

# One man's trash: the recovery of Frederick A. Cook's original telegram drafts announcing his attainment of the North Pole

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**ABSTRACT.** On 1 September 1909, Dr Frederick A. Cook landed at Lerwick in the Shetland Islands and cabled the unexpected news that he had reached the North Pole on 21 April of the previous year. This article recounts the equally unexpected recovery of the original telegram drafts Cook wrote for the cables sent from Lerwick. It discusses new details they add to the historical record and confirms others that previously had no confirmation. It also verifies the authenticity of the drafts, and, based on the physical condition of the recovered documents and documentary clues, it traces what can be known of the history of these documents between the time Cook wrote them and their publication a century later, proposing how they might have been originally saved from destruction in 1909.

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## Unexpected news

On the morning of 1 September 1909, *Hans Egede* steamed slowly up Brassay Sound and into the fine harbor of Lerwick, the capital of the Shetland Islands. A skiff was soon lowered and two men rowed toward the docks and curing stations of the herring trade, for which the town was the centre. The men aboard could scarcely be distinguished from any rough sailors, and if they were noticed at all on their errand, it is unlikely that any of the town's 4500 residents suspected the sensational news the little boat bore.

Upon landing, the ship's mate and a passenger from Greenland, Dr Frederick A. Cook, made their way past the ancient stone houses that dipped their gable-ends into the sea and up narrow Commercial Street to a hillside lane that led to Hillhead, where the telegraph station lay. After the operator assured him that his messages would be secure, Cook handed them in, along with others from *Hans Egede*. The first was addressed to Belgium, and was reported to read:

Lecointe, Observatory, Brussels:

Reached north pole April 21, 1908. Discovered land far north. Return to Copenhagen by steamer *Hans Egede*.

Frederick Cook. (*The New York Times*, 2 September 1909)

The second went to his wife in Brooklyn:

Successful and Well. Wire address to Copenhagen.

Fred. (*The Sun* (New York), 5 September 1909)

The operator read the messages and looked up, unable to hide his surprise. Then the doctor gave him a 2000 word statement. But the operator said he would not be responsible for it, suggesting that it be given to the American consul for safekeeping. Cook set out for the American consulate but, unable to locate it, went to the Danish consul instead, who agreed to hold the statement until receiving a reply.

Returning to the telegraph station, he wrote out a third telegram to be sent to a newspaper that had long been active in supporting exploration, *The New York Herald*:

Reached North Pole April 21, 1908. Discovered land far north. Have left sealed exclusive cable of 2,000 words for you with Danish Consul at Lerwick. Expect \$3,000 for it. I go steamer *Hans Egede* to Copenhagen.

Frederick A. Cook (*The New York Herald*, 2 September 1909)

A fourth message was left for the mother of Harry Whitney, a big game hunter Cook had met in Greenland, assuring her that her son was well. Then the two men returned to the boat, and only two hours after she anchored, *Hans Egede* disappeared down the sound and resumed her voyage to Denmark.

This was essentially the description of the events leading up to Cook's unexpected announcement of his attainment of the North Pole, as told in the book *Cook & Peary, the polar controversy, resolved* (Bryce 1997a). As with the other narrative parts of the book, this account was assembled from details culled directly from original sources, including the wording of the telegrams as they were printed in contemporary newspaper accounts.

During the writing of that book, several recoveries of significant documents were made. Among these was an unaltered print of what has been called 'the most

controversial photograph in the history of exploration,' which Cook claimed showed his climbing partner standing on the summit of Mt McKinley in Alaska. It proved conclusively that the photograph had been taken on a mere hillock of rock more than 19 miles from the summit (Bryce 1997a: 821, 1997b). Also recovered was the original diary of Cook's climbing partner, Ed Barrill. It contained convincing supporting evidence of the truth of the affidavit he swore in 1909: that Cook's claim to have reached the summit on 16 September 1906, was a fraud (Bryce 1997a: 807–812, 1997b, 1997c). Most unexpected, however, was the recovery of an exact photographic copy of the original diary Cook kept on his polar journey in 1908, a volume that had lain undisturbed in a Danish library for 83 years. It contained equally convincing evidence that Cook's claim to have attained the North Pole on 21 April that year was also a premeditated hoax (Bryce 1997a: 896–899). These and many other documents that were decisive in demonstrating Cook had lied about his two most famous exploratory accomplishments had been uncovered by years of painstaking, systematic research among the known repositories of primary documentation bearing on Cook's claims and others located by building on the clues the known ones contained.

Even so, no amount of patient research was preparation for the manner of the recovery of the original drafts of Cook's telegrams sent from Lerwick one hundred years ago.

