

### CLIMBING THE POLE: EDMUND HILLARY AND THE TRANS-ANTARCTIC EXPEDITION 1955–58.

John Thomson. 2010. Eccles, Norwich: Erskine Press. 144 p., illustrated, softcover. ISBN 978-1-85-297106-9. £15.

New books about iconic people are difficult terrain for historians. By definition, iconic figures are popular and adored, usually for some truly impressive accomplishments. But they would not be iconic if most of their significance had not already been written about, dissected, and celebrated. Which means that there is not much left to be said about, for example, the genius of Albert Einstein or the exploring skills of Roald Amundsen. But one area ripe for further investigation is the personality behind the icon. What is it that shaped the persons in question or led them to do the great things they did? These are fertile fields for new research and bookstores and on-line shopping carts are full of titles that have delved deeper and shed new light on important men and women.

In *Climbing the pole*, journalist John Thomson takes a fresh look at Sir Edmund Hillary's involvement in the Commonwealth Transantarctic Expedition (1955–1958). In particular, Thomson looks at Hillary's unsanctioned 'dash' for the geographic South Pole, which was accomplished after the New Zealand party had completed its assigned task of establishing supply depots for the crossing party led by Dr (later, Sir) Vivian Fuchs. Although original plans had called for Hillary's party to wait at their southernmost depot for Fuchs' arrival, Hillary chose to press on to the pole and in reaching it became the first party to arrive there overland since Robert Scott's in 1912. (Using aircraft, the United States established a permanent station at the pole in 1956, hence all post-Scott overland travellers have arrived to find an inhabited base.) Many British newspapers were vociferously critical of Hillary's actions, decriing that he was stealing glory from Fuchs' crossing party. At the same time, some New Zealand papers were lauding the achievement as an example of good 'ol Kiwi pluck, and a triumph of a group of colonial battlers out-doing the British establishment. Sir Edmund explained his decision to head to the South Pole, as a case of impromptu opportunity. Why not? He was close, he had completed his duties well ahead of schedule and therefore had time on his hands, and he happened to have enough spare fuel for the journey. His actions were those of an adventurous young man who could not turn down such an inviting opportunity. That was Hillary's story at the time and he stuck to it with only small modifications for the rest of his life. However, Thomson's meticulous research shows that Hillary had long been planning to make a push to the pole, and that his having time and fuel available to go further south on an 'impromptu' adventure was by no means accidental. It is this discrepancy between Hillary's claim of a lucky opportunity and what many documents show was his clearly premeditated planning of the polar trip that intrigued the author, and led to his investigations.

The book explores the interweaving of Hillary's clandestine personal adventure ambitions with those of the greater TAE, for whom he was a supporting player and subordinate to Fuchs. Hillary had successfully climbed Mt. Everest only a few years prior to this expedition and there is no doubt that his celebrity profile was beneficial to have on board. At the same time, Hillary was also tasked with being the leader of New Zealand's fledgling Antarctic programme and therefore already had a full plate of official duties. A lot of light is shone on the not-always-smooth relationship between Hillary and the Ross Sea Committee, the body that oversaw New Zealand's involvement in the TAE. The author also explores the relationship between Fuchs and Hillary, including some of the specifics of their communiqués while in different parts of Antarctica, as well as after the expedition when memoirs were being written. In addition, we learn of the critical thoughts held by some of Hillary's fellow Kiwis. For example, second-in-command Holmes Miller recorded in his diary his disgust that Sir Edmund was showing 'such selfishness and personal ambition.'

One other fresh angle presented by Thomson is a look into the role of the news media in getting the story out to the wider world. The so called 'race to the pole' between Fuchs and Hillary was mostly a media construct. Fuchs was methodically moving along, doing his planned scientific work and was never going to abandon that in order to accelerate his crossing. But this media fabrication did bring publicity to the expedition, and kept it in the news for several weeks. As an experienced newspaperman, Thomson is able to provide details about how different news sources competed for exclusives and 'scoops'.

Patriotism also shaped the coverage. There was a lot of criticism for Hillary in papers from the United Kingdom and Canada, whereas in New Zealand he was seen as a hero. Even today, 50 years after the event, most Kiwis who know about the expedition will see it as a triumph for local hero Sir Edmund. And this is perhaps why Thomson, a New Zealander who was based in Britain during the 1950s and 1960s, is well qualified for the role of objective investigator. Sir Edmund Hillary is much revered in New Zealand and as big a hero as this small country has ever produced. He was consistently named as 'most respected New Zealander' in national polls and his face was put on the country's five dollar note, while he was still alive. That is an honour usually reserved for heads of state. Sir Edmund's funeral in 2008 was a state occasion and Thomson is one of the millions of Kiwis who admires the man. This is no 'hatchet job' or muckraking smear campaign. Indeed, Thomson makes his respect for Hillary obvious throughout the book, including in its wonderful first sentence: 'In 1957, on the raw and chill purity of Antarctica, a good and famous man did a bad thing.'

Having stated his admiration of both Sir Edmund and the truth, Thomson uses the next 140 pages to spell out carefully all the details that reveal the dash for the pole as a carefully planned insubordinate act, as well as how Hillary's other actions in

leading New Zealand's exploration of this portion of Antarctica were significant and praiseworthy. There is nothing hyperbolic or sensational about the presentation and there is no attempt to knock a icon off his pedestal. Instead, we are given a very detailed look at one aspect of the last major exploring

expedition of the Antarctic, and of the career of its most famous participant. Students of Antarctic history will be pleased to have this additional information brought to light. (Peter W. Carey, SubAntarctic Foundaton for Ecosystems Research, 8 Estuary Road, Christchurch 8061, New Zealand.)