The Art of Adventure

David Livingstone documented a massacre in a Congolese town on a scrap of newsprint with berry juice for ink. Robert McCracken Peck reviews ‘Explorers’ Sketchbooks’ by Huw Lewis-Jones and Kari Herbert.

By Robert McCracken Peck
June 16, 2017 3:11 p.m. ET

‘Expedition,’ “exploration” and “discovery” are terms more often associated with hardship and tragedy than beauty, pleasure or insightful reflection. When we think of explorers, figures like Sir John Franklin and his naval crew come to mind, disappearing in their fruitless search for the Northwest Passage, their final exit tarnished by desperate acts of cannibalism on the ice. We remember Robert Falcon Scott and his fellow travelers starving just 11 miles from a food depot on their arduous return from the South Pole in 1912. James Cook ended his third expedition badly, stabbed to death in Hawaii in 1779, while Christa McAuliffe and her fellow Challenger astronauts slipped “the surly bonds of earth” to “touch the face of God” on a disastrous space launch better remembered for Ronald Reagan’s eulogy than the original purpose of their mission.

In “Explorers’ Sketchbooks,” a selection of field notes and illustrations made by 70 different adventuresome travelers, Huw Lewis-Jones and Kari Herbert introduce us to the more peaceful and positive sides of exploration. The documents they offer capture the sense of wonder and awe that travel has evoked in many souls brave
and lucky enough to have visited the world's remotest places. “All about us nature puts on the most thrilling adventure stories ever created,” wrote William Beebe, an American naturalist who divided his career between deep ocean research and tropical exploration in the first half of the 20th century. “To some men the jungle is a tangled place of heat and danger. But, to the man who can see, its vines and plants form a beautiful and carefully ordered tapestry.” Beebe was not an artist, but he worked closely with Else Bostelmann, who was. Mr. Lewis-Jones and Ms. Herbert reproduce five of her lively illustrations of the strange fish that Beebe observed swimming thousands of feet below the ocean’s surface.

“All artists are explorers,” suggests Tony Foster, a British painter who has spent three decades documenting his own travels from the tropics to the Arctic. The reverse also seems to be true for most of the explorers included here, a diverse and intriguing group of men and women. Some have familiar names, but many are little-known. In each entry, a short but informative one-page biography precedes several pages of the striking images made during their expeditions. Almost everything shown makes us want to see more, and to learn more about the people who made them. To help with this, a full bibliography is provided.

Several of the people included in the book are not artists (including Chris Bonington, Bruce Chatwin, Vivian Fuchs, Edmund Hillary, Robert Scott, Geoff Somers and Colin Thubron), but their notebooks, often accompanied by photographs of cultural artifacts or scientific specimens collected on their trips, are just as compelling as the sketchbooks of those who are. Sir Ghillean Prance, a botanist who has made more than 40 extended expeditions in search of plants, is one of five contemporary travelers who contributed essays to the book. In his “Glorious Forest” entry, he explains the importance of written and visual records in the discovery process. “Notebooks are an essential part of my exploring kit,” he writes. “Other things of course are important in a practical sense . . . and each might mean the difference between life and death in the jungle. But, in terms of making a genuine contribution to knowledge, the careful marks that you make in a journal will be the things that outlive you.”
Mr. Prance and the book’s other essayists—Mr. Foster, Alan Bean, David Ainley and Wade Davis—come at the subject from different perspectives (botany, art, space travel, biological investigation and anthropology), but all agree that the time spent recording and illustrating first impressions and life in the field is key to any explorer’s experience and central to the spirit of exploration. The book is ample proof of their claims and an inspiring argument for the value of traveling with a purpose larger than oneself.

When Meriwether Lewis set off on his journey across North America, Thomas Jefferson advised him that “knowledge unrecorded is knowledge lost.” Embracing this idea, Lewis returned with detailed diaries, many of them embellished with drawings of what he had seen. David Ainley, an ecologist who studies penguins, has taken this documentary approach on his own expeditions to Antarctica, creating notebooks that are an invaluable catalog of the observations he has made there. In his essay, “Indispensable Friends,” he makes the case for careful record keeping and describes his own diaries as “my most prized possessions.”

Wade Davis, who has journeyed widely among isolated cultures, takes a more philosophical approach to travel. He characterizes each of his trips as a “pilgrimage” toward a goal “which was not a place but a state of mind, not a destination but a path of illumination.”

The book’s author-editors have done a terrific job in selecting spectacular images and documents to reproduce. These range from Henry Walter Bates’s watercolors of beetles from the Amazon to Sven Hedin’s meticulous and evocative landscape drawings of Tibet; from sketches of icebergs drawn by the anthropologist Franz Boas while studying Inuit settlements in northern Canada in the 1880s to David Livingstone’s 1871 eyewitness account of a slave traders’ massacre in a Congolese town, handwritten in berry juice on a scrap of salvaged newspaper.

Especially notable, given the male bias of much exploration literature, are the dozen independent, talented and intrepid women featured in the book. Sailing to Suriname in the 17th century, the German illustrator Maria Sibylla Merian portrayed the lizards, snakes, plants, butterflies and caterpillars she saw there in riotous, accurate colors. Gertrude Bell sketched pottery shards while traveling in Samarra, Iraq. Marianne North, a friend of Charles Darwin, circled the globe twice in the 1800s in what the authors call “her mission to paint as many different species of plants as she could find.” Included in her six-page entry are some of her stunning oil paintings from India and Japan.

Anyone with an interest in travel will find “Explorers’ Sketchbooks” a
source of inspiration. Even those well versed in exploration history will discover new information here. “If this book can inspire someone to sit a while, to watch and listen, and to draw or jot some thoughts down,” say its authors, “then the effort in making it has its reward.”

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