

ROALD AMUNDSEN'S SOUTH POLE BOOK (1912)

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Abstract. *Roald Amundsen's South Pole Book (1912).* The Norwegian polar explorer Roald Amundsen published a book after each of his five expeditions: about the Northwest Passage, 1903-1907 (1907), the Northeast Passage, 1918-1920 (1921), the South Pole expedition, 1910-1912 (1912) and about the two attempts of reaching the North Pole (1925, 1926). In addition he published an autobiography in 1927, the year before he disappeared while flying on a rescue mission in the Arctic. Amundsen's most famous expedition is the South Pole expedition, the race to reach the South Pole before the British party led by Robert F. Scott. The book *Sydpolen* (The South Pole) is however not regarded to be very engaging; and Amundsen is certainly a much weaker stylist than his fellow Fridtjof Nansen. Amundsen's expedition report *Sydpolen* certainly has its weaknesses, but also some strengths. The article will discuss some aspects of the text.

Keywords: *Roald Amundsen; The South Pole; expedition literature.*

When Roald Amundsen was back on the polar ship *Fram* on the 27th of January 1912, after he had been at the South Pole a month earlier, writing a report about his expedition was a priority, because it would earn him money. That Amundsen began to write before he returned home, is evident for instance from a statement in his first chapter: "Here I sit among palm trees, surrounded by the most wonderful vegetation, eating luscious fruits, and writing the story of the South Pole". ("Her sitter jeg i palmenes le, omgitt av de vidunderligste vekster, fråtsende i de herligste frukter og skriver – Sydpolens historie", Amundsen 2003, p. 41). The environment which he now described, was that which he had seen as a guest of Don Pedro Christophersen in Argentina, a Norwegian businessman, landowner, and diplomat.

That opening scene is a striking contrast between where Amundsen sits and what he writes about, or between warm exuberance, and cold and ice. But one's expectation of a change back and forth between the environment described by the author being surrounded by palm trees and his earlier travels among the ice, is not fulfilled. A more imaginative author would have made use of that contrast.

A simplified history

Apart from the enticing beginning of the chapter, the entire first chapter, "Story of the South Pole", is a simplified review of earlier attempts to conquer the Antarctic. The final chapter is also disappointing, for the story ends in Hobart, the capital city of Tasmania, and therefore we cannot follow Amundsen to his triumphal reception in Norway. In a private letter, he wrote: "I will omit chapter VII: *Home Again*, as it is impossible to do anything more about it". ("Jei sløifer kapitel VII: Hjemme igjen. Som du nok forstår er det umulig at prestere noe større om det", Bomann-Larsen 2003, p. 184). One of the team members, Kristian Presterud, was asked to write the chapters "Southward" and "Northward", which describe the sea voyage, and Amundsen wanted the poet Vilhelm Krag to add some visual imagery to the descriptions. Amundsen is clearly struggling with his own style of writing. He just describes what had actually happened, and imaginative descriptions of Nature, for which Fridtjof Nansen is so famous, can barely be found in Amundsen's writings. He prefers facts over feelings. One does however not miss

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a figurative and metaphorical language or flowery adjectives. The problem is that Amundsen as a writer often lacked a coordinating device.

Humor and self-irony

There are however some bright spots in the *South Pole* story. Amundsen possessed a considerable sense of humour, something which Nansen barely had. The following is clearly a dig at Nansen and his style of writing. When describing the departure from *Framheim* towards the South Pole, Amundsen wrote:

While I stood and looked at the loaded sleds, which stood there ready to begin the long voyage, I tried to think of something poetic, like *the never resting human spirit*, or *the mystical and terrible icy desert*, and then thought: no, that would not do! It was far too early in the morning for something like that.

Imens stod jeg og betraktet de pakkede sleder som stod der ferdige til å begynne den lange reise. Jeg søkte å puste opp en smule poesi – «den aldri hvilende menneskeånd» – «den mystiske, grufulle isørken!» Nei, det gikk ikke. Det var visst for tidlig på morgenen. (p. 383)

Another example of laconic humor is a meeting with a penguin, which he describes this way: “He ended his life bowing his way into a frying pan”. («Bukkende endte den sine dager i stekepannen», p. 223). And in another place: “An emperor penguin just came to visit, and ended up in the stew pot.” (“En keiserpingvin kom nettop på besøk – suppekjelen”, p. 251).

