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**IN THE GHOST COUNTRY:**  
*A Lifetime Spent on the Edge.*

By Peter Hillary and John E. Elder. Free Press. 341 pp. \$26

In 1998, Peter Hillary and two fellow adventurers set out to duplicate Robert Falcon Scott's legendary attempt to travel on foot from McMurdo Sound to the South Pole and back again. Scott reached the pole (only to discover that Roald Amundsen had beaten him to it) but died on the way back. Hillary and his team didn't manage the Antarctic roundtrip either, though instead of death on the ice, their expedition ended with an airlift from the pole and blizzards of recriminations.

Part travel account and part memoir, *In the Ghost Country* offers a fascinating look at the life of a modern-day adventurer who has done everything from exploring both poles to boating up the Ganges. Yet times have changed since Hillary's famous father and his Sherpa companion became the first men to scale Everest. With a satellite phone company cosponsoring the Antarctic expedition, the three men make frequent calls home and submit to endless media interviews from the ice.

Hillary's account of the expedition is a case study of group dynamics gone horribly

wrong. Even before the team leaves for Antarctica, they're having enough problems to make them consider seeing a counselor. Their decision to go ahead with the trip, Hillary writes, is akin to a couple's decision to have a baby in hopes of bolstering a shaky marriage. It proves disastrous. In Hillary's telling, the expedition's motto shifts from Alfred Tennyson's "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield" to Jean Paul Sartre's "Hell is other people."

Back home in New Zealand, relations turn even icier. Team member Eric Philips's *IceTrek: The Bitter Journey to the South Pole* (2000) depicts Hillary as mentally and physically unfit and blames him for the expedition's failure. In this counterattack, Hillary is the noble aristocrat, Philips the power-mad monster, and Jon Muir the caveman-type fond of throw rugs made from feral cats. Hillary goes out of his way to criticize his companions' failings—inadequate training, a last-minute decision to jettison 10 days' worth of food, a refusal to dress warmly enough to avoid frostbite—while offering excuses for his own.

After his companions stop talking to him, Hillary passes the time with ghosts. As he trudges through the whiteness, he chats with friends who died on climbing expeditions and with his mother, killed along with his sister in



*An ice shelf on the Antarctic coast.*

a Himalayan plane crash. The prose style—the book alternates between Australian journalist John Elder’s narrative and bold-faced interjections from Hillary, sometimes as brief as a word or two—mirrors the trip’s hallucinatory qualities. Elder’s writing is especially florid: Being inside the tent during a storm is invariably, and inexplicably, compared to being in

the belly of a rabid dog.

Toward the end of what he calls the loneliest trip of his life, Hillary asks his companions if he might occasionally walk alongside them. They say no, and he bursts into tears. It’s as if Antarctica were nothing more than junior high on ice.

—REBECCA A. CLAY

## CONTRIBUTORS

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