

South Georgia, Gateway to Antarctica

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SOUTH GEORGIA, GATEWAY TO ANTARCTICA. By Ludwig Kohl-Larsen (English translation by William Barr), Norwich, U.K.: Bluntisham Books and The Erskine Press, 2003 (original in German, 1930). 295 pages, 3 maps, 39 illustrations. £24.95/\$45.00. ISBN 1852970758.

Ludwig Kohl-Larsen was an early twentieth-century naturalist and explorer with a university education in medicine and natural history. He studied and wrote extensively about animal behavior, anthropology, ethnology, paleontology, and geology in regions as widely scattered as Lapland, the subantarctic islands, and Africa. In this book he describes an expedition to the subantarctic island of South Georgia in the 1928–1929 austral summer to film and study wildlife and geography, accompanied by his wife and a photographer. He was introduced to South Georgia in 1911 when he joined the Second German Antarctic Expedition as the expedition doctor. En route to Antarctica he suffered a severe attack of appendicitis and was put ashore at Grytviken whaling station in South Georgia, where he recovered in the home of Captain C. A. Larsen, after whom the Larsen ice shelf is named. He later married Capt. Larsen's daughter and changed his name from Kohl to Kohl-Larsen. Returning to South Georgia in 1928, he conducted his studies by hitching rides on whaling vessels from one remote bay or island to another around South Georgia, camping for a few weeks at each site and exploring the region via three- or four-day sledge journeys. There was no radio communication between his party and the whaling station, and transportation was loosely arranged around the schedule of the whalers and the weather.

The book is essentially an expanded diary of these camping trips and sledge journeys. It focuses generally on bird and animal behavior, the weather, and the landscape, but the star performers are king penguins, gentoo penguins, elephant seals, skua gulls, and terrible weather. These clearly commanded the attention and interest of the party, and the mating, courtship, and other rituals of the penguins and

seals, the voracity of the skuas, and the ferocity of the storms are described in considerable detail throughout the book. Kohl-Larsen's descriptions include numerous personal comments that give insight into his temperament and the nature of the times. During one harrowing sledge trip, when they had lost most of their provisions in an ice-covered stream and were pinned down in a blizzard, he exclaims that their most valuable possessions are first, their sleeping bags, and second, "one's pipe!" Not a word about the tent. Several weeks along in their season he is relieved that his wife has taken over all the cooking duties—work that is "inappropriate for a man." He seems to revel in describing the discomforts imposed on them by the fierce and frequent storms and often compares their lot somewhat dismissively with the lab scientists who will eventually analyze their collections. He is, not unexpectedly, a strong conservationist, and his description and discussion of the whaling industry has a very contemporary ring. By 1914 right whales were already completely protected, humpbacks could be hunted only one week in the year, and by 1928 there was widespread concern about protecting the blue and fin whales. Kohl-Larsen decries the greed of the whaling industry and its unwillingness to acknowledge the problem of steadily declining catches.

The book is quite readable in small bites. It is an excellent translation, but it doesn't have a climax (i.e., it is not a survival tale), and tends to be repetitious. I found it interesting and enjoyable to read in 20- to 30-page segments, but tedious if I tried to spend much longer at one sitting. The maps and photos represent a lot of work under difficult conditions. The photos are black and white, as expected for that era. They appear to be of good quality but are not well reproduced, and they are not well placed in the book; i.e., they are often placed far from the relevant text. The maps are interesting and very useful. All the geographic features mentioned in the text can be easily found, and it is easy to follow the routes of all their traverses. Even their campsites are well marked. Although it is not explicitly shown, one can see the route (with help from the text) taken by Shackleton, Worsley, and Crean in their epic crossing of South Georgia in 1916.

The book will appeal to persons interested in polar regions and in southern hemisphere bird and animal life. Certainly, those who have visited penguin rookeries will understand how "the next few hours passed in a flash as we observed the birds," and how "one could stand for hours in an unreal dream—without becoming tired of it." For those who have not had such an experience, Kohl-Larsen provides a window into one of the most fascinating phenomena of the avian world.

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