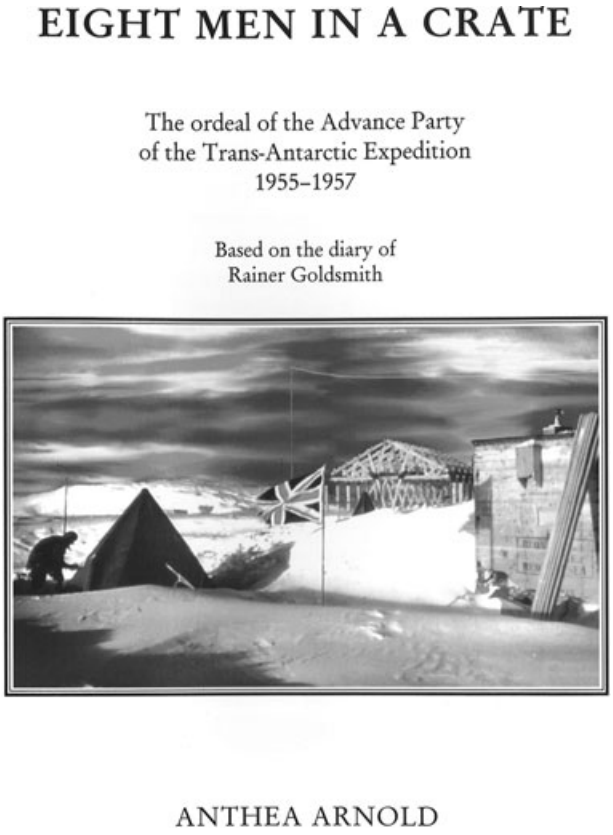
Review of *Eight men in a crate: the ordeal of the advance party of the Trans-Antarctic Expedition 1955–1957 based on the diary of Rainer Goldsmith*, by Anthea Arnold (2007). Norwich: Erskine Press. 133 pp. ISBN 978-1-85297-095-6.

The year 2008 is a milestone in terms of two notable anniversaries relating to Britain's Antarctic history. One hundred years ago, the British made the first territorial claim to the Antarctic via Letters Patent, and in so doing precipitated a process that was to lead to six other countries pressing their own claims. Fifty years ago, the Trans-Antarctic Expedition (TAE) successfully executed the first mechanized crossing of the polar continent. Although a great deal of attention is now being given to the International Geophysical Year (IGY, 1957–1958), I would contend that the TAE, which did not take place under the auspices of the IGY, was an important element in the evolving scientific and political contours of human engagement with the Antarctic.

Imagined in the late 1940s by the British geologist Vivian Fuchs, this privately organized expedition was nonetheless supported by four Commonwealth governments—Britain, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. Planning and fund-raising began in earnest in 1955, and it would not be unfair to claim that the TAE had a chequered organizational history. Within Britain, Fuchs and his supporters had to contend with others such as Brian Roberts, the long-time Foreign Office adviser, who thought the expedition to be an unwelcome distraction from the ongoing efforts to not only hold onto Britain's territorial claim in the region, in the face of South American competition, but also to ensure that the Americans and the Soviets did not extend the Cold War into the Antarctic. At the same time, the international politics of the extreme southern latitudes were being transformed by the news that the Soviets would participate in IGY Antarctic activities. Alarmingly, for the Australians at least, the Soviets planned to locate their IGY bases in Australian Antarctic Territory, and the Menzies government decided that Australian efforts needed to be redoubled in order to ensure that the Soviets were mindful of the prevailing geopolitical landscape.

Against the geopolitical and financial odds, the TAE managed to secure sufficient funding and political support. The participation of New Zealander Sir Edmund



Hillary unquestionably helped not only raise the profile of the Antarctic generally, but also galvanized media attention. This inevitably created some tensions as the Cambridge-educated scientist (Fuchs) had to share the limelight with the 'Conqueror of Mount Everest' (Hillary). The plan was to use advanced parties to create bases in advance of the crossing, and to begin the process of mapping out a route across the Antarctic continent. From the Antarctic Peninsula, Fuchs' team would start at Shackleton Base and then proceed towards the South Pole via South Ice Base. From the Ross Ice Shelf, Hillary was expected to create depots 480 and 700, and to help to map out a route for Fuchs once he passed beyond the South Pole and made his way towards the Ross Ice Shelf. In October 1957, Fuchs' team began their 2000-mile journey, and it was never intended that Hillary would meet Fuchs at the South Pole.

