

BOOK REVIEW

Review of *Scott's last biscuit: the literature of polar exploration*, by Sarah Moss (2006). Oxford: Signal Books. 251 pp. ISBN 1-902669-87-8.

Fifty years ago, George Bass revolutionized maritime archaeology with the observation that it was far simpler to train an archaeologist to be a scuba diver than it was to turn a scuba diver into an underwater archaeologist. One is tempted to make a similar observation about literary theorists writing polar history while reading this interesting volume. It is not that scuba divers cannot perform underwater archaeology; it is just that one set of skills cannot be learned nearly as quickly as the other.

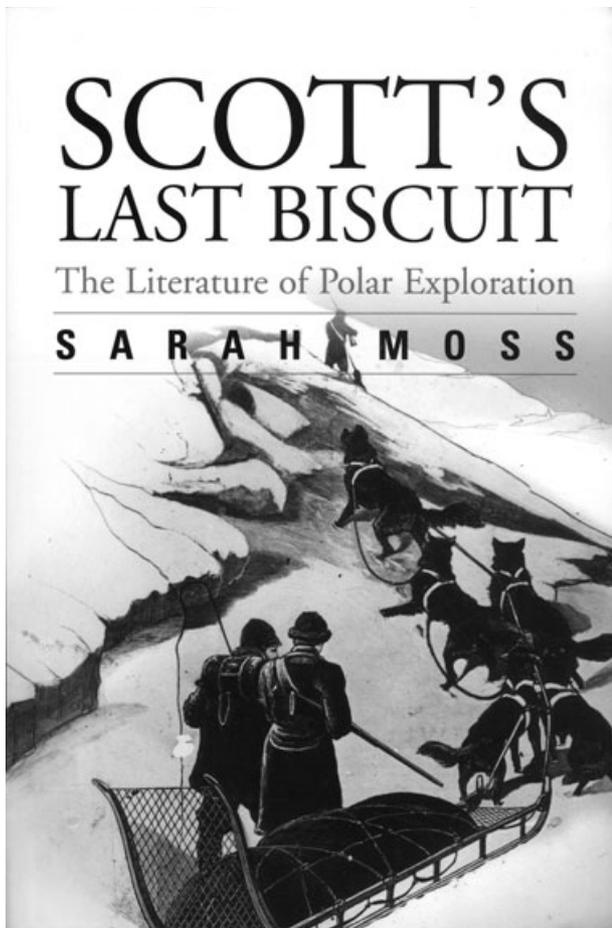
As a literary theorist, Moss, a lecturer in English at the University of Kent, Canterbury, UK, alternates between the best and a bit of the worst of postmodern feminist literary analysis in this intensely interesting series of essays on the fiction, non-fiction and poetry of polar exploration. The focus here is on the polar regions as places of continuous disorientation, where there is only one day and one night per year, and where one can walk forwards and backwards at the same time. The Arctic and Antarctic are unstable places not only climatically, navigationally and cartographically but, as this study suggests, as templates for human longing and desire, heroism and the projection of cultural superiority.

For the most part the book works remarkably well as literary analysis, especially the fascinating trope on the Norse Greenlanders as the original Arctic explorers (except that, as usual, the Celts beat them to it nearly everywhere). One learns of the remarkable notion that Hans Egede died still convinced that an idyllic Eastern Settlement lay just on the other side of Greenland, rather than directly under his feet in the form of archaeological remains.

Moss offers a plausible suggestion for why the Western Settlement was found eerily and very recently abandoned in 1350 (resulting from the natural aversion to anyone on the horizon who looked like a tax collector), but her suggestion that the colony was still a going concern as late as 1605 (p. 40) is arguable at best. At that point, no one had heard from the Greenland Vikings for nearly 200 years. To her credit, Moss admits that the disappearance of the Norse Greenlanders is still a mystery waiting to be solved; in my opinion by maritime archaeology.

Correspondence

P. J. Capelotti Abington College, Penn State University, Abington, PA 19001, USA. E-mail: pjc12@psu.edu



The segment on the modern Viking Fridtjof Nansen is similarly excellent, save for a slight bump into a feminist hummock that conflates Nansen's hunting of baby bears with anxieties over "feminine softness and over-indulgence on the *Fram*..." (p. 81). Unfortunately, many of the essays that follow are marred by factual errors that threaten to sink the whole effort (and would do so if they did not similarly freight so many other works on polar exploration). These omissions and errors appear when Moss retells history to support her criticism of the literature of that history.

