Review for Nimrod 2018

Robert B. Stephenson

Edward J. Larson, *To the Edges of the Earth; 1909, the Race for the Three Poles, and the Climax of the Age of Exploration* (New York and London: HarperCollins, 2018) 329pp, illustrated.

[The author spoke at the Shackleton Autumn School in 2011 ("Did Shackleton Care about Science?") following the appearance of his book *An Empire of Ice; Scott, Shackleton, and the Heroic Age of Antarctic Science* (Yale University Press, 2011).]

Edward Larson's latest book to touch on the polar regions takes an interesting approach by comparing and contrasting the efforts to reach the three poles. To my knowledge no one has gone along this path before. Two of the efforts are independently well known and reasonably obvious: the north pole and the south pole (with the south magnetic pole thrown in for good measure). The third and more obscure one is the attempt to climb to the highest mountain altitude yet reached.

The year that ties these three together is 1909. The attempts: Shackleton's Nimrod expedition (the Southern Party made up of Adams, Marshall, Shackleton and Wild; the Northern Party made up of David, Mackay and Mawson); Peary and Cook's competing attempts to reach the North Pole; and The Duke of the Abruzzi, Prince Luigi Amedeo's expedition to the Karakoram to climb the world's second tallest mountain, K2 (Everest was closed to climbers back then).

If those drawn to the polar regions are interested exclusively in one or the other of the poles but not both, they are *mono-polar*. (This reviewer is one of these and is squarely in the Antarctic camp.) And then there are those who split their attention between the two poles. We call these people *bi-polar*. (This is one of the few jokes, lame as it is, that polar buffs have come up with.) In this book Larson has invented a third category: the *tri-polar* enthusiast. It certainly works for Shackleton, Peary and Cook because there are numerous similarities shared by the three beyond the year 1909. But the case for the Duke is quite a bit weaker though nonetheless interesting. All three share similarities but including K2 as a third pole seems a bit of a stretch. The *tri-polar* ranks have to be small in number at best.

Ten other Larson titles are listed opposite the title page, only one of polar interest. He's written on evolution, George Washington, eugenics, and the American election of 1800. So although he is a history professor at Pepperdine University, he can also be considered a professional writer. Many of those penning polar books are polar devotees first and writers second, meaning their efforts often don't end up being page turners. Larson's two polar books are, if perhaps not page turners, are very well written and present the subject matter in a compelling way that focuses rather than fogs the mind. He has a good turn of phrase which makes reading this account enjoyable. I also found I was effortlessly learning something about Arctic history which I have assiduously avoided doing in the past. It's what we usually refer to as "a good read."

Larson's treatment of Shackleton's Nimrod expedition is an excellent summary of the explorer's only really successful expedition: the accomplishments were many. True, they didn't get to the pole but nearly did. Mt. Erebus was climbed, the magnetic pole was attained, the Beardmore Glacier was discovered (and conquered), and the first book was written, edited, illustrated, printed, bound and issued in the Antarctic—the *Aurora Australis*.

Peary's numerous attempts at the North Pole gets the same excellent treatment. Each expedition gets a bit closer until the very final (successful?) one with the explorer well into middle age. What a difference between the approach taken by the two explorers: Shackleton's four-man Southern Party versus Peary's virtual army of men and Inuit helpers. (He referred to his teams as 'divisions' and led them as if he were a field marshal.) There are the women behind the men: Josephine (Jo) Peary and Emily Shackleton; the loyal lieutenants, Matthew Henson and Frank Wild; the competition, Frederick Cook and Robert Scott.

The Antarctican might not learn a lot about the Antarctic from this book, nor might the Arctican about the Arctic or the Mountaineer about mountain climbers, but each will learn much about two of the three.

A few of the interesting things I learned: "Like Inuits, Peary slept in his clothes and traveled without sleeping bags or tents." Professor David "…had headed off to the Snowy Mountains to learn how to cross-country ski and build igloos."

(Interesting because of the little skiing that got done during the Nimrod expedition; and were igloos ever built during any heroic-age Antarctic expedition?) Peary's expeditions had no scientific program whatsoever unlike those of Nansen, Scott or Shackleton. One wonders why.

I'm not suggesting that a visual timeline should have been added to the book but if one had been the coincidences, similarities, overlapping time periods would have been dramatically evident. Time is really what ties these three together.

I spied a few errors: Andrée didn't try "…to fly over the pole in a hot-air balloon…," it was a hydrogen balloon. Scott's Discovery expedition was co-sponsored by the Royal Geographical Society and the Royal Society, *not* the Royal Navy. William Beardmore didn't go "…to the same private school as Shackleton…" [Dulwich College], rather he went to the High School of Glasgow. It's not Steward Island in New Zealand but Stewart Island.

And lastly a portion of the book's subtitle*, the Climax of the Age of Exploration*, jars me a bit. I would put the climax a bit later so as to include Mawson's Australasian Antarctic Expedition, Scott's Last Expedition and Shackleton's Endurance Expedition.

948 = word count