



Risking reputation in the colonies

Moritz von Brescius: German science in the age of empire: Enterprise, opportunity and the Schlagintweit brothers. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, xiii+414pp, US\$ 120 HB

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Scientific reputation, like any highly contingent commodity, can fluctuate wildly, subject as it is to the interaction of unstable cultural, political and economic variables. This is especially true in fields of research, such as geographic exploration, where the potential for fame and fortune generated by an unusual level of public interest may cloud critical judgment and corrupt scientific motives. As Moritz von Brescius shows in this valuable monograph centred on the Himalayan expedition of the Brothers Schlagintweit—briefly famous, then notorious, then forgotten—a lifetime of scientific endeavour may reap the acclaim bestowed upon a Humboldt or, *mutatis mutandis*, culminate in dismissal as a humbug.

The trio of exploring Schlagintweits—Hermann, Adolph and Robert—grew up in a cultured Bavarian milieu of solid bourgeois affluence: a wealthy and renowned eye surgeon for a father, elite *gymnasia*, and private tutors for languages and art. Proficient students who demonstrated an early affinity for the sciences, the brothers undertook a series of pioneering Alpine expeditions in the 1840s and 1850s, producing accomplished sketches and scientific treatises, while earning doctorates in geography (Hermann and Robert) and geognosy (Adolph). In 1854, with the backing of the East India Company and the blessings of Humboldt himself, they set off on the three-year Himalayan journey that would earn them transatlantic renown and, eventually, bitter recrimination and controversy.

This is an ambitious work. Von Brescius offers, on the one hand, a generally engaging narrative of the fascinating course of the Schlagintweit expedition—replete with perilous treks through exotic landscapes, episodes of disguise in native dress, martyrdom at the hands of tribal warlords and all the other Rider Haggard tropes deemed de rigueur for metropolitan Europe's Victorian-era intervention in colonized locales. At the same time, he makes adroit use of the venture as a lens through which to interrogate a range of themes central to the encounter of the European and

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non-European worlds as the great age of terrestrial discovery was closing. Chronologically organized into eight chapters, the book positions the Schlagintweits in the context of the European geosciences and traces their early career, the planning and course of their great expedition, and the controversial aftermath of the venture, including the grasping efforts of the brothers to profit from their newfound notoriety.

Overland exploration conducted in the Humboldtian fashion was an elaborate proposition, entailing provisions, equipment and labour power on a scale comparable to that of a small military campaign. Each of the expedition's two cameras, to consider just a single piece of the cumbersome inventory hauled into the Himalayas, constituted 500 lb of fragile and awkward baggage, requiring a train of twenty camels and six labourers for its passage in the mountains. The expense was prodigious, and von Brescius is particularly successful at unravelling the involved channels of patronage exploited by the Schlagintweits to finance what they anticipated would be a reputation-making scientific venture.

Without a German colonial presence in central Asia, the Schlagintweits' Himalayan ambitions could be realized only with the active support of an emergent transnational network of scientific connections. German travellers in the 1850s could not hope for access to the region without the support of the British authorities. Here, the laurels garnered by the accomplishments of German science played an important role in legitimating the little-known trio. German explorers and armchair geographers alike—not only Humboldt, but Heinrich Barth, August Petermann, Carl Ritter and more—had close ties to the British geographical establishment. After their initial efforts to obtain Prussian funding had been rebuffed, the brothers secured recommendations that brought them employment with the East India Company.

But John Company was a business, not a scientific foundation. In angling for backing from the Company's directors, the brothers devised a scientific agenda with obvious economic application, promising to do a bit of everything. They would take readings for the great "Geomagnetic Crusade". They would collect a vast range of meteorological and hydrographical data of agricultural and military value. They would gather geological and mineralogical data, collect and analyse a huge array of plant and soil samples, undertake new and sophisticated cartographical projects, and record photographic and painted images, while pursuing extensive ethnographic research, eventually producing a famed array of facial castings of what Europeans then saw as the kaleidoscopic miscellany of "races" represented by the subcontinent's indigenous peoples.

The Schlagintweits were several decades too late in making this kind of proposition. The epistemological audacity that emboldened Humboldt to compose his *Kosmos – Sapere aude*, indeed - belonged to the heyday of universalizing gentlemanly naturalism that had emerged from the Enlightenment, and its time had now passed. By now, what von Brescius aptly describes as "the disorderly process of disciplinary specialization in the sciences" was already well underway. (36) The industrial age embraced the technician, not the generalist, and the scientist of varied parts formerly lauded as a polymath was now liable to find himself marginalized as a dilettante.

