
History has rarely accorded as much attention to a single expedition as that given to the British Antarctic (Terra Nova) Expedition of 1910-13 led by Captain R.F. Scott. Frank Debenham, an Australian, was taken on by Scott as junior geologist. His diaries have been lovingly edited by his daughter June Back, who has supplemented them with extracts from letters and explanatory details. The diary entries were intermittent and not written for publication, but they retain all the freshness and enthusiasm of a young man embarking on the greatest adventure of his life. While the fate of Scott and the Southern Party has held centre stage for 80 years, very substantial scientific results were obtained by field parties exploring the coasts of Victoria Land.

Debenham, or Deb, as he was known, was a member of the four-man Western Party during the first summer and the second Western Party during the second summer. He was a master of plane-table surveying as well as an astute geologist. The diary contains many drawings and sketch maps. The sketch maps are clear but of uncertain scale and orientation, so I found it easiest to follow the party’s sledding routes by using the full array of modern large-scale topographic and satellite image maps. Both parties made the exciting discoveries of mumified seals far inland in the so-called dry valleys. Deb was always perceptive in his understanding of natural phenomena. He found a headless fish on top of the McMurdo Ice Shelf and later used the finding to formulate a theory on how the ice shelf was formed. Half a century wrong, but later had to eat his words. Deb was always perceptive in his understanding of natural phenomena. He found a headless fish on top of the McMurdo Ice Shelf and later used the finding to formulate a theory on how the ice shelf was formed. Half a century later, a New Zealand glaciologist claimed to have “proved” the theory wrong, but later had to eat his words. Deb had it right. He was a romantic as well as a scientist, and this is reflected in his writings: “This morning the clouds hung like candle snuffers over Mount Discovery.” Instead of camps I, II, and III, they had Camp Labyrinth, Honeycomb Camp, Mushroom Camp, Alcove Camp and many other imaginative names. For the reviewer — an Antarctic traveller from another age — the narrative carries an astonishing yet unspoken acceptance of high levels of risk as an occupational hazard. Clothing was grossly inadequate, bad falls were common, and they frequently dropped (unroped) into crevasses. Snow blindness and a headless fish on top of the McMurdo Ice Shelf and later used the finding to formulate a theory on how the ice shelf was formed. Half a century wrong, but later had to eat his words. Deb had it right. He was a romantic as well as a scientist, and this is reflected in his writings: “This morning the clouds hung like candle snuffers over Mount Discovery.” Instead of camps I, II, and III, they had Camp Labyrinth, Honeycomb Camp, Mushroom Camp, Alcove Camp and many other imaginative names. For the reviewer — an Antarctic traveller from another age — the narrative carries an astonishing yet unspoken acceptance of high levels of risk as an occupational hazard. Clothing was grossly inadequate, bad falls were common, and they frequently dropped (unroped) into crevasses. Snow blindness and


Robert Weeden’s Messages from Earth is itself a message that should be conveyed not only to inhabitants of northern climes, for whom it is primarily intended, but also to humankind in general, regardless of latitude or attitude. The author avails of 30 years of experience, insight, and scholarship, gained mostly while a professor of natural resources at the University of Alaska, to produce a thoroughly captivating book. The result is a primer on living “gently, comfortably, and sustainably” in the North. More importantly, however, Weeden stresses that such an existence is untenable unless founded and guided by an ethic towards nature. Messages from Earth outlines this ethic — an ethic based on ideals but couched in the realities of nature and the demands and processes of a modern society.

The tone of Messages is set in the introduction. There the author brings to sharp focus the inherent conflicts that have arisen worldwide between cultural evolution, with its speed and flexibility, and genetic evolution, with its vastly slower adaptive response time. Weeden points out that the most universal failing of recent cultural evolution is its inability to adjust its numerous forms to the rhythms, character, and physical limitations of regional environments, but he believes that humanity is beginning to realize that exploitative societies have "had their day" and that human survival now depends on a dramatic reorientation of thought and behavior.