

THE ARCTIC: ENIGMAS AND MYTHS. Paul Simpson-Housley. 1996. Toronto, Oxford, Buffalo: Dundurn Press. 144 p, illustrated, soft cover. ISBN 1-55002-264-4. £13.95.

It is hard to believe that as recently as 100 years ago, before the advent of satellite navigation and accurate determination of position on the Earth's surface, considerable uncertainty and suspicion surrounded the routes of expeditions and their achievements, and that before the coming of still photography and the moving image, geography had to rely on expedition artists' impressions and on uncorroborated travellers' tales. This was particularly true of polar exploration, where reflective ice confounded the eye of the beholder and mirages were not to be discounted. Imaginary mountain ranges were reported as real, islands were mapped where today none exist, and the attainment of high-latitude goals were claimed based on locations hurriedly or incompetently observed. Whether such accounts were deliberately misleading or fictitious in order to gain personal esteem and reward, it may never be possible to say, but it has given rise to a large and fascinating literature on polar myths and legends.

Paul Simpson-Housley has re-examined some of the better-known Arctic enigmas and myths and provides a useful, but not exhaustive, guide to the research literature in this esoteric field of polar studies. The author is a human geographer specialising in behavioural studies; he explores environmental perception at the interface between landscape and literature. Those familiar with his earlier publications — the book *Antarctica: exploration, perception and metaphor* and his edited collection of essays, *A few acres of snow: literary and artistic images of Canada* — will recognise his attraction to this genre.

After a brief introduction on 'Geography and perception,' the author illustrates the concepts of Arctic enigmas and myths by chapters on selected unexplained occurrences, but with no textual connection between chapters. The subject matter varies from the supposed northern odysseys of Pytheas, St Brendan, Adam of Bremen, Nicholas of Lynn, and the Venetian Zeni brothers, to reported accounts of mermen and mermaids, and the search for the Northwest Passage, where the Croker Mountains were reported in Lancaster Sound and the Strait of Anian supposedly led into the Pacific Ocean. The book concludes with the controversy surrounding the attainment of the North Pole and the counter-claims for priority between Frederick A. Cook and Robert E. Peary. In the chapter 'Of lost ships and cannibals,' there is a curious juxtaposition of the loss of Sir John Franklin's ships, *Erebus* and *Terror*, and John Rae's reports in 1854 of the evidence of cannibalism amongst the remains of the ships' crews. This allegation was refuted by Charles Dickens in an issue of his serial *Household Words*, where he stated his disbelief that any Royal Navy personnel could be capable of such infamy. For his two chapters on the Northwest Passage, Simpson-Housley has made much use of two publications: *Oddities, a book of unexplained facts* (1928,

revised 1944) and *Enigmas, another book of unexplained facts* (1929). They were written for a popular market by Lieutenant Commander Rupert T. Gould, RN, better known for his scholarly classic work, *The marine chronometer*, and for his patient repair at Greenwich of Harrison's chronometers. It is to be regretted that Simpson-Housley makes no references to the papers by W.G. Rees on polar mirages (Rees 1988a, 1988b), where Rees offered a scientific explanation for *Fata Morgana* to account for imagined islands and ships.

Should a second edition of this book be contemplated, the author might consider a commentary in a final chapter on geographical misperceptions from the standpoint of the behavioural scientist. Otherwise, it remains an unconnected narrative for the curious reader rather than for the polar scholar. (Peter Speak, Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge, Lensfield Road, Cambridge CB2 1ER.)

References

- Rees, W.G. 1988a. Polar mirages. *Polar Record* 24 (150): 193–198.
 Rees, W.G. 1988b. Reconstruction of an atmospheric temperature profile from a 166-year-old polar mirage. *Polar Record* 24 (151): 325–327.

TERRA INCOGNITA: TRAVELS IN ANTARCTICA. Sara Wheeler. 1996. London: Random House. xii + 306 p, hard cover. ISBN 0-224-04184-3. £16.99.

Travellers are a curious breed, and Sara Wheeler clearly recognises her empathy with travel writers, both present and past. She took advantage of the Writers and Artists Program funded by the National Science Foundation to visit US, New Zealand, and Italian stations in the Ross Sea, and then added a visit to a British station to provide a further contrast. In reviewing this book, Beryl Bainbridge described it as 'entertaining, audacious and imaginative,' and I can subscribe to all three. Wheeler's writing style is immediately entertaining, and her approach audacious in believing she could encompass and understand the breadth of the Antarctic spirit and activities in her short visits. Most interesting is her imaginative approach in which her selective emphasis builds a picture of life at Antarctic stations that may seem at odds with the experiences of many others. I suffer from the disadvantage of having visited all the same stations as she did and having left Rothera only shortly before she arrived. Too much relevant information can be a disadvantage for a reviewer!

No one would expect an old scientist and a young writer to necessarily experience things in the same way, but one might have expected them to agree on the facts! For example, the reader might have assumed that Wheeler was the only woman at Rothera, ploughing a lonely furrow against masculine intolerance. Unfortunately, this wasn't the case, but it would have spoiled the story to be too accurate. Let me not cavil though over the details — the book is really not about them. Its real purpose is encapsulated in the quotation she uses from T.S. Eliot's *Little*