

The man who discovered Antarctica: Edward Bransfield explained – the first man to find and chart the Antarctic mainland. Sheila Bransfield. 2019. Barnsley: Frontline Books. xviii + 318 p. illustrated, hard cover. ISBN 978-1-52675-263 5. £25. US\$49.95.

Whatever one thinks of this book after reading it, one cannot accuse the author of not setting out her market stall clearly in the title. Bransfield did it! An unambiguous statement. No one else on board did anything towards the “finding” and “charting” . . . not Midshipman C.W. Poynter, from whose log we learn much, actually most, about the expedition in question, nor any of the other officers placed on board *Williams* and certainly not William Smith, part owner of the vessel in question, and probable discoverer of the South Shetland islands which led to the expedition on which Bransfield achieved what he apparently achieved. Nor were any of the crew involved in the “finding” and “charting”. Nor is any doubt expressed concerning the possibility that what was seen on the prophetic day was simply a large island. And, as a footnote, a question that will occur to many readers of this journal, one has to observe that the Russians, Bellingshausen and his crews, floating around somewhere in Antarctic waters at the time, barely get a mention throughout the whole volume.

But let us go back to the book in question. There is absolutely no doubt that the author, a distant relative of Edward Bransfield, has done an immense amount of wholly admirable work, of the most exacting, and exhausting, kind into the little that is known about her subject. And for this, all polar history enthusiasts will be in her debt since her work is unlikely to be repeated. She has simply dug up everything that apparently there is to dig but she does make the point that it is perfectly possible that some gem, for example, a portrait of Bransfield, or a set of logs, might emerge from some unlikely source, that might necessitate revision. But for the present, let us be grateful or what we have.

And this is neither more nor less than a full detailed biography of Edward Bransfield, Master RN of HMS *Andromache* who was placed on board *Williams* by Captain Shirreff of that ship to investigate reports by William Smith of land well to the south of Cape Horn. This took place in 1819 and the resulting expedition was probably one of the most successful Antarctic expeditions in that it achieved what it set out to achieve at minimal cost and casualties. The problem is that the book takes some 200 pages before arriving at the point in the book at which Bransfield placed his significant footprint on history.

Bransfield was “pressed” into the Royal Navy in County Cork in 1803 but proved to be an excellent sailor and enjoyed a steady if not spectacular rise through the ranks. Several chapters are devoted to his naval career with information provided, from, mostly, a detailed study of the Admiralty records, of his ships and the officers under whom he served, some of the highest distinction. This is all very interesting but no one could claim that it was written in such a way as to grip the reader’s attention, especially if he or she has taken up the book for insights on the subject’s Antarctic career. This part could be much reduced in length and at this point one wonders concerning what, if any, editorial guidance or supervision was provided for the author.

And when one does arrive at the chartering of *Williams* by Shirreff and one peruses what the author has to say about the expedition one feels curiously deflated as if one had climbed a mountain to realise that one had not actually reached the top. Because there is virtually nothing new in it. Recourse is had to generous reprinting of sections of Poynter’s journal and, astoundingly, there is neither map of the voyage nor reprint of the chart that was the result of it. Quite how any reader who was not more or less intimately acquainted with the South Shetland Islands, preferably in person, was to make sense of the text in their absence is unclear to this reviewer.

Bransfield’s career after the expedition is covered in equally thorough detail as is his earlier life. He died in Brighton in October 1852 having lived there in comfort for some years, the comfort arising from his half pay and prize money.

The presentation of the book is good. There is a full critical apparatus, index, and so forth but rather too much, to this reviewer’s taste, at any rate, concerning the author herself. Some of the illustrations are relevant but as noted, there are no maps. The dust cover is attractive in that it portrays a vessel against a suitable icy background that is presumably intended to be *Williams*.

But the latter was a brig while the vessel shown is a ship, having three masts and, more to the point, gun ports. She is clearly a sloop of war.

To sum up, a useful book for those interested in the non-polar parts of the life of Bransfield but those interested in the *minutiae* of the expedition that made his name will learn little that is new. However one must be generous and restate that the author has

searched deep and hard to find such details of his life as there are to find . . . always excepting possible gems! And for that she deserves our thanks and congratulations (Ian R. Stone, Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge, Lensfield Road, Cambridge CB2 1ER, UK (irs30@cam.ac.uk)).

DOI: [10.1017/S0032247419000561](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032247419000561)