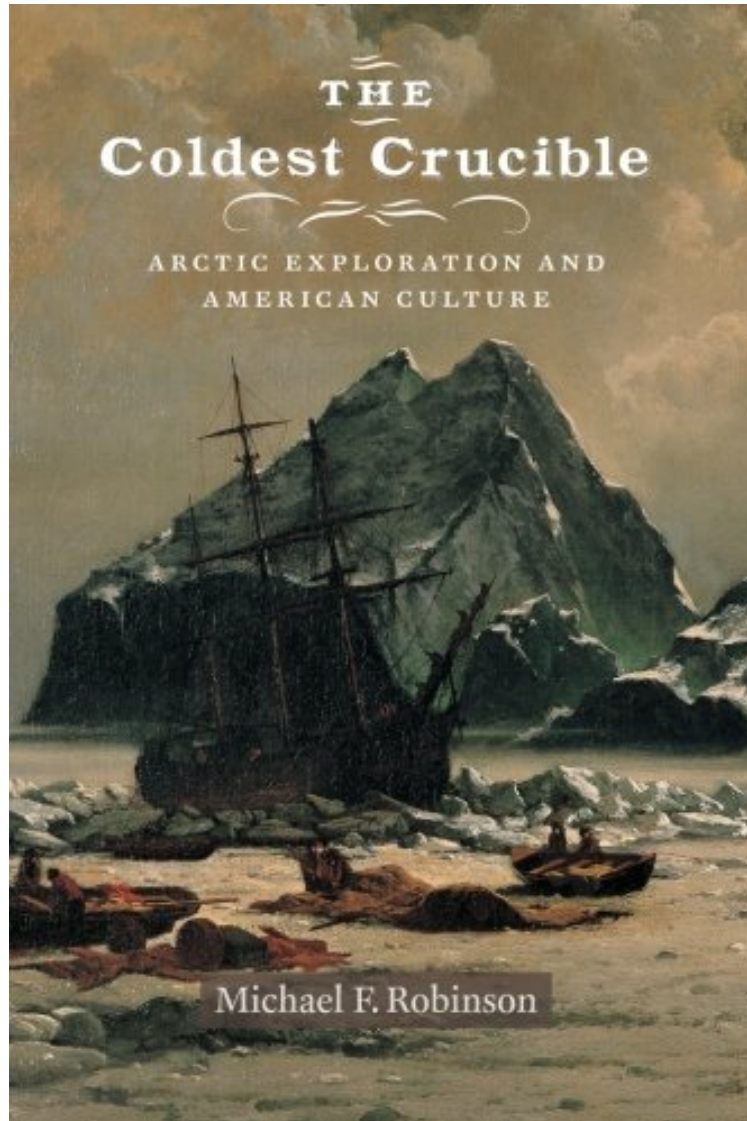


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The Coldest Crucible: Arctic Exploration and American Culture

Michael F. Robinson

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Michael F. Robinson : The Coldest Crucible: Arctic Exploration and American Culture before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Coldest Crucible: Arctic Exploration and American Culture:

7 of 8 people found the following review helpful. Good Analysis of the Ice in the American Imagination By Roger D. Launius Michael F. Robinson's "The Coldest Crucible: Arctic Exploration and American Culture" focuses on the public perception of American Arctic exploration to illuminate developments in the political and cultural history of the

United States between 1850 and 1909. He approaches the Arctic as "a faraway stage on which explorers played out dramas that were unfolding very close to home" (p. 3). He unpacks the political and cultural demarcations of American culture and uses the polar explorers as a means of illuminating U.S. society and culture. Most important, Robinson finds that the explorers offered an unequivocal statement of American exceptionalism that all could embrace. In the end, he asserts that Americans used the Arctic as a surrogate for other controversies and dramas played out far from the snow-covered region. There is much in "The Coldest Crucible" to admire. Robinson makes a succinct, well-structured argument, using Arctic exploration as a stage on which to dramatize what he thinks are the core elements of the American nation in the nineteenth century. Robinson is at his best when he documents the manner in which the Arctic served as a unifying theme in a nation divided by slavery in the 1840s and 1850s. At a critical level stories of the search for Sir John Franklin's lost expedition diverted the public from the more serious issues taking place on the national stage. I immediately thought of the many diversions of minor stories in the media in the 2002-2003 time period rather than focusing on the huge story of the nation's politics lumbering toward what became the quagmire of Iraq. But diversions were no less useful in the post-Civil War era, but Robinson tends to interpret Arctic exploration differently in that era. He seems to emphasize its role more as an expression of anxiety about a loss of masculinity present in the rise of urban America. But I find his unifying theme valid there as well, and would suggest that the race of Robert Peary and Frederick Cook to the North Pole was just as attractive a feature of Americanism writ large as the pre-Civil War efforts in the Arctic. While I quibble with the details of his thesis, Robinson's study is superb. It effectively demonstrates his central contention that the exploration of the Arctic was effectively invoked by observers to further ends on the continental American landscape far removed from the ice. His innovative approach will have to be dealt with in the historiography hereafter, and no one will be able to deny that Robinson has made his case that our culture gave rise to the polar expeditions undertaken by Americans in the nineteenth century. As he demonstrated, the quest for the Arctic for Americans represented a unique synergy between culture and exploration, each one playing off the other.

In the late 1800s, Arctic Fever swept across the nation as dozens of American expeditions sailed north to the Arctic to find a sea route to Asia and, ultimately, to stand at the North Pole. Few of these missions were successful, and many men lost their lives en route. Yet failure did little to dampen the enthusiasm of new explorers or the crowds at home that cheered them on. Arctic exploration, Michael F. Robinson argues, was an activity that unfolded in America as much as it did in the wintry hinterland. Paying particular attention to the perils facing explorers at home, *The Coldest Crucible* examines their struggles to build support for the expeditions before departure, defend their claims upon their return, and cast themselves as men worthy of the nation's full attention. In so doing, this book paints a new portrait of polar voyagers, one that removes them from the icy backdrop of the Arctic and sets them within the tempests of American cultural life. With chronological chapters featuring emblematic Arctic explorers including Elisha Kent Kane, Charles Hall, and Robert Peary *The Coldest Crucible* reveals why the North Pole, a region so geographically removed from Americans, became an iconic destination for discovery.

A wonderful book to read and ponder. Michael Robinson takes us on an exhilarating voyage into the American encounter with the Arctic from Elisha Kane to Robert Peary and Frederick Cook. The characters are alive, the scenes are vivid, and the stories are riveting. But this is not another book on the Arctic explorer. Robinson has delivered a long-overdue argument, one that is both nuanced and elegant. The lived experience of the explorer began and ended not on the ice floes of the north but in the committee rooms, newspaper offices, lecture halls, sideshows, circuses, and private dining clubs throughout the country. Robinson shows brilliantly that the Arctic explorer reflected the changing culture of the country. Progressively cut off from science, the explorer found himself in the pockets of the great press barons in whose hands scandal and failure made better copy than did geographic success. Like so much of America, the explorer had become a brand, a disturbing sign of the future.