

The Horror

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Raymond John Howgego

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF EXPLORATION TO 1800

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YOU OPEN Raymond John Howgego's book and dive into the world's great and terrible past. The *Encyclopedia of Exploration* is a vast, meticulous and absorbing record of human restlessness that seems to be quite without precedent. Designed and published in Australia, printed in China in clear fine type laid out on good opaque paper in well-organised entries, its nearly 1200 large pages are sturdily bound in olive green cloth and supplied with three silver ribbon bookmarks. All this costs just under \$300, which is a bargain. This is a necessary book, produced not by 'a team of specialists' huddled in the shelter of an institution, but by a single scholar driven by passion.

A postage stamp-sized photo on the jacket's back flap shows Raymond Howgego standing by a frontier marker stone in a snow-covered mountain pass linking China and Pakistan. This tiny image represents the only intrusion of the personal into a splendidly disinterested work, written in dry, clear, humorous and syntactically sound English. The entries are stripped to the bone, but not so much so that Howgego can't find space to tell us that William Lithgow, the seventeenth-century traveller, was known as Cut-lugged Willie, 'after four brothers had cut off his ears when they found him with their sister'. One reason for getting out of Scotland and seeing the world. The book is a wonder for its exact economy of language alone.

What is exploration? Howgego is wisely elastic in his inclusions. A hundred years ago, his task might have seemed easier. Explorers were the agents of empire, and empire was generally celebrated. Discovery was never neutral, and exploration meant annexation, occupation, civilisation. As the European empires expanded through Africa, Asia and the Pacific, territories became ever 'wilder' and their inhabitants ever more 'fearsome and savage'. Accounts of exploration shed their scientific baggage and became a branch of popular adventure writing — especially for boys, the empire's future builders and servants. It was eminently British and self-absorbed in an almost childlike way. A nostalgic whiff of it comes from the spongy pages of *The Faber Book of Exploration* (Benedict Allen, ed., 2002,) a collection of adventure passages from mainly British sources. The jacket uses an illustration from 1865 of two Englishmen in hats, nursing rifles and reclining in a canoe as two naked Africans manoeuvre it over rapids.

Howgego, in his *Encyclopedia*, lacks these nineteenth-century certainties, but he has his biases — toward Europe and the printed word, mainly — and his problems. How to

organise material that covers the globe and all of history before the nineteenth century? Howgego fits it into a conservatively biographical format. Since the span of a life is one of the irreducible units of our human experience, this makes sense. But it does limit access to the book's stupendously informative contents. Life is more than an accumulation of lives. You get nowhere in this book if you don't know an explorer's name.

What if you want to know about Chinese explorers of the world beyond the middle kingdom, or who delineated Africa or the Arctic, or Western encounters with Japan, or the medieval Arab travellers, or Portuguese sea voyages? There is no obvious way in. The *Encyclopedia's* information being parcelled out person by person through the great compendium, all you can do is turn the 1100 closely printed pages and hope to find enough (q.v.)s to lead you on. Sometimes an entry like 'Islamic geographers 700–1800' suggests that Howgego recognised the difficulty of the individual entry. The lengthy bibliography for the conquest of Mexico is under Cortés — obvious enough, but if you're interested in Venezuela, you have to know the name of Diego de Losada, who founded Caracas in 1511.

This book needs a dozen survey articles on major regions and periods of history to direct the reader to the relevant personal entries. It needs indexes grouping people by region and period. Personal coordinates are not enough in a work that ranges so far in time and space. The *Encyclopedia* will be a standard work of reference. It could be made even better. Howgego is clearly a meticulous detail man rather than a big picture man. The detail is wonderful and indispensable and *there*, but a reader needs more help in finding the right detail, and something to hang the detail on.

TRAVELLERS HAVE ALWAYS been liars. They have an aggressively credulous audience. How could Marco Polo not have embellished when he dictated his story in 1298 to another jailbird in Genoa? Howgego is finely aware of the complex ways explorers' truths relate to fiction. People find what they are looking for. Alexander Selkirk, the real Scottish sailor, is rewritten as Robinson Crusoe, under pressure of public demand. Columbus confidently identifies the coast of Venezuela as the Earthly Paradise, from his reading of medieval cosmographers, sees a manatee and sourly notes that mermaids aren't as beautiful as promised. Reasons of state intervene. The discovery of Brazil, marvellously described in the letter of Pero Vaz de Caminha, may have been elaborately staged by the Portuguese government, already secretly familiar for years with the South American continent.

