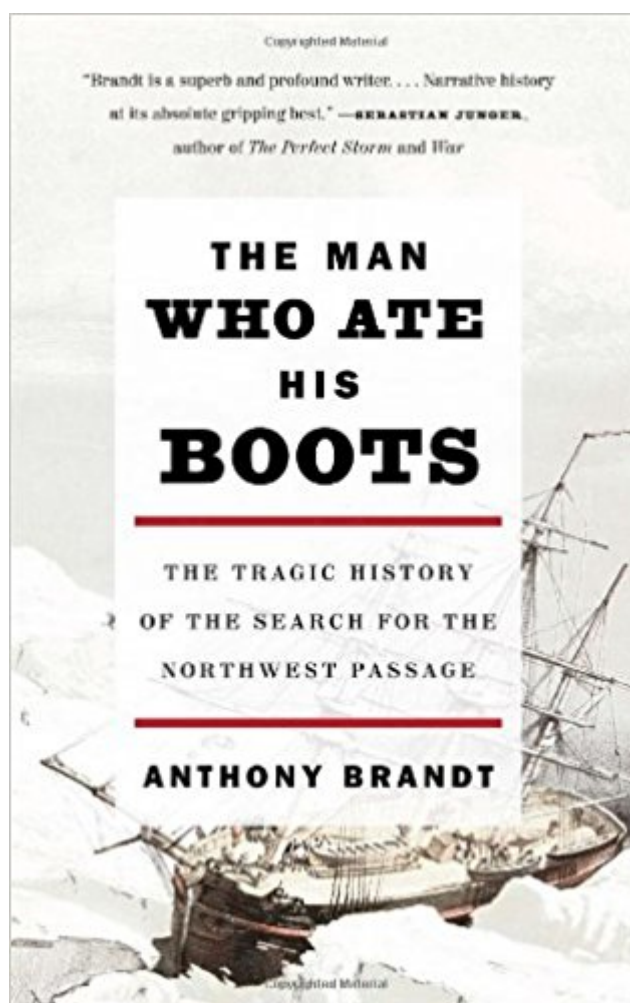


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# The Man Who Ate His Boots: The Tragic History Of The Search For The Northwest Passage



## Synopsis

After the triumphant end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, the British took it upon themselves to complete something they had been trying to do since the sixteenth century: find the fabled Northwest Passage. For the next thirty-five years the British Admiralty sent out expedition after expedition to probe the ice-bound waters of the Canadian Arctic in search of a route, and then, after 1845, to find Sir John Franklin, the Royal Navy hero who led the last of these Admiralty expeditions. Enthralling and often harrowing, *The Man Who Ate His Boots* captures the glory and the folly of this ultimately tragic enterprise.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

A Q&A with Anthony Brandt Question: In *The Man Who Ate His Boots* you tell the rousing and often horrifying story of the search for the Northwest Passage, the holy grail of nineteenth century British exploration. Why did so many people invest such time, energy, and effort in to this search? Anthony Brandt: There's no simple answer. In part it had seemed since the 16th century--when the Spanish and the Portuguese were claiming all the easier routes to the Far East--like a peculiarly British mission to find this great unknown route to the East via the north; and after 1815, when the Napoleonic Wars ended with such a decisive British victory and the seas were theirs, the chance to use idle ships and idle seamen to find it became too attractive to resist. The British now thought they could do anything, no matter how difficult, especially at sea. But it was also to some degree the product of one man's enthusiasm, and that was John Barrow, the powerful second secretary of

the Admiralty, who believed in an open, unfrozen, polar sea; and he had an ally in the first lord of the Admiralty, the second Lord Melville, who supported the idea and was able to gather Parliamentary support. The British people were excited by the idea, too, and got behind it. Question: Was the mission a fool's errand? Anthony Brandt: It proved to be so, and there were skeptics from the beginning. But at the time the Arctic was completely unknown. The map was blank above 80 degrees north in all areas, and above 70 degrees north in most. Nobody knew what the Arctic Ocean was like, or whether there even was an Arctic Ocean for that matter. For all they knew Greenland might extend to Asia, and some mapmakers thought it did. Others firmly believed that salt water could not freeze. The Greenland whalers knew better, but they weren't scientists, they were commercial fishermen, and men like Barrow paid no attention to them. They weren't gentlemen. In retrospect, then, it certainly seems like a fool's errand, but life does not happen in retrospect, and what seems foolish now seemed like a noble effort at the time. Question: Your title refers to John Franklin's 1819 failed expedition where 11 of the 20 men in the exploration party died of starvation and the survivors were forced to eat their boots! Franklin's expedition is perhaps the most famous, but there were dozens of missions sent to the Arctic in the first half of the nineteenth century, one failure after another. Each of the commanding officers felt as if he was prepared for the journey ahead, so what was it that doomed these expeditions to failure and death? Anthony Brandt: The Arctic is intractable. No amount of preparation can ensure a person's safety in an environment full of so much risk. The margin of survival is extremely narrow in the Arctic, and even small mistakes--the loss of a glove; forgetting to bring sun glasses; the sudden collapse of an ice floe--can kill you, and in a very short time. More of Franklin's men might have survived in 1821 if he had turned back a week earlier, or even a few days. To survive in the Arctic, one must be very bold; one must also be very cautious. Question: What has been the legacy of these explorers? Should we remember them as heroes? Anthony Brandt: Hero is a word that makes me uneasy. One man's hero is another's devil. There are multiple sides to every story. I prefer the word courageous. Parry, Franklin, the two Rosses: whatever one thinks of the project they were engaged on, there can be no question of their courage. One holds one's breath as Lt. Parry picks his way between the ice and the shoreline, half blinded by fog sometimes, hoping the wind doesn't shift and trap him between an ice floe perfectly capable of turning his ship into splinters and a shoreline composed of solid rock. These men were often religious, and one can't help but think that they would almost have to be, to do what they did. Question: The Man Who Ate His Boots is full of eccentric characters, many of whom bicker with each other in highly entertaining public battles. If you had to pick one, which historical character was most fun for you to bring to life?

