

SHACKLETON: A LIFE IN POETRY. Jim Mayer. 2014. Oxford: Signal Books. 176 p, softcover. ISBN 978-1-909930-10-0. £9.99.

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As the author of this Shackleton biography states, ‘few people remember him for his love of verse’. This provides an entry point for a new study of Sir Ernest Shackleton, Antarctic explorer and Edwardian hero. This is not a chronological biography; it is episodic and based on a single theme, which the author explores in detail. The reader unfamiliar with the flow of events in Shackleton’s life might be advised to refer to one of the more conventional biographies, such as *Shackleton* (Huntford 1985) or the newly-released *Shackleton: By Endurance We Conquer* (Smith 2014).

However, the lack of a detailed narrative in Mayer’s new study does not thereby make it any less valuable. The author sets out to illuminate one important aspect of Shackleton’s life, and one aspect alone, and to select most carefully those parts of his subject’s life that demonstrate his lifelong study and continuing love of poetry. He tells the story of how, in 1910, an interviewer, thinking that men of action were not always men of books, somewhat smugly asked Shackleton if he read. To the surprise of the interviewer, the answer came back with typical Shackletonian bluntness: “Always.” Mayer explores the many factors that contributed to the explorer’s love of verse, including his Irish heritage and the influence of his wife, Emily Dorman, a comfortably-well-off, middle-class Englishwoman who introduced her husband to the pleasures of reading Robert Browning.

Browning was indicative of the particular strain of poetic expression that most appealed to Shackleton, who was attracted to him primarily because of his Neo-Romantic brand of cosmic optimism—the never-say-die determination of the Victorian achiever not to let life and its troubles overcome the human spirit, and to find a way through in the face of life’s trials and challenges. Two other poets in this mould captured Shackleton’s admiration: the British-Canadian, Robert Service (1874–1958), known as “the bard of the Yukon,” who provided Shackleton with a vision of the romantic adventurer; and that great English poet of the Imperial quest, with its attendant duties and morals, Rudyard Kipling.

Service travelled extensively through North America and settled in the Yukon. As a great exponent of the open road, he won favour with Shackleton, who always found the day-to-day duties of a settled and civilised life rather irksome. Service’s preference for “verse, not poetry, ... something ... the fellow in the pub would quote” also appealed to Shackleton. Kipling provided Shackleton with a vision of the principled and dutiful servant of the Empire, especially as expressed in his well-known poem, “If,” which provides a model of manly self-sufficiency, and his *Barrack-Room Ballads*, a collection which Shackleton found both entertaining and instructive.

Aside from these three, Shackleton also favoured Tennyson, Coleridge, Swinburne and Longfellow. As Mayer shows, poetry was a constant thread running through Shackleton’s life, and he was able to put his study of all these poets to practical use whenever he needed a pithy quote with which to enliven his various public speeches, or to communicate a sense of bubbling optimism and overwhelming confidence. These attributes inspired his audiences and his fellow explorers and companions, contributing to his well-recognised leadership qualities. As Mayer reiterates, the reason he was such a good communicator

and an inspiring speaker “was, of course, his lifelong study of poetry.”

However, Mayer pushes his study further than merely recording Shackleton’s love for, and practical use of, poetry. Part of his remit is to make available all of Shackleton’s own poetic creations, which, considering how widely scattered the sources are, is an ambitious but (I am glad to report) largely successful undertaking. Even more ambitiously, he often uses Shackleton’s favourite poetic pieces as a means of exploring the Shackletonian mentality, implying that the poetry he read was somehow a cipher for explaining his thought patterns and his view of the world.

