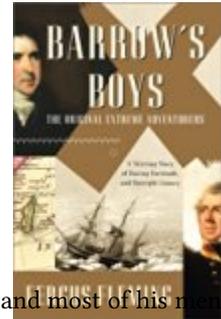


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Fergus Fleming. *Barrow's Boys: A Stirring Story of Daring, Fortitude, and Outright Lunacy*. New York: Grove Press, 2001. 512 pp. \$26.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8021-3794-4.

Reviewed by Kathy Gorman (Minnesota State University, Mankato)
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Adventure and exploration books have routinely topped the bestseller list since the 1997 appearance of Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air*. Fergus Fleming's *Barrow's Boys* combines the narrative appeal of the best of the adventure books with the historical context required by scholars in his story of John Barrow, Great Britain's Second Secretary to the Admiralty during the first half of the 19th century.

Fleming's work is an attempt to focus attention on Barrow's crucial role in the exploration of uncharted portions of the world by British explorers. But as Fleming himself notes "Barrow inevitably plays second fiddle to his explorers" (p. vii). It is the explorers who stole Barrow's thunder in his own time and do it again in this work. Fleming makes it clear that Barrow was not necessarily the most likeable of men, but was a driving force in pushing Britain into the far corners of the globe.

Barrow served as Second Secretary from 1804 to 1845. His role was that of true administrator, taking the decisions from his political superiors and making them work in the real world. Naval officers needed new challenges, and exploring the path of the Niger River or searching for the Northwest Passage provided them. But as Fleming repeatedly shows, very few of the actual explorers escaped unscathed. Many died in their attempts to discover new places or new routes. Sometimes their deaths were a direct result of Barrow refusing to change his mind about what they should find even when the evidence changed.

Barrow's preconceived ideas had disastrous consequences in the search for the route of the Niger River. Barrow believed it "flowed into the Congo" (p. 17). The first major expedition Barrow sent off was led by James Tuckey in 1816. Because of Barrow's beliefs, Tuckey was sent to the Congo, despite warnings of danger there. The

end result was the death of Tuckey and most of his men and no real information about the Niger. Barrow sent three more expeditions out to find the Niger's route. Each time one or more of the leaders died and the mouth of the Niger was not discovered until 1831. If a lucky explorer actually managed to return home and write accounts of his trip, Barrow savaged those who did not agree the Niger flowed into the Congo.

Equally disastrous was Barrow's attempt to find the Northwest Passage. Explorer after explorer went out to find the route from Atlantic to Pacific through the northern reaches of Canada. Barrow believed such a route could be easily found if only his explorers would look hard enough. John Ross, William Edward Parry, and John Franklin all led attempts to find the Passage. Ross and Parry managed to return from their missions, unsuccessful but alive. John Franklin's fate has never been conclusively proven although the bodies of some of his men were discovered along with hints of cannibalism. Every time an unsuccessful explorer returned to Britain, Barrow went out of his way to ruin their reputation and future prospects.

There is very little to dislike about this work. Maps to accompany the stories of the individual explorers would be helpful. It would also be nice to have some idea of what other nations were doing at the same time and if there was real competition for Barrow to worry about. The broader historical context is missing too often. In many cases the reader is left wanting to know more about the individual expeditions and explorers and Fleming's notes and bibliography provide needed guidance in that direction.

Based on the accounts of the explorers themselves and the records of the Admiralty Office, Fergus Flem-

ing has written an engaging, very readable account of British exploration in the first half of the 19th century. He has successfully told the story of the actual explorers and stressed the importance of the governmental officials and agencies behind them. It is a work both armchair explorers and scholars can learn from and enjoy.

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