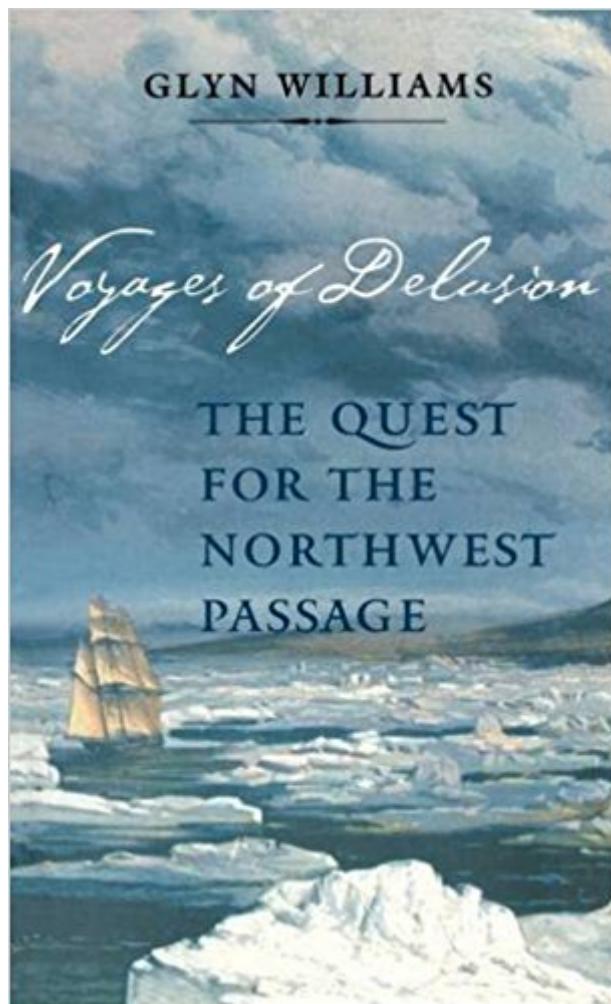


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Voyages Of Delusion: The Quest For The Northwest Passage



Synopsis

The eighteenth century—*the Age of Reason*—was characterized by determined attempts by philosophers, scientists, and political theorists to dispel myth, superstition, and ignorance. But the Age of Reason also witnessed some of the most irrational and vainglorious attempts by sailors and speculators to find a navigable Northwest Passage that would lead through the icy seas of the Arctic from Hudson Bay to the wealth of the Pacific Ocean. Lured by the promise of fame and riches, men endured paralyzing cold, malnutrition, and terrifying storms. Many lives and fortunes were lost in the quest for the elusive "maritime philosopher's stone." In this gripping work of narrative history, Glyn Williams describes the adventures and mishaps of these misguided expeditions. Vividly written and replete with fascinating characters, *Voyages of Delusion* is a riveting contribution to the history of North American exploration.

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Customer Reviews

Although the 18th century was the "age of reason," wishful thinking may better characterize the spirit of the era's adventurers' pursuit of the chimerical Northwest Passage (a sea route from North America's northeast coast through to the Pacific, which had already been a goal of explorers for 200 years). The advantages of such a route—cheaper access to the China trade, the opening of exploration in western North America and national glory—were so enticing, entrepreneurs convinced themselves they could hardly lose by sending out a mission. As University of London history professor Williams painstakingly documents, politicians and financiers eagerly talked themselves into pseudoscientific "proofs" that such a passage must exist, based on the direction of tides, the

sighting of whales in inland waters and other factors. More "evidence" could be mustered from hoax voyage journals and conjectural mappings by cartographers willing to treat geography as a speculative art. Williams juxtaposes these wealth and fame seekers with the poor captains and crews of these ill-fated expeditions. Stranded in ice-bound refuges for long winters, they lost body parts from frostbite, died from scurvy or accidents—or if they made it back to Europe, often found themselves the objects of derision (or worse, court-martial) for not having found the passage their sponsors were sure existed. Readers know in advance the passage wasn't discovered then, but the addition of money-hungry patrons to the equation makes it more excruciating than a saga like Shackleton's Antarctic expedition. Williams may be too scholarly for general readers, but students of maritime exploration and 18th-century British politics will find this work engrossing, especially the detailed notes on sources. Illus. Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information, Inc.

