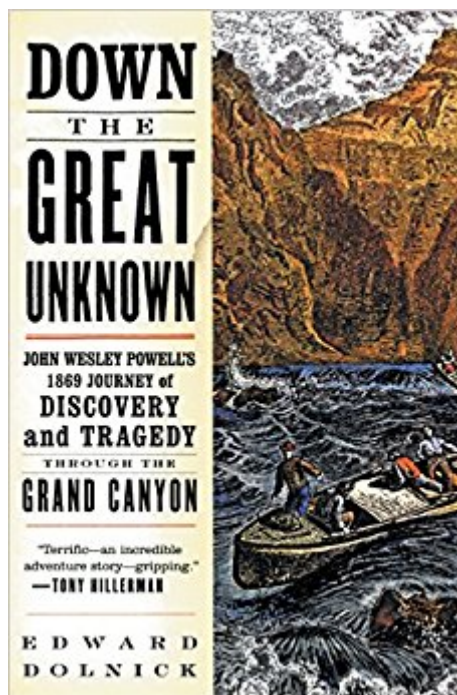


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Down The Great Unknown: John Wesley Powell's 1869 Journey Of Discovery And Tragedy Through The Grand Canyon



Synopsis

On May 24, 1869, a one-armed Civil War veteran named John Wesley Powell and a ragtag band of nine mountain men embarked on the last great quest in the American West. No one had ever explored the fabled Grand Canyon; to adventurers of that era it was a region almost as mysterious as Atlantis -- and as perilous. The ten men set out down the mighty Colorado River in wooden rowboats. Six survived. Drawing on rarely examined diaries and journals, *Down the Great Unknown* is the first book to tell the full, true story.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

There are several epic sagas of exploration in the present-day "lower 48" United States.

Chronologically, the first was Cabeza de Vaca's 1527-35 trek from Florida through the American Southwest and into Mexico. Then there was the journey of Lewis and Clark in 1803. Finally, there was that insane one-armed army major who with nine companions floated down the unmapped Green and Colorado rivers. Having read and enjoyed John Wesley Powell's own book about his 1869 expedition, I was shocked to hear that it was written decades after the events had taken place. Time had added an optimistic, even roseate glow to what was actually one hundred days of hell on earth with a crew that was grumbling and even mutinous at times. Instead of basing his book exclusively on Powell's book, he used the actual diaries written by Powell, Bradley, and others at the time to round out his tale. No doubt, you know that thousands of people have floated down the Colorado in recent years. But Powell and his men used keeled rowboats in which the men with their oars faced the rapids with their BACKS. In other words, they were facing the wrong direction most of

the time. When they undertook the journey, they had no way of knowing whether there were waterfalls that would plunge them to their deaths. (There is one such waterfall on the Little Colorado, which feeds into the Colorado proper south of Lee's Ferry.) As it was, irrespective of how much they grumbled, Powell saw all his men landed safely, except for the three who abandoned the party at Separation Canyon and were mysteriously murdered by Indians or (possibly) paranoid Mormons who disbelieved their story of running the Colorado. Dolnick's descriptions of the perils of white-water running rival Krakauer's descriptions of climbing Everest in *INTO THIN AIR* or the tempest in Sebastian Junger's *THE PERFECT STORM*. The author's attention to detail and apparent knowledge of his subject made *DOWN THE GREAT UNKNOWN* a joy to read. My only real complaint is that Dolnick interrupts the journey with a multi-chapter flashback of Powell's experiences at the battle of Shiloh, where he lost his arm. The matter, however interesting in itself, should have been introduced earlier, along with more background information about his crew, rather than interrupting the main narrative. My only other complaint is that I would have preferred standard superscripted numerical endnotes to the phrase cues he uses; and I would have preferred a better map of the entire expedition that appears on the endpapers of the hardback version. Still and all, this is a superlative page-turner that I would recommend to anyone with an interest in American history or even tales of adventure.

This was a fantastic book. I read Powell's "Exploration of the Colorado" almost 50 years ago and was so excited about it that I bought a boat, tried to replicate his trip, almost drowned and spent 10 days nearly starving in Cataract Canyon. If I had read Dolnick's book instead of Powell's romanticized, much abbreviated account, I would have been much more cautious. Powell's book is still one of the great books in American history, but until I read Dolnick's book I really didn't know what went on. It was like revisiting the trip all over again, and was, if this is possible, even more exciting. There's only a book or two each year that I recommend to my friends and this is definitely one. Also, to any river runners out there who think this is just a rehash of Powell's trip - it's much, much more.

This is an exciting adventure story. The book describes the Powell Expedition's journey of exploration of the last unmapped area of the lower 48 -- the Colorado River and its canyons (including the Grand Canyon). These century and more ago adventure stories always amaze me as a modern reader. Major Powell and his group knew nothing about the Colorado River or the canyons. They didn't know if game would be available, they didn't know if the river contained just

rapids or huge water falls like the Niagra. They didn't know how to run river rapids -- all of the men were hardy outdoors types (some courtesy of the Civil War completed four years before their great adventure). None of the men were boatmen and none had ever run white water. Nevertheless, the intrepid Powell and his expedition started out on the Green River in present day Wyoming and followed it down through it's merger with the Colorado and through the Grand Canyon over the course of 100 days. Powell was driven by the adventurer's quest to leave his mark and a love of Geology and natural history. His crew were driven by nothing more than youthful adventurism and wages. Although they lost one boat, had much of their food spoiled, went weeks without killing any game and regularly climbed rocky canyon sides for vantage points, no men were lost as part of the expedition. Several later expeditions following in their wake had men drown, die from falls and exposure and generally suffered for their lack of experience, planning and knowledge. Powell was an enthusiastic leader -- and lucky. He had also left an arm in Tennessee courtesy of Confederate gunnery during the Battle of Shiloh. Powell endured his wilderness trip with one arm and -- this is incredible -- usually was one of his party who ascended canyon sides to take readings or scout the coming river conditions. There is an unbelievable story in the book of Powell being trapped on the side of a cliff, hanging on by one hand. His man above had to pull him up. With no rope, he had to take off his union suit, dangle it behind Powell and have Powell let go of the cliff in order to grab the lifeline and be pulled to safety. The book has many thrilling vignettes like the one above. Their trip was hard work. About a third of the rapids encountered were portaged or lined instead of run. Portage was hard work -- unloading all the supplies, carrying them around the rapid, carrying the boats (made of heavy oak) around the rapids -- over rock and w/o shoes near the end of the trip. Lining was also hard, boats were let out through the rapid with rope and jumped around vantage points in order to get them safely through. But many rapids were run - some without adequate knowledge of what was in store, some because many parts of the canyons through which they traveled had no side landings over which to portage or line. That these backward rowing men in boats designed to run about placid harbors were not dashed to pieces and drowned ten times during their journey is amazing. It also makes for a heck of a good story. The writing is good. The author makes much use of Powell's classic book on the trip -- as well as his river notes, and the journals of several other participants who have survived. The descriptions and story telling give as good of a "you are there" feel as a book can. He also cuts away at times to modern river runners to give an appreciation of how certain famous rapids look to people who run them for a living. This and dashes of geology and brief histories add a nice balance to the book. It is amazing how these adventurers were willing to go blindly into "the great unknown." They stared death in the face and defeated it by

a combination of luck, pluck and determination. A good book for armchair adventurers.

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