

2012

## Review of *Griffith Taylor – visionary environmentalist explorer* by Carolyn Strange and Alison Bashford

Christina E. Dando

University of Nebraska at Omaha, [cdando@unomaha.edu](mailto:cdando@unomaha.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/geoggeolfacpub>

 Part of the [Human Geography Commons](#)

Please take our feedback survey at: [https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE](https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE)

---

### Recommended Citation

Dando, Christina E., "Review of *Griffith Taylor – visionary environmentalist explorer* by Carolyn Strange and Alison Bashford" (2012). *Geography and Geology Faculty Publications*. 12.  
<https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/geoggeolfacpub/12>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Geography and Geology at DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Geography and Geology Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact [unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu](mailto:unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu).

*Griffith Taylor: Visionary, Environmentalist, Explorer*. CAROLYN STRANGE and ALISON BASHFORD. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008. Pp. 283, color illustrations, maps, index. \$30.95 paper. ISBN 978-0-8020-9663-0.

Few would argue the inherently visual nature of geography, our use (and love of) maps, our emphasis on fieldwork and observation. Carolyn Strange and Alison Bashford's biography *Griffith Taylor: Visionary, Environmentalist, Explorer* is as much a visual biography as a textual one, drawing on extensive visual materials as well as diaries and letters. Through images and texts, Strange and Bashford create a portrait of a complicated geographer, revealing a leading geographer of the twentieth century whose contributions cover the spectrum and the globe.

Strange and Bashford's approach is largely chronological, as most biographies are, but in doing so, emphasize Taylor's changing interests and spheres of influence, telescoping out from a very focused view (literally with fossils) to a broad, international perspective and then back down again late in life when his sphere was very much focused on his family. As they move through his life, they illuminate Taylor's shifting roles: explorer, anthropogeographer, family man, nation-builder, and global peacemaker.

Born in England and immigrating to Australia with his family as a boy, Taylor took to writing and sketching early, keeping extensive diaries throughout his life. His early education was in Australia, with a Bachelor's of Science from the University of Sydney (p. 21). In 1907, Taylor won a scholarship to study at Cambridge. Close to graduation and with no prospects in hand, opportunity intervened at a Cambridge Philosophical Society dinner, when Taylor was asked to join Captain Robert Scott's British Antarctic Expedition (pp. 38-9).

The *Terra Nova* Antarctic expedition left from New Zealand on 30 November 1910. In Antarctica, Taylor was in charge of the Western Geological Party exploring the physiography and geology of South Victoria Land (p. 56). Taylor's party successfully carried out its mission and returned safely; tragically, the five members of polar party perished, including Captain Scott. Taylor contributed to official expedition histories and papers as well as publishing his own works, including a book. In 1916, he was awarded a doctorate based on the glaciology research he conducted on the Scott expedition.

After the expedition, Taylor took a position at Australia's Bureau of Meteorology. The Bureau had a central role in Australia's debates over climate and race: white Australians were limiting the immigration of Southeast Asians to Australia while questioning whether white settlers could handle the country's tropical north (p. 83). Through his work, Taylor contributed to the debate, taking the tactic that it was not a matter of could whites settle in hot, humid lands but *would or should* they (pp. 84-5). Taylor translated his ideas into striking graphics, establishing "his reputation as a popular lecturer, journalist and aspiring academic" (p. 95). Taylor's work drew the attention of Australian government officials as well as international geographers, but to patriotic Australians, his words were heresy.

Taylor made the move to academics when he accepted the foundation chair of geography at Sydney University in 1920 (p. 103). Taylor continued his anthropogeographical work, taking to the field to study Australian Aborigines, putting his theories to the test. Results of his travel and research were published in both the popular press and in academic journals. His work culminated in *Environment and Race* (1927), where he correlated climate with the origin and distribution of human racial groups.

As a public intellectual, controversy haunted Taylor for much of his academic career (p. 124). Taylor saw himself as "a persecuted bearer of the truth" and believed it was his job to scientifically explain the lack of settlement in Western Australia and why it should not be developed (pp. 124, 126). Some did listen to his reasoning but the combination of his position on Western Australia with his ideas on race put him on "a collision course" with the newfound Australian identity (p. 135).

A graceful exit came in 1928 when Taylor took first a position at the University of Chicago, then another at the University of Toronto. At Chicago, Taylor continued his work but was again marginalized, for possibilism was dominant in American academic geography and anthropogeography was out of favor (p. 139). In 1934, the University of Toronto hired Taylor as its foundation professor. Taylor saw this as an opportunity to continue his work on nation-building (p. 144). The Toronto department flourished under Taylor.

In his last "scale jump," Taylor had argued as early as 1933 the progressive concept of no biological basis for racial differences and that this notion could lead to world peace (p. 161). Taylor proposed a new field, *geopacifism*, as "an 'antidote' to the poison of German geopolitics," spelling out his theories in *Our Evolving Civilization: An Introduction to Geopacifism, Geographical Aspects of the Path toward World Peace* (1946), arguing geography's key role in nation-building and world peace (pp. 167, 171-2). *Geopacifism* received little attention but Taylor remained upbeat, wanting "to be remembered as a prophet for peace" (pp. 181-184). Taylor retired at the age of 70 and returned to his family in Sydney. He died in 1963 at the age of 80.

Strange and Bashford have constructed an extremely engaging biography of a formidable twentieth-century geographer. Taylor covered the spectrum from explorer to academic, from physical to human geography. His association with environmental determinism often results in his dismissal, but his contributions to geography are considerable with few geographers today claiming a fraction of his accomplishments. Overall, this biography is well researched and written. I especially appreciate the sense of humor that percolates throughout the book, tied to Taylor's personality, but certainly appreciated and nurtured by the authors. Between the humor and visuals, this is a pleasure to read.

Through this work, I have a new appreciation for Taylor's contributions to our geographical world and the role of the visuals in early twentieth-century geography. Notable geographer's biographies have appeared in the last decade (such as those of Isaiah Bowman and Charles Daly), but none offer as rich a visual feast as Strange and Bashford. Their over 100 illustrations include his scholarly sketches and maps, his drawings for family, and cartoons of Taylor by students as

well as by editorial cartoonists. These illustrations shed interesting light on the visual culture of twentieth-century geography, which was not just scholarly drawings of landforms and climate, but rather a means to capture the spatial in all its possible forms, from Taylor's sketch of a "touring library" (p. 32) to the affectionate sketch of Taylor as a block diagram (p. 198). Visuals were key to Taylor's "view" of geography, so entirely appropriate that his biography addresses both the texts and the images that were both so much a part of his public and private lives. Unfortunately, Strange and Bashford rarely engage the visuals. Clearly they see their importance to Taylor but I see little effort to unpack these images and their significance to his life and work. More work needs to be done on the interplay between theory and images, such as Heather Winlow's (2009) article in *Geographical Research* (vol. 47 no. 7, pp. 390-407) "Mapping the Contours of Race: Griffith Taylor's Zones and Strata Theory," which examines Griffith's use of cartography to fortify his racial theories. Maps and diagrams are not just pretty pictures; for many geographers, the theory and images go hand-in-hand, with the images being developed along with the theory (today termed *visualization*). If we are to understand the geographers, we need to clearly understand the theory and the images and the relationship between them.

Christina Dando  
*University of Nebraska-Omaha*