Book Reviews


At the dawn of the 21st century, blank areas denoting the unexplored have vanished from the maps of our planet. Nonetheless, adventurers and explorers continue to find new challenges by climbing unnamed peaks, traversing jungles, circumnavigating the globe with balloons, or venturing into deep seas and the polar regions. *In the Teeth of the Wind* by the Belgians Alain Hubert and Dixie Dansercoer with Michel Brent, relates one such story of modern exploration. More than just the diary of Hubert’s and Dansercoer’s 1997–1998 journey across the Antarctic, this book combines modern travel reporting with a story of physical challenges and accomplishments, scientific research, personal relationships, and adventure.

The book opens with a preface by Baron Gaston de Gerlache, president of the Belgian National Committee for Antarctic Research, who places this adventure within the context of a remarkable line of early Belgian Antarctic exploration. A 210-page description of the planning and preparation, and of the journey itself, follows. The first chapter (12 pages) briefly reviews the history of Belgian exploration in Antarctica. It introduces Huber and Dansercoer, their previous adventures, and the planning of their trip. The development of sail-supported sports and travel is also covered, which leads into how the idea of crossing Antarctica by these means grew into a reality. In their traverse of the Antarctic continent the two-person team used power-kites (sails harnessed to the skiers’ bodies) to help them pull their two sledges across the ice shield. The authors point out the meticulous attention paid to gear and food selection, mental preparation, and achieving the required physical fitness.

Then follows “The Journal,” a 156-page account of the journey. This section, written in the style of a travel journal giving a day-to-day report, is the core of the book. The at-times repetitive description of 99 days of travel is skillfully enlivened by intertwining personal monologues from the two authors. This sharing of their thoughts provides insight into their mental commitment, personal relationship, and growth during the journey.

The book traces their Antarctic traverse along a route from the former Belgian research station Roi Baudouin Base (presently known as Blue Tourist Base) via the South Pole to McMurdo. The expedition suffers from an abundance of problems right from the start. However, these setbacks are eventually overcome with skill and determination. Help from Michael Brent becomes critical when one of the sledges fails and needs to be replaced. The scientific component of the project is also documented. Stratigraphic, temperature, and snow density data were regularly recorded. Snow samples were collected and investigated by macrophotography for shape and form of snow crystals and by isotopic analysis for paleoclimatic research.

This book is well written and readable. Another compelling feature is the 96 color photographs, a few of which are in double-page format. Four maps and graphs are used to illustrate the route. The book concludes with five appendices: (1) Power Kites for Traction (4 pp.), (2) The Scientific Mission (3 pp.), (3) The Polar Diet (7 pp.), (4) Equipment List (4 pp.), and (5) Previous Crossings or Attempted Crossings of the Antarctic (5 pp.).

*In the Teeth of the Wind* is easy reading that will appeal to a wide range of enthusiasts, from the hard-core mountaineer and Arctic adventurer to the mainstream traveler, and to all of those who will never give up the dream of wandering in the footsteeps of their childhood heroes, or beyond.

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What is the attraction of the Arctic? To many it is the challenge of living in a difficult and unusual environment. To some, it is the history of human settlement and heroic exploration in the days of wooden ships and iron men. To many in science, it is the unique and substantial contribution of the high latitudes to the Earth’s biological and physical systems. But to almost all of us, it is, in addition, an aesthetic attraction.

I crave snow-topped mountains, dreary wastes, and the cruel Northern sea with its far horizons at the edge of the world where infinite space begins. Here skies are clearer and deeper and, for the greater wonders they reveal, a thousand times more eloquent of the eternal mystery than those of softer lands. (Kent 1996)

This book is a beautifully produced catalog of William Bradford’s landscape art as represented by a special retrospective organized by the New Bedford Whaling Museum. However, it is more than an exhibition catalog, with a fascinating discussion of Bradford’s life and times by Kugler, a chapter on his mastering of form and development of style by the noted marine historian Ronnberg, and a discussion of his remarkable travel folio by Greenhalgh. The quality of the color reproductions is excellent, and the word “arctic” is misspelled only once in a chapter title. The book is replete with information on the life and history in the New England maritime and the coasts of Labrador and West Greenland in the mid–19th century.

William Bradford (1823–1892) was a lineal descendent of the governor of Plymouth Colony. After an unsuccessful career as a shopkeeper in New Bedford, Massachusetts, he turned to art, specializing in carefully rendered “ship portraits.” He became enamored of the scenery farther north and managed to promote numerous expeditions to Labrador and Greenland, reaching 75°N latitude in Melville Bay. On many of these trips he took along photographers so that he could use these early pictures in addition to field sketches in oils or charcoal/graphite as preliminary studies for studio canvases. Along with his contemporaries Frederic Church and Albert Bierstadt, he became famous for huge, spectacular landscapes that became well known in America and Europe. He also produced a large book of photographs (*The Arctic Regions*) and gave lectures (“The Bradford Recitals”) on the Arctic that included notes about Norse expeditions in Greenland, indigenous peoples, glaciers, and icebergs and were accompanied by Inuit songs. Following his death, his reputation (along with that of Bierstadt and Church) declined, but his work has attracted renewed interest with retrospectives beginning in 1969.

Bradford’s landscapes of sailing ships and the arctic coasts show incredible and accurate detail, and he was obviously fascinated by