

uncertainty still surrounds the passage of events despite almost 100 years of reportage, debate, and retrospective scrutiny.

These reservations withstanding, there is so much here that is really wonderful stuff. Following Beau Riffenburgh's lead in *The myth of the explorer*, Robinson's analysis of the role of the press in sustaining a popular culture of exploration remains compelling, and is one of the major strengths of this engaging book. *The coldest crucible* takes a big step toward helping to explain why the North Pole, a region so geographically removed from Americans, became such an iconic destination for discovery. Although brief, I particularly enjoyed Robinson's discussion of the seductive pull of these regions, the 'Arctic Fever,' to re-use a borrowed phrase that is more than merely a playful literary metaphor. In fact, the phrase was part of a vocabulary of polar endeavour that many explorers were quick to urge upon their audiences: to justify their actions as pure, romantic impulses and to try to explain away the irrational compulsion that drove them to the north, while at the same time glossing over the very real and rational motives for voyaging, namely the promise of fame and financial reward. This idea still binds many travellers and adventurers — particularly those pseudo-explorers of the present — into 'deliberate risk-taking in pursuit of a goal of no apparent practical value.' Just as astronauts hurtle into space, or happy tourists chug north in icebreakers, all are tied by the representations they make to friends, family, perhaps patrons; all bound to the 'needs of a watchful public.'

Overall, this is a useful study that should have broad appeal: to historians, historians of science, cultural and historical geographers, and, not least, to a large public audience. Robinson's enthusiasm for the subject coupled with a sensitivity for the context and nuance of the production and reception of geographical knowledge in the late nineteenth century — a mix of both 'evidence' from the field as well as reputations forged far from the ice — ensures that there is much that can be taken from this particular study of the American cultural landscape. One soon realises too that there is a great deal more to be discovered in exploring the imaginations of an American public that looked towards the north in the nineteenth century. (H.W.G. Lewis-Jones, Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge, Lensfield Road, Cambridge, CB2 1ER.)

ANTARCTICA CRUISING GUIDE. Peter Carey and Craig Franklin. 2006. Wellington, New Zealand: AWA Press. v + 233 p, illustrated, soft cover. ISBN 0-9582629-4-2. \$US25.95; \$NZ39.99.
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As is evident from the title, *Antarctica cruising guide* is aimed primarily at ship-borne tourists to the region. It is a small, compact publication designed to fit easily in the pocket of most red parkas, and is both a wildlife field guide and gives a brief description of 11 'landing' sites

in the South Shetland Islands, and 14 sites on and around the Antarctic Peninsula. *Antarctica cruising guide* does not include sites in any other location, on the grounds that the vast majority of tourists visit the Peninsula region, and the guide is written for them. The book is lavishly illustrated throughout, with photographs taken mainly by the authors. It is worth buying for the illustrations alone.

The book is divided into four basic sections. First, there is an introduction to Antarctica, comprising sections on physical geography, geology, and glaciology. The section concludes with a very quick summary on 'political Antarctica,' which includes a description of territorial claims and the origins of the Antarctic Treaty and the Environmental Protocol. There is also a page on 'Antarctica facts and figures,' which is plagued by the common problem of there being no consistency among differing publications regarding the mean thickness of the ice sheet, the area of summer and winter ice cover, and even the precise height of the Vinson Massif.

The second section describes some of the landing sites and scenic spots in the South Shetland Islands and the Antarctic Peninsula. These are well done. They comprise a short block of text, accompanied by photographs of the site, the wildlife that might be expected, and some of the scenery. There is also a summary of information, so the visitor can see at a glance what might be expected. For example, the entry for Half Moon Island has as its main points of interest the Argentine base, the chinstrap penguin colony, lichens and mosses, and the remains of a wooden boat. A second column itemises the specific wildlife that might be seen, with the page number on which that particular species is described.

The third section comprises the bulk of the book, and is a description of the wildlife to be found in the region. Serious birdwatchers or biologists will prefer more detailed guides, but for the beginner, *Antarctica cruising guide* is clear, succinct, and easy to use. It begins with a brief overview of the terrestrial ecosystem, with a report on plants and land-based animals. Then there is an overview of the marine ecosystem, with sections on the Southern Ocean, the marine food web, plankton, sea-floor dwelling organisms, fish, and other vertebrates. Next comes birds, divided into seabirds and penguins, followed by mammals, with sections on whales and seals. This is perhaps the book's greatest strength, and contains some of the best photographs of Antarctic wildlife I have seen. Neither of the authors is a professional photographer, but their combined illustrations show an attention to detail and a desire to capture some of the sights with which any experienced Antarctic will identify — for example, a southern giant petrel with a red-stained face after feasting on a freshly dead seal (page 104), a black-browed albatross 'running' across a calm sea to take off (page 116), a group of Adélie penguins leaping off an ice floe (page 159), and the pink, gaping maw of a sleepy leopard seal (page 180). These make a pleasant change from the standard 'bird standing in the water' shots of many field guides.