In this very ambitious methodology, Mayer is only partly successful, I think. At its most effective, this method of correlating particular poems with Shackleton’s life experiences and ideals, does successfully illuminate some of his deeply-felt thought processes. A good example is in Chapter Fifteen, where Mayer uses Browning’s poem, “Prospice,” to elucidate certain aspects of Shackleton’s strongly-held beliefs. The poem was written after the death of Browning’s wife, Elizabeth Barrett, and it contains musings on the nature of marriage, commitment and death. Browning says that the thought of death must be conquered, but not allowed to “creep past” or to be suppressed. Death, moreover, far from being a separation from loved ones, may be a “great release” and the ultimate reunion of souls. Shackleton and his wife took great comfort from this view and, sometimes, before leaving on another dangerous expedition, Shackleton would send Emily a telegram consisting of a single word—Prospice.

On other occasions, however, Mayer’s method of elucidating thoughts and attitudes through poetry is less successful, pushing it to extreme or tendentious lengths. In discussing Tennyson’s *Ulysses* as a template for Shackleton’s restless wanderings and the pursuit of knowledge through adventure, he likens the swish-swish sound of Shackleton’s skis and poles to a sort of mantra running through his head—“not to yield, not to yield”—a refrain taken directly from Tennyson’s poem. This seems far-fetched and more than a little unlikely.

As with many first editions, there are a few typographical errors and omissions that need correcting (e.g. “This was only the second expedition to Antarctica [to] be organised ...” (page 72) and “The poem is quite sophisticated but well with[in] the capabilities of a sixteen-year-old ...” (page 178)). The proofreader has also missed a few phrasal adjectives which require hyphens (e.g. “Shackleton rose to reply to the after[-] dinner speeches ...” (page 102)). These sorts of errors are easily corrected in a second edition. More regrettable, however, are some of the typesetting choices that make for inelegant copy, such as setting “25th” instead of the more usual “twenty-fifth,” or even “25th.” It might be argued that setting cardinal numbers as figures is allowable, but setting ordinal numbers as abbreviated superscript spoils the visual elegance of the line and can introduce a small mental hiccup for the reader as it breaks the continuity of the text.

While on the topic of inelegance, the layout of the book is a little disappointing. Page margins are cramped and the matching of bottom lines on facing pages is sometimes out by more than one line of text. In these days of computer typesetting and tight production costs, this is perhaps excusable, but is less than ideal. In my review copy, text on the front and back covers is very close to the physical edge of the page, as if the guillotining process has not been controlled carefully enough, but this may

change on production copies. It is nice to see the inclusion of traditional running heads when so many new books these days omit them. They provide a convenient and instant guide, re-engaging readers who lift their heads from the page for a moment's thought. I would have liked to see them set in lower case rather than capitals, as they are a tad too prominent on the page. On the positive side, chapter heads are nicely offset from the beginning of the text, with ample white space and good placement on the page.

These minor concerns can be put aside, however, because it is on content that most readers will judge this book, and, in this regard, the author has amply fulfilled his brief, providing the reader with a new and interesting thematic approach to the life and achievements of Sir Ernest Shackleton. The author's attempts to explore Shackleton's mind through the medium of poetry is a worthy undertaking, but is only partially successful. However, the main point of the book—to provide sometimes

little-known facts about Shackleton's lifelong commitment to poetry and poetry-writing, and to show that his love of words has helped him to express himself well—is ably executed. Mayer shows that Shackleton's familiarity with, and ability to formulate, the well-turned phrase and the well-chosen word contributed in no small way to his success as an inspirational and charismatic leader of men. Shackleton was no literary genius, as he himself would have readily conceded, but his abiding love of poetic expression was a vital part of his success as a man of action. I commend the book as an interesting and informative read. (Chris Elmore, Melbourne, Australia (cre@me.com))

References

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CONTESTING THE ARCTIC. POLITICS AND IMAGINARIES IN THE CIRCUMPOLAR NORTH.

Philip E. Steinberg, Jeremy Tasch and Hannes Gerhardt. 2015. London: I. B. Tauris. xiii + 209 p, hardcover, illustrated. ISBN 978-1-78076-148-0. £56.00.

