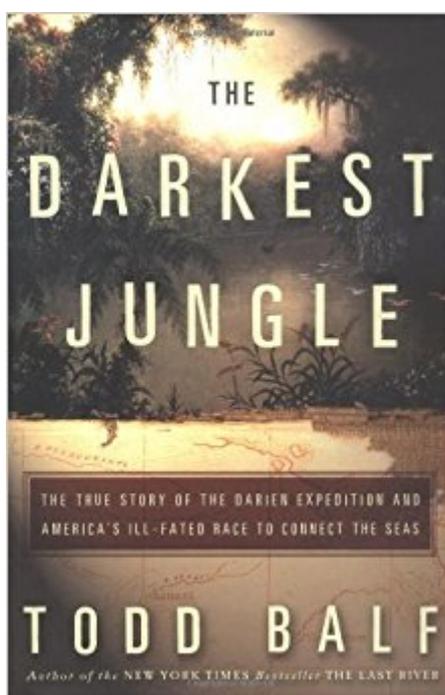


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# The Darkest Jungle: The True Story Of The Darien Expedition And America's Ill-Fated Race To Connect The Seas



## Synopsis

“Commit yourself to the Virgin Mary, for in her hands is the way into the Darién” and in God’s is the way out. •The Darkest Jungle tells the harrowing story of America’s first ship canal exploration across a narrow piece of land in Central America called the Darién, a place that loomed large in the minds of the world’s most courageous adventurers in the nineteenth century. With rival warships and explorers from England and France days behind, the 27-member U.S. Darién Exploring Expedition landed on the Atlantic shore at Caledonia Bay in eastern Panama to begin their mad dash up the coast-hugging mountains of the Darién wilderness. The whole world watched as this party attempted to be the first to traverse the 40-mile isthmus, the narrowest spot between the Atlantic and Pacific in all the Americas. Later, government investigators would say they were doomed before they started. Amid the speculative fever for an Atlantic and Pacific ship canal, the terrain to be crossed had been grossly misrepresented and fictitiously mapped. By January 27, 1854, the Americans had served out their last provisions and were severely footsore but believed the river they had arrived at was an artery to the Pacific, their destination. Leading them was the charismatic commander Isaac Strain, an adventuring 33-year-old U.S. Navy lieutenant. The party could have turned back except, said Strain, they were to a man “revolted at the idea” of failing at a task they seemed destined to accomplish. Like the first men to try to scale Everest or reach the North Pole, they felt the eyes of their countrymen upon them. Yet Strain’s party would wander lost in the jungle for another sixty nightmarish days, following a tortuously contorted and uncharted tropical river. Their guns rusted in the damp heat, expected settlements never materialized, and the lush terrain provided little to no sustenance. As the unending march dragged on, the party was beset by flesh-embedding parasites and a range of infectious tropical diseases they had no antidote for (or understanding of). In the desperate final days, in the throes of starvation, the survivors flirted with cannibalism and the sickest men had to be left behind so, as the journal keeper painfully recorded, the rest might have a chance to live. The U.S. Darién Exploring Expedition’s 97-day ordeal of starvation, exhaustion, and madness “a tragedy turned “triumph of the soul” due to the courage and self-sacrifice of their leader and the seamen who devotedly followed him” is one of the great untold tales of human survival and exploration. Based on the vividly detailed log entries of Strain and his junior officers, other period sources, and Balfour’s own treks in the Darién Gap, this is a rich and utterly compelling historical narrative that will thrill readers who enjoyed *In the Heart of the Sea*, *Isaac’s Storm*, and other sagas of adventure at the limits of human endurance.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This catchy little history book shows us how deceptively brutal the Panamanian isthmus can really be. Of course, long before the actual Panama Canal was completed, the region had been obsessed over by all types of explorers and speculators wanting to create the ultimate shortcut for world travel. This book focuses on the 1854 exploratory mission of Isaac Strain and his men, in search of a possible route for a canal in the Darien region of the isthmus, which ultimately was not selected for the canal. While Panama may appear to be just a skinny little strip of land, it is actually up to 100 miles across with steep mountains, punishing weather, the worst tropical diseases and insects, rivers that go in all the wrong directions, and the most impenetrable jungles on Earth. Here Balf documents the harrowing ordeal of Strain and his men, as the team ultimately discovered that the Darien region was definitely not suitable for a canal, losing several men along the way under gruesome conditions of starvation and suffering. Some parts of this book are quite terrifying as guys start dropping dead in the worst possible ways. This mostly fascinating vignette is held back a little by Balf's rather thin and wandering writing style, as the characters (particularly Strain) fail to really come to life. Meanwhile, there are two different stories about the rescue of the nearly-dead Strain and his associates after months of being lost in the festering jungle. In the sensationalistic introduction, meant to draw the reader in, Strain is near death when rescued but dramatically fights his way back to lucidity. But later, in the actual historical account, he was certainly in ill-health but still competently commanding his men.

The 1850's was known as the "canal era," in U.S. history. "Commerce was King," and President

Franklin Pierce was an aggressive expansionist who viewed the nation's borders expanding to Cuba and beyond. Moreover, Pierce was no less determined to be the first country to find a canal route on the Isthmus of Panama. At the time, the traditional sailing from east to west was around Cape Horn, "one of the most storm-ravaged passages in seafaring," and a four-month voyage to boot. A Darien Canal would cut the tough trip to California in half. To this end, Todd Balf's "The Darkest Jungle: The True Story of the Darien Expedition and America's Ill-Fated Race to Connect the Seas," is a stirring tale of the 27-member exploring group and its dashing leader, Lieutenant Isaac Strain. The author (also an accomplished researcher) explains how the search across the Panama Isthmus was an old idea. In 1503, Christopher Columbus, on his fourth and final voyage carefully combed the Panama coast for the isthms but grew disgusted and abandoned the search. In 1513, Vasco Nunez de Balboa was the first European to see the Pacific from a peak on the Darien but did not successfully negotiate a passage. Consequently, the January 19, 1854 U.S. Darien Exploring Expedition was an ambitious undertaking filled with great risk. There were also tremendous economic considerations involved, with both the United Kingdom and France having declared intentions to march into the Darien with their own joint expedition in early 1854. Fortunately, Lieutenant Strain's instincts were outstanding and the quality of the American survival skills were impressive. Nevertheless, it was a painful and deadly race into the jungle. Strain's leadership was crucial...

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