 90 miles in a small open boat to get help after his expedition ship was stuck in Arctic waters (Moore [1967] 1981, 42). In 1897 Cook joined, as ship's doctor, the Belgian Antarctic (Belgica) Expedition on which Roald Amundsen was beginning his polar career. Amundsen credited Cook with the survival of the unprepared party (the first Antarctic over-wintering). Amundsen wrote that the expedition's escape from the ice was "due first and foremost to the skill, energy, and persistence of Dr. Cook" (*New York American* Sept. 19, 1909, quoted in Riffenburgh 1994, 170).

The Drama Unfolds

These are the central players in this Polar drama of Fall 1909, which gripped the world when on Sept. 1 Cook cabled from the Shetland Islands that he had reached the North Pole on April 21 of the prior year, 1908. He had thus taken some 15 months to return from his trek and report his claim. On Sept. 1, 1909, *The Evening Mail* headlined: "DR COOK REACHES NORTH POLE." The next day, Sept. 2, *The New York Herald* headlined "THE NORTH POLE IS DISCOVERED BY DR. FREDERICK A. COOK, WHO CABLES TO THE HERALD AN EXCLUSIVE ACCOUNT OF HOW HE SET THE AMERICAN FLAG ON THE WORLD'S TOP." [FIGURE 1] The world was instantly abuzz with excitement, and Cook was hailed a hero. His long absence, disguised initially as a hunting expedition, brought back the crown jewel of exploration. (*The Evening Mail* 1909, Cook 1911). Cook's 1906 Mt. McKinley expedition had created a publicity tidal wave, from which he was able to raise substantial funds to outfit his entire North Pole expedition two years later. The Doctor was congratulated by such eminent explorers as Adolphus Greely, Robert Falcon Scott, Ernest Shackleton, and Roald Amundsen (Riffenburgh 1994, 175).

There was one person, however, who while surprised, he was certainly not delighted for his old comrade's success. That was Admiral Robert E. Peary, who by coincidence was at that very moment en route home after having claimed the North Pole for himself. Peary was thus returning to what he expected would be the adoration and adulation he craved. One can imagine his feelings at having almost 25 years of hard, sometimes desperate work, and the conquest he thought his by divine right, instead claimed by a man he now considered a thief.

Five days after Cook's cable, on Sept. 6, Peary cabled from Labrador that he himself had "Nailed the American flag to the Pole" on Apr. 6, 1909, a year after Cook claimed to have stood at 90 degrees north, and had found no trace of Cook's presence there. Peary

cabled that Cook's claim should "not be taken seriously." This was the first public appearance of a dispute between the two. (Hall 1917, 318). On Sept. 7, 1909, newspapers headlined Peary's conquest of the Pole: "ROBERT E. PEARY, AFTER 23 YEAR SIEGE, REACHES NORTH POLE. . . ." (*New York Herald* Sept. 7, 1909). But to Peary's bitter disappointment, his claim to have been first was not generally accepted.

Peary's public condemnation of Cook's claim began immediately. Peary went so far as to obtain "confessions" from Cook's Eskimo companions which were immediately shared with the press: "PEARY QUOTES ESKIMOS AS SAYING COOK WAS NOT OUT OF SIGHT OF LAND," read the Wednesday, Sept. 8 issue of *The Evening Telegram*.

However, momentum had already gathered in Cook's favor. The Doctor arrived in New York from Europe to a huge reception on Sept. 21, 1909. Peary arrived just a few days later, to a litter of soggy confetti. The reception was over.

While it was true in those innocent times that an explorer's word was his honor, both Peary and Cook now felt pressure to produce evidence of their claims. The newspaper war was in full gallop, spurring on the increasingly rancorous dispute with *The New York Times* having a special stake in Peary's claim, while *The New York Herald* had a similar interest in Cook.

The McKinley Factor

At this point in the media clamor there arose the recollection of an event three years previously, which was to sway public and scientific opinion on the Polar controversy inexorably toward Peary. This event involved a massive mountain lying in the far-off Alaska Range: Mt. McKinley, 20,320 feet (6,193.5 m). Mt. McKinley and the North Pole now became forever linked in the history of exploration, and in the lives of these two men, one of whom is now acclaimed as the discoverer of the North Pole, while the other's sad decline was marked by scorn and censure.

Alaska and the McKinley region had become a focus of much public interest and exploration after the purchase from Russia in 1867, and especially so at the end of the 19th Century and beginning of the 20th. In the January 1903 issue of *National Geographic Magazine*, Alfred H. Brooks and D. L. Reaburn of the U.S. Geological Survey published their "Plan for Climbing Mt. McKinley" (Brooks and Reaburn 1903, 30-35).

This same issue, by curious coincidence, published an account of Robert E. Peary's lecture before the National Geographic Society on Nov. 29, 1902 in which, doggedly pursuing his Polar ambitions, he "stated very emphatically that he believed the North Pole could be reached by making Cape Hekla, in northern Grinnell Land, the starting

point for a sledging trip north. . .” (Peary on the North Pole 1903, 29). This might be the literary debut of the mingling of the destinies of the great mountain and the North Pole.

Partly in response to the Brooks-Reaburn article, some eleven Mt. McKinley expeditions were mounted over the next decade (Moore [1967] 1981, 29). Brooks suggested “an expedition to climb the mountain should approach it from the northwest” (Brooks and Reaburn 1903, 31). However, of 11 expeditions to the mountain over the next decade, “those from the South exhausted themselves. . . three of four expeditions which wintered North of the range were able progressively to locate the ultimately successful route, in 1910 to make the ascent of the North Peak, and in 1913 to reach the top of the South Peak, the mountain’s true summit” (Moore [1967] 1981, 29).

Cook’s 1903 McKinley Expedition

Frederick Cook appears on the Mt. McKinley scene in the summer of 1903 as a well-thought of, resourceful, cheerful, and patient expeditioneer. Cook secured funding from Harper’s Magazine for an attempt on Mt. McKinley and mounted a full-fledged expedition which included 15 pack horses secured from the Indians in Washington’s North Yakima country, and shipped with the expedition all the way to Tyonek, Alaska, the jumping-off point for Mt. McKinley (Cook 1909, 2).

