

## Book Reviews

**ROALD AMUNDSEN: THE SOUTH POLE EXPEDITION 1910–1912.** Geir O. Kløver (editor). 2010. Oslo: The Fram Museum. 411p, illustrated, soft cover. ISBN 9788-82-8235-010-5 [price not indicated]  
doi:10.1017/S0032247411000027

Primary sources for the human history of Antarctica prior to the mid-20th century are scanty. Of the total number of individuals who landed on its shores, sailed over its waters, or flew through its skies prior to 1950, only a small number left behind insightful accounts of their time on the ice, their reasons for going, their impressions of the last continent, what befell them there. Thus it is no wonder that diaries, and diarists, have assumed unusual importance in Antarctic historiography. Indeed, for the great expeditions of the heroic age, other than letters sent back home and the occasional book or interview written years or even decades after the fact, diaries are the only direct voices of record. Because they effectively control what can be chronicled or discussed, they impose both directionality and limitations on the historian's narrative. Yet despite the inherent interest of such personal records, surprisingly few are available in a convenient and inexpensive published form. This especially applies to diaries not written in one of the major European languages. It is therefore especially pleasing to note that, thanks to the efforts of the Fram Museum in cooperation with the National Library of Norway, Roald Amundsen's complete Antarctic diaries are now available in English translation for the first time.

I emphasise the word 'complete' because Roland Huntford's recently published *Race for the South Pole: the expedition diaries of Scott and Amundsen* (Huntford 2010) also presents excerpts from Amundsen's South Pole diaries (along with those of Olav Bjaaland and Robert Falcon Scott), but only for 1 September 1911 to 5 March 1912, the period spanning the race for the pole and its immediate aftermath. By contrast, the Fram Museum's version provides the entirety of Amundsen's text: it begins on board *Fram* in early June 1910 during the vessel's shakedown cruise, and ends in Buenos Aires in March 1912 with Amundsen's recording, with evident satisfaction, his completion of the first part of what would become *The South Pole* (Amundsen 1912). This version also includes such extras as a register of the contents of each crate carried on the southern journey, an appendix on modifications made to *Fram* for its Antarctic voyage (reprinted from *The South Pole*), and a wonderful selection of expedition photographs, many of which are not to be found in either Huntford's *The Amundsen photographs* (Huntford 1987) or Geir Kløver's *Cold recall* (Kløver 2009). Among the photographs are scenes of *Fram*'s departure from Norway, shipboard life on the way to Antarctica, and the pleasant diversions the men experienced in Tasmania and Argentina during their triumphal return to civilisation. Sadly, there is no index.

While both publications of the Amundsen diaries are welcome, neither qualifies as a critical edition in the tradition

of, say, the Hakluyt Society publications. Huntford supplies an introductory chapter and a number of notes, but there are no departures from his well known position on the differing capacities of Scott and Amundsen. Perhaps wisely, the Fram Museum edition offers a straightforward translation, with the occasional very short editorial note embedded in the text. For those familiar with *The South Pole*, such incidental help is usually enough when confronted with an unfamiliar surname or toponym. (But one will look fruitlessly for 'Axel Heiberg Glacier', because in his diary Amundsen called this feature 'Folgefonna' after a well-known Norwegian glacier, only changing the name later. This omission, while unfortunate, is the only one of consequence that I noted.) Having no Norwegian myself I cannot comment on the accuracy of the translations, except to compare random passages in the two books. I am happy to report that the Huntford and Fram Museum versions are extremely similar, except for what strikes me as acceptable differences in the choice of colloquialisms to make the translations more readable in English.

Since Amundsen's sledging journals have long since been heavily mined by authors like Huntford and Tor Bomann-Larsen (for example, Bomann-Larsen 2006), what remains to be learned? For the newcomer to Antarctic history, the attraction may be to have the story of the expedition unfold in real time, as it were. But I suspect that already knowledgeable readers will want to spend their time searching for new insights into *how* they did it, not in terms of kilometers achieved or calories consumed per day, but the raw evidence of mental toughness and emotional courage that kept these men going in circumstances that would bring down the rest of us. This is the deeply personal side of expeditionary history, one that does not reveal itself unless participants were willing to record their innermost thoughts. Unfortunately, from his diary entries we learn almost nothing about Amundsen's interior voyage across Antarctica, because writing about it, with the necessary level of revelation and introspection, was not his way. Unlike Scott, who often confided his existential angst to his journal, Amundsen tended to concentrate on the immediate concerns of the day, how problems were overcome, avoided, or transformed in some manner. In short, he comes across in just the way he wanted people to view him, as a master logistician, unflappably focused on the issues at hand.

Another feature of Amundsen's style, which also contrasts with Scott's, is that he devoted very little space to evaluating or criticising his companions, or indeed saying very much about them at all. They entered into his narrative in much the same way as the dogs did, meriting brief notice for their activities or performance, but not much else. The exception is the cook, the unthreatening, relentlessly positive Adolph Lindstrom; he repeatedly receives praise for his housekeeping qualities and ability to repair almost anything, and, more revealingly, for the fact that '[h]e is amazingly willing to agree to everything one says to him' (5 April 1911). Even Hjalmar Johansen's mutinous outburst after the abortive September journey (17 September

1911), when he told Amundsen that he regarded him as unfit to lead, is recorded with little evident emotion (but with a certain amount of self-justification). I assume that Amundsen realised that the fleshlessness of his narrative style would be considered a defect in a popular book; in any case, in *The South Pole* he took pains to provide his companions with more personality than they are given in the diaries.

