

Reviews

NANSEN: THE EXPLORER AS HERO. Roland Huntford. 1997. London: Duckworth. xiv + 610 p, illustrated, hard cover. ISBN 0-7156-2740-6. £25.00.

One of the most difficult tasks in the field of history is writing a biography that is both popular and that also meets the criteria of an academic historian. Indeed, although biographies are a major part of the current book trade, and ones with the right subjects can sell in huge numbers, they regularly show little knowledge of modern historiography and tend to follow the conventional narrative tradition, linearly pursuing the careers, relationships, journeys, and experiences of their subjects.

While such biographies may be highly successful on the marketing front, they are generally a disappointment in the academic or scholarly sense. They frequently show a failing in the understanding not only of current developments in social, cultural, or imperial history, but of different national, social, institutional, and geographical settings of varying time periods. And they tend to fail the sequence of criteria for judging them that the imperial historian John MacKenzie (1994) has laid out:

How well do they use the life to help explain an era? How valuable are they for the scholarly reader and how far do they comply with the quality of scholarship and referencing that s/he would demand?...Alternatively, do they popularize work on the period for a wider audience, fulfilling some basic standards of accuracy and interpretation? How far are they seduced by that age-old biographical trap of seeing everything through the eyes of their subjects?...Moreover the question arises as to how significantly do these biographies develop or depart from literary and historical traditions.

The massive difficulty in producing a biography that fulfils not only such scholarly criteria but the demands of an audience with an insatiable appetite for the thrilling 'page-turner' is obvious. Yet, that is exactly what the master of the polar biography, Roland Huntford, has done in his latest book. *Nansen: the explorer as hero* is an effort that will pass the acid test both of scholar and of popular reader.

The image of Fridtjof Nansen, of course, looms huge in both Arctic and Antarctic exploration. His combination of intellect, creativity, and actual accomplishments is perhaps unequalled in the history of exploration, polar or otherwise. And his role of mentor, of what Huntford calls 'the supreme polar oracle' (page 387), is unique, not to be equalled even by the major institutional figures such as John Barrow or Roderick Murchison, who were behind so much of nineteenth-century exploration.

Born in 1861, Nansen became an expert skier and an early advocate of the use of skis in polar exploration. He

came to international attention in 1888 after accomplishing the first crossing of Greenland, a feat notable not only for its completion but for the planning and originality that went into it: Nansen was the first person to attempt to cross Greenland starting on the largely uninhabited eastern side and traversing to the inhabited west. By being left by ship off the east coast, he turned previous thinking on its head, burning his bridges of escape and forcing his party to continue to successful completion or to die.

Nansen emerged from his crossing of Greenland as a national hero and an international figure of prominence. Five years later, he launched a new venture that drew sceptics throughout the polar community. Spurred by the discovery off southwest Greenland of relics from the *Jeannette* expedition, an idea took root, a plan by which Nansen could 'take note of the forces of Nature...and try to work *with* them and not *against* them' (page 148). Nansen proposed to build a ship that could withstand the pressure of the ice in the Arctic basin, to insert her into the ice, and to drift with the current that must have taken the relics of *Jeannette* from near the New Siberian Islands to Greenland. This would allow him to reach the North Pole, or very near to it. Nansen's concept of a polar current and his belief in the feasibility of building such a ship were both roundly condemned by the international polar community. But he pursued his plan, hiring the architect Colin Archer to build a ship with sloping sides and rounded bilges, one on which the ice could not get a grip, and that, instead of being crushed by the floes, would rise under pressure. The result was that greatest of polar ships, *Fram*.

Nansen's subsequent drift in *Fram*, during which he continued to show his innovation and ability to improve skis, sledges, clothing, and cooking material for varying polar conditions; his leaving the ship with one companion, Hjalmar Johansen, and their attainment of a farthest north; their desperate retreat to Franz Josef Land, where they wintered in miserable conditions; Nansen's famous meeting with Frederick George Jackson; and his return to Norway virtually coinciding with that of *Fram*, were the stuff of which legends spring, and Nansen became an international celebrity of a status equalled perhaps only by Henry Morton Stanley among explorers of that age.

But Nansen was much more than just a polar explorer. As a young invertebrate zoologist before his crossing of Greenland, he had been one of the founders of the neuron theory, leading not only to his PhD, but helping give rise to the development of modern neurology. Following the return of *Fram*, he served as one of the focal points in the Norwegian struggle for independence from Sweden and, after that was obtained, as his country's first envoy to the Court of St James, where he became a close friend of King Edward VII. And, later in life, he was an active representa-

tive of the League of Nations, ultimately receiving a Nobel Peace Prize for his work in repatriating prisoners of war from World War I, his efforts to alleviate the misery caused by famine in post-revolution Russia, and his successful guidance on the exchange of refugees between Turkey and Greece after redvisions of their territory.