Cook’s 1903 expedition primary goal of reaching the summit of the mountain from the North was ultimately defeated. “Though thwarted by an insurmountable wall, we had ascended Mt. McKinley far enough to get a good view of its entire western face” (Cook 1909, 72). But the Cook party accomplished the first land circumnavigation of the mountain, covering a vast amount of country and mapping the terrain. By all accounts it was an excellent job. The expedition’s reports, from both Cook and party member Robert Dunn (Dunn 1907) and their maps, were well-received. Cook’s reputation was recognized by his election as president of the Explorers Club upon his return to New York City.

The 1906 Expedition

Riding the crest of his reputation, Cook organized a follow-up expedition for 1906 to focus on climbing the mountain from the South, having concluded in 1903 that a northern route was not feasible. He had no problem getting applicants. The party included several men who would play a part in the drama that would unfold after this trip: Prof. Herschel Parker, physicist, of Columbia University, Belmore Browne, artist, author, and climber, and Ed Barrille (Barrill), assistant horsepacker.

The party spent an intense summer in 1906 bushwhacking, routefinding, mapmaking, and crossing rivers, swamps, and tundra to approach the southerly reaches of the mountain. However, the going was slow and difficult and Cook concluded in mid-August

that they were still too far from the summit, and the season was too far advanced for a summit bid that year. "Owing to our repeated failures and the advancing winter we decided that our energies for the short period of the remaining season would be better spent in exploration than in climbing, and to this end our plans were now made" (Cook 1909, 181). Cook did conclude that a northeast route to the summit, via Muldrow Glacier, was now the only plausible route. Cook split the party up and assigned various alternate duties, such as "collecting specimens of animal life and [surveying] new districts" (Cook 1909, 181).

Belmore Browne also reported that the summit attempt was given up for the year, and the party disbanded at the Cook Inlet site of Tyonek in mid-August (Moore [1967] 1981, 5).

Doubts Arise

Shortly thereafter, Browne was amazed to hear rumors that Cook had summited the mountain with Ed Barrill. Browne had difficulty believing that Cook and Barrill could have returned to the mountain, traversed to the northern side, and summited, all in the space of 12 days, and with winter weather approaching. "We knew the character of the country that guarded the southern face of the great mountain, we had traveled in that country, and we knew the time that Dr. Cook had been absent was too short to allow of his even reaching the mountain. We therefore denied the rumor" (Moore [1967] 1981, 53).

When Browne and other members of the party met Cook as scheduled in Seldovia, near the southern tip of Alaska's Kenai Peninsula in early September, Cook confirmed that he and Barrill had reached the summit.

"At last the Doctor joined us, and to my surprise confirmed the report. . . As soon as we were alone I turned to him [Barrill] and asked him what he knew about Mount McKinley, and after a moment's hesitation he answered, 'I can tell you all about the big peaks just south of the mountain, but if you want to know about McKinley go and ask Cook.' I had felt all along that Barrill would tell me the truth" (Browne 1913:70-71, quoted in Riffenburgh 1994, 184-185). However, on Sept. 27, 1906, Cook wired his backers in New York, "We have reached the summit of Mount McKinley by a new route from the North" (Moore [1967] 1981, 53-54).

Proof, however, was not forthcoming, either from Cook or from Browne on either side of the question. Browne understood that "before I could make the public believe the truth I should have to collect some facts. I wrote immediately upon my return to Professor Parker telling him my opinions and knowledge concerning the climb, and I received a reply from him saying that he believed me implicitly and that the climb, under the existing conditions, was impossible" (Browne 1913:70-71, quoted in Riffenburgh 1994, 185).

Claims and Counter-Claims

Browne and many individuals within the mountaineering and exploration community immediately dismissed Cook's McKinley claim. "I knew that Dr. Cook had not climbed Mount McKinley," Browne proclaimed (1956, 70-71), "the same way a New Yorker would know that no man could walk from the Brooklyn Bridge to Grant's tomb in ten minutes."

According to Dr. Cook, he and Barrill "crept impatiently over the heaven-scraped granite toward the top" of Mt. McKinley and reached the summit on Sept. 16, 1906. Poised at the top of the continent, Cook wrote that he "shall always remember, with a mental focus sharpened by time, the warm friendship of my companion Edward Barrille," in particular, "the final pictures which I took of Barrille with the flag lashed to his ice axe as an arctic air froze the impression into a relief which no words can tell" (Cook 1907, 83; Cook 1908, 231; Washburn 1958, 6). **[FIGURE 2]** Indeed, Dr. Cook's now-famous "summit photograph" appeared in the May 1907 edition of Harper's Monthly Magazine as the single most important piece of evidence to support his claim. Dr. Cook need not have worried about his inability to paint a written description of the summit scene, for it was not his words which led to the eventual demise of his claim, but the photographic evidence, the "frozen impression" of Barrill standing atop that snow-covered peak, that would become his Achilles heel.

Browne, his skepticism now confirmed, later wrote, "Barrill had told me so." Cook, responding to questions posed to him by Browne, declared the climb to be "easier than he expected" (Browne 1956, 70-71; 1911, 482).

Publicly, the Harper's article was well received. But Browne, and co-expedition leader Professor Herschel Parker, privately believed that Cook had deceived the world. Although the pair shared their views with fellow members of the American Geographical Society and the Explorers Club, without firm evidence beyond Barrill's subtle, yet powerful statement to Browne in Seldovia, they dared not publicly condemn the Doctor (Browne 1956). Cook's summit account now began to unravel with the 1908 publication of his book *To the Top of the Continent* in which was printed a similar, yet strikingly different summit photograph than that which appeared in the May 1907 Harper's. Opposite page 227 and entitled "The Top of the Continent," the "summit" photograph of Ed Barrill revealed clearly a second peak in the image's lower right-hand corner. Browne and Parker were convinced that this photograph was an uncropped version of the 1907 Harper's photo, and that Cook himself had therefore provided evidence to disprove his own claim. **[FIGURE 3]**

Browne (1911, 483) argued that "anyone conversant with mountain photography or topography would recognize at first glance," that the second peak "was a mountain as

high or higher than the mountain shown as the summit of McKinley." Parker and Browne believed that this photograph "constituted absolute disproof of Dr. Cook's story." Their argument was strengthened by a second photograph, opposite page 239, of a small, obscure peak "in relation to the surrounding mountains," which, Browne declared, proved that "both pictures of the peak were taken from nearly the same point." Dr. Cook had provided Browne and Parker clear photographic evidence of the "fake peak," along with a clear description of the surrounding area in which Cook's photograph's had been taken. The duo's determination to disprove the Doctor's claim grew following Cook's 1909 declaration that he had reached the North Pole the prior year.

