

Review for Nimrod 2019

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Hester Blum, *The News at the Ends of the Earth; The Print Culture of Polar Exploration* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2019) 298pp, illustrated.

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Before launching into this let me say at the outset that \$99.95 is an outrageous price to pay for the hardbound version of this otherwise commendable book (\$86.27 on Amazon). What's the world of publishing coming to? one might ask. Collectors such as myself always go for the hardbound/cloth edition. It somehow reads better and certainly looks nicer on the shelf. Well, in this case I didn't bite the bullet...I settled for the paperback version (slightly on the high side as well at \$26.95). (By the way, the book is available as a free .pdf via the Oapen Library at <http://oapen.org/search?identifier=1005199>) I'm not sure why this is so, but I applaud Duke University Press for allowing it.

Decades ago I was fortunate to purchase a three-volume set of the *South Polar Times*, the illustrated typescript 'Polar Periodical'—a term Hester Blum introduces in her book—produced during Scott's two expeditions and passed around to the expeditioners (and later published in limited facsimile editions). And not long after, in 1978, I became a proud possessor of a copy of *Aurora Australis*, the first book written, edited, illustrated, printed, bound and issued in the Antarctic during Shackleton's Nimrod expedition. Other than my car, it was the most expensive thing I had ever bought up to that time. (Given recent auction prices, it now looks like a great bargain.) These two purchases set me on a course of trying to track down other copies (particularly the *Aurora Australis*) and to learn as much as possible about the production, the physical characteristics and the location of these two Antarctic classics. Frankly, it is this information that I seek out and enthuse about.

Although Hester Blum does so as well, she seems far more interested in *interpreting* the contents of the many Polar Periodicals, Arctic and Antarctic, featured in her book. She being a professor of English this is to be expected and as a consequence the outcome is far more scholarly and intellectual than the result would be if I attempted such a book. I

would be stuck on bibliographic points, variants, inscriptions and production details and not so much on the contents and what they might mean.

She uses at least three terms to describe the subject of the book: Polar Ecomedia, Polar Periodicals and Extreme Printing. I like Polar Periodicals best as it's descriptive and has an alliterative ring to it. Extreme Printing is kind of appealing too. Polar Ecomedia I don't get at all. I've always avoided using the term 'Newspaper' in referring to what I'm now going to call 'Polar Periodicals' because they are less likely to include what we would think of as news and more likely to feature submissions in a 'lighter vein:' poetry, doggerel, jokes, acrostics & riddles, fantasies—but with the occasional serious article on some expedition subject as well.

Just what are we talking about here? What is a Polar Periodical? The author writes in Chapter 2 that "Arctic newspapers began as a novel way for expedition members to amuse and distract themselves during the darkness and relative inactivity of a polar winter, in the same spirit in which crew members mounted theatricals and participated in other entertainments such as dancing, magic lantern shows, lectures, and singing." The same would hold true for efforts in the Antarctic. (Although Blum doesn't mention it, Shackleton originally saw the publication of the *Aurora Australis* as, in part at least, a commercial undertaking that would make money. But he and Wild, Joyce, Marston and Day couldn't satisfactorily work out the details, so the result became a 'give away' to friends and family but mainly to past and future, mostly wealthy, sponsors.)

Let's look inside the book: It starts out with a Chronology, a four-page table listing 'major polar expeditions by North Americans and Europeans, 1818-1922.' The columns are arranged by year, ship & commander, description of the expedition (e.g. British, Alaskan coast) and whether the expedition produced a shipboard newspaper (18 titles are listed). This is useful as it's essentially an index to the Polar Periodicals mentioned in the book. Many of these I was not familiar with particularly the Arctic examples. The Antarctic ones new to me (in English) are *Expedition Topics* (Shackleton's Quest expedition) and the *Glacier Tongue* (Mawson's Australasian Antarctic expedition); neither gets much treatment in the book suggesting that they weren't particularly noteworthy. What is absent and would have been more useful is an appendix including

details on all the titles: format, number of issues, editors and contributors, etc. This harks back to my preference for bibliography over literary interpretation.

Following is the five-page Preface 'Books on Ice' a title deriving from David and Deirdre Stam's Grolier Club exhibit back in 2006 and an inspiration for the author who comments "I was riveted." She goes on to recount that "...the sight of the *Illustrated Arctic News* activated not only my fervor but my archival instinct as well, and moved me to proclaim...here is my next book."

Next come the Acknowledgments, all five pages of them, followed by the Introduction, a lengthy 42 pages including 17 illustrations of Polar Periodicals (all the book's illustrations—62 in total—are black & white). The author describes her book in the Introduction: "I open this book with three chapters on the newspapers and other printed materials created in the Arctic and Antarctica and discuss how expedition members used the generic form of the periodical to work through questions about their time, place, and impermanence in the polar regions. The final two chapters turn to forms of ecomedia such as Arctic dead letters and Inuit knowledge circulation, both of which have broader critical and theoretical implications for the study of the environmental humanities and literary history alike."

Chapter 1 ('Extreme Printing') starts on page 43. The author "...describes how sailors came to print at the polar ends of the earth, concentrating on the outfitting, mechanics, and production of presses and printed materials in the polar regions." Chapter 2 is devoted to 'Arctic News' and Chapter 3 to 'Antarctic Imprints.' I must admit that I skipped Chapter 2 (I did go back to it later) and went directly to my mono-polar interest: Antarctic Imprints. The author spends a good bit of space on both the *South Polar Times* and the *Aurora Australis* so I was pleased about that and learned some new things about each.

I admit to reading Chapters 4 and 5 and the Conclusion in a rather cursory manner. They just didn't pique my interest but that's just me.

The Notes and Bibliography are extensive, totaling together over 50 pages. The Notes are particularly informative and make for pleasurable reading.

As always I searched hard for typos and faulty facts but could find none which is unusual in this age of laid-off copy editors.

I'm certain that Hester Blum's effort will stand the test of time as the authoritative treatment of this captivating subject.