

Book Reviews

THE OXFORD COMPANION TO WORLD EXPLORATION. David Buisseret (Editor). 2007. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2 volumes: xxx + 478 and x + 501 p, illustrated, hard cover. ISBN 0-19-514922-X. £140.00.

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The first question one might have about this handsome two-volume set is ‘what is the difference between a companion and an encyclopaedia?’ Although the editor raises the issue of what constitutes a companion in the book’s introduction, he never really answers that question, leaving me, for one, believing that despite this following the Oxford University Press tradition of calling their works ‘companions,’ an encyclopaedia by any other name remains an encyclopaedia.

From its birth, this project was a collaborative effort between OUP and the Newberry Library in Chicago. The latter is a large (some 1.5 million volumes) independent research library that specialises in the humanities, and particularly emphasises the civilisations of Western Europe and the Americas. The Newberry also has specific expertise in the historic development of mapping, and David Buisseret, the editor, is a former director of its Hermon Dunlap Smith Center for the History of Cartography. The knowledge and interests of Buisseret and the Newberry are shown in the number, length, and quality of the entries relating to mapping and map-making, which form a key and valuable contribution of this book.

In any encyclopaedia with a broad focus, the primary editor needs specialised advice to determine the topics selected, find appropriate contributors, and assess the articles for accuracy and quality. Professor Buisseret was fortunate to have four eminent ‘section editors’ who helped get this process moving – including Glyndwr Williams – and an additional dozen members of an ‘Advisory Board,’ which included the oceanographer/historian Margaret Deacon and, for guidance on the exploration of Siberia and the Russian north, Carol Urness. Equally renowned advisors in non-polar areas included Sanford Bederman and Roy Bridges on African exploration and Norman Thrower, whose broad expertise includes maritime history, mapping, and scientific aspects of exploration.

So much for the background to *The Oxford companion to world exploration*, but does it actually work between the covers? Is it comprehensive in its coverage, are there logical selection criteria, and are the entries of sufficient length to give the necessary information? Are

the articles written by international experts whose names one would expect to see affiliated with certain entries? Is it accurate, adequately illustrated, and accessible to the average reader? And do its organisation and index make it a ‘user-friendly’ work?

As one who has edited a multi-volume encyclopaedia, I can vouch for the fact that even with two volumes – and in this case approximately 700 entries – one has to make hard decisions about what to include, because it is impossible to cover all topics. There are certainly a number of entries that I was most pleased to find included, such as Imperialism and Exploration, Roderick Murchison, the North West Company, and August Petermann. That said, there are quite a number of surprising omissions as separate entries, the most notable surely being Robert E. Peary. He does receive brief mention in the entry on the North Pole – as does Frederick Cook – but it is inexplicable how an explorer of such magnitude was essentially left out of the work. Nor are there entries for S. A. Andrée, Carsten Borchgrevink, John King Davis, George Washington De Long, Erich von Drygalski, Jane Franklin, Vivian Fuchs, Adolphus Greely, George Strong Nares, Otto Nordenskjöld, Joseph Wiggins, or Frederick Schwatka. And although Alexei Postnikov has written numerous entries about Russian explorers, there is not the equivalent emphasis on the Baltic Germans who were such key figures in Russian exploration. Therefore, we see no entries for Karl Ernst von Baer, Alexander von Middendorff, Friedrich Lütke, Carl von Ditmar, or Ferdinand von Wrangell.

It is not just explorers of the polar regions that are overlooked. Strangely, there is an article on T. E. Lawrence, whose exploration was minimal, but not one about William Shakespear or Harry Philby, both of whom were equally involved in political efforts in Arabia during the period surrounding the Great War, and also accomplished great feats of exploration as well. Nor is there an entry for William Gifford Palgrave, who might have been carrying out spy missions for not one but two masters in 1862 when he became the first European to reach the Wahhabi capital of Riyadh.

Lawrence’s entry is not the only one that shows a lack of consistency in selection. There is an entry for the North Pole, but not the South Pole. There is another for the Gobi Desert, but not for the terrible Taklamakan or the Rub’ al Khali, the Empty Quarter of Arabia. And there is an article for the Rocky Mountains, but not for the Himalayas or even that long-sought-after centre of mountain mystery, Tibet. The same applies for entries about individuals. In the introduction, the editor indicates that

Sir Edmund Hillary is not included in the work because he ‘was not in our sense an explorer’ (vol 1, page xxiv). In the following paragraph, he admits to ‘a certain prejudice in favour of women.’ Individually, these two positions are fine, although I would argue that Hillary’s work during the Commonwealth Trans-Antarctic Expedition would qualify him as an explorer. Regardless, the inclusion thereafter of an entry for Annie Smith Peck, a mountain climber in the Andes – the entry for which does not indicate that she did an iota more exploring than Hillary in the Himalayas – makes the editor’s selection of her rather unsettling. If Hillary does not deserve inclusion in a book about exploration because he was not an explorer, then, woman or no, someone else who is no more an explorer should not receive an entry.

