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BOOK REVIEW

SOUTH: AN ANTARCTIC JOURNEY

by Chris Orsman (Victoria University Press, $19.95)
Reviewed by Bill Sewell

You don't need to have been an Antarctic explorer or even to have visited Antarctica to write about it.

Although many of the best-known accounts have been produced by explorers — Scott, Wilson, Cherry-Garrard, Byrd — the Antarctic has also long been "an arena for the imagination" which has fascinated poets and novelists, including Coleridge, Mary Shelley, Edgar Allan Poe and Dickens. New Zealand writers of poetry and fiction have been no exception, as evidenced by Graham Billing's novel, *Forbush and the Penguins*, and now Chris Orsman's long poem, *South: An Antarctic Journey*.

Orsman's fascination is partly family-based. His grandfather won a trip to Dunedin in 1910 to join Scott on the *Terra Nova* for a short voyage from Port Chalmers to the Otago Heads, and one of the family heirlooms is a copy of the photographer Ponting's *The Great White South* (1921). Many of Ponting's stark black-and-white photographs have become triggers for Orsman's poem.

Although *South* is composed of 44 short pieces, almost all in unrhymed couplet form, it is essentially a narrative telling the story of Scott's final expedition, divided into five parts: "Getting There", "Landing", "The First Winter", "South", and "Heading for Home".

Orsman uses the story as a framework within which to meditate on the meaning of Antarctica and also to develop the idea of a "journey of the soul".

The Antarctic becomes a symbol for human curiosity, the need of the species to probe the unknown, to push out the limits, even when it seems that the reward will be no more than the achievement itself.

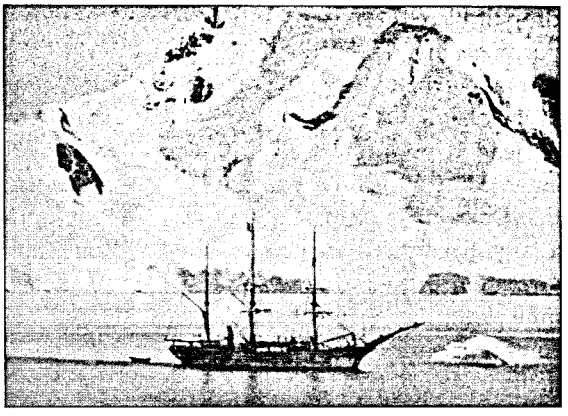
There is no doubt that the Antarctic provokes a poetic response in people. In *South*, Orsman simply takes this reaction to its logical consequence, based on a profound knowledge — derived though it is at secondhand, from his reading. He is able not only to conjure up the Antarctic environment with extraordinary immediacy, in crisp and sometimes searing imagery — "It becomes so cold the emotions / freeze on their faces" ('Piloting') — but also to give the Antarctic as an *idea* added resonance, by making it reflect what drives so much human behaviour.

Bill Sewell is a Wellington poet and critic.

HISTORICAL

THE RIDDLE OF THE ANTARCTIC PENINSULA

by David E. Yelverton FRGS.
Part II: Pioneers of the Antarctic Night: The Story of the Belgian Antarctic Expedition 1897-9.



L'Expédition Antarctique Belge headed the *Beligica's* bow towards the South Shetlands and the Antarctic beyond on 14 January 1898. The opening raid upon Nature's white wilderness had to overcome a shaky start . . .

At that time there was no connection between the discoveries of Biscoe, Dallmann and Evensen on west side and those of Dumont d'Urville, Ross, and Larsen on the east. Between them in the north, there lay Trinity Land as the Admiralty chart called it, discovered by the English sealer Edward Bransfield in 1820. To the east of the coast he found lay d'Urville's Orléans "channel", and to the west of it Hughes Bay, discovered by the Connecticut sealing skipper in 1821. Beyond this to the south-east Larsen declared on his map that there was no land, and the island mountains he showed trending northwest from Robertson Island seemed to support that.

To emerge beside those islands was the goal De Gerlache now had in mind as he made southward, believing the bay was the entrance to a channel through which he could steam or sail to the Weddell Sea. Just six weeks of the season remained to them.

A week later, after crossing the Drake Strait in moderate weather and making the first line of soundings to chart its floor, they were running for shelter in a fierce sea in the Bransfield Strait beyond the South Shetlands.

It was then that the Antarctic claimed the first life in the new assault on her shores. The coal stacked on the deck shifted and blocked the scuppers, so the men were put to work to shift it below. Despite a warning from Amundsen, the young seaman Auguste Wiencke swung himself outside the enclosed rail to clear a scupper outlet, and in an instant was swept away by a wave.

A valiant attempt by Lecointe to save him failed and the shadow of the popular lad's death hung over the ship as they sheltered in the lea of Low Island that night, 22 January 1898.

In keeping with the quick-change Antarctic climate, the next day was perfect. Starting with the sighting of Cape Neyt (named after their first cash donor) which had the 64°S 62°W position of the possible island shown on the Friederichsen map, they discovered on the 24 January that the gulf was the entrance to the strait they sought. A week was spent mapping its coasts as best they could, hampered by the absence of stars and moon, and the masking of the sun by its mountainous shores. Making their tenth landing on the Ile Brabant, Danco fell into a crevasse and after the rope broke was only saved by his ski getting stuck across a narrower part of it. During the eight days the party was ashore, Lecointe took the *Belgica* over 60 miles further south into the channel (now named Gerlache Strait), finding that it continued south-west with no sign of turning towards the Weddell Sea.