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Contesting the Arctic by Philip Steinberg, Jeremy Tasch and Hannes Gerhardt is a noteworthy addition to literature on the circumpolar north. Due to a steady increase in climate change coupled with investments in shipping, tourism and mineral extraction, most scholars would regard the region as being pivotal in terms of contemporary world politics and socio-economic development. Like previous studies that see the Arctic as an historic space of transition from Cold War militarisation to enhanced cooperation, *Contesting the Arctic* foregrounds the establishment of the Arctic Council and its working groups set up to mitigate risks to human and environmental security but does so critically. In terms of understanding the Arctic through a lens of security, *Contesting the Arctic* is valuable because the authors manage to explore a wide scope of power mechanisms used to govern Arctic space by understanding power vis-à-vis knowledge or ideas, which emerge within multiple sites of discourse across space and time. Arctic governance is contested according to what Steinberg et al. and other political geographers refer to as 'imaginaries' (page xii), which signify an understanding of Arctic space emerging in competing sites of discourse. Thus, the focus of the title and sub-title of the book tells a lot about the approach taken by the authors.

Through discourse analysis the authors challenge interpretations of Arctic space emerging from older, colonial forms of knowledge and power fixed on the premise of state sovereignty by drawing on imaginaries of the circumpolar north. Unlike the circumpolar south, the northernmost space of the planet is rich in natural resources, sparsely inhabited and prone to a wider variety of interpretations. In its six content chapters the book addresses the various ways in which Arctic space has been and is being interpreted, followed by a conclusive chapter on the 'normalisation of the North' (page 160). The authors are critical in each chapter of Arctic governance in its varying shapes and forms, which they often perceive as the 'status quo' (page 9) versus the 'others' (page 13). This approach draws on imaginary binaries, differences and assemblages of meaning

that Steinberg et al. conclude formulate a mythical Arctic space. In the chapter titled *Terra Nullius* the focus on claiming Arctic space is performed in acts of exploration, foreign policy, media discourse and cartographic reproduction. In the chapter titled *Frozen Ocean*, the legal regimes of sovereign states are depicted as exploring, mapping and territorialising Arctic space at the expense of others like indigenous groups who either cannot promote their imaginaries successfully or whose imaginaries are wrongly interpreted by legal experts. Several chapters on themes of 'preservation' (page 140), 'resource extraction' (page 90) or 'nationalism' (page 112) follow a similar approach in contesting Arctic space through discourse. It is contestation that forms the basis of politics of the circumpolar north which, according to the authors of *Contesting the Arctic*, emerges from discourse across space and time so as to re-/produce the material Arctic itself.

In the final chapter, the critical phrasing of the book denotes a subtle reminder to policy-makers, -shapers and -experts on the region that the Arctic is somewhat indiscernible given that multiple discourse about Arctic space co-exist. Nonetheless, images and imaginaries are powerful in the politics of the circumpolar north, which the authors argue re-imagine the Arctic as discourse is contested. For instance, an image evoking the 'nature reserve' (page 176) produced by Greenpeace on top of an ice sheet in 2010 is arguably framed against a status quo of imaginaries produced by governments, thereby calling on the world community to defend Arctic space. Therefore, while official discourse from the United States in the run up to its Arctic Council 2015 chairmanship may indeed campaign 'one Arctic' with regard to shared opportunities, challenges, and responsibilities, the authors of *Contesting the Arctic* uncover less official discourse in order to express people living, experiencing or governing Arctic space separately. The book thus provides empirical evidence in support of dissenting imaginaries of Arctic space within the world of policy-making whilst being critical of governments within the Arctic Council attempting to forge imaginaries together. Whether or not this is beneficial is of secondary importance to the authors who objectively undertake a story re-telling role. However, with regard to the future of Arctic geopolitics Steinberg et al. claim that it is more likely that finding 'the right combination' (page 179) of separate Arctic-s will continue as the agenda shared by most respondents of the book who will continue to contest the future of the Arctic.