

ROALD AMUNDSEN'S BELGICA DIARY: THE FIRST SCIENTIFIC EXPEDITION TO THE ANTARCTIC.

Edited by HUGO DECLEIR. Bluntisham, Huntingdon: Bluntisham Books, 1999. ISBN 1 85297 058 8. 208 p., 8 maps, 8 b&w photographs, 25 line drawings, 5 sketches. Hardbound. £24.95; US\$45.00.

Priority, the act of being the first to carry out an action or process, exercises a powerful hold over the imagination. It is a pan-cultural obsession that crosses all sorts of geographical, linguistic, and political boundaries. Yet, the act of being first is, arguably, rather overrated. It seems something of an error of judgement to value an occurrence or experience more highly (or indeed at all) simply because it was the first of its kind. There is a prevailing conviction (or perhaps insecurity) that, just because something occurs first, it is dignified by an importance that it might otherwise not possess. The history of exploration in the polar regions is no stranger to the curse of priority. Both the Arctic and the Antarctic are awash with such claims, and these are often the focus of bitter, acrimonious disputes and the obliteration of once good reputations (witness, for example, the enduring Cook/Peary controversy over priority at the North Pole).

Hugo Decler's book offers in its subtitle yet another "first": "the first scientific expedition to the Antarctic." Leaving aside the dubious worth of the subtitle (or the possible priority claims of, say, the United States Exploring Expedition of 1838–42), it should be stated there is much to recommend Decler's chosen topic: irrespective of being first, second, or whatever, the *Belgica* expedition was significant by virtue of its achievements. As Decler informs us, "the *Belgica* expedition put an end to the theory that the Antarctic peninsula consisted of an island archipelago and in addition provided the first chart with a realistic coastline of the western part of Graham Land" (p. 83).

The *Belgica* Antarctic Expedition of 1897–99 left Antwerp bound for the Antarctic on 16 August 1897. The crew had an international pedigree and comprised nine Belgians, six Norwegians, two Poles, one Romanian, and one American. Between 23 January and 12 February 1898, the expedition discovered and charted the 170 km Gerlache Strait (named after the expedition leader), and made 20 landings in the vicinity of the strait. The expedition then cruised along the pack ice, entering the ice on 28 February and becoming trapped on 10 March 1898. The crew overwintered, achieving a complete annual cycle of geological, geomagnetic, glaciological, meteorological, and oceanographic observations. They also took bathymetric and hydrological soundings and numerous botanical and zoological samples before arriving back at Antwerp on 5 November 1899.

Decler has sectioned Amundsen's *Belgica* diary into chapters, providing each with "an introduction which completes the story" (p. 11), and in general the strategy works well. The diary reveals a playful man who delighted in the antics of Nansen, the ship's cat (p. 22)—a gourmand

who appreciated "delicious" coffee, "beautiful women," and sarcasm (p. 35–6), but who was also deeply religious (p. 73). Amundsen's strong sense of duty is also evident. He writes: "I am also clearly aware of what I as a Norwegian owe my fatherland...to work so that my country will never be ashamed of its sons" (p. 36). His diary further discloses his sensitivity to the effects of "civilisation" on indigenous peoples: "All natives on the archipelago are doomed. They have not been able to resist the evil of civilisation...brandy...has almost destroyed them...[and] syphilis...is very widespread among them" (p. 57–58).

The expedition is intriguing not only for its main players, but also for its supporting cast. In addition to Amundsen, the crew counted among its number the much-maligned Dr. Frederick Cook, about as good an example as one could wish to find of waging priority wars. In this text the often vilified Cook, now routinely labelled as the quintessential liar, cheat, and fraud of all things polar, receives a needed reappraisal of character. Amundsen, who clearly admired Cook, describes how the doctor tried to save the sight of a child (p. 61) and how he once "burst into tears" at the sound of "musical instruments." With characteristic understatement, Amundsen writes: "He was musical and had missed music so much" (p. 63). Amundsen considered "Dr. Cook, in all ways a very reliable man" (p. 111) and "value[d] the doctor's opinion very highly" (p. 121). The strong bond between the two men is shown by Amundsen's visit to Cook in prison and Cook's making an exception to his 'no visitors' rule to receive him (p. 31).

The demythologizing effect of Amundsen's personal diary partially collapses the image of the so-called "heroic era" of exploration. Moreover, it reveals a tension between the diary excerpts and the occasional, but unfortunate, mythologizing of Decler's explanatory text. For example, Decler describes Fridtjof Nansen as a "well-built, intellectual" and "athletic" "demigod" (p. 13), and the author also seems a little too comfortable with a discourse of national "supremacy" (p. 15) and success. In addition, there are some highly contentious claims. For example, the "industrial revolution was, of course, accompanied by a rock-solid belief in the development of the exact sciences and in particular their application" (p. 1).