Howgego never reaches where the written word has not gone. Fantastical voyages — such as Gulliver's — are noted, but not the real explorations recorded orally by preliterate peoples. I found nothing about the feats of Polynesian navigators, collective and anonymous, who crossed the Pacific and settled Aotearoa (New Zealand), or the travels of the early Greek colonisers in the western Mediterranean. Nothing on what we know of the anonymous Asian people who first

crossed into the Americas, or those other Asians who came south to discover Australia. Even individual identities that are collective and mythological in origin get squeezed out. Odysseus is not here, though his long voyage home to Ithaca after the Trojan War is clearly based on real, if not always identifiable, coordinates in the Mediterranean. The *Odyssey* is at once a founding document of European literature and Europe's first narrative of exploration.

The book's triumph is the bibliographies that follow each entry. Their quality is beyond criticism by most of us. I did wonder why Howgego included some nugatory popular books on Marco Polo from the nineteenth century but not the fundamental Pizzorusso and Cardona critical edition of 1975. He came out pretty well after a few other quick checks. The bibliography for the appalling Columbus alone lists about three hundred items, but not Todorov. The explored hardly get a look in, though there is an excellent entry and bibliography for Bartolomé Las Casas, who denounced the Spanish genocide of the indios of Central America and the Caribbean, and another for Antonio Vieira, the seventeenth-century Jesuit who defended the Amazonians of Brazil.

The mass of the material here reflects the first centuries of Europe's modern expansion around the world. The histories of the men who led the way reek of blood and salt and smoke. This is a wholly male world of extreme cruelty and resourcefulness. I found only a single entry for a woman among the book's 7500 'persons or ships', and that was for Mary Wortley Montagu, who wrote excellent letters from the British embassy in eighteenth-century Constantinople. Hardly an explorer. Neither was Constantine Phaulkon, the Greek adventurer who became — in an already settled framework of French and English trading presences — prime minister of Thailand in the seventeenth century, before losing power and his head. Phaulkon discovered nothing and recorded nothing, but only if you know his name will you find the bibliography of nearly forty items on French activity in

Thailand in the age of the *roi soleil*.

So how does an explorer differ from a trader, a soldier, an invader, a colonist, a traveller, a tourist? Maybe not at all. Yet a sea change happened when Europeans started looking west rather than east, and discovered the Americas beyond the Atlantic. The explorer's vocation was born then in the grey zone where politics, business and crime overlap, just ahead of empire. Ancient and medieval explorers had tended to travel east overland to discover civilisations superior to their own. They sought business opportunities and useful alliances, but they also wanted to learn from other people. After Columbus, and after facing down the Islamic challenge in the Mediterranean, armed with the one true religion and advanced weapons technology, Europeans felt confident of their own superiority. Not even the Aztecs, the Incas, the Chinese or the Japanese intimidated them.

To explore in Portuguese is 'explorar', which also means 'to exploit'. All the Spanish and Portuguese wanted to learn from the locals in America was where the gold was. The invaders' strength was less their metal technology, which the locals were quick to assimilate, than the battery of European diseases such as smallpox and influenza. The New World was won by biological weapons of mass destruction, accidentally deployed at a time when Europe itself was still battling the bubonic plague that came overland on the trade routes from Asia. Religion justified it all. Brazil started life as the *Land of the True Cross*. Converting savages and enslaving them were conveniently similar activities. Things changed somewhat when the commercial and military initiative passed to the mercantile powers of Protestant northern Europe. North America was occupied, the slave traffic gradually phased out, and scientific travel flowered in the circumnavigations of Cook. Howgego's volume cuts out, with fine timing, at 1800. The promised sequel will be a very different book. By 1800 the world was mapped and most of it spoken for by the imperial powers. The thrill was gone, and so was a little of the horror.