

known Irish authoress, who describes the book as “A work of flawless prose, in which the plants, rocks and glaciers of Antarctica are treated with the same peculiarity as the characters in a novel. A feast.” I don’t know the criteria for selection for the aforementioned award, and I haven’t the literary skills of Edna O’Brien, but I can say that David Campbell undoubtedly falls into Joe MacInnis’s second category of scientists who write well for a broad audience of non-specialists.

It must be apparent by now that I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book. Its eclectic mix of subjects are cleverly woven together into a fascinating story. It is well written, well organized and full of interesting information. At the end of the book there is an appendix of plant and animal names, notes providing more details on particular items in the text and, for those who might want to discover even more, a bibliography. If the book should prove so popular as to go into a second edition, I would recommend more maps and illustrations, and the index needs some careful revision as you won’t always find what you want on the page indicated by the index. But these are minor complaints about a book that is very good value for the money.

I recommend *The Crystal Desert: Summers in Antarctica* without reservation to specialist and non-specialist alike, from high school to university. There is much here for physical, biological, and earth scientists, for those in the arts and social sciences, for the layman and policy-makers, and, of course, generals, admirals, politicians and reporters. Like me, you will learn much about the human and natural history of Antarctica and, if you have been fortunate enough to have traveled there, you will be reminded, as I was, of how privileged we are to have been able to visit and work in Antarctica.

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**THE MYTH OF THE EXPLORER: THE PRESS, SENSATIONALISM, AND GEOGRAPHICAL DISCOVERY.** By BEAU RIFFENBURGH. London and New York: Belhaven Press, 1993. Distributed in North America by St. Martin’s Press, New York. 226 p., illus., maps, index. Hardbound. US\$59.00.

Anyone who has ever thought about why Europeans continued to search for a Northwest Passage centuries after a viable commercial route to the Orient had been shown to be impossible would be interested in this book. So would anyone who has ever taken a moment to reflect on why it mattered if Frederick Cook beat Robert Peary to the North Pole, or if Peary’s visit was the first, or if either man ever attained the Pole. Appealing to readers of imagination, culture, and curiosity, Beau Riffenburgh’s new book is not an analysis of Arctic or African space nor of the peoples who live there. Rather, *The Myth of the Explorer*

examines the role of the nineteenth and early twentieth century newspaper in shaping how we think about those geographical spaces and the men who explored them.

The book’s thesis is that the new stamp of sensational journalism, the development of which Riffenburgh attributes to James Gordon Bennett Jr., editor of the New York *Herald*, shaped much of the imagery of Arctic and African exploration that is still in fashion today. Supplanting the Burkean landscape descriptors of the sublime and picturesque, the sensational journalistic techniques focused on the exhilaration of apprehending the unknown, on man’s role as a conqueror of nature, and on the explorer as a heroic conception of nation.

In a characteristically postmodern approach to heroes, Riffenburgh’s attention is on the social mechanisms that construct the notion of a hero, and not on the historical or biographical subject itself. Accordingly, while the author is well-informed about Robert E. Peary and Frederick A. Cook, his real interest lies in how these men were presented in the popular press and what that reveals about the manipulative powers of journalism. Thus, while the newspaper visionaries created heroic and profitable images of African and Arctic explorers for popular audiences, they exerted a controlling force on the shape that exploration was to take. In fact, within Riffenburgh’s sphere of reference, names such as Charles A. Dana, Joseph Pulitzer, and James Gordon Bennett Jr., hold as much sway as names such as Stanley, Nansen, Franklin, and Burton.

Riffenburgh’s intention is not to debunk those heroes from a past age, but to understand how we value them. In the same way that historians will recognize the incredible importance of John Barrow to nineteenth century British exploration of the Arctic, even though the Second Secretary to the Admiralty made only one brief visit to Greenland, *The Myth of the Explorer* enables us to grasp the extent to which commercial motivations in journalism not only gave direction to the course of geographical exploration between 1855 and 1910, but created a popular conception of heroism that virtually excluded the Danas, Pulitzers, and Bennetts from anything but vicarious participation. The newspaperman’s role was that of the dramatist, remaining backstage while he created roles to be played by more colourful explorers. And where the explorer’s colour was too subdued, the sensational presses either added their own highlights or turned their attention elsewhere. But because attention from the popular press was essential to procuring financial backing for outfitting an expedition, the newspapers actually played a role in the destiny of much exploration in Africa and the Arctic.

Like all good histories, Riffenburgh’s book does not simply present a collection of facts and dates, but gives readers a new way of approaching those facts and dates we already possess. He does, however, add a wealth of information about the history of journalism, gracefully and convincingly interweaving his knowledge of journalism into what we have known for some time about geographical exploration. Through this process, we are led to a full appreciation of how we think about the Arctic and Africa, and how we think about the men who explored them.

Both a trained polar historian and an experienced journalist himself, Riffenburgh writes this book with a solid knowledge of his material and a persuasive pen. As a stylist, Riffenburgh writes

from the almost old-fashioned position that if the reader can't comprehend the material, then the writer has failed to negotiate the difficult path of communication. This is a refreshing change from the more prevalent attitude in scholarly writing that demands more effort of the reader than of the writer.

Like all detailed studies, *The Myth of the Explorer* sometimes forgets to remind us that many other factors have come into play in the conception of Arctic and African exploration, and that the one providing the thesis here is merely isolated to improve our understanding, not to render invalid all other interpretations. Sometimes it is intellectually healthy to stand back and to absorb the larger picture. How, for example, does the newspaper image of the hero in the new land fit with Romantic or Victorian conceptions of culture? How exactly did this transition from the sublime and picturesque ways of apprehending landscape to the sensational mode come about? Because the sublime and picturesque were descriptors created to articulate European landscapes, did they prove inadequate vocabularies for the new worlds of Africa and the Arctic? Was there anything more geographically appropriate about the sensational—something that truly suited the landscape—or were newspaper visionaries merely in a sensational mode at the same time other forces were directing exploration to distant regions?

*The Myth of the Explorer* stimulates these and many other questions in the reflective reader, and while one might wish that Riffenburgh had addressed these matters more expansively, the book masterfully accomplishes what it sets out to do. To ask more than this would be unreasonable, for any book that genuinely seeks to understand our history and culture will inevitably raise more questions than it provides answers, and certainly Riffenburgh's work succeeds in this.

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