Even before the expedition set out, the eminent botanist Joseph Dalton Hooker protested that the brothers lacked the scientific expertise needed to fulfil the prospective agenda. Their initial reports upon return to Europe were tactless, obscuring

the brothers' reliance upon prior British research in the region. These reports, which coincided with the bloody Indian Rebellion of 1857, prompted withering sarcasm infused with nationalistic resentment in British scientific circles. A scathing anonymous evaluation of the "Prussian" explorers in *The Athenaeum* (possibly authored by Hooker) concluded scornfully, "we have no hesitation in saying that the facts claimed as discoveries by [the Schlagintweits] were all known to English scientific men" and that the mission "terminated in pretensions which are ridiculous and disgraceful." (227)

Elsewhere, their reception was more favourable, at least for a certain length of time. Tireless and unscrupulous self-promoters ("arch-puffers" to their critics), they were ennobled by the King of Bavaria—at their own urging and using a heraldic crest of their own design, as well as being celebrated on continental lecture tours. Hermann and Robert spent years in futile efforts to establish their scientific standing with an Indian Museum in order to avoid repaying debts generated by the expedition and to profit from various tawdry schemes. Adolph, executed in obscure circumstances at Kashgar, was briefly commemorated by a now-vanished monument, but like later German explorers in the Polar Regions, the Schlagintweits never attained the historic reputation they sought.

Von Brescius' analysis conforms with recent trends in interpretation of narratives of encounter noted by Harry Liebersohn and other cultural historians, and he carefully parses both European and Indian testimony to unveil indigenous agency in the Schlagintweit venture. In many regions, the brothers were dependent not only upon earlier British research, but upon informational orders created by their local guides. Although the Schlagintweits were unusually forthright in crediting these pundits, von Brescius critiques their accounts of the expedition in order to emphasise the explorers' dependence upon local agency.

The dutiful effort to attribute full credit to Naim Singh and other indigenous assistants employed by the Schlagintweits is characteristic of histories of exploration produced post-*Orientalism*, and while a welcome corrective to earlier disregard for such contributions, it is by no means clear that other consequences of that great work have been entirely salutary. A study such as this might prompt readers to question whether it is any longer possible to construct a narrative of Western exploration of the non-Western world not hopelessly burdened by the weight of irony. Modifiers such as "unknown" and "heroic", terms such as "sacrifice" (when applied to the exertions of and deprivations suffered by Western explorers), "martyr" and "voyages of discovery" are rarely employed here without quotation marks. At one point, von Brescius muses whether it is fair to use such nomenclature as "Schlagintweit expedition" to describe a venture that also utilized labour and expertise from indigenous people to achieve its ends.

It could be argued that such usages, reflections of the ironic sensibility that pervades recent histories of encounter, obscure and distort more than they illuminate the past. The Schlagintweits did, in fact, as the author notes, produce some maps of previously unmapped areas. To describe these regions as unknown, as they were to all the world's inhabitants who did not happen to live there, seems accurate. To describe self-deprivation in pursuit of new scientific knowledge with the word "sacrifice" also seems reasonable, and it may not be Eurocentric mythmaking to refer

to the death of Adolph Schlagintweit as a case of martyrdom for a scientific ideal. Thus, while indigenous assistance was central to the Himalayan expedition, the term “Schlagintweit expedition” seems to require no apology, given the fact that there would have been no expedition whatsoever without their agency.

These are obviously matters of far more import than mere authorial taste, but they in no way reduce the value of this admirable contribution. In clear, competent prose, von Brescius presents a subtly perceptive analysis of the scientific legacies of this little-known but important expedition. His monograph is, in every technical respect, superb, and certainly the definitive study of the episode. He mobilizes an unrivalled range of archival sources from repositories in India, the UK, North America and continental Europe, and his familiarity with the contemporary periodical and literary sources is vast. He is conversant with most of the contemporary literature on exploration and skilfully situates his work in the context of current scholarly research. The book itself, part of the Cambridge “Science in History” series, is handsomely produced and illustrated with relevant and striking images. Author and editors alike are to be thanked for a very detailed index which will make the work a most accessible and valuable resource for others working in related fields. Historical work performed with skill tends to inspire as many valuable questions as it answers, and it is evidence of the worth of von Brescius’ contribution that it is certain to serve as a starting point for further research into the varied scientific and cultural legacies of the Schlagintweits’ venture.

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