Another issue that plagues editors of encyclopaedias is the length of articles. This is to a degree out of their hands, because authors sometimes write more or less than assigned. Many of the entries in this work are excellent summaries and some give information I have not seen in other generalist texts. However, others are very short for the topic, and certainly the comparative lengths of entries do not do justice to some of the greatest names in the history of polar exploration. For example, the combined entries of Robert Falcon Scott, Ernest Shackleton, and Douglas Mawson are shorter than that for Charles Wilkes, and none of them longer than the article for Ann Bancroft. This strikes me as vastly out of proportion to their significance.

Many of the entries are written by internationally known authorities in the field. Those with polar interests will be pleased to see William Barr, Ann Savours, Barry Gough, and Glyndwr Williams as authors of multiple entries, which are of the uniformly high standard that one might expect from these scholars. Similarly, Sanford Bederman and Roy Bridges have produced numerous African entries, Conrad Heidenreich a series related to the early exploration of Canada, Denis Shephard articles on the exploration of Australia, and David Spencer Smith entries about explorers of central Asia. In addition, there could not be better selections for the authors of specific topics than W. Gillies Ross for Whaling, Felix Driver for Henry Morton Stanley, and Kirsten Seaver for Vinland.

Unfortunately, the authors of some of the other entries show a disappointing lack of expert knowledge of the subject. In the entry about Douglas Mawson, for example, his hut was not known as the home of the blizzard; it was Cape Denison to which the term refers. Mawson died at home in Brighton, not Adelaide. And on the Far Eastern Party, Ninnis did not eat dog; his loss down a crevasse with the majority of the food required Mawson and Mertz to eat the dogs on their return towards Winter Quarters. The bibliography for this entry also leaves something to be desired, as, in addition to *The home of the blizzard*, it cites only Lennard Bickel’s *Mawson’s will*. I cannot see how such a book – which engages in the historical sacrilege of putting words in characters’ mouths by making up

quotations – should be recommended over Philip Ayres’ outstanding biography, *Mawson: a life*.

Other entries show a regrettable lack of background to the polar regions as well. The article on Ernest Shackleton, for example, indicates that the British Antarctic Expedition ‘successfully placed the English flag on the South Magnetic Pole and came within 97 miles (156 kilometers) of the South Pole’ (vol 2, pages 235, 237). However, although David, Mawson, and Mackay reached the region of the South Magnetic Pole, they did not reach the Pole itself, some estimates having them as far as 50 miles away from it. And Shackleton’s 97 miles from the South Pole were, of course, 97 *geographical* miles, which is the equivalent of 112 statute miles or 180 km. Finally, in the entry on Frank Hurley, the author – who, according to his CV, has no previous papers or books relating to the polar regions – states: ‘Although the photograph of the icebound *Endurance* illuminated during the polar winter is often considered an icon of expeditionary imagery, it may also be considered an example of Antarctic kitsch’ (vol 1, page 396). As could the comment, which strikes me as inappropriate, silly, and tasteless.

Despite these examples, most of the entries – which extend from ancient times to the present and include every area of the world and even space exploration, are excellent. Equally as strong are the illustrations. Each volume has two large colour sections of plates reproducing historic maps and prints as well as featuring new maps drawn specifically for this work. They are printed at a very high quality and add immeasurably to the usefulness and enjoyment of the book. There are also numerous black-and-white illustrations throughout the volumes, including historic maps, ship plans, and paintings and drawings, many from the holdings of the Newberry Library.

Another important feature of the book is its several indices. Volume 1 has an alphabetical list of entries, including in a number of cases the major sub-entries. This is very helpful, although there are a few entries – such as ‘Modes of Discovery and Exploration’ and ‘Exploration as Redemption’ – that defy the reader to identify what they are about. Volume 2 concludes with an extensive (103 pages) and thorough index, and also features a ‘Topical outline of entries’ that helps link them in a series of subject categories in a very helpful fashion.

