
Readers of modern adventure-travel literature have, perhaps unconsciously, become accustomed to a common style in which danger and hardship tend to be deliberately understated, self-portraits are often humorously self-deprecatory, and the book's intent is unabashedly to pay off the expedition debts. In On Skis to the North Pole we have the Soviet version of this genre and it is a very different beast indeed.

In 1979, seven Soviet skiers travelled 1500 km from a tiny island near Yakutia to the North Pole. In so doing, they made the first land crossing to the Pole from the Eurasian continent. The story of the journey is told by Vladimir Snegiryev, a senior journalist for the state-run newspaper Pravda, which officially sponsored the expedition. Although not a participant in the trip to the Pole, Snegiryev writes knowledgeably because of his intimate involvement in organizing the expedition and taking part in several previous training trips.

Not surprisingly, the book has a heavy ideological tenor. It is the literary equivalent of monolithic Soviet representational art with sturdy-thewed heroes gazing stoically into the future with tools in gnarled hands. It rings with allusions to Valour, the Will to Win, Duty, Patriotic Sacrifice, being a Man, and fulfillment of individual and collective potentials. The expedition members, each in separate vignettes, are characterized as bursting with human virtues. In only a few tantalizing glimpses are we allowed to see their individual foibles. All in all, the book appears to be intended originally as a tale of moral inspiration designed to lead citizens to healthy, active, goal-directed lives and to broaden concepts of the possible.

However, it would be a shame to write off this book as merely a socially inspired tract. It is, in fact, a good book about a great trip. The leader, Dmitri Shparo, is a hard-driving man who single-mindedly worked for more than ten years to develop the support, equipment, and experience necessary for the journey. He started out doing small, privately funded ski trips and finally built up enough credibility to appear to be bristly individualists. This is most apparent in the person of Vasili Sishkarev, a poetry-writing gardener from Kazakhstan who disappeared nearly three-quarters of a century ago, the whalemen

This book is a celebration of a way of life and a breed of men that disappeared nearly three-quarters of a century ago, the whalemen (mostly British, some American) who braved the sea, ice and snow of the Davis Strait region in pursuit of bowhead whales from 1820 to 1913. It is not a dry historical treatise crammed with facts, figures and statistics, but a highly readable account of the experiences of nineteenth-century whalemen in the Davis Strait fishery. The layout and design of this book are delightful. It is copiously illustrated with photographs, journal extracts and sketches, portraits, handbills, etc., and these are particularly well positioned to illustrate relevant sections of the text, helping to bring the circumstances of the authors vividly to light as their stories unfold. Only two faults with the figures were noticed: the cliff-nesting kittiwake on p. 31 has been perched precariously on its side, while on p. 159 the house referred to in the figure caption is invisible.

I enjoyed reading this book and can thoroughly recommend it to anybody interested in the history of whaling or arctic exploration, and the quality of writing should appeal to the specialist and layman alike.

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