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Book Review

Erebus The Ice Dragon: A portrait of an Antarctic volcano, Colin Monteath (2023), Auckland, New Zealand: Massey University Press. 368p, hard cover. NZ$ 65. ISBN: 978-1-99-101636-2

Colin Monteath has written the first social and cultural history of a single mountain in Antarctica – Erebus, the southernmost active volcano, a place about which he is uniquely gifted to write. He spent 32 seasons on the Ice of which ten were as Field Operations officer for the New Zealand Antarctic Research Programme at Scott Base and, during those visits, he was the first person to descend into the volcano's inner crater. Such "a madcap adventure" he claims, that, as he went over the edge, he mused to himself, "surely this is not on my Public Service job description." Throughout the book, there are numerous "public servants" (if that title can be extended to government-funded scientists) experiencing considerable hardships, risks and rewards while exploring the mountain and its inner secrets. Monteath brings alive the interaction between field researchers and the mountain primarily through carefully documented and clearly written text supported throughout by artwork and photographs in a quite remarkable book. Many of the latter are from Monteath's superb personal collection and one wonders what his colleagues thought as he took photos at the summit camp as they struggled to re-pitch the 35 kg tent (p. 143) or during a blizzard (p. 202). However, it is today's reader that reaps the benefits of his foresight.

Taking an obvious chronological order, the book journeys from the geological formation of the mountain and its surrounds on Ross Island (Chapter 1) through the early explorers with a welcome nod to the early Polynesians and the more familiar Heroic Age explorations (Chapter 2). Monteath acknowledges the influence of, *inter alia*, Michael Palin's Erebus the Story of a Ship which dovetails neatly into the narrative in Chapter 3 with its powerful images. This extends to the broader context of the Heroic Age in the first, second and third ascents of Erebus (Chapters 4–6). However, it is the detailed, personal and highly engaging expeditions of the Scientific Era in Chapters 7–11 that bring the mountain to life. Here is real adventure. Hardships at temperatures often below −50C coupled with a clarity of purpose and finely tuned risk assessment. While the extensive bibliography documents the scientific findings, the chapters and their images portray an engagement with the mountain that is rare even in mountaineering literature. A topic about which Monteath is a considerable authority as a visit to Hedgehog House, his home office and reference library, will confirm. This hero factor, predominantly male, a distinct signifier of the Antarctic narrative, is on display throughout.

This passion is laced with tragedy, most profoundly felt and sensitively handled in Chapter 8, about the 1979 TE901 crash: its ironic title, "No latitude for error." The 257 who died are accounted for, along with the 331 who received the New Zealand Special Service Medal (Erebus) to recognise service in the aftermath including body recovery, crash investigation and victim identification of whom 220 were mortuary workers. Monteath was directly involved in the 11-day recovery operation and was able to correct various misconceptions and clarify how the crash fits into the mountain's history. However, it is the images of recovery teams in storms that puts the recovery as much as the accident itself into focus. First-hand reflections from Rex Hendry, Hugh Logan, Harry Keys and Colin Monteath provide insights unique to this tragedy. It is a stand-out chapter that disrupts the heroism and bravado more frequently found in Antarctic narratives. Here, there is only loss, laid bare.

Science is, of course, a key element in almost every activity relating to Erebus, and the extensive chronologies, glossary, endnotes and bibliography will be of great help to future researchers who follow on from the 39 Masters and PhDs already submitted about Erebus. By focussing on one significant geographical feature, there is a richness and insight about the entire Antarctic experience. One wonders what a similar approach to, say, the Dry Valleys, Mount Vinson, Thwaites Glacier or Antarctica's major ice shelves would reveal. These disciplined, rigorous researchers are balanced with adventurers such as Mear's solo winter ascent in 1985 (Chapter 9) and the more surreal tale of Phil Marshall as told by Carl Thompson (p. 200).

