

Johannes Mattes

Wissenskulturen des Subterranean. Vermittler im Spannungsfeld zwischen Wissenschaft und Öffentlichkeit. Ein biographisches Lexikon. [The culture of subterranean knowledge. Mediators in the field of tension between science and public. A biographical lexicon]

2019, Böhlau Verlag, Wien, Köln, Weimar, 572 p., ISBN 978-3-205-20678-1

Hardcover, € 60; eBook (pdf) € 49.99



The lexicon, written in German, begins with a brief but comprehensive introduction of 23 pages, and is followed by more than 500 pages with the biographies of 271 people who were active in the field of karst and caves in Austria and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, especially Slovenia, the Moravsky Kras (Czech Republic) and the Slovenský Kras (Slovakia). They lived in the period from the 16th century until recently. Their backgrounds differ in nationality, formal education, profession, scientific discipline and social group showing the diversity of the Danube Monarchy. The low number of women (14) results from the poor data situation for female cavers. The scientists and cavers described were mediators (go-betweens) connecting science and practice, social and ethnic groups and science and public.

Some of them, like Rosa Hofmann (1919-1943), had been lost from the collective memory, whereas others (e.g., F. Simony) are well known.

The introduction is written in scientific language, thus it is not always easy to read for amateurs, even if they are German speakers. The rest of the book is easy to understand and interesting to read not only for scientists. The introduction reflects on the history of speleology, the meaning and influence of cavers and caving to their age and vice versa, referring to philosophy and even psychology. Moreover, the introduction explains the bibliographic methods used and gives some general explanations (e.g., abbreviations).

The biographies were researched carefully with the help of caving clubs, cavers, scientists, and of course by means of literature, archives, and registers. Several loops of questions to informants were part of the process of writing the lexicon. The selection of the cavers described in the lexicon was published in relevant journals and the feedback was considered. The biographies are written in a very factual way, respecting the achievements of the cavers and scientists, describing their contribution to caving and speleology. Also, some uncomfortable facts come out all the more clearly, and the entanglement of people in history becomes explicit. Political and historical circumstances had impact on the cavers biographies, the development of caving clubs, and the research itself.

The author, Johannes Mattes, is himself a go-between a historian, working at the Austrian Academy of Sciences and an active caver.

Monika Schöner