



Peter Davidson. *The Idea of North*. London: Reaktion Books, 2005. 256 pp. \$27.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-86189-230-0.



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Twilighting North

“Everyone carries their own idea of north within them” (p. 19). With this refrain Peter Davidson leads the reader on an excursion through literature, art, and documentary records about experiences, imaginings, and representations of northern environments. This briskly paced, evocative, and well-illustrated treatise offers a virtual cornucopia of insight, showing the enduring value of comparative–cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural–reflection. It opens up a vast and fertile common ground potentially sharable by geography and the humanities.

The Idea of North is structured in three chapters: 1) Histories of the north with particular emphasis on European and Mediterranean sources; 2) Imaginations of North, highlighting the works of artists, creative writers, and film-makers; and 3) Topographies, with specific references to places in Scandinavia, Japan and China, Canada and Scotland. The boundaries, however, are permeable. Throughout the book, the three foci–histories, imaginings, and places–interweave. The tapestry is most intricately woven in the context of northern England and Scotland; Scandinavia is amply featured; there are sharply focused glimpses, too, on other lands around the

Arctic Circle. As a whole the book sheds fresh light on representations of nature, space, and time in the high latitudes of the Northern Hemisphere.

The text glides back and forth among literal and metaphorical meanings of geographical terms. “The book tries to map the specific territory defined by its title” and yet “It is not a book about northern places so much as about places that have been perceived to embody an idea or essence of north, or northness” (p. 19). Places–real or imagined, lived-in or aspired to–rather than cardinal direction, in fact, claim central attention. “North” as descriptor of place is “shifting and elusive” the author admits, yet, “paradoxically, it is a term that evokes a precise–even passionate–response in most people” (p. 20). Paradoxical connotations of north recur throughout: north as seat of evil and darkness or as seat of virtue and light, melancholy or felicity, exile or haven, challenge for exploration/conquest or escape from civilization. The preferred sources are literary and artistic, and thus the powerful role of symbolism in representing landscapes and life rings through. There are excellent vignettes on the significance of place in the shaping of artistic creati-

ity; there are astute reminders, too, about the contexts in which ideas were expressed and audiences won. Geographical contributions are also profiled, including some lurid examples of environmental determinism and cartographic gaucheries. But the recurrent and persistent focus on “topographies” in this book also affords vital glimpses on the multi-sensory, emotional, and moral experiences of place.

Classical texts reveal the propensity of self-acclaimed superior races from the south to denigrate less civilized peoples of the north. “The Hellenic race,” Aristotle claimed, “occupying a mid-position geographically, continues to be free, to live under the best constitutions, and to be capable of ruling all other people” (p. 22). For Olaus Magnus the North was the abode of Satan and in Dante’s *Inferno* the prison for the damned is northern. In China the north is Yin (cold and darkness), and in Kalevala the Northland is described as “the man-eating, the fellow-drowning place” (p. 30). Yet even from ancient times, e.g., in the works of Hecataeus and Homer, there was a belief that further north—beyond the North Pole—there dwelled on a blessed and fertile island a Hyperborean civilization devoted to Apollo. In Postel’s *Cosmographicae disciplinae* compendium (1561) the North Pole is the place where the devil is chained by God; it is also the seat of virtue, bathed in sunshine, the place on earth closest to heaven (p. 34).

For Scandinavians Greenland was Ultime Thule (p. 159), the twelfth-century Adam of Bremen asserting that Greenlanders were so called because they were bluish-green, and got that way because of living in the ocean (p. 160). Shamans abound in the Arctic, Finns and Sami notorious as sorcerers (p. 65). North China, beyond the wall, is proverbially the place where invasions come from (p. 180). Later, the territories beyond the wall were seen as a place of freedom, the simpler homeland, the old hunting grounds. Japanese perceptions of the Ainu on the northern island of Hokkaido reveal similar antipathies. Until the nineteenth century it was assumed that the natives were of the same race since they were descendants of the emperor, but upon direct encounter, during the period of the Meiji Restoration when Japan was looking toward Western scientific ideas, a racist view of the Ainu as degenerate anachronisms—and therefore available for exploitation by superior races was adopted (p. 179). Scotland, viewed from the south, is inevitably hyperborean, a place of dearth: a mean, negligible land—a necessary mythology since the Union of the Crowns. But Lowland Scots have also thought of the Highlands as a place of misery, and Highlanders as treacherous savages. The terms “north” and “deprivation” are thus highly rela-

tive, and parallels can be found in the case of Sami, Inuit, and nomads around the world where settled folk became dominant.

