



Chatwin



BOOKS & MEDIA

gossip, and brilliant mimic. Uncomfortable at home, Chatwin embraced the Olde English ethos of global exploration. "I find I can be English and behave like an Englishman," he said, "only if I'm not here."

3. *Marco Polo: From Venice to Xanadu*, by Laurence Bergreen (2007) How's this for adventure? Seventeen-year-old Italian kid accompanies dad to China on camel, hires on as consigliere to Kublai Khan, stays for 17 years, returns home, gets captured in war and thrown in jail, and writes a memoir that stays in print, more or less, for 700 years. That's **Marco Polo's** story, and biographer Laurence Bergreen tells it masterfully in this Tom Jonesian romp through 13th-century China. Young Marco encounters both pleasures of the flesh ("Take my daughter—please," says the village headman) and homicidal hosts, marking his as one of the luckiest lives ever lived.

Lives Well Lived (Mostly)

> Our favorite biography of the year celebrates Jacques Cousteau (at right). Like any good life story, it's a tale of unchecked ambition and poor behavior. And since it left us wanting more, we decided to count down the greatest adventure bios ever written. Clear space on the bookshelf. BY BRUCE BARCOTT

1. *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West*, by Wallace Stegner (1954)

Rarely have subject and biographer so fortuitously met: The great and awful story of **John Wesley Powell**, the man who mapped the American West, is amplified by the literary dexterity of Stegner, arguably the West's greatest novelist and environmental advocate. Powell was a one-armed Civil War vet and self-taught naturalist, and his 1869 trip down the Colorado River wasn't just one of the most storied American journeys of exploration; it turned Powell into the West's most tragic advocate. He saw the land as an arid desert that needed careful stewardship, but in D.C.'s halls of power his voice was drowned out by profiteers hell-bent on exploitation. Stegner's book gets this, and so it isn't merely a biography of the man who mapped the American West. It is *the* story of the American West, in all its glory, exploitation, and ruination.

2. *Bruce Chatwin: A Biography*, by Nicholas Shakespeare (1999) Some say modern adventure travel was invented by Tony and Maureen Wheeler, creators of the *Lonely Planet* guidebooks. I say the patent

belongs to **Bruce Chatwin**. In classics like *The Songlines* and *In Patagonia*, the Brit showed that the sublime was still waiting for anyone with a passport. Shakespeare's biography reveals the author as ten times the character he portrayed in his own books: a world-class raconteur, incorrigible

REQUIRED READING

Lord of the Underworld

Jacques Cousteau: The Sea King, by Brad Matsen (PANTHEON, \$28)

BY THE END OF HIS LIFE, Jacques Cousteau seemed a caricature of himself. The red cap, the thick accent—the Cousteau aesthetic was so overripe that director Wes Anderson used it as the template for *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*. But this month, Brad Matsen reminds us that Cousteau earned his fame honestly: He invented the modern understanding of the sea. Matsen, an ocean writer and film producer, proves himself a master of biography on his first try. Born in 1911 to a landed family in a village far from the coast of France, Jacques-Yves Cousteau discovered his love for the sea as a naval officer. He wanted to be a filmmaker, and many of his innovations were driven by a desire to take his cameras into the deep. Thus his creation of the underwater movie (1938), a scuba tank and regulator (1940s), and the wildlife TV show *The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau* (1966). He was no saint: Matsen deals with his dalliances (the guy kept a second, secret, family), the callousness he showed his sons (he sued Jean-Michel over his use of the family name), and the ever-present tension between science and showmanship. But *The Sea King* never loses sight of Cousteau's accomplishments. "Everything seemed like playing to him," Jean-Michel once remarked. And it was. For centuries, the romance of the sailor's life had been extolled in poem and song. Cousteau showed us that things were far more alluring under the ship. —B.B.