It was believed in the eighteenth century--since known as the Age of Reason--that a navigable Northwest passage might exist. Williams points out in his introduction that the quest for a sea route through or around America had already begun in the sixteenth century, "when the successors of Columbus slowly realized the massive, continental dimensions of the new lands across the Atlantic." Williams, an emeritus professor of history at the University of London and author of eight previous books, chronicles the ill-advised expeditions of Christopher Middleton in 1741, of William Moor and Francis Smith in 1746, the five voyages of James Walker (which began in 1750), Russian voyages to Alaska from 1728 to 1741, and others. Williams witnesses the self-glorifying and failed attempts by men enticed by the promise of fame and fortune as they suffered from sickness, malnutrition, storms, and the deadly cold. Mountainous icebergs, violent tides, fog, and snow were hazards to be endured. But readers, of course, can comfortably sail off into reverie without facing any of these perils. George CohenCopyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

This is a great read - a true time-travel for arm-chair-travelers. By now you already know what this book is about from the product description and the other reviews, so I won't bore you with details regarding the scope of the book. The tales of exploration of the coasts of northern North America provided in this book read like a screen play of a very exciting movie (along the lines of Master and Commander), but they are REAL LIFE experiences, not Hollywood fiction. (Imagine your brandy freezing solid in Hudson's Bay, or trying to dig a ship free from 10 feet of ice beneath 13 feet of snow.) Prof. Williams has done extensive research on the subject (everything from then-current newspaper articles to explorers' journals), and includes many useful maps and drawings to

illuminate the text. While the title suggests a limited scope (i.e., the search for the Northwest Passage), the narrative actually touches on a much wider range of topics. In fact, this book motivated me to pursue further reading regarding the explorations and achievements of Magellan, Drake and Mackenzie. Being a resident of the Pacific Northwest, I was also surprised to discover (from this book) the origin of many of the place-names I grew up with (but never appreciated), such as Puget Sound and Vancouver Island. The narrative of this book is concise, exceedingly well written, and includes enough anecdotes and Welsh dry humor to keep the reader engaged (and possibly amused, depending on your sense of humor). While we all know the outcome of the story (i.e., no easy NW Passage was found - sorry if that's a spoiler for some readers), it's simply just fascinating to see how the tale evolved to those involved at the time. If there is one negative to this book, it is the following: there is no map to show the reader just how very complex the coastline is of the Inside Passage along the northwest Pacific coast (the presumed western entrance to the NW Passage). While Illustration 51 at page 404 (drawn in 1798) gives some idea as to the complexity of the coastline around Vancouver Island, the maps at pages 310 and 391 suggest a much simpler coastline. If one looks at a modern atlas showing the Inside Passage, one can see that this coastline is simply peppered with inlets, thus allowing the "Voyages of the Imagination" (the author's term regarding the supposed voyages of de Fuca (1625) and Fonte (1640) of a NW passage) to be propagated for almost 200 years (until finally disproven circa 1795). Bottom line: a good map of the current coastline of the Pacific NW might help the reader to more fully appreciate why the myth of the "Northwest Passage" was held by so many for so long (notwithstanding then-current (e.g., circa 1790) evidence to the contrary regarding the impossibility of a NE entrance to the NW Passage). In our modern age of satellite imagery, cell-phone communications, and other modern conveniences (such as orange juice concentrate to prevent the onset of scurvy in sailors) it is easy to dismiss the accomplishments (and ignorance) of those explorers who went before us as recently as 220 years ago (a mere blink of the eye in the timeline of human history) to discover what we now take for granted. We owe it to those intrepid souls to study their history and their contributions, and to learn from them. Why? Because regarding interstellar (and beyond) space exploration, we are just as ignorant (if not more so) as the folks of 1700 were regarding their knowledge of the extent of their planet. As John Toland said (and to paraphrase): history does not repeat itself, but human nature does. So let us try to avoid the mistakes of our predecessors in going forward with the continued exploration of our world, solar system, galaxy and universe.

Presented in a manner different enough from many other books on the subject that I did not feel I

was reading the same story again.

