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Review By John Wright

EXPLORING IN THE HEROIC AGE

The Encyclopedia of Exploration, Volume III: 1850 -1940 Oceans Islands and Polar Regions

Hordern House Rare Books

SOME world explorers were always destined for fame; others, who had the same indomitable spirit but far less luck, perhaps, never rose above comparative obscurity.

The 'heroic age' of polar exploration which ended in the early 20th century produced many contrasts in fortunes, none more striking than those of Norwegian Roald Amundsen and Japanese explorer Nobu Shirase.

Both were inspired as boys by tales of Arctic exploration and both had dreams of claiming the ultimate prize of the North Pole. Beaten by Robert Peary to that goal in 1909, both men immediately turned towards the Antarctic and the unclaimed South Pole.

Amundsen, who had conquered the Arctic's Northwest Passage in 1905, was experienced and well-equipped; Shirase, a comparative amateur, was under-funded and ridiculed at home and abroad for his ambition.

The Norwegian went on to claim the South Pole from under the nose of Robert Falcon Scott's tragic British expedition in 1911, and was to die in suitably heroic circumstances on a rescue flight in the Arctic in 1928.

Shirase, also beaten by Amundsen to the Pole (the two expeditions came in brief contact early in 1912), tried to explore coastal Antarctica but accomplished little. He spent the rest of his life in debt and died in 1946 in a rented room above a Japanese fish shop.

Amundsen and Shirase are just two of more than 3000 explorers and word travellers whose lives and achievements are detailed in "Encyclopedia of Exploration 1850 to 1940: The Oceans, Islands and Polar Regions" – the third mammoth volume in an extraordinary series of reference works by British scholar and traveller Ray Howgego.

Howgego, a former physics teacher with a lifelong interest in exploration, astonished academia in 2003 with "Encyclopedia of Exploration to 1800" - a huge, one-million-word text commissioned by Australian publisher Hordern

House and now regarded as a definitive reference work on the history of exploration.

He followed that with “Encyclopedia of Exploration: 1800 to 1850”, a volume which had the same aim: to document every known explorer, every voyage or journey of exploration they undertook and every ship they sailed in, and to provide exhaustive bibliographical references. It was described by the Times Literary Supplement as “a towering work of scholarship”.

In the latest volume, Howgego adopts the same meticulous attention to research and detail in a study of world exploration up to the modern age. Limited to the oceans, islands and Polar Regions, it will be followed by a final volume, still being written, on continental exploration during the same period.

Restricted in geographical scope as it is, Howgego's latest work still comes in at a whopping 724 pages, with more than 520 major biographical and other articles on the history of exploration, travel and colonisation into the 20th century.

All the big ‘heroic age’ names are here – the likes of Shackleton, Mawson, Nares, Nansen, Amundsen, Scott and Peary - as well as countless other 19th and 20th century explorers and world travellers who contributed something to the global map but who fell short of universal fame.

Howgego already has endeared himself to a general reading public as well as academia with an approach to his work that combines serious scholarship with an attractive writing style and a commitment to recording the sort of detail that rounds out and humanises his subjects.

The age covered in this book saw the advent of aerial exploration (by balloon, powered airship and aeroplane), serious ocean hydrography, the first use of photography and cinematography in remote regions and the emergence of independent global wanderers, adventurers, ‘gentlemen voyagers’ and the first intrepid female world travellers.

Among them were Englishman Thomas Stevens, who crossed the United States on a penny-farthing in 1884 and went on to be the first to cycle around the world. George Train, a US businessman and adventurer who lived in Melbourne in the 1850s, also travelled around the world, in a record 80 days in 1870, inspiring the famous Jules Verne novel.

Female travellers whose lives Howgego records include, at the obscure end of the spectrum, English butterfly collector Margaret Fontaine, who lived in Australia during World War 1 and who was found dead beside a road in Trinidad with a butterfly net in her hand. More famous names include pioneer aviators Amelia Earhart and Amy Johnson.

There are also biographic articles on several 19th and early 20th century travellers who, though not explorers in the strict sense, contributed because of their profile to a greater knowledge of the world before the advent of mass tourism: Paul Gauguin, Robert Louis Stevenson, Mark Twain, Anthony Trollope and Australian novelist George "Louis" Becke.

In general historical articles, the book closely examines the history of aerial exploration and provides a detailed and comprehensive record of the exploration of the islands of the Pacific and elsewhere, including New Zealand, New Guinea and the East Indies. The bibliographies are exhaustive.

Howgego's achievement in this work, as in the previous two volumes, is phenomenal in terms of scope, output and depth of research. Nothing matching this has been seen before, and collectors, librarians and historians are among others now waiting for Howgego to complete the job with the final, much-anticipated volume of this extraordinary undertaking.

Encyclopedia of Exploration 1850 to 1940: The Oceans, Islands and Polar Regions, by Raymond John Howgego (Hordern House, Sydney, \$245, www.hordern.com or www.explorersencyclopedia.com).

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