

## Reviews

**THIS DISTANT AND UNSURVEYED COUNTRY: A WOMAN'S WINTER AT BAFFIN ISLAND, 1857–58.** W. Gillies Ross. 1997. Montreal, Kingston, London, Buffalo: McGill–Queen's University Press. xlv + 258 p, illustrated, hard cover. ISBN 0-7735-1674-3. £20.95.

In June 1857, William Penny, the Scottish whaling captain and Arctic explorer, took two ships, *Lady Franklin* and *Sophia*, from Aberdeen into the Davis Strait in pursuit of right whales. He was accompanied by his wife, Margaret, and his 12-year-old son William on a wintering voyage that was to last until the autumn of the following year. This book, as the subtitle suggests, is woven round Margaret Penny's journal of the voyage.

Although the journal has a curiosity value, being written by the first white woman to winter on Baffin Island, in itself it is rather disappointing. It has none of the literary merits of many other journals of the time: it fails to catch the moods of the crew, and has no real power of description of scenery, events, or people. Mrs Penny didn't seem to have an eye for what would be of interest for those who might read the journal later. Indeed, the journal is so pedestrian that she must have assumed that few others would ever see it: she must certainly not have expected that it would ever be published.

It is particularly disappointing in its lack of the insights one might have expected from a woman's point of view. For example, in spite of the fact that this was her first voyage to the Arctic and that she was leaving some of her children behind, she seems to have had little desire to dwell on the departure of the ship from her home port, Aberdeen. Nor did she show any interest in describing in detail living conditions and living space aboard ship during the long days and nights of the Arctic winter. Similarly, there are no exclusively feminine comments on dress, diet, hygiene, or health. Indeed, although she had her husband with her, even he only merited an occasional mention; and on one occasion when he was away from the ship and overdue by two days, her feelings were merely expressed in her journal by the under-emotional entry: 'I spent a most anxious & sleepless night.'

However, in spite of these weaknesses and omissions, the great strength of this book is not in the journal itself, but in the contribution of the author. W. Gillies Ross is perhaps uniquely qualified to write this book. As a young man, he was a naval cadet, and so has had experience of the sea and ships. He is now professor emeritus of geography at Bishop's University, Canada, and his academic interest has, for 30 years, been the Arctic and Arctic whaling. In addition, he has been a regular visitor to Arctic Canada. The depth and breadth of his research are confirmed by the many acknowledgements at the beginning of the book and by the impressive list of references at the end. But

experience and research would count for little were it not for his innate skill, humanity, and enthusiasm as a writer and interpreter.

Gil Ross' approach has been to divide Mrs Penny's journal into chapters. Although this is rather arbitrary, it is an approach that has worked extremely well, because Ross has reinforced each chapter with his own commentary, and these commentaries make this book a work of the highest order. Clearly the author is writing from a knowledge of Arctic whaling in general, and of William Penny in particular, which is unsurpassed. Because of his interest and confidence in his subject, he has produced a book that can take its place among the best contributions to the history of Scottish Arctic whaling.

The Scottish Arctic whaling industry began in earnest in the middle of the eighteenth century, at first from ports around the Firth of Forth, but later from ports farther north — Dundee, Aberdeen, and especially Peterhead. Since ships from Peterhead alone carried crews totalling 1500 men in the mid-nineteenth century, it is clear that the industry, for a time at least, must have been an important employer.

The whales were hunted not for their flesh, but for their blubber, which could be rendered down into a relatively pure oil, and for whalebone. Although whalebone was used mainly in stiffening ladies' fashionable dresses, it also had other uses, making umbrella frames, window frames, sieves, and so on. However, the importance of the contribution of whale oil in the Industrial Revolution is perhaps not fully appreciated. At the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, it was one of the few oils of sufficient purity to be used as a lubricant in the machinery developed to meet the burgeoning needs of the textile industry, farm mechanisation, and transport. It also gave a relatively bright light when burned, and was used as an illuminant in the newly established factories.

By the time Penny sailed in June 1857, the right whale was scarce everywhere. It had already been hunted almost to extinction in the Greenland Sea and was now facing the same fate in the Davis Strait. But Penny had a deserved reputation as an innovator. A few years earlier, he had opened up Cumberland Sound in Baffin Island as a hunting ground. Now, with this voyage of 1857–1858, he was planning to go a stage further and establish a permanent shore station on Kekerten Island in Cumberland Sound. This would have a number of repercussions. Firstly, Scotsmen would have to winter regularly at the station. Secondly, the whalers could employ Inuit to assist in the pursuit. Thirdly, the whalers would be on hand when the whales migrated to and from their breeding and feeding grounds. Finally, the blubber could be rendered down to oil quickly on shore rather than be stored in barrels to await

treatment on return to the home port. In his commentary, Ross discusses the consequences of each of these as they arise in Margaret Penny's journal, and expands on the journal entries to a greater or lesser extent using his own vast and detailed knowledge of the Arctic and Arctic whaling. In addition, he has provided further specific information about William Penny, a man whose contribution to Arctic exploration has never been fully recognised, even in his own country.

