

THE LAST IMAGINARY PLACE: A HUMAN HISTORY OF THE ARCTIC WORLD. By ROBERT MCGHEE. Toronto: Key Porter Books Limited, 2004. 296 p., maps, illustrations, color plates, index, bib. Hardbound. Cdn\$39.95.

The word “Arctic” to most people calls forth images of ice and scoured bedrock, perpetual days and nights, polar bears, seals, Eskimos and reindeer herders, dramatic explorations and daring escapes, tragedies, and triumphs. In most renderings, the Arctic is a place apart, different, amazing, and at once inhospitable and alluring. In *The Last Imaginary Place: A Human History of the Arctic World*, Robert McGhee presents a circumpolar history of the Arctic that shows how Southerners came to share many of the more fantastic or romantic images of this region. It turns out that the popular image of the Arctic for those living to the South, even for many who have spent years in the North, is heavily refracted by filters of half-truths, myths, and fantasies that were by-products of the history of Southerners’ speculation about, exploration and exploitation of, and accommodation to the northern reaches of the globe. McGhee peels away many of these layers and shows us how these filters have not only twisted the popular image, but also led to astonishing natural and human tragedies. It is only when we come to see the Arctic *not* as a place apart, mythic, remote, austere, romantic, but rather as *a place connected*, part of the fabric of world history, that we will be able to develop more appropriate attitudes and policies. In a characteristically well written and convincingly argued 13 chapters, McGhee examines the development of the Arctic image from the speculation and explorations of Greek astronomers and explorers in the first millennium BC to the military policies and installations of the Cold War.

Chapter 1 presents a general summary of Arctic colonization in the context of world prehistory, from the last ice age to urbanism, and sets the stage for how the “developed” world came to view Arctic peoples as anomalous curiosities or throwbacks to the past. Chapter 2 starts the historical narrative of the book with a look at some of the earliest myths and speculations about what lay to the north of the known European world, from the first millennium BC, as documented by the early Greek writers, and into the Christian era. Chapter 3 juxtaposes the fantastic imagery of the previous chapter with a more accurate discussion of Arctic environments and the adaptations they have supported. It includes a concise summary of the archaeological history of the Canadian/Greenlandic Arctic. Set in the context of the author’s visit to post-Cold War Chukotka, Chapter 4 summarizes the history of Siberian peoples and their interactions with Mongols, Russian traders, and Soviet collectivization and industrialization. The chapter foreshadows the theme of humanity in the face of indignities that characterizes many Arctic peoples around the North. Chapter 5 presents the history of Norse expansion around the North Atlantic. The Norse contact with Inuit in

Greenland and Arctic Canada provided the European world with its first historical documentation of the native peoples of Greenland and North America.

The theme of native documentation is extended in Chapter 6 (*Inuit*) to look at the history of anthropological and archaeological study of the Inuit and their predecessors. McGhee shows how academic interpretations have sometimes led to damaging policy decisions (e.g., the resettlement of Inuit to Resolute Bay under utopian assumptions about Inuit adaptability). Gradually the chapter moves into more current interpretations of Inuit and their history, citing linguistic and archaeological evidence and somewhat overlapping and elaborating on the topics covered in Chapter 3. As an archaeologist, I found this chapter particularly interesting, and I suspect many will find McGhee’s interpretations both credible and perhaps questionable. For example, the suggestion that Thule migration from Alaska to Greenland was spurred by an effort to access Norse iron is both interesting and somewhat far-fetched (how did they know it was there?). Similarly, I found the repudiation of “adaptationist” arguments both trendy and narrow-sighted (people adapt to commercial situations just as they do to climate change).

Chapters 7 to 11 offer a fuller and more systematic chronicle of the history of European expansion into the Arctic and the calamities that went along with geographical discovery. Together, these chapters serve to highlight what can go wrong when people with little knowledge of or experience with Arctic climates, environments, and people find themselves forced to cope with them. Here we have accounts of the early history of exploration of the coasts and seas north of Eurasia from the 15th to the early 20th century: Frobisher’s fateful 16th-century mining expedition to Baffin Island; the discovery and eventual destruction of the Spitsbergen ecosystem; the history of exploration of Hudson Bay and the catastrophic foolhardiness of many who engaged in it; Franklin’s fatal quest to identify a North American Northwest Passage, and the expansion of geographical knowledge that resulted from the search for his lost expedition; and the race to the North Pole. These chapters, along with Chapters 3 and 5, cover much the same ground as Jeannette Mirsky’s classic history *To the Arctic: The Story of Northern Exploration from Earliest Times* (1934, 1948, 1970, University of Chicago Press), but are embellished with personal reference to McGhee’s own travel and research in the areas and subjects under discussion.