Anthony Brandt: I suppose egotistical, cranky, battleworn, and almost always wrong John Ross was my favorite sailor on this trip. For me he gave the stereotype of the British eccentric new levels of meaning, and it was always fun to watch him mess things up. The fact that he had once been run through with a bayonet added a bit of spice to his character, and his pamphlet wars with various enemies were always entertaining. But for sheer love I'll opt for Lady Jane, John Franklin's wife and one of the most extraordinary women of her time, surely the most intrepid woman traveler of the first half of the 19th century. I keep hoping someone will write a new biography of her. I got carried away a few times and devoted too much space to her and had to cut back. I think the memorial to her husband in Westminster Abbey should really be a memorial to her. Question: Thanks to global warming, in the summer of 2007, the Northwest Passage opened to ship traffic. What can you tell us about the future of the Northwest Passage? Anthony Brandt: I wish I knew, so that I could invest in it. But, joking aside, the Passage was open in 2007 and 2008, but not in 2009. I doubt that it will be open reliably every summer for a while, perhaps a decade. But inevitably, if warming continues at the present rate, I don't see how it won't open every summer by 2020, and that will cut thousands of miles off the present sea routes to the Pacific from the Atlantic, and vice versa, reducing costs for shippers all over the world. Is this a good thing? Obviously, only in the short term, and only for shippers--and possibly oil and natural gas producers, if they find as much oil and natural gas as they think exists in the Arctic Basin. Already the Northwest Passage is a tourist attraction of sorts, and a Russian icebreaker makes the trip every summer with paying passengers. Maybe they'll take me along on one of these trips. I'd like to see it, if I can sleep in a warm cabin and eat good food while I'm there. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Whether it is Gordon of Khartoum or Scott of the Antarctic, British imperial history is replete with heroic failures, deemed æmartyrs for the Empire. • Brandt, the editor of the National Geographic Adventure series, illustrates that the search for the fabled Northwest Passage provides a good share of such men. Once geographers realized that the Americas were ænew æ continents rather than the edge of Asia, the discovery of an all-water route through the landmass to the Pacific became a goal for European imperial powers. For the nineteenth-century British explorers, it was the equivalent of the Holy Grail. In a practical sense, the passage was non-existent because the waters north of Canada were icebound all year. That didn't prevent a parade of adventurous, often heroic, and sometimes foolhardy British mariners from challenging the ice in an incredibly hostile environment. This is a superior tale of nobility, hubris, and sadly, futility. --Jay Freeman --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Informative yet kinda dry. I felt that a good bit of the back story about their personal lives could have been omitted and not really lost much of the story. But, I didn't write the damn book. I skipped over most of the personal stuff. Overall not too bad.

A very enjoyable book that brought back some of the forgotten, or obscure historical events of some forgotten hero's names. I remember my grandfather spoke of some of these men when our own winters brought the snow and cold.

wonderful book! easy to read and packed with information. tied in with an older book I own about polar exploration. would highly recommend to anyone with an interest in the exploration of the Northwest Passage.

Enjoyed the book very much ,thanks. My son is a history buff and enjoyed also. Thanks, again for the book.

Not enough if a story line to hold my interest...a bit dry for me....

Fascinating, so vivid and detailed. A page turner. Learned a lot about the men who risked their lives and honor for the goal of the Northwest Passage. The author did a great job in putting this book together.

Overall, the book provided a good read into the final attempts in the 19th Century to find the ever elusive Northwest Passage. However, I found the author expended on too many occasions far too much detail than was necessary, whereas he skimmed over and gave short notice to some of the more prevalent and renowned issues faced by historical participants. The reader is deluged with place names, people names, and relatively minor events resulting in a loss of perspective. I would recommend the book, but not as a must-read for anyone desirous of learning more about the 19th Century's final searches for the Northwest Passage.

I was given Anthony Brandt's book, The Man Who Ate His Boots, and I found it to be a fascinating, wonderful read. I started it rather hesitantly, thinking it would too too historic, too intellectually challenging, too dry for me. Well, I read the introduction and was completely hooked. Could not put

it down. Squeezed reading time into every day for days. Yes, you would learn a lot of history, but so much about men, their preconceptions, their biases, and their utter follies. It is a great gift for anyone even mildly interested in history or human behavior.

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