

Wilfred Thesiger - The Life of the Great Explorer by Alexander Maitland.
Harper Press 2006.

When a biography is entitled 'The Life' the reader knows that s/he has in their hands an authorised text that will contain a welter of material that may not have been available to previous biographers. In the case of Wilfred Thesiger the definite article is even more significant, because there are other books about him, as well as the many books that he wrote himself.

So the reader is guaranteed fresh insights and analyses, as well as an assumption of greater access to the subject in question. Alexander Maitland started his biography of Thesiger, whom he first met in 1964, in 1992, and over the remaining 11 years of Thesiger's life much of the material in it was shared by Maitland with his subject. It is to his great credit that he nevertheless writes of Thesiger in a supremely honest way, not shying away from the more confused, introverted and darker aspects of his character.

Thesiger was a remarkable man, who led an extraordinary life, as a soldier, explorer, courtier, photographer and writer; a man who loathed modernity and revelled in the drama of wild places untouched by progress; a natural empathizer with the peoples of Arabia and Africa, the latter the place of his birth and fount of his inspiration.

Concluding the book however one is left with the impression that while Thesiger was an honourable man, devoted to his siblings and quintessentially his mother, he was not a particularly nice one; you may reflect on whether niceness is far too banal a concept to apply to someone cut from such an heroic mould, and whether the lack of such a fuzzy quality is even relevant, but for most modern readers whose heart is not eased by the arid wastes of the desert, or soothed by the simplicity of an African rondavel, the lack of tangible human warmth and pleasantness can be, at least, extremely disappointing.

This impression should not detract, however, from a meticulously researched and exemplarily well written biography of one of the 20th century's great figures.

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