

# REVIEW

## CYNICAL VIEW OF A FAMILIAR TALE

[A review by Harry King\* of David Thomson's *Scott's men*, London, Penguin Books Ltd, 1977, 331 p, illus, maps. £5.95.]

This book attempts to be more than just another life of Robert Falcon Scott. Rather it is intended to be a group study, an analysis of the characters of Scott and those closest to him in the Antarctic, as well as his wife Kathleen, his patron, Sir Clements Markham, and his two rivals for the pole, Shackleton and Amundsen. An analysis of personal character and motive, the book also tells us something about the British and their attitude to duty. Despite certain obscurities of style this is, on the whole, a well written book, and in places shows much insight; but it will almost certainly annoy and upset those who have personal experience of what polar exploration is really about. Mr Thomson, whose previous literary experience has mainly been in the field of the cinema, seems essentially out of sympathy not only with the aims of polar exploration ('I have not been to Antarctica and do not accept all the reasons they gave for going there') but also with the whole *dramatis personae*, disparagingly referred to as 'a rather marooned portion of English society in the years before the First World War . . . a strain in Edwardian manhood, absurd, admirable and remote'.

No great effort of reappraisal is required these days to demonstrate that Scott had a hard battle all his life to cope with the demands made on him by his fellow human beings and by harsh circumstances. Probably he was not a great leader of men. The author quarries exhaustively in Scott's diaries, now published in an unedited facsimile edition, to make these points over and over again. He does not trouble overmuch to balance this adverse picture with some reference to Scott's many and balancing virtues, though he does have the grace to suggest that he achieved greatness 'near the end'. Throughout the book there is this tendency to pick on human failings and soft-pedal virtues. Even that best of all men, Edward Wilson, does not escape: 'an admirable man, and yet he does not quite escape the incongruity of a decent padre in the trenches of the Great War'. And of Oates's self-sacrifice he comments: 'he was hardly a mature hero, but he may have guessed that the graceful exit would fix him securely in history'. Even in these cynical and hardened times such hastily constructed judgements seem offensive to the memory of the dead.

Equally superficial are Mr Thomson's judgements of the motives that impelled Scott and his companions to risk their lives in the then little understood field of Antarctic exploration; 'nothing', he suggests, 'would have driven them south except a lust for recognition and importance', though this is hastily qualified by 'going south was their version of human uniqueness and of the loneliness that surrounds it'. The pioneer scientific work carried out on the two Scott expeditions he sees as having 'few practical purposes'. As for the pole journey itself, that was an essentially futile and wasteful undertaking on a par with the Moon shots, 'immensely touching . . . but marginal to the mood and needs of the period'. Most scientists active in Antarctica today would admit to owing something to the work carried out by Scott's scientists. As to what the moods and needs of the British public in 1910 might have been, that is indeed a matter for conjecture. Mr Thomson's view that Amundsen's clever and calculated dash to the pole was what they needed is equally open to debate. Oversimplification, gross generalization, a tendency to gild and to debunk has spoiled what might have been a good book. Meanwhile the reputations of Scott and the pole party will continue to survive untarnished, enshrined in Scott's own last letters and his diary and in the pages of Cherry-Garrard's classic *The worst journey in the world*.

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