

THE SÁMI PEOPLES OF THE NORTH: A SOCIAL AND CULTURAL HISTORY. By NEIL KENT. London: Hurst & Company, 2014. ISBN 978-1-84904-257-4. ix + 331 p., notes, bib., index. Hardbound. £22.00.

Finally, a modern book about the history of the Sámi people in English! I have long been waiting for this kind of comprehensive study. Neil Kent has written an overview of Sámi history for an academic and general audience. Sápmi – Sámiland, the Sámi Nation is an area in the northern part of Fennoscandia (Norway, Sweden, Finland, and the Kola Peninsula, Russia). The people have been called Lapps or Laplanders, and their land, Lapland. In 1732, Carolus Linnaeus documented the Sameatnan (Sámi land) on his journey to northern Sweden. “Sápmi” as a term for the land is more modern; it was used during the 1970s and is now the official term.

Neil Kent’s familiarity with all Nordic major languages as well as Russian is in his favour, as earlier ethnographers focused only on Norway or Sweden. Where do the Sámi peoples come from? DNA data seem to indicate Central Europe, while linguistically (as part of the Finno-Ugric language group), it might be from the east. A lot of Kent’s resources come from Russian and Finnish archives, which give readers new knowledge about Sámi history. When he needs a witness to history, the Italian explorer Guiseppe Acerbi (1773–1846) is the main writer he refers to. Acerbi’s report from his journey to the North was published in 1802 as *Travels through Sweden, Finland, and Lapland, to the North Cape in the years 1798 and 1799*. Even though many times Acerbi’s statements are prejudiced, Kent interprets him well and provides us with new descriptions of the situation in the North (the stories from the Russian side are new to me).

Kent presents many details—perhaps too many, as one sometimes does not see the forest for all the trees. For a historian looking for data about a certain occasion, it is a gold mine, but for a general reader it can be too much information and the context may be lost. Personally, I think details for instance about the death rate for prisoners during the Soviet repressions (p. 57) are indeed interesting to know, but for the storyline it is too much information. When one does write in such detail it is easy to miss some information, and Kent does that, particularly about facts relating to the Swedish part of Sápmi. He tells about the academic and political leader Israel Ruong (p. 148) who as he says was the most important person for Sámi development, but Ruong never worked at Umeå University. He was active at Uppsala University and Uppsala Landsmålsarkiv (Institute for Language and Folklore) until he retired in 1969. The Sámi language department was opened in 1975, and Ruong’s influence had a large impact on the creation of the department. The Centre for Sami Research-Vaartoe was established in year 2000. One other fact that Kent misses concerns the Sámi poet Paulus Utsi (p. 190), born in Lyngseidet, Norway, whose family wintered in Sweden but migrated to Norway during summer. Utsi’s family was one

of many families relocated from Karesuando to Jokkmokk, 400 km away, during the 1900s.

Neil Kent is trying to grasp a people’s history from an early age when the ice was melting until today in 300 pages. It is an impossible task, but I must give him credit for trying and I salute him. I recommend this book for courses at the university level; it is a good tool for students to start learning about one of Europe’s indigenous peoples. The reproduction is of high quality and the language, at least to me, is easy to follow. I would like to have seen some photographs to enlighten the text; only the dust jacket has a photo of a north Sámi family from the late 1800s. I recommend that readers approach the book as a novel, then dive in and go for the details—the eastern part of Sápmi is perfectly written, as are the prehistory and history!

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