

BOOK REVIEW

Ross in the Antarctic by Rear Admiral M. J. Ross. Caedmon of Whitby, 1982. 314 pp, 8 maps. £12.50.

James Clark Ross is a name to conjure with in the annals of Antarctic exploration. Therefore, this well-researched book by his great-grandson, Rear Admiral M. J. Ross, is a welcome and detailed account of his famous voyages between 1839 and 1843. The central character emerges as a fine naval officer of great determination and dedication, these qualities being equalled by his ability and persistence as a scientist.

Ross gained his early polar experience in the Arctic as a midshipman, first with his uncle John Ross, and then with Edward Parry. It was during these voyages that he was trained in making magnetic measurements, and he also showed great interest in natural history. By 1829, when he again sailed with his uncle, this time in search of the North West Passage, he had been promoted Commander. In 1830, travelling by dog team, he succeeded in reaching the North Magnetic Pole. After an absence of two years they were given up for lost. Their ship had sunk, but the party finally turned up safely and unexpectedly in 1833.

Thus with 13 years of Arctic experience it was not surprising that the Admiralty appointed James Ross to command the Antarctic expedition promoted by the British Association and supported by the Royal Society. The main objective was to make regular magnetic observations in the Southern Ocean and, if possible, to determine the position of the South Magnetic Pole.

His Majesty's Ships *Erebus* and *Terror* sailed in September 1839, and returned to England four years later having circumnavigated the Antarctic continent, and penetrated the ice of the Ross Sea twice in successive seasons when, for the first time, men had seen the great 'ice barrier' formed by the cliffs of the ice shelf. Seventy years later Amundsen, the first man to reach the South Pole, was to write of this achievement:

'Few people of the present day are capable of rightly appreciating this heroic deed, this brilliant proof of human courage and energy. With two ponderous craft – regular "tubs" according to our ideas – these men sailed right into the heart of the pack, which all previous explorers had regarded as certain death. It is not merely difficult to grasp this; it is simply impossible – to us, who with a motion of the hand can set the screw going, and wriggle out of the first difficulty we encounter. These men were heroes – heroes in the highest sense of the word.'

After wintering in the Falkland Islands, in 1842/43 they attempted to enter the Weddell Sea. Although unsuccessful, they discovered Cockburn, Seymour, Snow Hill and Lockyer islands, although at that time the last three were thought to be capes.

Among all the detail in this book there is much of historical interest to scientists – the building of magnetic observatories at the Cape, St Helena, Îles Kerguelen, Hobart, Auckland, Sydney and the Falkland Islands, together with the constant observations made through the voyages. In the botanical field the Assistant Surgeon Joseph Hooker's work was outstanding; but their attempts at oceanography and marine biology, both then in their infancy, seem to have been less impressive.

The chapter concerned with the controversy between Ross and Wilkes tells a complex story. Ross was surely in the right, but one has some sympathy for Wilkes who had, perhaps generously, sent a copy of his chart to Ross. Doubtless a major factor which led to the dispute was Wilkes' practice (as he himself said) of drawing on

his chart 'the land not only where we had determined it to exist, but those places in which every appearance denoted its existence'. Certainly he was not the last explorer to fall into this trap.

All the illustrations are originals and two separate track charts by Ross are contained in an end-pocket. Many of the names given to features are still valid, though a number are no longer in use.

The whole story has been put together with painstaking detail and will fascinate those interested in early Antarctic exploration. It certainly fills a gap in polar literature.

V. E. FUCHS