

## Book Reviews

**Atkins, John. *The Heroic Age of Antarctic Exploration on Film and Television, Volume 2, Scott and Amundsen***

**McFarland, 2026**

266 pp., illustrations, bibliography, notes and index

ISBN 9781476696867 (softcover) US\$49.95

The Race to the South Pole is one of the best studied aspects of Antarctic history and thus it is a pleasant surprise to review a book that adds not just a small nuance but a new perspective to the already impressive historiography on the subject. John Atkins looks at the Race to the South Pole through the lens of film and television productions ranging from early productions released immediately after the two expeditions to modern-day documentaries and feature films.

While being divided into 19 individual chapters, the book is loosely organized into three main sections, although these sections are not specified in the book itself. The first section deals with period productions of the two expeditions and the immediate aftermath. It includes detailed technical information on capturing the footage and processing the raw material under the conditions of an Antarctic expedition. Atkins also discusses the consequences of Scott's decision to take a professional photographer and filmmaker to the Antarctic while Amundsen decided to have the filming done by himself and his team members. The section also discusses early screenings of the footage back home and in the case of Scott especially, screenings at a time when his fate was not even known back in the UK. When reading this section, it is clear that both Scott and Amundsen not only understood the power of film as the new media of their time but used it very purposefully and with success. The second section deals with productions still largely based on the footage captured during the above-mentioned expeditions but by putting the *The Northern Mariner / Le marin du nord* 35, no. 3-4 (Autumn-Winter 2025): 391-474

footage together into feature-length productions that aimed to tell the story of the heroes and to support the respective national claims for Antarctica. Lastly, the third section deals with more modern productions no longer based exclusively on the original footage, often incorporating recreations of the expeditions with actors and scripts. These were regularly not even filmed in the Antarctic but in the glacier regions of other parts of the globe like the Swiss Alps. On the one hand this might be the least relevant section of the book for an Antarctic historian as all these productions were not based on authentic footage, but material recreated with the help of actors. On the other hand, these productions show historical perception of the event in their respective time period. While being something different, changes in historical perception might also be understood as a historical research topic in its own right. In the end, it is astonishing that the Race to the South Pole or the expeditions led by Scott and Amundsen generated such an interest, and that a hundred years after the event there have been expensive television productions even in countries with no direct connection to the historical event itself like the German ZDF production of 2011 or a French production of 2015.

Altogether, the book is a well-researched analytical history of film and television productions featuring the competing expeditions of Scott and Amundsen and clearly demonstrates that the various film and television productions were in a certain sense comparable to the historic event itself. This contributes to the debate about the prerogative of interpretation of the outcome of the historic race beyond the obvious fact that Amundsen was the first at the South Pole. As such it is an important contribution to the historiography of Antarctic exploration and an equally important contribution to the discussion of how media productions were used to shift the narrative of specific historic events over time. Furthermore, it is an impressive insight into how filmmakers at the beginning of the twentieth century were already able to make high quality productions under the most unforgiving Antarctic conditions. Just seeing the photograph of how the camera needed to be strapped to the anchor of one of the expedition vessels to secure a steady platform says more than any wordy description.

The book includes a substantial number of black and white photos, many of them screengrabs from the productions discussed in the book. In addition, the photographs of Amundsen after his return from the pole are of utmost interest to any historian as they demonstrate his early awareness of the importance of visual media at the beginning of the twentieth century and how he proactively avoided being portrayed as the fur-clad long bearded outdoor hero. To the knowledge of this reviewer, many of the photos have not been published before and the reproduction quality is high for an academic paperback and not

a glossy coffee-table book.

The 16-page filmography covering film and television productions between 1911 and 2025 is one of the most interesting features of the book. Each of the entries includes a short synopsis of the respective production as well as some information on its background and the names of the main actors. Finally, a well-done bibliography and an index complete the book.

Atkins' new book can easily be recommended to any historian with an interest in Antarctic history and to historians of film and television as it provides a most unique analysis of how coverage of a single historical event developed over the span of little more than a century. With a suggested retail price of US\$49.95 for the print edition, I would probably abstain from using it as a mandatory book in the classroom due to it being extremely specialized, but would include it easily in a list of suggested additional readings for any class on Antarctic or even polar history at large.

This reviewer must admit that reviewing volume two of a book without having read volume one is always somewhat problematic but assumes given the high quality of this volume that most of the comments made before will also apply to volume one, which deals mainly with the infamous Shackleton expedition.

Ingo Heidbrink  
Norfolk, Virginia

**Bamford, Tyler R. and Hulver, Richard A., ed. *Best Beloved. The Wartime Letters of Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz to His Wife, Catherine. Contributions to Naval History No. 11***

**Naval History and Heritage Command, 2024**

lii + 219 pp., bibliography, index

ISBN 9781943604937 (section 508-compliant PDF) available for free at [www.history.navy.mil](http://www.history.navy.mil)

Admiral Chester W. Nimitz was a famously reserved man. According to his first biographer, Elmer B. Potter (1976), when he was a young cadet at the Naval Academy he was so negatively impressed by the infamous Sampson-Schley controversy that he resolved never to publicly slander a fellow officer. Such a line of conduct logically extended to written statements as well, prompting him to refrain from expressing any kind of censure in those documents liable to become public.

The letters included in the present collection do not make for an exception: it is understood that writing to his beloved wife Catherine represented one of