This book investigates a number of 18th-century voyages of discovery for a Northwest Passage from the Atlantic Ocean to the East Indies, a passage that took root in the imaginations of cartographers and explorers (and their sponsors) and would not die. Three voyages of discovery into Hudson Bay are examined - the voyage of James Knight, which disappeared without a trace after (or during) it wintered on Marble Island in 1719-20; the disappointing six-week exploration of Christopher Middleton's expedition after being stuck in the ice for nearly 11 months at Churchill where many of the crew fell victim to scurvy (1741-42); and the contentious (and fruitless) voyage of William Moor and Francis Smith that sparked an investigation by Parliament (1746-47). English officials were sorely disappointed with the empty-handed results of these voyages of discovery, and decided that perhaps better luck would be had by attacking the passage from the west. Williams then examines some Russian and Spanish explorations of the west coast of North America, but concentrates primarily on the superb voyage of James Cook in 1778, which proved once and for all that the Northwest Passage did not exist. Many imaginative and hypothetical maps suddenly became obsolete. Williams does an excellent job relating his story, much it coming from a thorough and deep look into the archives. The many maps are a major asset. It's a fascinating and informative study. Highly recommended.

Writing about the search for the Northwest Passage seems almost as obsessive as the quest itself. Williams' entry in the growing stack of these works has the advantage of tight focus. He limits his survey to the 18th Century - Enlightenment Europe. He illuminates a time when the Royal Navy hadn't yet gained control of the seas. The vivid accounts of 19th Century Empire building have obscured the hesitant beginnings of earlier eras. The 18th Century explorers were hesitant pioneers, largely unknown today. Williams conveys their voyages with the domestic political dramas as background. With accomplished style, this book traces the debates as it follows the early explorations into Hudson's Bay and the North Pacific. Three figures take central stage in this narrative. The first is Arthur Dobbs who set the tone and topics in support of the search. Dobbs, an MP from Ireland, saw the promise of increased trade, finding mineral riches and nationalist expansion through finding the Passage. A major aspect was his goal to demolish the monopolistic grip of the Hudson's Bay Company on trade and exploration in the North American Arctic. In Williams' account, Dobbs maintained his campaign over many years, as an open advocate and anonymously. Dobbs was instrumental in helping turn over exploration from private hands and put it

under the aegis of the Royal Navy. Dobbs was convinced [or convinced himself] that fur trading profits would be purely secondary to the potential mineral wealth to be found in the Arctic. Over the years, Williams recounts, fluctuating relationships with other European powers prodded Dobbs into more purely nationalistic reasons for pursuing the Passage. With Spain well established in the New World, but hesitant in exploring unknown lands, France and Russia became new threats. As Dobbs faded from his active role, his themes were furthered by Alexander Dalrymple and Joseph Banks. Banks, who journeyed with Cook to the Australian coast, urged a strong British presence in the Pacific. As a result, an opening to the Passage from the west became the new quest at the end of the 18th Century. Williams surveys the Spanish and Russian incursions well, but skims over the enigmatic La Perouse, whose career was more South Pacific than North. All the North Pacific voyages, he demonstrates, were guided by the almost mythical accounts of de Fuca and de Fonte of nearly a century before. Williams has little good to say about the persona crossing his view. Dobbs is portrayed as a manipulator of skilled abilities. Driven by his desire to crush the HBC's monopoly and expose its secrets, he even organizes and funds an exploration of this own. Other promoters are too easily deluded and captains are fractious or incompetent. Even the mighty Cook, far out in the Pacific, shouldn't have been there on his fatal last voyage - he'd become unwell and irascible, a danger to the success of the expedition. Only the Italian Malaspina and George Vancouver are lauded for accuracy and honesty. Not all of his judgments are well-considered. He gives Robert McClure credit for finally revealing the passage, when it was overlander John Rae who reached the Passage while seeking the Franklin crew. Williams has given his account an extra bonus by inserting some fascinating illustrations. Not only are modern maps there for reference, but he's included replicas of 18th maps by various cartographers. Some of these are even based on maps drawn or described by Native American peoples. His sources are many and varied, providing a guide to others wishing to delve into the era. A good writing style makes this book a worthwhile purchase. [stephen a. haines - Ottawa, Canada]

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