*To the Ends of the Earth*is a magnificent lost opportunity. Dippel takes his readers on a journey to the poles, describing the suffering, passions, delusions, ambitions, and cultural absurdities of the 19th century and early 20th century expeditions. But he does it in a tumultuous way.

Discovering the poles is not a "regular" discovery/exploration. Conquering the poles is not like conquering any other territory. The poles have an environment that is not simply inhospitable for humans, but that brings out the worst in them.

Explorers would head either North or South by boat, until their ship would get stuck in ice. The ships may or may not be crushed by the pressure of the ice. The men would spend the winter on the ice, in the hope to have a better start in the spring, assuming they survived the winter.

The months of darkness, freezing temperature, lack of food, and isolation from the known world bring almost inevitable depression and madness, aside from frostbites, malnutrition, and diseases. Having other people around in confined spaces drives people out of their minds. Having nobody at all, equally drives humans out of their minds. Deadly boredom would be alleviated with repetitive tedious scientific measurements, which eventually were doomed as irrelevant, but done nevertheless, in deadly conditions, in an attempt to keep a routine in a place that felt timeless.

The conditions on the way to the poles in the 19th and early 20th century were such that it is estimated that one in every two explorer died on expeditions.

Why go facing almost sure death? Or why facing conditions that may scar one for life, assuming one makes it back? Dippel offers a variety of answers, all of which are not necessarily flattering. Mostly, they boil down to greedy personal ambition. Scientific knowledge was just an excuse as testified by some penguin eggs collected risking human lives, and then left to gather dust in a box for decades in the British Museum.

Being a "successful" explorer meant fame and money. The glory to be recognized as "the first" and the royalties from the books one would publish upon their return (which often amounted to millions of today's dollars). But the money was more often than not just

instrumental to finance the next expedition. Glory remained the driver.

19th and early 20th century public fascination with polar expeditions, which drove the sale of books and newspapers, and most importantly drove the blind desire for glory, was often linked to nationalism and a craving for heroes, especially in times of peace.

But the attempted conquests of the poles were approached with the same attitudes people used to approach situations at home. British explorers would show up at the poles in their leather boots, flannel pants, and wooden coats. They would refuse to learn from indigenous people and wear snow shoes and animal skins. Indigenous people could not possibly have anything to teach the "obviously superior" British. Social status and ranks ought to be respected at all cost. Even when forced to live in a hand-made ice cave for several months. A line should be marked on the floor to divide lower-rank and higher-rank people. The superior and impeccable morals of the West implied both a divine investiture to conquer the poles, and thus a superiority over nature. Nature should be tamed by human will.

Not at the poles. At the poles, or on the way there, "success" was merely surviving; it was enduring indescribable suffering; it was still being a gentleman. Expedition after expedition would fail to arrive at the poles, or to discover the Open Polar Sea (an alleged warm and open body of navigable water at the North Pole), and would even fail to bring back men alive. Yet, these failures were heroic and thus were the celebrations of the cultural superiority of the explorers. So much so that even the disappearance of the Royal Navy officer Sir John Frankin and his 128 men was transmuted into a heroic gentlemen's tale, so strong in the popular mind than when, after several years of search for him, evidence was brought back that he and his men may have engaged in cannibalism in the futile attempt to survive, the popular uproar discredited the evidence (and its discoverers) and not the Royal Navy officer or the inhuman conditions of an ill-equipped journey to the pole.

Dippel attributes the first arrivals at the poles by Norwegians (South Pole) and Americans (allegedly to the North Pole) to their more democratic and less stuffy culture, which allowed them to more easily adapt to this alien environment and to learn from past mistakes as well as from the Inuit.

But while Dippel remains almost silent on the Antarctic success of Ronald Amundsen, he

describes the Arctic alleged successes built on the lies of Frederick Cook and Robert Peary. Both Cook and Peary were so driven by blind ambition and hunger for glory that they both willingly lied and falsified their records and accounts to claim something they did not achieve. The truth was only dug out later when, after the Vietnam War, the myth of an immaculate hero was no longer sustainable.

Dippel's account of polar explorations is potentially a magnificent account of the darkest parts of the human soul that the darkness of the poles brings out. But his narrative, at least in the eyes of this reader, renders it into a polar storm. Each chapter swipes back and forward and without warning from the Arctic to the Antarctic, from one ship to another, from an explorer to another, from a time to another, leaving the reader disoriented. Not all explorers are present or presented with balanced importance, and no explanation is given for this. The volume does not provide a chronology of events or a list of explorers to aid the reader. It does not even have a map. It does instead have some period pictures, which do not quite help a reader not deeply familiar with all the expeditions. The constant back and forward makes several parts repetitive, without any necessary gain in clarity.

It is a book worth reading, if only because it may whet the curiosity to read more, to read something written more linearly on the topic.