

Nature and the Environment, Great Lives.

William A. S. Sarjeant

Volume 19, Number 4, December 1992

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/geocan19_4br01

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Geological Association of Canada

ISSN

0315-0941 (print)

1911-4850 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Sarjeant, W. A. S. (1992). Review of [Nature and the Environment, Great Lives.] *Geoscience Canada*, 19(4), 180–180.

Reviews

Nature and the Environment, Great Lives.

By Doris Faber and Harold Faber
*Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, and
 Collier Macmillan Canada, Toronto*
 viii + 296 p., 1991, US \$22.95

Reviewed by William A.S. Sarjeant
*Department of Geological Sciences
 University of Saskatchewan
 Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7N 0W0*

The portraying of a theme of discipline by assembling a series of biographies of major protagonists is a literary form that first emerged around the end of the nineteenth century. It is an approach fraught with dangers. As someone has said, "The briefer the treatment, the lesser the truth" (a saw whose wisdom is made daily apparent on radio and television). Yet, paradoxically, the very briefest of listings, done to a tightly standardized format, tend to achieve precision in the few details they furnish. It is the works of intermediate length that cause greatest trouble for their authors; what should be put in and what left out? The consequence of the omissions is often a paean of praise, a trumpet-blast to a life which seems one tranquil, continuous sequence of achievements, without any failures or sombre moments.

At best, the result can be stimulating. The Fentons' book *The Story of the Great Geologists* (in a subsequent edition, *Giants of Geology*) contains quite a few factual errors, but is so readable that it must have inspired many students to become interested, not only in the earth sciences, but also in their history. At the other extreme I could quote, but will not, many such works that serve, instead, to crush enthusiasm under a lead-weight of uninspired fact.

One of the initial problems is to decide who should be included and who excluded. The work under review forms part of a Scribners series, of which four others have appeared already, each embodying approximately a quadricesimal selection of eminent persons. In this work, 26 naturalists and natural

scientists figure. Since the book is for an American audience, the overweighting of United States citizens is predictable, 17 of them being given attention (if Agassiz be included). Of these, one is unequivocally a geologist (John Wesley Powell) while three others (Louis Agassiz, Roy Chapman Andrews and Charles Darwin) were major paleontological discoverers. Other persons treated for their contributions, profound or incidental, to the earth sciences were John and William Bartram, Alexander von Humboldt, Carl von Linne, John Muir and Alfred Russel Wallace. So, yes, there is enough in this volume, potentially, to interest readers whose concerns do not extend more widely.

The text is organized, not by relative dates in scientific history, but in alphabetical order. The style is readable, in the fashion that one of our better newspapers is readable; but, as with newspaper accounts, there is often a lack of balance and almost uniformly a lack of scientific perspective. The many reported conversations add immediacy, but their authenticity should not be enquired into too closely!

I liked the illustrations. All too often, the portraits illustrating such works show their subjects, not in full physical vigour at the time of their greatest attainments, but in a condition of venerable decrepitude as their lives draw to an honoured (but, by then, unproductive) close. Not so here. Instead of the bleached, long-bearded and cloaked Charles Darwin of the popular image, we are shown him at the age of 31, pensive and somewhat withdrawn, seemingly pondering his theories, but not yet sure. The John Muir of the illustration is not a blanching sage, but a vigorous young tough, quite capable of tackling all those mountains. The Agassiz portrait shows the enthusiastic and enchanting teacher, while Powell is depicted when on that splendid exploratory voyage through the Grand Canyon. Only the Bartrams and John Burroughs are portrayed exclusively when aged, probably because of a lack of other portraits.

The handling of names is somewhat irrational. Full names are given for all the Americans — Humboldt's name is given in the text in a supposedly full form, but inexactly (it was Friedrich *Wilhelm* Heinrich Alexander) — but Charles Robert Darwin's second name is not

quoted, nor are the other Christian names of Louis Jean Rodolphe Agassiz. As for Carl von Linne, he is cited only under the Latinized form of his surname. Such inconsistencies are irritating, to this reader at least. Also irritating to a bibliographer, but surely not the authors' fault, is the reversal of the two components of the title on the book's spine, as *Great Lives: Nature and the Environment*. (The title-page appellation is, of course, correctly cited here.)

For what audience is this work — and, indeed, this Scribners series — intended? Certainly not for the informed scientific historian, nor yet for pupils at junior level in schools. A teen-aged and a relatively uninformed elder readership seem the likeliest aims. For both groups, it should serve well enough to entertain and, perhaps, to instruct. Whether it will serve also to inspire its readers to further scholarship, I am less sure; to attain that, a sequential treatment by date and a less broad compass might have served better.

REFERENCE

- Fenton, C.L. and Fenton, M.A., 1945, *The Story of the Great Geologists*: Doubleday, Doran, New York, xvi + 301 p. (Revised edition, 1952, *Giants of Geology*: Dolphin Books, Garden City, New York, 318 p.)