

*Islands in a forgotten sea: A history of the Seychelles, Mauritius,  
Réunion and Madagascar*

**(Pretoria, Protea Book House, 2010, pp. 448, map, metric  
table, table of place names, list of sources, index. ISBN: 978-  
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## **TV Bulpin**

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TV Bulpin, who died in 1999, enjoys a deserved reputation as the doyen of twentieth-century South African travel writers. As a young man, he earned a living through his keen photographic and cinematographic interests, but from the early 1950s he became a prolific writer and publisher, and produced many hundreds of pamphlets, booklets and articles in addition to his 29 books during a long and successful career. The main focus of this prodigious output dealt with southern Africa south of the Zambezi River; *Islands in a forgotten sea* is Bulpin's only major publication on an area outside the mainland subcontinent.

The book was first published in 1958 by Howard Timmins, and a second edition appeared in 1969, under the Books of Africa label, Bulpin's own publishing house. It has been out of print for a long time, and Protea Book House presumably took a decision that a new edition would appeal to interested readers who seek well-informed material on the region, as well as visitors and tourists to the islands of the western Indian Ocean.

New editions of books invariably offer revisions and updates of an earlier text. This third edition of *Islands in a forgotten sea*, however, is unaltered from the two earlier editions, which is scarcely surprising given that the author has been deceased for over a decade. The only differences are that the few somewhat garish and clichéd photographs have been dropped, as have the numerous and much more appealing line drawings that appeared throughout the second edition. One marked improvement, however, is in the index, which is greatly expanded and hence significantly more worthwhile than the former rudimentary versions. This is certainly a welcome improvement.

Essentially, therefore, a text created in the late 1950s has been presented to a modern readership, and it is naturally reflective of the state of writing on Africa and the world during that period. While not entirely neglectful of the histories of indigenous peoples, Bulpin's book is essentially an account of the activities of Europeans in Madagascar, the Seychelles, the Comores and the Mascarenhas (Mauritius, Réunion and Rodrigues) island groups. Its focus is therefore overwhelmingly on the era of European conquest, trade and settlement between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. This naturally included extensive interaction between Europeans and local people, but all the same, European actions in western Indian Ocean settings do dominate the text. Coverage of the region's history before the seventeenth century is scanty, while Bulpin barely touches on the twentieth century at all – for him, history ends at the end of the nineteenth century. The sweeping general subtitle of the book, “a history of...”, could therefore be deemed somewhat misleading, both because of its concentration on European actions and of its coverage in time.

It also needs to be noted that *Islands in a forgotten sea* belongs to a somewhat florid genre of travel writing, which, though an enduring tradition, will not have universal appeal in the early twenty-first century. Readers are introduced to the Sea of Zanj in the first chapter, the Arab name for the western Indian Ocean, meaning “Sea of the Blacks”, and there is more than a suggestion of the dark and enigmatic Africa stereotyped by many European writers in what

follows. It is a “fabulous” sea, a “sea of legends”, a “mysterious wilderness of water”, containing “dreamlike jungles” of coral reefs around “lost” islands, whose formation was a “spectacle” that was “truly fit for the eyes of the gods” (pp. 11–15, *passim*). This provided a setting for “legend” and “restless adventure”, “romance” and “mystery”, “myth” and “quaintness”, “strange tribes” and “exotic” behaviour (pp. 12–27, *passim*). Such descriptions and characterisations, though possessing remarkable durability in some popular writing, have generally fallen into disuse in more serious works.

Despite these limitations, Bulpin’s study of the western Indian Ocean has considerable merit, and there are two main reasons which make the republication of *Islands in a forgotten sea* worthwhile. First, his extensive research and command of detail demand great respect. He has immersed himself in the histories, memoirs and travel accounts of the region, as well as various official records. His source list is extensive – though serious scholars will be frustrated by the absence of full data (indeed, the publisher could have used the opportunity to tidy the list and to bring it in line with contemporary citation practice). Bulpin is particularly secure in the English and French material, and has taken rather less trouble with Portuguese and Dutch sources; all the same, the source list reflects wide reading and familiarity with nineteenth and twentieth-century published literature on the region.

Second, Bulpin possesses impressive narrative skills, which of course are central to his success as a writer. Although his style will not be to every reader’s tastes, he recounts the history of the colonial powers and their various successes and many failures in a vivid and engaging fashion. He is an engaged and passionate narrator, who relishes the cut and thrust of history. He is unsurprisingly not deeply concerned about process and underlying motive, and much more interested in human actions and folly (of which countless examples are recounted here). Thus, the endeavours of various seamen, governors, merchants, settlers, missionaries and pirates are recorded, often in explicit detail as the author relishes unusual, irrational or eccentric behaviour and actions.

Arguably, the most frustrating feature of this book is its absence of footnotes or endnotes, being a product as it is of a less rigorous age. All the same, I have used earlier editions of this book with great profit in the preparation of lectures on the Indian Ocean region, and I welcome its reissue. At a time when Indian Ocean studies and transnational concerns have become prominent, the book should appeal to historians and scholars, particularly if it is taken

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on its own terms (indeed, I wonder if Bulpin would today characterise this as a “forgotten sea” given the upsurge in study of the area). The volume’s 448 pages possess considerable substance, and ought not to be haughtily ignored or dismissed as mere popular journalism.

The book’s main appeal will probably lie with those with a general rather than an academic interest in the area. Bulpin produced at least part of the book “in a tiny bungalow beside a moonlit beach on the island of Mauritius” (p. 25), and *Islands in a forgotten sea* is perhaps best enjoyed in relaxed circumstances under a palm tree on a tropical beach, rather than studied with a critical eye under artificial lights in the confined spaces of a research library.