

**SCOTT OF THE ANTARCTIC: WE SHALL DIE LIKE GENTLEMEN.** Sue Blackhall. 2012. Barnsley: Pen & Sword Discovery. 170 p, illustrated, hard cover. ISBN 978-1-84884-664-7. £19.99

The original title of this book, when it first appeared for pre-order online in September 2011, was *Scott of the Antarctic: the legend 100 years on*. Such a promising byline made me hope for a comprehensive overview along the lines of Stephanie Barczewski's magisterial *Antarctic destinies* (Barczewski 2009); in the event, it was amended to the less assuming *Scott of the Antarctic: we shall die like gentlemen*. Unfortunately, this choice of byline highlights a central problem of writing on Scott, namely the battle lines which have been posthumously drawn over his reputation. How exactly should we read the sentence 'we shall die like gentlemen', taken from Scott's farewell letter to Sir Edgar Speyer of 16 March 1912? Is this heroism or naiveté? Idealism or fatalism? Is it fair to superimpose modern attitudes onto a man of the Edwardian era? Shouldn't the immediate context of that letter (Scott's probably having just witnessed Oates' self-sacrifice that same day) be taken into account? Yet one searches this book in vain for independent analysis or even a solid synthesis of the material. Instead we're given an exercise in cutting-and-pasting, an assemblage of facts, reports, journal extracts and opinions from various commentators. The author herself is, for the most part, nowhere to be seen.

Neither is the proof-reader or the fact-checker, come to think of it. There are far more mistakes than one can comfortably overlook, and after the section on Scott's *Discovery* expedition the section dealing with the *Terra Nova* soon turns into a game of 'spot the error'. Edward Leicester 'Naitch' Atkinson? (page 37) George Simpson, 'another *Discovery* veteran'? (page 37) George Seymour 'Silas' Wright? (page 38) Apsley Cherry-Garrard, born in 'Bedford, Hertfordshire'? (page 39) Victor Campbell, known as 'the wicket mate'? (page 42). Anyone expecting the common confusion between Edgar 'Taff' Evans and Edward 'Teddy' Evans will not be disappointed (allegedly it took six men to bring *Teddy* Evans back to his ship after a drinking session (page 46)).

There are noticeable confusions and errors in chronology too, some significant. For example, George Vince's death on the *Discovery* expedition is misdated to 11 March 1903 (pages 27–28), not 1902. The tragic misstep of Vince's death in fact occurred barely one month after *Discovery*'s disembarkation in Antarctica, whereas Blackhall's chronology gives the impression that the British made such a novice error after a full year's worth of polar experience. On the *Terra Nova* expedition the pony Jehu was supposedly shot on 24 February 1911 (page 69), yet survived this minor mishap to form part of the line-up for the southern journey in October–November 1911 (pages 71–72). Apparently after having been given an order by Scott on 22 December 1911, Atkinson 'stayed where he was': Blackhall's unclear phrasing gives the erroneous impression that at this point Atkinson must have pitched camp on the Beardmore Glacier (page 100). Allegedly Campbell's Northern Party, abandoned in their ice cave, 'saw a party of men approaching them'

on 10 April 1912 (page 95): this must be a reference to the return of Atkinson, Gerof and Keohane to *Cape Evans* on that date, and Blackhall's summary would certainly confuse any newcomer to the Northern Party's harrowing experiences. Meanwhile Teddy Evans was 'invalided home in 1929 but returned in 1913' (page 151). The author of a book pitching itself as a reference work (though sadly without an index) should have been especially careful to catch such errors. Furthermore, as there are no page references for the quotes offered, all of this results in a narrative that is hard to trust.