As is well known, the relationship between the two men became controversial when it became apparent that Hillary's team was making great progress via their

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converted farm tractors. On the other side of the continent, Fuchs' progress was slower by comparison, and rather than wait at Depot 700, Hillary's team went straight onto the South Pole and enjoyed the hospitality of the newly created American IGY station. Inevitably, the media in Britain and around the world reported this achievement in terms that were less than flattering to Fuchs, and comparisons were drawn between an earlier Anglo–Norwegian 'race to the pole'. Hillary's 'dash' to the pole had upset relations and upstaged Fuchs. To compound matters, Hillary even advised Fuchs to finish the second part of the journey from the South Pole to the Ross Ice Shelf in the following summer season. Fuchs arrived at the South Pole station in January 1958, and fearing that he was running out of time pushed on quickly to complete the rest of the journey. Denying that there was any rift between him and Hillary, Fuch's snow-cats eventually crossed Antarctica in early March. It had been a momentous journey, and the Queen duly knighted Fuchs for his achievements.

The TAE was important in a number of regards, leaving aside the achievement of crossing the continent itself. First, it persuaded New Zealand in particular to invest more substantially in Antarctic-based activities, including the IGY. Hillary's involvement was catalytic and his name is now forever attached to Scott Base, as they recently opened a new fieldwork centre there. Second, it demonstrated that, following the Norwegian–British–Swedish Antarctic expedition, multiple countries could work together notwithstanding some personality clashes along the way. This was not inconsequential in the midst of the IGY, which had seen its own expressions of tensions relating to internationalism and prevailing nationalistic geopolitics. Third, it created new knowledge and understanding of the Antarctic ice sheet.

I have begun this review with an overview of the TAE, and the wider geopolitical context, because Anthea Arnold's account of the advanced party is rather fleeting with regard to the broader context of the expedition itself. Based on the diary of Dr Rainer Goldsmith, the medical officer (attached to the advance party), it is a curious mixture of her commentary and actual diary entries dating from 1956–57. I say curious because Arnold provides the reader with no sense of how she actually used the diaries, and the process that led her to negotiate the writing process with Goldsmith. As someone who has written a number of pieces about the TAE, I have found that the surviving members fall into two categories—either they are enormously loyal to all the participants (especially the two leaders) of the TAE, and want to emphasize the achievements, or else they are happy to gossip about the tensions, and in particular the 'dispute' between Fuchs and Hillary. For many of the participants, the TAE was the biggest adventure of their lives, and, in some cases, their entire homes seem to be filled with photographs and memorabilia of the expedition.

Goldsmith's party undoubtedly did not get a great deal of publicity, and it is fair to say that the achievements of the advance party have largely been neglected in favour of accounts of the actual crossing and the aftermath. Goldsmith himself did not take part in the actual crossing, and it is interesting to note in their official account of the TAE, Fuchs & Hillary (1958: 10) had this to say about Goldsmith: 'He was a large young man of 28 with a tendency to look for new ways of doing things'. The author of that particular sentence was almost certainly Fuchs (despite joint authorship), and my sense is that this statement was not meant to be a ringing endorsement. Indeed, Arnold's preface is emphatic about Goldsmith having been very critical of Fuchs' leadership and the planning process that led to the despatch of the advance party. Arnold is also convinced that the ordeal of the eight members attached to the party could have been avoided, had the expedition been organized differently (p. 14). The advance party was supposed to create a base hut and begin the process of exploring the area to the south, so that Fuchs' main party would be able to initiate their mechanized crossing. Ultimately, whatever the difficulties and inadequacies of individuals, the expedition succeeded in its own terms.

