

A NEW ECONOMIC REGION IN THE USSR

For planning and statistical purposes, though not for administrative or functional purposes, the territory of the USSR is divided into 19 large Economic Regions [Ekonomicheskiye Rayony], each including within it a number of administrative subdivisions. The Soviet North, a term which connotes an exactly defined area, falls wholly within four Economic Regions—the Northwestern, East and West Siberian and Far Eastern. Each of these four, however, includes large and important areas which are not part of the Soviet North. Under legislation of November 1982, the Northwestern Economic Region has now been split in two, the split almost following the southern boundary of the Soviet North. The part that lies within the Soviet North, consisting of Karel'skaya ASSR, Komi ASSR, Arkhangel'skaya Oblast', and Murmanskaya Oblast', together with Vologodskaya Oblast', becomes a new Northern Economic Region. The remainder of the old Northwestern Economic Region, consisting of Leningrad city, Leningradskaya Oblast', Novgorodskaya Oblast' and Pskovskaya Oblast', retains the old name. The change was made 'in order to improve territorial planning of the economic and social development of the USSR, and no doubt reflects regional planning policies (*Ekonomicheskaya Gazeta*, 1983, (11): 14).

The practical effects for students of the northlands should be that statistics quoted for the new area will be a more accurate measure of northern development than were those quoted for the old, larger area. Whereas previously it was necessary to try to extract from statistics of the Northwestern Economic Region the figures for Leningrad, Leningradskaya Oblast', Novgorodskaya Oblast', Pskovskaya Oblast', and Vologodskaya Oblast', it is now necessary to extract only the last-named. What effect the new grouping will have on economic development of the area remains to be seen.

CONFERENCE ON SIBERIA

An international colloquium on 'Siberia: colonisation, development, and prospects, 1582–1982' was held in Paris on 24–27 May 1983. The principal organizers were the Laboratoire de Slavistique of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, and the Centre d'Etudes sur l'URSS of the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales; many other French institutions were also involved. The secretary of the colloquium was M. Boris Chichlo. Some 130 specialists from many countries attended, but none of the 27 Soviet citizens invited was able to come.

Apart from plenary sessions at the opening and closure, the working sessions were organized in four commissions which met simultaneously. Their subjects were on conquest and discovery; cultures, peoples and religions; Soviet Siberia; and the Siberia of exile, the camps, and literature. A number of papers had a specifically northern interest, more particularly those in the commission on cultures, peoples and religions. Contributions to the commission on Soviet Siberia included many on economic topics, especially energy and transport, and these of course include reference to Arctic and sub-Arctic developments.

The papers are being published by the organizers. Another conference on the same general themes is planned for 1987.

Reviews

GALLANT GENTLEMAN

[Review by Clive Holland* of Sue Limb and Patrick Cordingley's *Captain Oates; soldier and explorer*. London, Batsford, 1982. 184p., illus. £12.50.]

The problem facing any potential biographer of Captain L. E. G. Oates is that one is dealing less with a famous life than with an outstandingly famous death. His enduring fame is of course based almost entirely on his last few weeks in 1912, when he accompanied Scott to the South Pole and, returning,

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heroically sacrificed his life in the hope of giving his companions a better chance of survival. But how does a biographer do justice to those humdrum years of childhood and early career which preceded his brief encounter with immortality? The only previous full-length biographer of Oates, L. C. Bernacchi in his *A very gallant gentleman* (London, 1933), chose to avoid the issue by devoting only a fraction of his book to the man's life; the rest was little more than a re-hash of the old familiar story of Scott's last expedition.

Sue Limb and Patrick Cordingley, however, have faced the problem squarely. They have made extensive use of a wide variety of hitherto untapped sources, both published and unpublished, to fill out the details of the life before the famous death, to give real personality to the shadowy hero, and thereby to provide some explanation of what made him capable of his immense self-sacrifice. Their most valuable source of unpublished information, indeed the backbone of the book, is a long series of letters from Oates to his mother written between 1899 and 1912—that is from the beginning of his army career to just a few weeks before his death. Sue Limb first came across these letters in the early 1960s when they were still in the possession of Oates's sister Violet, and armed with this treasure store she embarked on an early version of this biography. Sadly, that first effort came to nothing and her biography was set aside for many years. But then in 1979 she found the perfect catalyst to give new stimulus to her dormant work. She met Patrick Cordingley, an officer in Oates's own regiment who shared her interest in Oates and, above all, was able to contribute his specialist knowledge of military history. It is a most fortunate combination of talents.

The book begins with a charming sketch of Oates's childhood which successfully combines established family history with some solid historical research on the late Victorian period, the reminiscences of Violet Oates, and a little reasonable speculation. His was a prosperous and a loving family and his early years were apparently little short of idyllic, full of sport and adventure and marred only by his slightly fragile constitution, by the premature death of his father, and by a little backwardness in academic learning which left him short of the qualifications necessary for Oxford. An Oxford education had appeared a natural and necessary step in his progress towards an army career and the setback infuriated him. But dogged commitment to a part-time militia corps eventually won him his commission, and to his delight he found himself gazetted into one of Britain's best cavalry regiments, the 6th Inniskilling Dragoons. By this stage, frequent quotations from those letters to his mother have begun to lend colour to the biography, but also the specialist army knowledge of Patrick Cordingley comes into play: the authors use many diverse sources to provide a vivid image of the army and army life in Oates's time, and so place his experiences and the feelings expressed in his letters in clear perspective.

