

BOOK REVIEW

Review of *Return to Antarctica: the amazing adventure of Sir Charles Wright on Robert Scott's journey to the South Pole*, by Adrian Raeside (2009). Mississauga, ON: John Wiley & Sons. 324 pp. ISBN 978-0-470-15380-2.

This book is mainly the result of a visit made to Antarctica in general and the historic huts on Ross Island in particular. The author is the grandson of Sir Charles Wright who was a physicist and glaciologist during Captain Scott's last expedition aboard *Terra Nova* (1910–13). Indeed much is derived from his grandfather's diary published in 1993 (Bull & Wright 1993). Wright was a member of the party that found Scott's last camp after the 1912 winter.

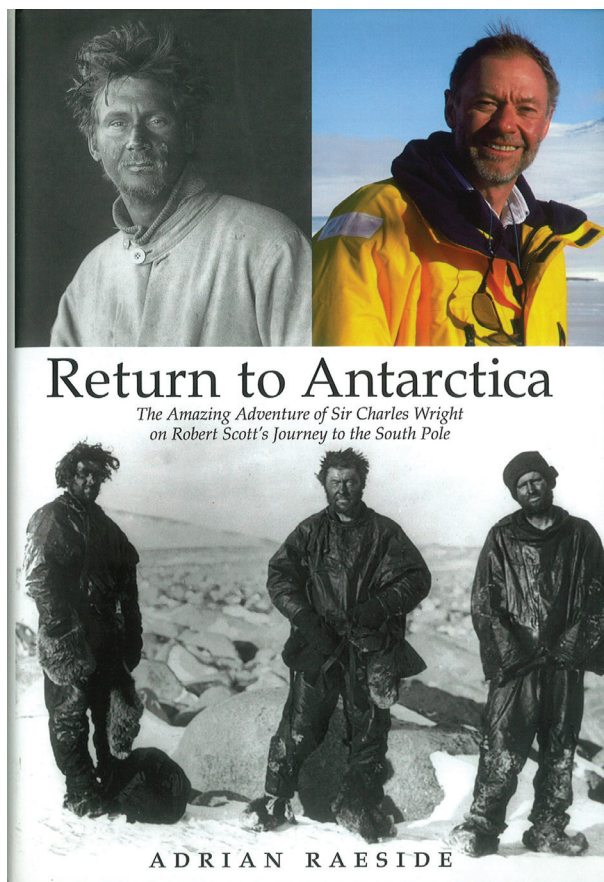
During the past decade or so, it has become practical for various descendents of the men who explored Antarctica about century ago, during the Heroic Age, to visit the sites where their ancestors worked. Not many of these visitors publish their impressions but Raeside, who is a prominent cartoonist, expressed himself throughout this work in his distinctive, somewhat ironic, sense of humour. He travelled with a tourist group aboard a Russian icebreaker, *Kapitan Khlebnikov*, as a guest lecturer for Quark Expeditions. As well as his own impressions and those of his grandfather he draws much from a study of the literature. His aunt and Sir Charles's daughter, Pat Wright, made many pen and ink illustrations for the published diary and many of these are used to illustrate the book.

The author notes that he was privy to many personal stories from the expedition. He added that his grandfather was modest about his accomplishments and reluctant to speak publicly about his time in the Antarctic. His family also knew many personal stories that include the difficulties of hunger, boots falling apart while crossing the ice-shelf, frozen sleeping bags and much else.

The text gives a humorous account of Antarctic discovery but deals mainly with Scott's expedition and the part played by Wright. Unfortunately there are noticeable errors and, in this reviewer's opinion, somewhat flawed understanding; a few examples follow. *Discovery* was never designated HMS (p. 9). Herbert Ponting was not the first ciné photographer in the Antarctic (p. 59). The *Belgica* expedition did not winter

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“on the Antarctic continent” (p. 62). Although there is seal blubber stored inside at Hut Point I do not think this makes it “basically a shrine to seal extermination” (p. 122). Carbide, although used for illumination, can not make “carbide candles” (p. 162). Geography or navigation is in error with the assertion that one can travel “east, west and south” from the South Pole (p. 229).

It is pleasing, however, to see that the comprehensive scientific work of the expedition is given prominence instead of the common concentration of the alleged “race to the pole”. Chapter 19, “Redux”, is essentially an analysis with benefit of hindsight of the errors made by Scott but it is apparent that a proportion of these can be justified neither from science nor history. The last chapter, “What became of everyone”, gives brief biographies of 10 of Scott's men with notes on *Terra Nova* and the hut. Sir Charles Wright's decorations and honours are listed and the point made that he was the last surviving member of the expedition (he died in 1975). Raeside concludes by summarizing his critical opinion of Scott

(p. 273) who was “repeating the same blunders and in some cases making up new ones” and “That only five men died . . . is a testament to the resilience of those who were there with Scott”.

The notes, given by chapter, include references to interviews and primary published works. The index is good and comprehensive and a list of about 150 photographs is provided. Maps and sketches are common through the text—and a couple of the author’s cartoons are included.

The first illustration (p. ix) is of the author in his study surrounded by photographs, maps, instruments, letters and many other items used by his grandfather in the Antarctic that he inherited from his aunt, Patricia Wright.

The last illustration (p. 299) is of Sir Charles Wright with his sledge converted to house part of his extensive polar library. The next appearance of these items, with Sir Charles’s library and medals, was on 22 September 2010 as lots 107–168 in the Polar Sale at Christie’s in London. Thus it appears the book was part of a process of catharsis that, after the voyage, severed much of the author’s connection with his distinguished grandfather.

Reference

Bull C. & Wright P. (eds.) 1993. *Silas*. Columbus: Ohio University Press.