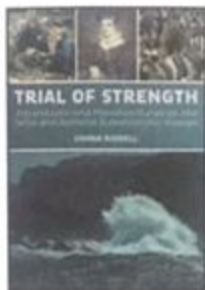




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Trial of Strength: Adventures and Misadventures on the Wild and Remote Subantarctic Islands

Shona Riddell

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Reviewed by Joe O'Farrell

A good friend of mine, a polar historian who lectures on the cruise ships to Antarctica, likes to tell the story of the passenger who, at question time after his talk on the subantarctic islands, asked – with all seriousness – ‘are there any more undiscovered islands?’.

The further I got into Shona Riddell’s book, the more this seemingly asinine question appeared less so, and in fact – to judge from her metaphorical journey around these ‘forgotten islands’ – the question seemed perfectly logical!

As she explains, the subantarctic – politically and geographically – is defined as the area north of the Antarctic Circle between 47° and 60° latitude south of the equator. These subantarctic islands have no permanent ice on them and are warmer than their Antarctic neighbours, with an abundance of wind, fog and rain caused by the colder Antarctic seas colliding with the warmer waters of the north. This imaginary line is called the Antarctic Convergence, and the global area immediately to the north of it has its own unique climate and environment. For the purposes of this book, therefore, the author follows the now accepted convention of referring to this area as the subantarctic.

Most of the 20-odd island groups in the region are under the control of either Australia or New Zealand, and it is these islands which form the nucleus of Ms Riddell’s story. In the main, they are the remnants of ancient volcanic eruptions and have been shaped

over the centuries by glaciation and ocean currents. Significantly, they contain some of the world's few remaining unspoiled environments.

So, is this book a dry but worthy geophysical and environmental assessment of these remote places? Anything but. In all probability, it started out as little more than a piece of local history. The author, Shona Riddell, is a New Zealander. Auckland Island is a subantarctic island. The connection? In 1849, her great-great-great grandparents Isaac and Sarah Cripps left England, with their three young children, to begin a new life on an island in the southern ocean.

In what was, for its time, an extraordinarily advanced and courageous social experiment, the five Cripps, along with 55 others, swapped their relatively safe, but mundane, life in England for the possibility of a new beginning on a remote, utterly hostile, and, as they were led to believe, uninhabited island on the other side of the world. There, on Auckland Island, in April 1851, the Cripps's fourth child, and the author's great-great grandmother, Harriet, was born.

The story of the Cripps, their fifty-five fellow travellers, and the settlement they founded on Auckland Island 300 miles south of New Zealand's south island, warrants a book all to itself.

In circumstances, but not motive, eerily similar to the (English) Patagonian Missionary Society and its attempt around the same time to establish a settlement on Tierra del Fuego – just around the Antarctic corner from Auckland Island – Charles Enderby (of the famous British whaling and shipping firm – later to carve its name on the continent of Antarctica) set up a whaling station and settlement on Auckland Island.

At the time, so writes Ms Riddell, Britain was lagging behind America in the whaling stakes and whale oil was in high demand for domestic and commercial lighting, as well as whalebone for riding crops, umbrella ribs and women's corsets. The waters around Auckland Island are the winter-time breeding grounds of the southern right whale, so it seemed like the ideal location for

Enderby's new venture. To house the whalers and their families, he built the settlement of Hardwicke, named for the Governor of the new fishing company he established for that purpose. It doesn't take from the story to say here that the venture was not a success, or that the settlement of Hardwicke lasted only three short years, but it needs to be stated that the full narrative, as given by Ms Riddell, is both a joy and a sorrow.

Spurred on, no doubt, by what she came across in her reading and research for the Auckland Island chapter, the author has unearthed some quite extraordinary stories relating to the other islands in the subantarctic group. Her research into the discovery (a qualified term) of these islands is of the highest order, as is her style of writing. Those of us who feel that we are reasonably acquainted with most of what there is to know about, for example, Campbell Island, or Macquarie Island, or even the Bounty Islands, are in for a rude shock. We don't know the half of it!

Every page of this delightful book brings a new story; every up-turned rock reveals a nugget of new information, every reproduced photograph a feast for the senses.

We are caused to reflect on the unheralded and unsung part played by whalers and sealers in the discovery of new islands. To explorers, the announcement of a new find is the priority. To whalers and sealers, it is a matter of the greatest secrecy. We are regaled with the tale of one Capt Hasselburg who, in 1810, first saw Campbell Island with its enormous colony of fur seals. In jig-time, he filled his ship with 15,000 fur-seal skins, and returned to Sydney leaving behind a gang of seven sealers to ready the next prized consignment. Still managing to conceal his discovery of Campbell Island, Hasselburg set out to return to pick up his men and their loot. On his way there, he discovered an even better El-Dorado, Macquarie Island. But excitement got the better of him. He dashed back to Sydney. His sealing competitors became suspicious when he returned so quickly, and this suspicion increased when he ordered a large volume of salt (used for curing skins). At the same time, he engaged a dozen or so extra sealers, and announced that he was heading straight back out to sea. As Ms Riddell put it, he

might as well have inserted a giant notice in his local paper announcing that he'd found a profitable new sealing location.

