

Book Reviews

FACE TO FACE: POLAR PORTRAITS. Huw Lewis-Jones. 2009. Cambridge: Scott Polar Research Institute and Polarworld. 288p., illustrated, soft cover. ISBN 978-090-102107-6. £25.00 doi:10.1017/S0032247409990453

In his preliminary essay, Huw Lewis-Jones argues that, 'it is a book created to display some stunning portraits. It may be best to leave the rest to the imagination.' This is a timely comment to the reviewer who is attempting to formulate an encompassing and descriptive set of observations. There are books containing polar photographs providing expedition accounts such as those of Ponting and Hurley, but this is an innovative and quite superb collection of portraits, 100 in all, formed partly out of historic photographs in the collection of the Scott Polar Research Institute and partly out of the contemporary work of Martin Hartley. The photographs are the heart of the book, each turn of the page revealing a full page portrait, some of which are of familiar faces, Scott, Shackleton, Nansen and Amundsen; some of which are of people more familiar by name than face, such as Ponting, Gjaever, Rasmussen; and some who have emerged into public view for the first time, including Inuit of both the past and the present. Between each historic photograph is a contemporary portrait, from Børge Ousland in his home, almost unfamiliar in urban dress, to the cheery chef from Resolute Bay.

Even of the familiar, there are piquant surprises: in addition to the flu-stricken and corpulent Sir John Franklin, there is his first lieutenant, Graham Gore, staring out towards *Erebus* with a resolute half smile, the ship's rigging clearly reflected in the high polish of his cap's peak; Shackleton is pictured informally, munching heartily on a sandwich; Fuchs' eyes are squeezed shut as he laughs at something, possibly the pleasure of the prospect of his first bath in three months. These are indeed portraits, the subject posed and engaged with the photographer, and thus with the reader. The focus is the individual rather than the event, so there are none of the grimmer records taken following desperate hardships such as Mikkelsen and Iversen. For the most part, there are smiles, peace and calm, interrupted only by those textual references to the tragedy that awaits a few of them. A rare exception to this is Pen Hadow, just having been testing his immersion suit in Resolute Bay and possibly in more need of warmth and a change of clothes than an extra few moments to pause for a photograph. So, for the majority of these photographs, the subject and reader look directly into each other's eyes, and indeed, as Lewis-Jones suggests, it is the world of imagination we must inhabit. The book provides a colourful introduction to the novice in armchair polar exploration, by calling up many of the principal 'players', though there is a distinct Anglophone 'drift' in the older photographs reflecting the provenance of much of this extraordinary treasure house.

This impressive array, almost too rich to contemplate in a single sitting, feeds a near irresistible urge to categorise, to spot

subsets and to classify into groups: monochrome and colour, historic and new, explorer/scientist/support worker/Inuit (the popcorn seller linked only by the wearing of a parka). Such an exercise serves only to emphasise the diversity of nationalities, of expeditions and roles, and the difference in the imperatives that the poles have exerted on the adventurous, the scientist and the seeker after extraordinary experiences. The collection defies the reader to find convenient boxes, as much by not including cross references, you come across the portrait of Charles Swithinbank and try to remember where else in the book you read a quote by him on another (it was John Gjøe), and you meet Bettina Aller and know the name was mentioned on another page (it was Jean-Gabriel Leynaud's). Without a reference list, you find yourself flicking backwards and forwards, the process interrupted by your attention being re-captured by the power of the photographs in between.

The substantial and absorbing essay by Lewis-Jones provides an historical context to the use of photography both as expedition record and as formal portraiture. With well-judged succinctness, he charts the story from the pictures of Franklin in 1845 up to the use of moving pictures, incorporating captivating visual examples and a rich array of anecdotes into an exposition of the technical developments easily digested even by the subject novice. Like the best of introductions to a subject, it provokes in the reader an appetite to read further, and thus the bibliography to be found in the end pages is particularly welcome. A further essay, in fact the record of a discussion between Lewis-Jones and Martin Hartley sits like a matching bookend at the end of the polar portraits. This discussion roves far and wide over subjects including cultural, practical and ethical aspects of exploration, and the role of the person paid to wield the camera. As is commonly the case with records of discussions, the reader has to invest more effort in the text of what is essentially a private verbal interchange. More than even with Lewis-Jones' opening essay, the photographs in this section lure the reader away from the text, speaking so clearly and directly as they do. The book closes with an afterword from Hugh Brody entitled 'The boundaries of light' which offers a deeply personal reflection about photographs, memories and meanings. These three written pieces suggest a desire to meet the interests of diverse readers, and yet there is 'bet-hedging' by the inclusion of some remarkable photographs that, because of their subject matter, would not have met the criteria for inclusion in the main collection of portraits. Like a treasure trove, it is the photographs that time and again seize and enthrall, whether from the end papers, the title pages or the portfolio of portraits itself. The reader has the liberty to take or leave the textual offerings, though few would want to omit Lewis-Jones' opening essay. With the exception of the brief texts which accompany each portrait, and which would have benefited from a pruning of the anecdotal (and occasionally ungenerous), the written materials offer a set of insights and thoughts many readers, if not all, will appreciate. (Sue Nicol, Isle of Man College, Homefield Road, Douglas, Isle of Man).