Blackhall's commentary is inoffensive on the whole, but occasionally it breaks into an unnecessary emotiveness. On the Norwegian threat she comments, 'Should Scott have continued with a dangerous race he had no way of winning?' (page 63) In fact, as Fiennes' biography of Scott makes clear, in 1911 there was no cast-iron guarantee that Amundsen's team, covering *terra incognita*, would have found a viable way to the pole (Fiennes 2004: 240). (One might more sensibly ask whether Scott should have taken his nation's money for an attempt on the pole just to give up immediately upon hearing of Amundsen's challenge.) Then upon the discovery of Amundsen's tent at the pole, we read: 'The sight of dog tracks compounded Scott's agony – why had he not retained his faithful and resilient dog teams?' (page 105). Blackhall could have answered her own question with a glance at her own lengthy citation of Scott's journal entry for 21 February 1911 (pages 59–61) in which Scott relates what happened when his dog-team collapsed through an snow-lid and down into a sixty-five-foot crevasse. Thankfully, Scott and Meares were able to halt and secure their sledge in time to prevent a catastrophe, leaving most of the dogs hanging limply from their harnesses in the abyss. As Scott is quoted:

Why the sledge and ourselves didn't follow the dogs I will never know. I think a fraction of a pound of added weight would have taken us down (. . .) If the sledge had gone down Meares and I *must* have been badly injured, if not killed outright (pages 60–61).

Those 'faithful and resilient' dogs, rushing eagerly forward, had nearly killed Scott. Is Scott's subsequent guarded attitude towards them really so inexplicable? One has to ask why such extensive extracts were included verbatim in the book if the author was not prepared to engage fully with their contents in her commentary.

To give a further example of unsubstantiated comment, there is 'Scott would forever view [Teddy] Evans as something of a rival' (page 36). A rival? Really? By 1909 the highlight of Evans' career had been his stint as Second Officer on the polar relief ship *Morning* back in 1902–1904. Evans certainly rose to deserved prominence later in his life, but it required the dashing manoeuvres of the Dover Patrol in WWI to bring his particular talents to the fore. During the *Terra Nova* expedition of 1910–1913 the energetic, boyish Evans was far from a good fit with the majority of his colleagues, and the dull atmosphere of scientific enquiry at base hardly showed him to best advantage. Anyone who thinks that Captain Scott, C.V.O., famous polar explorer, acclaimed author and accomplished captain of five ships previous to *Terra Nova*, could ever have regarded the

inexperienced Lieutenant Evans as a 'rival' cannot possibly have examined the evidence to the depth required.

That the 'Teddy Evans as Scott's rival' canard should have been repeated as solid fact indicates how little analysis there is in this book. This is especially unfortunate, because in choosing Scott, Blackhall has elected to tackle a subject in which careful analysis is essential. In assessing Scott's last expedition, the newcomer has to negotiate a veritable minefield of misinformation. In the last few decades the ground has been strewn with so many mistakes, misinterpretations, smug observations from hindsight, urban legends, character assassinations and post-imperialist cynicism that it now requires some persistence to get to anything approaching the truth of these men and their historical context. Given this background, Blackhall really should have avoided the passive citation of other writers' unsupported opinions within the body of her own work.

Puzzlingly, Blackhall also includes a short chapter of Antarctic tribute poetry. The famous last verse of Robert W. Service's 1909 poem *L'envoi (Ballads of a Cheechako)* is here misattributed to Douglas Mawson (page 141). A lengthy amateur eulogy from 1913 is also quoted in its entirety: 'Britannia mourned her son/Whose work was done', etc. (page 142). Enthusiasts of William McGonagall will enjoy this last, but I would have preferred Frank Debenham's striking 1956 poem *The quiet land* ('Men are not old here/ Only the rocks are old, and the sheathing ice. . .').

In conclusion, this book needs a considerable amount of revision, the open presentation of sources used and far deeper evaluation than is present here. Blackhall has amassed and quoted a large amount of data, but much of it is commonplace (Scott's writings make up a sizeable percentage of the contents), and the distracting errors and unsubstantiated opinions in the commentary make it too unreliable for recommendation. Scott's *Journals* should be read in their entirety, previously-deleted passages and all, in Max Jones' Oxford University Press edition (Jones 2008). Meanwhile the best all-round general introduction to the Terra Nova expedition is probably still Diana Preston's *A first-rate tragedy* (Preston 1997) or, for young adult readers, Richard Farr's *Emperors of the ice* (Farr 2008). (Karen May C/O Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge, Lensfield Road, Cambridge CB2 1ER.) (karenmay31@gmail.com)

### References

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