The North Pole controversy soon grew to a feverish pitch, with claims and counter-claims becoming daily reading for the world and a source of increased revenues for the newspapers.

Meanwhile, at the South Pole

As Peary's attacks mounted, Cook's long-time friend Roald Amundsen publicly supported the Doctor (Amundsen 1928, 20, 26). However, Amundsen supported Peary's claim as well: "I know Admiral Peary reached the North Pole. The reason I know it is that I knew Peary," he would later write (Amundsen 1928, 225). Nonetheless, Amundsen, a distinguished Polar explorer, in final preparations for his own North Polar expedition, now found dashed any hope of realizing his life-long dream to be first at the North Pole. It is interesting to note that it was Peary's claim and not that of Cook, which Amundsen cites as the reason for his abrupt change of plans. "Then, just as everything was about ready, the world was electrified by the news that Admiral Peary, in April, 1909, had reached the North Pole" (Amundsen 1928, 64). With the North Pole now conquered, Amundsen quietly and deviously revamped his plans and set sail for the Antarctic and the South Pole. "He [Amundsen] understood that it was the claim that counted," wrote polar historian Roland Huntford. "Once made, it destroyed all chance of uncontested primacy and by leaving the issue for ever wreathed in doubt, killed the goal." Amundsen, Huntford argues, had the "Napoleonic audacity to swing from one Pole to the other" (Huntford 1986, 207).

Amundsen's audacity placed him in direct competition for the South Pole with British Antarctic explorer Robert Falcon Scott, who had long before declared his Antarctic intentions. The now famous "race to the Pole" between the two explorers is meticulously documented, for instance, in Huntford's *The Last Place on Earth*. However, it is uncontested that Amundsen and his party were first to reach the Pole, on Dec. 15, 1911. "The regions around the North Pole - well, yes, the North Pole itself - had attracted me from childhood, and here I was at the South Pole," Amundsen declared. "Can anything more topsy-turvy be imagined?" (Amundsen 1925, 121). Travelling light, with dog-teams and skis, the Norwegians attained the Pole in relatively good condition. In "topsy-turvy" contrast, Scott's men, half dead and man-hauling their equipment and supplies,

arrived at the Pole on Jan. 18, 1912, and confronted the bitter reality that the Norwegians had beaten them to the prize (Scott 1983, 395-397). Scott and his men suffered not only from the harsh realization of their defeat in the race, but from the devastating cold and near depletion of all food stocks. The men made a valiant attempt to return to their base camp, but succumbed miserably to starvation, frostbite, and hypothermia less than 15 miles from their life-saving depot of food and fuel. On Mar. 29, 1912, Robert Falcon Scott died with his arm draped over one of his companions. Their tent became an ice-encrusted tomb. "Had we lived," Scott wrote, "I should have had a tale to tell of the hardihood, endurance, and courage of my companions which would have stirred the heart of every Englishman" (Scott 1983, 432, 444).

Cook's Claims Unravel

Armed with what they believed to be irrefutable evidence against Dr. Cook, Browne and Parker addressed the Explorers Club, convincing the leadership to conduct a formal investigation into the McKinley matter. Upon Dr. Cook's return to the United States from the North Pole expedition, and with the ever-increasing public war raging between the Doctor and Peary, Cook was called before Explorers Club to answer his critics. On Oct. 15, 1909 and then again on the 17th, the Special Committee of the Explorers Club was held in New York City, at which Chairman Marshall H. Saville informed Dr. Cook that the "committee wants to hear from you concerning the ascent of Mt. McKinley. The data as furnished in your book has been criticized by various persons, as we want those doubtful things cleared up, and you only can explain them" (Explorers Club 1909a). Indeed, Parker and Browne presented a formidable defense of their position, taking detailed issue with Cook's narrative and photographic evidence. They not only questioned Cook's summit photograph, they declared that many of the photographs presented in the 1908 text had purposefully been mis-captioned, misleading the reader as to their true location (Explorers Club 1909a, 15-17).

Throughout the tense afternoon of Oct. 17, committee members encouraged Cook to address these allegations. "If Dr. Cook could say two or three words that would give us any comfort," pleaded one member, "we would be very glad to hear them." Cook declined to address the committee, noting the public firestorm raging about the McKinley and North Pole claims had taken their toll on him. "I have come back here and have suddenly been thrust into a controversy," he pointed out. He explained that he did not have time to "breathe, have not had time to eat, and it doesn't seem to me that you should expect me to go into any details just at this moment." He requested, and was granted one month to collect his thoughts and review his 1908 published account, confessing that he had not "read the book since I have returned, and I had not read any of the copies before I went away [to the North Pole]" (Explorers Club 1909b, 11). Indeed, the book was published while Dr. Cook was on his unannounced 1908 North Pole expedition, as he vanished from the public eye after doubt had surfaced about his McKinley claim.

Dr. Cook failed to meet the Explorers Club deadline, and by December 1909, he had once again disappeared from public sight. Rumors as to his whereabouts ran rampant with newspapers offering rewards of up to \$1,000 for information as to his location. Faced with the reality that Cook would not or could not provide any additional information to support his claim, the Committee issued a fourteen-point report to the membership, detailing the case against Dr. Cook. The report dealt a fatal blow not only to Dr. Cook's McKinley claim, but provided the gateway for renewed questions regarding his attainment of the Pole. The final Explorers Club report was dramatic in its simplicity and finality: "Therefore, your committee recommends that the entire claim made by Dr. Cook that he ascended to the summit of Mt. McKinley in 1906 be rejected by the Explorers Club as unworthy of credence" (Explorers Club 1909b, 2). Based on these findings the committee unanimously voted in favor of a motion made by one member that "the name of Dr. Cook be dropped from the rolls of the Explorers Club" (Explorers Club 1909c).