The book would also benefit from an index and rather better proofreading. Small errors abound. A sample of these reveals that Auguste de Gerlache was an "infantry [sic] colonel" (p. 3) and that there is a geographical area called "the Persian Golf [sic]" (p. 7). Seemingly, Amundsen was informed that Cook AND Peary had reached the North Pole in "1901" (p. 10), contradicting Cook's claim to have reached the pole in 1908, and Peary's claim of 1909 (though Decler produces this latter information on p. 29). On p. 55, "though" appears instead of "through"; on p. 74, there is an inexplicable change of typeface; p. 79 tells us that "This was a also miracle"; and on p. 86, they all "sail further into in the ice."

That said, it should be stressed that the value of the text as a primary resource and its generally useful commentary

far outweigh the irritation of its errors. This translation of a personal diary from such a formative period of Amundsen's career as an explorer offers a valuable insight into the man and an equally useful addition to the current literature.

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**HUNTING TRADITION IN A CHANGING WORLD: YUP'IK LIVES IN ALASKA TODAY.** By ANN FIENUP-RIORDAN, with WILLIAM TYSON, PAUL JOHN, MARIE MEADE, and JOHN ACTIVE. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000. xx + 310 p., photographs, index, bib. Hardbound, US\$52.00; Softbound, US\$22.00.

Ann Fienup-Riordan's latest book is a stimulating look at her anthropological and personal relationships among the Yup'ik in southwestern Alaska. Reflecting on 25 years of research in the region, describing recent projects, including stories, commentary, and other material from her Yup'ik co-authors, she offers several views of the changing world of Alaska Natives, of the relationship between anthropologist and subject, and of the very goals of anthropology itself. In doing so, she looks unflinchingly at her own research in the past, charting her development amid the social, academic, and political shifts of the past quarter-century.

The title reflects her quest and exemplifies a central theme of multiplicity of meaning. *Hunting Tradition in a Changing World* is in part about hunting, though only a little. A few years ago, this meaning might have been the only interpretation of such a title—Yup'ik seen as hunters, their economic and cultural relationship to the environment the focus of anthropological research and understanding. Today, however, it means much more. "Hunting tradition" refers equally well to the quest of the Yup'ik themselves to find their own history and to celebrate it in their own terms, not through the eyes of the explorers, missionaries, or collectors who left the only written records of a century ago. One of the more compelling sections of the book is the description of Yup'ik elders visiting Berlin's Museum für Völkerkunde to examine the thousands of Yup'ik artifacts in its collection, reclaiming not the physical objects but their own ties to their own history.

*Hunting Tradition in a Changing World* is also about anthropology and its task of identifying and describing "tradition" in the form of culture. The task of anthropology, to help "us" understand "the Other," is today loaded with questions about whether one can understand another,

what it means to describe another people, how this process reflects and affects the relationships between researcher and subject. Here, the book is really a progress report. Fienup-Riordan describes the path of her own career, in part in the light of the sweeping changes that have occurred in anthropology as a discipline.

Both the richness and the ambiguity of research have increased dramatically since Fienup-Riordan first went to the Yup'ik area in 1974. Her insights about the Yup'ik are the product of two-and-a-half decades of building relationships and thinking carefully about what it all means. On the one hand, it is astonishing to think how much we all learn from the experience of Yup'ik elders in a Berlin museum. On the other hand, it is sobering to realize how simplistic our view has often been of what anthropological research really entails. Far from an objective examination of another culture and its manifestations, such research is a transaction: the informant, too, has goals, reasons for telling what he or she is telling. Stories and events have multiple meanings, depending on context and interpretation. In this quest, the notion of a single Truth must be abandoned, to be replaced with a sense of deeper, if more ambiguous, meaning.

An example is the incorporation of traditional symbols, rituals, and beliefs in the Christian faith and practices of the Yup'ik region. Fienup-Riordan describes how the apparently simple story of the arrival of missionaries and the conversion of the Yup'ik to Christianity is more accurately a complex tale involving the relationship of pre-Christian beliefs to Biblical teachings, the translation of Christian terms into Yup'ik words already full of spiritual meaning, and the eventual incorporation by the church of certain traditional rituals. These rituals, which had once been denounced by the church, now stand for Christian beliefs, Yup'ik beliefs, and the idea that Christian teachings had been anticipated long before missionaries arrived.

On a personal level, the anthropological enterprise is complicated by the fact that researchers are liable to make friends among those they wish to study. Having worked in the community of Toksook Bay since 1974, Fienup-Riordan—along with her family—is part of the local landscape. This impressive time span gives her both an unusual degree of insight into the societal changes that have taken place and a rich background to draw on for her descriptions of the personal relationships that make research more immediate. Yet such research is also more challenging: how can one describe one's friends?

Fienup-Riordan addresses these topics and more with grace and humor. While the writing tends to jargon at times, these lapses are fortunately few, and most of the book is written clearly and well. Her account of the difficulties of learning Yup'ik is delightful, and her modest assessment of her facility in the language perhaps understates the significance of her efforts to learn it. James Barker's black-and-white photographs enhance the text with striking images of Yup'ik life. The selection of writings and stories by her Yup'ik co-authors adds to the