Huntford deals with all of these stages of Nansen's life with elegant writing backed up by his usual impeccable research. This book took the author more than a dozen years to produce, and that extreme care shows. Huntford spent a vast amount of time mastering all of those areas in which Nansen had been expert, including neurobiology, design of skis and sledges, a full comprehension of ice, and the political, social, and cultural dynamics of Edwardian England, Leninist Russia, and pre- and post-independence Norway. The result is a book of enormous scholarship, taken from an almost incomprehensible number of original sources, numbering among them official documents from such varied sources as the League of Nations, the International Red Cross, and the governments of Norway, Sweden, and Britain; diaries, journals, and correspondence of hundreds of individuals; and newspaper reports. Huntford also lists hundreds of articles and books in his references section, many of them serving as background on a wide variety of cultural and social issues — such as the Norwegian fascination with skiing or the background of appointing personnel to the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 — so that no nuance of events in which Nansen played a part or by which he was influenced could be missed.

The personal side of Nansen is also developed in the book. Although to the outside world, he was brilliant, talented, and the epitome of the modern Viking — tall, blond, handsome, and in marvellous physical condition — he was, in fact, restless, 'ever seeking satisfaction, whether in science, exploration, or politics, he was trapped by the illusory search for happiness' (page 1). Thus, Huntford reveals Nansen's own weaknesses as a leader; his difficulty in making close friends with men; his disappointing relationships with those who sought his guidance and help, such as Otto Sverdrup, Roald Amundsen, and Robert Falcon Scott; his indecisiveness about continuing his career of exploration, and his naiveté in his interplay with political figures such as Philip Noel-Baker of the League of Nations (himself carefully portrayed) and V.I. Lenin, who used Nansen to further the motives of the new Bolshevik regime. The book also explores Nansen's altogether different relationships with women — with whom he felt much more companionable, but whom he always seemed to relate to better at a distance. This was particularly true about his long-suffering wife Eva, with whom he could always most easily communicate by letter, rather than in person.

Ultimately, what is so striking about *Nansen* is that it combines what an academic would desire of a scholarly book with a lively, fast-paced portrait of an intriguingly complex man. It is not necessarily easy to feel a close

affinity for Nansen himself; he was truly, as Huntford proclaims, a 'Renaissance ideal of the universal man,' but he was also a man who was a remote and, at times, tyrannical husband and father, and who was so reserved that, only after three-quarters of a year sharing a sleeping bag with Johansen after they had left *Fram*, did he allow Johansen to address him with his surname and the familiar 'you' rather than the polite form of address; even then, there was no use of Christian names. But one can certainly warm to Huntford's biography, with the author's mastery of his subject, as well as his time and culture, with Huntford's remarkable verbal portraits of the Arctic, his subtle humour, and his ability to entertain, even thrill, while at the same time educating.

Huntford has previously written two superbly researched and crafted biographies of polar explorers (1979, 1985). This effort, which Huntford thinks of as the completion of his 'cycle of modern polar exploration' (page ix), stands tall, even next to his own previous works. For those of us who have been eagerly anticipating this book for more than a decade, it has been well worth the wait. (Beau Riffenburgh, Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge, Lensfield Road, Cambridge CB2 1ER.)

References

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AN ALIEN IN ANTARCTICA: REFLECTIONS UPON FORTY YEARS OF EXPLORATION AND RESEARCH ON THE FROZEN CONTINENT. Charles Swithinbank. 1997. Blacksburg, VA: McDonald & Woodward Publishing. xviii + 214 p, illustrated, hard cover. ISBN 0-939923-43-2. \$US49.95.

Lest anyone should think that the author of this book is a visitor from outer space, he is in fact the well-known glaciologist who was head of the Earth Sciences Division, British Antarctic Survey, until his retirement in 1986, and who is noted for his down-to-Earth approach to life in general and field research in particular. His wealth of experience — mainly in the Antarctic but also in the Arctic, on land (or ice), on or under the sea, and in the air — is unsurpassed. The book covers only a fraction of his 40 years' experience, namely the periods he spent on United States Antarctic operations. The title of the book reflects the American term for a foreign national, however friendly and companionable, on an American enterprise. The reader is allowed only brief glimpses — in a few sentences — of Swithinbank's time successively with the Norwegian–British–Swedish Antarctic Expedition, the Defence Research Board of Canada, the Soviet Antarctic operation, the Royal Navy, the Scott Polar Research Insti-