

only some 151 nautical miles to the Pole. Peary claimed that daily mileages from this point increased by a factor of four. This outrageous claim has been the focus for the doubts expressed as to whether he reached the Pole (see my reviews in *Nature* **339**, 435 (1989); **344**, 902 (1990) and **348**, 590 (1990)).

Meanwhile, supported by *The New York Herald*, Frederick Cook, Peary's erstwhile colleague, had a year earlier set off on a different route to the Pole. The stage was now set for the controversy that broke when Peary found on his return that Cook claimed to have reached the Pole a year earlier.

This was the sort of issue for which the papers had been waiting. They plunged into the role ascribed by Charles Reich to the modern corporate state: "Utterly out of human control, wholly and perfectly indifferent to any human values". Combat was joined, no holds were barred, nothing was too sensational, and extensive campaigns were mounted to discredit the opposition and increase circulation. Cook was more gentle than Peary and a much more likeable character, 'the Prince of Losers' as he became known. He was unable to produce indisputable evidence of having reached the Pole, but neither could Peary, although with the help of the aggressive campaign against Cook and *The New York Herald* by *The New York Times* and the *National Geographic*, Peary emerged as the victor. Peary understood the press and how it generated images and could deliver fame. He exploited the press as it usually exploited explorers and became established as the hero of an American myth. The general rejection of Cook's claims seriously injured the credibility of *The New York Herald* while Peary's short-lived recognition helped establish *The New York Times* as a journalistic force.

Riffenburgh believes that the image of the explorer has retained a strong hold on the public imagination. The fact that this image has in the main been constructed by the press and often bears little relation to the reality owes more to the public's general preoccupation with tragedy and controversy than with scientific achievement or geographical discovery. The public wanted adventure, not, Stanley claimed, the truth.

The press undoubtedly became expert at manipulating readers' perceptions of explorers. But perhaps explorers since the heyday of the nineteenth century have also been concerned to project a romanticized image of themselves: a recent conqueror of both poles claimed it was all worthwhile, "because it impressed girls at parties!" □

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Gallic gloss

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La Science au Présent. Edited by Y. Gautier, D. Laverne, M. Delplanque, F. Gil and J.-L. Verley. *Encyclopaedia Universalis*; 1992. Two-volume set. Pp. 600. FF630.

HERE is a paradox: this two-volume reference should be translated, because it is meant only for French eyes. Aimed at the reader with a good scientific base, it gives a fly-on-the-wall insight into what French scientists worry about. Naturally, this is not what the publisher intended and, I suspect, a French reader would be unaware of how culturally bound the book is. But this is where its real interest lies.

La Science au Présent masquerades as an encyclopaedia of contemporary science and, in a chaotic way, it is. The book covers in detail a range of contemporary issues from high-temperature superconductivity, through cognitive science, to global warming and scientific fraud. Each chapter is written by a specialist, chosen from an army of more than 200 scientists, nearly all from French institutes. But few are well-known outside France, although Axel Kahn, Jean-Marie Lehn and Pierre-Gilles de Gennes make brief appearances.

The quality of writing is uneven. The first chapter of Volume 1, on the search for absolute zero, gets bogged down quickly, whereas much of the second volume has the limpity of good science journalism. Graphs, photographs and diagrams are put to good use and pithy captions mean one can dip into the book at random, then roam into the text itself for more detail. After all, this is not a book to be read from cover to cover. There is a useful but fairly arbitrary glossary at the end of the second volume, with entries asterisked in the text as they appear. There is also an index to around 1,200 keywords.

So far, nothing surprising. But it soon emerges that *La Science au Présent* is also about French science, with plenty of rallying calls for Gallic researchers 'trampled underfoot by Anglo-Saxon journals' (to paraphrase a statement by the French Science Minister, Hubert Curien, on page 486).

The first signs of idiosyncrasy appear in the way the book is structured. Text-book headings suggest that the gamut of science today can be rendered coherent by the verbs: "observing", "visualizing", "understanding", "questioning", "managing", "producing", "publishing" and "debating". This is the sort of didactic approach exhibition designers use. But the structure is spurious and arbitrary.

And it hampers other kinds of organization, making it difficult just to look something up. To add to the confusion, each author tackles his subject in his own way, so there is no basic grid to fall back on.

Then there is the choice of entries themselves. Of course, there is a good chunk of what preoccupies people at the cutting edge of science worldwide. There is also a large helping of what French scientists — read 'engineers' — are good at: high speed trains, telecommunications, nuclear energy, aerospace, agriculture. A disarming chauvinism creeps in occasionally. Half a page of the glossary is devoted to a list of train speeds, only, one suspects, because France holds the record.

Yet, if the flag-waving is irritating to an English or American reader, this is surely because he or she is unaware of how invasive the equally restricted Anglo-American world-view can be. On close reading, especially of Volume 2, traces of bitterness bubble to the surface. Dominique Stehelin, the Frenchman 'forgotten' from the 1989 Nobel prize for medicine, is reinstated. Montagnier versus Gallo is there (and on page 524 not 526 as N. Witkowski's chapter on fraud says). The glossary contains the esoteric entry "Benveniste (affair)", albeit with a candid description of the debacle that preoccupied *Nature* in late 1988.

The bitterness turns into wishful thinking in what must be a Freudian typographic error. According to a table in Hubert Curien's chapter (page 486), there were exactly as many French biomedical publications (124,096) as American, out of a total of 307,027 in the National Library of Medicine. If this is not a slip, French should be obligatory in all US universities.

But it is chapters like Curien's on the language of science, Martine Barrère's on scientific secrecy, and Geneviève Teil's fascinating analysis of the way in which the style of learned journals promotes an image of the scientist as modest, disinterested and doubting, that should be translated. The general public could be forgiven for thinking the opposite is true today. And — probably no more than paranoia — several French researchers believe American or British reviewers turn down papers because of poor English, then steal the ideas.

Between the lines of this book lie several thought-provoking messages. Flipping through the pictures in the two volumes, one finds *La Science au Présent* to be largely about computers and industrial-scale apparatus. But two-thirds of the world have access to neither. □

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