### The first documents of the polar controversy

Several days after these telegrams were sent, Robert E. Peary, a civil engineer in the US Navy who's ambition it had been to reach the North Pole for at least 16 years and who had failed to do so in three previous attempts, arrived at another telegraph station at Battle Harbour, Labrador, and cabled: 'Stars and Stripes nailed to the North Pole.' He thus staked his own claim to have reached the Pole on 6 April 1909 (*The New York Times*, 9 September 1909). But that was nearly a year after the date Cook claimed to have been there. To gain priority, Peary then challenged the validity of Cook's claim, telegraphing *The New York Herald* on 10 September that he felt it unlikely that the newspaper would be 'imposed upon' by Cook's story, as Cook, in Peary's words, had merely 'handed the public a gold brick.' Thus started the great 'Polar Controversy,' which many refuse to see as settled, despite the enormous amount of documented and physical evidence against either man actually having been anywhere near the goal he claimed.

The drafts of Cook's telegrams constitute nothing less than the ur-text of this controversy, the literary equivalent of the 'Face that Launched a Thousand Ships.' Only this time, these brief penciled documents launched innumerable printed and spoken words in a never ending argument over the question of polar priority, and embody the first utterance, as one partisan put it, of 'The Lie that Won't Die.' With their recovery, not only is the original

wording of Cook's telegram drafts available for the first time, but also some of the history of those documents.

And just how does one who has already spent thousands of hours toiling among those seeming infinite archives of antique paper searching for evidence that would establish relative truth about the discovery of the North Pole come upon the very first words written on a subject that has caused such endless disputes? Indeed, how does one acquire such unique documents? The answer might be nothing more than either good fortune or blind luck, or perhaps some of each, plus the ability to see what others who had not had such extensive experience failed to see. But the simple fact is, they were purchased on eBay.

### How Cook's telegram drafts were recovered

One afternoon, I happened to browse the eBay auction site, something I was not in the habit of doing on a regular basis. There are always a few listings under Frederick Cook, including copies of his book, *My attainment of the Pole*, humorous postcards, trinkets, and other pieces of the vast memorabilia the controversy spawned. But this time there was something more unusual: a listing for 'Frederick Cook. two handwritten letters,' offered at a starting bid of \$1 from a seller in Denmark. The auction was accompanied by a small picture of two documents. But they were not letters at all.

I immediately recognised one as a torn telegram blank with Cook's writing on it. Cook's handwriting is very distinctive, and having read books filled with it, I recognised the document as authentic, although it was not signed. Cook's writing is often difficult to read because of the unusual way he formed some of his letters in the words of his casual scrawl. However, after years of deciphering it, I had little trouble seeing that the words on the telegram blank were very close to the telegram Cook had sent on 1 September 1909, to *The New York Herald*. The other was a handwritten draft for a telegram on what appeared to be a Danish blank. It was to be sent to the Explorers Club of New York, addressed to Cook's millionaire financial backer, the gambler and big game hunter John R. Bradley. However, this item, although signed 'Cook,' was not in Frederick Cook's hand.

Perhaps the very brief description written in a language the seller had not completely mastered, which nevertheless accurately described the pair as 'very unik items,' was not enough to attract interest, or perhaps potential bidders were discouraged because the auction carried a reserve, keeping the items from being sold for less than an undisclosed minimum price. Or possibly no one else could read Cook's problematic writing in the small scan of the documents that accompanied the auction. In any case, only two bids were placed. One was nominal, and far short of the reserve; mine exceeded the reserve, and so won the lot. It was only when I contacted the seller to conclude the purchase, however, that I was informed of 'more unique' items than these. Through protracted correspondence, I learned the details of these additional items, and realised,

to my amazement, that I was being offered the original drafts of the four telegrams Cook handed in at Lerwick, plus several other related items. I made an offer that was promptly accepted, in part because the owner thought the entire group of documents should remain together. Eventually, all of them arrived in the United States in good order after a stay of nearly a hundred years in Denmark.

### History of the drafts

Some of the history of these documents came with them in the form of a small, undated clipping of an article that appeared in the prominent Danish newspaper *Politiken*. Translated from the Danish, the item stated:

Dr Cook

Some time ago, a telegram arrived from New York saying that very high prices had been paid at an auction in America for some letters written by Dr Cook right after he arrived in Copenhagen from the North Pole. By coincidence there exist, here in town, some even more interesting documents written by Cook: the drafts of telegrams written in Cook's hand that he sent to the New York Herald from Lerwick; that is, the very first documents by his hand about his North Pole expedition.

The documents are now on display at the art dealer O. Bruun at Bredgade 69. The owner of these documents is willing to sell them if a rich collector can be found; the money will be given to charity.

Upon examination, it became evident that most of these items had once been in this exhibit. Each of the telegram drafts has a tiny hole in each corner, probably where it had been pinned for the display mentioned. These holes also were present in another news clipping that came with the documents, dated 10 September 1909. Although unrelated in content to the original documents, it contained a brief 'farewell' message penned by Cook to the Danish people and signed by him, which it reproduced in facsimile. The pinholes suggest that it was used as a handwriting sample to compare with the documents on display and so illustrate their authenticity. If so, this places the display some time after the clipping's date, that is, after Cook departed for America.

