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Undying Curiosity: Carsten Niebuhr and the Royal Danish Expedition to Arabia (1761–1767) [Book Review]

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Undying Curiosity: Carsten Niebuhr and the Royal Danish Expedition to Arabia (1761–1767), Lawrence J. Baack. Franz Steiner Verlag, Stuttgart (2014). 443 pages, €68 hardcover.

The Royal Danish Expedition to Arabia has long occupied a marginal place in histories of exploration, geography, and science. In recent years, however, the expedition has garnered greater interest. This upswing is evidenced by the appearance of three key works: Josef Wiesehöfer and Stephan Conermann's edited collection *Carsten Niebuhr (1733–1815) und seine Zeit* (2002), which contextualises the work of Niebuhr and the expedition more broadly; Ibin Friis, Michael Harbsmeier, and Jørgen Bæk Simonsen's edited collection *Early Scientific Expeditions and Local Encounters: New Perspectives on Carsten Niebuhr and "The Arabian Journey"* (2013), the first collection of essays in English about the expedition and its broader context; and, here, historian Lawrence Baack's *Undying Curiosity*, which presents the first scholarly, monograph-length account of the expedition.

In roughly 400 pages, Baack, a former professor of history at the University of Nebraska, traces the expedition from its origins in Göttingen to Carsten Niebuhr's return to Copenhagen in 1767. The first chapter outlines the expedition's origins and planning, and underscores the personal and institutional conflicts that made the selection, training, and organisation of the expedition team a messy process. The second and third chapters trace the expedition from the travellers' departure in January 1761 through to Niebuhr's journey back to Copenhagen, whilst the fourth discusses the expedition's findings, Niebuhr's efforts to publicise the findings, and Niebuhr's post-expedition life. The book is very much centred on Niebuhr, but Baack does a nice job of weaving in the biographies of the organisers and other expedition members.

Baack's book has several interrelated aims. In presenting an account of the expedition, he aims to situate it within the context of Enlightenment science and exploration,

to present a vivid account of the travellers' experiences in the field, and to 'take the sciences of the expedition seriously and define their significance in the 18th century' (p. 23). He aims, moreover, to demonstrate the centrality of Carsten Niebuhr's biography and 'unrelenting intellectual curiosity' (p. 16) to the success of the expedition.

Baack is rather successful in contextualising the expedition. In the first chapter, he illustrates the intellectual contexts that informed the expedition's organisation and planning. The expedition was defined, Baack argues, by intellectual currents of what he calls the 'Northern European Enlightenment' (p. 16), a term that he could have done more to clarify. In the conclusion, he steps back from the narrative to compare the scientific, organisational, and political character of the expedition with those of James Cook, Anders Celsius, Charles Marie de la Condamine, and others. Baack shows that whilst there were similarities in terms of scientific aims and practices, the Danish expedition stood out because 'it operated solely as a scholarly endeavor' (p. 16), rather than as an adjunct to colonial expansion and mercantilism. Other scholars have made a similar claim about its scientific character (e.g., geographer Hanno Beck and historian Wolf Feuerhahn), yet Baack provides the most extensive and well-argued case for this claim. Through his rigorous engagement with Danish and German archives, his account shows that existing postcolonial discussions of the expedition have inaccurately portrayed its political and cultural aims based on selective, decontextualised readings and a lack of familiarity with primary sources. I would argue, however, that whilst Baack successfully problematises existing postcolonial readings, he overlooks the possibility that one could do more to excavate the geographies of power that shaped the expedition whilst also being careful with the sources and avoiding the errors apparent in postcolonial readings.

Baack is also quite successful in vividly illustrating the experiences of the travellers in the field. We get a sense of the practical challenges they faced in navigating within foreign

cultures, the ways various members of the team dealt with such challenges, and the difficulties associated with practices such as surveying, charting, copying hieroglyphs, and collecting and transporting botanical specimens. Such practical challenges and the scholarly disposition of the travellers, we are told, led to a shift in the expedition's focus away from Biblical topics to the natural sciences. There is some truth to this, as Baack's evidence shows, although it is questionable whether this shift was as dramatic as Baack claims, particularly if one considers Johann David Michaelis's engagement with Niebuhr's findings.

The author does a nice job as well of situating the expedition's findings within the eighteenth century. Baack makes clear what was novel about the findings within the fields of natural history, botany, philology, astronomy, and geography. Baack's framing of the expedition's results is not, however, entirely historical. At times, he wavers between a contextualised understanding of science and the language of an older historiography concerned more with identifying progress and advances in scientific knowledge than with the social nature of such practices. Baack's engagement with geography's role in the expedition leaves something to be desired. Baack rightly argues that geography, or rather what he curiously terms 'cultural geography' (p. 300), was a key feature of Niebuhr's work, yet in discussing this, Baack could have enriched his discussion if he had engaged with the significant and still-growing body of scholarship on Enlightenment geography. That said, he provides an excellent and detailed account of Niebuhr's work on tidal measurements, town plans, and his measurement of latitude and longitude in the field.

Baack's account marks a substantial contribution to our understanding of the expedition and Niebuhr's life and work. It will indeed become the standard account of the expedition. It evidences a deeply scholarly engagement with Danish and German archival sources, as well as an impressive, productive, and critical engagement with secondary literature. This does not mean, however, that *Undying Curiosity* closes debate on the

expedition. Rather, more work could be done on the geographies of Enlightenment and power that defined the expedition, work that could both complement and challenge Baack's interpretation.

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