

## BOOK REVIEW

Review of *The expeditions of the first International Polar Year 1882–83*, by William Barr (2008). Calgary: Arctic Institute of North America. 417 pp. ISBN 978-1-894788-03-8.

It is probably safe to assume that no readers of *Polar Research* are unaware that we have just come through a fourth International Polar Year (IPY). All science is, or should be, based on the previous achievements of others, and thus the experiences and results of the previous three IPYs (the latter IPY is known as the International Geophysical Year) are also in the forefront at this time. This account of the first IPY expeditions reflects that the market was ripe right now.

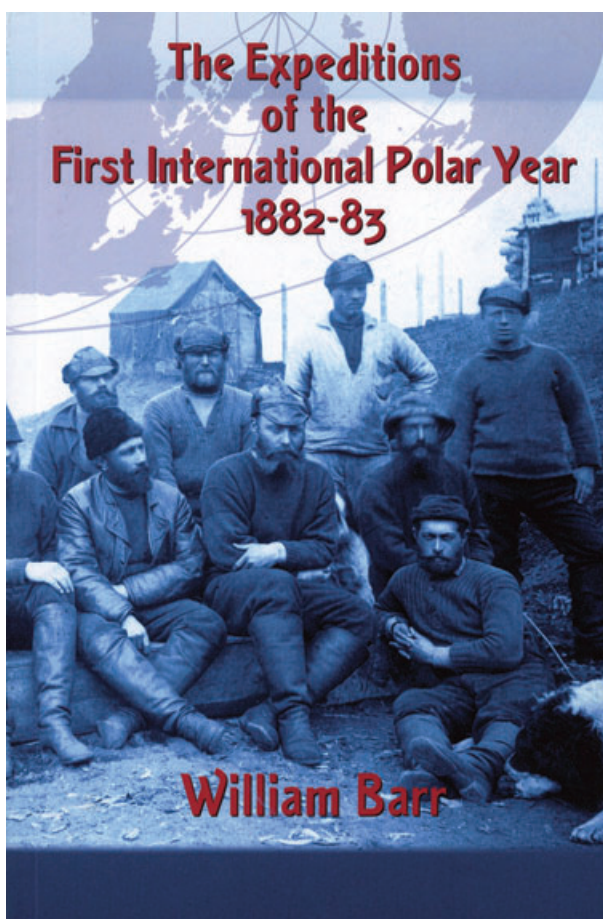
As the IPYs progressed, they became ever broader and wider in scope, both geographically and scientifically. In 2007–09 more than 60 countries and 50 000 scientists and technicians are said to have participated, to the sum of 1.2 billion USD (Schiermeier 2009). At the other end of the scale, the first IPY, in 1882–83, is much easier to get to grips with. Then, 11 nations established 14 major stations: 12 in the Arctic or near-Arctic, and two in the Southern Hemisphere, at South Georgia and Cape Horn. It is useful, in addition, that the author of this book, William Barr (no relation to this reviewer!), also mentions several small auxiliary expeditions, as he calls them, which were mostly one-man shows, as well as the fact that many meteorological/magnetic observations were taken by observatories worldwide, as a supplement to the main IPY programme.

William Barr first published this material in 1985 in connection with the 100th anniversary of the first IPY (Barr 1985). The new book is a reprint of the 1985 material, including the introduction and conclusions, but with slight adjustments to the reference list, and with the addition of a helpful index. One would have liked to see the illustrations in the conclusions of the remains of three of the station sites updated with new photographs, since a lot might have happened to these Arctic ruins during the past 20+ years.

One of the delights of the first IPY in a historical context are the reports that appeared afterwards, which give us detailed insights into not merely the scientific work, but also the successes and tribulations—and in some cases absolute disasters—that occurred during the various expeditions. As William Barr points out, the reports were

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published in five different languages, and no one before him had produced a monograph concerning all of the expeditions. He states clearly that the focus of his book is not so much on the scientific programmes as on the “achievements, hardships, everyday life, and weaknesses of all the expeditions involved” (p. 9). The last sentence of his introduction, which states that “These pages in the history of polar expeditions have remained blank for far too long” (p. 9) is not as appropriate now in 2008 as it was in 1985, as the IPY expeditions and stations have been the focus of various studies in recent years.

