

Reviews

A FIRST RATE TRAGEDY: CAPTAIN SCOTT'S ANTARCTIC EXPEDITIONS. Diana Preston. 1997. London: Constable & Company. xviii + 269 p, illustrated, hard cover. ISBN 0-09-476380-1. £16.95.

Two persuasive accounts of the life and death of Captain Robert Falcon Scott have been published in recent years, one a biography by Elspeth Huxley, the other in novel form by Beryl Bainbridge. In this latest contribution to the genre, once again by a woman, the subject is treated as a straight history, but with a focus on the personalities involved, most perceptively on the complex nature of Scott himself. The author, an Oxford history graduate, is a freelance journalist who has written a life of Bonnie Prince Charlie, perhaps, like Scott himself, a heroic loser. Her inspiration, she tells us, dates from her days at South Hampstead School for Girls, where a framed quotation from Scott's 'Last message to the public' used to catch her eye; later she discovered that the school had contributed the cost of a pony and a dog to Scott's *Terra Nova* expedition. Although essentially a book for the man-in-the-street, Mrs Preston has equipped it with explanatory notes and bibliography that evidence assiduous research in the library of the Scott Polar Research Institute, with its wealth of archival material in the field, and consultation of the Kennet family papers in the Cambridge University Library. True to her description on the cover blurb as an 'avid traveller,' the author's investigations have taken her as far afield as Cape Town, Christchurch, and the historic huts on Ross Island.

The book is divided into 18 chapters and an epilogue. A brief introduction sets the stage, suggests reasons for the British affection for 'plucky losers and heroic failures,' and seeks explanations for the eventual apotheosis of Scott and the demonization of Amundsen. The task the author sets herself — an ambitious one — is to strip away the 'improving stories' that surround heroes in the hope of revealing their underlying nature. The opening chapter provides a history of Antarctic exploration to the turn of the present century, leading into an account of Scott's childhood and upbringing. He appears as dreamy, introspective, and, at times, indolent. Apprenticed to the Royal Navy at an early age, the discipline and hard work did wonders for his character. Yet still he found himself troubled by that 'sickness of the heart' of which he was always aware and against which he struggled constantly throughout his life. Not conventionally religious, Scott had a belief in Providence, exemplified by two coincidental meetings with the influential Sir Clements Markham, resulting in his appointment as leader of the *Discovery* Antarctic expedition, a heaven-sent opportunity to escape the professional rut and prove himself in a virtually unexplored terrain. Three chapters of the book are devoted to

Scott's, on the whole, successful conduct of Britain's first nationally sponsored expedition to carry out serious geographical and scientific investigations in Antarctica. After a testing year, in which Scott's managerial and organizational powers were stretched to the limit, the *Discovery* expedition eventually got under way. Mrs Preston's account of events is clearly and accurately presented. The near fatal southern journey of 1902–1903 sees Scott interacting with two companions who came to influence him significantly: Ernest Shackleton, subsequently a bitter rival for the South Pole, and the saintly Dr Edward Wilson, who was to become his sole confidant and who came to die alongside him on the Barrier. Mrs Preston's character sketches of all three are wholly convincing, although she throws no further light on the question of just why Shackleton was invalidated home by Scott — was it Royal Navy versus Merchant Navy or perhaps Scott's fear of a possible rival? As the author makes clear, Scott did have his detractors — his second-in-command Albert Armitage being a prime example, but he was also capable of making lasting friends, including Bill Lashly and Edgar Evans, both from the lower deck. Indeed it was they who taught Scott all about the close companionship inherent in manhauling.

With the return home of *Discovery* in triumph, it comes as a relief to read about a very different Scott, no mere polar hero, but a successful man of letters, following the publication of the expedition narrative, and accepted by high society. Mrs Preston is at her best in a chapter entitled 'Captain Scott in love,' where we meet the emancipated, husband-hunting Kathleen Bruce and are detailed the tempestuous courtship of the lovelorn explorer whose innate sense of insecurity is once more brought to the surface. Later Kathleen was to admit that true love only evidenced itself after the birth of their son Peter.

It was clearly Kathleen who influenced her husband to challenge Shackleton's near achievement of the South Pole in 1909 — 'It's got to be done, so hurry up!' To retell yet again the Greek tragedy that is Scott's last expedition is indeed a challenge that the author accepts with no little degree of success. She reminds us of the tremendous pressures under which Scott worked during the period of preparation. He was entirely responsible for recruitment, supplies, the purchase of *Terra Nova* and, of course, the utterly (to him) uncongenial business of fund-raising — the expedition was chronically in the red. It was also an expedition on which much went wrong from the late arrival at Ross Island and the fatal placing of One Ton Depot, through all the subsequent mishaps with the ponies followed by the shattering news of Amundsen's presence at the Bay of Whales, which precipitated a race to the Pole. Mrs Preston is scrupulously fair to Amundsen and refrains

from portraying him as the villain of the piece. Scott himself denied any suggestion of a race, but his morale must have been seriously undermined. The events of 17/18 January 1912 gave the coup-de-grâce; Bowers' group photograph tells all.

