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## South Light: A Journey to the Last Continent

Daniel "A" Ellison

Michael Parfit

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A notable literary consequence of the *Somers* affair was Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*, a tale inspired at least in part by the sea drama in which Melville's first cousin, Lieutenant Guert Gansevoort played an important supporting role. Unlike the mutineers of the *Somers*, Melville's Billy is a supremely good young sailor whose hanging takes place aboard a British naval vessel in time of war. But there is more than a superficial resemblance between the personal character of Slidell Mackenzie (McFarland devotes a solid chapter to the man and his background) and that of Melville's fictional Captain Vere. Both commanders enjoy a high reputation for military and personal integrity; both have strong literary inclinations. Both combine a passion for instant justice by death with a near-maudlin fatherliness toward the young men they have so quickly condemned. Both pay a heavy price in mental suffering subsequent to the executions.

The affair of the *Somers* and Melville's *Billy Budd* raise profound psychological questions as well as important issues of naval justice and discipline. It remained to Melville to elevate the problem to the plane of the metaphysical and moral, staging in art the drama of the eternal conflict between the order of grace and the order of necessity.

J.G. BRENNAN  
Naval War College

Parfit, Michael. *South Light: A Journey to the Last Continent*. New York: Macmillan, 1985. 306pp. \$17.95

Antarctica is the earth's most far-off place, submerged like an iceberg in the U.S. consciousness. Fewer than one person in 250,000 goes there annually. The less fortunate but still curious rely on books and photographs to appreciate this huge landmass, its volcanos and wildlife. Out of the region's pristine elegance emerges *South Light*, Michael Parfit's vivid, 9-month affair with the "last continent."

He embraces it eagerly, without inhibitions. Unencumbered by equipment or uniforms he observes research programs and people with a fine eye for detail, and a refreshing outlook on the last unspoiled place on earth. ". . . You stepped out and were dazzled for life. You emerged in Antarctica."

By ship and aircraft he probes the continent—watching science, measuring commitment, immersing himself in unique experiences. Strongly encouraged by a Navy helicopter crew, he even becomes a member of an elite swimming club in water at 31 degrees.

Parfit's first impression reflects what those before him already knew: "It was white, endlessly and frighteningly white," is his outlook after a harrowing flight on a C-130 into a whiteout (virtual blizzard) at McMurdo Station. Past the point of safe return, the resigned Navy flight crew manages a safe landing, mindful that the continent's resolute grip upon them precludes any other option.

He then shifts forward in time to a voyage on the USCG icebreaker *Polar Sea*. While the varied chronol-

ogy is confusing at first, he ultimately succeeds in developing the theme that Antarctica is an extraordinary place from which we have much to learn.

Aboard ship he draws on quotes from early explorers to show the continent at its unpredictable worst. The historical perspective sets the tone for excellent writing in later chapters about scientists and research ranging from space to the distant past.

The book benefits from Parfit's deep knowledge of his subject. Using historical comparisons he carefully points out that the *Polar Sea's* journey is no throwback to the days of wooden decks and sail. Warm and well fed, he watches with impunity the same conditions which brought disaster to Shackleton on the *Endurance*, "The slow violence of the ice and the rage of the sea."

Yet Admiral Byrd saw a place where, "Nature had worked on such a large scale and with such infinite power that one could only gape at her handiwork." Scott, embittered by defeat and an evanescent vision of personal grandeur, called the South Pole, "An awful place, and terrible enough . . ."

From such disparate views *South Light* reveals the intensity of the Antarctic experience, then and now. Parfit is at his best describing, with subtle insights, the people and their impressions of the continent.

The middle chapters, set in McMurdo, make it clear that time and technology have reduced the risks to modern Antarctic research-

ers. Visitors still observe, "the distant invisible land . . . all wind, whiteness and shadow," but with less concern for who owns it than for what it has to offer for all. Some, including the author, think the last continent is the world's best hope for science, cooperation, and peace.

The journey concludes with visits by sea to several stations where international relations and cooperation are the rule. Disagreements seem to pale against the sheer enormity of the continent. Drinking cognac with a Russian base leader Parfit reminds us that, "in Antarctica our differences ran shallow in the cold."

Although the book is well written, a few minor flaws appear. For example, the *Polar Sea's* heading is said to have, "pinged from 240 to 30 the long way around," a confusing mix of nautical terminology. Mt. Siple is called one of the last unseen places on earth. In fact, it was viewed and photographed by the Marie Byrd Land Party in 1977. Finally, the map at the beginning shows McMurdo on the mainland, nearly 200 miles from Scott Base. However, the two sites are virtually collocated and are on Ross Island.

Aside from these blemishes the book is first-rate. Even polar experts are certain to find it stimulating. No one wishing to become more familiar with the world's least known continent, in its most intense period of discovery, should fail to accompany Mr. Parfit on his remarkable journey through *South Light*.

DANIEL "A" ELLISON  
U.S. Space Command