

The Spectral Arctic. A History of Dreams & Ghosts in Polar Exploration. Shane McCorristine. 2018. London: UCL Press. x + 265 p, illustrated, softcover. ISBN: 978-1-78735-246-9. £22.99. Free PDF available at: <http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/10047485/1/The-Spectral-Arctic.pdf>

Polar history, and more specifically polar exploration, has yielded a myriad of scholarly and non-scholarly publications. Disputes on interpretation of historical data have arisen amongst scholars and reinterpretation has triggered lively debates on the nuanced nature of polar history. For a non-historian like myself, these nuances are difficult to grasp and therefore reviews on historical accounts can often only be written from a non-historian's perspective. This being said, as an Arctic (or polar) scholar, irrespective of discipline, one inevitably needs to deal with polar history in one way or the other. One of the most intriguing features one stumbles across are old maps of the Arctic, which are filled with wondrous and oftentimes terrifying creatures from the realms of sagas, stories and – quite simply – imagination (Harper, 2014). Even though this might be the case, the strategic study of the role of imagination within contexts of polar exploration has been neglected – until the publication of this marvellous volume entitled *The Spectral Arctic. A History of Dreams & Ghosts in Polar Exploration* by Shane McCorristine.

The book links the personal imaginings of British explorers and those they left behind with those of the Arctic environment. The term 'Arctic' in this volume – albeit left undefined – contextually refers to the Western High Arctic and does not concern northern Europe or northern Russia. The Arctic – the exploration of which in this book circles around the lost Franklin expedition, as the author concedes (p. 3) – is therefore presented as an "environment that was haunted: by inhabitants, spirits and sensed presences" (p. 40). This viewpoint, even though we are dealing with a historical book, is still of utmost importance in contemporary Arctic discourse: after all, the tourist industry as well as the popular media often stylise the Arctic as something mysterious, as an untamed wilderness that is home to 'nature peoples' – the Inuit, Sámi or Nenets.

McCorristine's study is therefore highly recommended for readers capable of self-reflection in different contexts. What I mean by this is, for instance, his analysis of the role of walking in the Arctic. For explorers stuck in the Arctic winter ice, walking was not just an element of everyday life, but served as an important tool to map the region and to make sense of it. While they perceived the Arctic as an 'empty' space in which they were trapped, walking provided the walker with new perceptions, for example by finding Inuit grave sites, which enabled an understanding that these seemingly 'empty' surroundings are in fact populated areas. At the same time, the fear of getting lost during walks in these polar deserts provided the ship with an increasing notion of homeliness. While the reader may think that these are givens to some degree, McCorristine shows how the perception of the individual explorer is changed fundamentally through walking in the Arctic environment. In other words, walking was not merely a means to combat boredom in the long period of overwintering but, following Gibson's affordance theory (Gibson, 1979), it had an impact on the affordances of both the environment and specific objects. Upon reading these lines, I could not help but wonder how walking has affected my own life in the perception of the world and of different objects. Indeed, McCorristine has skillfully managed to open up the discourse on oneself in environments that serve as projections of our own mental maps and imaginings.

Not surprisingly, the present volume does not merely serve as a source of self-reflection – it also affords important information of the societal discourse on the Arctic in 19th-century Britain. One aspect of British Arctic exploration, which has, at least to my knowledge, not entered the public discourse, is that of clairvoyance. Clairvoyance was a practice that seemingly enabled the 'voyeur' to gain information of a person or an object through, what would now be called, remote sensing. This practice was rooted in the belief that all objects and people are linked through a transfer of energy, thus enabling the obtainment of information despite geographical distance. While to the reader of the 21st century this appears rather like an element of fiction – after all, it is reminiscent of the 'Force' in *Star Wars* – McCorristine shows how clairvoyance served as a source of information, and more importantly hope, for those left behind. By devoting an entire chapter to this issue, the author underlines the importance of this practice in the Victorian era and does not imbue the narrative with his own stance on whether clairvoyance is 'true' or not. He merely factually describes and analyses what role clairvoyance played and to what degree these 'travels' indeed corresponded to historical facts, thereby providing a deep insight into Victorian cultural psychology.

Another aspect of the book that needs to be highlighted is McCorristine's focus on the role of women in Arctic exploration, paired with his focus on ghosts and imagination. First of all,

exemplified by Jane Franklin, it was women who served as those keeping up hope at home upon the safe return of the explorers. But moreover, while the Arctic was a sphere for male endurance and perseverance, in contemporary media outlets and stories, the Arctic was often portrayed as an ice queen luring the men into her lair. In other words, while it was men who physically went to the Arctic, exploratory efforts were marked by female narratives, which McCorristine places great emphasis on – starting to fill a gap in the discourse on Arctic exploration: the role of non-indigenous women. This approach is also extremely relevant for the study of the Arctic today, particularly in light of the success of the *Women of the Arctic* initiative (<http://www.genderisnotplanb.com>), which enables the unravelling of an intentional or unintentional gendered view on Arctic scholarship.

There are many things to say about *The Spectral Arctic*. The most important message that I would like to convey to the readers of *Polar Record* is that this book is extremely relevant for different

disciplines. It inspires self-reflection, opens up new views on Arctic exploration and makes the psychological effects for explorers and their peers ever more understandable. Needless to say that this book is a highly recommended read. (Nikolas Sellheim, Helsinki Institute of Sustainability Science (HELSUS), University of Helsinki, PO Box 4, 00014 Helsinki, Finland (nikolas.sellheim@helsinki.fi)).

References

- Gibson, J. J.** (1979). *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Harper, T.** (2014). Magic mountains and sea serpents: The secrets of early Arctic maps. *The Conversation*, 21 November 2014. <https://theconversation.com/magic-mountains-and-sea-serpents-the-secrets-of-early-arctic-maps-34342> (accessed 16 August 2018).

DOI: [10.1017/S003224741900007X](https://doi.org/10.1017/S003224741900007X)