

THE ICE BALLOON: ONE MAN'S DRAMATIC ATTEMPT TO DISCOVER THE NORTH POLE BY BALLOON. Alec Wilkinson. 2013. London: Fourth Estate. 239 p, illustrated, soft cover. ISBN 978-0-00-746003-8. £8.99.

On the cover of this book, we are informed that the author's 'writing is...flawless and engaging', that 'his diligence of research, elegance of style and perfect pitch' enables him 'to give a doomed, forgotten hero a fine memorial to his heroic adventure in the golden, amateur age of polar exploration', that he writes with 'insight and flair, artfully interleaving Andrée's story (for it is, of course, he with whom the book is concerned) with a brief history of Arctic exploration', and that the story is told 'with panache and compassion.' One should feel privileged to read such a profound work of literature.

But when one starts perusing the book itself, one is soon brought down to earth with a bump. For what one has is a rather second rate recounting of the Andrée story with nothing new for the average reader of *Polar Record* save some interesting insights into Andrée's and his companions' private lives and brief points relating to the history of ballooning. The structure of the book is depressingly predictable. After a short section on the discovery of the expedition's remains on Kvitöya in August 1930, there is a potted history of Arctic exploration from the early 16th century, including some of the nowadays almost obligatory 'digs' at Franklin and of the British approach to the Arctic generally. We then arrive at Andrée and his first insight concerning the possibility of reaching the pole by balloon, which apparently took place in a private conversation with A.E. Nordenskiöld on 16 March 1894. In parenthesis it should be noted that he was certainly not the first to *contemplate* the possibility. For example the British John P. Cheyne evolved equivalent plans in the 1870s but they came to nought (Lewis-Jones 2008).

The first public expositions of Andrée's evolving plan took place in 1895 at the Royal Academy of Sciences in Sweden and, later, at the 6th International Geographical Congress in London. Then we are introduced to Andrée's background, and this is the most interesting section of the book for those who are aware of the story of his flight and its aftermath. Andrée participated in the Swedish expedition to Svalbard that was part of the first International Polar Year in 1882–1883 and this affords the opportunity for the insertion of a lengthy account of the Greeley expedition, one of the two American contributions, but which had nothing whatever to do with Andrée or his scheme.

We now lurch back to Andrée and his early experiences in balloons, including his development of 'guide ropes' that would afford some measure of steerability into a non-dirigible. Then we move to Nansen and *Fram* for a few more pages and, by this time, one harbours the, no doubt, unworthy suspicion that the writer knew that he would not have sufficient material for a book strictly on Andrée and his expedition alone and found it necessary to introduce a measure of 'padding'.

With 1896 matters speed up so to speak. The expedition established a base at Dansköya but due to faulty wind directions no launch took place that year and the party returned to Sweden

for the wait until 1897. There were difficulties over the winter and these manifested themselves in the withdrawal of the third member of the crew and a replacement being secured. During the second summer the wait was long but eventually the balloon departed from Dansköya on 11 July 1897 to vanish from the world until several decades later when the remains of it, including bodies, diaries and exposed film, were discovered on Kvitöya. It was then possible for the story to be pieced together and for Andrée and his two companions to take their rightful place in the polar pantheon. But during his description of these stirring events, the author feels it necessary to have another irrelevant interjection and describes the experiences of the members of Charles Francis Hall's *Polaris* expedition after Hall's death when they drifted southwards on an ice floe towards Newfoundland.

In judging this book one has to bear in mind the readership for which it was intended. This would seem to be people with little, if any, knowledge of the Arctic and to that extent this reviewer is aware that he might be open to the charge of unfairness in some of the points made above. The main fault of this book is the constant interruption in the narrative while the author introduces largely extraneous matter. Moreover, there are several errors of fact, it would be tedious to list them, and emphases, such as to lead one to consider the possibility that the author has never in fact been to the places about which he writes. This reviewer for whom visual impact has always been more important than the printed word, is of the opinion that the only places at which one can really grasp what Andrée took on are the launch site on Dansköya and the memorial to the expedition on Kvitöya.

The presentation of the book, at least the paperback version, is disgraceful. The maps, not drawn specially for this book but culled from various sources, are completely useless and the photographs are blurred and unconvincing. There are no references in the text and there is no critical apparatus as such. Quotations are not cited, and there are some startling omissions in the short list of references. For example, Liljequist's *High latitudes*, that great compendium of the history of Swedish polar travels and research, which has an excellent section on Andrée with some first class illustrations for example of the structure of his balloon (Liljequist 1993), is conspicuous by its absence.

One of the journalists giving the book a 'puff' on its front page noted that he could read it 'on a packed subway at rush hour.' It would seem more suited to a transit lounge at an airport in which one is incarcerated due to a delayed flight. As noted above, readers of *Polar Record* will learn little or nothing from it but it might at least afford them some relief of tedium in such a venue. (Ian R. Stone, Scott Polar Research Institute, Lensfield Rd. Cambridge, CB2 1 ER (irs30@cam.ac.uk))

References

- Lewis-Jones, H. 2008. 'Balloonacy': Commander Cheyne's flight of fancy. *Polar Record* 44(231): 289–302.
Liljequist, G.H. 1993. *High latitudes: Swedish polar travels and research*. Stockholm: Swedish Polar Research Secretariat.