Also accompanying the holographic telegram drafts was an actual telegram delivered to Cook at the Hotel Phoenix, where he stayed during his week in the Danish capital. The telegram is from Cook's brother, William. Finally, there was a small rectangle of quadrilled paper inscribed 'Very truly yours Frederick A. Cook 15 Hart St Brooklyn, NY USA.' Because Cook had not lived on Hart Street since at least 1896, and the inscription implies it was written for someone outside of the United States, this slip of paper had no obvious relationship to the other items, all from 1909. It lacked any pinholes.

According to their former owner, these items constitute the entire content of a lot purchased in Denmark at a live auction. The owner, who attended many auctions, believed the lot was purchased around 1985. As far as the owner could recall, the small quadrilled paper was part

of the auction lot, for which it might have served as a holographic sample of Cook's writing for authentication purposes.

### The drafts and their historical implications

The telegram drafts throw new light on the sequence of events of 1 September 1909. The original drafts of the four telegrams are written in pencil on two sheets of plain white paper, two to the page. They read as follows (Figs 1, 2):

1) Lerwick  
New York Herald.

We reached North Pole April 21. last year  
Discovered land far north. Sealed exclusive cable  
~~is left w~~ of two thousand words is left ~~with operator~~  
here [written above crossed out words]  
For it three thousand dollars will be expected. If you  
want it cable operator. I go steamer Hans Egede  
to Copenhagen.

Frederick Cook

2) Georges Lecointe  
Observatory Royal Uccle Belgium  
We reached North Pole April 21 last year  
Discovered land far north. Return to Copenhagen  
Steamer Hans Egede

Frederick Cook

3) Mrs Cook  
693 Bushwick Ave Brooklyn New York.  
Successful and well wire address  
Hotel Bristol Copenhagen.  
Fred.

4) Mrs Stephen Whitney. New Haven. Conn.  
Saw Harry Whitney in April. He is well  
and awaits Eric.

Dr. Cook

The address given in Cook's telegram draft to his wife was that of his friend, Dr Robert Davidson, who lived across the street from them in Brooklyn. Cook was aware from letters he had received at Etah, Greenland, that Mrs Cook had lost their house at 687 Bushwick Avenue in the financial panic of 1907. That is why he asked for her current address.

The telegram draft to Mrs Stephen Whitney related to her son, Harry Whitney, a paying 'guest' on Peary's ship *Erik*, when she sailed for Greenland in July 1908. Whitney was allowed to winter in the north in order to hunt big game, and in fact took up residence in a house at Annoatok, which Cook and his companion Rudolph Franke had built there from packing boxes, and in which they spent the winter of 1907–1908 preparing equipment for Cook's attempt on the North Pole the following spring. Peary was in the habit of defraying some of his expenses by transporting wealthy 'guests' such as Whitney for a hefty fee. The wording of Cook's telegram

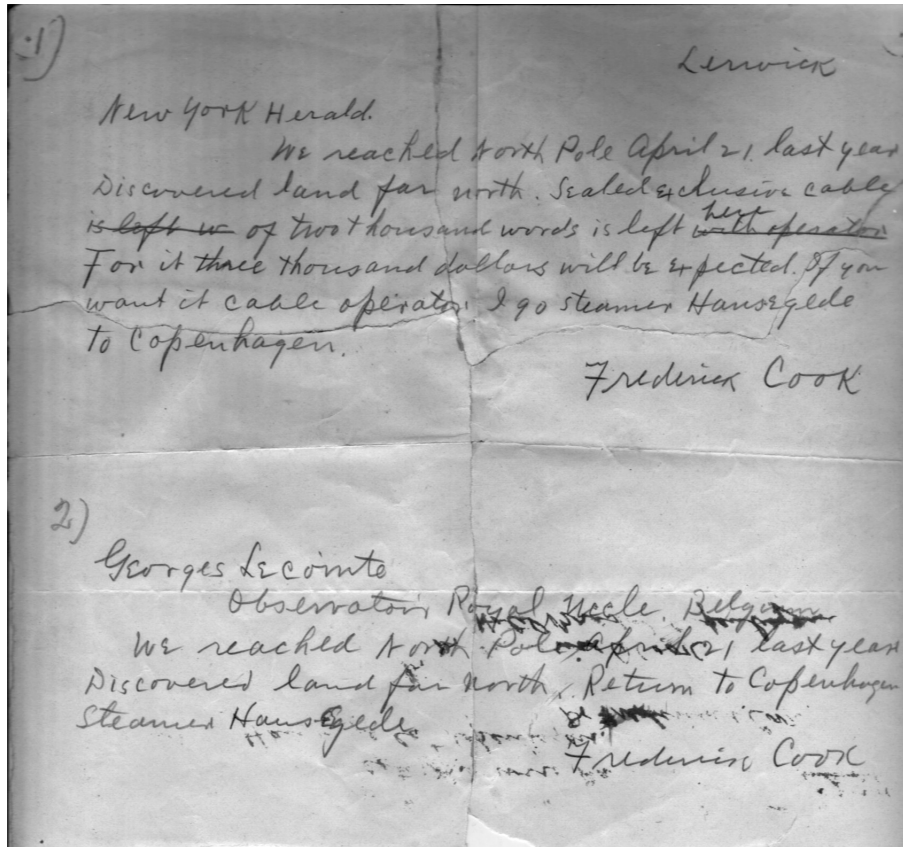


Fig. 1. The original drafts of two telegrams written by Frederick Cook, one to *The New York Herald*, and the other to Georges Lecoqte.