The final section, again brief, is about threats to Antarctic conservation, and is a necessary addendum to any guide to this vulnerable region. It begins with the Antarctic Treaty, listing those countries that have so far acceded to it. The next section is about conservation, making the point that a third of the species described in the wildlife section are listed on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. The section on sealing notes the early slaughter of Antarctic fur seals, but not elephant seals. The following section on whaling is a little more detailed, noting the rapid success of the industry in the early part of the twentieth century, followed by the IWC moratorium in 1986. It concludes by noting Japan's continued harvest of southern whales, and raising the possibility of establishing a sanctuary in Antarctica for protecting these animals. I imagine most of the people reading this guide, having experienced the majesty of a baleen whale in its natural environment, would be inclined to think it a very good idea. The section continues with a description of fishing and the problems arising thereof, and the issue of invasion by alien species. The book finishes with ozone depletion and global warming.

The book finishes with a useful glossary, and the Guidelines for Visitors as set out by Recommendation XVIII-I of the Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting of 1994. The increasing numbers of visitors to the Antarctic are going to have an impact on its ecosystems at some point. Indeed, some people believe the impact is already being felt. However, the general public will not be much interested in protecting (and paying for the conservation of) a continent from which they are banned, and that only scientists are permitted to see. *Ergo*, tourism is here to stay, whether we approve of it or not. However, it can play an important role in the continent's future, by keeping it in the public eye. Many of us who work on cruise ships encourage passengers to talk about the area to schools and youth groups, in the hope that a younger generation will see this as an area to preserve. *Antarctica cruising guide* is an excellent souvenir for any passenger to the area, and its stunning photographs and friendly text will hopefully remind them of the fragile beauty of the place. It may also remind them that here is something worth protecting for the future. (T.R.D. Grade, History Department, Stanford University, Palo Alto, CA, USA.)

RIVER OF WHITE NIGHTS: A SIBERIAN RIVER ODYSSEY. Jeffrey Tayler. 2006. London: Robson Books. xxiii + 230 p, hard cover. ISBN 1-86105-949-3. £16.99.

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Jeffrey Tayler is a journalist and one of today's 'most intrepid writers,' according to the blurb, whose work regularly appears, so we are told inside the cover, in up-market travel magazines. He resides in Moscow and is fluent in Russian. In this book, he describes a journey that he undertook with one companion down the Lena River from near Lake Baikal to its mouth, some 3800 km

(2400 miles), in a boat that appears to have been a glorified Zodiac. He is recreating 'a journey first made by Cossack forces more than 300 years ago' and while seeking 'primeval beauty and a respite from the corruption, violence and self-destructive urges that typify modern Russian culture' only finds 'Cossack villages unchanged for centuries . . . Soviet outposts full of listless drunks . . . and stark ruins of the Gulag . . . grand forests hundreds of miles from the nearest hamlet.' So 'far' from 'help' is he that the personality of his companion obviously becomes important. However, 'Vadim' is a 'burly Soviet army veteran embittered by his experiences in Afghanistan' who 'detests all humanity' including, it seems, Tayler himself. But Tayler needs his 'superb skills if he is to survive a journey that quickly turns hellish,' and, despite all his adventures in wild parts of the world, 'he has never felt so threatened as he does now.' This atmosphere of mild hysteria is reinforced by a comment by Colin Thubron helpfully printed on the front cover that states that the journey was 'wrenched out of near disaster.'

All this is probably quite sufficient to deter most readers from bothering with the book at all and, in parenthesis, this reviewer wonders how often blurb writers perform precisely the opposite service to writers than the one they are supposed to be performing. But such rejection would be a pity since the book is not written in the feverish tone adopted in the blurb but is a fairly sober, matter of fact, and rather convincing, account of what was obviously a difficult journey, enlivened by some astute comment and mild wit.

There is an introductory chapter starting with Ivan the Terrible and moving on to the work of the Cossacks in securing Siberia for Russia. The author continues to consider more recent developments in that country and 'seized by a desire to find out what had gone wrong' he decided to head for the hinterland. 'The Lena came to mind. The villages, settlers, descendants of exiles, and indigenous peoples along its banks represent a distillate of Russia's outback masses.'

The book comprises a series of vignettes, conversations with the people met *en route*, impressions of the places visited, details of the journey along the river, and always with the lowering presence of Vadim, irritating but indispensable, in the background. Some of these vignettes are of real interest. At the village of Nyuya, just inside the Republic of Sakha, there are still a few Volga Germans, the remains of a community that was deported *en masse* by Stalin during the early stages of World War II to this remote region from the area on the Volga to which their ancestors had been invited by Catherine the Great in the eighteenth century. In between, this area had become, under Lenin, the so-called German Autonomous Republic. The author determined to meet some of these people and decided on a visit to the village mayor to seek his aid. The village disappointed, since it looked 'entirely desolate' and no different from many of the others along the river. Eventually finding the mayor,