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To the Top of the Continent: Discovery, Exploration and Adventure in Sub-arctic Alaska, The First Ascent of Mt. McKinley, 1903-1906

Frederick Albert Cook

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Dr. Fred. A. Cook gives a graphic account of how he ascended Mount McKinley in Alaska, in "To the Top of the Continent." The volume is splendidly illustrated with photographs taken by the author. Unlike many tales of actual adventure, this is well written and holds the attention of the reader. We eagerly follow the Doctor through his harrowing experiences and many failures, and ultimately see him waving " Old Glory " on the top of the highest mountain in North America, looking down on the one side over the Arctic Circle, and on the other over the rolling Pacific Ocean—all around the snow glittering ghastly white, and overhead the black dome of the sky. Dr. Cook thus describes the sensations of the party as they struggled to the summit:

"Our legs were of wood and our feet of stone. After prodigious efforts we were forced to camp at 18,400 feet with not enough energy left to talk or to eat. The silk tent was pitched, and as we crept into the bags we were so reduced by frost and the awful breath-reducing struggles that we were but half conscious of the surroundings. The best thing to dispel the shivers was hot tea. The water boiled at a point so low that the tea was weak and never very hot. To get the real flavour it was necessary to eat the leaves. It was a restless and exciting night. Restless, because the task of breathing less than one half an atmosphere and pumping blood through collapsing arteries abnormally taxed our powers. Exciting, because with heaving, pulsating bodies we felt as if the end of life had come and the door of Heaven was about to open. An advance of twenty steps so fagged us that we were forced to lean over our ice-axes to puff and ease the heart; another twenty steps and another test, and so on in a life-racking series of final efforts."

Cook's account of the ascent of Mt. McKinley was disputed by those who later claimed credit for this feat. As mountaineering author Edwin Swift Balch states: "The ascent of Mount McKinley by Cook can never be proved or disproved, unless perchance there is a big enough stoneman on top to withstand Alaska storms. This is the case also with thousands of other ascents."

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