

Erebus: the story of a ship. Michael Palin. 2018. London: Hutchinson. 334p, hardcover. ISBN 9781847948120. GBP 20.

Michael Palin is well known as a raconteur, comedian on TV and in film (e.g. *Monty Python*, *Ripping Yarns*, *A Fish Called Wanda*), and the presenter of well-received TV documentaries (e.g. *Pole to Pole*, *Sahara*, *Himalaya*). His books include lively accounts of his journeys, novels and diaries. He is popularly regarded with affection and as an all-round 'good egg' in old British public school parlance, a description that suits him very well.

For Palin, this volume is a venture into what may be regarded as 'serious' non-fiction and probably merits detailed attention on these grounds alone. But this is by no means a trivial book, combining as it does much solid information with a lightness of touch characteristic of his previous works. It is a history of H.M.S. *Erebus*, the famous 'bomb' vessel that was prominent in two major polar explorations. The first of these was under the command of James Clark Ross in an expedition that lasted from 1839 to 1843; it succeeded in penetrating the sea that was named after Ross and accomplished its primary mission, which was to conduct a series of magnetic observations in the southern hemisphere. For its second, and much better known, expedition, it was the vessel in which Sir John Franklin attempted to transit the northwest passage, starting in 1845, and which led to the loss of all on board.

This naturally begs the question of why the book is ostensibly about *Erebus* only and did not include in the title the second vessel on both expeditions, H.M.S. *Terror*, which had as long a polar pedigree as *Erebus*, was similarly a 'bomb' vessel but was slightly smaller and somewhat older. Readers of this journal will immediately understand why. The book was conceived after the September 2014 discovery of the wreck of *Erebus* in shallow waters in the Canadian Arctic archipelago but before the September 2016 discovery of the wreck of *Terror*, not too far away but in deeper water. The author, or more likely, one suspects, his publisher, probably did not feel that he could invest a similar amount of time as that employed in the research on *Erebus* on a second vessel, but to Palin's credit, references to *Terror* are prominent throughout the text.

A comprehensive and most interesting account of the construction and commissioning of *Erebus* is presented, stressing her sturdy build, together with details of her pre-Antarctic career. Clear and informative ship plans are included. The book then proceeds to a full statement concerning the Antarctic expedition, and the author takes pains to include extracts from two of the few first-hand accounts that exist. The first of these accounts is that of the surgeon on board *Erebus*, Robert McCormick, who had more polar experience than most of the other 'names' of the period. McCormick's main interests were ornithology and geology, rather than medicine, and he has been pointedly traduced in several books concerning expeditions in which he participated. But from his own account, generously quoted by the author, he comes across as rather more sympathetic and humane than previously presented. At all events he has the securing of the type specimen of the south polar skua (*Stercorarius maccormicki*) to his credit, and it is a pity that the author does not mention this.

The second first-hand account used liberally by the author is that of Sergeant William Cunningham, who was the commander of the Royal Marine detachment on board *Terror*. Cunningham was highly literate for a non-commissioned officer of the time and one can almost hear him barking orders to his men while, when off duty, recording in his diary many pertinent details of the voyage. For these inclusions alone we owe much to Palin.

The book then proceeds to the northwest passage, and here there is somewhat less originality in Palin's fairly straightforward account. Throughout, he refers to Francis Rawdon Moira Crozier, the captain of *Terror* on both voyages, in sympathetic terms and stresses the commonly held view that Crozier was more suited to a subordinate role on an expedition rather than that of leader. But, of course, after the death of Franklin on 11 June 1847, Crozier was thrust into the directorship of the expedition. It appears from the archaeological evidence secured by very many search expeditions that the expedition, such as it was by that time, fell apart, indicating that this view of Crozier might have been right. A great 'what if' arises from the possibility that a tougher leader at that juncture might have directed matters such that some might have survived. But we will never know unless the 'holy grail', written records, has survived in one or both vessels and that such might be secured by those conducting research on the wrecks.

So far, one hopes sufficient has been written to persuade readers of this journal that their time would not be wasted by reading this book, no matter how familiar they were with the exploration

history of the polar regions. Palin is an attractive writer, and the book is certainly difficult to put down. He includes various reminiscences of his own trips to the regions in question and, although this reviewer normally finds such intrusions irritating, these constitute a small proportion of the whole and can be easily overlooked.

There are one or two trivial points. The list of three films set out on p. xi, of 'the Navy and war', that stimulated Palin's youthful interest includes only one, *Above us the waves*, that is actually about the Navy. The first, *The sea shall not have them*, was about an RAF air sea rescue unit, and the last, *Cockleshell heroes*, was about the Royal Marines. As part of his review of Arctic exploration before *Erebus*, on p. 28, Palin refers to W. E. Parry's North Pole attempt of 1827 but omits the really significant result that it secured, namely that the polar ice moves and in this case did so in a directly opposite direction to that desired. On p. 36 the title of Poe's only novel is misquoted and

on p. 199 we have the Royal Geological Society. None such exists, although the Geological Society of London received a Royal Charter in 1825. As Palin was, from 2009 to 2012, President of the Royal Geographical Society, this slip is understandable.

The book is very well presented in substantial binding, with thick paper, and with well-chosen illustrations and excellent maps. There is a modest but useful critical apparatus. This reviewer was pleased to be informed that the type setting was done in India, in Pondicherry no less. The price of the book is very reasonable.

No subscriber to *Polar Record* will regret taking up this volume. He or she might not learn very much but would have a pleasant time perusing it. (Ian R. Stone, Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge, Lensfield Rd, Cambridge CB2 1ER (irs30@cam.ac.uk))

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