to Whitney's mother has never been available before. Cook misspelled the name of Peary's support vessel, *Erik*. Whitney eventually returned to New York in another ship and found himself at the centre of the growing dispute between the two explorers because he failed to return the personal belongings Cook had entrusted to him in Greenland. It developed that Peary had objected to him taking anything belonging to Cook aboard his ship. Cook later claimed that the loss of these belongings, which he said contained vital original records, prevented him from proving he had reached the Pole.

The original sequencing of the four messages on these drafts indicates that Cook initially intended to send his first cable to *The New York Herald*, rather than Georges Lecoqte. Cook knew Lecoqte from his own service on the Belgian Antarctic Expedition 1897–1899, when Lecoqte was second-in-command of the expedition vessel, *Belgica*, and Cook her surgeon. In 1909, Lecoqte was the Astronomer Royal at Uccle and secretary of the International Polar Commission. That Cook had apparently chosen to send his first cable to him was widely regarded as being his official announcement of his attainment of the North Pole, but the sequence of the cables as written on these recovered papers places the Lecoqte cable second, after that addressed to *The Herald*. There is some reason to believe that Cook may have had a secret arrangement with that newspaper

and might have been under obligation to send the first notice to *The Herald* (Bryce 1997a: 1120–1121, note 89). Cook's original intention to leave his 2000-word narrative with the operator is indicated by his original wording: 'Sealed exclusive cable of two thousand words is left with operator. For it three thousand dollars will be expected. If you want it cable operator.' That the cable operator balked at being left in charge of a manuscript valued at such high figure, the equivalent of more than \$60,000 today, would account for the stricken words in the original draft, which was probably amended in the telegraph office.

The accounts on which my original narrative of Cook's stop at Lerwick were based stated that the operator suggested leaving his dispatch with the US consul. It has since been learned there was no US consul in Lerwick; consulates were maintained there only by those countries having an interest in the Shetland herring trade. Instead, Cook left the dispatch intended for *The Herald* with the Danish vice-consul, A. Cunningham Hay, at the offices of Hay and Co, which represented several of these nations' interests.

Cook also drafted a new telegram in ink, using a telegram blank (Fig. 3), although exactly when he made this out is not clear. It stated:

New York Herald.