Monteath also offers a kind of obituary for those field workers inspired as much by the adventures of the Heroic Era as the discoveries of the Scientific Age. It is difficult to imagine how field research will change as the Scientific Age gives way to new forms of scientific discovery in the early Anthropocene. Though Chapters 11 and 12 highlight not just the experience of conducting globally leading edge science on Erebus but also, between the lines of the text, the

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wider motivations and rewards of being, in effect, an extremophile. Technically, this is "an organism able to live in extreme environments of temperature, radiation, salinity or acidity" (p. 229) but the definition could be loosely extended to those motivated to study them. These chapters shift back to the more scientific tone of the opening chapters in a very accessible way punctuated with input from researchers (Roberto Anitori, Paul Broady and Peter Otway). Collectively the text and superb photographs may well inspire future researchers to study Antarctica even if data collection is increasingly less first-hand and more likely obtained through satellites and drones.

The book closes, most eloquently, with enlightening views of Erebus through the artistic imagination (Adele Jackson, Chapter 13). This completes the book's voyage from a potential coffee-table destination to somewhere more complete, more profound. Jackson begins with Polynesian and Māori oral histories before traversing representations, literary, visual and musical of Erebus from the Heroic Era to the Modern Age through the work of a multitude of artists working in various media: oil paintings, poetry, photography, sculpture and music including b l o o p r, a "down-tempo electronic" musician. It is within these diverse images, many of which are presented, that Jackson weaves in both the geopolitical manoeuvring, so intrinsic to the Antarctic, and the deeply personal such as the TE901 tragedy with its promotional brochure polar-themed menu which closes with "*and for desert, Peach Erebus. The flight will be unforgettable*" (p. 280). Together these provide deeper connections, and mysteries, suggested by the individual responses to the mountain in the earlier chapters, to the complex layers of meaning placed on iconic mountains such as Erebus. The importance of these mountains in society has long been recognised and meditated upon. Robert MacFarlane in his 2003 book, "Mountains of the Mind: A History of a Fascination," discusses the hold that mountains have on the modern imagination and that "what we call a mountain is . . . in fact a collaboration of the physical forms of the world with the imagination of humans – a mountain of the mind" (MacFarlane, p. 19). He goes on to describe that "mountains, like all wildernesses, challenge our complacent conviction – so easy to lapse into – that the world has been made for humans by humans" (MacFarlane, p. 274). Erebus falls, as presented by Monteath and Jackson, quite clearly into this description and that "Antarctica remains a talisman, perhaps, that humans can look after an entire continent" (Monteath, p. 27).

These multiple threads provide much more than insights into the biophysical research around the Erebus volcano. Collectively, it is a social study on both historical and contemporary drivers and inhibitors of Antarctic research and where this might be headed in the early Anthropocene. Monteath steers clear of discussion on the Antarctic Treaty System and its potential to protect, or otherwise, the complex precarities of Antarctic environments. It would be fascinating to know what Monteath thinks the trajectory of science and exploration might be over the next 100 years – for me, this was the only omission in an otherwise comprehensive and engaging social, physical and cultural history of such an important geographical Antarctic feature.

The book is much more than just a delight for the armchair traveller and historian. It blends the charm of the adventurous; delights in idiosyncrasies such as John Harrison's team who rigged their sledge with a tent floor to act as a sail for the latter part of their descent; with the importance of the science and the complexity of the operations required to deliver the research. It faces tragedy directly when describing the TE901 crash and the difficulties of conducting such a large-scale recovery operation. The book is as much about Antarctica as a single mountain as it shifts from individuals' hardships to the cultural and spiritual expressions generated from those journeys. For Monteath, "in a noisy, cluttered world, perhaps Antarctica's greatest blessing and solace is silence. It is a place of wonder that spiritually nourishes us all" (p. 27). It might struggle to maintain that essence as the Anthropocene progresses, but it certainly emphasises why there is a need.

Bob Frame
Gateway Antarctica, University of Canterbury,
Christchurch, New Zealand
Email: bob.frame@canterbury.ac.nz

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