Some of these are minor or apparent slips of the pen: John Cabot is nowhere to be found; Poul Norlund becomes Paul Norlund; Svalbard is referred to as "Spitzbergen", which in itself is a corruption of "Spitsbergen". (As one of the first people I met in Longyearbyen remarked: "It has an 's' instead of a 'z' because it was discovered by a Dutchman and not a German".) Ernest H.

Shackleton had returned to Antarctica once, on *Nimrod*, between the RSS *Discovery* and *Endurance* expeditions, not “several times” (p. 21). Moss’ Arctic history is perhaps too credulous when discussing Robert E. Peary’s claim to the North Pole; perhaps too incredulous when dismissing The Great United States Exploring Expedition under Charles Wilkes. Scientists experimented with aviation at the poles both before and after the First World War, but not after the Second World War (p. 23), by which time aviation was a given in polar operations. Thoreau’s *Walden Pond* (p. 86) is in Massachusetts, not in Maine.

Then there are the errors that seem to compound each other. By now, it seems clear that Parliament should proclaim that no British polar scholar shall henceforth cite Roland Huntford’s *The last place on Earth* on Captain Robert F. Scott without first proving that they have studied Sir Ranulph Fiennes’ counterbalancing *Captain Scott*. Scott is described as choosing polar exploration because it still held the prospect of rapid promotion “two hundred years after Parry’s voyages” (p. 99), which should, of course, be less than 75 years after Parry’s voyages. Scott is described incorrectly as being forced from the Bay of Whales (p. 100) after finding Captain Roald Amundsen and *Fram* already there, when the two never met (although, as Fiennes relates, not for want of Scott’s trying, especially when Amundsen hid himself during Scott’s pre-expedition visit to Oslo).

Moss parrots the manifestly incorrect claim that Scott “refus[ed] to take any notice of Scandinavian and American success with skis and dogs” (p. 101) when he took not only dogs and skis, but also ponies and motor-sledges (and, earlier, a balloon) to Antarctica. Apsley Cherry-Garrard (p. 115) takes his famous winter journey to the penguin rookery with Lawrence E. G. “Titus” Oates and Dr Edward Adrian “Uncle Bill” Wilson, when it was, of course, Wilson and Henry Robertson “Birdie” Bowers along with “Cherry” who survived that intense ordeal conducted for pure science.

There are similar problems with the chapter on the Swedish aeronaut Salomon August Andrée. The reader is

led to believe that Andrée sought to reach the North Pole in a hot air balloon, when his whole aeronautical career was centred on adapting hydrogen gas balloons for geographic exploration. Moss congratulates Andrée on his brave use of new technologies, a notion she does not impart to the lamented Captain Scott. Knut Fraenkel is described as a railway engineer “much younger than the other two [crew members]” (p. 117), when in fact he was just out of civil engineering school and two years older than the youngest expedition member, the tragic lover/photographer Nils Strindberg (whose intense love affair with Anna Charlier is glossed over in this book that does so much elsewhere to explore the role of women in the polar regions).

Moss concludes her analysis of the failure of the expedition with the remarkable assertion that the men died because they were cold and had no winter clothing, even though they had survived several hundred kilometres of a frigid trudge across the ice pack to Kvitøya, and presumably were all dead long before the onset of the winter of 1897. The bibliography suggests that Moss has not read anything on the subject published after 1931.

Despite these errors—and they are maddening—this book reveals a potential polar essayist of some stature. There are really several potential books here, not least the still-unwritten cultural comparison between the explorers of Scandinavia and those of the UK and the USA. But like George Bass’ scuba diver trying to learn archaeology, Moss needs to show that she can master the details of polar expedition history before attempting to survey the whole shipwreck. For now, *Scott’s last biscuit* works well as humanism and literary criticism, less so as humanism and polar history.

References

- Fiennes R. 2003. *Captain Scott*. London: Coronet Books.
 Huntford R. 1999. *The last place on Earth*. New York: Modern Library.