We reached North Pole April 21 1908. Discovered land

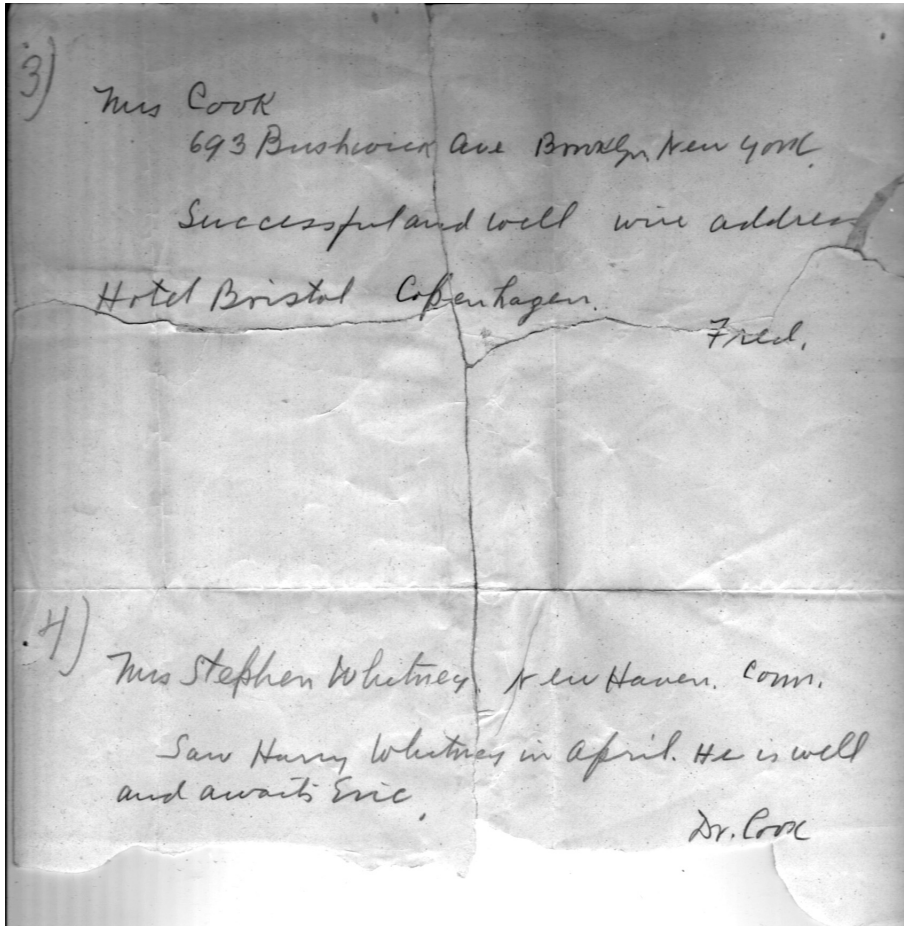


Fig. 2. The original drafts of two telegrams written by Frederick Cook, one to his wife, and one to Mrs Stephen Whitney.

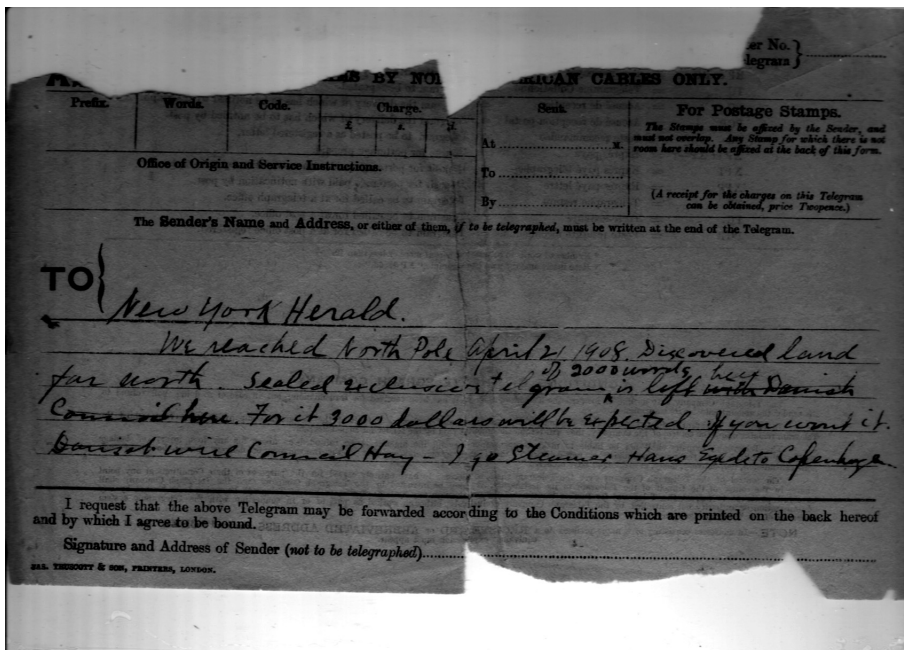


Fig. 3. The draft telegram to *The New York Herald*.

far north. Sealed exclusive telegram of 2000 words [inserted] is left with ~~Danish~~ here [written above crossed out words] ~~consul~~ here. For it 3000 dollars will be expected. If you want it.

~~Danish~~ wire Council Hay – I go Steamer Hans Egede to Copenhagen

That this is not the original telegram that was sent is indicated by the fact that it lacks the required signature of the sender or the required stamps affixed at the place provided. The variances between this draft and the published telegram, aside from usual newspaper editing, suggest several possibilities. They could imply that Cook had already met with Hay, and, if so, it was written *after* leaving his 2000-word statement with him. Or the cross-outs might suggest that he was uncertain of Hay's official capacity. It could also be that Cook wrote out this ink draft originally with the intention of leaving his dispatch with Hay, perhaps at the suggestion of someone at the telegraph office, then decided to try to find a US official, as reported, but when he was unable to locate any, he modified the cable to *The Herald* yet again to read that he had left the dispatch with the Danish [vice-]consul after all; thus the strike-outs. If this is so, then there is a perfect consistency between the drafts and the account above, and it also explains the change in the sending sequence of the cables, as the telegram to *The Herald*, which he intended to be sent first, had to await transmission until Cook could find someone willing to take responsibility for his dispatch.

As a side note, Hay, who was a vice-consul 1909–1918, kept a consular letter book, which is preserved at the Shetland Museum and Archives. Apparently he was not much impressed that the Pole had been claimed. His only mention of his meeting with Cook is a laconic letter to the latter sent to the Hotel Bristol in Copenhagen, dated 2 September 1909:

With reference to your call yesterday I beg to inform you that I received at 820 pm the following message from New York: 'Cable Dr Cook's 2000 words immediately. Herald will pay three thousand dollars & cable tolls. Send via Commercial cables. James Gordon Bennett, New York Herald,' and that your message was handed to the Telegraph Office for transmission forthwith.

