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Review

SIR HUBERT WILKINS: HIS WORLD OF ADVENTURE. A Biography by LOWELL THOMAS. *New York and Toronto: McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc. 1961. 8½ x 5¾ inches, 297 pages, illustrated. \$5.95.*

On March 17th, 1959, an unusual burial took place in the Arctic. In a temperature of -26°F, with a wind of 30 knots blowing over the vast desolation, the ashes of Sir Hubert Wilkins were scattered at the North Pole. Nearby lay the nuclear submarine "Skate", whose presence in that remote place had been made possible by the exploits and vision of Wilkins.

This biography by Lowell Thomas renders belated, and inadequate tribute, to a man whose insatiable curiosity, will-power and courage contributed much to the opening-up of the polar regions. For Wilkins was the first man to fly an aeroplane across the Arctic, the first man to land in an aeroplane on the ice of the Arctic Ocean, the first man to walk back from a downed plane in the Arctic, the first man to fly in the Antarctic, the first man to discover new land from the air, the first man to try to take a submarine under the polar ice.

The life of Sir Hubert Wilkins reads like a romantic novel. Born in 1888 in Australia, the son of a sundowner, Wilkins grew up in the bush. He studied electrical and mechanical engineering, and, at seventeen, became interested in

movie work. He joined a carnival as a tent cinema operator in Australia, then made his way to England. After touring Europe and North America as a photographer and reporter, he took up flying, and was one of the first men to take photographs from an aeroplane. In 1912, he covered the Balkan War as a movie cameraman. After a series of adventures in the Balkans, he returned to England, and did publicity work, ascending in a balloon from Brixton Gas Works in the company of a Captain Penfold who, dressed as Santa Claus, leapt from the basket, leaving Wilkins and another man to drift, onward and upward, until the balloon finally came down many miles from London. After this, Wilkins spent some time in the West Indies, making a movie for a cocoa firm.

His arctic career began in 1913, when he was invited to go north with Stefansson. He stayed with the Canadian Arctic Expedition for three years, and became imbued with Stefansson's ideas on the North. He learned that the Arctic was not a barren, inhospitable place, but a region that offered great advantages for certain forms of transportation. The ice in the North provided many rough but adequate landing places for aeroplanes, and the sea below the ice a medium that submarines could use. During the long, harsh marches between 1913 and 1916, Wilkins became convinced of the value of aeroplane travel

in the North. And Stefansson suggested to him the possibility of using submarines to travel under the ice of the Polar Basin.

In the spring of 1916, Wilkins set off to return to Australia to join up, and after a journey of 33,000 miles, was awarded a commission in the Royal Australian Air Force. As a combat photographer, he saw a great deal of action in France, serving with distinction, and being awarded the Military Cross and bar. In 1919 he took part in the England to Australia Air Race, and crashed in Crete. Shortly after this, he went on an ill-starred expedition to Graham Land, and then made a number of trips in airships; he just missed being aboard the R-38 when it crashed. In September, 1921, Wilkins went south with Shackleton on the "Quest", and after the death of "the Boss" came back to England, and accepted a post with the Society of Friends' Emergency and War Victims' Relief Committee. In 1922 he visited Poland and Russia as an observer for this committee. In the following year he led an expedition to Northern Australia, collecting specimens for the British Museum, and living, for a while, with the aborigines.

In 1926, he was finally able to put his ideas about flying in the Arctic into practice. Under the auspices of the Detroit Arctic Expedition, and in aircraft piloted by Carl Ben Eielson, he made a series of flights north from Alaska across the Arctic Ocean. He landed on, and sounded through the ice, and later crashed on the ice, and walked back to the land.

In April 1928, Wilkins and Eielson flew a single-engine Lockheed Vega over the Arctic from Point Barrow, Alaska, to Spitzbergen. This remarkable flight brought him great fame, and a knighthood. More than this, it was a triumph for Wilkins's imagination and courage, and fully vindicated his judgment about flying in the North.

In the same year, Wilkins flew in the Antarctic, using Deception Island as a base. After his return from this expedition, he went around the world in the Graf Zeppelin, then returned to the

Antarctic, carried out more flying, and proved the insularity of Charcot Island.

