

## BOOK REVIEW

Book review of *The return of the South Pole sled dogs: with Amundsen's and Mawson's Antarctic expeditions*, by Mary R. Tahan (2021). Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing. 467 pp. ISBN 978-3-030-65112-1.

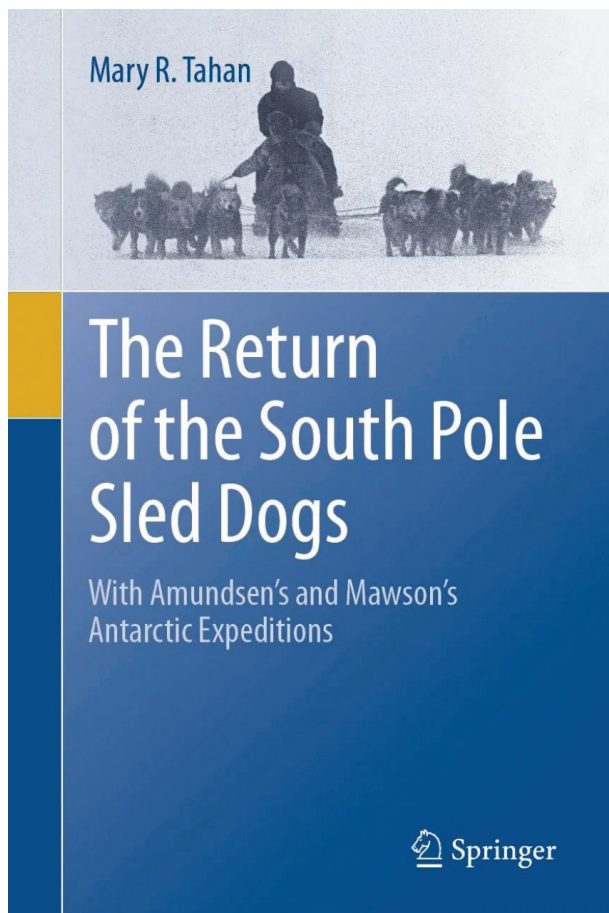
“So we arrived and succeeded to plant our flag at the geographic South Pole—King Håkon VII’s Plateau. God be thanked!”—Roald Amundsen’s words (quoted by Tahan 2019: 497), and his Antarctic journey to conquer the geographic pole, could not have been possible without his sled dogs, as the Norwegian polar explorer himself indicated. There were many times when the lives of the explorers depended on the ability and endurance of these noble animals. Such was the importance that Amundsen attached to dogs that he gave his crew the following motto: “Dogs first, and dogs all the time” (Amundsen 1912: 108). Sled dogs (and knowledge about them) could make the difference between the success and failure of expeditions during the Heroic Age of Antarctic exploration. Yet, sled dogs have taken a back seat in expedition accounts until the Canadian–American writer, documentarian and researcher on polar exploration, Mary R. Tahan, made them the main actors of her previous book—*Roald Amundsen’s sled dogs: the sledge dogs who helped discover the South Pole*, which approaches the Norwegian expedition from its planning to the return to Norway through the lives of the sled dogs. However, the legacy of these sled dogs went far beyond Amundsen’s expedition.

*The return of the South Pole sled dogs: with Amundsen’s and Mawson’s Antarctic expeditions* is Tahan’s new book, in which she focuses on the 39 sled dogs who survived and returned from Antarctica after their involvement in the King Edward VII Land Eastern expedition, work at the Framheim Base Camp and the conquest of the South Pole. This book is, therefore, presented as a follow-up volume to the previous one, offering complementary historical information about the rest of the sled dogs’ lives and how they were regarded by the Norwegian and Australian expedition members, as well as the other people who came into contact with them. In this new book, Tahan’s tone has changed somewhat: the emotional and personal touch that treated sled dogs as domestic pets has been lessened.

