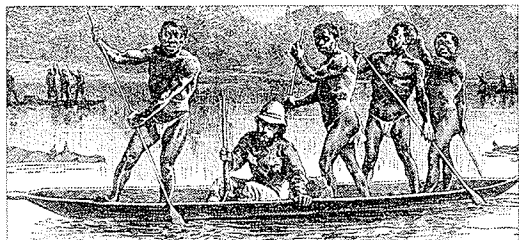

ogy is proof that you cannot destroy the allure of good travel writing, not even by the kind of overexposure the genre has received in recent years. Hansbury-Tenison's collection sticks to the subgenre of travel writing with the best dramatic possibilities: first-person period accounts of explorers, all of whom struggled to visit far-



flung and unreported places or underwent astonishing ordeals, and often both. Hansbury-Tenison, himself a gold-medalist explorer with the Royal Geographic Society, suggests in his introduction that "explorers are quite different from travelers," since their curiosity impels them not toward other cultures per se but toward extremes of novelty, danger, and privation. He also acknowledges that his explorers' sense of accomplishment in reaching exotic places was heightened, far too often, by complete obliviousness to the people who actually inhabited them: "Time and again the European explorer, as he 'discovers' some new land, makes a passing reference to his native guide."

None of this interferes, fortunately, with the selector's editorial gusto; nor with the reader's ability to appreciate these hundreds of accounts for their better qualities. They're mostly of easy browsing length and are arranged by region and chronology, so that you can trudge through Asia repeatedly from Marco Polo's day to Sir Edmund Hillary's (and discover few changes apart from mode of locomotion). There are a fair number of self-caricaturing British imperialist types, from the British Jesuit William Gifford Palgrave in 1862 fulminating against camels—"from first to last an undomesticated and savage animal, rendered serviceable by stupidity alone"—to Lady Florence von Sass Baker, wife of an explorer, writing home to her stepdaughter from Africa in 1871 for more handkerchiefs: "The whole country is in a state of the wildest anarchy. . . . We shall have to support some

tribes and subdue others before any hope [of] order can be entertained."

But the moxie and ardor of these explorers comes through, too, along with an old virtue that doesn't always get its due these days, sheer physical bravery. This is especially true of the classic South Pole accounts that Hansbury-Tenison wisely places at the end. Though endlessly anthologized, this sequence remains thrilling: Roald Amundsen reaching the Pole in 1912, Robert Falcon Scott devastated to arrive a month later and learn he's been beaten, the agonies of Scott and his men on the attempted return march ("no idea there could be temperatures like this"), their gruesome deaths, and the horror of the next team when its members find Scott's diary. Scott was especially concerned that posterity know of the grit with which one companion handled his imminent death from frostbite and gangrene: Lifting the flap of the tent in a raging blizzard, he remarked, "I am going outside the tent and may be some time."

Science & Technology

HIGHER SUPERSTITION: *The Academic Left and Its Quarrels with Science.* By Paul Gross and Norman Levitt. Johns Hopkins. 328 pp. \$25.95

It's hard to imagine deconstructionists, Afrocentrists, and radical feminists and environmentalists taking any cues from Christian fundamentalists. Yet the latest target in the academic Left's war against a white, male, Western worldview is science. So say Gross, a former director of the Woods Hole Marine Biological Laboratory, and Levitt, a professor of mathematics at Rutgers University. And while creationists merely tried to replace evolutionary biology with Genesis, a growing element within the academic Left is seeking to disavow science completely, labeling it another tool of cultural oppression.

For most of this century, Gross and Levitt argue, scientists were natural allies of progressive thinkers, and often at the forefront of movements for racial and sexual equality or global ecological responsibility. But since postmodernism began to infect the academy in the 1960s, the search for objective truth has become the worst

form of heresy. Vigilant feminists deconstruct algebra problems to uncover ostensibly sexist stereotypes (“Why is it *Bob* and *Fred* in the powerboat race?”) and expose the semiotic tyranny of DNA, while Afrocentrists claim their ancestors were the first to approximate the value of pi.

The complaint Gross and Levitt make about this critique of science is less philosophical than factual: these humanities professors don’t know the first thing about science. “Buoyed by a ‘stance’ on science, they feel justified in bypassing the grubby necessities of actual scientific knowledge,” the two authors argue. The philosopher Steven Best, for example, makes the case for “postmodern science” by hailing chaos theory over Newton’s linear equations. But oops! Newton’s equations are nonlinear.

Feminists are among the main culprits, as they search for an alternative “feminist science” to counter centuries of male-driven research. Gross and Levitt concede that the profession has traditionally excluded women, but they deny that the foundations of science are distorted by patriarchal assumptions. There is only good and bad science, they argue, not male and female science. The feminists’ mistake, they say, is to confuse language that describes results with the results themselves. But is the attack on metaphor mongering really the feminists’ only complaint? Take the authors’ main example: A group of feminists has decried a textbook description that depicts “martial gang rape” of an egg by the sperm. The feminists’ complaint certainly goes overboard, but as Gross and Levitt themselves point out, a vast science has emerged in the past

30 years, pioneered by women, proving that the egg is much less passive than was previously thought. Contributions by women have challenged basic assumptions.

Gross and Levitt reserve their harshest criticism for Afrocentric theorists, who are guilty of “flagrant falsification of science in the service of Afrocentric chauvinism.” In the collection *Blacks in Science*, Khalil Messiha argues that a small wooden figure of a bird made in Egypt is an example of “African experimental aeronautics.” The evidence? If you build a copy with lighter balsa wood and add a vertical stabilizer, you get a so-so version of a toy glider. This kind of analysis is destructive, Gross and Levitt say, because it assumes “black children can be persuaded to take an interest in science only if they are fed an educational diet of fairy tales.”

While Gross and Levitt succeed in making light of their opponents, one is left wondering, as their own last chapter asks, “Does It Matter?” As they themselves admit, “scientists generally ignore these critiques,” so they are unlikely to affect the field. And with the exception of feminists, the other radicals they describe are at the periphery of the academic Left. If the issue at stake is the ability of the larger culture to interact with science, then scientists are partly to blame. Research contracts have professionalized and isolated many scientists into lab ghettos, where they have little contact with the general culture. In the end, it all seems like a lot of academic bickering that could be mitigated by a steady dose of mandatory English and biology courses.