The autobiography, though incomplete, is nevertheless massive, and encompasses nearly one thousand closely printed pages. It does not make for easy reading for several reasons. First, the format, obviously designed to cram the work into one volume, is very congested. Secondly, editorial adherence to the original punctuation, paragraphing and spelling (frequently bizarre and often illiterate, e.g., "annonymous") considerably impedes ready comprehension. Thirdly, the narrative is often disjointed and repetitive, with the writer heavily labouring his major points. Above all, the profusion of sometimes irrelevant detail provides us with many fine trees and lots of shrubs, but frequently denies us a wood.

Many facets of Wilkes's character emerge strongly throughout. He was consistently honest and sincere, and warmhearted to friends, but also conceited, somewhat priggish, and a stern disciplinarian. He seems to have cultivated strong likes and dislikes, and regularly placed people with whom he came into contact, many of them now hallowed by history. The remarks on Ross are part of a larger picture of opposition and setbacks which would surely have destroyed a lesser man. The autobiography is extremely informative, but not always in the manner one might expect. It does not, for example, supply as much information on American naval history as might be hoped, and it says nothing about the problems of the South. The autobiography encompasses nearly one thousand closely printed pages. It does not stand alone, but also needs to be read in the context of the works of James Fenimore Cooper through the press, could not have been resurrected to correct the spelling in the chronological table, which is almost as haphazard as Wilkes's own (e.g., "disobedience" and "Cemetery"). In general, however, the volume should be welcomed by every maritime library and by students of 19th century naval history.


The life of Charles Wilkes spans the greater part of the 19th century, and his autobiography, which he began in 1871, covers over sixty years, breaking off in 1862. His career was varied, eventful, turbulent and, in all, successful, since he progressed from midshipman to rear admiral in relatively easy stages, though he never compromised his rigorous principles and had to weather convictions by two courts-martial — setbacks which would surely have destroyed a lesser man. The most notable features of his career include his command of the U.S. Exploration Expedition (1838-42), during which the icebound Antarctic was discovered to be a continental land mass; and his boarding of the British steamer, Trent, to remove the Confederate Commissioners, John Sliddell and James Mason: an international incident which found its way into the works of James Fenimore Cooper through the press, could not have been resurrected to correct the spelling in the chronological table, which is almost as haphazard as Wilkes's own (e.g., "disobedience" and "Cemetery"). In general, however, the volume should be welcomed by every maritime library and by students of 19th century naval history.

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My initial reaction to the book was "At last!" Here is a profusely and well illustrated book written in a popular vein on Precambrian through Quaternary glaciations. The book is divided into eight chapters and a glossary. Reading the book, one gets glimpses of the Precambrian, Ordovician, Carboniferous, and Quaternary glaciations, and some of the postulates as to the origin, causes and future possibilities of renewed glaciation. Unfortunately, the glimpses are overshadowed by the inadequacies of the book. These include inadequate cross-referencing of text and figures, inadequate explanation of figures, inadequate or incorrect definitions and numerous typographical errors. Figures are unnumbered and not specifically referred to in the text, so that the reader may be unaware that the following page has a highly informative illustration that would help clarify a concept. Nor do the captions alert the reader to the real significance of the illustrations or the details to be gleaned from them. Many of the illustrations, such as the diagram outlining the accumulation and ablation zone, are inadequately or not at all explained.

Definitions are often inadequate or incorrect. The following are but a few examples: medial moraine, makes no reference to accumulation downstream from the juncture of two coalescing glaciers; palynology as the "study of fossil spores, especially pollen"; and carbonates as "material made of carbonates such as calcite, dolo".

The concept of the book is one that would fulfill a need and is one that still appeals to me: one that would reach out both to the professional as a summary and to the layperson. A revised version of the present volume would be a welcome addition to the literature on glaciations for both the layperson and the professional. Regrettably, I cannot recommend the present version.

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