

*Celebrity Culture and the Myth of Oceania in Britain, 1770-1823*. By Ruth Scobie. Boydell, 2019. viii+208pp. £65.00

Celebrity culture provides an effective way to assess Britain's developing relationship with the Pacific in a readable and engaging work that would have benefited from coverage of two additional aspects; first the French dimension, of which the British were well-aware, and, secondly, the wider question of a reconceptualization of British engagement with the wider world, away from 'wise Orientals' and, instead, toward the cartography of the Romantic, whether Abyssinia, Native Americans or Oceania. Scobie is aware of these elements but could have done more to bring out what was distinctive about Britain and important to the celebrity culture around Oceania. How for example does the treatment of James Cook, which she handles very well, differ to that of Mungo Park? Is Abyssinia ultimately passed by because links are too episodic for celebrity culture? What about missionaries?

It is part of the skill of Scobie that she leaves this reader wanting more. Hers is an account at once factual in its unearthing and discussion of texts and also suggestive, as when she considers the relationships between representations of celebrity and 'threats of consumption [consumer views] to the heroic, self-sacrificing subject,' and when she argues that imagined Oceanias were a way to discuss paradoxes of illusion and disenchantment.

I would be less certain of the latter, but found the coverage, notably of Otaheite, Cooke, the *Bounty*, and Australia throughout interesting. Scobie focuses on differences between the celebrity of British explorers and of Polynesians they brought back, and points out that, despite anxiety about the fragility of Cook's fame in the eighteenth century, decades of colonial activity in Oceania ensured that, by the 1820s, he had reached something approaching the status of imperial founding father. Moreover, as with stories of Cook's death, so with the *Bounty* as the metropolitan mythic account of Bligh and Christian became disconnected from any central, official text or authority. The mutiny was, almost immediately, more widely understood as a product of celebrity culture than an episode of naval or imperial history, appealing primarily to curiosity about its protagonists. For Australia, there was also a metropolitan misrepresentation with discussion mainly about policing the novel ambitions of the colonial project, and speculating over its potential replication of the metropolis in the Antipodes.

The eighteenth-century quest for celebrity was one that was multifaceted and, as befitted a complex and dynamic society, unfixed. Scobie provides an excellent guide to part of it, but there was much more. Hopefully, she can take forward her method accordingly, and assess how it works with the very varied imperial palette of the period.

Jeremy Black