

thing as basic as the passage of time from a totally different viewpoint. In *Mathematics Elsewhere*, Ascher, a professor emerita of mathematics at Ithaca College, seeks to enter the mathematical mindsets of other cultures through the Mayan calendar, the Marshall Islanders' intricate maps, the Tongan system of social ranking, the ornate flour figures that Tamil women would draw on their thresholds, and a number of other customs. The result is both fascinating and frustrating.

At times, the book provides a compelling glimpse into another civilization. For example, one chapter describes how the Marshall Islanders, who live on tiny islands scattered across a million square kilometers of the Pacific, were able to navigate vast stretches of seemingly featureless ocean. Ascher delves deeply into the islanders' once-mysterious methods, including the frail-looking frameworks of palm ribs lashed together with coconut fibers that guided canoes from island to island, and the training of the navigators (lying in their outriggers, they learned to sense the interplay of wind, water, and land).

By depicting "some mathematical ideas of people in traditional or small-scale cultures," Ascher aims to contribute to "a global and humanistic history of mathematics." But while the practices in the book are describable by

mathematics, there is, with few exceptions, little evidence that they reflect a different type of mathematical thought than Westerners'. Just because Marshall Islanders represented ocean swells rather than physical distances on their maps doesn't mean that they had a fundamentally different view of relationships in space, nor does our ability to represent Tamil drawings by a mathematical formalism known as an "L-system" mean that Tamil matrons implicitly understood formal systems and recursive algorithms.

When there *is* a clear mathematical conclusion to be drawn—for example, that the Maya used zero some centuries before it appeared in Europe—Ascher curiously shies away from it. This is particularly disappointing because the Mayan and other calendars give her the strongest case for seeing a different type of mathematics in another culture—cyclical calendars may have forced a few cultures' timekeepers to explore rudimentary ideas in mathematical group theory, a subject that didn't captivate the West until later.

Despite the weak mathematics, *Mathematics Elsewhere* provides interesting snapshots of different cultures. Perhaps it should have been titled simply *Elsewhere*.

—CHARLES SEIFE

HISTORY

PARIS 1919: Six Months That Changed the World.

By Margaret MacMillan. Random House.
570 pp. \$35

Occasionally an anecdote—such as the tale of Napoleon dousing himself daily in eau de cologne because he feared baths—casts intriguing new light on an event or a time we thought we knew. MacMillan, a professor of history at the University of Toronto, offers many such stories in this history of negotiations toward the Treaty of Versailles that ended World War I. One day, for example, Olwen Lloyd George, the attractive young daughter of British prime minister David Lloyd George, was invited to go for a drive with French premier Georges Clemenceau, a fiery old socialist nicknamed the Tiger. In the course of their excursion,

Clemenceau turned to Olwen and asked whether she appreciated art. Indeed, she replied, whereupon the old rogue whipped out a batch of naughty photos.

As that story reminds us, the Treaty of Versailles was not just an abortive attempt to bring peace to a devastated Europe. Nor was it simply an attempt by President Woodrow Wilson, with his Fourteen Points and League of Nations, to bring American fairness and decency to the squalid deal making of discredited European empires. It was also a bridging event that took Europe from the moral laxities of a bloody war into the Jazz Age.

"Elsa Maxwell, not yet the doyenne of international café society that she would become, secured a passage from New York as companion to a glamorous divorced woman who was on the

lookout for a new husband,” MacMillan records. “The two women gave marvelous parties in a rented house. General [John] Pershing supplied the drink; Maxwell played the latest Cole Porter songs on the piano; and the divorcée found her husband, a handsome American captain called Douglas MacArthur. Outside, early one morning, two young officers fought a duel with sabers over yet another American beauty.” This is a rather different account of what went on at Versailles from the classic one by Harold Nicolson, who maintained that participants kept themselves “alert, stern, righteous, and ascetic,” for “there was about us the halo of some divine mission.”

MacMillan’s splendidly readable book is enlivened not only by romantic dalliances but by a perspective that gives all the nations represented at Versailles their due. Her most prescient chapter relates the sad failure of the Chinese delegation to hold the Shantung Peninsula against Japan’s demands. The Chinese had put their faith in Wilson and his Fourteen Points. Wilson was sympathetic, but the Italians had already walked out because he wouldn’t

grant them the loot promised in secret clauses of the treaty that had brought them into the war. “If Italy remains away and Japan goes home, what remains of the League of Nations?” he plaintively asked. At the very moment China’s idealist and pro-Western intellectuals were abandoned, Russia’s new Bolshevik government offered to return all the concessions extracted from China by the tsars. Within months, the disappointed Chinese delegates to Versailles helped found the Chinese Communist Party.

MacMillan also relates a conversation between Wilson and the Australian prime minister, the cheeky Billy Hughes, who wanted to annex the former German colony of New Guinea. Wilson asked whether Christian missionaries would have open access to the pagan natives. Certainly, Hughes replied—“There are many days when the poor devils do not get half enough missionaries to eat.”

A reader enthralled by MacMillan’s wonderful anecdotes might easily fail to notice that this is an impressive work by a serious historian.

—MARTIN WALKER

CONTRIBUTORS

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