

**Tom Griffiths, *Slicing the Silence: Voyaging to Antarctica*,
University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 2007.**

ISBN 978 0 86840 9726

This is an in-depth study of historical, scientific and human related aspects of Antarctica, centred on Griffiths' voyage to the Australian Antarctic station of Casey in the summer of 2002-2003. It consists of a series of essays cleverly linked through personal experiences on that voyage and expanded into a colourful word tapestry on Antarctic history, politics, science and expedition culture. The scope of the book develops from describing the earliest human contacts with the frozen continent, to portraying contemporary aspects of life with the Australian National Antarctic Research Expeditions. The book is extraordinarily well researched and each of the fifteen chapters begins with a personal diary entry of events from the voyage. It then cleverly weaves these into the broader historical perspective of scientific exploration and the human emotional issues of expeditions. In doing this, Griffiths shows his own feelings towards the frozen continent. He uses key selected references to portray relevant but obscure background details which are not commonly addressed in Antarctic literature. This lifts the well-known journeyman stories of the 'heroic era' of Antarctic exploration into a special treatment of light and shade, giving an interesting balanced perspective. Whilst the familiar core events of Antarctic exploration are used as a base to present highlights of past expeditions, less familiar aspects are explored, such as why certain literature was taken on sledging trips and the impact food fantasies had on starving men.

Griffiths explains that he purposely took two old dairies with him on his voyage, which he frequently drew on for a historical perspective. The first was the unpublished journal of Fred Middleton, a young doctor on the 1916 voyage of the Aurora with John King Davis to retrieve Shackleton's Ross Sea party, with Shackleton himself on board as an observer. The second was the published account of the historian and journalist Stephen Murray-Smith who undertook a six-week summer voyage in 1985-1986 as an independent observer for Barry Jones, Minister for Science and with responsibility for Antarctic administration. Middleton's makes a connection with the several Australians

who were the backbone of the section of the Shackleton Ross Sea expedition. Murray-Smith provides a somewhat controversial snapshot of the culture of the Australian National Antarctic Research Expeditions at a time of change. When at Casey station, Griffiths finds a rich source of material in the neglected station logs which contain a large amount of unique information on human events at the Australian stations. This material together with other station logs held at the Australian Antarctic Division is expertly used to show the ups and downs of station morale amongst wintering parties at Australian bases. The issue of women participating in Antarctic expeditions is traced from the Antarctic honeymoon of Jennie Darlington on the Finn Ronne expedition in 1947, through barriers in the minds of leaders such as Byrd, Fuchs and Dufek to the fully accepted status of women in current Australian National Research Expeditions.

The author explains that initially his intention was to skirt around the stories of the 'heroic era', but this was clearly not possible in any in-depth study and the first essay opens with a well-balanced review of the circumstances of Scott's last expedition before juxtaposing the survival experiences of Mawson's Australasian Antarctic Expedition experience in 1912. Although both expeditions endured tragic loss of life, the treatment is not just focused on a death and glory 'Boys Own' account. It is a more human approach with empathy and a balanced historical perspective rather than the conflicting and often emotional interpretations that exist elsewhere in the literature. While the legends of the 'heroic era' of Antarctic exploration are broadly covered, Griffiths readily admits his Australian bias in approach at the start of the book, but this does not detract from his presentation of material. Australia's territorial ambition in Antarctica is used to explain Mawson's 1929-1931 coastal expeditions, but this theme is expanded to cover the actions of Antarctic claimant and non-claimant countries, particularly Russian and American approaches to territorial claims. This culminates in the signing the Antarctic Treaty in 1959, which holds these claims in abeyance.

Griffiths' uses his historical expertise and entertaining style to take the reader deep into a number of scientific disciplines. For example, he regresses climate changes backward to the last ice age in Australia, documenting its impact on the indigenous people of the Australian continent. The integrated treatment of Antarctic-related topics focuses on its

geography, geology and geophysics. It uses insights from early exploration voyages in tracing the Antarctic history from whaling to aspects of modern environmental science, which is then seen as a barometer of the planet's health. The impact of westerly weather on sailing ships in the Southern Ocean along with the search for longitude is used for an essay on the Southern Ocean. This in turn is widened into a study of space meteorology to explain the impact of Antarctica on global weather and climate change. The penguin cycle is skilfully negotiated through the famous 'Worst Journey in the World' by Apsley Cherry-Garrad, describing the retrieval of penguin eggs from the emperor penguin rookery at Cape Crosier in the winter of 1911. The emperor penguin is used as a link to the modern era of exploration. When fire destroyed the French base in Terre Adelie in 1952 it forced a winter at an observation hut near the emperor penguin rookery by seven men including the Australian surveyor Robert Dovers. The penguin connection is taken further with stories of personal encounters with Adelie penguins and references to the *March of the Emperors* film photographed at the French site and released in 2005 with markedly different French and American narratives.

The theme of the final chapter returns to the 'heroic era' of the opening essay and discusses tourism and the treatment of artefacts left by the early explorers. It closes with an account of the auction of a sledging biscuit supposedly taken from the polar tent of Scott's last camp, and explores the fascinating conjecture of whether this was indeed kept as an uneaten biscuit by starving men as a symbol of hope and resolution or merely an unsubstantiated myth.

Griffiths researches literature very well and investigates various quotes of the term 'silence' from primary sources to describe Antarctica and the colourful title. This can also be seen as continuing the theme of Bowden's history of the first fifty years of Australian National Antarctic Research Expeditions in *The Silence Calling*. This focus on 'silence' is probably due to the author's single experience at one site where the weather was relatively windless at the time. It would be nice if this fine work could be continued through a visit to Mawson station or time spent on the inland plateau and mountains where the wind noise overcomes the silence and presents another dimension. I would certainly like to see him extend his work by continuing his experience in the katabatics of

Mawson station and windswept areas of the Prince Charles Mountains or Enderby Land Mountains where the 'song of the wind' can be such a dominant experience. But from the single visit to Casey, he carefully synthesises much of the culture and spirit of the modern Australian Antarctic expeditions using interviews with current and past expeditioners. This provides colour and does not become tiresome as hearsay and descriptions of extreme behaviour are almost entirely avoided. The publication has only two minimal maps and no photographs other than the front cover and a thumbnail print of Griffiths on the ice. The text is supported by thirty pages of endnotes with a comprehensive index but no separated bibliography.

This book, by a master historian is immense in its scope and detail. The text does not become morbid or depressing due to Griffiths' skill in injecting light and shade and his liberal use of easily-read eloquent text. The text is deceptively rich and makes a very important contribution to Antarctic literature bridging past and present cultures. It is a blend of a scholarly history with current activity and is much more than a quick popular account of a summer voyage with a contemporary Australian Antarctic relief expedition.

John Manning,
School of Historical Studies, Monash University.