At about the same time the Doctor was receiving the key to the City of New York in recognition of his North Pole claim, Ed Barrill released an affidavit given on Oct. 4, 1909, just prior to the Explorers Club meetings, in which Barrill dismissed any notion that he and Cook had reached McKinley's summit. Although there is question as to whether or not Barrill was paid by Peary supporters for such information, the affidavit dealt a critical blow to Cook's credibility. Indeed, just one day prior to the Explorers Club meeting of Oct. 15, *The Globe and Commercial Advertiser* of New York published a full text of Barrill's story. "I was with Dr. Cook continuously every day during the time he was attempting to ascend the mountain," he stated, "and at no time did we reach an elevation in excess of 10,000 ft." In addition to a detailed narrative of the expedition, Barrill provided a sketch map of the exact route he and Cook followed up the Ruth Glacier (Washburn 1989, 121). Armed with such resources, Browne and Parker persuaded the Explorers Club to support an expedition in the summer of 1910 to retrace Dr. Cook's route, duplicate his "summit photo," and attempt to scale the true summit (Browne 1911, 486). Browne was well aware that a successful duplication of Cook's photograph would shatter Cook's public credibility, confessing that such a photograph would settle "once and for all time his Polar claim" (Browne 1956, 74).

In the summer of 1910 three expeditions headed to the slopes of Mt. McKinley. In addition to Browne and Parker, the Oregon-based climbing group, the Mazamas, embarked on an attempt to retrace Cook's expedition in the hopes of vindicating his claim. Stymied by the terrain and convinced that Cook could not have climbed the mountain as he had described, the group conceded that Cook's claim was a hoax (Rusk 1945). Four Alaskan Sourdoughs, who had earlier dismissed Cook's summit story, ventured to the mountain, where two of the members reached the mountain's lower North Peak (Cole 1985). By mid-June, armed with first-hand knowledge of the terrain, Barrill's map and narrative, as well as the Doctor's photographic and written account of the 1906

expedition, Browne and Parker surveyed McKinley's Chulitna Glacier region, which they had explored four years earlier (Browne 1911, 486).

Following Cook's photographs and description, the duo retraced his exact steps up the Ruth Glacier (which Cook had named for his daughter) ending their search along the slopes of a minor snow-covered peak. Travelling ahead of Browne, Parker realized that the "fake peak," Cook's "summit photo," lay just before him. "We've got it!" exclaimed Parker, and, according to Browne, the men "stood there lost in thought of the dramatic side of our discovery." [FIGURE 4] Parker reached the top and reenacted Barrill's summit pose while Browne photographed the scene. The men estimated this peak to be twenty miles distance from the true summit. They also duplicated a number of Dr. Cook's photographs, proving many of his images were mis-captioned. The pair had indeed discovered Cook's secret, and they soon would share that secret with the rest of the world (Browne 1911, 488). "Our mountain detective work," Browne later explained, "was based on the fact that no man can lie topographically" (Browne 1956, 121).

"EXPLODES DR. COOK'S MT. M'KINLEY CLAIM," declared *The New York Times* on Nov. 11, 1910. "THE GREAT NORTH POLE CLAIMANT NEVER GOT NEARER THAN TWENTY MILES FROM THE PEAK." Here then was final photographic proof vindicating Browne and Parker and forever branding Cook a liar. With his claim of Mt. McKinley destroyed, so went Cook's hopes of maintaining the public's support for his North Pole exploits. Cook was blasted in the press, with all credible claim to the Pole erased. The Peary Arctic Club wasted no time in capitalizing on Cook's misfortune, and gleefully crowned Peary the rightful discoverer of the North Pole.

North Pole or South, No Real Winners but the Truth

Parker, Browne, and climbing companion Merle La Voy, returned in 1912 to try and climb the peak one last time. Battling a fierce blizzard just a few hundred feet below McKinley's summit, the men encountered ferocious winds and cold and abandoned their efforts. "I couldn't go ahead," Browne later wrote, "through the stinging snow I saw a sight that will haunt me to my dying day. The slope above me was no longer steep" (Browne 1956, 344). Just one year later, Walter Harper, part Native Alaskan and part Caucasian, became the first man to step foot on the top of North America, closely followed by expedition organizer Reverend Hudson Stuck, Harry Karstens, and Robert Tatum (Stuck 1989).

By 1913 the Stuck party was heralded as the first to climb McKinley without controversy or question. However, Amundsen's South Pole expedition was tainted by the tragedy of Scott and his men. Financial backers who felt deceived and embarrassingly uninformed also plagued Amundsen's victory and he had to publicly answer those critics who saw his achievement as a cause of Scott's death. The British considered Amundsen's expedition a blatant encroachment upon Scott's continent; not a sporting move to the English, who

were fiercely proud of their explorers. Yet Amundsen (1928, 65-66) argued that he had indeed notified Scott of his change in plans and his intent to head south, sending Scott a cable in Australia. "Captain Scott had the fullest possible notice," he declared. Amundsen attributed his victory and Scott's tragic end to the fact that Scott had chosen to man-haul supplies, and use Shetland ponies to transport food and equipment. The ponies quickly bogged down in the snow, proving useless early in the expedition. Amundsen utilized dogs and sledges to establish a series of caches from which the team could advance or retreat. His small, fast and flexible expedition was in stark contrast to Scott's large-scale British military style expedition with large depots and complicated logistics (Amundsen 1928, 68-69).

In the wake of the quest for the North and South Poles we find a trail of personal tragedy, inflated ego, nationalism, public passion and contempt, and enough interest and emotion to fuel debate for generations to come.

