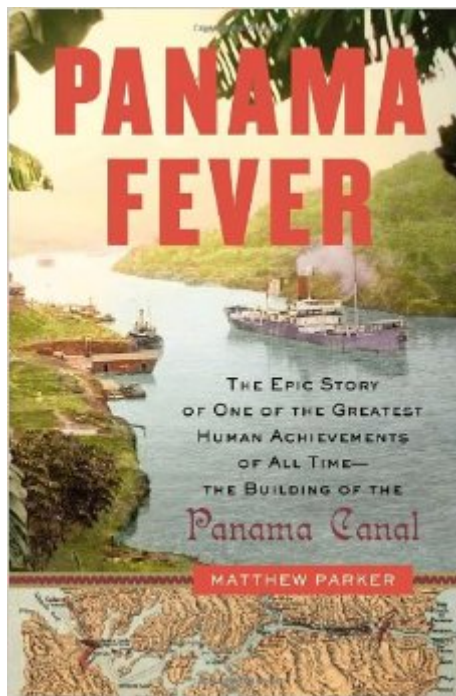


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# Panama Fever: The Epic Story Of One Of The Greatest Human Achievements Of All Time-- The Building Of The Panama Canal



## Synopsis

A thrilling tale of exploration, conquest, money, politics, and medicineThe Panama Canal was the costliest undertaking in human history. It literally required moving mountains, breaking the back of the great range that connects North and South America. Begun by the French in 1880, its successful completion in 1914 by the Americans marked the end of the Victorian Age and the beginning of the "American Century." The building of the Panama Canal was a project whose gestation spanned hundreds of years. Columbus himself searched for a way to get to the Pacific across the narrow isthmus of Central America. For centuries, monarchs, presidents, businessmen, and explorers all struggled to find such a passage, knowing that whoever controlled it would exert unsurpassed control over global trade, and therefore the fate of nations. The first history of this mighty achievement in nearly thirty years, *Panama Fever* draws on diaries, memoirs, letters, and other contemporary accounts, bringing the experience of those who built the canal vividly to life. The massive project riveted public attention: "Panama Fever" spread throughout the Western world. Politicians and businessmen engaged in high-stakes international diplomacy in order to influence its location, path, ownership, and construction. Meanwhile, ditch-diggers, machinists, drivers, engineers, and foremen from all over the world rushed to take advantage of high wages and the chance to be a part of history. But the grim reality of Panama " searing heat, torrential rains, fatal mud slides, and malarial mosquitoes " soon caught up with them. More than 25,000 of those who enthusiastically signed on as workers succumbed to dysentery, yellow fever, and malaria, giving a fatal twist to the meaning of "Panama Fever." The truly horrific toll unleashed a second race to find a cure so the canal could be completed. The discoveries of the heroic doctors who battled these diseases would lead to a sea change in the way infectious diseases were treated, thus paving the way for the tremendous medical advances of the twentieth century. Filled with remarkable characters, including Teddy Roosevelt, Ulysses S. Grant, and Ferdinand de Lesseps, the French genius who built the Suez Canal and almost snatched Panama out from under American control, *Panama Fever* is an epic historical adventure that shows how a small but fiercely contested strip of land in a largely unknown Central American nation suddenly made the world a smaller place and launched the era of American global dominance.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This is a well written story on the building of the Panama Canal. Matthew Parker focuses on the French efforts in the 1880s to the United States taking over the project in 1904. Several key figures are discussed such as Ferdinand de Lesseps, John Stevens, Theodore Roosevelt, William Gorgas and others from various skilled backgrounds. The author is extremely effective in telling the human side of the story, which is the area I usually find most compelling. The sheer scale of this project is enough to merit praise for those who were involved in this engineering marvel, though it had negative aspects to its building as well. From the earliest explorers, the narrowness of the Panamanian Isthmus presented great potential to those who could envision the linking of the two oceans. Over time, we see competing ideas of where the canal should be built, e.g. such as the early U.S. view of building it in Nicaragua. People like Ferdinand de Lesseps, who built the Suez Canal, wanted it to be a sea level canal, while it was later on conceded that only a lock canal would be possible. How would the building of the canal be funded? Where would the labor force come from? How would the natural environment be manipulated? These were some of the major issues faced. The nature of the Panamanian Isthmus, and its political status are also delved into. The controversial U.S. involvement in the independence of Panama is discussed in some detail. The United States had at this time an imperialistic streak, especially when seen against the backdrop of the Spanish-American War. Panama was in essence a government propped up by the U.S. Government in its desire to have control over the canal zone. The French effort in building the canal ended in bankruptcy.

This book is subtitled "The Epic Story of One of the Greatest Human Achievements of All Time - the Building of the Panama Canal." It should have been subtitled "The Tragic Story of American

Racism, Imperialism, and Exploitation during the Building of the Panama Canal," because this is clearly the theme. The heroes of this tale are the West Indian blacks, chiefly British subjects, who provided the bulk of the unskilled workforce. The villains are the Americans, who are depicted as ruthless opportunists and bullies. The French are cast as an idealistic people intending a great service to humanity who were misled and robbed by a few frauds and charlatans involved in their canal project. The social history is an interesting and worthy topic, but suffers from being told out of context. There is a palpable pro-European, anti-American bias. The casual reader might well infer that the evils of racism and imperialism were uniquely American, because the British author gives few details that would allow a reasoned comparison of American attitudes and practice to those then prevailing in British India and South Africa. But all histories are biased to some extent. The chief fault of "Panama Fever" is that the social history is told to the near-exclusion of the details of the engineering project that is the ostensible subject of the book. The technical aspects are glossed over, and the building of the canal appears merely as a picturesque but indistinct backdrop for the social and political themes.

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