I may add that there may be some slight charges in connection with dispatching the message, in respect of the operators working overtime, but if I hear anything further about this, I shall let you know. (Shetland Archives, D31/17/3, page 241, quoted in an email from Brian Smith, dated 30 January 2009; the original typed letter signed by Hay and stamped with the seal of the Danish vice consulate is in the Papers of Frederick A. Cook, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.)

Another evidential feature of the drafts is that the one to Lecointe bears several reversed words in ink smudged over the top of the original pencil draft. When these are read in a mirror, they appear to be portions of the message to Mrs Cook; 'wire' and 'Hotel Bristol Copenhagen'

along with Cook's signature 'Dr Frederick A. Cook' are clear enough to easily be made out. But because Cook only signed 'Fred' in his message to his wife, these must represent parts of two different messages. Closer examination reveals that portions of the words 'Hans Egede to Copenhagen' are visible above the signature, which matches the wording unique to the message sent to *The Herald*. Probably, as Cook filled out the required telegram blanks in ink from his pencil drafts, he laid them face down on the paper on which he had written the first two drafts. The ink was not yet dry and transferred the words to the Lecointe draft, showing that the pencil copies are actually the original drafts, and not mere copies done at some other time and place, as these smudged words indicate they were with Cook in the telegraph station as he wrote out his dispatches in their final form.

### A good story confirmed

The telegram from William Cook reads:

=DEAR BROTHER WE ARE ALL GLORYING IN YOUR

WONDERFUL SUCCESS WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU

TRUST YOU RECEIVED MY CABLE YESTERDAY REGARDING

HAMPTONS MAGAZINE = BROTHER WILL AND FAMILY +

The portion of this item bearing this message typed on glued strips of paper has the number '6' in pencil. Another portion of this same telegram, also marked '6', retains the stamped date, '5. Sep. 1909', the day after Cook arrived in Copenhagen, has a mere squiggle at the place marked 'sign,' and has the typed words on strips of paper glued to the blank

NEWYORK 22/4 34 ORD

Dr FREDERI

still intact, the rest being torn away, and the adjacent quarter missing. The larger chunk bears the notation 'Hotel Phoenix' and 'Fred' on the back.

Despite his instructions to his wife to send her address to Hotel Bristol, Cook never stayed at the Bristol during his visit to Copenhagen. The Bristol was simply not good enough. Nothing but the Phoenix would do for the Danish hosts of the Discoverer of the North Pole! This strengthens the case for the telegram drafts being original, because the reversed words 'Hotel Bristol Copenhagen' on the Lecointe draft shows that at the time these words were smudged, Cook still expected to stay at the Bristol, precluding that they could have been written any time after his arrival in Denmark.

William Cook's message also confirms an account regarding Benjamin Hampton's efforts to obtain the rights to Cook's story for *Hampton's Magazine* (Bryce 1997a: 478–479). There had been no independent confirmation of this story before now, but the date of the telegram matches perfectly with what its author recalled later in life, along

with all of the other internal dates, giving good assurance that the rest is fairly accurate.

Hampton's offer of 'whatever price you ask' had been ignored by Cook in Copenhagen, but Hampton had been working the other side of the Atlantic as well, sending T. Everett Harré, one of his sub-editors, to visit William Cook the day his brother had announced his discovery. Day after day, Harré came to Cook's milk depot on Bedford Avenue, hoping to ingratiate himself with the dairyman and induce him to accompany him to Europe.

At first William was apparently reluctant. 'No, no, I wouldn't embarrass Fred,' he protested. But Harré persisted. 'Think how glad he'd be to see your face among those thousands of strangers. You needn't intrude upon your brother,' cajoled Harré, 'all I ask is that you introduce me to him and help me in any way you can so I can engage his attention and land his story.' Seductively, he played on William Cook's sympathies and his pride, painting a picture of the man looking on while his brother was showered with medals and honors by a foreign king, and offered him first-class passage and \$500 for this pleasure. In the end it was all too much to resist, and the day Dr Cook landed in Copenhagen, William Cook agreed to Harré's offer.

But it was Saturday, and the banks were closed for the Labor Day holiday and would not open until Tuesday, the same morning the first available ship was scheduled to sail. Hampton decided to get the cash and meet Harré on the dock at Hoboken.

On Tuesday morning, as the bells on *Kronprinz Wilhelm* sounded all non-passengers ashore, Harré grew frantic. Ben Hampton was nowhere in sight. In a panic he phoned the office and demanded to speak to Reginald Kauffman, the managing editor. 'Ben's on his way,' assured Kauffman, 'but have you seen *The Times*? It publishes a message from Peary that he reached the Pole.' When Harré told William Cook the news about Peary, it reminded the milkman that he had a telegram in his pocket. 'This came first thing this morning — in the rush I forgot to open it,' he said. 'Guess it's an answer from Fred to the cablegram you sent telling him we are coming.'

Harré tore open the envelope. It read: 'No use your coming. I will arrive in NY Sep. 21 on Oscar II.'

