

POLES APART: FASCINATION, FAME AND FOLLY
BOOK LAUNCH SPEECH BY
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Good evening and thank you for inviting me to launch *Poles Apart: Fascination Fame and Folly*, the publication marking the 175th anniversary year of the Royal Society of Tasmania.

I begin by paying my respects to the traditional and original owners of this land—the Mouheneener people. I acknowledge the contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginal community, who have survived invasion and dispossession, and continue to maintain their identity, culture and Indigenous rights.

My first impression of this book is also the one that remained with me after reading it, namely, how accessible and friendly it is – the latter because of the quantity and stylistic variety of illustrations, their placement throughout the text – and friendly also because each chapter heading and author name is in handwritten font.

And in the former – accessibility – this is so because there’s nothing abstruse or too scientifically technical about the texts, which one might possibly have anticipated in a learned, multi-author publication about the Polar regions.

So, for me the book is an editorial and design triumph because its readership will in no way be confined to those whose professional interest is in polar history, polar geomorphology, polar exploration and the tensions between exploiting and conserving the Arctic and Antarctic regions. It will be of interest to a broad readership and, as each contribution is self-contained, it is suited to browsing and dipping into, as well as reading from cover to cover.

Here is but one example of what I’m attempting to articulate. Contributor Dr. Des Lugg, long-time specialist in Antarctic medicine, cuts right to the chase with two clinically neat definitions, among the many available for the Polar environments.

“The 10°C July isotherm,” he writes, “based on climate and ecology, and essentially the tree line, is the most useful definition of the Arctic.”ⁱ

And he then writes: “Likewise, Antarctica is the ice sheets and lands below the Antarctic Convergence (Antarctic Polar Front), where cold waters from the Antarctic region meet and sink beneath the warm waters from the middle latitudes.”ⁱⁱ

How clear that is. And familiar to an audience such as is here this evening. But how many people outside of this room would easily be able to “define” those two regions?

I have no doubt that this book has the capacity to enlighten many readers, including in high schools and ought to be promoted as such.

Its genesis is also part of its attraction. Editors Anita Hansen and Brita Hansen explain in their Preface that, following the success of the Society’s 2016 publication *The Library at the End of the World*ⁱⁱⁱ, and this year’s *Mapping Van Diemen’s Land and the Great Beyond*, they decided to again use the Society’s collections to work on a book, this time based on Tasmania’s history of exploration and European settlement. But – and here I quote them:

“As research progressed we were overwhelmed by the volume of resources available and our initial plans of an all-encompassing [publication] were quickly dispelled as unrealistic. With several options open to us, we decided to focus on the Arctic and Antarctic.”^{iv}

So it is that *Poles Apart: Fascination, Fame and Folly* is distilled from a very considerable resource base.

Indeed the story of that resource base forms part of the book.

As archivist Tony Marshall documents, donations of books and other materials to the library of the Royal Society, from the earliest years right through to the substantial Sir Ernest Clark bequest in 1951, ensured that its value extended beyond being exclusively a scientific collection. I will quote Tony in this regard:

“For well over a century, the Royal Society of Tasmania was the principal (and often the only) institution working to ensure that the original records of Tasmania’s history were collected, preserved and used to make the State’s history better known. The Society’s continuing commitment to preserving the material in its care and encouraging its use by students and scholars is truly worthy of celebration and congratulation.”^v

And I can tell you as an aside – and it’s a mildly depressing aside – that this principle of collecting and keeping books was unfortunately not adhered to at Government House. The original William Porden Kay design for the building completed in 1858 included a library – today’s Ante-Drawing Room – but for reasons unknown that was not put into effect, which had negative consequences.

David Owen, who has a background as a writer was appalled to discover that there have been at least two Government House book sales, to quote the Mercury, “A

Large Library of Valuable Books”^{vi} when Governor Thomas Gore Browne departed in 1868 and another in the 1920s and so one can only imagine the contents of a Government House Tasmania Library today, had one been established, developed and maintained from the outset.

But to return to *Poles Apart*. Each of the book’s 19 contributors brings to the text an individual perspective enriching the whole. Elizabeth Leanne, for instance, University of Tasmania Associate Professor in English, writes with great experience of “the relationship between print culture and polar exploration”,^{vii} employing names as famed as Samuel Taylor Coleridge whose Antarctic poem, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” was inspired by northern and southern exploration narratives, including it seems James Cook’s *A Voyage toward the South Pole and Round the World*.

... While the late Pat Quilty, to whom the book is dedicated – as a “long-time member and staunch supporter of the Royal Society of Tasmania and a great ambassador for Antarctic science”^{viii} – tells us about Charles Darwin and South America’s strange and obscure notoungulate the *Toxodon*, a creature built like a low-slung rhinoceros, and an ineluctable victim of evolution.^{ix}

Personally, I was intrigued to read about John Webber, the artist and draughtsman employed on Cook’s Third Voyage because in 2014, Dick and I happened upon an exhibition, *The Art and Science of Exploration* at Greenwich which included many of Webber’s works including the engraving of the Sea Otter in *Poles Apart* and other works including ‘Man of Van Diemen’s Land’.

And I was also interested to learn more about the voyages of Sir John Franklin, and that he has been called the ‘man who ate [his?] boots’ because on the 1819-1822 expedition to find the Northwest Passage, the expedition ended with half of the members dead (some murdered) and others reduced to eating the leather parts of their equipment.^x

As well as the 19 contributors, there are the “In His Own Words” extracts. Reading this book I had to agree with Nansen, who wrote: “Nowhere, in truth has knowledge been purchased at greater cost of privation and suffering.” Remember, the awful fate of Belgrave Ninnis and Xavier Mertz! And the ordeal endured by Edward Wilson and his two colleagues from Scott’s expedition in search of Emperor Penguin eggs.

I could go on, because there is lots more to say! I personally have learnt such a lot, I know what a pair of ‘finnesko’ is, I understand more about krill, “the lynchpin of the Southern Ocean”^{xi} and I won’t now forget why we have a bust of Dumont D’Urville in the front hallway.

By merely skimming the surface I leave you to surely want to know more, which you can easily do by availing yourselves of a copy of *Poles Apart: Fascination Fame and Folly*, edited by Anita Hansen and Brita Hansen and published by The Royal Society of Tasmania as part of your 175th year – and which as your Patron I now proudly declare officially launched.

Thank you.

ⁱ Des Lugg, “Poles Apart: Literally and Metaphorically”, page 42.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Page 12.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Tony Marshall, “More than Science and Books”, page 36.

^{vi} Mercury, Thursday 31 December 1868, page 4.

^{vii} Page 52.

^{viii} On Title Page.

^{ix} Page 133.

^x Page 50.

^{xi} Page 220-221.