

Book Case

The Editor recommends six books for the weary off-duty medic to enjoy.

AURORA: IN SEARCH OF THE NORTHERN LIGHTS.

Melanie Windridge (William Collins 2016. ISBN 978-0-00-815609-1, RRP £18.99 hardback)



I enjoy astrophotography but to take detailed photographs of distant galaxies from my back garden requires a night when there is no cloud, no wind and no moonlight – I don't get to enjoy my hobby very often!

In the last few years, I have turned to "night sky photography" taking photographs of the aurora borealis or phenomena such as noctilucent clouds - it's possible to do this with a digital SLR and a tripod and a little cloud, wind or moonlight doesn't present a major problem. The north coast of Northern Ireland is ideal for this and it's not too hard to choose a spot looking northward with very little light pollution.

I'm always keen to learn more about the aurora borealis and this book by plasma physicist Dr Melanie Windridge combines travelogue, history and up to date physics of our Sun and the Earth's magnetic field. The author travels to many spots associated with the aurora such as Canada and Iceland but also closer to home in Scotland and Scandinavia. Each chapter comprises a separate visit where she examines local culture and history in relation to the aurora, then goes observing with local guides and finally explains one aspect of the phenomenon per chapter and how it can fundamentally affect our radio transmissions, transatlantic flights, GPS and power grids. Our modern electronic world has become increasingly vulnerable to the solar wind – a massive solar flare in 1859 resulted in household items such as candlesticks becoming statically charged and telegraph wires worked for hours with the power disconnected! Imagine

the chaos if this "Carrington Event" was repeated nowadays – the closest we have come was the Quebec power grid failure in 1989. A very enjoyable combination of travelogue and physics!

THE OTRUN

Amy Liptrot (Canongate Book 2016. ISBN 978-1-78211-548-9, RRP £8.99 paperback)



Small towns and islands can seem dull and oppressive to the young, so the author, Amy Liptrot, took the first opportunity to leave her native Orkney and travel to the bright lights of London. Her plan was to build on her success in writing short articles and blogs and develop a career in publishing. Initially, things went well but increasing addiction to alcohol resulted in her descent into the seamier side of life and brushes with the law. Eventually, she realises that staying in London can only take her further down and she returns home.

The book describes her isolated existence in Orkney as she struggles with sobriety and putting her life on an even keel. She turns to many of the familiar things such as seabirds, whales, the aurora and the dark night sky that she couldn't wait to leave before. This time around, she uses digital and social media not only to study and appreciate the natural phenomena but also to gain companionship from online communities. Her new interests lead to a conservation job with the RSPB and she joins an Orkney sea-swimming club (!) which in turn leads to scuba-diving amongst the wrecks scattered around the rocky coast. Eventually she rebuilds a stable existence.

This is a book about alcohol addiction and the acknowledgement that recovery is possible but things will be very different afterwards. It's about the rich natural world of Orkney and how to appreciate and share it in the 21st century. It's also very much about how small, isolated communities are embracing the new to preserve the old.

COLD: EXTREME ADVENTURES AT THE LOWEST TEMPERATURES ON EARTH

Ranulph Fiennes (Simon & Schuster UK 2014. ISBN 978-1-4711-2784-7, RRP £7.99 paperback)



In a way, this is another form of addiction. Sir Ranulph takes the reader through his long career as a polar adventurer (I think adventurer is the appropriate term to use here). The expeditions are listed chronologically and it's interesting to read how technology changes from Inuit hand-made fur parkas and map-reckoning to Gore-Tex protective clothing and GPS. I enjoyed the descriptions of drifting on broken shards of pack ice and the hazardous crevasses but a certain recklessness does permeate the book. Some examples:

We could easily have crossed the crevasse, if we had brought a crevasse ladder.

His injuries should not have been fatal but unfortunately, the doctor had not survived.

Then there is the self-surgery on frost-bitten finger tips.

Many of the expeditions follow in the footsteps of previous explorers and the history of the trail-blazers is well written. Often, the modern expeditions are much smaller and man-powered rather than involving dog-teams or even in the early Edwardian stages, Mongolian ponies.

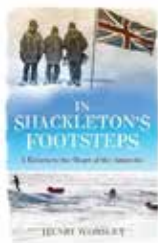
The calorie expenditure from man-hauling sledges is enormous and despite advances in nutrition, severe weight loss is expected – the image of a skeletal Ran after an expedition in the colour plate section is disturbing. Constipation and piles are a consequence of a high calorie, low residue diet.

