

If one expects an historical novel-like book, or a character-building biography, or an adventure diary, about the man who discovered Antarctica, one would be disappointed. Sheila Bransfield's book feels instead like a labour of love based on years of archival work.

Sheila Bransfield painstakingly reconstructs the life of Edward Bransfield (no relation) from official ship logs and similar documentation. This is not an easy job, given that Edward came from a modest Irish family and was kidnapped by the Royal Navy as a young boy—a practice apparently common in the early 19th century. The young boy grew up at sea and developed enough navigational skills to rise through the ranks and eventually be in command of the small ship that discovered the Antarctic mainland. He retired wealthy but with little fame, mostly due to the British politics of discovery, which focused on the Northwest Passage rather than the new Southern continent. Antarctica appeared on the radar of British attention only after the French announced their interest in it.

The book is like a surgical reporting of life at sea. How many people were on board, how many punishments by flagellation or other means were administered, how many deaths by drowning, how many live animals, how many pounds of food, and what kind of food, how many gallons of water/rum/wine or other drinks, how many rats on boards, how much spoiled food, how many storms, how many repairs of sails or of the ships in any given year of all the ships in which there is a record of the presence of Edward Bransfield on board. There is an account of all the movements of these ships, where and when they were, and if and where they were engaged in military actions or military exercises.

The picture one gets, or at least that this reader got, is of a mix of boredom and danger on board of the ships. Living conditions and safety were not exactly high. Which makes the account of chapter 19 (of 21) especially remarkable. Between 1819 and 1820, Bransfield led one single tiny wooden ship across a sea of dense fogs, icebergs, with snowstorms, gales, and dreadful weather, not knowing where they were going, against the convictions of Captain James Cook that there was no continent out there, and in addition having to deal with aggressive penguins, seals, and other birds. Against all odds, the ship returned unscathed, and without having lost any men. Bransfield put several British flags on the newly discovered lands, made detailed charts, and brought back several specimens of which there is no longer any record.

Sheila Bransfield, *The Man Who Discovered Antarctica: Edward Bransfield Explained. The first man to find and chart the Antarctic mainland* (Barnsley: Frontline Books, 2019) | 2

I think the average reader would have benefited from a map of the different routes described in the book, rather than the pictures of the author raising the British flag in places where Edward Bransfield is said to have passed. Nevertheless, the book seems a much-needed step in the rehabilitation of Edward Bransfield into the pantheon of great explorers.

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