Chapter 12 (*The People’s Land*) brings us up to date, covering the whaling and gold rushes of the late 19th century as well as the military buildup surrounding World War II and the Cold War. Here we see how the Arctic, previously a place of peripheral interest to southern nations, became a place of great economic and strategic importance, and swept the native inhabitants, largely without voice, into the global arena. The resulting impact on people and land was dramatic, but in the later 20th century, as McGhee outlines, the inhabitants of the Arctic rose to

the growing political and ecological challenges. From Scandinavia and Siberia to Alaska, Canada, and Greenland, circumpolar peoples have succeeded in organizing and reasserting control over northern developments through political action, education, and persistence in the face of great social and environmental devastation. The final chapter (13) brings the book to a close in a streamlined three pages and seeks to reestablish a sense of the romantic in the now less *imagined* Arctic.

In summary, this book shows us how the Arctic has been redefined (or re-imagined) over the course of 2000 years, and especially over the last 600 years. While the book accomplishes many useful goals, one of its most significant contributions is the humanization of the Arctic as a place with history, a place with real people, and a place whose romantic image has long been fueled more by southern ambition and willful ignorance than by any inherent property of Arctic people and places. In this light, the Arctic becomes a place that we can understand, identify with, and become sympathetic towards, regardless of where we live.

The writing meanders in a pleasant way through reflections, historical details, and analyses. The chapters in turn are arranged somewhat eclectically, shifting back and forth from region to region, while generally (though not always) moving forward in time. There is some repetition from chapter to chapter. And yet, for these few distractions, the book as a whole carries the reader to a series of forceful conclusions about the ways in which outsiders have viewed the Arctic and how these views have served the agendas of southern nations at the expense of the aboriginal inhabitants and the natural environment.

The Last Imaginary Place is comfortably written and compellingly argued. I recommend it as a good read with an important message. The book is not written as a textbook, but chapters may be useful in classes. Beyond the classroom, the casual reader with an interest in the Arctic will be richly rewarded by the lucid prose, historical summaries, and insightful arguments.

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ARCTIC HUMAN DEVELOPMENT REPORT. Edited by NÍELS EINARSSON, JOAN NYMAND LARSEN, ANNIKA NILSSON and ORAN R. YOUNG. Akureyri: Stefansson Arctic Institute. 2004. ISBN 9979-834-45-5. 242 p., maps, colour illus. Softbound. US\$28.00 + s&h.

The last few years have seen the appearance of several assessments mandated by the Arctic Council, each charged with summarizing the state of some aspect of the

circumpolar Arctic, such as pollution (AMAP, 1997, 2002), flora and fauna (CAFF, 2001), reindeer husbandry and hunting (Jernsletten and Klokov, 2002; Ulvevadet and Klokov, 2004), climate (ACIA, 2005), and this volume on Arctic human development (AHDR). At a minimum, these books serve as excellent teaching tools for undergraduates and those graduate students seeking to broaden their horizons beyond their chosen disciplines. However, they are also clearly intended to serve as solid introductions for the public at large and especially for policy makers. In this respect, the global hoopla surrounding the release of ACIA has far surpassed that for any of the other Arctic Council reports released to date. Notwithstanding the comparative lack of media coverage, the AHDR is a milestone in the realm of Arctic science in general and the social sciences in particular.

Social scientists constitute the bulk of the report's authors. Although I am primarily a biogeographer and ecologist, my academic training also encompassed exposure to a broad interpretation of 'northern studies.' At the same time, my chosen area of research—anthropogenic and natural disturbance regimes in tundra and boreal ecosystems—led me into close and ongoing cooperation with Arctic indigenous peoples. Thus much of the report material and many of the trends were already long familiar to me. Still, there were a few surprises. I hope this review will highlight the overall utility of this impressive volume for a diverse readership.

From several authors we hear that, despite long-standing intercultural contacts among northern peoples, the interpretation of the Arctic as a distinct geopolitical region is relatively recent (arguably beginning with Mikhail Gorbachev's speech in Murmansk, in October 1987). This view contrasts with the perspective of biogeography, which for well over a century has recognized the circumpolar distributions of a diverse array of organisms as a salient feature of the Arctic. The book is not intended as a presentation of research results, but rather as an up-to-date overview of available information, with an eye to highlighting recent trends and future projections, exposing gaps in our knowledge, and drawing policy-relevant conclusions. These are too diverse and numerous to list here. The text is divided into sections on Orientation (two chapters), Core Systems (four chapters), Crosscutting Themes (six chapters), and one concluding chapter. These sections cover everything from demography to legal, health, and education systems, to resource governance, gender issues, and community viability. Societies/cultures, economics, and international and political relations are, of course, covered individually, but also feature prominently throughout the volume. The caliber and diversity of the authorship are key strengths of the book, and the contributions are all well written in an accessible style.

Chapters in this and its companion volume (ACIA, 2005) are fewer, somewhat longer and more in depth than those in, say, the CAFF book. Still, some chapters dig deeper than others, and readers will likely appreciate that the supporting literature is well documented. Contribu-