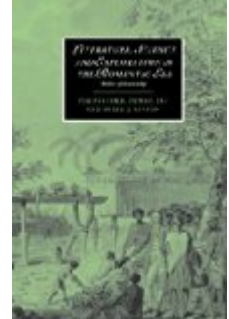


Tim Fulford, Debbie Lee, Peter J. Kitson. *Literature, Science, and Exploration in the Romantic Era: Bodies of Knowledge.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. xviii + 324 pp. \$80.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-82919-9.



Reviewed by Charles Withers

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One of the central issues in any account of science and exploration is whether the tales told travel as truth. Can the facts of the "new" be understood by audiences elsewhere who have not seen for themselves what is being recounted to them in the form of travel narratives, scientific report or public exposition? What lies behind or beyond the bound covers of the book or other form of literature? Has the claim to scientific "authority" and authorship been dependent upon peoples and knowledge systems which have been effaced in the writing? Do certain forms of writing help secure truth better than others? What are the connections between scientific writing and other forms of literature?

From the late seventeenth century, schemes to regulate the observer and their writing in order to achieve a "plaine style" certainly helped put nature to order. But the innate richness of the world as a geographical space does not make its classification easy at any time. For the German natural philosopher Alexander von Humboldt, for example, in 1804 deep in the Amazonian jungles with the French botanist Aime Bonpland, encountering

a hitherto unimagined floral diversity (and not being able to do anything about it because memory was no guide to perception) was akin to madness: "we rush around like the demented," he wrote to his brother, "quite unable to classify anything." [1] If "out there" was difficult enough to make sense of, being "back home" offered other difficulties, not least over the terms used to make sense of other places and cultures. "Science" may now have an unrivalled epistemological and cultural authority but it is still something that needs to be worked at. And before the 1830s, the term did not have its modern connotations of precision, institutional affiliation and disciplinary specialization. Even "exploration" meant different things. Although as a process of geographical encounter, land and sea-borne exploration might share similar principles--safe navigation, securing foodstuffs, returning home in one piece--much ocean-going exploration in the past was on a larger operational and geographical scale than land travel and, certainly in the southern oceans in the later eighteenth century, explorers saw different humans in island groups as symbols of different culture systems, not as everyday travelling com-

panions with whom one often had to share a disguise, a language and even a tent in order to travel and return. And "literature" of course has variant forms: fictional writing, factual writing, scientific writing and aesthetic writing, private and informal notes on a voyage as distinct from the mulled-over, measured and mediated "Journal of an Expedition" intended for public audiences.

These are some of the issues dealt with in this thoughtful and engaging book. The book offers a very British view of the questions it addresses, but it is not to be faulted for that. The central period of interest here is between 1768, and Cook's first voyage to the Pacific, and 1833, the year in which the word "scientist" was invented and two years after the foundation of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, a fact which, in their conclusion, the authors see as an establishment which broke with previous forms of scientific conduct and management. In particular, the scientifically specialized world of the 1830s broke with the world of generalization and patronage that centered on Sir Joseph Banks and his coterie in Soho Square, Kew Gardens and the Royal Society. If Banks is the "scientific" hero upon whom much late-eighteenth-century exploration depended and around whom much of the discussion of it here spins, his counterpart around whom the connections between literature and science are explored is Samuel Taylor Coleridge. A third and contemporary figure, that of the Swiss philosopher of science Bruno Latour also casts a long shadow here, for it is his work, in particular his ideas of "centres of calculation", "accumulation cycles" and specimens of the unknown traveling as "immutable mobiles" which are drawn upon to make sense of the long-distance entanglements between late eighteenth-century exploration and empire, Romantic discourse and disease, foreign subjects and foreign bodies.

The book is in two main parts, prefaced by a clear and instructive introductory chapter. Part 1, "Exploration, Science and Literature," has seven

chapters covering Banksian networks, aesthetic and economic botany, Banks's patronage of Mungo Park in West Africa and of William Bligh and the breadfruit on the high seas, Banks's connections with Blumenbach, the Gottingen-based physical anthropologist and racial theorist and those networks of cosmopolitan scientific and literary endeavour that connected Banks, Coleridge, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, and scores of British Naval officials and explorers as they sought to understand the shifting contours of terrestrial magnetism that drew men and ships, in fact and fiction, towards the North and South Poles. Part 2, "British Science and Literature in the Context of Empire," has three chapters. Their subjects embrace electricity as both a material and a cultural phenomenon, smallpox vaccination in the work of Edward Jenner as both an emancipatory science and for the poet Southey a moral scar upon the face of British politics, and a discussion of the hoped-for redemptive functions of domestic fireplace technologies which would improve the lot of Britain's children chimney sweeps, boys mainly, whose lives revealed a world of home-front slavery.

The book draws upon a wide range of interdisciplinary endeavour and, in turn, aims to speak to workers in several fields. Broadly, the authors succeed on both counts. The chapters stand well as "moments" in the longer story of the emergence of science as a particular discursive form of exploration and of literature, and, with one or two exceptions perhaps, the chapters connect together well in demonstrating the complex relationships between exploration, science and literature. Over twenty illustrations--portraits mainly and engravings but only one map, that of Halley's Atlantic Chart of 1701 illustrating the lines of magnetic variation--are sensibly employed and, in most cases, discussed in relevant chapters. This is important since the way the world was pictured was as much part of the new worlds of science and exploration as printed literature.

The volume will fit well alongside those many other accounts of travel, science and the making of the "modern" world in this period, some of which are referred to by the authors. It is a work that should be used in teaching as well as in research, not least because it affords one opportunity to break down the disciplinary walls that too often separate modern academic inquiry despite claims to the contrary. Here we can understand in historical context how the connections between the worlds of science and literature are not immutable. Three points made here in conclusion should not be seen to detract from my admiration and enjoyment of this book. First, the conclusion is too short at only three pages. This is a pity since an opportunity has been lost to lay out some of the principal threads of the argument. Secondly, one might have wanted more on the technologies of science, on instruments and the practices of instrumentation, for in an important sense science began to travel, albeit haltingly and unevenly, because of appeals to a language of standardization and through cultures of replication which had to overcome the facts of geographical difference. Finally, the broadly British experience examined here should not be taken as either definitive or as prescriptive. Comparisons with the French context would be instructive. To some degree, of course, looking at the connections between exploration, science and literature in national terms is profoundly wrong-headed: exploration in this period was about Enlightenment cosmopolitanism as much as it was about the priorities of national interest; "science" was about establishing a language and a form of literature that transcended political and epistemological boundaries. Here, we are given a compelling account of why these questions matter and of the importance of their sustained scrutiny.

Note

[1]. Dorinda Outram, "On Being Perseus: New Knowledge, Dislocation and Enlightenment Explanation," in *Geography and Enlightenment*, ed.

David N. Livingstone and Charles W. J. Withers (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p.285.

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