Just then up rushed Ben Hampton, breathless, disheveled, and clutching a fat wad of bills, which he pressed into Harré's hand just as the last bell rang out for departure. Harré hurriedly showed Hampton the cable and told him the news from *The Times*. Hampton ran his hands wildly through his hair as he often did in a high state of excitement. 'You better take Brother William back home,' he said, 'and come back to the office for a conference.'

By the time Harré got there, Ben Hampton had developed a whole new strategy. 'There's going to be a hell of a fight,' he said. "'Cook has the public with him. But Peary's got the organization.' Hampton decided to switch his bets to Peary, and sent Harré off to Sydney, Cape Breton Island, to await Peary's arrival. (Harré 1940)

Cook or Peary, Hampton had the idea that this polar business held the key to getting a jump on his competitors. He was certain that it would push *Hampton's* 350,000 circulation over the half-million mark and establish him as the king of the 15-cent magazines. As Hampton waited, and watched his chances for any part of the polar story slipping away to others, he anxiously telegraphed Harré: 'You must win or I am up against it now' (Hampton telegram to Harré, 14 September 1909, Peary Family Papers RG401, National Archives II).

Harré eventually did land Peary's story, but the enormous price Hampton paid was not returned in copies sold and eventually led to the magazine's bankruptcy in 1912. Curiously enough, Harré went on to ghost Cook's book *My attainment of the Pole* in 1911 (Bryce 2001). Years later, Harré claimed he knew more about the polar controversy than anyone else, having, in effect, worked for both explorers. But, alas, he spent his literary efforts writing flowery fiction about romantic heroines and never set down all he 'knew.'

### The Bradley draft

The last item to be considered is the message to John Bradley, which although written in ink, bears the number '5)' in pencil on the left margin (Fig. 4):

John R. Bradley

Explorer's Club

New York

Arrive on steamer Oscar second about

September twentieth Will close no

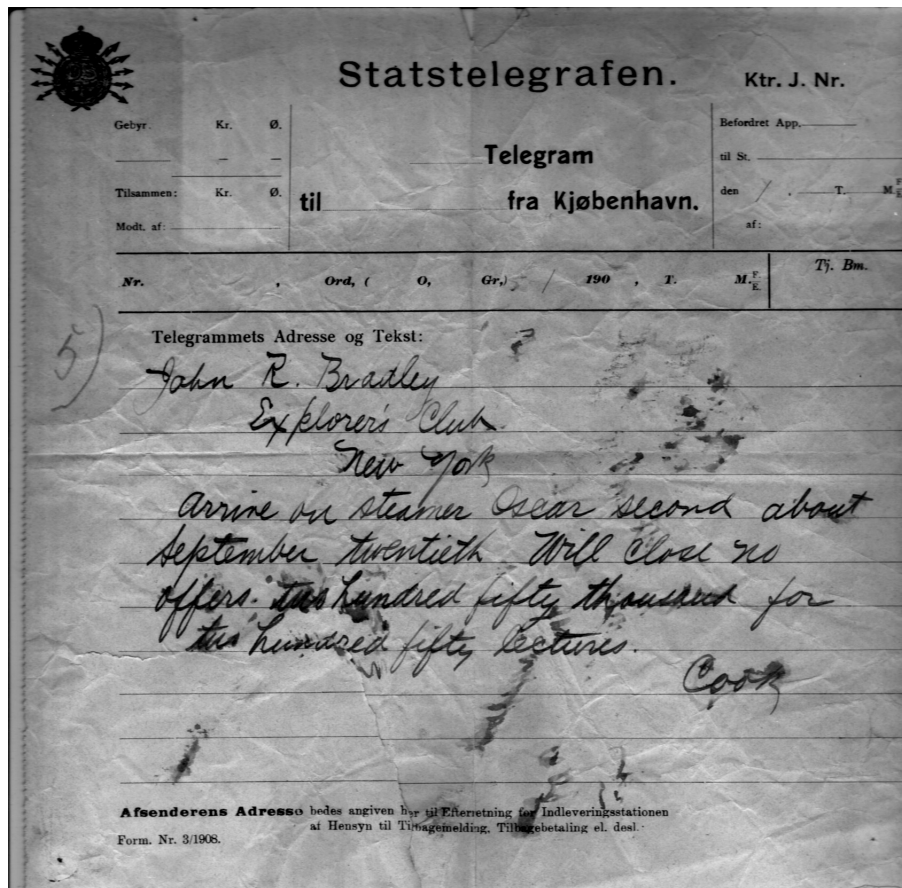
offers. two hundred fifty thousand for

two hundred fifty lectures.

Cook

This telegram also has ink smudges on it, but there are no legible reversed words. Most likely it was written at Cook's dictation by Walter Lonsdale, who had been assigned to Cook by the American minister to Denmark, Maurice Francis Egan, to act as his private secretary. Lonsdale's first task was to deal with the enormous stack of letters and telegrams that awaited Cook's arrival in Copenhagen, many of them containing lucrative offers for rights to his story. The fact that this and the other original items all bear a number with a closed parentheses in pencil indicates that they are not Cook's numbers, but more likely those of the individual who made up the display in O. Bruun's art store, as these last two are unrelated to the original telegram drafts or their sequencing. All of the numbered items have pinholes, with the exception of the William Cook telegram, which bore no handwriting, and might have been thought to be of insufficient interest to be included in the display.