As has been said elsewhere: 'This is truly the work of a mature scholar at his peak,' and it is 'An exceptionally fine book.' This reviewer agrees wholeheartedly with these comments. W. Gillies Ross has taken the entries in a rather spare journal and, by his own skill, knowledge, insight, and experience, has brought life, light, and humour to it. (Alex R. Buchan, 38 Arran Avenue, Peterhead, Aberdeenshire AB42 1PZ.)

**THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF HG PONTING.** Beau Riffenburgh and Liz Cruwys. 1998. London: Discovery Gallery. 136 p, illustrated, hard cover. £19.95.

Technically innovative, artistically talented, the embodiment of a turn-of-the-century, globe-trotting photographer, Herbert George Ponting in his hey-day was regarded by his peers as one of the greatest exponents of the art and craft of the camera. Today he is best remembered as the camera artist, as he preferred to call himself, on Robert Falcon Scott's last and tragic Antarctic expedition. In actuality, a good deal of his best work originated on earlier travels, from Japan, China, and India in the east to the Swiss and French Alps in the west. This book is lavishly illustrated throughout with reproductions (many full-page) of Ponting's photographs, some 'artistic,' others essentially documentary. Accompanying these illustrations is a readable and well-researched life of the man, containing much of interest concerning his technique and equipment. When Ponting died a bankrupt man in 1935, his collection of glass plates was bought by the Paul Popper Photographic Agency, London, to help pay his creditors. In their premises, the collection languished for many years, being eventually sold in 1990 to a Nottingham-based photographer. The plates are now safely preserved for posterity in purpose-built accommodation. A limited edition of 20 prints from this book are available from the publishers. Both authors are polar historians of repute, and jointly responsible for the editing of *Polar Record*.

The opening chapters are devoted to Ponting's early life and travels. Born in Salisbury, England, he was the second of a family of eight and destined to follow his father into the world of banking, a profession from which he speedily removed himself to seek his fortune in California. Here he dabbled unsuccessfully in fruit-farming and goldmining, eventually finding his true vocation — photography. A keen interest in the newly popular stereoscopic process led to the production of some prize-winning photographs, one of which, 'Mules at a California round-up,' attracted publishers and led to a commission to

visit, in turn, Japan, Korea, and Manchuria. Subsequently, on the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War in 1904, Ponting found himself accredited to the Japanese Army in Manchuria on behalf of *Harper's Weekly*. It was the time spent in Japan that really fired the photographer's imagination and was to be the inspiration behind his subsequent travel book, *In Lotus-land Japan* (1910). Seven beautifully reproduced plates, representing some of his best work from this period follow chapter 2, those of Mount Fuji being a foretaste of his subsequent studies of Mount Erebus in Antarctica.

Following Manchuria, the strict chronology of Ponting's travels becomes imprecise and one comes to regret the absence of personal journals. Certainly he was in northern China and India between 1906 and 1907; his view of the Great Wall, taken with a long-distance lens, and his pictures of the Taj Mahal are stunning. It was about this time that Ponting met with the mysterious and much-travelled Cecil Meares, subsequently in charge of Captain Scott's dogs. It was Meares who, in 1909, introduced Ponting to Scott, who was determined that photography should play a major role in illustrating the scientific and topographical work in the Antarctic. Previous Antarctic expeditions had made use of the camera, but none could boast of a professional photographer. Thus was Ponting hired at £5 a week — £1 more than the scientists — having turned down a more lucrative offer to tour the empire for the Northcliffe press. Scott's confidence in his choice was not to be misplaced, as his own diary entries give evidence.

In chapters 4 and 6 will be found references to Ponting's *modus operandi* detailing the infinite pains he took to ensure that everything needful for successful cold-climate photography was attended to. Ponting's photographic laboratories, both on *Terra Nova* and subsequently in the expedition's hut on Ross Island, were equipped with every conceivable facility, including a developer for cinematograph film. His field equipment, all incredibly weighty by present-day standards, included two cinecameras, glass-plate cameras as well as those using roll film, and cameras for telephotography and scientific work. Invaluable was the slide projector to boost morale during the dark months of winter.

From the moment when *Terra Nova* entered the pack ice on the voyage south to the time when Ponting finally returned to civilization in January 1912, he seemed to spend every waking hour of the day — and of the night too, using flash — recording every feature he could of land and sea-ice formations, as well as the seals, whales, skuas, and penguins that so delighted audiences back home. A selection of the best of these Antarctic photographs is reproduced in the book, including eight full-page numbered plates of the best known. Among these are many of Ponting's portraits and groups of his comrades, most famous of all being that of Scott writing up his diary. One can only regret the impossibility of Ponting accompanying the Pole Party at least to the foot of the Beardmore Glacier. He himself was probably frustrated by the scenic limita-