

## Book Reviews

**THE DISCOVERY OF THE SOUTH SHETLAND ISLANDS: THE VOYAGES OF THE BRIG WILLIAMS 1819–1820 AS RECORDED IN CONTEMPORARY DOCUMENTS AND THE JOURNAL OF MIDSHIPMAN C.W. POYNTER.** R.J. Campbell (Editor). 2000. London: The Hakluyt Society (Third Series, No 4). xv + 232 p, illustrated, hard cover. ISBN 0-904180-62-X. £45.00.

In January 1998 there appeared a note in this journal, by the editor of the present work, announcing the discovery of a surviving first-hand account of the famous voyage in 1819–20 of the brig *Williams*. This was the voyage in which the crew of that vessel surveyed part of the South Shetland Islands and were the first to sight the Antarctic Peninsula. The account was the journal of Midshipman C.W. Poynter, one of three midshipmen who, together with Edward Bransfield, Master RN, and a surgeon, had been ordered on board by Captain W.H. Shirreff, HMS *Andromache*, when he had chartered *Williams* from her captain and part owner William Smith. The reason for Shirreff, whose ship was in Valparaiso at the time, taking this step was the news conveyed to him by Smith that he had landed on the islands and had claimed them for the British Crown. Smith had, in fact, completed three voyages in the area of the islands in 1819 and had sighted the islands on the first. His landing on them took place during the third voyage.

In his note, the editor also described Poynter's journal, which had been purchased by the Alexander Turnbull Library, part of the National Library of New Zealand, in some detail and placed it in its context with regard to the existing, almost contemporary, secondary accounts of the voyage. This was sufficient to ensure that all those with interests in polar history would resolve to read the full journal when it was published. The editor indicated that he was already undertaking the work on the journal, and those wishing to read it could only look forward with impatience until it should finally be in their hands (Campbell 1998).

This is now the case in a typically handsome Hakluyt Society volume. It should be stated at the outset of this review that the expectations arising from the editor's 1998 note have been vastly exceeded and that we have here a major contribution to polar history. For not only has the editor printed Poynter's journal, he has also republished, in full or in substantial extract, several accounts of Smith's three 1819 voyages in *Williams* and of the voyage of 1819–20 in which the naval party was on board. So within a single volume one has virtually all that is known of the discoveries made by the crews of that modest vessel in what might reasonably be regarded as an *annus mirabilis* of Antarctic exploration.

The structure of the book follows a clear and logical

plan. There is a full introduction during which the editor sets the scene for what is to follow. He starts by giving a brief account of the South Shetland Islands and permits himself an interesting, and amusing, digression concerning stone-age projectile heads 'found' in samples taken from the sea bed off King George and Greenwich islands. These are now known to have been added after collection by some fraudster or practical joker.

A second section in the introduction introduces the principal personnel: Smith; Bransfield; Poynter; P.J. Blake and T.M. Bone, who were the other two midshipmen; A. G. Young, who was the surgeon; Shirreff; and J. Miers, who wrote one of the early accounts of Smith's discoveries. The section on Poynter alone covers nearly four pages, and there are no fewer than 16 footnotes, showing clearly the care with which the editor has unearthed comprehensive information about the author of the main text.

Then follow the chapters of the book, the first of which is entitled 'Antarctic background.' This starts almost inevitably with the ancient Greeks and sets out information concerning approaches to the continent until the time of Smith's voyages. The second chapter does not, however, follow on to deal with those voyages but seems to be somewhat of a digression, concerned as it is with the South American background, in effect explaining what Shirreff was doing in Chilean waters for Smith to report to him concerning his discoveries.

There follows a chapter that might also at first sight be regarded as a digression since it addresses 'Nineteenth-century navigation and surveying.' However, one suspects that there would be very few readers of this volume whose knowledge of the topic was so comprehensive as to enable them to skip this chapter, since it provides a masterly summary of the topic and serves to alert readers to the immense difficulties to be faced by Bransfield and his colleagues concerning the surveying work they were ordered to undertake in the South Shetlands.

Chapter 4 is entitled 'Three voyages of William Smith.' The first voyage was from Buenos Aires to Valparaiso, starting on 16 January 1819. During this voyage Smith sighted the South Shetland Islands on 19 February and on arrival in Valparaiso he reported this to Shirreff, who took the view that the 'land' was probably ice. On the second, from Valparaiso to Montevideo, starting on 16 May, Smith attempted to follow his previous track but saw no land, while on the third, from Montevideo to Valparaiso, he tried again and this time was successful, sighting land in approximately the same place as on the first voyage. On 17 October, he sent a boat ashore and claimed the land for the Crown. He followed the coast for some distance and finally turned towards Valparaiso, where he arrived on 24 November. This time Shirreff was more receptive and

took immediate steps to confirm the discovery. Thus the details of Smith's voyages are an essential precursor to the voyage with the naval party on board. The editor notes that the log of *Williams* has not survived, but he lists the near contemporary accounts that include extracts from it. He comments on each and reprints them in a reduced font size. This covers some 18 pages. The chapter concludes with a comparative examination of the different versions.