As VIPs and others currently take one- or two-day flying trips to the heart of Antarctica, it is enlightening to read of the struggle some of the first IPY expeditions had to even reach their starting point—or to get back home again afterwards. William Barr starts both his introduction and his accounts with Adolphus Greely’s American expedition

to Lady Franklin Bay, which was the most dramatic and ultimately disastrous of the 12 Arctic expeditions. Although the station was established without trouble, and ran for two whole years with great success, the relief expedition came nowhere near to fetching the 25 men in the summer of 1883. The men had to attempt to make their own way southwards through the ice-filled strait between Ellesmere Island and Greenland. They ended up in a dire condition in Starvation Camp on Pim Island, and only seven of them were alive when help finally arrived at the end of June 1884. One of these died soon after.

On the other hand, the Russian expedition to Ostrov Sagastyr' in the Lena Delta did not suffer such a gruesome fate, but it took them from December 1881 to August 1882 just to reach the site of their station, travelling overland from St. Petersburg by train, sledge, carriage, river barge and steamer: a journey worth a book of its own.

Yet another experience of unplanned travel belongs to the Dutch expedition, whose ship, the *Varna*, got locked in the ice in the Kara Sea and spent the IPY there instead of at their chosen site of Dickson, near the mouth of the Yenisey. At the end of December 1882 the men moved into a prefabricated house on the ice, as the *Varna* was leaking badly, and towards the end of July she sank. The men made their way by sledge and boat to the Russian mainland, bringing with them all the observations and reports they had made for the IPY programme. We are in fact struck in several chapters by how different the ice conditions in mid-summer were in many of these areas compared with those of today.

Others again had a relatively uneventful IPY, but still their reports contain a wealth of interesting facts about their experiences, equipment, observations, extra scientific work that came in addition to the IPY programme, and connections to any local populations involved. William Barr has, as mentioned above, concentrated his recounts of the expeditions on these details of the experiences of the men during the IPY. He has not attempted to analyse the whys or hows, but sticks to straightforward chronological descriptions, as related in the printed reports. There is a multitude of examples of minute detailing that could be considered trivial, but that despite this add to the understanding of these expeditions of 125 years ago—and can in many cases still be experienced today! “On the return trip they found that the spring tides had flooded the ice in places, and hence they all got wet feet; despite Lockwood’s ensuring that the men changed their socks as soon as possible, Private Biederbick sustained a frostbitten toe, although it did not prove serious”

(p. 25). As one party left another on the shore of the Lena Delta, “The oarsmen gave three cheers while Bunge answered with three rifle shots” (p. 187). It is obvious that William Barr could not, or would not, leave out the smallest detail from his translating and recounting!

There are a few things to miss in this book: some of the events that are recounted beg for an explanation or an attempt at analysis. A serious rift developed between Greely and the expedition surgeon Dr Octave Pavy during spring and summer 1883 that seems to have had roots in more than just the mentioned botanical collection that Greely found too poor to be of any use (p. 41). Pavy was later actually placed under arrest. He died of starvation only three weeks before relief arrived at Starvation Camp. An analysis of the role of any local populations involved would also be interesting, but this is not the role of this book. In fact, the largest passage in the book that deviates from the straightforward reporting style of “They did this, then they did that” is contained in the chapter about the work at, or out from, Ostrov Sagastyr', where the reader is treated to a long and detailed description and explanation of the geomorphology of the area (pp. 174–177, 191). The explanation is to be found in the blurb about the author on the back cover: “He is a geomorphologist by training”.

There are very few maps for a book that uses many pages to describe the various journeys to and from the IPY bases, or to describe reconnaissance trips. A final negative remark, which reflects on the publisher rather than the author, is that the book is bound so tightly that it will not at any point stay open without being held that way.

There is much to commend the book. Not least, there are very few typographical errors. The fact that these reports are collected in one publication and in one language is the main point. The wealth of details does ensure that we have gathered here before us most of the information that can be gleaned from the general reports of the expedition, and can use this in many ways, including for some of the analyses that William Barr has neither intended nor produced here.

## References

- Barr W. 1985. *The expeditions of the first International Polar Year, 1882–83. Arctic Institute of North America Technical Paper 29.* Calgary: Arctic Institute of North America.
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