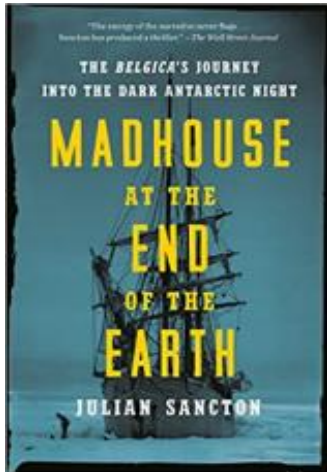


Madhouse at the End of the Earth: The Belgica's Journey into the Dark Antarctic Night

by Julian Sancton



About the Book

The harrowing true survival story of an early polar expedition that went terribly awry --- with the ship frozen in ice and the crew trapped inside for the entire sunless, Antarctic winter.

In August 1897, the young Belgian commandant Adrien de Gerlache set sail for a three-year expedition aboard the good ship *Belgica* with dreams of glory. His destination was the uncharted end of the earth: the icy continent of Antarctica.

But de Gerlache's plans to be first to the magnetic South Pole would swiftly go awry. After a series of costly setbacks, the commandant faced two bad options: turn back in defeat and spare his men the devastating Antarctic winter, or recklessly chase fame by sailing deeper into the freezing waters. De Gerlache sailed on, and soon the *Belgica* was stuck fast in the icy hold of the Bellingshausen Sea. When the sun set on the magnificent polar landscape one last time, the ship's occupants were condemned to months of endless night. In the darkness, plagued by a mysterious illness and besieged by monotony, they descended into madness.

In this epic tale, Julian Sancton unfolds a story of adventure and horror for the ages. As the *Belgica*'s men teetered on the brink, de Gerlache relied increasingly on two young officers whose friendship had blossomed in captivity: the expedition's lone American, Dr. Frederick Cook --- half genius, half con man --- whose later infamy would overshadow his brilliance on the *Belgica*; and the ship's first mate, soon-to-be legendary Roald Amundsen, even in his youth the storybook picture of a sailor. Together, they would plan a last-ditch, nearly certain-to-fail escape from the ice --- one that would either etch their names in history or doom them to a terrible fate at the ocean's bottom.

Drawing on the diaries and journals of the *Belgica*'s crew and with exclusive access to the ship's logbook, Sancton brings novelistic flair to a story of human extremes, one so remarkable that even today NASA studies it for research on isolation for future missions to Mars. Equal parts maritime thriller and gothic horror, MADHOUSE AT THE END OF

THE EARTH is an unforgettable journey into the deep.

Discussion Guide

1. The author opens part one of MADHOUSE AT THE END OF THE EARTH with an epigraph: "Sometimes science is the excuse for exploration. I think it is very rarely the reason," a quote from George Leigh Mallory. Do you agree? Why or why not? Do you believe it applies to the voyage of the *Belgica*?
2. Why do you think the South Pole in particular was so fascinating to de Gerlache and his crew?
3. In order to plan and execute his own polar excursions before joining the *Belgica*, Frederick Cook relies heavily on the knowledge and skills of indigenous people, including two young Inuit siblings who he brought to live with him in New York and ultimately used in a "traveling Arctic showcase" in the city. Discuss the way that Cook and his contemporaries depended on the labor and knowledge of indigenous people in explorations of this nature. Do you find these arrangements fair?
4. After making landfall in the Antarctic, Amundsen is thrilled to ski across the snow in what he supposes is the very first ski trip on the continent. Sancton writes, "It was a minor exploit, to be sure, but it was his first first." What do you make of the explorers' preoccupation with being the first, even in a minor arena like skiing? Do you feel that same "urge to reach the top of things"? Why or why not?
5. De Gerlache fears meeting his death in the Antarctic ice pack, but more acutely, he fears unfavorable treatment in the Belgian press --- whether for hiring a crew with non-Belgian members, not achieving the voyage's stated mission, or falling short of his goals, among other reasons. Why might he feel this way about the press? Do you believe his fears negatively impacted his decision-making? Do you see evidence that modern public figures have similar trepidation about the press today?
6. In order to free the *Belgica* as the men approached their second winter lodged in Antarctic ice, Sancton writes that it required "an almost inconceivable amount of effort" from the exhausted, ill, and downtrodden sailors aboard the ship. Where do you think the men gathered the strength to cut themselves free? Why do you imagine it took so long to develop this plan and put it in action?
7. The "Herculean effort" required to cut a canal through the ice to attempt to free the *Belgica* "didn't sap the men's energy but, on the contrary, replenished it." Alongside the positive physical effects of invigorating labor, the hope of escape was also instrumental in bringing many of the sailors back from the brink. Discuss why hope might have this effect on the men.
8. Cook points out that aside from a copy of the Bible, there were no religious texts on board. What role did religion play in this expedition?
9. Upon returning to Belgium, de Gerlache and the remaining crew were welcomed with hearty festivities and prestigious awards. According to Sancton, however, "a journalist observing the festivities noted that the men looked "disoriented" and "unsettled" by the attention." Discuss this major change in mindset among the sailors, most notably de

Gerlache. Would you feel the same disorientation amid pomp and circumstance after having survived a similar ordeal? Why or why not?

10. Discuss the lives of Amundsen and Cook following the *Belgica's* return. The two men, so close during their Antarctic expedition, went on to carry out similar feats over the years with (incredibly) varied results. Why do you think Amundsen succeeded where Cook could not?

11. As discussed in the Notes and Sources, Sancton draws primarily on firsthand accounts and diaries of the sailors aboard the *Belgica* to write MADHOUSE AT THE END OF THE EARTH. Are they trustworthy, in your opinion? Why or why not?

12. Having finished the book, discuss the expedition and its legacy. Did the fate of any of the men surprise you? Do you think the *Belgica* was successful in its voyage?

Author Bio

Julian Sancton is a senior features editor at *Departures* magazine, where he writes about culture and travel. His work has appeared in *Vanity Fair*, *Esquire*, *The New Yorker*, *Wired* and *Playboy*, among other publications. He has reported from every continent, including Antarctica, which he first visited while researching MADHOUSE AT THE END OF THE EARTH.

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