

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!

Krister Stoor

Department of Language Studies /Sámi Studies  
Centre of Sami Research – Vaartoe  
Umeå University  
SE-901 87 Umeå, Sweden  
[krister.stoor@umu.se](mailto:krister.stoor@umu.se)

HARNESSED TO THE POLE: SLEDGE DOGS IN SERVICE TO AMERICAN EXPLORERS OF THE ARCTIC, 1853–1909. By SHEILA NICKERSON. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2014. Distributed by University of Chicago Press. ISBN 978-1-60223-223-5. viii + 320 p., maps, b&w illus., notes, bib., index. Softbound. US\$24.95.

In her book *Harnessed to the Pole*, Nickerson follows the traces of the many sledge dogs who accompanied eight American Arctic explorers in their quest to discover remnants of the lost Franklin expedition and to reach the North Pole during the second half of the 19th century. Nickerson, an American writer and poet, argues that none of the explorations analyzed in the book could have been realized without the help of dogs. Whether mechanically listed as part of the expedition’s equipment or caringly given names, these “Sherpas of the Arctic” (p. 9) were not only essential for transportation, hauling, and orientation purposes, but also helped protect against attacks from other animals (polar bears, wolves), assisted in hunting, served as entertainers and companions during the long and often depressive and lonesome Arctic winters, and sometimes even provided meat for the explorers and other dogs. Particularly today, when dogs are honored for their civilian and military services, Nickerson argues that the sledge dogs that enabled early 19th century explorations to the Arctic also deserve to be recognized.

The book’s 24 chapters mainly chronicle the role of sledge dogs during different Arctic expeditions (from Elisha Kent Kane’s Second Grinnell Expedition of 1853–55 to Robert E. Peary’s North Pole Expedition of 1908–09). Some chapters highlight special crosscutting themes

like “disease and diet” (chapter 8), a discussion of different cosmologies and, thus, understanding and treatment of dogs in Inuit culture and the explorers’ culture (chapter 6); the bonds between dog and driver (chapter 9); and the companionship of other animals when dogs were unavailable (chapter 10). Other chapters provide useful contextual information for the period of time analyzed in the book. After an engaging initial account of dogs in 19th century literature that went to the North Pole, Nickerson elaborates in chapter 2 on the role of the Greenland dog for Arctic expeditions. The difference between sledge and sled is explained in chapter 4; various explanations for the bonds between humans and dogs are provided in chapter 22; and the author’s thoughts on the commemoration of dogs can be found in chapter 24. A list of references, sometimes infused with the author’s personal comments (found in the “Notes”), as well as a detailed bibliography and index, can be found at the end of the book.

*Harnessed to the Pole* tells stories of compassion, gratitude, and excitement, but also of hardship, harshness, and exasperation, and its emphatic and vivid descriptions enable the reader to feel almost a part of the journey. Nickerson’s focus on dogs in selected Arctic explorations enriches the understanding of polar expeditions in general, but also provides the reader with a human perspective; alongside enthralling descriptions of interactions between dogs and humans, careful readers can also learn about Inuit culture and cosmology (e.g., the importance of naming dogs, which could have been dealt with in a separate chapter). Occasional anecdotes portray the whole spectrum of human life in the Arctic: for example, in chapter 14, Nickerson describes how Inuit meet cats for the first time, and in chapter 17 the reader learns about how a crew member on a doomed expedition fastened a dog’s collar around his arm “so that it might identify his corpse when it washed up on the coast” (p. 186). The correct plural form of one of the Arctic’s Native inhabitants is Inuit, which means “the people;” unfortunately, the author lists them incorrectly as “Inuits” in the index and describes them as “Inuit people” throughout the book.

Detailed chronological accounts throughout the book mark its strength and weakness at the same time: whereas reading can become somewhat cumbersome at times, they serve to provide credibility and depth.

*Harnessed to the Pole* serves as a significant contribution to the recently developed field of human-animal relations. Although the book might be of particular interest to (Arctic) historians and ethnologists as a primary audience, it is also an enjoyable and approachable book for everyone interested in the topic. In *Harnessed to the Pole*, Nickerson’s call to recognize the contributions of sledge dogs in Arctic explorations culminates in an eloquent, at times emotional, new perspective on American Arctic explorations in the late 19th century. The book provides an insightful piece of the larger, yet mostly unknown, mosaic of human-animal relations during Arctic expeditions. It serves

as inspiration to reach beyond its scope to find and describe more traces of sledge dogs in the Arctic.

Lydia Schöppner  
Arthur V. Mauro Centre for Peace and Justice  
St. Paul’s College  
University of Manitoba  
Winnipeg, Manitoba R3T 2N2, Canada  
[lydia.schoeppner@gmx.de](mailto:lydia.schoeppner@gmx.de)