As each book is focused on a different time period, each can be enjoyed on its own. However, for the reader

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to fully appreciate the scope and depth of the author’s work, both titles should be read. Tahan has painstakingly pieced together a detailed account of each of Amundsen’s sled dogs from newspaper reports, telegrams, letters and diaries, museums, exhibitions, as well as visits to Antarctica, Argentina, Australia, Norway and elsewhere, and from personal interviews with descendants of Arctic and Antarctic explorers.

The book starts with a short introduction that summarizes the author’s previous book and covers the origin of the Greenland sled dogs, the sailing to Antarctica and the arrival of the 116 dogs, the conquering of the South Pole and the return to Framheim. The book’s 28 chapters are divided into six sections, each dealing with a different time period after the return from Antarctica. Similar to Tahan’s earlier book, each chapter is comprised of an abstract, notes, references and pictures, making it easy to locate specific information about the time period of interest and the events described.

The book's main history starts in January 1912, when the Norwegian expedition set sail to Hobart, Tasmania, where Amundsen would announce the successful attainment of the pole to the world. The group of 39 remaining dogs, which had been together for almost two years, would then take different paths: 18 dogs continued on the *Fram* to Argentina to complete the last stage of the Norwegian expedition before returning to home. The other 21 dogs set sail again for Antarctica, on board the *Aurora* with Douglas Mawson's ill-fated Australian Antarctic expedition. From this point onwards, Tahan divides the events into two different narrative lines: the final stages of the Norwegian expedition (dealt with lightly in the earlier book) and the Australian expedition.

As the end of the Norwegian expedition unfolds, the author narrates the story of the arrival in Argentina and the beginning of the use of dogs as a marketing tool at the Buenos Aires Zoological Gardens. Infections and the radical change of living conditions had fatal consequences for most of the dogs. Only three of them survived and made it back to Norway, where the two youngest dogs would be used in Arve Staxrud's Arctic rescue mission for the German Arctic expedition of Lieutenant Herbert Schröder-Stran. Tahan also explains the transport of dog skins and the reconstruction and taxidermy exhibition in Norway of those dogs that did not survive.

As for the dogs that Amundsen had given Mawson, almost half of them were killed in Adélie Land after Mawson's courageous solo return from George V land to the base camp. Without communication with the *Aurora*, six men in Adélie Land, awaiting the return of Mawson, were forced to spend another winter there. The decision was made that under the difficult circumstances they could not keep all the dogs alive. The remaining dogs served a crucial role as moral support for the surviving men during the winter, until they were rescued. The last stages of the sled dogs' lives and their final destinations in Norway and Australia are described. The last survivor

of the Amundsen's sled dogs was Obersten (whose name translates into English as Colonel), one of the 17 dogs that had reached the South Pole.

In recounting the journeys of these animals, Tahan touches on other aspects of the Norwegian and Australian expeditions and their repercussions, for example, the success of Amundsen's strategy compared to that of his rival Robert Falcon Scott; how the expeditions were received after their return from the southern continent; the first surgical operation in Antarctica (performed on one of the sled dogs); the huge importance of Amundsen's brother, Leon Amundsen, in all stages of the preparations for his brother's expedition and in the final moments of the surviving dogs; and the communication between the leaders and captains of both expeditions, which reveals how the expeditions were influenced by one another and how their principals shared their knowledge and experiences.

The enormous research effort represented in this book will be appreciated by any reader with a deep interest in the history of polar exploration. Tahan narrates the sometimes forgotten story of the voiceless actors—the sled dogs—that made the Antarctic exploration of the Heroic Age possible. The dogs withstood rough sailings, very heavy work pulling sledges under extremely harsh conditions, use as marketing and tourism tools, public exhibition and quarantines. The sleds dogs can themselves be seen as heroic explorers that contributed vitally to the successful attainment of the South Pole and saved human lives in Arctic and Antarctic expeditions.

## References

- Amundsen R. 1912. *The South Pole: an account of the Norwegian Antarctic expedition in the "Fram", 1910–1912*. 2 vols. (A.G. Chater, trans.) London: John Murray.
- Tahan R.M. 2019. *Roald Amundsen's sled dogs: the sledge dogs who helped discover the South Pole*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing.