REVIEWS


Students of Antarctic history will need no introduction to the works of A.G.E. Jones, who for many years past has carried out indefatigable research on polar exploration and navigation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, shedding light on the personalities and achievements of little-known sealers, whalers, and explorers in polar waters. In this, his first book-length monograph, Jones devotes a preliminary chapter to the Bellingshausen’s sighting of the continental land, and how trustworthy was their navigation.

Antarctica, a dome of ice some 5½ million square miles in area, exposing only a small fraction of the underlying rock, is a recent discovery unknown to eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century navigators. Reports of “land” need to be treated with the greatest scepticism. A distant iceberg, a strange cloud, mist mistaken for a dimvery of land. The historical evidence has been virtually insoluble problems; in reconstructing the tracks of the explorers in polar waters. In this work; he has arranged some of the facts, there appears to be no detailed study of the

The historical evidence is a valuable contribution to the Inaccessibility of Antarctica, reminding us of its all-encompassing and at times impenetrable pack ice, and the unpredictability and severity of its weather. He takes pains to stress the special problems of navigating a sailing ship in these waters, particularly the fixing of longitude and the difficulty of maintaining dead reckoning with little knowledge of magnetic variations.

In a further chapter we are reminded of the achievements of early British explorers of southern waters such as Francis Drake and Edmond Halley, whose discoveries whittled down in size the vast Southern Continent of the geographers, paving the way for Cook and his successors. Mr. Jones takes Captain Cook, his fleet, and his charts as his main source for eliminating claims to Antarctic priority have been made. Other candidates are Edward Bransfield jointly with William Smith, the Russian Thaddeus von Bellingshausen, and the American Nathaniel Palmer. The history of early Antarctic voyages has already been chronicled by historians of the calibre of J.B. Bertrand, M.I. Belov, R.T. Gould, and J.C. Beaglehole. Mr. Jones’s special contribution to the debate is his careful reappraisal of the known facts based on a critical examination of original logbooks and charts, and his use of the information contained therein to reconstruct the course of events on the critical days concerned.

The problems of plotting track charts from the available material are considerable, requiring specialized knowledge and expertise. As the author stresses, there appears to be no detailed study of the methods of navigation used during this period. The navigators for whom claims to Antarctic seen nothing new. It is Archie Hunter’s memoir of the years he spent in the Canadian north, sent by the Hudson’s Bay Company to Repulse Bay when he was 18 years old, the author worked in the fur industry until his retirement. He was moved about to Wager Bay, Pine River, Lac du Brochet, Telegraph Creek, and numerous other postings during his nearly 40-year employment with the Company, and consequently, Hunter’s account has a solid air of authority to it. Few, if any, are better qualified to speak about life in northern trading posts. Although his trading duties made his life somewhat more domesticated and perhaps less glamorous than Camsell’s prospecting and Munsterhjelm’s trapping livelihoods, the geographic breadth of his postings and the length of his tenure in the north clearly qualify him as a significant spokesman for such an experience.

Like Charles Camsell’s Son of the North and Erik Munsterhjelm’s The Wind and the Caribou, Northern Traders is Archie Hunter’s memoir of the years he spent in the Canadian north. Sent by the Hudson’s Bay Company to Repulse Bay when he was 18 years old, the author worked in the fur industry until his retirement. He was moved about to Wager Bay, Pine River, Lac du Brochet, Telegraph Creek, and numerous other postings during his nearly 40-year employment with the Company, and consequently, Hunter’s account has a solid air of authority to it. Few, if any, are better qualified to speak about life in northern trading posts. Although his trading duties made his life somewhat more domesticated and perhaps less glamorous than Camsell’s prospecting and Munsterhjelm’s trapping livelihoods, the geographic breadth of his postings and the length of his tenure in the north clearly qualify him as a significant spokesman for such an experience.

Hunter’s book is not concerned with evoking the landscape, nor with illuminating the relationship between the residents of the tiny posts and their wilderness environment. hunter responds to these settings as though — collectively — they constitute a distinct region that is clearly distinguishable from any on the ‘Outside’.

The book gives the reader glimpses of some celebrated personalities — Charles and Anne Morrow Lindbergh, who landed at Baker Lake to refuel, and Sergeant W.O. Douglas of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, for instance — but more significantly, the author is one of the many inhabitants of the posts, men and women who would otherwise remain nameless and unknown — the trappers, the Natives, the missionaries, the other traders. These people are the backbone of society in northern Canada, and they become the true centre of Hunter’s book. Who they are, what they do with their days, and how they interact with one another is perhaps the most important revelation of Northern Traders.

The book has a rather basic structure, one that is sometimes annoyingly simplistic and repetitious. Hundreds of anecdotes, usually less than one page in length and often no longer than five or six sentences, are arranged according to where they originated, that is, at which post. Other than this arrangement, one could almost shuffle the anecdotes without any serious loss to the book as a whole. There is no build-up of suspense or curiosity, nor is there any development in the attitude of the author. Perhaps “collection of reminiscences” is a more accurate descriptive term for Hunter’s book than “memoir”, for little of the author’s thoughts, feelings, or personal growth appear in this work; he becomes an observer of life at northern trading posts.