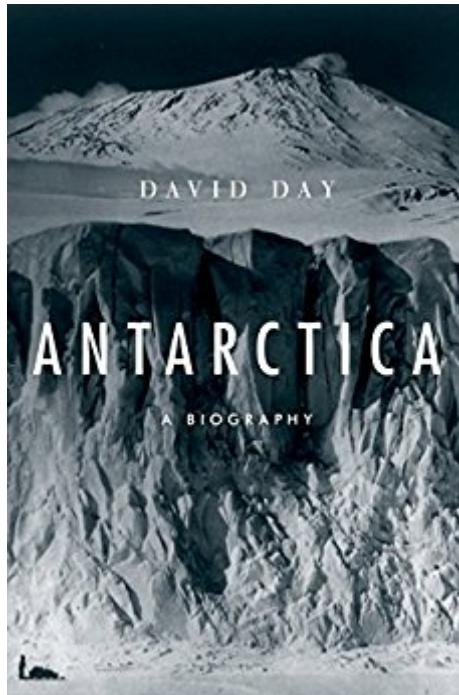


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Antarctica: A Biography



Synopsis

Since the first sailing ships spied the Antarctic coastline in 1820, the frozen continent has captured the world's imagination. David Day's brilliant biography of Antarctica describes in fascinating detail every aspect of this vast land's history--two centuries of exploration, scientific investigation, and contentious geopolitics. Drawing from archives from around the world, Day provides a sweeping, large-scale history of Antarctica. Focusing on the dynamic personalities drawn to this unconquered land, the book offers an engaging collective biography of explorers and scientists battling the elements in the most hostile place on earth. We see intrepid sea captains picking their way past icebergs and pushing to the edge of the shifting pack ice, sanguinary sealers and whalers drawn south to exploit "the Penguin El Dorado," famed nineteenth-century explorers like Scott and Amundson in their highly publicized race to the South Pole, and aviators like Clarence Ellsworth and Richard Byrd, flying over great stretches of undiscovered land. Yet Antarctica is also the story of nations seeking to incorporate the Antarctic into their national narratives and to claim its frozen wastes as their own. As Day shows, in a place as remote as Antarctica, claiming land was not just about seeing a place for the first time, or raising a flag over it; it was about mapping and naming and, more generally, knowing its geographic and natural features. And ultimately, after a little-known decision by FDR to colonize Antarctica, claiming territory meant establishing full-time bases on the White Continent. The end of the Second World War would see one last scramble for polar territory, but the onset of the International Geophysical Year in 1957 would launch a cooperative effort to establish scientific bases across the continent. And with the Antarctic Treaty, science was in the ascendant, and cooperation rather than competition was the new watchword on the ice. Tracing history from the first sighting of land up to the present day, Antarctica is a fascinating exploration of this deeply alluring land and man's struggle to claim it.

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Customer Reviews

The sub-title of this book, A Biography, is appropriate, even though the subject is not a person. David Day begins by painting-in a background that is relevant to the subject, but against which the subject is not yet visible; then the highpoints of the early years are noted, not over-burdened with detail; followed by a very full account of the subject's most active and best documented years, with all the political and/or business intrigue, successes, and periodic setbacks. The subject in this case is still living, so any story of decline and death is yet to come. In Day's account, the antecedents of our subject include various 18th century explorers, most famously Captain James Cook. Cook searched exhaustively for the long-rumored continent of the southern seas, concluding finally that there was none in temperate waters not already discovered, and that whilst there may well be a land mass at the South Pole, its ice-choked seas meant that it was not worth the risk involved in discovering and claiming it for England. Within the context of his time, Cook's judgment was no doubt sound, though the history of the continent might have been very different if England or any other single country had at that time claimed it as its own. The first person to actually see Antarctica, as distinct from its encircling ice sheets and ice barrier, may have been Captain Gottlieb von Bellingshausen, a Baltic German in the service of Tsar Alexander I. He circumnavigated the continent in 1820. However, it may be that American and Norwegian seal hunters and whalers were by then aware of the land mass. Certainly, they were familiar with the peripheral islands, especially those closest to the southern tip of South America.

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