

WITH HILLARY AT SCOTT BASE: A KIWI AMONG THE PENGUINS. Vernon Gerard. 2012. Wellington: Bateson Publishing. 147p, illustrated, soft-cover. ISBN 978 1 877520 07 5. £29

The recent International Polar Year has stimulated historians to look back to IGY and examine more closely what was achieved and exactly how decisions taken then have structured Antarctic activities since. Amongst all the academic writing some of the still living participants found the time and energy to dust off their diaries and recount what life was like almost 60 years ago. Vern Gerard was one of those early New Zealand scientists who took part in building Scott Base as a platform for Edmund Hillary's supporting work for the TransAntarctic Expedition and establishing the fledgling New Zealand programme.

Whilst much of what he has to say will be familiar to anyone who has worked in the Antarctic there is a subtle blend of both determination and pride in what they achieved. As a physicist his role was to establish the first Kiwi Antarctic magnetic observatory but, of course, like everyone else he had to take a full part in building the station as well. Some of the information he gives is interesting – how, for example, Hillary decided that the site at Butter Point originally selected for the station was inaccessible and Pram Point was chosen by him instead to the consternation of those who wanted to be away from the Americans and some of the scientists for whom Ross Island was not ideal. As Gerard says that “the Scott Base magnetic observatory must be easily the most poorly sited magnetic observatory in the world”, but Hillary was not concerned about the scientific requirements. Indeed, as Gerard remarks, his scientific huts were the last to be built. His account of the air hostesses that arrived on board

a chartered Pan American Stratocruiser will bring wry smiles to those whose memories stretch back to an Antarctic culture completely without women. And his comments on the “race to the Pole”, although suggesting this was created by the media, recognise that Hillary had this in mind from a very early stage as he was an ambitious man and getting to the Pole first would raise his own profile as well as that of New Zealand. As it turned out the enthusiasm for things Antarctic generated by this in New Zealand was crucial in ensuring that the government continued to support scientific research after IGY.

In his final chapters he discusses tourism into the Ross Sea, the Mt Erebus air crash and the weather during Scott's expedition. He also makes some interesting comments about the effects of free alcohol on performance after he left the station and on the lack of the organisation of New Zealand activities in those days!

The publishers say this seems to be the only first-hand account by a scientist of the building and establishment of Scott Base and as such provides a much needed personal view to read alongside the official narrative in Helm and Miller (1964). These days scientists do not need to build their own stations and despite all the efforts planning still sometimes goes awry. However it would appear that the experience of overwintering has not changed much and is still something that can be a truly formative experience (David W H Walton, British Antarctic Survey, High Cross, Madingley Road, Cambridge CB3 0ET, UK).

Reference

Helm, A.S. and Miller, J.H. 1964. *Antarctica. The story of the New Zealand party of the Trans-Antarctic Expedition*. Wellington: Department of External Affairs.