One of the incidents of particular interest to me is the *Slakterei*, or Butcher's Shop (21 November 1911), when, according to plan, Amundsen had his men kill more than half of their dogs. They had needed all their animals to ascend the Transantarctic Mountains; that task accomplished, they required only as many dogs as would be needed to get to the pole and back to Framheim. The meat taken off the sacrificed dogs would then be used to feed the surviving animals as well as the men. Judging from the passages devoted to this day in *The South Pole*, amounting to several pages, I assumed that Amundsen's diary entry would also contain ruminations on the necessity of it all, some additional justification for the slaughter. Here is his full account: 'It has been a really strenuous day, mostly for the dogs. But they have also, 24 of our best comrades, been given the best reward: death. On arriving at 8pm, they were shot and their intestines removed. They will be skinned tomorrow.' The harshness, or, alternatively, the matter-of-factness, of these sentences are jarring, and Amundsen doubtless felt he had to embellish in his book the account of the slaughter to show that he had at least felt *something*. And perhaps he did; but on the ice there was no room for philosophising or unnecessary emotional expenditure.

The publication of Amundsen's South Pole diaries is part of an ambitious project, under the general editorship of the Fram Museum's director, Geir Kløver, to issue in translation the available diaries of all of the major Norwegian polar explorers of the 19th and early 20th centuries (some in parallel Norwegian and English editions). Amundsen's *Belgica* diary has already

been published in this series. In the next year or so, the museum will publish translations of the Antarctic diaries of Amundsen's companions Hjalmar Johansen, Olav Bjaaland, Oscar Wisting, Jorgen Stubberud, and Sverre Hassel, together with those of Thorvald Nilsen and Ludvik Hansen who served on *Fram* but were not part of the shore party. It is a splendid thing that these sources will now become readily accessible to a much wider readership than in the past.

Amundsen's personality in English language sources is usually cast as cold and remote, driven by his need to win. Some of Amundsen's companions, especially Sverre Hassel, had much to say about him, both good and bad, and perhaps we can look forward to having a more rounded view of the man in future. But just in case you thought Amundsen's affect was so unrelievedly flat that he could not express joy in simple pleasures, turn to the entry for 21 July 1911. It was still midwinter, but with enough light for Amundsen to go to a nearby food cache to bring back some fresh supplies for Framheim's table. It is touching, in a way, to read how this closed, hard man could expound for several paragraphs upon how tasty, how marvelous, how truly fine, were the jams, vegetables, cheeses, chocolates, cigars and so on and on: 'Yum yum, how good they are!' The same thing can be said for the volumes that have appeared so far in the Fram Museum series, which bodes well for the rest. (Ross D.E. MacPhee, Department of Mammalogy, American Museum of Natural History, New York NY 10024, USA.)

### References

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**RACE TO THE END: AMUNDSEN, SCOTT AND THE ATTAINMENT OF THE SOUTH POLE.** Ross D.E. MacPhee. 2010. New York, London: Sterling Innovation (American Museum of Natural History, in association with the Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge). x + 245p., illustrated, hard cover. ISBN 978-1-4027-7029-6. US\$27.95, C\$35.95.  
 doi:10.1017/S0032247410000471

More has been written about Robert Falcon Scott's last expedition of 1910–1913 than about any other Antarctic expedition, with the South Pole expedition of Roald Amundsen in 1910–1912 not far behind. With so many published, noteworthy analyses of these two momentous and contemporaneous expeditions, particularly those of Roland Huntford (1979), Tor Bomann-Larsen (1995), Susan Solomon (2001), Ranulph Fiennes (2003), Max Jones (2003), David Crane (2005), and Stephanie Barczewski (2007), one may rationally query whether we really need another book, especially so soon. Dr. Ross MacPhee has shown us that there is always room for another when the book is done as well as his is.

How MacPhee came to his interest in polar history, became curator of the 'Race to the end of the Earth' exhibition at

the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) in New York City, and author of the present volume deserves comment. MacPhee, born in 1949 in Edinburgh, Scotland, spent his formative years in western Canada. As a college undergraduate, he planned to become a professional historian concentrating on the exploration and colonisation of Africa. However, he had many other interests and while in graduate school realized that African history did not interest him as much as physical anthropology. He received his doctorate in this field in 1977 at the University of Alberta and taught for several years at Canadian universities. He then joined the faculty in the Department of Anatomy at Duke University Medical Center, Durham, North Carolina, where he became associate professor in 1986, teaching human gross anatomy and conducting paleontological research in Madagascar. Two years later, he joined the staff of the AMNH, as curator of mammals, at which he has resided professionally ever since. In the past two decades he has continued to study mammalian evolution, with forays into paleobiogeography, ancient DNA, Siberian permafrost mummies, and Pleistocene extinctions.

MacPhee came to Antarctic history when he was appointed co-curator of the AMNH's 1999 *Endurance* exhibition, proposed and organised by Caroline Alexander. The AMNH's policy is to have a resident curator when a show