Often Ran is competing against other nationalities attempting the same route and much emphasis is put on expeditions being unassisted – even the air-evacuation of a sick team member is regarded as "assistance" since his rations will become available for the remaining team.



Eventually age, heart conditions and lack of digits catch up with Ran, so what does he decide to do? – climb Everest! One attempt ends with a severe anginal attack near the summit but eventually he is successful.

IN SHACKLETON'S FOOTSTEPS. A RETURN TO THE HEART OF THE ANTARCTIC.



Henry Worsley (Virgin Books, 2011. ISBN 978-1-905-26493-3, RRP £18.99 hardback)

This is one of my favourite books. In 1908, Ernest Shackleton led an unsuccessful pony-powered expedition to the South Pole. Ninety-seven miles from the pole, he decided to turn back as he knew the team would starve on the return leg – everyone got back safely.

In the years leading up to the Centenary, Henry Worsley, a descendant of one of Shackleton's team planned a repeat expedition along the same route.

This book describes Henry's attempts to get a team of "Shackleton descendants" together and attract sufficient sponsorship to pay for it all. In order to get to their start point, enormous logistic support is required and extremely brave pilots!

Once out on the ice, he charts their daily progress and contrasts the modern experience with excerpts from Shackleton's diary. Some of the modern photos mirror those taken in 1908.

Henry was older (48 years old in 2008) than the other team members and he describes his fears about his fitness and the need for self-maintenance in the unforgiving climate.

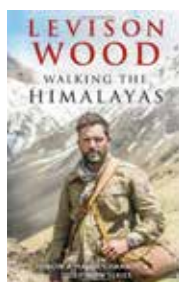
Eventually the team reach the South Pole which is now occupied by an enormous US base. Somewhat surreally, their journey ends at the pole with a greeting

from an American officer in a jeep who offers them coffee and breakfast!

I was sad to learn that Henry died on a solo unassisted trans-Antarctic expedition in 2015/16. This was following the route of another unsuccessful Shackleton expedition. Henry's goal was to cross the entire continent by himself, hauling a 150kg sledge with no assistance (not even a sail/kite). Henry got to within 30 miles of his goal but succumbed to malnutrition which resulted in fatal peritonitis.

WALKING THE HIMALAYAS.

Levison Wood (Hodder and Stoughton, 2016. ISBN 978-1-473-62624-9, RRP £20 Hardback)



This is the book of a Channel 4 television series – I haven't seen the series and you wouldn't guess from reading the book that this was anything other than a modern day trek along the base of the Himalayas through several countries. The walk commences in Afghanistan and proceeds through Pakistan, India, Nepal and Bhutan.

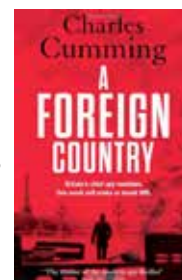
I very much enjoyed the writing style which was sparse and concentrated on Levison's companions, the countryside and the people he meets, rather than himself. There is no journey of self-exploration here, just descriptions of stunningly beautiful but rugged terrain and the people who try to exist here. Some areas are lush and fertile, some are hard and unforgiving. Life can be cheap with remains of lorries littering the valley beneath a crumbling mountain road and rope bridges over snow-melt swollen rivers frequently giving way. Along the route, he makes close friends with his guides and his insights into their personalities and beliefs is one of the strengths of the book. The simmering feud between India and Pakistan over

Kashmir makes one realise how little this conflict is reported in the West.

Highlights include meeting the Dalai Lama, who bridges the divide between the spiritual and modern, the commercialisation of Kathmandu and the enforced "Shangri La" happiness of Bhutan. Two colour plate sections illustrate the book. I'd recommend this to anyone who enjoys hill walking.

A FOREIGN COUNTRY

Charles Cumming (Harper, 2013. ISBN 978-0007346431, RRP £4.99 Kindle)



I don't often read spy stories but Charles Cumming was mentioned in Andrew Marr's recent television series about literary genres and I thought I should investigate further. I suppose the heyday of the spy novel was in the 1950s when the dashing hero had to save the world from a crazed madman with links to one superpower or another.

By contrast, there are no plans for world domination here, just a story of what happens when rivalry between two supposedly friendly intelligence agencies boils over into active hostility. Much of the book is based on patient and thorough observation rather than shooting – the first shot is fired on page 350 or so. The insights into the spy's "tradecraft" are illuminating – I didn't realise it was so easy to break into key card hotel rooms!

There is also an undertone of treachery throughout – the hero has already suffered from being the scapegoat for a politically inconvenient mission in the past and he knows that failure to succeed here will result in further isolation and denial of responsibility by those in power.

An interesting, modern take on the spy novel.

