Deep sea thrills
Charles H. Langmuir


UNDERSEA exploration by submersible is one of the most captivating aspects of oceanography. Working in an environment more hostile than outer space, penetrating depths far greater than those accessible to military submarines, seeing parts of the Earth previously unseen by human eyes, discovering new life forms or ancient wrecks — how could anyone fail to be fascinated? Nonetheless, a particular talent is needed to tell the tales of deep-sea exploration in a way that keeps the interest of a lay audience. Who better to undertake this task than Robert Ballard, the man who led the expedition that discovered the wreck of the Titanic in 1985?

Ballard began his career as a naval officer in 1967, serving as the funding conduit between the US Office of Naval Research and Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution on Cape Cod, Massachusetts. Alvin, the Navy’s three-man research submarine, was then already Woods Hole’s pride and joy, and Ballard took a particular interest in its operations. While preserving his naval connections as a reserve officer, Ballard became a graduate student at Woods Hole. Exploiting his naval connections to the full, and with abundant energy, Ballard had the knack and good fortune to be in the right place at the right time, and has participated in many of the most important investigations of the deep sea over the past 20 years. Here, aided by a professional writer, he relates his experiences with a sense of salesmanship that can make even the mundane seem exciting. The result is a book that is difficult to put down, for it possesses many characteristics of a modern thriller.

As a thriller it is successful. The story begins in 1963 with a vivid account of the loss of the US nuclear submarine Thresher and the death of its entire crew as it sinks in 8,500 feet of water. It then jumps forward 20 years, with Ballard and his team mapping the disaster site using an undersea camera system. During this expedition, Ballard professes to have “found the Rosetta Stone that would decipher the mystery of deep ocean wrecks”. Next comes the successful conclusion of the search for the Titanic, “the Golden Fleece of undersea exploration”. In the first 20 pages we have been carried skilfully from disaster to triumph, and it is clear we are reading more of an adventure story than a routine scientific autobiography.

The professional scientist may take a sceptical view of Ballard’s literary liberties. Ballard often takes routine events in the life of a sea-going scientist and spins a yarn around them to create high drama. In recounting his PhD thesis defence, he has the reader believing that a single question from the audience could have put his career in jeopardy. He describes the recovery of a camera sledge onto a ship as if the weather were exceptionally dangerous, whereas a photograph of the same episode shows normal seas. Hyperbole makes the story and man larger than life: the deep sea poses a “relentless, unforgiving menace”; a ship’s engines are “powerful thrusters”; the van with routine technical equipment is a “nerv center crammed with electronics”; and the camera sledge (called “Argo”) is “a vehicle of exploration as audacious as its namesake in classical Greek mythology”. The narrative is often carried forward by dialogue, as if the events were unfolding on the printed page. Despite sometimes being contrived and over the top, the literary mechanisms work: they bring the discoveries to life and captivate the reader’s interest.

Although it is certainly a rousing good adventure story, the book must also be considered as a scientific autobiography, because it refers to the historical facts of discovery and presents the evolution of a man and his scientific career. Ballard compares his life to the epic voyages of a mythological hero, as enunciated so eloquently by Joseph Campbell. The outline and chapter headings of the book follow Campbell’s heroic paradigm, from early questioning, through great trials, to ultimate truth shared with the world. Ballard names his equipment “Argo”, “Jason” and “Medea”. In recounting how he was asked to present the case for submersibles to an early planning meeting for the FAMOUS project (a French-US venture that provided the first detailed examination of a mid-ocean ridge), Ballard portrays himself as a young hero, not yet a PhD, under the stern glare of the “Gods of Oceanography” set in opposition against him. After much discussion at the meeting, the submersible idea prevailed. Ballard concludes that “Alvin and I were given the chance to participate in one of the most important scientific expeditions of the century”. This tendency towards self-glorification, apparent in the book’s subtitle, and the depreciatory attitude towards many scientific collaborators, many of whom were the principal authors on subsequent scientific publications, detract from the historical value of the book.

The epic paradigm may work well for readers willing to accept Ballard as the conquering hero of the deep. Others less smitten may wonder about true heroism, particularly when Ballard describes how he handled the difficult interpersonal problems that are a part of any life. As Campbell emphasizes, the classic voyage of the hero is ultimately an inner journey, where wisdom is gained through suffering. Gilgamesh, through a moment of inopportunity, loses the elixir of eternal life before he returns to his kingdom, externally empty-handed. Humility before life’s power, recognition of good fortune as a gift rather than an egotistical accomplishment, a sense of being part of rather than above humanity — are not these essential
elements of the hero's journey? They are missing from Ballard's book.

Ballard reveals himself as a superb salesman, capable of delivering a glamorous view of sea-going exploration as mythic accomplishment. In this sense, he provides a useful public service: few scientists can convey their subject or the events in their life in such a gripping way. Those interested in deeper questions of discovery and the nature of man and science will need to look elsewhere.

Charles H. Langmuir is at the Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory, Columbia University, Palisades, New York 10964, USA.