

PASSAGE OF DARKNESS: THE ETHNOBIOLOGY OF THE HAITIAN ZOMBIE. By WADE DAVIS. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988. 344 p. + xx, maps, illus., glossary, bib., index. Hardbound, US\$29.95; Softbound, US\$9.95, Cdn\$12.95.

H.P. Lovecraft and Indiana Jones move over! Wade Davis has shown once again that facts can be stranger than even the strangest fiction. Northern readers interested in the resilience of traditional lifeways and mechanisms for sharing power in traditional societies will find food for thought in this book. Those interested in traditional uses of plants and animals will learn something new. Even those cabin-bound sourdoughs who need a good mental holiday in the tropics should pick it up. Anyone seriously skeptical of the powers of magic, bored with science, unconvinced of the value of interdisciplinary research or unfamiliar with the discipline of ethnobiology should make *Passage of Darkness* required reading.

Unabashedly emulating his vodoun (voodoo) mentors, who had no qualms about trading knowledge for cash (including the ritual secrets of their legendary "zombie powder"), Davis has already published many of his findings in the popular novel *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, which has been sensationalized in a film and video version of the same name. After all, isn't it a sign of stupidity to give up something of value and receive nothing in return? But, unlike some popular authors, Davis has not abandoned his discipline for the chase of gold. He has contributed an enormously captivating, thoroughly researched treatise on an elusive, dangerous and bizarre topic of significance to an array of disciplines ranging from pharmacology and conservation biology to parapsychology and political science.

My only problems with the book might have been solved with another round of rigorous editing. I found some sections to be repetitive and to occasionally dwell too long on relatively unimportant points. For example, I found the twenty pages on the "problem of death" a bit tiresome and rambling. The overall impression was that the book had been hastily assembled from the author's collection of pre-written essays and field notes out of a sense of duty to publish a scholarly account. Perhaps the publisher recognized the quality of most of the writing and let the weak spots pass rather than risk interfering in an overall high quality piece of work.

Davis's original objective was to verify and document the zombie phenomenon, the macabre process of creating living corpses. If such secrets could be ciphered, the pharmacological community, especially anaesthesiologists, might once again benefit from traditional ethnobiology. Davis accomplished this objective admirably. He witnessed and documented eight complete preparations of the "zombie powder" from four widely separated locations in rural Haiti. Then he analyzed the physiological activity of the active ingredients and determined the emic and etic processes by which they are prescribed and administered. He discovered the main active ingredient to be one already known by science. This potent nerve poison produces death, near death-like symptoms, erroneous diagnoses of death and even premature burial in completely unrelated modern societies.

The sophisticated techniques and knowledge of otherwise illiterate practitioners are evidence that many phenomena unknown to science may well be understood and practiced in so-called primitive cultures. The destruction of biological diversity throughout the world along with the indigenous cultures that know and depend on it are shown once again to be tragic losses for us all.

Parapsychologists might recognize the *ti bon ange* (the aura? the luminous egg?), the vodoun concept of the outer soul that is stolen from the victim in the zombification process. This is the presence that hovers above the grave of the freshly buried victim and is captured by the bokor (an evil voodoo priest) before exhuming the helpless living corpse and leading it away to a miserable half-death of mind-broken slavery. They will be interested in similarities between the experiences of documented zombies and the recorded accounts

of patients recounting near-death experiences. They will also recognize the tremendous power of suggestion and psychosomatic symptoms of powerlessness and malaise induced by bokors through post-coma suggestion and reinforced by powerful psycho-active drugs. Empathetic readers might want to re-evaluate any romantic notions they may have about witchdoctors, shamans and the like. They will surely increase their appreciation for the power of terror that "magical" practices can generate in pre-literate societies.

Passage of Darkness is much more than a documentation of the mysterious Haitian zombies and explication of the secret powder used to create them. It is an exposé of an incredibly resilient and powerful folk lifeway, violently uprooted by slavers from deepest darkest Africa, and unknowingly transplanted to root and flourish in the hothouse Haitian cultural amalgam. Through the tumultuous slave trade, the evil colonial era and equally brutal slave rebellions, through the post-revolutionary period and into modern Haiti, the vodoun hougans (good voodoo priests) and bokors have survived. Aided by their secret Bizango societies (including the infamous Tonton Macoute), they have practiced and enforced their traditional techniques of fear, discipline and social order as recently as their late leader, the Baron Samedi, Papa Doc Duvalier.

