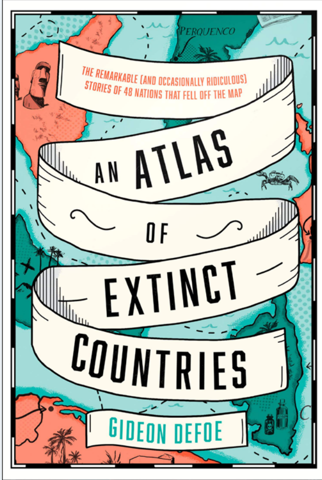

AN ATLAS OF EXTINCT COUNTRIES

By Gideon Defoe

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245 pages

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Review by: Leo Dillon

Let's begin with the title. *An Atlas of Extinct Countries* is not an atlas, at least not by any definition that likely readers of this journal would accept. The small maps contained in the book cartoonishly illustrate the text they support, but are not its main element. It's also a stretch to describe some of the territorial entities included in this collection as countries. As the author cheerfully warns the reader in his introduction, if you "want a book that sticks to a firm definition of what a country is, you are owed an apology" (15–16). He admits that one of the places he describes, Libertalia, "is (*almost* certainly) a flat-out lie" (144). But it's at least true that these entities are all extinct—or at least not currently breathing.

An Atlas of Extinct Countries is a humorous take on forty-eight places that at some time in history were considered by at least someone to be independent or autonomous. The author, Gideon Defoe, summarizes this work as "the obituaries of the nations that fell off the map" (15), but don't expect a serious exposition or a comprehensive history of these lost places. Beginning with the subtitle of his introduction, "Generous to a Fault, They Died Doing What They Loved: Exporting Tin," Defoe sets the tone of irreverent, Monty Pythonesque humor that pervades what follows.

Everything about this smallish book (245 8½ × 5½-inch pages) is brief. It contains an introduction, forty-eight descriptions of extinct entities that form the main part of the book, a chapter on flags and another on anthems, a select bibliography, and some acknowledgments. Each of these parts contains only two or three pages of text, except for the chapter on flags, whose interspersed illustrations expand it to four pages. There is a lot of blank space; some pages have only an illustration in the corner, such as an orangutan, a burning sailing ship, or a unicorn, superfluously lifted from the map that accompanies that section.

The forty-eight entities of the main part of the book are divided among four sections: "Chancers and Crackpots," "Mistakes and Micronations," "Lies and Lost Kingdoms," and "Puppets and Political Footballs." The alliteration of these titles, and a lack of any further explanation on what they mean, are likely clues that one should not take them too seriously. For instance, "The Kingdom of Sikkim, 1642–1975" is listed under "Lies and Lost Kingdoms." Yes, it was a kingdom that is now lost, but the same could be said of the Kingdom of Bavaria or the Kingdom of Sarawak, both listed under "Chancers and Crackpots." That is also where "Easter Island (Rapa Nui), 1200–1888" is placed, presumably in reference to the rapacious settler Jean-Baptiste Dutrou-Bournier who appeared on the island in 1866, five hundred and fifty years into the era described in the title, and was killed there eight years later. It feels as if Defoe put it in this section because he had no better place for it.

Each of the forty-eight entity sections begins with a summary page, followed by a page with a map, and then a two- to three-page description. The summary page contains the years or dates that the entity existed, or the period as described in the book, some applicable facts—such

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as population, capital, currency, cause of death (usually sarcastic, sometimes hilarious), its current political status—and an introductory paragraph that's often a conversational tangent rather than a summary of the subject entity. "The Kingdom of Corsica, March–November 1736," for example, is summarized thus:

> Theodore Stephan Freiherr von Neuhoff—of "fine form and handsome face"—left a trail of debts, inspired an opera and a couple of novels, got punched by jealous husbands, and basically did all the eighteenth-century Errol Flynn stuff you could hope for. (36)

While this is an amusing introduction to the chancer or crackpot von Neuhoff (both apply) who "founded" the "Kingdom," it is not very relevant to the entity itself.

Fitting the mood of the book, the maps are playful. Drawn by illustrator Joy Gosney, they are highly generalized but appear spatially accurate, and, in lieu of geographic detail, they include drawings that illustrate points made in the text. My favorite, from the map of "The Free State of Bottleneck, 1919–23," on page 115, is an image of the Archbishop of Mainz with mice crawling over him (Intrigued? You'll have to read the book). There is neither scale, nor latitude and longitude on the maps. Instead of the latter, the entities are located using the what3words geocoding system, a set of three random words that identifies a three-square-meter piece of the Earth's surface, an area about the size of a big truck. Defoe writes that "One of the benefits of this is that it's much easier to remember three words than a string of numbers" (18). Fair enough, but even the smallest of his chosen territories–a maternity ward in a hospital in Ottawa, Canada–consists of hundreds of these three-word units, and the larger ones contain hundreds of millions of them. How, I wonder, does he choose which one to use?

