

**Review of *Race to the Pole*
Submitted for Nimrod 4
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August 2010**

RACE TO THE END: AMUNDSEN, SCOTT, AND THE ATTAINMENT OF THE POLE by Ross D. E. MacPhee. Pictorial boards, in a plastic slipcase. New York: Sterling Publishing Co., Inc., 2010. 245pp plus 4 folding panoramas and 2 folding maps. \$27.95. ISBN: 978-1-4027-7029-6. Web: <http://www.sterlingpublishing.com>

It used to be that when a major exhibition opened at a museum or library, a catalogue would be done up which interested persons could purchase and take around and consult during their visit. The entries would be numbered to correspond to whatever was being displayed. If the caption didn't answer a question, maybe the catalogue would. There might be an essay or two by qualified experts to put things in perspective and lend importance to the production. The purchaser afterwards could take the catalogue home and put it on the shelf and perhaps use it for reference from time to time or leave it about to impress the neighbors. Two good polar examples of this approach are *Shackleton: The Antarctic and Endurance* which was issued to accompany the exhibition of the same name at Dulwich College in 2000-01, and the more recent *The Heart of the Great Alone* (2009) which—although not mentioned in the book—is the catalogue for the exhibition, again of the same name, that was staged in the Queen's Gallery, Palace of Holyroodhouse, in Edinburgh (and is now at New Zealand's Canterbury Museum until late February 2011).

Nowadays, however, the more common approach seems to be to issue a “companion” volume, really a stand-alone book that focuses on the subject of the exhibition but doesn't actually take one through the exhibition.* The problem with

this is that from the book you don't know for certain what was displayed and what wasn't. Caroline Alexander's hugely popular *The Endurance* (1998) is a perfect and well-done example of this genre...and in the same league is Ross D. E. MacPhee's *Race to the End: Amundsen, Scott, and the Attainment of the Pole* (2010). Just as Alexander's book was linked to the *Endurance* exhibition that had its premiere at New York's American Museum of Natural History, MacPhee's is linked to the exhibition currently—until early January 2011—at the same great institution. (Indeed, MacPhee, an evolutionary biologist at the Museum, co-curated the *Endurance* exhibition, which naturally leads to the question will MacPhee do for Scott and Amundsen what Alexander did for Shackleton?) Well, we are now in the midst of the centenary of the conquest of the South Pole and there will be increasing attention to the whole matter over the next year or two, so it might just.

So now to the book. My initial reaction when I first picked it up and skimmed through the heavily illustrated contents was: "This is very, very good." And that remains my view. It's good in all the ways that count: clean and modern design, reasonable price, very readable writing, meaty and helpful captions, scads of illustrations (some familiar but many new to me at least) and no obvious errors that jumped out to me (other than the misspelling of Lyttelton which nearly every polar author misspells at some time). Above all else it strikes me as presenting a very 'fair and balanced' account of the race to the South Pole. No sides are taken, and one is free to reach one's own conclusions. And there are observations made which, though perhaps touched upon by others before, somehow got my attention this time around. One example:—

"But how much do most people really know, or really want to know, about these men of the heroic age? If you think Shackleton was your kind of hero, does it matter that he was an acknowledged womanizer whose business dealings were sometimes shady? Or, in Amundsen's case, that he was an adulterer who made a practice of evading his creditors? If Bowers was a saint in your eyes, are you concerned that, by modern standards, he was a thoroughgoing racist and religious bigot? If Petty Officer Evans was a working-class hero, does this excuse

the fact that he was also a loutish binge drinker? Most egregious of all: what, if it is true, as biographer Michael Smith contends, that in 1900 Oates fathered a child on an eleven-year-old girl? My point is that these were real people, with real lives and personal histories, in which things happened sometimes that were far from commendable or praiseworthy. If one seeks to understand them they first have to be accepted for what they were, free of notions concerning what is or is not a proper heroic personality. Those who are attracted to the strenuous life are, after all, rarely slaves to convention."

And another one:

"Yet for all of his obvious, documented failings there is a full measure of countervailing evidence concerning Scott's strength of character, his sense of justice, his willingness to do anything and everything he asked his men to do. It is just not conceivable that this man, who conducted not one but two expeditions to Antarctica, who had veterans and novices alike clamoring for positions on his team, was the blubbing, unstable incompetent that some authors have made him out to be. Scott may never receive the level of approbation that Shackleton has recently enjoyed, in part because Shackleton's apotheosis came for him comfortably late, long after the chief participants in his expeditions had died. Scott comes with much more baggage, and with a list of virtues that were considered exemplary in upper-class, prewar Britain, but which have little resonance today. Nevertheless, one expects that the wheel will turn again, when new attitudes take hold or old ones are reinterpreted."

Chapter 1 starts off in Port Chalmers at the end of November 1910 as the *Terra Nova* departs for Antarctica. Later in the chapter there's a quick review of the history of Antarctic exploration but otherwise the attention is squarely on Scott as it is in Chapter 2. Amundsen appears in Chapter 3, then Chapter 4 shifts back to Scott, and so it goes through most of the book. More text and more images relate to Scott than to Amundsen but this is not surprising given what the curator had to choose from. Chapter 15 is welcomed because it focuses on Amundsen from the time of his return from Antarctica to his death in 1928. And Chapters 14 and 16 discuss what happened following the Polar Party's demise, Scott's legacy and how it's changed over the years.

The capsule bios at the back of the book of all the participants with birth and death dates and nicknames are well-drafted and concise. There's an index (which so

many books lack these days). The plastic slipcase is a nice touch. And the covers of the book feature a very nicely produced detail from Dollman's famous painting of Captain Oates staggering out from the tent into the blizzard. Included as a fold-out is Wilson's annotated hand-drawn map of the polar journey, the original having been retrieved from the final camp. Perhaps most interesting is the lovely set of "obsessively detailed panoramic panels" that first appeared in *The Sphere* in 1913 showing the polar party's progress to the pole and return journey ending at the final camp. These haven't been reproduced before, to my knowledge.

The *Race to the End* is a major accomplishment and should be on the bookshelf of every Antarcticist.

* I've been told on good authority that one of the reasons for this approach is that when such a book is being written, it's not known for sure just what will and what won't be included in an exhibition.

Word count: 1267