Looming in the midst of the Polar controversy stands Mt. McKinley, as dominant a figure in the theatre of exploration as it is on the Alaskan horizon. Although Dr. Cook had distinguished himself on the Belgica Expedition, with Peary in Greenland, and along the lower slopes of Mt. McKinley in 1903 and then again in 1906, his claim to have ascended the mountain marked the beginning of his end. Cook capitalized on his short-lived fame following the McKinley "ascent" to pursue his ultimate goal – the North Pole. Perhaps his claim to the Pole would never have been challenged so vigorously had Browne and Parker not discovered the McKinley ruse. And although Peary's claim caused Amundsen to redirect his efforts south, the fact that two men now claimed the North Pole surely reinforced Amundsen's distaste for following suit. Amundsen's personal relationship with Cook added to the drama as well. Indeed, in 1926 Amundsen, on an American tour, visited Cook while the latter was imprisoned in a Federal penitentiary, convicted in Texas on charges of mail fraud which Cook's supporters felt was unjustified and political. "I felt I could do no less than to make the short journey to the prison and call upon my former benefactor in his present misfortune." Amundsen reflected (1928, 74) that "Whatever Cook may have done he was not the Dr. Cook I knew as a young man," declaring that some "physical misfortune must have overtaken him to change his personality, for which he was not responsible." The Doctor died in 1940, carrying with him answers to so many questions.

The Controversy Continues

In the decades following Cook's death, several serious attempts were made to retrace his McKinley expedition and recreate his "summit photographs." Indeed, Cook had left behind a set of photographic "fingerprints" from which to work. Dr. Cook's supporters have repeatedly claimed to uncover new evidence placing the Doctor on McKinley's summit. Such claims are often met with equal vigor from the opposite side. In 1956 mountaineer Walt Gonnason was hired by Mrs. Vetter, Dr. Cook's daughter, to retrace

her father's route. The expedition failed to reach their goal, attaining a height of 11,400 feet. Yet Gonnason departed the mountain convinced Cook had indeed reached the summit (Gonnason 1994, 22-25). Gonnason returned to McKinley in 1994 as consultant to a Cook Society expedition that would once again try to retrace the Doctor's trail. The team, led by a small group of world-class mountaineers, failed to successfully climb Cook's route. Yet members of the Frederick A. Cook Society believe that a sketch found in Dr. Cook's diary resembles that of a peak identified by the team from a point Cook would have traversed on his way to the summit. The sketch, and additional narrative information presented by the Society does little, however, to bolster Cook's position (Cook 1996; Bryce 1998, 41-82).

Dr. Bradford Washburn, widely considered to be the authority on Mt. McKinley, has been chief among Cook's critics. In 1955 he began a meticulous investigation of Cook's 1906 expedition, locating and photographing, for the second time, the "fake peak." **[FIGURE 5]** Over the last four decades Washburn has succeeded in locating the site of each of Dr. Cook's photographs, supporting those assertions made by Browne and Parker. Similar investigations of the "fake peak" were carried out by mountaineer, scholar, and former editor of the American Alpine Journal, H. Adams Carter, in 1957. Carter's photographs serve to reinforce those positions held by Browne, Parker, and Washburn (Washburn, 1958). **[FIGURE 6]** In 1996 Litton Itek Optical Systems of Lexington, Massachusetts applied the most advanced image analysis equipment and expertise to this controversy. Itek has been involved in many high profile image evaluation cases, including the assassination of President Kennedy, the Patty Hearst bank robbery, and the Space Shuttle Challenger disaster. Itek's Image Science Department "found that in all cases the modern photos matched the images in Dr. Cook's 1907 publication" (Litton Itek Optical Systems 1996, 2).

Dr. Cook's "summit" photograph was compared to those reproduced by Browne, Parker, and Carter. All four images were duplicated to make each image the same size. **[FIGURE 7]** The photos were then used to "visually overlay one image onto another to facilitate matching the features between any two images at a time. . . . Our conclusion," the report states, "is that these four photographs are, beyond a doubt, all of the same peak and were taken from nearly the same camera station" (Litton Itek 1996, 2). **[FIGURE 8]** The work of Browne and Parker, with additional investigative work by Carter and Washburn, has been validated by one of the most advanced image analysis labs in the world. **[FIGURE 9]**

Yet there still exists a small group of Cook supporters who claim that even if Dr. Cook's "summit photograph" was taken a distance from the peak, it does not mean that he failed to reach the summit. Perhaps the Doctor was merely illustrating his ascent and summit victory, the argument goes, on some minor peak so that he would have a visual reproduction of the summit scene (Heckathorn 1995, 35; Cook-Dorough 1995, 37). The society forwards many reasons why Cook would have staged the scene, including bad

film packs, cold temperatures, and bad weather. Yet the Doctor does not mention staging his photograph, nor does he indicate any equipment problems. In the thirty-four years between the 1906 climb and his death in 1940, not once did Dr. Cook offer such a defense of his photographic evidence. Indeed, the Doctor stated clearly that his narrative and photographs were a true and accurate portrayal of his expedition. [FIGURE 10]

Although Peary was christened the true discoverer of the North Pole, haunting questions regarding his claim continue. Moreover, embarrassing family issues dogged Peary throughout his career. News that he had fathered a son while in Greenland, as did his expedition partner Matthew Henson, added to his public and private troubles (Counter 1991). And what of Amundsen, discoverer of the Northwest Passage and South Pole who long had dreamed, and indeed, prepared his entire life to reach the North Pole? A bitter-sweet victory for reaching the "wrong Pole," and then chastised for encroaching on Scott's exclusive rights to the continent. Scott perished not because Amundsen challenged him for the Pole, but because of so many other factors, not the least of which included improper preparation, improper equipment, and his unwillingness to utilize dogs and sledges in favor of ponies and mechanized tractors. Scott's Polar party was doomed. But in death, he and his men became heroes.

The controversy simmers to this day, occasionally coming to a boil and spawning new generations of loyalties and alliances. Ironically, even Peary's claim to the Pole is now questioned, with historians, scholars, and diehard believers combing expedition notes and diary entries for new interpretations and evidence that will lay to rest the question of who reached the Pole first (Bryce 1997; Eames 1973; Herbert 1989; Hunt 1981; Molett 1996; Rawlins 1973; Wright 1970).

