

The editor is to be congratulated on bringing these letters to light; their appearance so soon after the publication of Philip Ayres' life of Mawson (reviewed in *Polar Record* 198) is most opportune. (H.G.R. King, Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge, Lensfield Road, Cambridge CB2 1ER.)

**THE ARCTIC IN THE BRITISH IMAGINATION 1818–1914.** Robert G. David. 2000. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press. xx + 278 p, illustrated, hard cover. ISBN 0-7190-5943-7. £46.00.

Robert David's new book explores the various ways in which the Arctic was represented to the British public during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. David looks not only at the many books produced by Arctic explorers, but also at the exhibits and panoramas so popular in the time before cinema, at the newspapers and magazines of the day, and at the print items targeted for young audiences. Yet in spite of its seemingly broad scope, *The Arctic in the British imagination* is not so important for new factual information that it brings to the table, but rather for the way it refocuses how we think about what the Arctic looks like. With this new perspective in mind, one is encouraged to revisit and rethink materials that have long been the traditional subject of Arctic study. For example, David explains the technical matters that necessarily altered the colour of illustrations so that they could be reproduced in published versions of explorers' narratives. Once the reader sees how far from visually accurate such representations were, s/he more easily grasps the similarly subjective nature of the written texts themselves. They are, in fact, products of cultural manufacture, not the factual records for which they are frequently mistaken. One begins to think of the familiar narratives of such men as John Franklin and John Ross as constructions closely allied to historical fact, but nevertheless distinct from it. David's concern, of course, is with the particular nature of those constructions and the forces that shaped them.

His assessment of how the British public came to perceive the Arctic immediately brings into play the ambiguity of cause and effect. To use George Orwell's analogy of how an effect becomes a cause, and a cause becomes an effect: a man fails because he drinks and then he drinks because he is a failure, and on and on. The reader of David's book soon realises that, as the early images caused the public to acquire certain expectations about the Arctic, those expectations — and the commercial interest in fulfilling them — in turn became causes that shaped subsequent images presented to the British public.

David effectively selects and arranges his material to reveal the influence of the popular imagination on the Arctic image and of the commercial and technological innovations that gave it shape. In his enthusiasm for his thesis, the author makes some insupportable explanations for isolated causes and their effects, but most certainly he builds a provocative and thoughtful case for his approach to Arctic studies. Without doubt, the most important

feature of this book is the different line of enquiry it encourages. It invites the reader to see Arctic history as a product of popular interest, and not simply as a phenomenon directed by mercantile and Admiralty decisions. No doubt, the actual events of history were shaped by a multiplicity of factors, and if David sometimes gets carried away in estimating the impact of popular forces, his approach at least heightens awareness of these less tangible factors.

The introduction is the most difficult part of the work. Rather than inviting the reader into the interesting world that the book explores, it spends most of its time justifying what the book is about to do. This approach seems obligatory in modern critical writing, especially in the world of theses and dissertations, but the style is more designed to satisfy academic examiners than to interest readers. In the introduction, David states the purpose of the book is 'to examine the variety and nature of Arctic representations, and where appropriate to consider their meaning in the context of theories created in other contexts' (page 20). That convoluted and opaque explanation, along with chapter sub-headings such as 'Representational theory and the Arctic' and 'Appropriating the Arctic,' speak volumes about the nature of the introduction. Personally, I prefer the Nike approach: 'Just do it.'

After relatively hard slogging through the uninviting introduction, the reader becomes more absorbed. The second chapter examines the numerous popular images of the Arctic as they were created and disseminated in travellers' and explorers' narratives and in the engravings that generally accompanied them. The third chapter looks at the popular creation of the Arctic as a testing ground on which heroes could be made, even at the expense of the natural and social sciences that were the true objects of the geographical societies' frequent expeditions into those regions. The fourth chapter investigates the role of the press in shaping and solidifying the lay image of the Arctic, an image that was shaped as much by what the commercial presses thought their readership wanted to see as by the more broad and encompassing scientific endeavours that often took Britons into the Arctic. Chapter five addresses the ways in which the Arctic was exhibited throughout the century in museums, panoramas, art galleries, and the like. The sixth chapter explores the representations of the Arctic as it appeared in publications tailored to young audiences — novels, penny magazines, comics, and school textbooks. And the final chapter draws conclusions from what precedes it, although not in a very satisfying manner.

David's approach to his subject is quite thought-provoking. And while his unbending compulsion to argue his main thesis sometimes unnecessarily biases his own judgment, he clearly has a commanding grasp of many of the primary and secondary sources available in Britain. Even though he is aware of much of the excellent Arctic scholarship produced in Canada during the past several decades, his attention to it is generally superficial, paying little more than lip-service to considerable scholarship that could be effectively employed to advance his own argument.

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.