

Book reviews

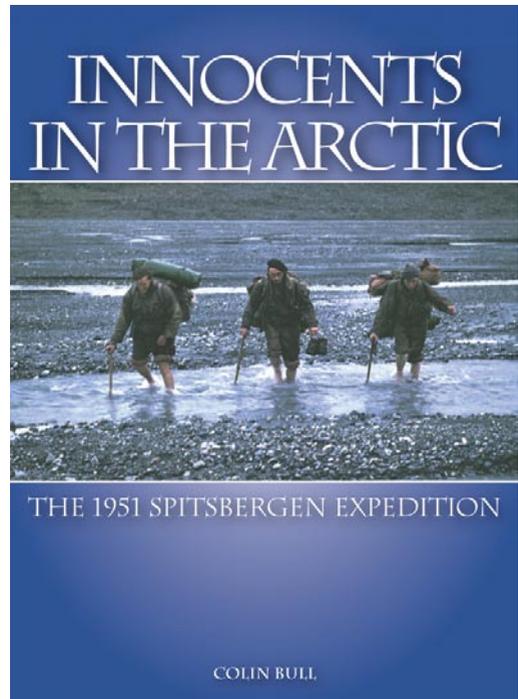
Review of *Innocents in the Arctic. The 1951 Spitsbergen Expedition*, by Colin Bull (2005). Fairbanks, AK: University of Alaska Press. 254 pp. ISBN 10: 1-8899963-73-9.

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As the title implies, this book is the story of an expedition to Spitsbergen in 1951. It would be an exaggeration to state that the expedition was actually sent forth by the University of Birmingham, but the ten young members were all attached to that institution as graduate or undergraduate students or, in two cases, as lecturers. One of the latter had by 1951 reached the considerable age of 28, but otherwise the field party consisted of men in their early twenties. In other circumstances this information might be of little relevance, but in this particular case age—or rather lack of experience—does play a certain role, alluded to by the book's title. No doubt the university lent moral and to some extent practical support to the expedition, but it is obvious from reading the book that the initiative and most of the effort came from the participants themselves. Thus, an important lesson is learned already at the outset of the story: enthusiasm can bring you a long way, even to the Arctic.

The expedition was scientific in its intent and lay-out. In one sense it was a follow-up of a previous Birmingham expedition in 1948, in which Lionel Weiss took part. He was also the initiator of the 1951 venture. Having discovered Carboniferous fossils among significantly older metamorphic rocks of the so-called Hecla Hoek basement complex (Pre-Cambrian to Silurian age), Weiss was eager to find out more about the tectonic forces that had formed the land. Therefore, he planned to make stratigraphical investigations in the area around St. Jonsfjorden on the west coast of Spitsbergen, the largest island in the Svalbard archipelago. The main research object was to interpret and map the structural geology south of St. Jonsfjorden, but studies of Quaternary phe-



nomena, like beach terraces and glaciers, were also to be undertaken. Geophysical investigations were on the programme too, but largely had to be abandoned due to lack of time and proper instruments. Hence, the author himself, who was the on-board physicist, was more or less demoted to rock-carrier. Not that it seems to have bothered him too much.

Although science plays an important part in the book, *Innocents in the Arctic* is neither a scientific report nor a popular textbook on the geology of western Spitsbergen. It is rather a chronologically ordered documentary augmented by more personal reminiscences of the expedition, which perhaps places the book in the broad category of travel literature. This concept could seem traditional and uninspiring for a broader public without particular interest in Arctic science and it requires a good writer to work out well. Luckily, Colin Bull is a good writer and editor, but it is relevant to question whether the audience for this kind of book might be rather narrow. More of this later.

As mentioned above, the book maintains a traditional chronological form. Following a list of participants, a foreword by former director of the

Norwegian Polar Institute, Olav Orheim, and a preface by the author, there are 11 chapters dealing with the expedition itself from start to finish. The first five describe the preparations in England and the hazardous voyage of the expedition vessel *Miss Mabel*, first from her berth in Cork to Liverpool, then via Scottish canals and across the North Sea to Norway. When they eventually reached Tromsø, already seriously delayed, the local authorities refused to let *Miss Mabel* continue to Svalbard, as she was obviously unfit for navigation in Arctic waters. Consequently, the group had to board the passenger ship *Lyngen*, which brought them safely to Longyearbyen. Chapters 6 through 10—roughly half the book—deal with the field expedition to St. Jonsfjorden. I regard this as the main part, where the organization of camps and fieldwork under very harsh weather conditions is vividly described. Almost in passing we are also taught a bit of geology, often in a humorous way and on a scientific level I think most readers can handle. Since the expedition split into two main parties, an inland and a beach party (no pun intended), the chronology is not strictly maintained in these chapters, but this is elegantly solved by the author, who manages to stitch the events of the five weeks together and tie up loose ends. Chapter 11 is about the return voyage of *Miss Mabel*, which proved every bit as eventful as the trip to Norway. The concluding chapter 12, called “Aftermath”, is mostly about the later lives and careers of the expedition members and answers an obvious question from the reader: what became of these guys afterwards? There is also a list of publications from this and related expeditions and a very adequate index. The book is well illustrated with photographs, some of which are quite good, and there are a few maps and drawings as well. The publication has a pleasing lay-out and a decent print quality. The proof-reading must have been thorough; there are remarkably few typos and errors as far as I can see.

For those of us who have had the good fortune of spending a few seasons in Svalbard, whether on business or for pleasure (or both), *Innocents in the Arctic* has a lot to offer. For one thing we learn about the conditions in Svalbard more than 50 years ago, which is interesting from a historical perspective. Anyone with a love for the wilderness can easily understand and sympathize with the joys of experiencing magnificent Arctic landscape and wildlife, the pleasures and frustra-

tions of camping and the special personal relationships that grow from spending time together during fieldwork under challenging conditions. It is also fascinating to learn how the expedition members tackled challenges in a time before helicopters, Ski-doo's, GPS, Gore-Tex and all those wondrous things that have made life more than bearable for the polar scientist. One cannot but be impressed by the amount of research they were able to do “back then”, fuelled by tea and biscuits and limitless enthusiasm. It is the way that Colin Bull relates all this that gives the book its foremost quality, in my opinion. Thanks to careful note-taking and valuable contributions from the other expedition members, and probably frequent meetings of the group, he has been able to compile a comprehensive story that renders details even down to bits of conversation. This adds life and character to an account that might otherwise have been an old-timer's tedious recollection of events half a century ago. The narrative is easy-flowing, low-key and sprinkled with understated humour and subtle irony—a style many of us appreciate as “typically British”. No bragging or macho language here to spoil the relaxed tone of the book, thank you very much. I suspect ageing has done this narrative and its author well.

This is a quite personal book, which is both a strength and a possible weakness. On the positive side the personal details, including the photographs, bring us closer to the characters, to the extent that we may feel we actually are getting to know them properly. This adds credibility and a human touch to the book and elevates it from a mere account to a real story, and a charming one, too. On the more critical side, I sometimes get the feeling that the book is primarily intended for friends and relatives of the expedition members, if not indeed for themselves. It is good fun, at least for a while, to read about camp routines and the drying of sleeping bags, but I would have liked to have learned even more about the geology and the scientific work they did, because those sections of the book are exceptionally well written.

I do recommend this book to all readers of *Polar Research*, without any reservations. Whether it will also appeal to readers outside the (admittedly large) “Arctic Family” is another question—only time and circulation will tell. I think the book has qualities to engage many categories of readers, but it certainly helps to have already an interest in polar areas and outdoor science.