One does not fear zombies. One fears becoming a zombie!

REFERENCE

DAVIS, W. 1985. *The Serpent and the Rainbow*. Toronto: Simon and Schuster. 288 p.

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FROZEN IN TIME: UNLOCKING THE SECRETS OF THE FRANKLIN EXPEDITION. By OWEN BEATTIE and JOHN GEIGER. Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1988. xi + 180 p., maps, illus. Hardcover. Cdn\$22.95.

Frozen in Time is the public account of Owen Beattie's exhumation of three sailors buried on Beechey Island in 1846 by Sir John Franklin's Northwest Passage expedition, an expedition that met with total disaster in the years immediately following the burials. Beattie, a forensic anthropologist at the University of Alberta, has already published many of the results of his research in a variety of academic journals. And as further laboratory tests are completed, the undertaking of Beattie and his colleagues will likely produce numerous more detailed and scholarly articles concerning a multiplicity of facets of mid-19th-century life previously lost to modern man. Most of this work will, unfortunately, be conducted at a level of specialization and expressed in a language beyond the ken of many readers.

Frozen in Time, however, is directed to the layman — both to the reader interested in the fate of Franklin and his men and to those with more general curiosities, perhaps stirred by what the tabloids sensationalized. Unquestionably, this book will cause most readers to marvel at the state of forensic science. And no better specimens exist as a showcase for such skills than the bodies of these men who have been permanently frozen for nearly a century and a half. Much of what makes the book succeed rests with John Geiger, its co-author, who, I would assume, did most if not all of the actual writing. Geiger is an Edmonton journalist, and a fairly good one. He manages to convey clearly the basic issues at hand in Beattie's work and to present the five years of research in a way that intrigues and entices the reader. To be sure, the "story-selling" mark of the journalist appears in *Frozen in Time*, but with the exception of a few references or allusions to a hokey prescience about the ability of mothers to foresee disasters awaiting their sons or

to gothic wind and thunder storms that provide a Dr. Frankenstein-like atmosphere to the opening of John Torrington's coffin, the account is informative and effectively structured.

This remark about "spooky" storms providing cinematic atmosphere deserves some clarification. The issue is not whether such a storm occurred. Geiger does not give a weather report for all the other days of the expedition; consequently, when he selects this particular stormy night as one of the meteorological events to include in his account of several years' worth of research, and especially when he quotes a field assistant's reference to horror films — likely an observation offered in a jocular or ironic vein — Geiger implies a causal relationship between storm and exhumation. Such an implication denies the very empiricism on which this entire scientific expedition is based. To suggest that the relationship is anything but coincidental is an appeal to the same popular fascination with "other-worldliness" that made Bela Lugosi, Lon Chaney, and Boris Karloff household names. Beattie, we are reminded many times, maintained a respectful and analytical attitude in his examination of these human remains, but his ideal is surely cheapened by such manipulations. I suppose those readers who pick up the book solely through their fascination with looking into the eyes of men dead for over 140 years would have no objection to such theatrics. Nevertheless, I would have preferred to see these adolescent and "eerie" allusions cut out. They mar what is otherwise a very fine account of an important undertaking.

In many respects, this book reassuringly confirms what we already know, while bringing us new information at the same time. Although we have all grown up with the notion of scientists making wondrous discoveries through momentary flashes of insight (Newton and his apple or Archimedes and his bathtub come to mind as paradigms of the myth), education and experience tell us that scientific discovery grows out of long and arduous enquiry. The many summers that Beattie's numerous parties spent in the field are but one brief manifestation of such a lengthy enquiry. Of greater substance is the century-long investigation that began in the 1850s and with which Beattie's work has great continuity. For as *Frozen in Time* reveals, many of the very hypotheses on which Beattie's researches have been conducted have been drawn from the thoughts of 19th-century men who had also sought to determine the fate of Franklin.

