

ARCTIC CLIFFHANGERS. Produced and directed by STEVE SMITH and JULIA SZUCS. Canmore, Alberta: Meltwater Media, 2009. True Hi-Definition Documentary, 60 minutes.

In *Arctic Cliffhangers*, Steve Smith and Julia Szucs set out to document the effects of ongoing climatic changes on the functioning of Canada's Arctic marine ecosystems, and especially to describe what signals from seabirds are telling us about the likely future consequences of these changes for humans and wildlife alike. They have certainly achieved that goal, and much more. At its heart, this visually lush film is about connections between people (the Inuit people who have inhabited the Arctic for thousands of years, and the people who have inhabited the outport communities of Newfoundland for hundreds of years) and the frozen marine ecosystems on which their cultures depend. In fact, as Smith and Szucs effectively convey in their film, the viability of both cultures is now threatened, in large part because they rely on wildlife resources harvested from these startlingly fragile ecosystems.

But the film is also about the connections among three generations of wildlife scientists (four, if one includes the late Leslie Tuck, described here as "one of the pioneers of seabird biology") who study these ecosystems in the hope that the information they collect will ultimately help to preserve them. The first of the three generations includes two of the deans of Arctic seabird research in Canada, Tony Gaston of Environment Canada and Bill Montevecchi of Memorial University of Newfoundland. In fact, I strongly suspect that Smith and Szucs envisaged the film largely as a tribute to Gaston, in recognition of his unflinching dedication to Arctic conservation and the remarkable achievements of his four-decade research program on thick-billed murres and other Arctic seabirds. Hearing Gaston summarize his research so succinctly and eloquently, speaking from the field camp at Prince Leopold Island where he began, is definitely a highlight of this film.

To me, the film also works on another important level. When asked what life is like in an Arctic field camp, I often direct people to Tim Birkhead's (1993) book *Great Auk Islands: A Field Biologist in the Arctic*. Like that book, Smith and Szucs' film captures and conveys the "feel" of day-to-day life in a research camp, and I am sure many people will find it enjoyable for that reason.

I have just one criticism of the film, which is very minor: I found the title a bit flippant, and perhaps more importantly, potentially misleading: is it possible that potential viewers not familiar with the biology of the seabirds and the nature of the science will assume that it is a film about thrill-seekers, rather than scientists?

This is an excellent film, which I really enjoyed watching; it is both engaging and informative. I highly recommend it to all viewers interested in Arctic ecosystems and the human cultures they support—especially to viewers concerned about conserving both in an age of rapidly changing climate. The film will also be welcomed by

viewers interested in the work of scientists who have dedicated their lives to conserving these fragile ecosystems.

REFERENCE

Birkhead, T.R. 1993. *Great Auk Islands: A field biologist in the Arctic*. London: T & AD Poyser.

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POLAR IMPERATIVE: A HISTORY OF ARCTIC SOVEREIGNTY IN NORTH AMERICA. By SHELAGH D. GRANT. Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2010. ISBN 978-1-55365-418-6. xviii + 540 p., maps, b&w illus., notes, selected bib., index. Cdn\$39.95.

Shelagh Grant has written a very necessary and readable history of North American sovereignty in the Arctic. The attention to the Arctic given over the last few years by the media, commentators, and academics, and to some extent the Canadian government, begged the need for a thorough history of this vast region. This eminently readable book spans the history from the first inhabitants 5000 years ago to the present time, though it concentrates, understandably, on the last 200 years. The text is accompanied by 17 clear and useful maps and a large number of equally interesting black-and-white historical photographs. The history is meticulously researched and ably presented, with a wealth of fascinating detail and end notes to match. The section on aboriginal land claims and their progression within the context of Arctic oil development (chapter 11) is especially illuminating. The detailed treatment of Arctic history (including Alaska and Greenland and the role of Americans, Danish, British, and Norwegians), is of obvious interest to historians and should be to all Canadians. But the aspect that shouts out at the reader is the stark lack of attention that the Canadian government has given to the Arctic over these last 200 years. While the dramatic melting in the last decade has resulted in more public comment from Ottawa, Grant decries the lack of any real accomplishments. Introducing the high-sounding *Canada's Northern Strategy: Our North our Heritage our Future* in 2009, Foreign Minister Cannon said it showed the Arctic to be the government's "absolute priority" (26 July, 2009, quoted by Grant on p. 442). However, this assessment conflicts with the trail of broken government promises, from the three ice-capable nuclear submarines promised in 1987, to a Canadian Forces training base at Resolute, a deep-sea port for Iqaluit, and three new heavy-duty icebreakers promised later, to the eight Arctic Patrol vessels promised in 2007. The more lofty priorities in the *Northern Strategy* document of "exercising our Arctic