The same technique is adopted in the next chapter, covering the voyage of *Williams* with Edward Bransfield on board. The editor devotes much space to the obvious question concerning the relative positions of Bransfield and Smith and concludes that 'Bransfield was in fact in command of the *Williams* although his relationship with William Smith may well have been more similar to that between an admiral and his flag captain, than the nineteenth century one between the captain and the master of a naval ship' (page 70). He reprints Bransfield's orders from Shirreff and provides a summary of the voyage, including the unambiguous statement that on 30 January 1820 they made 'the first sighting of the Antarctic land mass.' This, of course, begs the question of what Bellingshausen and Lazarev had seen on 27 January, and the editor devotes a long footnote to the point, concluding 'it would seem probable that Bellingshausen and his people were the first to sight the fast ice with the continental ice front behind it. It is also clear that, although he did not see solid rock, he appreciated what he had seen' (page 74). The editor lists early published accounts of Bransfield's voyage and reprints them.

We then arrive at Poynter's journal itself, the centre-piece of the book, which is printed in full. This occupies more than 70 pages and is not in reduced font size. Poynter's style is simple, almost matter of fact, and the journal is very easy to read. Dates are entered at the side of the text. The entries for the fateful 30 January are comprehensive and the sightings made clearly caused much discussion: 'Our theme of conversation...was the Idea of having by the direction the land took discovered what might possibly lead to the determination of the long-contested question as to existance [*sic*] of a Southern Continent' (page 132). The editor gives a full commentary in the form of footnotes. These include the amendments to the text made by Poynter himself together with estimated positions, explanations of nautical terms, notes on the careers of the various people after whom significant points were named and well-chosen comments about the various forms of wildlife noted by the writer.

The next chapter gives details of the actual surveys made by Bransfield and lists all the existing charts that arose from the voyage. The final chapter addresses the other expeditions that took place in the 1819–20 season. There were three of these and they were, of course, engaged in sealing. It seems probable that some had heard of the existence of the islands from members of Smith's crew at their various ports of call.

There follow four appendices. The first sets out ex-

tracts from three important secondary accounts of Smith's voyages, but in parallel so that the similarities might be made evident. The second has correspondence from Shirreff to the Admiralty, which includes the charter agreement between him and Smith. This is a fascinating document and seems so unbelievably one-sided that one wonders why Smith signed it. All the onus seems to have been on him, and one is forced to wonder if Shirreff had legal training or at the very least some outline charter document placed on board by the Admiralty for captains to use in just such an eventuality. Smith was to guarantee that the brig was 'strong, firm, tight, staunch and substantial' and 'equipped, fitted, furnished and provided with Masts, Sails, Sail Yards, Anchors, Ropes, Cords, Tackle,' not to mention cables, sets of sails, a full ship's company and 'at least four Carriage Guns mounted, not less than four pounders, twenty five Muskets, twenty five Cutlasses and three pair of Pistols...' But when it came to money, the only mention of a specific sum was a bond of £500 that Smith was required to enter into as guarantee that his 'covenants, conditions and agreements' would be met. As for the payment, Smith was to receive 'such amount of pay per month...as the Commissioners of His Majesty's Navy shall think adequate' (page 200). Perhaps Smith was, indeed, a simple patriot, 'having the Good of his Country at heart' (page 64).

The third appendix comprises 'Additional naval reports,' while the fourth sets out a 'Selection of additional newspaper and journal reports.' There is a full bibliography and index.

Enough has been said so far to make it clear that this is an excellent book without touching on the illustrations, some of which are simply stunning. There are 31 in all and they divide themselves roughly into two types. The editor has taken the opportunity of printing a large number of charts and plans relating to the four voyages. The highlight of this collection is 'A chart of New or South Shetland, 1822,' which is the published version of Bransfield's chart. A note of criticism is due here. The chart is printed full size, but because of this it is divided so that it covers four double pages as printed in the book. As the rest of the book has been printed to such high standards, it seems a pity that the chart could not have been printed on one piece of paper and secured to the book in fold-out form. The other illustrations are a collection of photographs, of which many are in colour, of significant places referred to in the text. Most of these were taken in clear weather, but in order to enlighten readers who have not had the privilege of visiting the South Shetland Islands for themselves, the editor includes one entitled 'Typical weather like that experienced by Bransfield in Bransfield Strait' (page 130). Those with experience might observe that the weather in that picture seems rather good! There is a wonderful frontispiece. This is a beautiful painting of *Williams* at her 'most southerly position 23 February 1820' by Commander G.W.G. Hunt, RN.

