

BOOK REVIEW

Review of *Race for the South Pole: the expedition diaries of Scott and Amundsen*, by Roland Huntford (2010). London: Continuum International Publishing. 330 pp. ISBN 978-1441-16982-2.

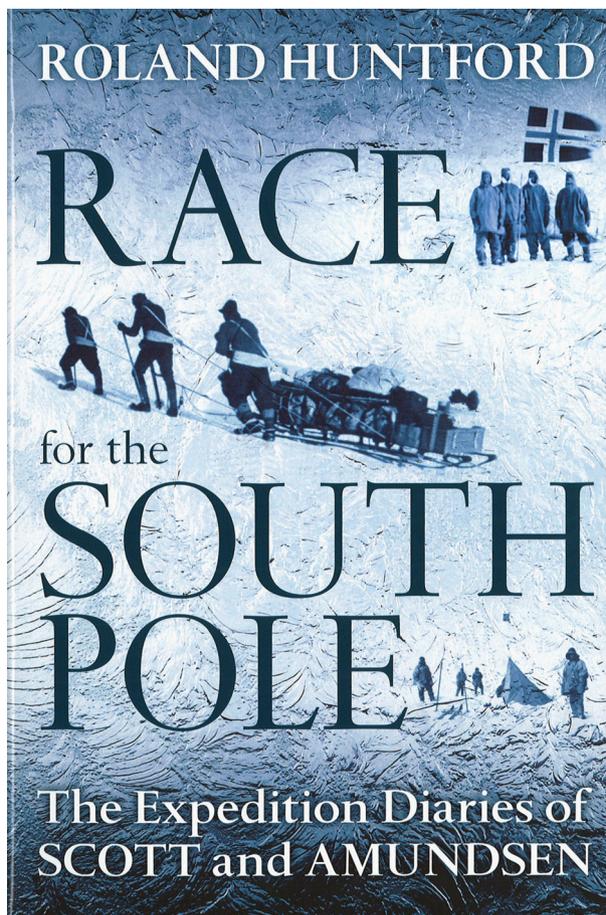
Roland Huntford is the grand old man among polar historians. After his classic *Scott and Amundsen* in 1979 (later editions were retitled, *The last place on Earth*), he wrote a series of books on Norwegian and British polar heroes as well as a thorough study of the history of skiing (2006). Huntford challenged the British admiration of Robert Falcon Scott's scientific programme and great courage—and insisted that Roald Amundsen's expedition was far better prepared and carried out. Huntford's scathing criticism of Scott's fatal choices and lack of competence dared to assault this cherished British polar icon in a manner that would be unthinkable for Norwegian authors.

Before the centennial anniversary in 2011 Huntford published a source-book with the expedition diaries of Scott and Amundsen: *Race for the South Pole*. The reader can follow the two expeditions as they unfolded day by day, the British venture through Scott's diary and the Norwegian through Amundsen's pen, as well as that of Olav Bjaaland, who was among the team of five Norwegians who first reached the South Pole in December 1911. Huntford begins the book with an insightful introductory chapter. He provides an exhaustive overview of the preconditions for the race that was to come in 1911. The tone in the presentation is recognizable: there is little doubt as to Huntford's favourites—the Norwegians. They possessed the knowledge, they mastered the skis and they were humble enough to learn from indigenous peoples and others with Arctic experience.

This book is primarily meant to be a documentation of primary source material. "What emerges is a whole new understanding of what happened on the ice", declares the blurb on the back cover, "the definitive account of the Race for the South Pole". But Huntford does not simply allow Amundsen's, Bjaaland's and Scott's texts speak for themselves. He offers considerable comment and explanation to supplement what the three gentlemen on the ice articulated in their diaries. Providing important background information, such

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commentary can, of course, be useful for readers. At the same time there is little doubt that Huntford gives us more than mere facts; his well-known view on the superiority of Norwegian (versus British) polar know-how clearly colours the presentation. He proposes an answer as to why Hjalmar Johansen was excluded from the South Pole team—exceeding what we can read in the diaries of Amundsen and Bjaaland. While some readers may appreciate Huntford's commentary as added value, it is fair to question whether points of view such as these belong in a primary source publication. Similarly, readers might wonder why Huntford lets Bjaaland supplement Amundsen's text: the title promises us the diaries of Scott and Amundsen, but not Bjaaland. Is not this a bit like two against one? In any case, Bjaaland—proficient in skiing and sober in style—is clearly a favourite of Huntford. "Bjaaland, as usual, had got it right", he states (p. 49).

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Bjaaland is presented as the symbol of Norwegian expedition culture, which also contributes to making *Race for the South Pole* into something else than a mere primary source publication from the Antarctic plains. The book is also Huntford's narrative on what happened during the two expeditions 100 years ago.

References

- Huntford R. 1979. *Scott and Amundsen*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Huntford R. 1985. *The last place on Earth: Scott and Amundsen's race to the South Pole*. London: Guild Publishing.