The descriptions of the territorial entities are often anecdotal, meant as much to amuse as to inform. The narrative style is akin to listening to a knowledgeable raconteur who can't help wandering into his own stream of consciousness and then ends his tale abruptly, leaving you wanting more. After reading many of these narratives, I found myself searching the internet for articles on these places, both to verify the more ludicrous claims presented in Defoe's writing (they all check out) and to satisfy an itch to know more than he was giving me in his all-too short vignettes. The footnotes often don't help in this sense; rather than the traditional usage of adding detail to a point in the text or citing references, they most often go off on a marginally-related tangent, like this sentence and corresponding footnote from "The Kingdom of Bavaria, 1805–1918":

> Ludwig I was both a patron of the arts and a notorious lothario[5] (he commissioned a series of portraits of "famous beauties of the day") but the old letch ([age] 61) met his match in Lola Montez ([age] 28). (28)

> [5]Ludwig I's wedding was the first Oktoberfest. Bavaria would later make the adoption of its beer purity law a condition of joining the German Empire. (28)

Or this one, from "The Republic of Vemerana, May–September 1980":

> Third time's a charm, so they [the Phoenix Foundation] tried again in 1980, now targeting the island of Espiritu Santo.[46] (96)

> [46] A cult on one of the islands today worships Prince Philip, which suggests a shortage of decent stuff to worship. (96)

Besides having nothing to do with Espiritu Santo, or the organization that's the subject of the sentence, the phrase "one of the islands" is unexplained (it refers to the islands that make up modern-day Vanuatu, which is not mentioned by this point in the narrative).

Defoe's style is distinctively British, and some of his cultural references were lost on this American reviewer, who had to look up Father Ted, Bear Grylls, and Mills & Boon to understand the narrative point being made. Those who enjoy British-English terminology are in for a treat here, with descriptive phrases such as "pointless juicers," "swish outfits," "imperialistic git," and "swank about." But while he sincerely derides the racism, greed, and other horrors of colonialism and imperialism that launched many of these territories, Defoe's sarcasm can verge on tone deaf, as in the following from "The Fiume Endeavor, 1919–1920":

> If you could ignore the occasional lynching and didn't mind the endless speeches crammed with those rhetorical flourishes that dictators

> everywhere would soon adopt as their own, life in Fiume was a party. (68–69)

The concluding chapters on flags and anthems are amusing but unnecessary afterthoughts, written in the same style as the rest of the book. There are five flags briefly discussed, and one of them lists the wrong entity (the Free State of Fiume of 1920–1924, as opposed to The Fiume Endeavor of 1919–1920) and names the wrong constellation on the flag, calling it Orion instead of the Big Dipper, in Ursa Major. The two-page chapter on anthems starts with a few droll observations, such as "For hardcore masochists, the Greek anthem goes on for 158 verses. Japan gets it done in four lines" (241). It goes on to discuss one anthem each under five "approaches": Emo (Kingdom of Corsica), Boastful (Kingdom of Araucanía & Patagonia), Boastful Yet Also Underwhelming (People's Republic of Tannu Tuva), Lazy (Neutral Moresnet), and Tardy (Yugoslavia).

It would be churlish not to point out that, with all its academic faults, this book can be both informative and a real hoot. If you can overlook the occasional whimsical treatment of real-world misery and the marginal relevance of some of the content, Defoe's narrative is often laugh-out-loud funny and his idiosyncratic perspective can be astute. For instance, in describing the formation of Yugoslavia as a socialist state after the internecine Balkan warfare of the early twentieth century, he writes: "Mutual war crimes aren't the most solid basis for a nation, but over the next 20 years Tito managed to wodge everything back together" (234).

You will likely be introduced to fascinating places. I had never heard of the Republic of Cospaia, a tiny independent state born of a territorial dispute between the Grand Duchy of Tuscany and the Papal States. Legally autonomous and free from the Pope's authority, this village and its farmland throve for almost 400 years, partly as a free trade zone but mostly through the production and sale of tobacco, a crop prohibited by the Vatican. I'm grateful to the author for introducing this captivating political anomaly to me in such a humorous and interesting way.

If I criticize the sections for being too brief and often incomplete, well, that's not always a bad thing; sometimes a short read is what you're after. And while the what3words classification system may not make much practical sense in this context, it yields such results as swinging.melon.widest or whimpered.harder.geek, toponymic handles perfectly in keeping with the flippant tone of the book.

I cannot recommend *An Atlas of Extinct Countries* to those hoping to pore over detailed maps of bygone political entities, or to those seeking a complete or scholarly account of the same—but if you have an interest in geopolitical history and want it served in short bursts of intelligently crafted, irreverent humor, then this book could be well worth your consideration.