

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

SHELAGH D. GRANT, *Arctic Justice: On Trial for Murder, Pond Inlet, 1923*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press. 2002, xx + 315 p., Index, \$39.95 hardcover.

Arctic Justice is a harrowing saga of crime and punishment in Canada's far north. The book culminates a nearly two decades-long engagement by the author with the history and culture of the Tununirmiut people of Eclipse Sound in North Baffin. Marshalling an encyclopaedic array of archival documents, government records, personal papers and interviews, Grant reconstructs the riveting events that framed and followed the trial in Pond Inlet (Mittimatalik) of three Inuit men accused in the 1920s of murdering a white Newfoundland fur trader, Robert S. Janes {Sakirmiak). In its telling, Grant's case study becomes the catalyst for an ambitious inquiry into the wider currents of international geopolitics, colonial conquest, and racialized justice that undergirded the troubled encounter between Inuit custom (piquajaq) and Canadian criminal law in early twentieth century.

In the dwindling evening light of 15 March 1920, at a campsite located out on the Admiralty Inlet ice, an Inuk named Nuqallaq ended Janes' life with a single rifle shot through the temple. In an especially poignant sense, these two men, Inuit and qaSlunaaq (white), keenly personified the two solitudes of race relations that dominated this pivotal era in high Arctic history. Nuqallaq, the son of an Iglulik shaman, was a Christian and a highly esteemed member of his Tununinniut community. The pugnacious Janes, for his part, was an odious presence in North Baffin. His longstanding abuse of the Inuit had deteriorated into a clear and present danger as the trader's fortunes dwindled and his desperation to escape Eclipse Sound intensified. In the eyes of the community, the execution of this qallunaaq was a regrettable necessity. Nuqallaq, and the two men who stood co-accused with him of the 'crime,' acted with the full consent of all those assembled at the camp.

For Ottawa politicians and judicial authorities, however, this apparently isolated incident off the Baffin coast signified something far more ominous than the violent demise of one truculent southern fur trader. As Grant chronicles in meticulous detail, the Janes killing galvanized the insecurities of a Dominion government whose sovereignty claims over the Arctic archipelago were still tenuous in the 1920s. Officials feared not just that Inuit criminality might impede the northward encroachment of white settlement, trade and commerce but, even more so, that a meltdown of Arctic law and order would, to the entire world, expose a more general

failing of Canadian governance in the region. Fuelled by these apprehensions, and yet further provoked by news of a second alleged Inuit murder—this time of a *polisialuk* (Royal Canadian Mounted Police officer) in the Coppermine River region—Ottawa’s response was out of all proportion (and expenditure) to the legal magnitude of the case. Grant convincingly shows how the 1921 criminal investigation by RCMP Staff Sergeant A.H. Joy, and the 1923 Pond Inlet trial of Nuqallaq, Ululijamaat and Aaitaaq under Magistrate L.-A.-A. Rivet and a six-man (all-white) jury, were less a matter of dispensing justice, and more about the perceived imperatives of showing the Canadian flag, domesticating Inuit ‘disorder,’ facilitating settlement by police, missionaries and traders, and generally consolidating the authority of government and law throughout the district.

Along with his remarkable young wife Anna Ataguttiaq (whose long and productive life ended in 1987, and to whom Grant dedicates the book), Nuqallaq is the dominant presence in *Arctic Justice*. He is the narrative nucleus around whom a truly unforgettable cast of characters circulates. A poised, assertive, searingly intelligent, though far from faultless man, the arc of Nuqallaq’s life is in many respects a microcosm of the twentieth-century Inuit experience with European ‘civilization’ and southern ‘justice.’ Against the solemn rituals of white law that unfolded in Pond Inlet during 1921 and 1923, Nuqallaq’s belief in the rectitude of his actions remained unshaken. To Nuqallaq and the Inuit, his conviction and ten year sentence for manslaughter (Ululijamaat garnered a two year term, and Aaitaaq an acquittal) were the product of an alien sensibility that eluded all the morality and reason that their own culture had bestowed. Nuqallaq’s subsequent confinement at the Stony Mountain Penitentiary in Manitoba (under an unfathomable provision of the Northwest Territories Act), and his contracting of tuberculosis while in prison, add an affecting denouement to Grant’s account. The circle closes as Nuqallaq, cadaverous with disease, won his discharge and return voyage to Pond Inlet, reuniting with Ataguttiaq only two months prior to his passing on 5 December 1925. In a final twist of grim contradiction, Nuqallaq’s release from the arms of Canadian justice signaled a new round of suffering for the Inuit people, as the TB that he had carried home ravaged through the Eclipse Sound Tununirmiut, and eventually spread far beyond the North Baffin district.

Arctic Justice is by no means a fully realized success at all levels (the manuscript could easily have been compressed by some 20 or 30 pages; the author’s exhaustive historical renderings occasionally overwhelm her narrative; and the book would benefit from a more probing immersion into critical legal, legal pluralist, post-colonial and critical race theories). But these imperfections aside, *Arctic Justice* is without question a critically important, and thoroughly original, contribution to the growing interdisciplinary scholarship on law, politics and Aboriginality in this country. The author’s devotion to the Tununirmiut people, their language and culture makes *Arctic Justice* a very special experience. Inuit voices—reproduced from original documents, and a comprehensive archive of oral histories—resonate throughout the book and offer eloquent testament to the sad events that transpired so long ago in what is now the Nunavut Territory. The haunting images of explorers, lawmen and Inuit—from

Grant's stirring photograph of Robert Janes' shallow grave to a final, devastating depiction of the once-formidable Nuqallaq sprawled on the Arctic ground with face averted from camera, TB sputum cup at hand—will linger long after the book's reading.

In the end, *Arctic Justice* is best read as a cautionary tale, delivering lessons about the follies of criminal (in)justice, colonialism, and the politics of race that reverberate forward from the 1920s and bear upon the present. Shelagh Grant leaves the reader to ponder whether, over the eight decades since Nuqallaq's homecoming, the nation has fully emerged from a time when it was "willing ... to spend a quarter of a million dollars on a court trial, yet appeared incapable of looking after the basic needs of Canada's most northerly citizens" (pp.209-10).

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