

Eight Men in a Crate—The Ordeal of the Advance Party of the Trans-Antarctic Expedition, 1955–1957

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Book Review

EIGHT MEN IN A CRATE—THE ORDEAL OF THE ADVANCE PARTY OF THE TRANS-ANTARCTIC EXPEDITION, 1955–1957. By Anthea Arnold, based on the diaries of Rainer Goldsmith. Norwich, U.K.: Erskine Press, 2007. 144 pp. £12.75 (paperback). ISBN 1852970952.

Anthea Arnold tells the story of the harrowing adventure of the eight-man advance party of the Trans-Antarctic Expedition (TAE) through the 1956 Antarctic winter at Shackleton Base on the front of the Filchner Ice Shelf, based on the journal of the physician, Rainer Goldsmith. The ship *Theron* deposited the men and departed before the hut could be built. Their coal (why in the world coal instead of fuel oil as used by other Antarctic expeditions of the period?) and many other supplies were lost when the fast ice on which they were unloaded, broke off at the beginning of the winter. They would have had nothing to burn coal in anyway, as far as I could tell. The men slept in tents and used a Sno-Cat crate as their cooking and living quarters for most of the winter, while they painfully worked on constructing the hut, used during the winter of 1957. I wish the author had reported the temperatures as they dropped through the winter and later rose after the sun reappeared. The minimum temperature of -63°F was noted on 26 July; the following winter at Ellsworth Station 50 miles to the west, we recorded a minimum of -67°F on 10 May.

The author rightly accuses Vivian Fuchs, the TAE leader, of poor planning for this first winter, as opposed to the TAE in general. As I read the book, I could not understand the purpose of this small group wintering over. Could it have been to have a British presence at this location just prior to the International Geophysical Year (IGY) in 1957–1958? They seemed to accomplish nothing except meteorological observations, and a 20 day exploration trip using dogs, for about 50 miles to the south in the summer of 1956–1957, just before the relief ship, *Magga Dan*, arrived. This trip could as well have been made a few months later. Although the party had a Sno-Cat and a weasel (both motor vehicles, usually in poor condition) they seemed to prefer dogs in spite of the fact that the TAE used Sno-Cats for the 1957–1958 crossing of Antarctica. I recall an American scientist, Dick Penney, who wintered in the early 1960s at Wilkes Station with the Australians, telling me that they used the dogs to pull killed seals up to the station from the sea. They killed the seals to feed the dogs. The author obviously has a romantic yearning for the days of dogs. However, by the IGY, aircraft and oversnow motor vehicles such as Sno-Cats were the preferred methods of long-range traverses across thousands of miles of the interior of the Antarctic Ice Sheet, not only by the TAE, but by the U.S.A., U.S.S.R., Argentine, French, and Australian expeditions.

There are a number of curious gaps in the knowledge displayed by the members of the party. For example, although

their situation seemed desperate at times, they did not seem to know of Argentina's IGY Belgrano Station only 15 miles to the west on the ice shelf. They seemed to have had no contact with this group, and thought they were 50 miles away. Actually, in the 1957 spring, the Argentines made a visit to Shackleton Base, using weasels.

The book has a number of nicely reproduced color photographs and many poor quality reproductions of black and white photographs. The maps are poor; e.g. one map has unlabeled latitude and longitude lines and a statement: "1:200,000 scale" which may have been the scale before it was reduced to page size. There are numerous minor errors in the text such as "British-Norwegian Expedition" rather than its correct name of "Norwegian-British-Swedish Expedition." This sort of mistake sets some folk's teeth on edge (particularly Norwegians and Swedes). There is no bibliography or even a mention of the Fuchs and Hillary 1958 book, *The Crossing of Antarctica*, which also describes the first winter at Shackleton Base. An index would be useful.

Despite these criticisms, this book is a very interesting and valuable contribution to the sparse Antarctic literature of the IGY period, in contrast to the numerous repetitive accounts published in recent years of the "heroic age" in the early 20th century. Certainly the author is nearly correct in her assertion that the "eight men in a crate" experienced one of the toughest Antarctic winters, excepting the five-man Campbell group on Inexpressible Island in the Ross Sea during the 1912 winter. Other difficult winters that come to mind are the three-man party at South Ice (also part of the TAE) in 1957, Byrd's partial winter "alone" on the Ross Ice Shelf south of Little America in 1934, and one winter at Vostok (in the 1960s) of about nine Russians, who, after a fire destroyed their power plant, lived in a hut at about 3700 m elevation heated by an improvised stove burning fuel oil.

During the following winter (1957), I and 38 other Americans wintered at Ellsworth Station 50 miles to the west. We had contact with the men at Shackleton and drove our Sno-Cats around the east end of the Chasm, discussed briefly in this book. I spent an hour alone at Shackleton after being dropped off by a helicopter to take a gravity observation in February 1959. Only a corner of the hut and a couple of antennas were visible. This was the last few time times Shackleton was visited before it drifted into the Weddell Sea as part of an iceberg.

I wonder what happened with Sally when Goldsmith returned home?

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