

Review Essay

Stephen R. Bown. *The Last Viking. The Life of Roald Amundsen*. Vancouver, BC: Douglas & McIntyre, www.douglas-mcintyre.com, 2012. xxii+357 pp., illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, index. CDN \$32.95, cloth; ISBN 978-1-55365-937-2. (Also available in e-book, ISBN 978-1-55365-938-9.)

Stephen Bown has produced a comprehensive biography of one of the world's greatest explorers. Since Ingrid Christopherson's earlier English translation of Tor Bomann-Larsen's (2006) biography of Amundsen does not appear to have achieved particularly widespread distribution, Bown's book will probably be the first English-language biography of Amundsen readily available to the Canadian reader. Bown's text covers every major stage and event in Amundsen's life. From an early age, Amundsen knew that he wanted to become a polar explorer and almost everything he did in life was towards that end. Bown discusses Amundsen's early attempts at "tempering" himself, including his less-than-successful attempt at a winter crossing of the Hadrangervidda in winter; his time spent at sea until he eventually obtained his master's ticket so that he could be his own captain on his expeditions; his first transit of the Northwest Passage in *Gjøa* in 1903-1906; his voyage to the Antarctic in *Fram* and his successful attainment of the South Pole (1911-1912); his transit of the Northeast Passage in *Maud* in 1918-1920; his unsuccessful attempt to fly to the North Pole with Lincoln Ellsworth in 1925; and finally, his rancour-ridden transarctic flight with General Umberto Nobile in the dirigible *Norge* in 1926. Bown has also described very adequately Amundsen's never-ending shortage of funds, and his endless, soul-destroying lecture tours to try to clear his debts from his previous expedition, or accumulate funds for the next one. He also introduces the little known fact that Amundsen had affairs (sometimes overlapping) with three married women.

There are, however, some conspicuous omissions from the coverage of Amundsen's major expeditions. As Amundsen himself wrote (p.40), an important objective of the voyage on board *Gjøa* was "to determine the North Pole's present position," yet the only reference to his attempts at achieving that goal is "several attempts to reach the magnetic North Pole" (p. 72). In fact, in the spring of 1904, Amundsen, Helmer Hansen, Godfred Hansen and Peder Ristvedt made a round-trip of some 300 miles (480 km) by sledge, north along the west coast of the Boothia Peninsula almost to the Tasmanian Islands. They were able to determine that the north Magnetic Pole had moved some distance northwards from where James Clark Ross had found it in 1831, but they appear to have been unable to pinpoint it (Amundsen 1908, I: 149-187). Another puzzling gap in Bown's coverage of the Northwest Passage expedition is a major sledge trip made by Godfred Hansen and Peder Ristvedt in the spring of 1905, when they reached, explored and mapped some 130 miles (206 km) of the northwest coast of

Victoria Island and on their return trip, discovered, explored and roughly surveyed the Royal Geographical Society Islands (Hansen, 1908: 296-366).

Finally, apart from the occasional reference to *Maud* being “frozen in the ice ... for several years” (p.233), there is no coverage at all of the vessel’s scientifically very important ice-drift. With Harald Sverdrup in overall charge, and with Oscar Wisting as captain, *Maud* entered the ice on 8 August 1922 near Herald Island, and emerged from the ice just north of the New Siberian Islands on 9 August 1924 (Sverdrup 1933). On the return trip to Bering Strait, they were forced to winter again near the Medvezh’i Ostrova (just northwest of the mouth of the Kolyma), and were back at Nome by 22 August 1925. The route of the drift generally paralleled that of Captain George W. De Long’s *Jeannette*, although slightly further south, but unlike De Long’s drift, a rich haul of six volumes of scientific results emerged from *Maud*’s. This, too, is an important part of Amundsen’s legacy, in that he was responsible for the mounting and financing of the expedition.

Apart from these critical omissions, Bown’s book is quite seriously flawed in several other respects. For example, he is remarkably careless with the spelling of personal names (these are more than just typos). For example, the famous mountaineer was Whymper not Whimper (p.9); the leader of the German South Pole expedition of 1911-1912 was Wilhelm Filchner not Filcher (p.116).

Unfortunately, Bown’s knowledge of geography also leaves much to be desired. Again a few examples will suffice. The strait separating Denmark from Norway is the Skagerrak, not Skagerr Rack (p.4); Jackson Island (where Nansen and Johansen wintered in 1895-96) lies in the middle of Fran Josef Land not “near” that archipelago. Bown talks of the “gently undulating terrain” around Hobart, Tasmania (p.174): in reality Mount Wellington towers over Hobart to a height of 1271 m (4170 ft.). And finally, Ayon (not Anyon) Island (p.216) lies not at the mouth of the Kolyma, but some 300 km further east.

Bown’s knowledge of arctic history in general is equally weak. Contrary to Bown’s statement (p.57), James Cook not only penetrated north of Bering Strait in 1778, but reached Icy Cape on the coast of Alaska and Cape North (now Mys Shmidta) on the Siberian coast (Beaglehole 1967). Nor was Amundsen the first to navigate Simpson Strait (p.84); it was navigated by Peter Dease and Thomas Simpson in both directions in 1839 (Barr 2002). On p.203 one reads that Amundsen’s plan to take a biplane north in 1915 would have been the first use of aircraft in the Arctic; in fact, Polish pilot Yan Iosifovich Nagurskiy of the Russian Navy made five flights in the area of Novaya Zemlya in a Maurice Farman biplane in search of the missing Brusilov and Rusanov expeditions in August-September 1914 (Barr 1985). Bown states that the voyage of the *Maud* in 1918-1920 represented the second transit of the Northeast Passage (p.218); this ignores the transits by the Russian Navy’s icebreakers *Taymyr* and *Vaygach* in 1914-1915 (Starokadomskiy 1976), making *Maud*’s the fourth transit. Bown’s statement (p.142) that Nansen used dogs on his trip across the Greenland Ice cap is incorrect (Nansen 1890). But by far the worst example of Bown’s ignorance of polar history is his statement that in 1911-12, Captain Robert Scott “had rarely dealt with snow” (p.139). This would overlook his trek of some 480 km across the Ross Ice Shelf in the summer of 1903-04 and about

the same distance up the Ferrar Glacier and westwards out onto the Ice Cap in the summer of 1904-05—not to mention two winters spent at McMurdo Sound (Scott 1905)!

A glance at Bown's "Select bibliography" reveals that he has consulted a reasonable number of the published works on Amundsen's life and activities. He is also to be commended for having "mined" the *New York Times* for its numerous articles on Amundsen between 1903 and 1928. But there is a striking lack of any reference to manuscript material. Although Bown does quote from the journals of various individuals, he does not indicate his sources. Thus, on pp. 155, 156, 157, 159, 165, 166, 167 and 168 there are quotations (in English) from Olav Bjaaland's journal. A quick check reveals that every one of these quotations repeats, word for word, quotations in Roland Huntford's book *Race for the South Pole* (Huntford 2010) which the latter had translated from Norwegian. There is, however, no acknowledgement of Huntford's contribution. This represents a particularly objectionable form of professional discourtesy.

In short, Bown's book is seriously flawed. Given his stature as a polar explorer, Roald Amundsen deserves better.

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