

BOOK REVIEW

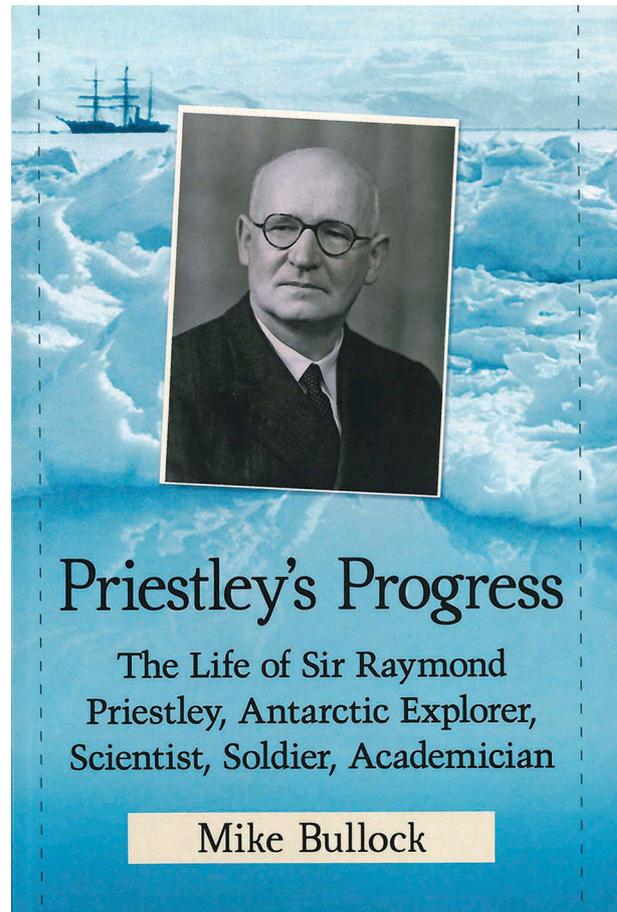
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Priestley's progress: the life of Sir Raymond Priestley, Antarctic explorer, scientist, soldier, academician, by Mike Bullock, Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2017, 197 pp., £38.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-7864-7805-7

Raymond Priestley was a key figure in the “Heroic Age” of Antarctic exploration who travelled south with both Scott and Shackleton. After serving in the First World War, he played a role in the early years of the Scott Polar Research Institute at Cambridge, and later in life his administrative talents were turned to acting leadership of the Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey (FIDS)—the forerunner of today’s British Antarctic Survey. In between he found time to serve as vice-chancellor of first Melbourne and then Birmingham University. Mike Bullock argues that this long and diverse career warrants a dedicated biography. This is a sentiment that I heartily agree with, even if this particular book cannot be regarded as the definitive scholarly work on Priestley.

The key source of information is Priestley’s extensive unpublished diaries. Bullock is right to point to them as an important and underused historical resource. From these emerge a picture of a diligent, proper and, above all, very English individual. Comments on cricket and the church pepper the text. Bullock clearly has great admiration for his subject, and sympathy for his world view, including a wry sense of humour capable of making light of even the most difficult situations. Readers of *Polar Research* may be disappointed at the comparatively brief account of Priestley’s remarkable (and justly famous) participation in the Northern Party of Scott’s final expedition. Seen in the context of the book as a whole, however, the choice makes sense: Bullock is primarily concerned with showing the full spectrum of activities that made up Priestley’s rich life, beyond the one episode for which he was arguably best known.

Bullock’s meticulous use of Priestley’s diaries produces a sharp portrait of their author and his sensibilities. This is particularly true of his later years, when Priestley moved in the upper levels of society and became a living icon of Britain’s Antarctic heritage. His participation in the Antarctic cruise of the Royal Yacht *Britannia* in the company of Prince Philip clearly made a great impression. But the wealth of detail on protocol and life aboard ship may try the patience of some readers, particularly as there is comparatively little detail on Priestley’s time at FIDS. Nor does Bullock make much reference to the relevant scholarly literature concerning this period.



Considerably more remains to be said about the great institutional changes in British polar research that took place during that long and interesting life, and about the specific contributions that Priestley made to the development of geological knowledge of the Antarctic continent. A rich field remains for historians and scholars of polar research.

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