

This is especially unfortunate, because many Canadians have an excellent grasp on the reality of the Arctic, which could serve as a standard against which to measure the constructed image that — if David's thesis holds — Britons have built through vicarious experience. One can expect a work entitled *The Arctic in the British imagination* to be Anglocentric, but David misses some quite relevant objectivity when he focuses so narrowly. In fact, had David broadened his intellectual research net, he would have discovered that several Canadian scholars developed similar approaches to the same topic some 10 or 15 years ago, although not to the same extent as David does.

Like most physical books, this one has some shortcomings. Given the special attention visual representations are given, more illustrations — perhaps some in colour — would be desirable. And it is regrettable that an author who attends so heavily to travel writing, popular lectures, and public exhibits should be confused about the meaning of 'travelogue' (page 7). The ubiquitous typographical errors somehow eluded yet another copy editor, and it seems that the judicious use of commas would have made the text much more easily digested in many places. As well, each chapter concludes in a flat, mechanical manner that belies the genuine insight and vigour of the

chapter itself, remnants, one supposes, of the same forces that created the highly self-conscious introduction.

Nevertheless, this is indeed an important study, not so much of the Arctic, but of how it has been imagined in Britain. According to David, who is a lecturer in history at St Martin's College, Lancaster, Arctic history has been 'increasingly isolated from mainstream historical research' (page 5; a brief look at work done by Canadian historians would demonstrate the Anglocentric nature of that assertion), and to the extent that is true, this book becomes an even more significant study. It is truly fascinating to consider, as David does, that the decline in Arctic exploration in the latter half of the nineteenth century occurred not because of the Franklin disaster, not because of McClure's arguable completion of the Northwest Passage, and not because of John Barrow's death, but because the 'lacklustre representations of the Arctic, when set beside those that emanated from other regions where British explorers were becoming increasingly active, did little to keep Arctic exploration at the forefront of popular imagination' (page 47). Whether correct or not, the idea is clearly a unique one worthy of careful consideration. (Richard C. Davis, Department of English, University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta T2N 1N4, Canada.)

Obituary

John Wilfred Wright, one of the last of those who took part in privately organized British expeditions that carried out sterling work in the polar regions between the two world wars, died on 18 July 2001, aged 87. He was an accomplished field surveyor, coping with the difficult problems of handling conventional instruments in the cold in the days before air photographic and tellurometric methods were available for mapping. He moved on to positions of responsibility in the post-war era as a master of advanced mapping technique.

On two adventurous expeditions in the 1930s, Wright's most exciting moment came on Sandy (Sir Alexander) Glen's Oxford University Arctic Expedition, 1935–36, to Nordaustlandet, of which he was one of four surviving members. In October 1935, during a depot-laying journey by dog sledge to the northeast corner of the island, a polar bear loomed out of the darkness along the route of Wright and his companion, Andrew Croft. Croft later described the incident:

John went forward to within 10 yards of the animal, which nevertheless continued to approach us. John had the presence of mind to retreat slowly backwards, but the bear was now only three yards from him and suddenly got up on its hind legs towering up in front of us... A volley of shouts possibly won the day; amazed by such unfamiliar noises and John's remarkable vocabulary, the bear dropped to his feet and lumbered off to the rocks in the distance.

In spite of the vicissitudes of bears, cold, and blizzards, Wright made a valuable survey of parts of the island, in conjunction with the geological work, and he cooperated fully in the expedition's pioneering research in glaciology and into the ionosphere. With the other members of the expedition, he was awarded the Polar Medal with Arctic clasp, 1935–36, gazetted in 1942.

