

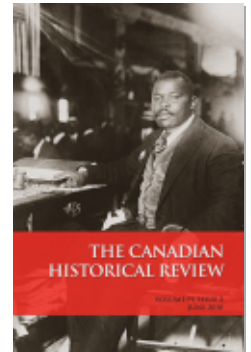


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Griffith Taylor: Visionary, Environmentalist, Explorer
(review)

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Griffith Taylor: Visionary, Environmentalist, Explorer. CAROLYN STRANGE and ALISON BASHFORD. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008. Pp. 287, \$29.95

This is a puzzling book to evaluate. It is a clearly written biography of Griffith Taylor, a successful twentieth-century academic who was ambitious, egotistical, and driven. The authors make an apt comment on his personality, saying that 'he never stood still and never stopped talking about it' (1). His career was characteristic of many leading male professors of his generation. He worked hard at teaching and publishing, was assisted greatly by a network of male friends and colleagues throughout his professional life, and with hard bargaining he advanced through to the top rung of the academic ladder. He was supported by a charming, intelligent wife who came from a respected academic family, took care of his homes and family, and organized their social life. An independent woman, Doris did volunteer work, was active in community outreach at the universities, and kept busy when her husband was away on long research trips with his male colleagues. Thus the book is an interesting but not unusual portrait of social and family life in academe.

Taylor was atypical in that he was associated as a student and professor at leading universities in *four* countries – Britain, Australia, the United States, and Canada. He started as a geologist, became interested in anthropology, and ended up a geographer 'analysing the relations between humans and the environment' (7). Indeed, at the University of Toronto he was the first chair of the Department of Geography, and Harold Innis, no less, strongly urged the university to appoint him. In certain respects he was ahead of his time in that he looked at 'the big picture' and was multidisciplinary in his approach, though his vast coverage sometimes lacked intellectual depth and rigour.

By the time Taylor took the Toronto job, he had an international reputation as a result of his best-known book, *Environment and Race* (1927), which recognized nature's limits but is now very dated in its ideas about racial characteristics, and on climate and white settlement. Taylor's reputation as an excellent teacher and a public intellectual was mixed, as were his work habits. Indeed the authors note that his research for the Bureau of Meteorology in Australia was thorough and precise, but his methods in anthropology were 'patchy' (105), fast, and inadequate. In Australia, he was not liked for expressing his views on how its desert would limit agriculture and population expansion, his

belief in race 'mingling,' and his opposition to the White Australia policy. In the United States, he was viewed as rather old fashioned in his deterministic approach to geography and felt marginalized at the University of Chicago. At the University of Toronto, he was widely admired as an optimist and ended his career in a job that had the high status he craved. He lived very comfortably in a large house in Forest Hill and, after his few years in 'the republic,' was happy to be back in a country with a British colonial past. Then after receiving many honours and much praise he retired to Australia, largely for family reasons.

A few aspects of the book are noticeable. It is beautifully produced, larger than the standard paperback, printed on high quality paper, with many photographs, the most stunning from Taylor's days in the 1911 British Antarctic expedition. The two authors evidently had considerable funding to do research and hire researchers. Yet the book is not well organized. It seems to have been planned thematically, making for overlapping subject matter and chronology rather than an integrated, chronological approach. An entire chapter on Taylor's personal relationships using the theme of 'family' defined broadly is tacked on near the end of the book – material that should have been woven into the narrative. The biography's greatest failing is that it is not analytical and the man and his ideas are not really put into any kind of intellectual or historical context. This weakness is most apparent when Taylor's ideas about race are discussed, because some of them were ludicrous though not uncommon in his day. They predated our knowledge of genetics, which the authors might have noted. Today, notions of race based on human genetic variation have replaced historical approaches such as craniology. What motivated the authors to write the book? Did they see Taylor as a precursor of modern environmentalism? He was aware of the budding field of ecology and sensitive to new ideas in different fields. Yet the authors did not draw conclusions about this intellectual life, its influences or contribution to evolving disciplines or thought. So the book remains a beautifully produced, rather disorganized biography of a male academic who had a successful career by the standards of the time. It is not very informative as an intellectual history from any perspective – ideas, disciplines, or thinkers.

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