

~~a post-modernist whose views are an outlier among those of contemporary writers on wilderness issues. In entering this territory, the author would do better, in my opinion, by taking a more balanced view of a multifaceted and often contentious topic.~~

~~Nevertheless, this is a minor complaint about a fascinating and well-written book. I recommend it highly to scientists, land managers and teachers as material for a personal library or a classroom.~~

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**Van Duzer, Chet** 2004: *Floating islands; a global bibliography, with an edition and translation of G.C. Munz's Exercitatio academica de insulis natantibus* (1711). Los Altos Hills CA: Cantor Press. xii + 400 pp. + 24 illustrations. US\$44.95 cloth. ISBN: 0 9755 424 0 0.

The island had no soil. Not that the trees stood in water. Rather, they stood in what appeared to be a dense mass of vegetation, as sparkling green as the leaves . . . The fabric of the island seemed to be an intricate, tightly webbed mass of tube-shaped seaweed, in diameter a little thicker than two fingers. What a fanciful island, I thought. J (Martel, 2003: 257)

Perhaps most of us would have come across the notion of a 'floating island' in literary fiction. Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*, the winner of the Man Booker Prize for 2002, may have served as one such event to many readers. After all, our reaction is bound to have been similar to that of *Pi*: a floating island can only be a *fanciful* island, a chimera, a mental delusion.

The idea of a *floating island* can be traced to Homer's *Odyssey*, where the island of Aeolus, floating upon the sea, is described as having sheer cliffs of unbreakable bronze (Homer, 800 BC: Book 10, Line 3). Those of us familiar with Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* may recall the flying island of Laputa, peopled by snobbish intellectuals (Swift, 1726). More recently, Eugenio Barba

(1979, 1986) deploys the term as a metaphor for a global community of itinerant actors.

Chet Van Duzer, however, has other things in mind. While references to mythical and literary floating islands are included, his main focus is 'natural floating islands' (p. vii), those pieces of 'land' that are more truly surrounded by water. His brief is to present no less than a global bibliography of such 'floating pieces of land which commonly consist of peaty soil made buoyant by gases released by the decomposition of vegetable matter, or else masses of aquatic buoyant vegetation' (pp. vii–viii).

The task is daunting, to say the least. The difference between the natural and the allegorical floating island, as that between the transient and the permanent one, is fuzzy and not always verifiable; the subject matter is obscure; and the attempt at a global reach presupposes a confident mastery of the world's store of languages, databases and oral traditions. The final task is simply impossible: is it mere coincidence that the by far the largest national geographical location of floating islands cited in the bibliography is the USA.

Still, this is not to detract from the book's accomplishments. Polyglot Van Duzer deserves to be congratulated for an oeuvre on natural floating islands that is as global as it can get. The bibliography contains some 1640 citations gleaned from 20 different language sources (including Estonian, Hungarian and Polish) spanning some 2500 years. Read about the floating peat mats in the *Huzenbacher See*, in Germany's Black Forest; vascular plants of Cranberry Island, Buckeye Lake, Ohio, USA; the intermittent floating island of Lake Ralågen, Sweden; or about the plants and fishers who inhabit the floating islands on Loktak Lake, Manipur, India. The thematic index organizes citations in terms of whether they deal with the formation of floating islands, the causes of their buoyancy, their movement, their intermittency, the gases they generate, their role in the ecology of lakes and wetlands, their flora and fauna, their usage for human habitation, their role in plant and animal dispersal, and techniques for

their management and control. The special characteristics of floating islands found in rivers or reservoirs, made of ice, of mud, or artificially constructed – for agriculture, wildlife habitat, human habitation, water quality improvement or for engineering such considerations, such as airports – are also categorized (pp. 351–63). The geographic index refers to floating islands found in 93 distinct countries on six continents (pp. 365–85). Appendix 1 is a gazetteer of floating islands not described in print (pp. 387–90). Appendix 2 is a bibliography of early accounts of new volcanic islands, chiefly in the Mediterranean and the Eastern Atlantic (pp. 391–400). And to those who remain incredulous to the bitter end as to whether floating islands really exist in the physical world, two dozen illustrations, most in full colour, should convert them.

Georg Christoph Munz wrote a dissertation on floating islands (Altdorf: Typis Kolhesii, 1711) that, we are told, offers a ‘good discussion of floating islands mentioned by classical authors, and of some floating islands famous in the 17th and 18th centuries’ (p. ix). This source is very rare. No problem for Van Duzer: he includes the complete Latin text of the original, along with his own English translation, on facing pages (pp. 1–33), plus detailed notes. How more thorough can you get?

The exhaustive and erudite nature of this reference text makes it a valuable contribution towards our understanding of a fascinating, albeit largely obscure, natural phenomenon. It is the most thorough investigation of floating islands to date. It is of interest to habitat specialists, agronomists, environment stewards, wetland researchers and island scholars generally. The one relevant detail I have missed is a reflexive research note on methodology that would have explained how the author went about his, truly awesome, academic quest.

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Barba, E. 1979: *The floating islands: reflections with Odin Theatret*. Graasten: Drama Books.

— 1986: *Beyond the floating islands*. New York: Performing Arts Journal Publishing.

Homer 800 BC/1998: *The Odyssey*. Translated by Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Martel, Y. 2003: *Life of Pi: a novel*. Edinburgh: Canongate Books.

Swift, J. 1726/1999: *Gulliver's travels*. London: Penguin Classics.

### Short review notes

~~**Baldridge, W. Scott** 2004: *Geology of the American Southwest. A journey through two billion years of plate tectonic history*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press xiii + 280 pp. £55.00 cloth; £19.95 paper. ISBN: 0 521 81639 4 cloth, 0 521 01666 5 paper.~~

~~The Southwest of the USA has spectacular geology and scenery. This well-written and well-illustrated book, though more geological than geomorphological, provides an accessible account of the evolution of the region from the Palaeoproterozoic onwards. It is of interest not only for the light it throws on the evolution of the area itself, but also for the way it places geological and broad-scale geomorphological evolution in the context of plate tectonics.~~

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~~**Brookfield, M.E.** 2004: *Principles of stratigraphy*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing. x + 340 pp. £29.99 paper. ISBN: 140511164X.~~

~~This is an undergraduate level text in stratigraphy, which contains some material that may be of interest to geomorphologists and Quaternary Scientists. It has three parts:~~

- ~~1. Basics includes weathering, sediment transport and major environmental settings;~~
- ~~2. Tracing environments in space and time includes dating, basin analysis, etc.; and~~