

## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

ROBERT MCGHEE, *The Last Imaginary Place: A Human History of the Arctic World*. Toronto: Key Porter Books, Canadian Museum of Civilization. 2004, 285p. Index.

The text belies the title: the Arctic world, in McGhee's broad social analysis, is peopled by "fellow humans" with a history as long and complex as any. The romantic legends through which southern Canadians have constructed exotic northern beings, or a national identity, or both, are no longer relevant. Further, Canadians living in the north share a set of challenges common to the circumpolar north, an area which McGhee surveys in this wonderfully-constructed account.

McGhee begins his analysis with a brief discussion of northern geology, archaeology, and the effects of the Ice Age on different human societies, ranging from hunting to agriculture. Given its significance for the north, McGhee has a brief, pithy chapter on the logics of northern hunting. While he acknowledges the harshness of northern existence, and the inevitability of periodic famines, he is also quick to acknowledge the "treadmill" that "civilization" creates in more bountiful environments.

In inverted temporal order, McGhee then escorts us across Arctic Siberia and the Norse settlements in the North Atlantic. Many parallels (and some differences) are drawn between Russian and Soviet settlement of the north, and the North American experience.

In particular, northern Russian peoples are being increasingly incorporated into an urban, culturally Russian system. McGhee describes the Viking expansion, from the ninth century onwards, as one facilitated by new military technology, but based on strong agrarian and trading communities in Scandinavia. In an equally careful sifting of evidence, McGhee proposes that long-term environmental decline, combined with a legitimate sense of military vulnerability, led to retreat from Greenland and the ecological impoverishment of Iceland.

McGhee then returns to the North American Arctic to provide a complex portrayal of Tuniit and Inuit cultures, cultures which feature significant variations in social organization and geographic location. McGhee, in keeping with the central theme of the book, concludes that Inuit ancestors were probably "an entrepreneurial North Pacific people" who were drawn eastward around 1200 A.D. by the possibilities of trade with the

Europeans. “Far from being the most isolated population on earth”, the Inuit have long been a part of “evolving global culture and economy.”

One difficulty with the circumpolar coverage is the relatively brief consideration given to the Saami peoples of northern Scandinavia. Rather than devoting a separate chapter to the extensive literature on the Saami, McGhee focuses a unit on the colonization of Svalbard (“Spitsbergen”), one which is book-ended by bleak chapters on the collective, and sometimes class-bound, idiocies of European explorers (there’s an earlier chapter on naïve, early European maps and conceptions of the north.) There is no doubting the bravery of many, but this impressive aggregation of rapacious incompetents is best left to other volumes (Samuel Hearne is an honourable exception [204-215]).

The volume concludes with a chapter cataloging the resources which still draw southerners north, various efforts by circumpolar groups to stake out political autonomy, and a daunting set of physical and social problems that will need immediate attention (climate warming, melting permafrost, pollution, population increase, and the like). To this reader, political reforms centered on administrative reorganization seem a poor match for the accumulating challenges.

Robert McGhee is an archaeologist at the Canadian Museum of Civilization who has specialized for much of his career on Arctic North America. This volume represents his mature, synthetic reflections on questions that have informed much of his earlier research. There is a grace and directness to the writing that should appeal to a general readership, one which is bound to grow in the coming decades. McGhee provides a gentle reminder to a preoccupied south of the things it has not accomplished: sustainable lifestyles and communities, personal happiness and, most of all, confidence that the future is manageable.

The book benefits considerably from 16 pages of illustrative pictures, presented in two blocks of 8, over 30 other pictures and illustrations, and 7 very useful maps.

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