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Fatal Journey: the Final Expedition of Henry Hudson

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FATAL JOURNEY: THE FINAL EXPEDITION OF HENRY HUDSON. By Peter C. Mancall. New York: Basic Books, 2009. 303 pp. $26.95 (hardcover). ISBN 978-0-465-00511-6.

Most Americans have probably heard of Henry Hudson, but only relative to the river that bears his name. I would hope that readers of this journal are aware of his Arctic voyages in the early 17th century, and that his men put him, his son, and seven of his men adrift in a small shallop, a shallow-bottomed boat, around 10 June 1611, at the south end of Hudson Bay (James Bay). They were never to be heard from again. Mancall, in this fascinating account based on a great deal of research, provides a reasonable explanation of Hudson's likely fate, after probably surviving for a polar winter or two. Unlike Jack London three centuries later, Hudson and his contemporaries had little skill in negotiation with the Americans (as the "Indians" and Inuit were called at that time). When Hudson led his ship *Discovery* out of London on 17 April 1610 with a crew of 21 men and two boys, he was "perhaps the most skilled explorer in England" after three previous polar voyages, including two to the Barents Sea. The author was unable to find any information on Hudson's personal life.

The objective of these strenuous efforts and those of others in the decades that followed was spices such as cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg, and peppers. Although four centuries too early, the Northwest Passage to the Southern Ocean (i.e. the Pacific) seemed reasonable considering the 24-hour summer daylight of the Arctic. Hudson did not anticipate the harsh winters that he and others managed to experience successfully, despite scurvy and little food. After all, the latitude of James Bay, where the *Discovery* wintered in 1610–1611, was at a similar latitude to northern England. They had no understanding of the Little Ice Age and the Gulf Stream. Serious businessmen invested their money in Hudson's voyages, because he had convinced them of his skill and ability to handle men in difficult circumstances. The particular crew on his fourth polar voyage proved impossible for him. Mancall reconstructs the likely course of events leading to the mutiny and subsequent tribulations of the crew before eight survivors of the original 23 arrived in London about 16 months after their departure. Mancall describes probable events during the winter of 1610–1611 and the following spring, as determined from their statements, and from fragments of journals and from Cree oral history. Obviously their accounts were biased from the start, but whom was there to believe? The guilty were among the five later killed by Inuit and two others who died on the voyage, or so the testimony went. But there were bloodstains on the deck.

As the author succinctly put it, "the disappearance at sea of an English mariner—especially one whose journey had received support from powerful and prominent patrons—was not a matter that could be left to mystery." Had they found the Northwest Passage? How could a dispute have led to a full-blown mutiny? The resulting interrogations of six of the survivors and a subsequent trial of four of these for murder (including Abacuk Pricket, who published a "self serving" journal in 1625) took until 1618. But that is not the main part of the story.

Through his careful research, documented in 21 pages of "notes on sources" and 38 pages of "notes," Mancall meticulously reconstructs the conditions met by Hudson before and after the mutiny, the climate, and likely behavior of the Americans. He uses descriptions from later Arctic explorers to the Hudson Bay area in the 17th century. The book contains two modern maps of the Hudson Bay and North Atlantic–Arctic oceans area showing Hudson's voyages, as well as numerous maps from the 17th century. The book also includes a number of pertinent 17th century illustrations and an early 20th century photograph of pack ice; their reproduction quality is only fair. There is, however, no contemporary portrait of Henry Hudson, because none has survived. I recommend this excellent book to both armchair explorers and serious students of the history of the Arctic.

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