Sadly, the Doctor is remembered primarily for what are now generally recognized as hoaxes, rather than as a brave and resourceful explorer, which he also was. Peary, perhaps the true discoverer of the North Pole, is viewed with cynicism as a possessed man, hell-bent to reach the Pole and not beyond public and private manipulation to claim credit for what he believed was rightfully his. Amundsen's exploration record stands for itself, but the human drama surrounding his own accomplishments and his disappointment in not reaching the North Pole made those personal victories hollow.

The story of the North and South Pole, Mt. McKinley, and the men who figured in these heroic events, appeals to the romance in our nature. The romantic figure of the explorer, hardships endured, victory and tragic death, all touch something very simple yet dynamic in us. What makes stories of exploration intriguing is not the lists of equipment, or even the geographic or scientific knowledge gathered. We search for and grasp the humanity in such endeavor. We identify and analyze the strengths and weaknesses of our heroes, and measure them against our own perceptions and norms. We are intrigued by those willing to place their lives in jeopardy, yet wonder about and perhaps condemn them for possessing strong egos or for their hunger for public attention. And, as we have seen with

Dr. Cook, exploration has had many casualties. Perhaps it is time we celebrate Dr. Cook's true accomplishments, of which there is a good deal we know with certainty. Those who support this idea should find creative and public ways to underscore Dr. Cook's contributions to ethnography, medicine, and exploration. Similarly, those who have condemned Cook to a footnote in the annals of exploration are doing him and history a disservice by not objectively exploring a rich part of our collective history and heritage in the North.

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Figure 2:¹ Dr. Cook's famous "summit photograph."

Figure 3: The upper part of Dr. Cook's controversial photograph of Edward Barrille on the summit of Mt. McKinley in September 1906 (from a duplicate negative – original negative appears to be missing.)

Figure 4: Features along right-hand profile provide clear match between Cook 1907 and Browne 1910 photographs. [Note "8310" with arrow beneath on Browne photograph, not an annotation). Identical features are also visible within interior, although not annotated here to provide unobscured view.

Figure 5: Bradford Washburn's picture of the upper part of the "Fake Peak," taken in August 1956 – enlarged from a part of a photograph taken at a considerable distance.

Figure 6: Cook 1907 (a) and Carter 1957 (b) photos shown at comparable scale.

Figure 7: (a) Cook 1907, (b) Browne 1910, (c) Parker 1910 and (d) Carter 1957 photographs.

Figure 8: Browne and Carter photos.

Figure 9: Browne and Carter photos.

Figure 10: Mt. McKinley, with Dr. Cook's "fake Peak" circled in lower left corner.

¹ Figures 2 through 10 used with permission of Bradford Washburn.

THE NORTH POLE IS DISCOVERED BY DR. FREDERICK A. COOK, WHO CABLES TO THE HERALD AN EXCLUSIVE ACCOUNT OF HOW HE SET THE AMERICAN FLAG ON THE WORLD'S TOP



Fighting Famine and Ice, the Courageous Explorer Reaches the Great Goal

MADE A NEW HIGHWAY, AN INTERESTING STRIP OF ARMED NATURE, BEYOND GREENLAND AND A TRIANGLE OF LAND OF 30,000 SQUARE MILES.
ACCOMPANIED BY ONLY TWO ESKIMOS
AND TWENTY-SIX DOGS IN LAST DASH

WHICH AFTER OBSCURE IS OVERCOME UNLIT AT LAST THE
TROMPH COMES AND THE STARS AND STRIPES ARE SET
WAVING ON THE "WORLD OF THE EARTH."

ANGER TORTURES ON THE HOMEWARD JOURNEY
EXPLORES THE PROBLEMS OF HIS GREAT VOYAGE. TELL OF HIS HEROIC
LABORS IN THE NORTH AND THE COMPASSION UNLIT THEY BRING
TORTURES TO THE SOUTH.

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L. B. WOOD, Esquire.
L. B. WOOD, Miss.
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L. B. WOOD, Dr.
L. B. WOOD, Mr.
L. B. WOOD, Sir.
L. B. WOOD, Hon.
L. B. WOOD, Rev.
L. B. WOOD, Honorable.
L. B. WOOD, Reverend.
L. B. WOOD, Right.
L. B. WOOD, Very.
L. B. WOOD, Most.
L. B. WOOD, Excellent.
L. B. WOOD, Good.
L. B. WOOD, Great.
L. B. WOOD, Wonderful.
L. B. WOOD, Amazing.
L. B. WOOD, Incredible.
L. B. WOOD, Unbelievable.
L. B. WOOD, Astonishing.
L. B. WOOD, Breathtaking.
L. B. WOOD, Mind-boggling.
L. B. WOOD, Jaw-dropping.
L. B. WOOD, Mouth-watering.
L. B. WOOD, Eye-opening.
L. B. WOOD, Heart-rending.
L. B. WOOD, Soul-stirring.
L. B. WOOD, Spirit-lifting.
L. B. WOOD, Soul-soothing.
L. B. WOOD, Heart-warming.
L. B. WOOD, Spirit-boosting.
L. B. WOOD, Soul-encouraging.
L. B. WOOD, Heart-encouraging.
L. B. WOOD, Spirit-empowering.
L. B. WOOD, Soul-empowering.
L. B. WOOD, Heart-empowering.
L. B. WOOD, Spirit-empowering.



DR. FREDERICK A. COOK AS HE APPEARED
LAST YEAR IN THE ARCTIC.



The North Pole the Most Cheerless Spot That Can Be Imagined, Says Dr. Cook

When the Discoverer Stood at Last on the One Peak
That Has Stunned the Ambitions of Centuries
Has One Feeling Was Infinite Loneliness.

