The tourist boom in Antarctica is mostly confined to the Antarctic Peninsula, within relatively easy reach of cruise ships out of Chile and Argentina. But for those who have the money or connections to make it to the Ross Sea, there are the towering Mt. Erebus and Mt. Terror to behold and, at their foot, the requisite pilgrimage to Scott’s Hut. The Edwardian heroic narrative of Robert Falcon Scott’s ill-fated expedition plays like a broken record in one’s head, so it’s a surprise, on entering the hut, to experience what an ordinary campsite it was, with roughly made beds and stacked crates of provisions, all lovingly “stabilized” and restored to period authenticity by the New Zealand government. The crates especially catch the eye. There’s not a single piece of plastic in sight, but otherwise it’s like wandering into a local supermarket stockroom full of hip-retro brands: Pears soap, Arnott’s Biscuits, et cetera.

Antarctica, until very recently, basically sold itself. The nineteenth-century polar continent—or at least its marginal islands—marked the polar frontier of a global industry in seal skins and whales. Post-Scott and the golden age—more specifically since International Geophysical Year 1957-58—investment in Antarctica has turned largely to scientific research, led by an uneasy consortium of European, American, and Asian nations. I say “uneasy,” because to what extent the research stations proliferating along the Antarctic coasts are proxies for eventual territorial claims is much debated. The terms of the 1959 Antarctic Treaty maintain that national claims on the Antarctic landmass will be neither disputed nor recognized—implicitly until such time as the lure of petroleum and mineral wealth becomes irresistible and all hell breaks loose.

But Antarctica as the emerging scene of a geopolitical “great game” is not the commodified Antarctica of Brand Antarctica, a valuable new contribution to polar cultural history by Tasmania-based Hanne Elliot Fønss Nielsen. The commercial agents of the Antarctica brand—which dates back to Scott and his tins of Huntley and Palmer’s comestibles—have instead persistently traded in romantic tropes by which to sell the polar contin-
ent: according to Nielsen's pithy summation, heroism, extremity, purity, wilderness, and personal transformation. From the very beginning, Nielsen asserts, “Antarctica has been sold as a product and as an idea” (p. 20).

According to Nielsen’s account, Antarctica in popular culture has never left the Edwardian era of Scott, Roald Amundsen, Ernest Shackleton, and later the American, Admiral Richard Byrd. She offers an overview of the well-known histories of the master salesmen that drove the golden age, with a particular emphasis on their commercial backers, from Heinz Baked Beans to Horlick’s to gramophones to motor cars. What follows is both more enlightening and entertaining, namely, a descriptive global inventory of commercial products skimming along in Scott and Shackleton’s icy wake, including, sunglasses, skin products, cognac, and, of course, all imaginable forms of comfortable outerwear (North Face, etc.).

In recent decades, tourism has emerged as a significant budget item in the global Antarctic economy. As Nielsen convincingly shows, tourism, like the rest, all borrow in one way or other from the original stock of romantic polar tropes that imagine Antarctica as a blank canvas for the enactment of hardy white masculinity. Was this fantasy already nostalgic to the Edwardians? Evidence suggests it might have been. Either way, Nielsen’s Antarctica is irredeemably retro: a kind of last frontier for luxury brands to peddle crypto-colonialist imagery of Western “endurance” against the odds. Proving her point, prestige labels are still selling relics of the golden age like so many bones of the martyrs: these include a new release of Shackleton’s original whisky stores (crates of which were fortuitously discovered in 2006 buried in the ice) and Scott’s favorite oatmeal biscuit (based on a fragment found of his “last supper” in the ill-fated tent). Perhaps the raw capitalization of Edwardian polar nostalgia is no more evident than in the recent flurry of tribute reenactments of golden age achievements—Antarctic crossings by bike, on skis, solo, in infinite variations on a theme. As Nielsen shows, these “feats” are as dependent on the capitalist-commercial apparatus of product sponsorship deals and press coverage as the original polar explorers of a century past.

The strengths of this book lie in its original focus—the century-old commodification of Antarctica—and the conscientious assembly of commercial ephemera from decades past to recoup that faded, but urgently relevant, history. Associating Antarctica with a product—for instance, Ray-Ban sunglasses—allows corporate brands to “offer their customers the chance to buy into a mythology of extremes” (p. 105). The five chapters, arranged thematically, show convincingly the persistence of Antarctic tropes in twentieth-century advertising that, “much like the ice of the southern continent—[are] dynamic, mutable, and responsive to human activities in far distant locations” (p. 3). Scott and his men might have perished, but capitalism has flourished on the ice. Other authors have focused on Antarctica’s global mediation through texts and images (photography, in particular). Nielsen is the first to open up the lowbrow trove of Antarctic advertising, and to make the argument that this has had the greatest (most insidious?) impact of all on the public’s naïve, atavistic perception of the ice continent.

If I have a quibble with this lively, well-researched cultural history, it’s the author’s tendency to make statements that—like land claims in Antarctica—can appear overblown, or at the very least disputable. Her insistence throughout that “the human history of Antarctica is predominantly a commercial rather than a heroic-exploratory-scientific history” is in the end mostly assertion, and vulnerable to any number of counterarguments (p. 8). In the grand sweep of modern global capitalism, isn’t “Brand Antarctica” rather a classic example of niche marketing, relevant only to a handful of labels trading in select mainstream and
prestige products for the polar affluent and polar curious?

Antarctica, after all, so long encrusted with stale, romantic mythologies of white-man heroism and all the commercial flimflam that attends it, is currently undergoing an unsettling metamorphosis in the public imagination. “Fragility”—Antarctica’s condition under climate change—is the byword of a now constant stream of media reports (based on the latest scientific studies) featuring melting glaciers alongside stressed polar wildlife. As Nielsen adroitly observes, cryospheric fragility doesn’t sell nearly so well as masculine derring-do in a blizzard. Advertising’s “purpose is to sell products or services to people, not to preach dystopian futures” (p. 152). Antarctica has never been more crowded, but it is scientists at the polar frontier who now command a global audience, not hoary-bearded explorers and their brand managers. Glacial deterioration in Antarctica is a slow, drawn-out, deeply impersonal tragedy, not a heroic one, and legible only to scientific instruments.

The larger question that hangs over this new Antarctica—and Nielsen’s book—is how quickly in the coming decades the rebranding of the polar continent will occur, and what form or forms it will take. Drilling and mining, let alone warships, will drive the romantic tourists away. And what about the emerging main narrative of Antarctica as cryospheric villain in our global climate change catastrophe? The rupture of the unstable Thwaites Glacier in West Antarctica alone, with a few confreres, will be sufficient to raise global sea levels by several feet, driving millions of climate refugees from coastal cities and literally redrawing the world map. It may not be very long, in fact, before Nielsen’s study of Antarctica in the popular imagination will read not as an up-to-date account, but as a very specific history of twentieth-century “Brand Antarctica”—bold, eternal, and enduring—rendered obsolete in the early-mid twenty-first century by video loops of collapsing glaciers split-screened with drowned cities. In this near-future scenario, surely Scott, Shackleton, and the rest will finally be submerged.
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