In her concluding chapter, 'The reason why,' the author carries out the customary post-mortem investigation and analyses the source of her original inspiration, Scott's 'Message to the public.' 'Qui s'excuse s'accuse' the critics might say. Mrs Preston properly thinks otherwise. These are the words of a dying man under unimaginable stress anxious to secure financial support for his own family and for the dependents of Evans, Wilson, Oates, and Bowers. She does have one criticism to make of Scott, and that is that he too slavishly copied Shackleton without the benefit of personal communication. She also takes up the question of Scott's abilities as a leader and the question of expedition morale. Maybe there were times when the expedition was run as if under ship's orders, but those who were close to Scott, especially those who knew him from *Discovery* days, were not merely loyal, but harboured great affection for him. There were, expectably, the grumblers — even Oates was critical at times. Mrs Preston sums up the situation with a quote from Sir Ranulph Fiennes: 'human beings are not ideally designed for getting on with each other, especially in close quarters.' The real point to remember, the author concludes, is not that the expedition failed, but that it very nearly succeeded.

This account of Scott of the Antarctic, although adding little that is new regarding the failure of the Polar Party, nevertheless presents a balanced and sympathetic account of its hero's life and times. Space doubtless would not permit, but one would have liked to hear more about the scientific work of both expeditions — really their main object. Mrs Preston's obvious enthusiasm for her task and the freshness of her style make the book a pleasurable read. It is to be hoped that this will not prove the author's sole venture into polar history. (H.G.R. King, Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge, Lensfield Road, Cambridge CB2 1ER.)

HUNTING THE LARGEST ANIMALS: NATIVE WHALING IN THE WESTERN ARCTIC AND SUBARCTIC. Allen P. McCartney (Editor). 1995. Edmonton: Canadian Circumpolar Institute, University of Alberta (Occasional Publication 36). xii + 345 p, illustrated, soft cover. ISBN 0-919058-95-7.

Hunting the largest animals is the product of a symposium on native whaling held at the 1993 meeting of the Alaska Anthropological Association. Although primarily archaeological in outlook, the 16 papers collected here include ethnographic and biological contributions, and, refreshingly, the comments of Yupik and Inupiat whalers who participated in the session. Surprisingly little has been published previously on prehistoric Alaskan whaling, but the topic is clearly vast and of central importance for understanding Eskimo prehistory. This, along with the overall high quality of the papers, will make the collection

essential reading for anyone interested in aboriginal whaling or northern archaeology.

Wide-ranging chapters by Mason and Gerlach, Harritt, and Sheehan consider the larger place of bowhead whaling in the Alaskan record. Mason and Gerlach subject the enigmatic Choris and Old Whaling cultures to a characteristically scathing reanalysis, rejecting on taphonomic grounds the claim that the latter in fact whaled, and dismissing its status as an archaeological oddity by subsuming it within a proposed Chukchi Archaic tradition. Similarly, the Choris whale bone association at Cape Krusenstern is best seen as an artifact of climatically controlled increase in carcass accumulation, in concert with a reduced rate of beach ridge accretion. Harritt traces shifts in subsistence orientation from ASTt times, arriving at the problem of accounting for the emergence of the Thule whaling pattern. While acknowledging a host of unanswered questions surrounding interaction between the Birnirk and Punuk antecedents of Thule, he identifies culture-historical issues related to the spread of complex Siberian modes of social organization as a more promising line of inquiry than conventional ecological approaches. Bandi similarly argues for the appearance of a Siberian warfare complex in the St Lawrence Island Punuk culture, which may have provided an organizational prototype for the whaling crew. Certainly, a lively social dynamic seems to have persisted at least into the twelfth century, judging from the occurrence of distinct migratory pulses of both Birnirk (Pioneering Thule) and Punuk (Ruin Island phase Thule) whalers in the eastern Arctic. Sheehan's ambitious model for the span of northern Alaska prehistory following the Thule exodus posits an elaborate string of causal relationships between climatic cooling, sea-ice expansion, the creation of permanent whaling villages, surplus production from successful whaling, population growth, expanded interior settlement, increasing reliance on inter-regional trade, and warfare resulting from trade disruption. The notion that coastal groups attained the high levels of population and social complexity documented historically due to the emergence of an inter-regional economy of scale is a powerful one, and of potential value for explaining the flourishing and abandonment of Thule population centres in the eastern Arctic. However, the model sometimes strays from the archaeological evidence. The assertion that 'trade was not based on rare or elite-oriented goods, but on utilitarian bulk commodities' (page 202) is belied by the virtual absence, archaeologically, of anything but the former. While it is reasonable to see the precarious situation of interior groups as dependent on trade with the coast, coastal groups seem to have relied on the interior not for bare survival, but as a market for converting marine mammal products into the precious commodities, especially hides, on which the wealth and prestige of whaling captains and their factions were based. Settlement of the interior represented the further delegation of hide production to those insufficiently wealthy and connected to whale.

Dumond and Yarborough both deal with the record