NO NORTH, NO EAST AND NO WEST THERE—
ALL SOUTH, NO MATTER WHICH DIRECTION

HOW THE NORTH POLE LOOKS

From the preparations to the night's march to the
pole the expedition was a continuous struggle.
The march was a series of hardships and dangers.
The snow was deep and the ice was hard.
The wind was howling and the sun was low.
The men were exhausted and the dogs were
starving. The expedition was a test of
endurance and courage. The men who
went to the North Pole were the best of
the best. They were brave and strong.
They were determined to reach the top
of the world. They were not afraid of
death. They were not afraid of
failure. They were not afraid of
loneliness. They were not afraid of
the unknown. They were not afraid of
the dark. They were not afraid of
the cold. They were not afraid of
the pain. They were not afraid of
the hunger. They were not afraid of
the thirst. They were not afraid of
the fatigue. They were not afraid of
the despair. They were not afraid of
the hopelessness. They were not afraid of
the futility. They were not afraid of
the meaninglessness. They were not afraid of
the insignificance. They were not afraid of
the nothingness. They were not afraid of
the emptiness. They were not afraid of
the silence. They were not afraid of
the solitude. They were not afraid of
the isolation. They were not afraid of
the alienation. They were not afraid of
the estrangement. They were not afraid of
the disconnection. They were not afraid of
the disorientation. They were not afraid of
the disorientation. They were not afraid of
the disorientation.

It was a long and arduous journey, but the men were determined to reach the top of the world. They were not afraid of death, failure, loneliness, or the unknown. They were not afraid of the dark, the cold, the pain, the hunger, the thirst, the fatigue, the despair, the hopelessness, the futility, the meaninglessness, the insignificance, the nothingness, the emptiness, the silence, the solitude, the isolation, the alienation, the estrangement, the disconnection, the disorientation.

The men who went to the North Pole were the best of the best. They were brave and strong. They were determined to reach the top of the world. They were not afraid of death, failure, loneliness, or the unknown. They were not afraid of the dark, the cold, the pain, the hunger, the thirst, the fatigue, the despair, the hopelessness, the futility, the meaninglessness, the insignificance, the nothingness, the emptiness, the silence, the solitude, the isolation, the alienation, the estrangement, the disconnection, the disorientation.

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The Herald Gets First Story of Finding of North Pole

The Herald has received the first story of the
discovery of the North Pole. The story is
a thrilling account of the expedition led by
Dr. Frederick A. Cook. The men who went
to the North Pole were the best of the best.
They were brave and strong. They were
determined to reach the top of the world.
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silence, the solitude, the isolation, the
alienation, the estrangement, the
disconnection, the disorientation.

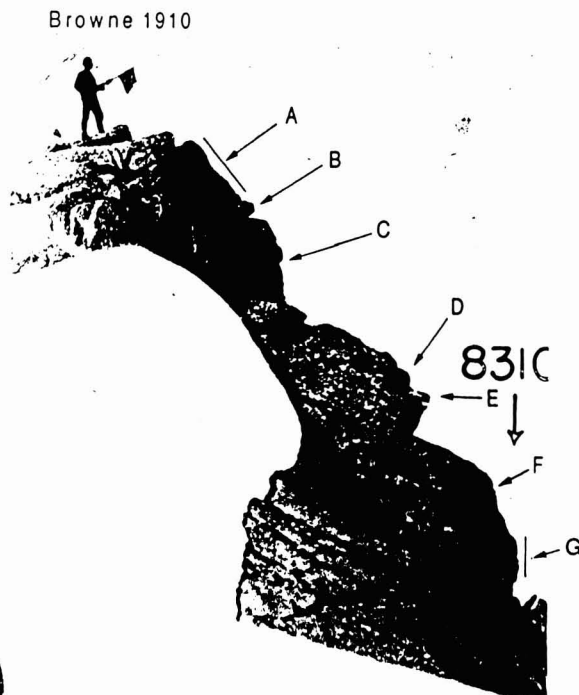
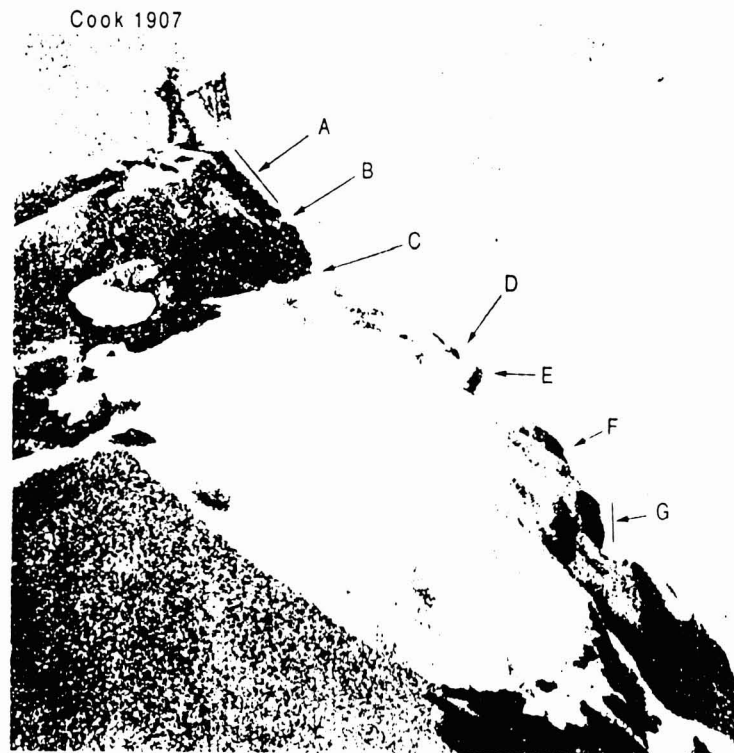




