

SIXTY DEGREES NORTH: AROUND THE WORLD IN SEARCH OF HOME. By MALACHY TALLACK. New York: Pegasus Books, 2016. ISBN 978-1-68177-146-5. vii + 230 p., map, colour illus., index. Hardbound. US\$26.95.

“At 60° north,” writes Malachy Tallack, “where I was standing, the parallel was half the length of the equator, and two-thirds the way to the Pole” (p. 17). Where he was standing was on the island of Shetland, next to a fence that marked an out-of-the-way field called the Green of Mundrup. It was also the starting point for a trip around the world, following, more or less, the 60th parallel.

His travels take him to Nanortalik, Greenland; to Fort Smith, Northwest Territories, Canada; to Seward, Homer, and Anchorage in Alaska; to Kamchatka and St. Petersburg in Russia; to the Åland archipelago in Finland; to Uppsala in Sweden and Oslo in Norway; and, finally, back to Shetland. He does not travel as a scientist or an explorer, but rather as an open-eyed and open-minded writer capable of turning an interesting phrase. He views landscapes and talks to people. He digests history and current events. He gains, on each stop, a sense of place that he serves up to his readers.

This is not an academic work, but rather a book to be read for enjoyment. It is a factual travelogue and a memoir, an autobiographical description of a young man trying to find his place in the world, devoid of citations and exhaustive explanatory endnotes. But that is the norm for travel memoirs, books written to share life-forming impressions, books written as labors of love.

Tallack’s writing is clear, vivid, and often clever. On one of his stops, he encounters men who might be dismissed as simply “drunk” or “inebriated,” but he describes them more eloquently as “men some considerable distance from sobriety” (p. 55). He notes that “a doze in the open air is rarely a bad idea” (p. 53). He describes Siberia as “a region that lives in the mind, in daydream and in nightmare; it is more imagined than seen” (p. 117). In Finland, he describes

morning twilight: “The light was still tentative, and though the flurries of early morning had ceased, an iron sky was glowering above” (p. 159).

Like all good travel writers, he has a way of capturing key details, of conjuring what feels like the essence of the places he visits. Regarding Russian politics, he quotes the words of a man he talked to outside of the Kazan Cathedral in St. Petersburg, words that he found shocking: “Sometimes dictatorship works,” the man said. “Sometimes you need that kind of order” (p. 145). Regarding the character of Sweden, Tallack remarks, “Public transport is about as reliable as the over-pricing of beer” (p. 207). He writes of the Norwegian oil fund, worth more than half a trillion dollars. He explains the property laws of Finland and the Finnish “everyman’s right” to walk, ski, cycle, swim, or camp wherever they please.

Bestselling travel books are usually built around some sort of hardship or another, often contrived. For example, an aspiring travelogue might rely on only a small sailboat, rowboat, or kayak, or on catching rides with strangers on private aircraft, all of which have been done. Or, as has also been done, an aspiring travelogue might hitchhike with a small refrigerator in tow.

Sadly, Tallack’s account of his rambling travels, travels that relied on commercial flights and buses and other convenient and routine means, may not attract a wide readership. His was an interesting trip, to be sure, but one without a serious purpose or significant hardship. Those who live close to 60° N, and maybe family and friends who have stayed behind in sunnier latitudes, might be interested, but others, unfortunately, might not give this book the chance that it deserves.

Why does it deserve a broad readership? Because *Sixty Degrees North* is, in the end, more than just a subarctic travelogue. It is a book about finding a home. Many people today, Tallack understands, do not have a strong sense of home. Instead, they have “the house in which their belongings are kept and in which they go to sleep at night.” He sees this as “the condition of our time,” as “a marriage without love, a relationship without commitment,” as “a kind of homelessness” (p. 214).

And it is in this context that he returns to his starting point, to Shetland, the place where he had grown up and, at a younger age, a place he had grown to hate. But with the perspective of travel, he sees Shetland in a new light. He sees Shetland as home. “That I came to love this place,” he writes near the end of this wonderful book, “having once hated it, is strange and yet entirely coherent” (p. 215).

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