Imagining the Supernatural North

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Imagining the Supernatural North. Edited by Elea-
nor Rosamund Barraclough, Danielle Marie Cudmore,
and Stefan Donecker. Edmonton: Polynya Press (Uni-
versity of Alberta Press), 2016. 328 pp., index. $29.95

The introduction to Imagining the Supernatural
North invokes Margaret Atwood’s “True North,” and
in some ways this book is a long and colorful coda to
that definitive essay. It explores the notion of the North
as the realm of the supernatural within the European
tradition from antiquity to the present day.

This is a North populated by gods, witches, real and
imagined invaders, allegorical figures, monsters from the
margins of maps, spirits, demons, and trolls. It has no
firm geographical boundaries. In some cases, the con-
cept of the North maps on to current understandings
of the Arctic. At other times it is instead a cardinal di-
rection, or a relative position. Ideas about supernatural
aspects of the North diverged widely in the Western tra-
dition, but the North remained the blank space on the
map, an uncanny, hostile, but alluring place that proved
a convenient screen for projecting hopes and fears, or
acting as a foil for European conditions.

Sixteen scholars from twelve countries across Europe,
North America, and Australia explore particular instanc-
es of the North’s symbolic geography. Chapters proceed
chronologically from Jewish lore and ancient Greek
proverbs and myths; through views of monsters, spirits,
and women in medieval and the early modern period;
to nineteenth-century travelers’ tales and naturalists’ ac-
counts; to modern reimaginings of Northern motifs in
science fiction, black metal music, and identity politics.

Actors in each of these times show their own “im-
aginatio borealis,” an imagined North. The ancient world
looked North for invaders, gods, or intermediaries be-
tween gods and mortals who were both and neither.

Medieval cosmology traded in that ancient dichotomy
for more negative monsters and demons, and looked for
their qualities in people—especially women. Witches
and demons disappeared during the Enlightenment, re-
placed by an image of the North as a romantic landscape
or a fatal beauty to be conquered. In the modern pe-
riod, the idea of the North expresses a longing for the
paranormal and mysterious, the spiritual, or the uncor-
rupted.

In some ways this book isn’t about the North at all.
While it turns on that symbolic geography, it roves over
a variety of European topics in literature, history, and
anthropology. Chapters review the theological/medi-
cal view of women held by medieval academics; the
turn of sagas set in Greenland from realistic to fantastic
landscapes and people; a forlorn dream-story by Jo-
hannes Koepler, published posthumously; and the ap-
pearance of Nordic supernatural themes in black metal
and death metal. Of particular note is the last chapter,
by Erica Hill, who takes on the implicit assumption
that shamanism equals religious practice in the North.
She argues that the Western focus on shamanism con-
structs a myth of its own, obscuring the beliefs and
ritual practices of hunters and their wives that were
the majority of religious activity in the contact-period
circumpolar North.

If the category of the North as seen in this book
seems sometimes too à la Lakoff, in the end it shows in
what a variety of ways we can project otherness on a
conveniently remote geography. Perhaps consciousness
of the shadowy and persistent images our culture bears
of the North can help us see more clearly the rapidly
changing Arctic that is becoming our reality.

Notes and bibliographies throughout, and a really
excellent index at the end, round out a good scholarly
work. It belongs on the shelf of polar collections along-
side Arctic Discourses and other works on construction of
the North in Western thought. It will also fit well into
collections on the history of Western science, literature,
or religion.

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