BOOK REVIEW

SCIENTISTS AND SCHOLARS IN THE FIELD: STUDIES IN THE HISTORY OF FIELDWORK AND EXPEDITIONS, Kristian Hvidt Nielsen Field, Michael Harbsmeier and Christopher J. Ries, eds. (Aarhus Universitetsforlag, Aarhus, Denmark, 476 pp.) This collection of essays is the result of a two-day conference that took place in Copenhagen in August 2008 that brought together scholars from the humanities and the history of science. The aim of the conference was to explore the history of fieldwork, cartography, and scientific exploration from a multidisciplinary perspective. The contributions to this work demonstrate the interdisciplinary fields of the conference’s authors as well as their namesake society, the Danish Network for the History and Sociology of Fieldwork and Scientific Exploration.

Opening with an introductory essay written by its editors, the volume contains 17 papers arranged chronologically covering the 17th century to present-day expeditions. The case studies offer examples drawn from Europe, Africa, Asia, and North America with a strong Nordic presence among its papers—taken in part from the location of the conference. True to its interdisciplinary label, this volume steps back from the direct study of research data and instead examines the collecting process in order to understand the practitioners and their impact on society and institutions. As a result, many of the essays focus on the identities of the scientists, as well as the public’s perception of expeditions and their accompanying research. On the whole, each author shares the desire to reexamine the traditional discourse regarding fieldwork’s 20th-century origins.

The first section, drawing on early modern research, includes case studies and uses historiographical comparisons to highlight the specific topics of study: anthropology, cartography, botany, and military history. Michael Harbsmeier’s paper argues against the traditional narrative of anthropology’s establishment in the 20th century by highlighting the similar fieldwork practices found among two early modern German naturalists, Leonhard Raunwolf and Peter Kolb. Jeppe Strandsbjerg sketches Danish state cartographic projects and their various networks used to collect geographic data. Similar to Harbsmeier, Rengenier Rittersma’s contribution highlights Luigi Ferdinando Marsili’s prediscipline field research and his fascination with the origins of truffles, arguing for Marsili’s recognition alongside Marcello Malpighi as examples of an 18th-century “proto” field scientists. Meanwhile, Kasper Risbjerg Eskilden and Daniel E. Clinkman provide institutional focuses in their papers: the former centered on Dutch scientists’ interactions with the Republic of Letters, and later exploring the Royal Society’s partnership with the Royal Navy.

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The next section, covering the late 18th and 19th centuries, comprises the majority of the volume. The 19th century in particular was a pivotal time, witnessing the foundations of several social science disciplines (though as noted, this fact is disputed by some scholars, including Harbsmeier). Nevertheless, the resulting papers delve into global case studies spanning four continents. Beginning with Africa, Anke Fischer-Kattner examines the travel writings of the French explorers Antione and Arnauld d’Abbadie and contrasts the two brothers’ anthropological research methods in 19th-century Ethiopia. Meanwhile, in Victorian colonial Africa, Casper Anderson describes the public perception of the explorer-engineers and their romanticized role in the scientific field. Palle O. Cristensen writes against the accepted narrative of the establishment of Danish folklore studies and argues the late 19th-century “amateur” folklorist Evald Tang and his high standards of ethnographic fieldwork should be recognized alongside the renowned Svend Grundtvig. Jumping continents, Jeremy Vetter, in a similar vein to Anderson, surveys the American West and the fieldwork networks established through professional sectors such as surveying and quarrying. Continuing the notion of identity and field research, Neha Gupta focuses on imperial India and the establishment of the Indus Valley civilization by examining the nation’s early archaeological excavations. Esther Finnilä provides one of the more intriguing contributions with her paper on travel and research, examining Ole Olufsen’s expedition to Central Asia using an imperial Russian train carriage. This section culminates with two papers by Serge Reubi and Christopher J. Reis. Reubi highlights the importance of cross-disciplinary intersections within 18th-century Swiss “proto” anthropology, whereas Reis notes the reliance on travel and site accessibility for field research and data collection.

The last section gathers contemporary examples of field expeditions and, as the previous sections have noted, examines the use of media, identity, and travel. Introducing the Internet as a variable, Kristian H. Nielsen focuses on the 2006–2007 Galathea 3 arctic expedition and the team’s decision to broadcast its experiments worldwide for television and the internet—resulting in many negative characterizations of the team and the Galathea project. Jenny Beckman also explores the impact of the internet on field research with her paper on the 2005 Swedish Taxonomy Initiative and its ongoing mission to complete a pictorial guide to the nation’s biodiversity. Finally, Mikkel Bunkenborg and Morten Axel Pederson use their own fieldwork in Mongolia to reevaluate the standard participant-observation anthropological method, advocating a multisited data-collection technique. Matthew Edney closes the volume with a historiographical survey of the study of map history. Edney’s work ties the previous 16 papers together by acting as the symbolic product of the fieldwork undertaken by the volume’s authors. Edney describes the progression of map-history as a sociocultural field and notes how maps can be—and should be—used as a discourse for studying individuals researching in the field.

Yet, one of the impediments of a developing field is the constant need to argue against the accepted narratives regarding the development of 20th-century disciplines that rely on field research. While the papers are generally persuasive with their arguments, much of the volume reads as case studies presented as counter-claims, rather than attempts to develop a new field. Indeed, the arrangement of the essays, chronological rather than thematic, is also representative of a push for a historiography of field studies. Admittedly, this reader would have preferred the
thematic arrangement provided in the extensive and informative introduction dividing the essays into categories including interdisciplinarity, public perception, travel, national identities, foreign fieldwork, and scientific identity. Although the field is in its developing phase, the combined essays provide fascinating accounts of global travel and scientific ingenuity.—Emma Hughes, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC, Canada