The bulk of this short book is made up of Arnold's commentary spliced with Goldsmith's diary entries. This format, although leaving some questions unanswered as to how certain judgements were made in terms of the editing process, is effective in that the narrative flows easily. What comes across very clearly in her narrative is the tensions (some of which were clearly class-based involving a university educated doctor and former servicemen who had not been to university) that arise when men, with very different backgrounds and attitudes towards life, have to share a confined space for a prolonged period of time. Although not noted in the book, the period in question is also significant, when younger men such as Goldsmith (who missed the Second World War because of their age) were looking for adventure, and possibly release from austerity-hit Britain. Older men, who had served in the War and possibly the Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey, were looking to continue their adult lives within the highly homosocial world of the Antarctic base hut. I am not at all surprised that Goldsmith found some of the conversation rather tedious (p. 20). Revealingly, Arnold notes that Goldsmith's encounters with Fuchs were not happy ones, and Goldsmith—or Arnold?—clearly did not approve of Fuchs' attitudes towards women who wanted to join the TAE (p. 24). It was clearly judged to be appropriate for women to work in administrative roles in

London, but not for them to join men (of a certain type) on the ice itself. What I am not so clear on is whether this apparent disapproval of Fuchs' attitude towards female applicants is faithful to Goldsmith's original diary entry, or a product of Arnold's contemporary judgement. Talking to men who participated in Antarctic expeditions in the 1950s has given me the sense that very few wanted women to participate; they worried that it would upset the delicate balance of life within a restricted base-hut environment. Although women were present in the Antarctic before the TAE, it was a continent remarkably dominated by men and their masculine practices. Fifty years later, women—scientists and tourists—are now a significant presence.

The advance party landed in Antarctica in January 1956, and, in best British polar tradition, the opening weeks appeared to have been somewhat chaotic and tinged with bad luck. With the help of some useful sketches and maps, Arnold conveys well the nature of base life as it slowly evolved. As women were absent, men had to perform a range of domestic and professional tasks, including cooking and cleaning. The loss of vital supplies was a bitter blow as the bay ice broke off and left the party with very little food for the dogs, limited fuel supplies and a shortage of building materials. It must have been a miserable time, and Arnold's narrative does not shy away from the fact that tempers were indeed frayed. The British polar tradition of sangfroid was in distinct danger of melting on a number of occasions. Over the course of the year (1956), Goldsmith became increasingly frustrated by the unwillingness of his companions to learn from previous generations of polar explorers (p. 75), and it is not difficult to imagine how tense things must have become. By May, with the weather deteriorating, conversation seemed to revolve around food and women (ironically, the absence of). Goldsmith and his companion Blaiklock, the lead surveyor, were reduced to reading *Winnie-the-Pooh* to one another in their tent to pass the time.

Sprits began to lift with the emergence of the summer season in October 1956, and the party were able to carry out further exploration and depot construction. But even then the decision to make trips south could also be deeply controversial. As Arnold recalls late in the book, others were deeply resentful of the fact that some members of the advance party (including Goldsmith) were able to leave the claustrophobic base hut and explore with the help of the dogs (p. 115). The journey south was clearly the highlight of Goldsmith's experience as they travelled towards the Theron Mountains. Indeed, a glacier attached to that mountain range bears the name Goldsmith Glacier in recognition of his presence. By January 1957, the party—especially Goldsmith—was preparing to return home to the UK. The account of his time ends on a sour note—his lack of respect for Fuchs, his bitterness at the lack of recognition for the work of the advance party and their travails, and the limited contact they enjoyed with other polar operators, including those at the IGY Halley Bay Base.

As Arnold recalls in a short epilogue, the Shackleton Base was occupied by the main part of the TAE until their departure in November 1957. Thirty years later the base actually disappeared into the Weddell Sea as the ice collapsed. Interestingly, despite his indifferent experiences with the TAE, Goldsmith returned to the Antarctic on two other occasions, and then went onto have a successful academic career.

In summary, this book was an interesting read, in part because it does not shy away from raising pertinent issues about how a group of post-1945 British and Commonwealth men contributed to an expedition that played a part in transforming human engagement with the Antarctic. I suspect Fuchs was right: Goldsmith did want to do things differently, but he may have also had unrealistic expectations about an expedition that was supported by people and organizations for very different reasons.

Reference

Fuchs V. & Hillary E. 1958. *The crossing of Antarctica*. London: Cassell.