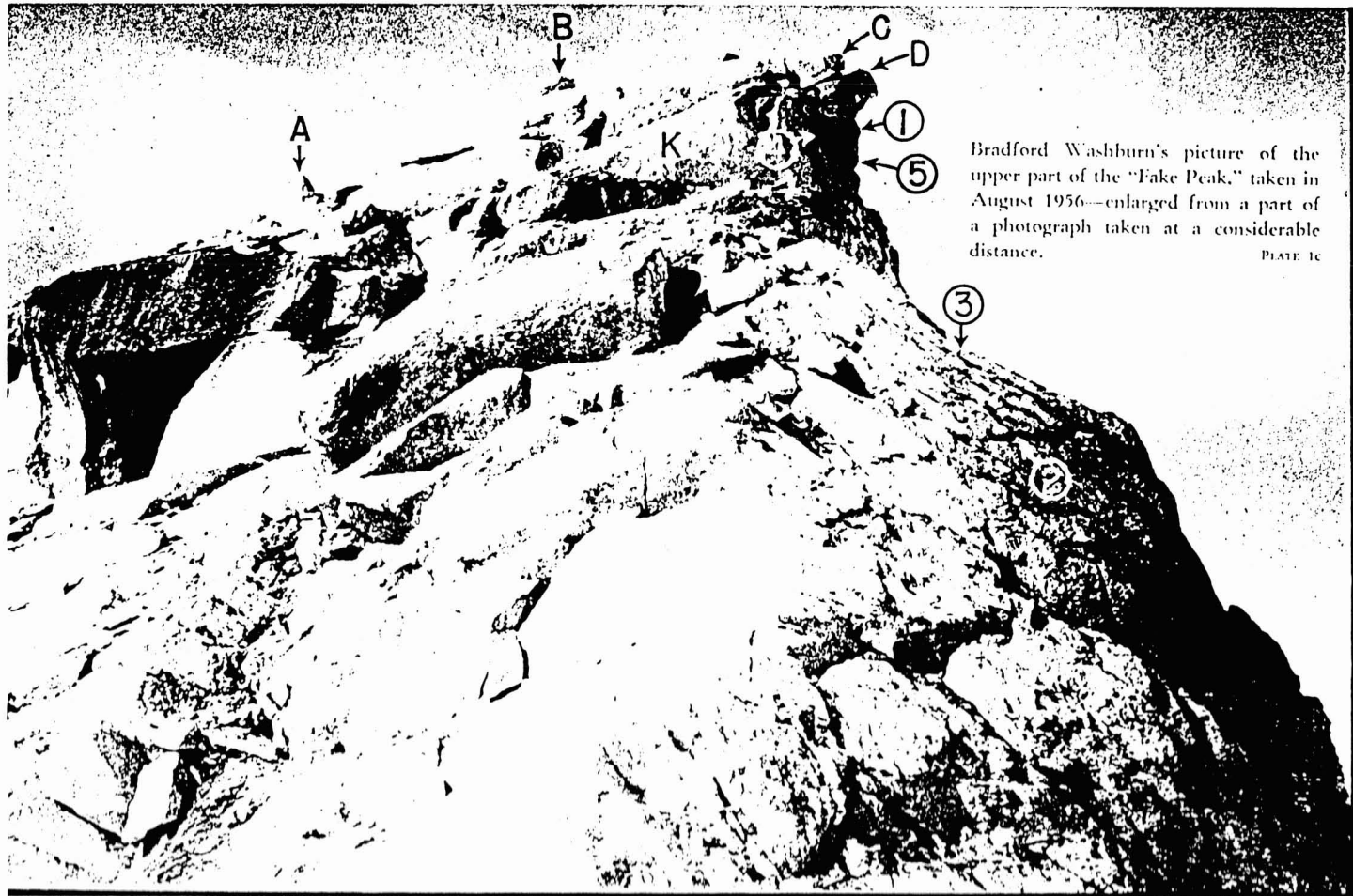
The upper part of Dr. Cook's controversial photograph of Edward Barrille on the summit of Mt. McKinley in September 1906 (from a duplicate negative—original negative appears to be missing).

PLATE 1A

G
8450



Features along right-hand profile provide clear match between Cook 1907 and Browne 1910 photographs. (Note "8310" with arrow beneath on Browne photograph, not an annotation). Identical features also visible within interior, although not annotated here to provide unobscured view.



Bradford Washburn's picture of the upper part of the "Fake Peak," taken in August 1956—enlarged from a part of a photograph taken at a considerable distance.

PLATE 1C



(a)



(b)



(a) Cook 1907



(b) Browne 1910



(c) Parker 1910



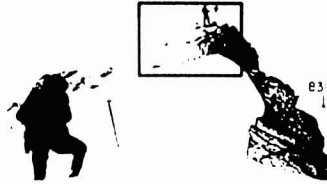
(d) Carter 1957

Belmore Browne photo, June 28, 1910



Carter photo

Area enlarged from Browne.

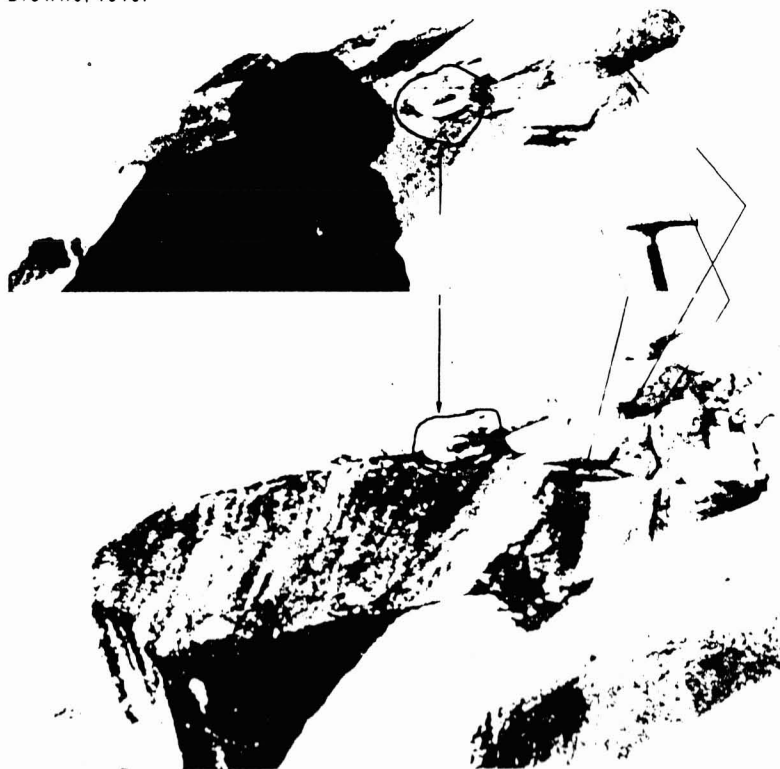


Browne photo modified by removing rock along cracks to show similarity to Carter 1957 photo



Area enlarged from Carter.

Browne, 1910.



Edge traced from Carter photo
superimposed on Browne.



Areas enlarged from
Browne (above) and
Carter (below).



Carter, 1957.



