

ON SKIS TO THE NORTH POLE. By VLADIMIR SNEGIRYEV. Translated by GEORGE WATTS. New York: Sphinx Press, 1985. vi + 240 p., 46 photos. US\$19.95.

Readers of modern adventure-travel literature have, perhaps unconsciously, become accustomed to a common style in which danger and hardship tend to be deliberately understated, self-portraits are often humorously self-deprecatory, and the book's intent is unabashedly to pay off the expedition debts. In *On Skis to the North Pole* we have the Soviet version of this genre and it is a very different beast indeed.

In 1979, seven Soviet skiers travelled 1500 km from a tiny island near Yakutia to the North Pole. In so doing, they made the first land crossing to the Pole from the Eurasian continent. The story of the journey is told by Vladimir Snegiryev, a senior journalist for the state-run newspaper *Pravda*, which officially sponsored the expedition. Although not a participant in the trip to the Pole, Snegiryev writes knowledgeably because of his intimate involvement in organizing the expedition and taking part in several previous training trips.

Not surprisingly, the book has a heavy ideological tenor. It is the literary equivalent of monolithic Soviet representational art with sturdy-thewed heroes gazing stolidly into the future with tools in gnarled hands. It rings with allusions to Valour, the Will to Win, Duty, Patriotic Sacrifice, being a Man, and fulfillment of individual and collective potentials. The expedition members, each in separate vignettes, are characterized as bursting with human virtues. In only a few tantalizing glimpses are we allowed to see their individual foibles. All in all, the book appears to be intended originally as a tale of moral inspiration designed to lead citizens to healthy, active, goal-directed lives and to broaden concepts of the possible.

However, it would be a shame to write off this book as merely a socially inspired tract. It is, in fact, a good book about a great trip. The leader, Dmitri Shparo, is a hard-driving man who single-mindedly worked for more than ten years to develop the support, equipment, and experience necessary for the journey. He started out doing small, privately funded ski trips and finally built up enough credibility to interest *Pravda* in sponsorship. The men he chose to accompany him appear to be bristly individualists. This is most apparent in the person of Vasili Sishkarev, a poetry-writing gardener from Kazakhstan who devoted himself for six years to getting picked as a team member. He did solo ski trips, slept outside for two years, and finally, on speculation, moved 4000 km to Moscow, where he proved himself to be physically the strongest member of the group. Shparo had little choice but to put him on the team. But Sishkarev's lack of academic ambition, his refusal to be cowed in arguments with his older, better-educated colleagues, and his marvellous impetuosity make him the black sheep of the expedition and the most interesting character in the book.

*On Skis to the North Pole* can be recommended to readers of *Arctic* both as a window into Soviet culture and as a tale of adventure.

Christopher C. Shank  
Department of Renewable Resources  
Government of the N.W.T.  
Yellowknife, N.W.T., Canada  
X1A 2L9

ARCTIC WHALERS, ICY SEAS. By W. GILLIES ROSS. Toronto: Irwin Publishing Inc., 1985. xvi + 263 p., 4 maps, 149 illus., glossary, bibliog., index. Hardbound. Cdn\$34.95.

This book is a celebration of a way of life and a breed of men that disappeared nearly three-quarters of a century ago, the whalers (mostly British, some American) who braved the sea, ice and snow of the Davis Strait region in pursuit of bowhead whales from 1820 to 1913. It is not a dry historical treatise crammed with facts, figures and statistics, but a highly readable account of the experiences of nineteenth-century whalers in the Davis Strait fishery. Fifteen first-hand accounts by whaling masters, surgeons, a mate, a boatsteerer and a sportsman-adventurer are presented in chronological order. Each chapter is

introduced, concluded and occasionally interlaced with commentary by Professor Ross that puts the account in a historical context, provides background information on the personalities, ships and places concerned, and summarises what were presumably more pedestrian portions of the journals. The comments are clearly distinguishable from the original accounts by differences in type size. Nine of the fifteen chapters are based on previously unpublished material, while the remaining six are from works published between 1827 and 1874.

Although the theme of whaling runs through most accounts, five of the chapters deal in the main with the business of arctic whaling itself. These include the voyages of *Hercules* of Aberdeen (1831) and four Dundee whalers, *Thomas* (1834), *Active* (1849), *Narwhal* (1874) and *Maud* (1889). Such accounts provide detailed descriptions of the techniques of capturing, flensing and processing whales (which differed somewhat from the perhaps better-known methods of Yankee right and sperm whalers), as well as information on the whales themselves and the exploitation of the arctic birds and mammals. Two chapters concern deliberate attempts to overwinter in the Arctic to steal a march on the single-season whalers — one (*Wellington* of Hull) being unsuccessful, and the other (*Emma* of Hull) providing an illuminating account of how crews occupied themselves during the enforced months of inactivity in the winter of 1859-60. Perhaps the most dramatic chapters concern those whalers (*Dundee* of London, 1826-27; *Viewforth* of Kirkcaldy, 1835-36; and *Dee* of Aberdeen, 1836-37) that unintentionally became beset in the ice, forcing their crews to face the hazards of starvation, scurvy and frostbite, while the threat of having to abandon ship if the pressure of ice became too great was ever present. To face rigours such as these with the lack of proper equipment, supplies and medical knowledge that existed must have required men with a special type of fortitude. It is perhaps not surprising that some attempted desertion — one such attempt in 1860, involving the theft of a whale boat by crewmen from the *Ansel Gibbs* of Fairhaven and the *Daniel Webster* of New Bedford, and ending in attempted murder and cannibalism, is described by a survivor. A recurring theme throughout the book is the evolving relationship between whalers and Eskimos, which is highlighted in two chapters. One concerns the visit of the 20-year-old Eenoooloopik to Aberdeen on the whaler *Neptune* in 1839 and his return in 1840, while the other reproduces notes and sketches of Eskimo life made about 1917 by David Cardno, an Aberdeen whaler who spent nine winters in Cumberland Sound.

Some minor points suggest the text could with advantage have been reviewed by a cetologist. On p. 213 the "tearing and chewing" of prey attributed to odontocetes is probably only exhibited by the killer whale. The statement on the same page that within the bowhead whale's mouth there are "approximately 700 slabs of baleen, hanging down from each side of the upper jaw" might mislead the casual reader if he had not just read the statement on p. 209 that "there are from three to four hundred blades on each side of the head." I am not aware that whale stomach contents have ever been used to make a particular product, as implied on p. 243. Right (including bowhead) whales were finally protected from commercial whaling (p. 244) in 1935, the year in which the 1931 League of Nations Agreement came into effect.

The layout and design of this book are delightful. It is copiously illustrated with photographs, journal extracts and sketches, portraits, handbills, etc., and these are particularly well positioned to illustrate relevant sections of the text, helping to bring the circumstances of the authors vividly to light as their stories unfold. Only two faults with the figures were noticed: the cliff-nesting kittiwake on p. 31 has been perched precariously on its side, while on p. 159 the house referred to in the figure caption is invisible.

I enjoyed reading this book and can thoroughly recommend it to anybody interested in the history of whaling or arctic exploration, and the quality of writing should appeal to the specialist and layman alike.

Peter B. Best  
Mammal Research Institute  
University of Pretoria  
South Africa