

A History of the Arctic: Nature, Exploration and Exploitation

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A HISTORY OF THE ARCTIC: NATURE, EXPLORATION AND EXPLOITATION. By John McCannon. London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 2012. 349 pp. \$35.00 (hardcover). ISBN: 978-1-78023-018-4.

A few years ago, I wrote a book about the prehistory of the higher latitudes. A HISTORY OF THE ARCTIC more or less takes up where my book ended, and complements the latter with a detailed account of events after 1500 C.E. (some prehistory is covered as well). A general theme, stated at the conclusion of the first chapter, is that the delicate character of the Arctic environment has never been able to withstand the destructive blundering of the industrial civilizations that began to invade it several centuries ago. With atmospheric carbon dioxide restored to its Pliocene level this year, the final chapter apparently is underway.

From a historian's perspective, the Arctic is unusual as a region defined by climate and environment, not historic ethnic boundaries. It imposes special demands on the historian, who must possess more than a superficial grounding in the geography, natural history, and ethnography of the region, along with some knowledge of the history of the varied nations that either border the Arctic or have intruded on it to some degree. A HISTORY OF THE ARCTIC has been written by someone who meets these requirements, which is fortunate for readers. Another recurring theme in the book is the attitude towards the Arctic created by writers and artists and their impact on its history after 1500.

Despite a relaxed writing style, the author seems to have aimed the book at a small subset of the general public. This becomes apparent almost immediately, as he discusses various definitions and terms in the opening chapter that, while matters of concern to academic folks, are unlikely to engage a wider audience. Following the first chapter, which also provides an environmental overview with some recent geologic history, the author devotes a full chapter to prehistory and ethnohistory. I think he has done a nice job with this chapter. There are a few errors in it, but they are minor. The author has the advantage of approaching the subject as a non-archaeologist, which leads him away from the temptation to provide readers with details about multi-faceted burins, harpoon-head classification, and the like. One omission from the opening chapter struck me: although THE BERING LAND BRIDGE is referenced in the back, there is no mention of the influence of the late David Hopkins' research and writing on the concept of Beringia and general interest in the subject.

It was the increasing northward push of nation states after 1500 that took the Arctic off the course it had followed since the Last Glacial Maximum. The pattern accounts for the asymmetry in the history of the region between the 16th and 19th centuries—at first there were no nation states in northern North America to invade the Arctic. In Europe, Novgorod began to probe into the Far North well before 1500, while the Vikings established early and ultimately unsuccessful settlements in southern Greenland as early as 1000 C.E. This asymmetry ensured that native Arctic peoples in Europe, including the Sami and Nentsy, were affected relatively early by intrusions from the south.

Two core chapters of the book are devoted to Arctic exploration and exploitation between 1500 and World War I. Although these chapters are divided by the year 1800, the author does not seem to attach any special importance to the beginning of the 19th century as a chronological marker. The shift towards broad-scale invasion arrived in the late 19th century with a major influx of non-native peoples into southern Siberia and the growth of mining in the Scandinavian Arctic and Alaska/northern Canada—all associated with railroad construction by the beginning of the 20th century.

There is a substantive chapter on the period between the end of World War II and the collapse of the Soviet Union (i.e., the Cold War), and a shorter but important chapter on the two world wars that anticipated it. The closing years of World War I brought the first modern military intrusions to the Arctic, including Allied supply routes and subsequent intervention in Arctic Russia. The early decades of the 20th century also saw the first intrusion of aircraft in the Arctic, which had an enormous impact on the region because of the scarcity of roadways and railways (and icy constraints on both riverine and marine navigation).

The confrontation between the Soviet Union and the U.S.A., which was an outgrowth of World War II, led to an unprecedented military-industrial invasion of the Arctic. Much of what happened seems to have been a consequence of the fact that the U.S.S.R. lacked forward bases with respect to the U.S.A. (at least until Cuba became a possibility). Their most credible strategic military threat during the early years of the Cold War was bombers or missiles over the North Pole. Military bases and radar stations were constructed (or expanded) on both sides of the Arctic and subarctic with major impacts on the local populations and environments. The author emphasizes that attitudes towards the Arctic as a remote wasteland contributed to some of the worst excesses, which included above-ground thermonuclear tests on Novaya Zemlya and a serious proposal (eventually abandoned) to use multiple thermonuclear devices to blast a harbor out of the north Alaskan coast near Cape Thompson (the infamous "Operation Chariot").

One issue that is not addressed in the final chapter (post-1991 period) is the impact of cable television and the internet on local communities in the Arctic, especially the Western Arctic. Overall, however, I think this is an excellent synthesis and likely to become a widely referenced source on the Arctic.

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