

## **Review for Nimrod 2013.**

Robert B. Stephenson

Day, David, *Antarctica: A Biography*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. 614 pp. \$34.95 ISBN: 9780199861453

What's going on here? The title is "Antarctica: A Biography" which would lead one to think this book starts out back in the days of Gondwanaland and—given its hefty length—takes us through all the expeditions and all the explorers up to the present day, detailing successes and failures, discoveries and crises, equipment, clothing, food, skis and sledges, dogs and ponies, ships and planes and a lot more. But it starts with Cook and, according to the table of contents, ends in 2012. (Actually the latest date appearing is 1991.)

Let's be clear: This is not the book to read if you want to learn about the history of Antarctic discovery and exploration or about Antarctic science or about adventures in the land of ice and cold. There are plenty of those around both good and bad. What this is, and it's unfortunate the title doesn't reflect it, is a book, and not a bad one, on Antarctic sovereignty issues—flag-planting, proclamations, possession, mapping, naming (and renaming) of features, territorial claims, postage stamps, colonization, politics and diplomacy.

David Day, who I learn is "Australia's greatest historian," focuses on such issues nearly to the point of obsession. It never occurred to me that every time a flag was planted in Antarctica the reason for doing so was to claim territory. I thought it more as a display of personal pride and accomplishment. Same with cairn building. Cairns are not necessarily to mark where a message or supplies might be but more likely in furtherance of a territorial claim. And making a claim wasn't something done off-handedly, we learn. There were secret instructions and precise procedures, mostly drawn up by diplomats who had never been close to Antarctica. Day relates that Mawson was instructed "...to have his party form a hollow square in front of the flagpole—but the terrain made this 'utterly impossible,' ...so they formed a circle instead..." Would this change in geometry invalidate the claim?

I think the book is a worthwhile addition to any Antarctic bookshelf for the sole reason that no other book that I can recall has gone into much detail about the whole subject of sovereignty which after all *is* important and almost as fascinating as the derring-do deeds of the Heroic Age explorers.

One of Day's observations, and he includes quotes to back it up, is that the proliferation of Antarctic research stations during the IGY of 1957-58 was less associated with the pursuit of science than it was an effort to establish or maintain territorial claims. It's a point of view, certainly, but one that seems a bit cynical. Were all those scientists aware they might have just been pawns in the secret machinations of their respective governments? Day continues: "The rush of base-building was matched by a flood of philatelic issues, as nations continued to use stamps to assert their sovereignty. ... Most Antarctic stamps were shameless examples of political propaganda..."

Day does a good job describing the key role that Norwegian whalers played in Antarctic exploration and the competition carried out between Australia and Norway in the area of mapping and naming features. Lars Christensen, who is not often written about, is given particular attention.

Some quirky things are described. I had no idea that Stenhouse, former captain of the *Discovery*, attempted in 1930 to put together a "...round-the-world-cruise aboard a trans-Atlantic liner, which would dip down to the 'Great White South' to allow its British and American passengers 'to join in a two day's dash in dog sleighs over the Antarctic continent' and stay in the abandoned huts of Scott, Shackleton and Amundsen." Wow!

Deception Island was the scene of much back-and-forth involving Chile, Argentina and Britain. A flag would be painted on a building one year, then a year later painted over with another country's flag. In 1953, "...the Argentine navy reinforced its country's sovereignty by transporting ten tons of soil from Argentina, ostensibly for the garrison to grow vegetables. In fact, the soil was a symbolic gesture to show that Deception Island was an integral part of Argentina."

Britain undertook a study "...of all operational, technical and safety aspects of using the South Polar Regions as a Proving Ground for testing H-bombs." Thankfully, that idea progressed no further.

In other words, there is a lot to learn from this book. It's just not a biography of Antarctica.

Many of the 30 black and white illustrations will be familiar to most knowledgeable readers—the Dance portrait of Captain Cook, Scott and his companions at the south pole; Mawson's "air tractor." But several are new to me and welcomed: some of Borchgrevink's men at Cape Adare around a flagpole with a Union Jack; a photo of Frank Hurley on skis operating a camera; a Russian Orthodox church erected in 2002 at a Russian base; and the very odd view of the bowling alley at McMurdo where stuffed penguins were used as pins! (Could this really be so?) The last of the illustrations is a 'Map of Territorial Claims' with its familiar sectors. It would be a lot more useful if it were larger and in color.

One error that caught my eye appears on page 307: "...and four cows that had been lent to the expedition by a New Zealand farmer." Day's source for this is Lisle Rose's biography of Byrd—*Explorer*—but Rose says nothing about a New Zealand farmer. There were actually three cows (one was pregnant and a calf was born on the expedition) and they were provided by American dairy farmers. I know this because the American Guernsey Cattle Club was at the time located in Peterborough, New Hampshire, the next town to mine. The Club's creative public relations officer made the arrangements.

Another error that jumped out is on page 474 where Day writes "Law tried to get America's *Polar Record* to give greater coverage to Australian activities." The *Polar Record* was and continues to be the journal of the Scott Polar Research Institute, not American at all.

But these are minor. Whether there are larger errors to be found, who knows? There are 63 pages of Notes and the author has a slew of academic connections so I'm willing to assume that the presentation is largely accurate. Some controversy has arisen, however, in the author's depiction of some explorers, among them Scott, Mawson, John King Davis and others. And the author has been described by one reviewer as "...squarely in the Roland Huntford camp in his opinion of Scott."

If you have a choice, go for the UK edition. Its cover is far more appropriate than the Ponting photograph used for the American edition. It shows Mawson and his men

cheering King George V on Proclamation Island, January 13, 1930, following the formal ceremony of asserting sovereignty over Enderby Land, Kemp Land and Mac. Robertson Land.