Just deserts

Why explorers are drawn to desolation

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Andrew Goudie

GREAT DESERT EXPLORERS
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In *Great Desert Explorers*, Andrew Goudie – formerly a professor of geography at the University of Oxford – writes about sixty of the "most interesting, intrepid and important" explorers of the past three centuries. He notes that many of them are "very little remembered or appreciated" compared with those "who ventured to the poles, climbed Everest or sought the source of the Nile".

It is interesting to speculate as to why. Partly, one suspects, it is because some of those other arenas involved large expeditions that required institutional backing and hence a certain level of publicity; a desert explorer, by contrast, might make do with a camel or tag along with a caravan. Part of the answer may also lie in the personalities drawn to explore deserts, many of them lovers of solitude – individualists and mystics who liked to go at their own pace and set their own agenda, unbothered by fame or recognition. And possibly less was at stake: deserts have usually lacked either the enigma of an undiscovered passage or the clear-cut success of reaching a summit. Travelling from A to B across a desert might seem, to the European imagination, less an adventure than a feat of endurance, like undergoing surgery without anaesthetic – and about as appealing, as Edward Eyre's account of crossing Australia's Nullarbor Plain in 1840–41 makes clear: "Three days had passed away since we left the last water, and it was very doubtful when we might find any more. Six hundred miles of country had to be traversed, before I could hope to obtain the slightest aid".

Explorers of all ten of the desert regions Goudie identifies across the world are included here; the only serious imbalance is that the deserts of South America are represented by only a single explorer, William Bollaert, the Dutch-English prospector and historian (1807–76). Greatest emphasis has been placed, unsurprisingly, on the largest deserts, those of Arabia and the Sahara. These were the scenes of the first desert forays by European travellers guided by the Enlightenment ideals of exploring, cataloguing and understanding the world. The African Association, formed in London in 1788, had the twin aims of discovering the source of the Niger and the city of Timbuktu; finding either would involve crossing the Sahara, and the many expeditions they sent out formed perhaps the only series of desert expeditions with consistent – albeit arbitrary – geographical goals. Goudie passes over the most famous figure, Mungo Park (1771–1806), as somebody already much discussed, and fastens instead on Johann Burckhardt (1784–1817) – who, as the European discoverer of Petra, is surely just as well known – and the more obscure Friedrich Hornemann, who in 1797 travelled south-west from Cairo to Murzuk in southern Libya, becoming the first European to cross the Sahara from north to south as well as from east to west.

In the 1820s the Association went into abeyance, but its goals were taken up by a new group of explorers; of these figures Goudie features Alexander Gordon Laing, the first European to reach Timbuktu (in 1826), and René-Auguste Caillié, the first to do so and come back alive (in 1828). Burckhardt, making a celebrated pilgrimage to Mecca disguised as a Syrian Muslim, had also been one of the first to exemplify that other great trope of desert exploration, the mystical orientalist. Richard Burton, Jack Philby (father of Kim) and Wilfred Thesiger all immersed themselves in the Islamic, and specifically Arab, cultures they travelled through, exploring deserts almost as a by-product of their exploration of a civilization that, since European trade had moved to the high seas in the fifteenth century, had become progressively more isolated from and unfamiliar to European knowledge.

Goudie succeeds in bringing out the distinctive flavour of exploration in other desert areas of the world, too: the bookish archaeologists Aurel Stein and Sven Hedin excavating ancient cities in Central Asia; the no-nonsense hard men Charles Sturt, Edward Eyre and Robert Burke opening up central Australia in the 1860s with a bull-headedness that was sometimes fatal; and the patriots of Manifest Destiny, John Frémont, William Manly and the one-armed John Wesley Powell, piecing together the topography of the American southwest for the expanding United States. But much of the twentieth-century coverage returns to the Sahara, where the vital innovation was motor transport. When suitably fitted out with wider tyres and more sophisticated engine cooling, cars became the major facilitator of systematic exploration of Egypt and Libya between the wars, pioneered by the New Zealander Claud Williams, the Hungarian László Almásy (the model for Michael Ondaatje's English Patient) and, perhaps Goudie's hero, Ralph Bagnold, a geomorphologist extraordinaire and – as instigator of the Long Range Desert Group – an inadvertent founder of the Special Air Service (SAS).

The book is richly illustrated with photographs, engravings and paintings; the numerous maps showing the explorers' routes are helpful, though lacking in detail. The entries avoid a formulaic structure: some give extensive biographical detail; some concentrate on dates, directions and discoveries; and others have more to say on their subject's contributions to science, archaeology, or anthropology. This ever-changing focus can seem arbitrary, but the result is that a book that might have become leaden and bloated remains readable and varied, retaining the constant capacity to surprise.