

# Tilting at windmills

Derek Fordham

**Robert E. Peary at the North Pole: A Report to the National Geographic Society.** By the Foundation for the Promotion of the Art of Navigation. *The Navigation Foundation, Box 1126, Rockville, Maryland 20850: 1989. Pp. 181 plus appendices. Pbk \$15.*

"I KNOW Admiral Peary reached the Pole. The reason that I know it is that I know Peary", wrote Amundsen. "The Pole at last!" was Peary's claim in 1909, a claim which started sceptics everywhere on attempts to establish that wherever Peary had been, it was not to the Pole that he had, "nailed the stars and stripes".

Wally Herbert, the explorer who would be the first to have reached the Pole by dog sledge if Peary is discredited, was the latest in this line of sceptics to go into print with *The Noose of Laurels* (see my review in *Nature* 339, 435; 1989). This new report, commissioned by the National Geographic Society, seems to be largely a reaction to that book.

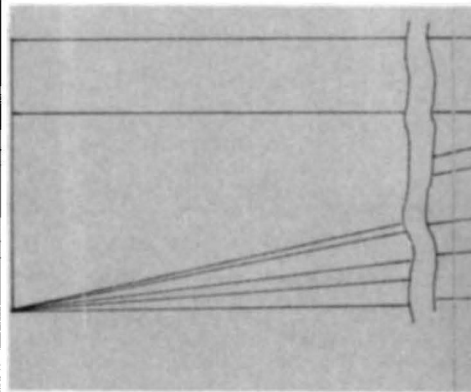
The National Geographic Society was one of Peary's main sponsors and might be expected to find in his favour now just as its three-man committee did after Peary's claim to have reached the Pole in 1909. At times, the Navigation Foundation's apparent determination to refute Herbert's conclusions seems at least as important as the vindication of Peary's case. Their report is just as positive that Peary reached within 5 miles of the Pole as Herbert is that he got no closer than approximately 60 miles.

The authors of this report claim that little new information has been contributed by the succession of books critical of Peary. But despite meticulous research there is also no new information here — new methods of analysis certainly, but the application of state-of-the-art technology to photographic interpretation and Peary's ocean depth soundings in no way overcome many of the objections, particularly those to the claimed daily mileages which form for many polar travellers the core of the objection to Peary's claim. The daily mileages of Will Steger's 1986 North Pole expedition are assumed to support Peary's claims, an assumption all the more misplaced in view of Herbert's careful analysis of the same point.

It is also inappropriate to compare the

daily sledging distances achieved by members of Sverdrup's expedition of 1898 on the relatively smooth sounds and fjords of

Photogrammetrical methods were applied to the shadows seen in Peary's North Pole photographs in an attempt to confirm the geographical location. But uncertainties as to the precise bearing of the Sun and the time of day at which the pictures were taken prevent definite conclusions from being drawn.



inconclusive, vague in part and badly presented — the introduction of new technology in support of it merely extends the arena and fuels new possibilities for argument for many years to come. Peary's supporters — and the National Geographic Society is squarely in this camp — will always believe he reached the Pole. It seems likely that attitudes formed over the succeeding 80 long years are too well entrenched to be modified and the situation is best summed up by Franz Werfel:

"For those who believe, no explanation is necessary. For those who do not believe, no explanation is possible." □

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the Canadian Arctic archipelago, or those of competitors in the Iditarod race in very different Alaskan conditions, with those possible for Peary on the constantly shifting chaos of the polar pack ice.

Attempts to establish by the application of photogrammetric methods to the shadows on Peary's North Pole photographs that they were taken near the Pole have greater weight, but they suffer from uncertainties as to the precise bearing of the Sun and the time when any of the photographs were taken. These parameters need to be known if the solar angle is to be used to establish a latitude from sight reduction tables.

Nevertheless, the report is a detailed and scholarly summary of probably all there is to know about this Arctic enigma. But it falls short of being a definitive proof, nor does it remove 80 years of doubt, "setting the record straight and putting an end to the long process of vilification of a courageous American explorer", as its authors claim. It sets out a strong case for Peary and in so doing raises some interesting points and throws new light on some of the perceived weaknesses in his claim. Peary's own evidence remains

■ The natural worlds of the Arctic and Antarctic are the subject of the beautifully illustrated book *Poles Apart*, by Jim Flegg with photographers Eric and David Hosking. The origins, exploration, wildlife, plant life and ecology of both poles are compared. Peary's attempts to reach the North Pole are described, ending with the planting of the "triumphant flag" (page 38) but with no hint of the subsequent controversy described above. Publisher is Pelham, price is £18.99.

■ Also just published, by Blandford, is *The Polar Bear* by Ian Stirling. Again beautifully illustrated with photographs by Dan Guravich, the book is a comprehensive account of the natural history of polar bears, the result of the author's fifteen-year project for the Canadian Wildlife Service. Price is £18.95.

■ *Fur Seal Island* by Paul Thomas will be published on 9 May by Souvenir (£12.95). The author tells an unabashedly emotional story of the northern fur seal, threatened with extinction as a result of human exploitation.