

**In search of the last continent: Australia and early Antarctic exploration.** McConville, A. (2022). Melbourne, Australia: Australian Scholarly Publishing Ltd. 227p, paperback. ISBN 978-1-922669-94-0. AUD 44.00.

This book describes the era of Antarctic exploration from James Cook's first circumnavigation (1772–1775) through to Borchgrevink's over-wintering (1899–1900). This is prior to the 'Heroic Age' of terrestrial discovery, notionally 1901 to 1917, which is a much more crowded field for publication covering many facets and numerous controversies. However, this pre-Heroic phase is not without its heroes, its intrigues or its dramas, as this book carefully documents. As such it is an important contribution to polar history.

McConville first describes the early British and Russian circumnavigations and the rapid growth of the sealing and whaling industries (chapters 1–3). Four of the great powers of the time: Britain (Ross), France (Dumont D'Urville), Russia (Bellingshausen) and the USA (Symes and Wilkes), then mounted significant expeditions in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (chapter 4) with all four recording numerous achievements and adventures. Interest then shifted to the Arctic with expeditions seeking a navigable North West passage (chapters 5–7). After several decades in the Arctic, polar exploration turned south again in the 1880's, largely through Melbourne, Australia, including the voyages of Henrik Johann Bull and Carsten Borchgrevink (chapters 8–13). The book rounds out with details on Borchgrevink's over-wintering expedition and on Henrik Johann Bull's later life including whaling and sealing rights on the Kerguelens and a dramatic shift in financial support (chapters 14–18). The book concludes by summarising the well-documented European explorations from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century up to the International Geophysical Year (Afterword).

It was Melbourne's location, and the wealth arising from the discovery of gold in 1851, however, that was pivotal in luring explorers back south. Formed by 'men of science' in Melbourne in 1886, Australia's Antarctic Exploration Committee was highly influential in this regard and McConville credits the Committee with an "*important and underestimated contribution (of) turning the gaze of large nations southward to Antarctica, after half a century of disinterest*" (p.195). Indeed, this is the core of the book rather than details of the expeditions themselves. Unfortunately, the Committee petered out in 1899, ironically with a contribution of £250 to Scott's Discovery expedition (p186).

McConville's style is accessible with appropriate referencing for anyone prompted to delve further. While the text is more academic than, say Michael Palin's *Erebus*, with which it partly overlaps, it provides access to an important question for that period—how were funds raised for these risky expeditions? The sections on the financial (mis)fortunes of the Enderby fishing fleets and the Southern Whale Fishery Company, for example, make fascinating reading. The numerous voyages detailed are brought to life with quotations and a few carefully chosen illustrations. The main focus is on the blend of two, sometimes competing, interests; commercial and '*geographical intent*' (p.29), which could also be read as colonial ambition disguised as scientific discovery. Overall the book represents a considerable amount of diligent research, primarily at the Victoria State Library in Melbourne, and it mostly emphasises factual over insightful interpretations of the archives.

It raises numerous questions for future research. What does the composition of the Antarctic Exploration Committee, its lengthy negotiations on grants and subsidies, as well as the voyages themselves, tell us about the colonial ambitions of the time? What were the explicit drivers for exploration and what implicit motives lay underneath them? For example, Cook's own voyages are seen, by some, as a mix of both scientific endeavour and colonial conquest as discussed, for example, in Yuval Harari's *Homo Sapiens*.

For a book that bridges technical research and non-fiction narrative, broader context would have been useful for an international audience. Given the Antarctic Exploration Committee's remarkable vision, it is unclear why they were so successful at that time in Australia's history other than being connected, at least in part, to the gold rush. This is particularly so given the complexities of raising the very sizeable sums required, from colonial governments' subsidies or from commercial financiers, to mount expeditions. For those readers unaware of the power dynamics in, say, Victoria, Australia in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, a broader lens would have been welcome while still keeping the book at a modest size. There are, of course, minor quibbles.

The author seems to conflate the England of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with Great Britain, which seems unfortunate in a historical analysis. It would also be good to have the sums in sterling expressed as a notional worth in today's markets. Finally, while reviewing the '*voracious, lucrative and competitive*' (p.10) whaling and sealing industries of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, attention should also be given to possible explorations around that time by Māori and Polynesian seafarers – even if only as far as the Sub-Antarctic islands – as discussed over recent years in the polar literature.

Future researchers will find this book highly valuable as they seek to add further layers of understanding and provide more context. As our understanding of heritage and of historical “facts” shifts as new research is published, books like this will be an important bridge into areas currently less well documented. (Bob Frame  Gateway Antarctica, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand ([research@frameworks.nz](mailto:research@frameworks.nz)))

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