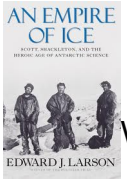
An Empire of Ice: Scott, Shackleton, and the Heroic Age of Antarctic Science



While most books about the Arctic or Antarctic focus on just one thing--the indomitable quest to reach one of the poles--this book has a much broader canvas--it covers the equally arduous work of making new scientific discoveries during the age of great polar exploration.

This broader canvas allows the reader to learn about biological, geological, and meteorological phenomena but also about the cost of empire. England sponsored many of these expeditions while this country held political dominion over one quarter of the world. And as the twentieth century dawned, political power was changing rapidly. Britain had lost face in the Boer Wars in Africa and needed heroism and success to bolster its image abroad and its people's faith in the government and military as Germany, France, and the United States were becoming arch competitors.

But the book is mostly about science and adventure under the most brutal conditions. At one point Scott and Shackleton dock near an ice floe and decide it's time to use a hot-air balloon to get a better view of the landscape ahead. In this totally unpeopled land, Scott rides up into the air and views the vast white expanse. For most of us, such a view would provoke sheer terror. And Scott himself was a little nervous in the little bamboo basket. I kept thinking, what if he falls out.

The book also describes social movements, for example, how the pseudoscience of eugenics affected exploration. When an important naval decision-maker takes a huge interest in it, he decides that the British navy should award polar leadership positions to the young and fit rather than than to commanders who have experienced the cold and hardships. This benefits Scott and Shackleton because they get to lead major expeditions at a young age.

But they both have sharp learning curves. They tie dogs and humans together only to discover that dogs won't pull sledges with humans. They find that Siberian ponies are useless in deep snow. They find that fur night suits don't keep you warm at fifty below. And scurvy which had largely been prevented for decades on the high seas, becomes a major problem again.

However, what the men lack in experience, they compensate for in sheet determination and true grit. Luck factored in as well. *Nimrod,* one of the expeditions that Shackleton led, managed to secure a winter location close to Mt. Erebus, a 12,000 feet plus volcano. What an incredible font of meteorological information that proximity allowed. For months, the scientists charted wind direction in the smoke's movement, and whenever eruptions occurred, they could even trace what happened to the plume in the upper atmosphere, observations that filled major gaps in the world's known climate patterns.

At heart this is a book about discovery, finding out that the southern Antarctic waters are rich in animal but not in plant life, that Antarctica was a continent not a collection of frigid islands locked under ice, that it was not a flat plane but a heavily mountainous country, and most importantly,

that humans can push themselves almost beyond the point of endurance, to conquer goals; that learning and discovery are worth more than pain, scurvy, amputated toes, etc. That the dream of placing a flag--whether British or Norwegian or American--on a snowy outpost was worth any arduous journey.

Award-winner Gretel Ehrlich [1] wrote three books about the circumpolar world that you might like as well. One of her books has a very similar title to Edward J. Larson's [2] book. It's called [3] In the Empire of Ice: Encounters in a Changing Landscape [4].
For the Love of Reading [5] Information, Answers & Reviews [6] Adventure [7] An empire of ice : Scott, Shackleton, and the heroic age of Antarctic science [8] Nonfiction [9] Science [10] Science & Nature [11]
Posted by Dory L. on Nov 15, 2011

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