

*Fireworking* is not just the history of a firework company although it does briefly explain its origins and development – and it is all the better for that. Nothing dry here (although occasionally there are lists of participants or employees which will please them, their relatives and friends but which are easily skipped by those to whom the names mean little). What is remarkable about this book is the stunning photography – and the events which it captures, and the text. I am not sure that anyone does leave books carelessly on a coffee table to be idly picked up by visitors as the term ‘coffee table books’ implies but – if anyone does - he will find few within the firework fraternity or even those having no such interest able to resist the colour and impact of the book’s design. But, to see the book merely as a vehicle to display The World Famous’ firework events would be an error. Yes, it is stunning, but the text does what *Fireworks* has shown over the years: that there are a great number of exponents of the firework art who can write eruditely about their work and capture our attention.

Organised – a book must have a structure – by the events staged by the company, the text is not stultified by its sequence. One needs to know exactly what The World Famous was. And this shows it was a firework company that did not stage firework displays but produced community theatre using a setting or concept. It was an anarchic organisation which rebelled against the establishment while often being employed by it. It adopted risk as part of its *raison d’être* – to achieve impact and a close-up experience. It even used small shop fireworks to achieve immediacy similar to that achieved in the nearness of the back garden display, although in such numbers that their acquisition often proved a problem. One sparkler can be exciting for a child – thousands fired at once can be a major experience.

The book starts with the origins of the company – and these are covered with a humour which is typical of the book. Having grown out of similar organisations – for which some of its workers originally worked – it decided upon the name of The World Famous Fireworkers – the ‘Fireworkers’ bit was often omitted. If the ‘world famous’ tag was a somewhat misleading claim – admitted in the book – for a company that ‘consisted of a twenty foot container in a Kentish wood, a few boxes of fireworks... and a very rudimentary website’, it was one which impressed the government of Nigeria who commissioned a display to mark the handing over of power from military rule to a civilian, democratic government.

The list of events and the international coverage shows that there was soon some justification for a name which few of its originators could have envisaged. While one cannot fail to be impressed by its achievements, this is in no way an advertisement of them – after all it would scarcely be worthwhile publicising with self-praise a company which no longer exists.

Contributors – and there are many – to the book write well and their enthusiasm is easy to see. Even if what they describe is often of an alarming nature. There is an account of the result of injuries – the performers and operators exposed themselves to incredible risks – to one ‘Tom’ whose experiences ended in intensive care section of the burns unit of East Grinstead’s famous Queen Victoria Hospital. Crackers! – the book suggests – was an event which exemplified this, epitomising The World Famous’ emphasis on immediacy for the audience. It is surprising that – given the restrictions of this health and safety conscious world – they got away with it. Some potential employers backed off – Belfast Council being one – but this did not stop the majority, such as the National Theatre and, surprisingly, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council commissioning events. If there is an over-use of extraneous industrial language from some of the contributors, one can perhaps put this down to the excited flow of their accounts which reflect the turmoil of setting up and the frenzy of the resultant fiery action.

While most firework events took place outdoors, The World Famous did indulge in indoor fireworks too. Their claim was that these employed bigger fireworks. Risk again. But, if descriptions are in no way sanitised – far from it – they encompass the encountering of the difficulties of rigging fireworks which will particularly appeal (and with which they can identify!) to the reading fireworker. Those used to trudging across muddy fields and dealing with difficult authorities and event organisers will read with interest and be able to sympathise with such as the passage which shows that weather proofing was liable to destroy sequence timing!

There are practical issues too – honesty prevails. So we learn what was intended, how it was conceived and planned but, tellingly, what happened in practice. It also tells how the latter experience led to development so that many projects finally looked very different from their initial conception.

The story is not entirely told by the practitioners – comments from outsiders, often from national newspapers, indicate the reputation which had been achieved by the end. For the end of the book is, sadly, the end of the company – perhaps a little starkly explained by a press notice. Clearly The World Famous wished to go out at the top but, in producing this record of their activities, they have provided enthusiasts with a colourful and well-designed account which deserves a place on all pyrotechnophiles’ bookshelves.