

Book Review

G.A. Mawer, *Incognita: The invention and discovery of Terra Australis*, North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2013, ISBN 978 1 925003 59 8, 279 pp., A\$34.95.

G.A Mawer's *Incognita* is, in itself, a voyage of discovery. Ambitious in its scope, the book chronicles European preoccupations with imagining, discovering and mapping the unknown southern reaches of the globe. Born from the author's involvement in the 400th anniversary of the first European sighting of Australia and his work with the Australian Hydrographic Society's (AHS) *Australia on the Map* project, readers could be forgiven for thinking that the work dwells solely on the well-trodden ground of Australian maritime and continental exploration. This is, however, only one small part of the much larger narrative that *Incognita* seeks to explore; one that successfully links imagination with discovery in a symbiotic relationship of global exploration.

Mawer is primarily concerned with those who conceived, believed or went in search of *Terra Australia Incognita*, the much larger 'unknown south land' that was assumed, from antiquity, to balance the Afro-Eurasian landmass. It is in the early chapters that the twin strands of imagination and exploration are most visible, and the work is notable in explaining the erroneous expectations of explorers who were influenced by the socially-invented visions of what supposedly lay in uncharted waters. With such little factual information or technology to assist the accurate charting and navigation of the globe, it comes as no surprise that fabrication and the reporting of dubious facts became a frustrating concern to those legitimately trying to establish the existence, extent and position of *Terra Australis*. As such, Mawer notes that the process of whittling away the unknown portions of the map was 'inexorable but not linear, a work in progress in which a promontory might be added here even while a peninsula was being demolished elsewhere' (p. xv). Mawer paints a vivid picture of maritime explorers desperately hoping for the great southern continent to be over the horizon, but never able to locate their imagined utopia.

The work is structured chronologically over ten chapters, and steadily moves from imagination to exploration; from fluid almost mythical constructs, such as Plato's Atlantis, to the firm and scientific adventures of Mawson in Antarctica. The main focus of each chapter is the expansion of explorers southwards, and the various challenges they faced. As such, the work traverses a long list of actors including Magellan, Saavedra, Mendaña, Quiros, Torres, Jansz, Le Maire, Nuyts, Tasman, Bouvet, Cook, Bellingshausen, Biscoe, d'Urville, Wilkes and Ross. Scattered through this history of physical discovery are also the scholars, storytellers and armchair adventurers who all contributed, however wrongly, to the 'idea' of *Terra Australia Incognita*. This sets the work apart from accounts that simply focus on maritime voyages of discovery and instead, Mawer seeks out the emotional and mythologised connection of Europeans to the maturing world around them. The words of More, Swift, Defoe and Symmes, for example, linger powerfully as a reminder of the influence of such imagination on the explorers themselves, and how their discoveries captivated the wider population. An insightful feature that helps tie each chapter together is the inclusion of a hemispherical map that charts the extent of 'incognita' after each explorer's voyages, mapping an unknown area that shrinks as the book progresses to its conclusion.

The book is well written and easy to read, and would suit a wide range of audiences. The early chapters of the book took some getting used to: Mawer's sense of humour is somewhat dry in places. The use of quotes to introduce some sub-sections, also tended to obfuscate rather than

assist the reader, but overall the work did well to maintain interest and has a strong narrative style. Mawer clearly has an avid interest and background in maritime history, and his strong attempt to understand the motivations of his various subjects adds great flair to his writing, as well as helping to show the complicated personal, political and economic realities faced by such pioneers. None are given precedence over another, as all are seen as important contributors to the fully charting the globe.

Mawer populates the book with some quality historical maps to illustrate the changing European worldview over time, however, many of these seem to be printed in such a small format that they are difficult for the reader to use. While the book's written discussion of various voyages of discovery was insightful, it would have been beneficial to include some maps noting the routes and dates of significant voyages. This would have enabled the reader to follow more easily the author's narration of events, rather than resorting to external maps. The only other criticism of the work is that while it touches on Indigenous peoples in the various lands 'discovered' by Europeans, the book has a strong Eurocentric quality that might alienate some readers or overemphasise the role of Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, French and British colonial empires.

Incognita is an interesting read that seeks to show how both imagination and exploration combined to help – and hinder – the eventual filling in of the map, pushing back the realms of fantasy and replacing it with the firm, yet often disappointing, realities of the southern oceans.

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Bio:

Mark is a sessional lecturer in history and international relations at USQ. His PhD focused on Scandinavian-Australian migrant communities in Australasia, 1850-1945. Mark's wider research interests focus upon themes of migration and ethnicity, including transnational histories, belonging and identity, as well as the impacts of racial ideologies and cultural homogenisation upon marginalised communities.