In summary, despite the inconsistency of quality brought about by the use of numerous authors – a problem that marks most encyclopaedias – this is a very welcome addition to the literature on geographical exploration and discovery. It is enjoyably readable, impressively illustrated, and contains a great deal of fascinating information. It will not replace Raymond Howgego’s three volumes of *Encyclopedia of exploration* or, for a polar audience, Clive Holland’s, *Arctic exploration and development*, but it still is a very valuable reference tool. (Beau Riffenburgh, Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge, Lensfield Road, Cambridge CB2 1ER.)

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ALBATROSSES, PETRELS AND SHEARWATERS OF THE WORLD. Derek Olney and Paul Scofield. 2007. London: Christopher Helm. 240 p, illustrated, soft cover. ISBN 978-0-7136-4332-9. £19.99. doi:10.1017/S0032247407006997

When Peter Harrison's book *Seabirds: an identification guide* was published by Croom Helm in 1983, it caused a minor sensation in the birdwatching world. For the first time, all the seabirds of the world were to be found illustrated and described in a single, relatively portable volume, with accurate distribution maps. Keen amateur ornithologists were made aware of the treasures to be found around the oceans of the planet, and many have since travelled to exotic and distant destinations in search of the many species of seabird that this book depicted.

Albatrosses, petrels and shearwaters of the world is the latest in a long line of first-class field guides from the excellent Helm publishing house, and seeks to improve our knowledge of this group of birds, the majority of which occur in the tropics or Southern Hemisphere. Have the authors achieved this aim?

The current book is a work dedicated to three families of seabirds, namely albatrosses, petrels, and shearwaters. The book begins with a list of the species and subspecies covered. There are 137 species recognised by the authors, and all are described and illustrated, with a distribution map for each. The authors then outline the taxonomic debate, and describe both the phylogenetic and biological species concepts well, pointing out the limitations of each, in terms that are sure to be understood by the general reader.

Since 1983, there have been significant advances in the study of seabirds. New species have been described, and birds previously considered subspecies have been promoted to specific status. The authors discuss these changes in taxonomy in their introduction. More importantly, advances in DNA analysis have led to changes in the taxonomic relationships between species. Although this is true for many bird families, nowhere has it been more so than for seabirds. For example, when I was a teenage birdwatcher in the 1970s, the field guides of the day only

described wandering albatross (*Diomedea exulans*). Now, we are informed that no fewer than six species of great albatross are recognised by most authorities.

One reason for the taxonomic changes may be that many species breed on remote islands that had been difficult for the researcher to access. Indeed, the Procellariiformes, which comprise the birds in this guide, are among the most enigmatic of birds and have drawn the increasing attention of birdwatchers and research workers during recent years. Much of this interest is due to the fact that for most of their lives, these birds are only to be found across the vast oceans of the planet, only coming to land in order to breed. As the authors state, most members of the general public are not aware of the existence of many of these species.

A historical background to the group is given, and we learn that the first petrels can be found in fossils aged between 40 and 45 million years old.

The next section describes the four groups that make up the species covered by this book. This is a well-written text and gives a good basic introduction to the species of the group.

I was interested to read that the wedge-rumped storm petrel (*Oceanodroma tethys*) was the only member of the storm petrels to visit its breeding burrow in the daytime. For all the others, night-time visits to the nest affords better protection from predation by larger seabirds. Of similar interest, we find that the sooty (*Puffinus griseus*) and short-tailed shearwaters (*P. tenuirostris*) are both able to reach up to 70 m below the surface of the sea in search of prey.

In a well-written section on identification, there are some useful guidelines for identifying a mystery seabird from this group. Pitfalls of identifying seabirds in different weather and lighting conditions are well covered and the observer is warned about this, and we are also presented with a discussion of the variability in the plumages that many of this group display. The relevance of moult in seabirds is also discussed.

I like the attitude that comes across in this book: that one cannot hope to identify all the seabirds one sees, and that if one doesn't know what species a bird was, it is safer for the scientific record not to guess.

A section on the conservation of this group of seabirds makes for bleak reading, with 10% of the species 'threatened with extinction in the near future.' The main reason put forward for this by the authors is predation of one form or other. There is interesting comment about the evidence of the use of seabirds as food resource by early Polynesian explorers as far back as 3000 years ago. The authors describe in some detail the damage inflicted on the seabird populations of the world by man since those early days. Non-human influence has also led to serious declines in seabirds that breed on offshore islands. The 'usual suspects' include introduced rats, pigs, and dogs.

Seabirds are also increasingly at risk when at sea, and the authors identify the well-known threats from drift nets and long-lining as being of major importance in