

## A NEGLECTED HERO

[A review by Roland Huntford\* of Lennard Bickel's *This accursed land*. Macmillan Ltd, London, 1977, 210 p, illus. £4.95.]

Why, suddenly, are we interested in all our yesterdays? It is a moot question. The fact is, recent history is *en vogue*, and it happens to apply to things polar as well. As far as the Antarctic is concerned, everybody who puts pen to paper is mesmerized by Scott's last expedition; doubtless because of the haze of myth surrounding it; and doubtless too because of the massed literary talent of the participants. Nobody—well, almost nobody—has considered other early enterprises of intrinsically equal interest.

The explanation is obvious. The expeditions were, on the whole, either lucky or well run. Tragedy and high drama are absent. That does not, however, apply to one undeservedly neglected venture: Sir Douglas Mawson's expedition to King George V Land in 1911–14. That expedition holds one of the great sagas of polar exploration. This was Mawson's sledge journey along the edge of the ice cap from Commonwealth Bay, during which his two companions, Ninnis and Merz, died, and he himself survived in a lone retreat which has few equals in the history of polar exploration. Mawson displayed physical and mental qualities, and a will to survive, which are distinctly inspiring. He is surely a hero for our own times. So it is encouraging that in *This accursed land* at last we have a book about that journey.

The book has certain limitations. The treatment of sources is not absolutely scholarly. There is a hint of the journalistic set phrase, and the historical background in particular contains a quota of inaccuracy and questionable judgement. Nordenskjöld's Swedish expedition, for example, was not, as Mr Bickel suggests, a failure because its ship happened to be lost. It was rather better organized than some august contemporary, and succeeding expeditions. In fact it was Norden-skjöld who, in his traverse of the Larsen Ice Shelf in 1902, initiated Antarctic sledging; not, as is generally made out, Scott on his southern journey during the *Discovery* expedition in 1902–03. Mr Bickel also has the dangerous habit of inventing conversations that could have taken place, but for which there is no reliable source. I know this question of historical dialogue is a vexed one; the rule is, if not beware, be wary.

All that said, Mr Bickel has nonetheless written a rattling tale. If *This accursed land* leads to a revival of interest in Mawson, perhaps to send readers to his own book, *The home of the blizzard*, it will have been worthwhile. Mawson, after all, not only survived a horrible ordeal. He also led one of the most successful of early Antarctic expeditions, discovering large tracts of country with very few people at his disposal. He was the first to use wireless in Antarctica. He was not only an epic survivor, but something more. He is worth reading about.

## IN BRIEF

## BOTTLED RELIEF

There is no end of books containing lists of improbable hints to explorers *in extremis*; but one Soviet scientist has nevertheless found a source of relief that seems to have escaped even the most comprehensive survival manual: Pepsi-Cola. Or at least, to be perfectly accurate, a Pepsi-Cola bottle.

The story comes from eastern Siberia, where a Soviet scientific expedition has recently been exploring the depths of Baykal lake. On one occasion, three members of the team were in a bathyscaphe at a depth of some 900 m when their craft sprung a leak at the point where cables from the surface entered it. They immediately began their slow return to the surface, but were still left with a disturbing problem: would the incoming water flood the bathyscaphe before they reached safety? The leader of the group, Aleksandr Podrazhanskiy, decided to determine their fate by measuring

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