There are one or two points worthy of comment. On

page 188, there is a potential source of confusion, in that the quote appears to refer to the longitude of Cape Horn rather than the latitude, but this, of course may have been an error in the original. One suspects that American readers may be amused by reference in the index to *HMS Constitution!*

This book is very worthy to be included in the lists of the Hakluyt Society and maintains the high standards of the Society's other publications. It is comprehensive, the subject matter is compelling, and the editor's writing is excellent. He has appreciated that early nineteenth-century journals and texts require considerable critical apparatus, and while this is all-embracing it is never intrusive. The editor's diligence in tracking down the very many difficult items referred to in the book is to be lauded, and an excellent contribution to polar history has resulted. It should be read by all with interests in that subject. (Ian R. Stone, Laggan Juys, Larivane Close, Andreas, Isle of Man IM7 4HD.)

#### Reference

Campbell, R.J. 1998. Voyage of Edward Bransfield in the hired brig *Williams*, 1819–1820: the journal of Midshipman C.W. Poynter, Royal Navy. *Polar Record* 34 (188): 60–61.

**IN THE LAND OF WHITE DEATH.** Valerian Albanov. Translated by Alison Anderson. 2000. New York: Modern Library. xxx + 205 p, illustrated, hard cover. ISBN 0-679-64100-9. US\$21.95; Can\$32.95.

In August 1912 the ship *Sv Anna*, commanded by Georgiy Brusilov and with a complement of 24, sailed from Alexandrovsk (now Murmansk), bound for Vladivostok with the goal not only of finding new hunting grounds for walrus and seal, but of becoming only the second ship to navigate the Northeast Passage. Less than two months later, west of Poluostrov Yamal, *Sv Anna* was caught in the ice and began to drift slowly north through the Kara Sea. During the next year, Brusilov and Valerian Al'banov — the navigator and second-in-command — fell out, and Al'banov was relieved of his duties. In January 1914, with the ship still drifting aimlessly, but now north of Zemlya Frantsa-Iosifa, Al'banov asked Brusilov for permission to build a kayak in which he wished to leave the ship when spring arrived. Brusilov consented, and, within two weeks, a number of other crew members decided to join Al'banov's venture.

On 10 April 1914, Al'banov and 13 other crew members left *Sv Anna* with five sledges and five kayaks to try to reach Zemlya Frantsa-Iosifa. Eleven days later, still only 28 miles from where they left the ship, three sailors decided to return to *Sv Anna*. The others continued their slow, agonising progress south, fighting against the rough ice on the surface and the currents that tended to carry them north. In mid-May one man disappeared searching for a route different than that Al'banov wished to take. Al'banov managed to hold the others together, and in late June they reached Zemlya Aleksandry, the western-most of the large

islands of the archipelago.

The party made for Mys Flora on Ostrov Nortbruk, where they hoped to find supplies left from the Jackson–Harmsworth Expedition (1894–97). They divided into two groups, half in the kayaks and the others on skis. In the next several days, one of the skiers died and then the other four disappeared before making a rendezvous with Al'banov's party at Mys Grant on Zemlya Georga. Three more died, two of them swept out to sea, before Al'banov and Aleksandr Konrad reached Mys Flora. Shortly thereafter, the two were met by members of Georgiy Sedov's North Polar expedition, and were taken south to Arkhangel'sk in the expedition ship *Sv Foka*.

This book is the first translation into English of Al'banov's account of the expedition, first published in Russian in 1917. Al'banov's diary made while aboard *Sv Anna* was lost on the retreat from the ship, so the book actually only tells the tale of the magnificent journey across the ice to Mys Flora. On the surface of it, this volume is a wonderful addition to the literature of Arctic exploration. Unfortunately, if one goes a bit below the surface, the picture is not quite as positive.

First of all, the editorial input (that is, the introduction and footnotes) is totally inadequate. Instead of giving a detailed and carefully documented background — such as the works translated and edited by William Barr regularly have — the introduction states: '...until 1997 I had never heard a word about the ill-starred journey of the *Saint Anna*, commanded by Georgiy Brusilov, nor of Albanov's daring flight from the doomed ship.' This story has, of course, long been known by serious historians of Arctic exploration, and has been mentioned in works as diverse as William Barr's translation of Brusilov's journal from this drift (Barr 1978), Clive Holland's *Arctic exploration and development* (1994), and Susan Barr's *Franz Josef Land* (Barr 1995). It is a disappointment that the background could not be supplied by someone more conversant with the history of the exploration of the area.

As it is, the reader gets no feel at all as to where this story fits into the exploration of the Russian Arctic. And there is little, if any, reference to previous events that shaped the course of the expedition. For example, while it is mentioned that Brusilov had some northern experience, it is not specified that he was an officer on board *Vaygach* in 1910 and 1911, and on the latter cruise had seen the entire coast from the Bering Strait to the Kolyma, that is, he had significant Arctic experience. Nor is there mention of the fact that in 1882–83 when *Varna* and *Dijmphna* were beset in the Kara Sea at much the same location as *Sv Anna*, they drifted in an anti-clockwise gyre, and that while *Varna* was crushed, *Dijmphna* emerged relatively unscathed. This probably influenced Brusilov in not trying to make greater effort to prevent being beset.

The few footnotes are also not carefully researched. Thus the note on page 12 states: 'Petermann Land and King Oscar Land had been reported by an Austrian expedition in 1873,' and the index indicates that that