



The North Pole

Who got there first? Cook v Peary...

In April 2009, Bruce Henderson wrote an article in the Smithsonian Magazine about Cook and Peary, and their claims to have reached the North Pole first.

Here is an extract from that article. The full version can be read at the [Smithsonian online magazine](#).



Frederick Cook and Robert Peary both claimed they discovered the North Pole.
(AGIP / Rue des Archives / The Granger Collection, New York).

On September 7, 1909, readers of the *New York Times* awakened to a stunning front-page headline: "Peary Discovers the North Pole After Eight Trials in 23 Years." The North Pole was one of the last remaining laurels of earthly exploration, a prize for which countless explorers from many nations had suffered and died for 300 years. And here was the American explorer Robert E. Peary sending word from Indian Harbour,

Labrador, that he had reached the pole in April 1909. The *Times* story alone would have been astounding. But it wasn't alone.

A week earlier, the *New York Herald* had printed its own front-page headline: "The North Pole is Discovered by Dr. Frederick A. Cook." Cook, an American explorer who had seemingly returned from the dead after more than a year in the Arctic, claimed to have reached the pole in April 1908—a full year before Peary.

Anyone who read the two headlines would know that the North Pole could be "discovered" only once. The question then was: Who had done it? In classrooms and textbooks, Peary was long anointed the discoverer of the North Pole—until 1988, when a re-examination of his records commissioned by the National Geographic Society, a major sponsor of his expeditions, concluded that Peary's evidence never proved his claim and suggested that he knew he might have fallen short. Cook's claim, meanwhile, has come to rest in a sort of polar twilight, neither proved nor disproved, although his descriptions of the Arctic region—made public before Peary's—were verified by later explorers. Today, on the centennial of Peary's claimed arrival, the bigger question isn't so much who as how: *How* did Peary's claim to the North Pole trump Cook's?

In 1909, the journalist Lincoln Steffens hailed the battle over Peary's and Cook's competing claims as the story of the century. "Whatever the truth is, the situation is as wonderful as the Pole," he wrote. "And whatever they found there, those explorers, they have left there a story as great as a continent.