A mysterious visit

We can find an interesting narrative device in Chapter 5 of the book. Here, Amundsen tells us about a mysterious visit to the base camp at Bay of Whales in the *Framheim* cabin, during the winter of 1910 to 1911. A text passage begins: “We came up the old path from where the *Fram* had been moored at first” (“Vi kommer opp den gamle oppkjørsel fra der hvor *Fram* lå første gang”, p. 318), and at first we think it is Amundsen and his men who are coming. But that is not so. Amundsen says: “But I see that you have become too warm during this march. So we will walk a bit more slowly.” (“Men jeg ser De blir varm av marsjen. Vi skal gå litt langsommere”, p. 322). Who is coming for a visit in the Antarctic in the middle of the winter? Is it Robert Scott or one of his men? And then the guest begins to tell the story himself, in the first person. “When Amundsen left me, he forgot to tell me where I could best find a place for myself. So I tried to follow him into the room in the cabin, but with that air in there, no thanks!” (“Da Amundsen gikk fra meg, glemte han å si hvor jeg best skulle stikke meg bort. Jeg forsøkte å følge etter ham inn i stuen, men luften der – nei takk!”, p. 323).

A snow tunnel leading into the cabin branched out into several different directions. And after a while Amundsen takes his guests on a tour. “Now grab onto my anorak, and follow me.” («Ta nu fatt i anorakkhalen min og følg etter», p. 322). Then the stranger meets the other members of the expedition, who are busy repairing their equipment, packing up supplies, or preparing a meal, and so on. At the end, Amundsen follows his guest out into the cold winter darkness again. “And as you can see, that lantern might not last if I went out there, and therefore I hope that you will excuse me if I don’t follow you any further, and turn back now while the flame still flickers. From here on you know your way already.” (“Som De ser holder lykten borte i leieren på å gå ut, og jeg håper derfor De unnskylder at jeg ikke følger Dem videre, men snur om mens den ennå lyser litt. Herfra kjenner De jo veien selv”, p. 367).

The reader as stranger

Who is being sent out into the winter darkness by Amundsen? Who is that stranger that is not named in any history book or in the Amundsen biographies, who hangs onto his anorak for 50 pages in this book, and who watches everything that happens at the base camp?

A small hint is given by the following comment from the stranger: "The first thing that attracted my attention was the library" ("Det første som tildrog seg min oppmerksomhet var biblioteket", p. 343). For this has to do with literature and literary devices: The stranger is the reader, who is introduced into the text at this point. It is we who are conducted around *Framheim* on that winter day. In reality, this is not just any winter day, but all of the winter days boiled down into a single day. That way we are able to obtain, without excessive repetition, a good insight into the daily lives of the expedition members during that winter.

Amundsen has found a way to avoid the tyrannies of chronologies. He presents us with long sequences of daily activities which are condensed into a single one. This is what makes these roughly 50 pages into some of the most interesting in this book about the South Pole. This is comparable to the complaint of Kristian Presterud in the chapter "The Sled Travels of the Eastern Party", where Presterud writes:

If I had described that long series of days as we experienced them while we traversed the flat barrier ice fields, then I am afraid that to a very large extent that would have been like singing 120 well known verses, which all sounded alike.

(Skulle jeg gi meg til å beskrive en lengre rekke dager slik som de forløp så lenge vi gikk på den flate barriere, er jeg redd for at beretningen i høy grad kom til å minne om den bekjente vise med de 120 vers som alle sammen lød like ens, p. 523).

Literary devices

Amundsen solves that difficulty by inviting the readers to visit the base camp, and by compressing a long series of days into a single day. That is a good literary device, one which Otto Sverdrup could have but did not use, in order to breathe life into his story of the expedition to north-western Greenland, which lasted four years (1898 to 1902). On board of the *Fram* Otto Sverdrup wrote the following complaint into the diary: "I can't write something that people will want to read. I was only able to line up similar important events." ("Jeg kan ikke skrive noget som folk kan læse. Det blir bare en opramsen af ensartede faktorer" (Hegge 1996, p. 120).

One can therefore conclude that Amundsen knew and used literary devices. He was aware of how documentary literature should be shaped. He had however not the skill or the patience to work the text through. As a storyteller Amundsen clearly falls short of Fridtjof Nansen.

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