Wright was born on 21 May 1914, the third son of the Reverend A.B. Wright, sometime vicar of Trumpington, near Cambridge. An uncle, Monty Wright, was the second master of Winchester and is remembered with affection by a long line of scholars. A firm believer in the benefits of vigorous exercise and cold baths, he took great pride in his nephew's activities in the Arctic cold. Young Wright was educated at Lancing and at Trinity College, Cambridge, where he started reading mathematics, later switching to geography, in which he graduated in 1935. In the summer of 1934 he organized and led a three-man undergraduate expedition to Hagavatn, a small glacier-dammed lake at the edge of the ice cap in southwest Iceland. The dam was known to have burst three times in the previous 50 years, causing floods in the land below. The party mapped the lake and its surroundings, and made soundings; they concluded that 20 years would elapse before the next flood. Wright's surveying experience on this expedition and in Svalbard in 1935–36 set the course for his later professional career, but not before he had taken part in a further Arctic expedition.

The British Arctic Expedition, 1937–38, based on Thule in northwest Greenland, was organized and led by David Haig-Thomas, who had been a member of an Oxford expedition to the same region two years earlier. Wright and the late Richard Hamilton, companions in Svalbard, made up the three-man party. While Haig-Thomas with one Greenlander went off on a long exploratory journey westward into the Canadian Arctic islands, Wright and Hamilton carried out a very useful topographic survey of the southeast coast of Ellesmere Island. Unlike most previous explorers in this region, rather than employ Greenland guides, they preferred to hire dog teams and act as their own dog drivers, as giving themselves greater freedom of action. Wright respected the great qualities of the Greenlanders, but he was fond of saying that ‘the Greenlanders don’t travel with you; you travel with the Greenlanders.’ He himself was highly regarded by the natives of Thule, being accorded the special compliment of the nickname *Tuluvak* (raven) from his beaky nose and, as a young man, jet-black hair.

Soon after his return from the Arctic, Wright exchanged a cold desert for a hot desert by joining the Sudan Survey. With the outbreak of war in September 1939, he was commissioned as *Bimbashi* (equivalent to Lieutenant Colonel) in the Sudan Defence Force. After later transfer to the British Army, whose hierarchy did not easily accommodate *Bimbashis*, Wright would recall with wry humour that, through no fault of his own, he dropped rank in two stages to finish the war as a Captain. In the early part of the desert war, he was attached as a surveyor and navigator to the Long Range Desert Group, raised and commanded by Brigadier R.A. Bagnold. From Wright’s accurate surveys, Bagnold gained new data on the shapes of desert dunes, on the formation of which he was the acknowledged expert. Wright was mentioned in despatches

for his desert service.

After the war, Wright resumed his work with the Sudan Survey until 1956, when Sudan gained her independence. He continued to serve for a few more years in the Middle East as chief surveyor with Hunting Aerosurveys, before returning to England to work for the Directorate of Overseas Surveys at Telworth, finally becoming deputy director before retiring in 1977. He was made OBE for his services. In retirement, he revisited Hagavatn, Iceland, in 1992, and in the following year he surveyed a glacier near Thule, which he had originally surveyed in 1938. He was a frequent contributor of articles and reviews to survey and polar literature, and served his time as president of the Chartered Land Surveyors and of the Arctic Club.

With his logical and ordered mind, seasoned by dry wit, Wright was an ideal companion in any situation. He became scornful of many modern polar expeditions, going forth with Guinness Book aspirations, much derring-do, and little or no interest in science, but confident in the knowledge that, if needed, search and rescue would be available. In his day, ‘the ground parties were entirely on their own; they set out with a known programme; and either they came back or they did not.’ Men of the calibre of Wright held to only four the number of deaths in the field on all British polar expeditions between the two wars.

In 1939 Wright married Dorothy Fetherstonhaugh, a geography graduate whom he had met in Cambridge when she was secretary to the director of the Scott Polar Research Institute, Professor Frank Debenham. From 1942 she was with her husband in the Sudan, and in the last years of the war in Egypt, working in Cairo on Army topographic intelligence. After Dorothy’s death in 1989, Wright remarried in 1992, but his second wife died three years later. He is survived by the three sons of his first marriage.
Geoffrey Hattersley-Smith