

Alistair Sponsel, 2008. "Review of *Seafaring Scientist: Alfred Goldsborough Mayor, Pioneer in Marine Biology* by Lester D. Stephens and Dale R. Calder." *International Journal of Maritime History*, 20: 386.

Review of Lester D. Stephens and Dale R. Calder, *Seafaring Scientist: Alfred Goldsborough Mayor, Pioneer in Marine Biology* (2007, University of South Carolina Press).

This is a sympathetic biography of the American zoologist Alfred Goldsborough Mayor (born A.G. Mayer; 1868-1922), who was the founding director of the Carnegie Institution of Washington's Department of Marine Biology. In this capacity, Mayor operated the first tropical marine research station in the Americas, at the Dry Tortugas islands in the Gulf of Mexico, from 1904 until his death. This laboratory has received less attention from historians of science than the similar institutions at Naples and Woods Hole, which both preceded and outlasted the Tortugas station, and this is the first biography of its founder.

The authors' modest argument is that Mayor deserves wider recognition than he enjoys today for his administrative activities and his research on jellyfishes and coral reefs. Lester Stephens, a historian who has previously written about other American naturalists, and Dale Calder, a marine zoologist, aim to right this wrong primarily by "present[ing] a detailed account of his life and scientific contributions for both specialists and the general reader." Stephens and Calder do give a thorough narrative of Mayor's private and professional life, as revealed by his publications and correspondence. Mayor was the son of one of the foremost American physicists of the nineteenth century, Alfred Marshall Mayer. He was lured into marine research by Alexander Agassiz (himself the son of an illustrious zoologist), who took him on cruises to the Caribbean and Australia while Mayor was a graduate student at Harvard. Despite his subsequent marriage to the daughter of yet another leading light of American science, Mayor continued to spend a staggering proportion of his life doing field work, including long annual stays at the Tortugas lab and a series of expeditions to the Pacific and the Torres Straits during what turned out to be his final decade. He was by turns a taxonomist who went outside the museum to collect his own specimens, a physiologist who built his laboratory at a remote field site, and a traveler who ventured around the world to perform experimental tests of coral reef formation. Stephens and Calder ably demonstrate the serious costs that such a career exacted on Mayor's health and his family life. They also give an evenhanded account of his devotion to eugenics, describing how the plague of chronic illnesses that afflicted him and his wife agonized Mayor's conscience as well as his body. The deft descriptions of Mayor's taxonomic work on medusae (jellyfish) bear the hallmark of Calder's expertise on the subject, and are augmented by beautiful color reproductions of images from his masterpiece, *Medusae of the World* (1910).

Stephens and Calder also promise to place Mayor “in the context of his time,” but they do so in a very limited way. For example, Stephens and Calder show that World War I threatened Mayor’s ability to travel for research and prompted him to change the spelling of his German surname, but they treat these events as idiosyncrasies of his biography without indicating that they were symptomatic of broader problems that World War I posed, to internationalism in the sciences and for the identity of German-Americans. This narrow focus on Mayor’s personal experience may be due to the authors’ heavy reliance on sources written by, or directly to, Mayor himself. More substantial discussions of his colleagues’ interactions with each other would have enriched our understanding of their communications with him, and a deeper engagement with secondary sources would have helped the authors use Mayor’s life story to shed a wider light on the field in which he worked and the time and place in which he lived. They frequently cite the rise of “modern biology” to explain Mayor’s shift toward experimental research in later years, but do not ask what his career might reveal about modern biology. He is quoted as claiming, in the introduction to his magnum opus, that “I have always felt that each working naturalist owes it as a duty to science to produce some general systematic work, and this has been an actuating motive in the production of this book.” If Mayor indeed felt compelled by such a moral obligation, what person or social norm might have persuaded him to do so? Or was this comment an implicit critique of experimenters by a man whose reputation to that point was primarily as a taxonomist? Could it have been a signal that Mayor now intended to set taxonomic work aside? Stephens and Calder repeatedly show the knack for finding quotations that bristle with nuance, but they rarely provide critical readings that might have made the book more thought provoking for general readers and given it a wider audience among historians.

It is a shame that Stephens and Calder have not pursued such inquiries, which would have helped to clarify the argument of the book. To what extent does Mayor deserve our attention for being extraordinary? In what respects is he worth studying because his life was representative of others’ whose biographies must remain unwritten? This book gives Mayor the “life and letters” treatment that he would have recognized as the appropriate posthumous memorial to a hero of science. Like the best works in that genre, *Seafaring Scientist* will continue to pay tribute to its subject by encouraging and enabling other scholars to find their own answers to these questions.

Alistair Sponsel
Department of History
Princeton University
129 Dickinson Hall
Princeton, NJ 08544
USA

asponsel@princeton.edu