The Bradley message adds authenticity to the reports of the vast sums being offered to Cook in Copenhagen for lecture and literary rights, which Cook later argued was evidence of his good faith, because he did not accept most of them (Cook 1913: 491–492). The telegram to Bradley seems to confirm that Cook had in hand a reported



Statstelegrafien. Ktr. J. Nr.

Gebyr. Kr. Ø.

Tilsammen: Kr. Ø.

Modt. af:

Telegram til fra Kjøbenhavn.

Befordret App. til St. den T. M. E. af:

Nr. Ord. ( O. Gr.) 190 T. M. E. Tj. Bm.

Telegrammets Adresse og Tekst:

5) John R. Bradley  
Explorer's Club  
New York

Arrive on steamer Oscar second about  
September twentieth. Will close no  
offers. Two hundred fifty thousand for  
this hundred fifty lectures.

Cook

Afsenderens Adresse bodes angiven for til Efterretning for Indleveringsstationen af Hensyn til Tilbagemelding, Tilbagebetaling el. desl. Form. Nr. 3/1908.

Fig. 4. The draft telegram to John R. Bradley.

offer from the lecture impresario Frederic Thomson of \$250,000 for 250 lectures. But Bradley wanted Cook to tour under his associate, William Gray, which he eventually did. Evidently, Cook's statement that he 'will close no offers,' and the amount stated, indicate that Bradley had asked him not to do so, and had asked how much he had been offered for the lecture rights.

#### An early example of recycling

Just where were these drafts between their writing and their appearance in the establishment of O. Bruun in Copenhagen? The physical condition of the documents is the primary clue as to how they arrived in the art dealer's custody. The two sheets of original drafts (Figs 1, 2) had been folded roughly in quarters, as if to be put in a pocket. They have identical tear patterns showing that they were together, one atop the other, when they were torn into six pieces. Each of the sheets is missing a portion at the bottom of the page, identical in pattern to the top two torn sections, indicating that the papers were folded in half when torn up. The telegram draft to Bradley (Fig. 4) had one corner torn off at the whole appears to have been wadded up. Will Cook's telegram had been torn in quarters, one of which is missing. What is left of the UK telegram blank had been torn in half and is missing portions at its top and bottom.

All of the torn papers have been pieced back together by carefully gluing to their backs either strips of stiff paper to join the tears, or making patches using something that looks like gummed glassine paper, similar to the material collectors used to mount postage stamps in albums.

All of the strips of paper are blank, with the exception of one that appears to have had a column of numbers written on it before being cut into a strip. No doubt they were thus when displayed in Copenhagen. These repairs and the presence of William Cook's telegram tying it to delivery to the Hotel Phoenix on 5 September 1909, along with the draft to Bradley in, presumably, Walter Lonsdale's hand, which, by content, had to have been written before 12 September, indicate that all of these torn documents were most likely retrieved from the trash can in Cook's hotel room by some enterprising individual. Probably this was a Hotel Phoenix employee who had access to Cook's room after he departed on 10 September for Christiansand, Norway, to board *Oscar II* for America. A photograph of his arrival in New York is presented as Fig. 5.

The mere fact that Cook casually threw away these documents seems remarkable, but might be explained by the fact that they vary in exact wording from the published cables. Perhaps he took copies of the actual messages and felt he no longer needed the original drafts, as they were not exactly what he had sent and might cause confusion





Fig. 5. Dr Frederick A. Cook speaking with representatives of The Arctic Club of America from the deck of *Oscar II* upon his arrival in New York, 21 September, 1909.

later. That he kept some kind of record seems confirmed by his statement in *My attainment of the Pole* that ‘To Mr Bennett I cabled: “Message left in care of Danish consul, 2,000 words. For it \$3,000 expected. If you want it, send for it”’ (Cook 1913: 465). Moreover, the words ‘if you want it,’ do not appear in any of the published versions of this cable, but are present in both of its drafts. It could be that the published cable did contain these words, but they were edited out for publication, however.

That actual telegrams themselves might still exist seems unlikely. Correspondence with the National

Archives of the United Kingdom, the British Postal Museum, the Porthcurno Telegraph Museum (Penzance, UK), and the Shetland Archives and Museum (Lerwick) all produced the same general reply: that these records were probably destroyed after a short period of retention.

### Conclusion

The unexpected recovery of these documents is not just a tangible reminder of the events of 1 September 1909, which marked the beginning of the greatest geographical controversy of all time. In a way, these humble pieces of torn paper with a few penciled words, recovered from a wastepaper basket, embody the entire polar controversy itself, because if they had never been written, there would have been no controversy at all.

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