In 1931, Wilkins attempted to realize another of his dreams, and took the converted, obsolete submarine "Nautilus" to Spitzbergen. Here he made several dives under the polar ice at 82°N, but was unable to proceed any farther because of the loss of the diving rudders.

In the 1930's, Wilkins returned to flying in the Antarctic, with Lincoln Ellsworth. His polar career came to a climax in 1937, when he took part in the search for Levanevsky and the other lost Russian airmen. During the search, he flew 44,000 miles, of which 34,000 were north of the Arctic Circle.

Such then was the fantastic, fascinating life of Sir Hubert Wilkins, explorer, aviator, and pioneer. A quiet, modest man, good with his hands and possessed of a great deal of enthusiasm and knowledge about many things, his life requires careful study and documentation in order to chronicle his achievements, and to estimate his influence on the exploration, opening-up and development of the polar regions.

This book makes no attempt to do this, and it would be unfair to judge it for what it is not — a definitive biography. It is best looked upon as a romanticized version of a romantic life, written for the general reader. After a bombastic introduction, Mr. Thomas adopts an autobiographical approach to tell "Wilkins' life and world of adventure as he told it to me over the thirty-odd years I knew him". The style of writing is flat and even, with no great depths or heights; the characters, including Wilkins himself, flit through the pages, but never appear as real people. But the range and variety of Wilkins's experiences carry the narrative convincingly along, and despite the slapdash approach and the annoying absence of important detail, the result is a thoroughly readable book that covers the life of Wilkins up to the time of the search for the Russian flyers.

It is interesting — and amusing — to compare Wilkins's own writings with this first person narrative. "Flying the Arctic" (1928), is a vivid, well-written,

precise, and intensely personal account of Wilkins's arctic experiences, and "Under the North Pole" (1931) gives his life up to the time he became involved with the "Nautilus". Mr. Thomas tells, in great and lurid detail, the story of how Wilkins first reached England, a story of which Wilkins himself makes no mention. The gypsy girl who stowed away on the "Alaskan" at Fairbanks receives no mention in Wilkins's own books; Mr. Thomas devotes nearly a page and a half to her. Some details have been changed for no apparent reason. Uncrating the planes at Fairbanks, Wilkins states that the workers complained of the cold when the thermometer read -52°F ; Mr. Thomas gives the figure as -20°F .

This book gives no details of the very considerable human problems that beset the attempts to take the "Nautilus" to the North Pole, such as the differences of opinion between Wilkins and Danenhower and Lake, and the attitude of the submarine's crew. It seems obvious, from these and other discrepancies and omissions, that Mr. Thomas did not bother to read Wilkins's books carefully before writing his biography, nor did he talk to many of the people who knew Wilkins well.

A serious error, and a detraction from Wilkins's own achievements, results from this. During the antarctic flights

of 1928, the book claims, Wilkins crossed "the Graham Land plateau . . . discovering the channels which apparently transformed the great peninsula into a chain of islands," and "discovered altogether eight new islands, three channels, and a strait, as well as an unknown land which seemed to be part of the Antarctic continent". No note or comment is added to explain that, in 1934-37, the British Graham Land Expedition showed Wilkins's channels to be glacier streams, and the strait to be non-existent, so that Graham Land is, in fact, a peninsula. Wilkins would certainly have been the first to admit this error. Without being formally trained as a scientist, he had a scientific outlook, and constantly modified his views and ideas when new evidence warranted doing so.

The book is well illustrated, but lacks an index, maps, and a bibliography.

A biography of Sir Hubert Wilkins, it is hoped, will someday get the same loving care that the Fishers devoted to the life of Shackleton. Much manuscript material on the explorer's life rests in the Stefansson Collection, and there are many people who knew Wilkins intimately, and worked with him. Until such a biography is written, Mr. Thomas' book will serve as a satisfactory account of the life of an accomplished and important arctic explorer.

JIM LOTZ

Obituary

Ukichiro Nakaya

Professor Ukichiro Nakaya was one of the best known and internationally prominent scientists in the field of snow and ice research. He died at Tokyo, Japan on April 11th, 1962 after a long illness.