

BOOK REVIEWS

HOW TO READ WATER – Tristan Gooley. Published in hard covers by Sceptre [www.hodder.co.uk] at £20.00. 384 pages including 16 pages of colour photos. ISBN 978-1-4736-1520-5

Tristan Gooley founded his reputation with *The Natural Navigator* and has built on it with four more books dedicated to ‘outdoor clues and signs’. As (probably) the only man alive to have crossed the Atlantic solo both under sail and in a light aircraft, it was inevitable that sooner or later he would turn his attention to water, and how it can be observed and understood.

How to Read Water starts with a somewhat inspirational introduction describing contrasting navigational skills from different oceans and cultures, before zooming in to study the behaviour of water in an environment to which all have access – the kitchen. From there he moves out to observe ripples on his garden pond (with a digression to the South Pacific) and into the wider countryside to seek signs – from plants to animal tracks – which indicate there is water nearby.

The chapter on ‘Rivers and Streams’ is particularly interesting, and also implies that soon we will reach the sea – the real point of interest for most OCC members. No so! Chapters on trout fishing and on the behaviour of ‘trapped’ water in a lake follow, though the curious will learn much from the latter. Then colour, light and sound as generated and/or reflected by water all are examined, until finally we do reach the coast, in the form of waves – everything from the barely visible ripples produced by blowing on hot tea to the breaking giants sought by serious surfers. ‘When Water Meets Land’ is followed by clear explanations of ‘reflected’, ‘refracted’ and ‘diffracted’ waves – something most will have witnessed, perhaps without knowing quite what they were seeing – illustrated by equally clear diagrams.

Many members will be familiar with Dr David Lewis’s research into the methods employed by Polynesian and Micronesian navigators until relatively recently, and may also be aware of the Vikings’ use of lodestone and, allegedly, sunstone. However Tristan Gooley believes they also used ‘natural’ indicators such as cetacean routes, the distance land birds range from the coast, and the colours of different currents (though no mention is made of water temperature). With his usual ‘put the theory to the test’ approach, Tristan and a friend head north on a two-handed voyage from the Orkneys to the Arctic Circle and then back to Reykjavik in Iceland. All turns out much as Tristan had predicted, and it rounds off the book neatly, though it would have been good to know what other navigational tools, if any, they also used.

How to Read Water is an intriguing and very well researched introduction to the subject, so why did I end up feeling very slightly disappointed? Possibly because much of its content is not, to be honest, that new, allied to the fact that at times the author appears to forget that many of his readers will be intelligent adults who already have some knowledge of the subject – typical OCC members, in fact! In addition, a ‘dipping’ approach might suit this book better than the usual reviewer’s task of reading from cover to cover in a short space of time. Having said that, there is much to interest and enthrall between its covers, and there will be few who don’t learn something new from it.

How to Read Water is an intriguing and very well researched introduction to the subject, so why did I end up feeling very slightly disappointed? Possibly because much of its content is not actually that new, and because at times the author appears to forget that many of his readers will be intelligent adults who already have some knowledge of the subject – typical OCC members, in fact! In addition, a ‘dipping’ approach might suit its subject matter better than the reviewer’s task of reading from beginning to end in limited time. Having said that, there is much to interest and enthrall between its covers, and there will be very few who don’t learn something new. For a more technical analysis of waves of all kinds, some may wish to follow *How to Read Water* by reading Gavin Pretor-Pinney’s *The Wavewatcher’s Companion*,

published by Bloomsbury in 2010/11.
AOMH