Within a short time of taking up his commission, Oates saw his first (and last) warlike action following the outbreak of the Boer War. It was during this action in South Africa that he committed the one other act of heroism that gave him some small claim to fame outside his Antarctic experience. In March 1901 he refused, with eventual success, to surrender to a superior force of Boers, earning for himself a mention in despatches and apparently a recommendation for the VC. Less cheerfully, a bullet in the thigh left him incapacitated for several months, and with a permanent shortening of the left leg which, some claimed, contributed directly to his breakdown on the polar journey 11 years later.

The authors' sound understanding of military history again helps them through the next stages of Oates's career when, with the war ended, he returned to routine army life, serving successively in Ireland (1902–06), Egypt (1906–08) and India (1908–10). In each of these postings, lacking the excitement of war, he found himself increasingly disillusioned and frustrated and, as he frequently complained to his mother, with absolutely nothing to do except to indulge his passion for equine sports: hardly promising material for a biographer! But the authors rescue the situation with a series of entertaining and informative essays, covering each posting, which present a wealth of background information on the troubled state of the British army at the time, on the nature of army social life as Oates would have found it, and on the contemporary historical setting in the countries to which he was posted. All this material serves to illuminate, and is in turn enlivened by, the attitudes and states of mind expressed in Oates's letters home—most notably his long catalogue of complaints about the condition of the army and his blunt expressions of purposelessness, despair and occasional mild rebelliousness, building up repeatedly to a resolve to quit the army altogether. In the end he did not quit, but in 1910 a successful application to join Scott's expedition won him a welcome temporary grant of 'special extra regimental employment' and the promise of some adventure at last.

Dealing with the Antarctic expedition, the authors turn from one problem to another; from engaging the reader's interest in the story of an obscure and largely uneventful life to maintaining interest in yet another re-telling of one of the most famous stories in the world. Once again, it is the careful use of Oates's own writings—including extracts made by Violet Oates from his polar diary (the original having been destroyed on instructions from her mother)—that enables the authors to add freshness and insight to the story. The diary and letters reveal, for example, that Oates, almost alone among Scott's men, was able to admire the hated rival Amundsen for his toughness and superior organization, even in the moment of defeat after arriving second to Amundsen at the pole: 'I must say that man must have had his head screwed on right. The gear they left was in excellent order and they seem to have had a comfortable trip with their dog teams very different from our wretched man-hauling'.

His cool, unemotional objectivity at that time of agonizing humiliation for Scott's pole party gives a little insight into the clear-headed detachment with which Oates could handle the worst of circumstances. It was a quality of mind that had been present in glimpses throughout his army career, clearly demonstrated in the Boer War, but called upon altogether too infrequently, for his taste, in the frustrating years thereafter. But now, at the very end, he showed that quality in full measure. Within two months of recording his equanimity in defeat at the Pole, Oates faced the gravest of crises: crippled with frostbite, he was hindering his companions in their race towards safety. Displaying again that cool detachment, he spotted their one chance of survival and walked out of the tent to his death.

'Hero or victim?' is the title of this book's last chapter; an examination of the ways in which succeeding generations have viewed his death, reflecting the doubts that have sometimes been cast on the value of Oates's self-sacrifice and, indeed, on the value of the whole tragic polar endeavour. But there is no need by this stage to wonder how the authors will answer their own question; throughout the book they have sympathetically and persuasively portrayed Oates as an amiable, essentially uncomplicated, but quietly most competent soldier who would never have coveted the label of hero, but, at the same time, was nobody's victim. Throughout his short life he yearned for adventure, but he did not close his eyes to the risks that adventure involved. In the end, the risks overwhelmed him, and he quietly accepted the consequences. Despite the doubters, posterity has elected him a hero, and this excellent book has emphatically endorsed, and let us hope reinforced, posterity's judgement.

One minor niggle. Those 340-odd letters from Oates to his mother have in recent years found a permanent home in the Scott Polar Research Institute, thanks to the generosity of many benefactors who enabled the Institute to purchase them, as it were, for the nation. It would have been both courteous and useful for the authors to tell us so, but for some odd reason they are content to record only that the letters 'are known to still exist'.

STARVING SAILORS

[Review by G. Hattersley-Smith* of *Starving sailors. The influence of nutrition on naval and maritime history*, edited by J. Watt, E. J. Freeman and W. J. Bynum. London, National Maritime Museum, 1981, 212 p. Soft cover £5.95.]

Many of the early expeditions that ventured into the polar regions were naval, and their provisioning drew on naval scales with the addition of such concentrated foods as were available. Readers of *Polar Record* will find much of interest in this symposium volume of papers by leading specialists in the fields of nutrition, physiology, neurology, and naval and polar history. The volume is the proceedings of an international symposium held at the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, on 16–18 April 1980.

The discovery of vitamins and the recognition of scurvy as a deficiency disease occurred only 70 years ago. The suffering of sailors from vitamin C deficiency is well documented. In a paper on the nutrition of British Arctic expeditions Ann Savours and Margaret Deacon make excellent use of this material, (also of E. J. C. Kendall's research of 1955), presenting the scurvy problem with fascinating insights of life below decks in naval exploring ships of the last century. It is easy to be wise with our current

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