There are many lovely serendipitous links and tangents embedded in the stories of these islands, the kind of links which encourage the reader to explore more. We learn, for example, that there's a Ross Cove and Erebus Cove on Enderby Island, and that what Captain Abraham Bristow initially named 'Sarah's Bosom' when he discovered the Auckland Islands in 1806, was subsequently renamed Port Ross after James Clark Ross called there on his celebrated 1839-43 *Erebus* and *Terror* expedition to the Antarctic. Nor was Captain Crozier, in charge of Ross's *Terror*, left out. Crozier Point is to the north-east of Auckland Island.

In bringing together all the disparate accounts of discovery, exploration, shipwrecks, abandonment and commerce, Ms Riddell has managed to condense into a single volume a wealth of information about the world of the subantarctic islands, some of it already known, but much of it lesser-known, if known at all.

Only to the cognoscenti will the name of Joseph Hatch be known. A London-born chemist, politician and entrepreneur, his greatest, and dubious, claim to fame is that he was the originator of the intensive-despatch method of extracting oil from elephant seals and penguins. At the turn of the twentieth century, he introduced to Macquarie Island the latest in hi-tech oiling equipment, designed to speed up the entire process. It took the form of Norwegian-designed steam-pressure 'digesters'. These were effectively giant bubbling cauldrons that could extract the oil without the animals having to be skinned first. I leave it to Ms Riddell to describe the gruesome process. '[The] unsuspecting penguins were herded into a pen as they waddled up the beach to their rookery. [They were] clubbed over the head, bled out, and then taken to the "Hall of Smells" and shoved into the digesters for steaming. After 12 hours, the resultant oil was scooped off the surface, cooled, and collected into casks for shipment.'

At peak production, there were ten digesters on three sites on Macquarie, and 'up to 3000 penguins were being tossed into them each day. During the period of Hatch's operation from 1889

to 1920, more than three million penguins are estimated to have been killed.' In a great piece of research, the author digs up a New Zealand newspaper editorial from 1890, which, in a sign of the times, attempts to defend Hatch's enterprise: 'It is a native industry and encouragement should be extended to him.....he is creating wealth by turning a variety of wild creatures into commodities serviceable to humanity.'

In what is another significant link, the author brings Sir Douglas Mawson and Frank Hurley into the story. Both had journeyed with the celebrated Antarctic explorer Ernest Shackleton, Mawson and Hurley first visited Macquarie Island in 1911, and would have seen at first hand the process employed by Hatch. The photographs and stories which they brought back to Australia raised awareness, and by 1916, and probably for the first time, people were beginning to feel affection and concern for the remote birds and mammals. When journalist and photographer Frank Hurley wrote a passionate description in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of the unwitting Macquarie Island penguins on their death march to the digesters, it triggered a public outcry which, ultimately, resulted in the closure of the enterprise in 1919. Whether or not it's a betrayal of emotion or a pointed verdict on the man, Ms Riddell closes the account with the withering 'Hatch died in Tasmania in 1928...His grave in a Hobart cemetery is nameless, without ornament of sentiment.'

This book isn't simply an historical journey through the subantarctic islands. It's right up-to-date. It charts the important scientific work currently being done on the islands, and devotes considerable space to the conservation measures now in place. In what might surprise many, it discloses, in the context of all of New Zealand's subantarctic islands being protected nature reserves by 1934, that Winston Churchill's UK Government of 1955 asked to 'borrow' the Antipodes Islands for hydrogen-bomb testing. The request was refused. Hmmm! Could that be why, 55,000ft over Gough Island in the Tristan da Cunha archipelago, some sort of test was conducted in 1955 which, it is suspected, has ramifications to this day in the form of rat-sized mice overrunning the island? But that's a digression.

In publishing terms, this is a splendid book, and Exisle Publishing New Zealand is to be complimented on it. The size, super octavo, is ideally suited to the content. The dust-jacket, boards, binding, and paper quality are all of the highest quality. The stunning photographs, both historical and current, are, in the main, of the highest resolution. In short, the production values are exemplary.

This is a book which does not allow the mind's-eye to close. Long after the final page has been read, the images remain in the consciousness, whether they're of the former Moriori slave Rohana and her husband, taken outside their Chatham Island home in the 1890s, or the photographs of the author's ancestors Sarah and Isaac Cripps, or of the tiny and remote picket-fenced Hardwicke Cemetery on Auckland Island, or of the imagined 15-week-old Isabel Younger, who died in November 1850, and upon whose lop-sided headstone her grieving father carved her initials. Such images are beyond evaluation. Ms Riddell should be rightly proud of her work.

Joe O'Farrell is a polar historian, author and speaker.

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