After returning to pick the land party up, he took their diminutive barquentine down the Neumayer Channel past the island they named after their dead comrade, with its tremendous backbone range, the Sierra du Fief, dominating the eastern skyline. Pausing against the backdrop of Biscoe's Mt.William to put a party ashore, they rounded Cape Errera to explore the main strait east of the island.

Headed south once more they emerged on 11 February to discover that Dallmann's Bismarck Strait was a large bay, which they named Baie de Flandres. First to navigate the 25-mile long Lemaire Channel (the southern part of which is today named Penola Strait), they passed inside the Kaiser Wilhelm I Islands, also discovered by Dallmann in 1874, without recognising them. Imagining he had discovered them, De Gerlache renamed them after Cdr Wandel and his other Danish supporters, calling the group the Iles Dannebrog. Beyond the last of them at 65°15S they came to impenetrable ice on 13 February.

It spelled the limit of their geographical achievement. In 22 days they had redrawn the map and along a 166 kilometres stretch had traced the western coast of the Antarctic Peninsula, which continues for a further 925 kilometres to the south.

Beyond the last two capes (Tuxen and de Troot[f]) the coast had disappeared into what they took to be a "vaste baie ou détroit." Lecointe endorsed his chart "Détroit de Bismarck?" and this was to dominate the thinking behind two pioneer expeditions which set out in their wake to resolve whether the peninsula was simply a string of islands or really part of the unknown continent that they all dreamed of discovering.

Forced away to the north west before they could reach what they took to be Biscoe's Pitt Island they came to what they named the "Isles Cruls". From their description however, and the course plotted on Lecointe's chart, there is at least an arguable probability that they sailed through the islands encountered by Charcot in 1905, which he named the Betbeder Islands.

Frustration was to be the Belgians lot for the next two weeks, while they followed the ice edge ever west of south looking for a way through, with tantalisingly sightings of Alexander Land 74 kilometres away, its mountains rising over the horizon, but with no way to get near it.

On the last day of February, when ships usually sought warmer waters, they had reached 84$^{1}/_{2}$W. Told there was suddenly a clear way to the south, De Gerlache quickly came up onto the bridge. The wind was ENE, so they could sail either south or north with equal ease. Three days before[1], the scientists had spoken out against attempting to push further south this late in the season, but after a short conversation in which both Gerlache and Lecointe recognised the risks, the possibility that, like Ross, they might break through into an open sea, clearly outweighed them. "With profound excitement [joie]", Lecointe later wrote, "I gave the order to head the ship southward"[2].

In that rapid decision to seize the hoped-for opportunity despite the lateness of the season, the two men seem to have forgotten that Ross had taken his similar decision on 5 January, almost eight weeks earlier in the season of 1841. After a day when the ice was relatively broken, Ross, seeing a water sky to the south, led his ships into thicker ice, from which they emerged three days later. No such sky greeted the advance of the *Belgica*. Either forgotten or discounted was the fact that late in February Ross had found the pack hard against the land and could find no way southward into it.

But even if they had remembered, there was another factor in the minds of the two men on the bridge that day as they made their risky decision. Of the expedition funds only £640 remained — surely firm evidence that their budget always was grossly inadequate for what they had set out to do. Even if the staff contributed the whole amount of letters of credit they carried, the total then available would scarcely be enough to put the ship in good order and reprovision her. There was certainly not enough to pay for extra hands to bring the crew up to strength.

Rather pessimistically they thought the achievements so far would not win them further government support. So, in their eyes, if they returned to South America the expedition would be over. If they pushed south and broke through, there was at least a chance that some tremendous discovery on a par with Ross's might justify everything after all[3]. They might just find a passage through to the Ross Sea and emerge there in time to land the wintering party at Cape Adare[4].

(To be continued)

Notes

(f) Pointe NE of Berthelot Islands. Today named Cape Deliverance.

Source Refs:

(1) Cook: ch14

(2) Lecointe p191

(3) ibid p196-7

(4) Scottish Geographical Magazine Oct.1898 map facing p572

TRIBUTE

STEPHEN THORNLEY

Antarctic geologist Stephen Thornley and his climbing companions, Chris Hoare and Andy Boas, died in August 1996 after a storm overtook them near the 7700m summit of Disteghil Sar in the remote Karakorum Mountains of Pakistan.

Steve grew up in South Molton a small town in Devon, England. After graduating with Honours from Cambridge University he came to New Zealand on a Commonwealth Scholarship in 1993. A young man of remarkable energy and talents, Steve excelled not only in his science, but also in classical music, language, literature, tramping and mountain climbing.

He gained his Antarctic experience several years ago when he was part of a Victoria University geological party working on Lower Beacon rocks of the Dry Valley area.

He will be remembered for his "not-a-minute-to-be-wasted" enthusiasm when he once appeared in plastic climbing boots at a midwinter's Antarctic get-together in Christchurch on his way to make a winter ascent of Mount Aspiring.