Beattie's motivating hypothesis, of course, is that Franklin's party suffered the debilitating effects of lead poisoning, brought on by the high level of lead present in the solder used to close tins of preserved meat, which constituted the core of the expedition's food stores. In fact, Captain Erasmus Ommanney, after consulting with other searchers for the missing Franklin, concluded that something had gone awry with the expedition's food supply. This conclusion was drawn after the three graves on Beechey Island had been found. Ommanney reported to the British government in 1852 that it was likely Franklin's "preserved meats were of an inferior quality." Hence, the cornerstone of Beattie's hypothesis had been laid some 130 years before his own analysis began.

Similarly, the very notion of exhuming the bodies in hopes that they would provide a clue to what happened was also well aged. Dr. Peter Sutherland had made precisely this suggestion in the decade immediately following Franklin's disappearance. Sutherland, surgeon aboard ship with whaling captain William Penny, had in fact observed that such an examination would present no difficulty for the very reason that the bodies would have been frozen solid in the permafrost of their arctic graves. Two years later, under Commander Edward A. Inglefield, Sutherland was able to exhume seaman John Hartnell's body. His prognosis: Hartnell had died neither from scurvy nor any other malignant disease, but had died from consumption. The biggest surprise to Beattie's expedition, however, was yet to come. When Beattie removed the clothes from Hartnell's body, preparatory to performing the autopsy, he discovered that not only had an exhumation already been performed, but an autopsy had been conducted to determine the cause of death, probably by Dr. Harry Goodsir, assistant-surgeon aboard the *Erebus*.

What Beattie did, then, was continue probing at a series of hypotheses and possible methods conceived long ago. The exhumations, the autopsies of well-preserved corpses, the suspicions of food supplies — these were the products of a century and a half of enquiry.

I take special pleasure with *Frozen in Time* because it does not push the lead poisoning hypothesis. Rather, it presents the evidence as intriguing, but accepts that it is also far from conclusive. But in the process, the book presents information and benefits growing out of this research that no one seemed to anticipate when the project got under way. And those discoveries are what is truly important about this most recent effort to determine what happened to John Franklin and the 128 officers and men under his command.

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JOURNAL OF AN ALEUTIAN YEAR. By ETHEL ROSS OLIVER.
Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988. 284 p., maps, illus.,
appendices. Hardbound, US\$25.00; Softbound, US\$12.95.

Before Russian fur hunters arrived in the Aleutian Islands in the mid-1700s, Atka Island was centrally located in a region occupied by an estimated 12 000 to 15 000 Aleut people. However, as the economic potential of the archipelago waned during the Russian period and as hostilities, disease, and resettlement reduced Aleut population to some 2000 - 3000, few villages remained. Village consolidation continued in the American period, so that by the outbreak of World War II, the only villages in the entire central and western Aleutian chain (a span of some 1300 km) were those on Atka and Attu islands respectively, with a combined population of fewer than 150.

In June 1942, Attu village was overtaken by Japanese troops and its Aleut residents were taken to Japan, where only half survived their imprisonment until the end of the war. In the same month, U.S. troops evacuated the Atkans from their village, which was under threat of Japanese bombing and occupation. As in several other Aleut villages, the evacuation was carried out with little planning and even less advance warning to the Aleuts, who had only hours to prepare for their departure. To keep the Japanese forces from finding useful shelter should they land on Atka, almost all of the buildings, including homes and the Russian Orthodox Church, were burned to the ground by the U.S. troops.

Following their internment in southeastern Alaska, the Atkans were returned to their island in 1945, where they quite literally had to rebuild their village and their lives. The Attuans, likewise, were compelled to settle in Atka, since the government would not allow them to return to their prewar home. One year later, Ethel Ross Oliver and her husband, Simeon Oliver, arrived on the island, she to teach school and he to act as a liaison between the government, including military personnel stationed on Atka, and the community.

The book begins with a foreword by Moses Dirks, an Atka Aleut and a specialist in the Aleut language. Dirks puts Oliver's Atka of the postwar years in perspective by giving an informative present-day overview of life in the community, of communication and transportation to the rest of Alaska, and of services and facilities available to Atka residents. Following this, Oliver's preface outlines the circumstances leading to her and her husband's journey to Atka.

An introduction by anthropologist Margaret Lantis summarizes Aleut prehistory and the Russian and American periods, with special attention given both to education and to the wartime internment of Aleuts in southeast Alaska and the subsequent attempts for reparations (for which federal legislation has been enacted since the publication of this book).