Symbolic transformations of nature, space, and time remain one of the strongest common foci of geography and humanities.[1] These, and the ambiguities and contrasting perceptions of north, are highlights of this book. Ice, glass, and mirrors figure in the northward journey of Hans Christian Andersen’s *The Snow Queen* (p. 67); icebergs symbolized spiritual power and hidden truths for Canadian painter Lawren Harris (p. 77). Early medieval cosmographers placed hell in Iceland, but for twentieth-century writer William Morris, Iceland was saga country, cradle of social democracy (p. 169), its landscapes the “great cathedral of the north” (p. 168). Renaissance elites took delight in transparency with ever finer window glass (p. 80), cut-glass chandeliers and girandolles raising light levels in winter rooms (p. 82) and candelabra with faceted lustres enhancing the reflections of candle flames. Wendigo, the ice demon with a heart of ice, which eats moss, frogs or preferably human beings—is for Margaret Atwood the embodiment of north (p. 70). Wendigos crossed the invisible barrier dividing the natural from the supernatural north and lost themselves in so doing. The ice mirror thus became a mirror of truth, a place of exile becomes a place of freedom and the ice turns to gems, real diamonds (pp. 70ff.). At Harbin in Manchuria and in Hokkaido there are annual displays of glacial cities and snow festivals (p. 73).

The North has also influenced cultural perceptions of sacred space and time. In Japan the dead were traditionally laid out so that their heads point northwards (p. 173). Northeast was considered as the most unlucky direction on the compass, so temples were built to the northeast of Kyoto to protect the city from bad spirits. In medieval Japanese tradition, the significance of a place was largely determined by its place in memory, i.e., its location in human time and space, rather than by its geography (p. 174). The Solovetsi Islands in the White Sea were regarded by the Sami as a point half way between this world and the next, so they built labyrinths of stones on the graves of dead shamans and chiefs there (p. 47). For Orthodox monks, these constructions were seen as “Babylons.”

A special feature of *The Idea of North* is the attempt to reveal the many ways in which an artist’s creativity has been shaped by experiences of life within particular places and landscapes. The author’s own experiences in his native Scotland shine through in his vivid sketches

of landscape and events. Reflecting on a photograph of his father (from the 1930s) he notes, "A generation of educated Scots came out of the war almost free from nostalgia. There seemed to be nothing about the pre-war world they were minded to regret, except the world of McIntosh Patrick's painting, *Autumn, Kinnordy*" (p. 236). Radicalized by the war, they thought that the old world had had its day, that its injustices had lasted over long. "Their only regret was for the autumnal rigs, the horse-teams and the intricate skills of the horsemen" (p. 248). Just as the Chinese Tartar Emperor longed for his "native Steppe," so too the Scottish traveler longed for home. "Of all mysteries of the human heart," Robert Louis Stevenson wrote in *The Silverado Squatters*, "this is perhaps the most inscrutable.... let me hear, in some far land, a kindred voice sing out, 'Oh why left I my home?' and it seems at once as if no beauty under the kind heavens, and no society of the wise and good, can repay me for my absence from my country" (p. 143).

Historical events and contexts have surely shaped audience receptivity for particular artistic and literary representations of North. "The north wind strengthens virtues," Albertus Magnus preached, "whereas the south wind weakens them" (p. 22). A few centuries later "relations between north and south were re-drawn. After the Reformation travel between north and south was restricted and legends grew about places rarely visited" (p. 38). For southerners the northern enemy could be associated with Luther and the Swedish armies while in the north legends grew about the decadence of the south. The woodcut *Personification of North* (1618) displays a fair-haired knight in armour—starkly powerful, an aggressor in his prime, at the height of his power (p. 40). Northern adventure—seeking Northwest and Northeast passages—were popular goals of the early nineteenth century. *Arctic Shipwreck* (1823-1824) by Casper David Friedrich (1774-1840) bemoaned the restoration of absolutism in Europe after decades of revolution and reform, thus allegorically expressing the wreckage of hopes, the powerlessness of the individual against absolute forces (p. 46). To what extent, the author asks, was this scene constructed from images of ice nearer home—the freezing of the Elbe in the severe winter of 1821?

Twentieth-century examples also reveal changing images of north. The year 1912 brought a dark shadow for the great enthusiasm about geographical explorations which had marked previous decades. The failure of the Scott expedition was firmly linked in the popular mind with the sinking of the Titanic. While the attention of the 1920s was drawn to the sunny south, "the compass

needle of the 1930s pointed unequivocally northwards" (p. 83). The leading preoccupations of writers then included social concern about the declining industries of northern England and "that complex of survivor guilt and hero-worship felt by many of that generation for fathers and older brothers who had fought, or were killed, in the First World War" (p. 83). Orwell's *Road to Wigan Pier* (1936) depicted the north as symbol of authenticity and heroism. For Auden, already fascinated by Scandinavian mythology, the north beckoned adventure and also reflection (p. 85). In his *Letters from Iceland* (1936), however, he queried the social ethics of the sagas, noting also how these were appealing to the German National Socialists (pp. 94-95). Place was crucial to the Auden of the 1930s; the North Pennines formed for life his idea of the paradisaic landscape (p. 100). The painter Eric Ravilious (1903-1942) also harboured analogous ideas of the north (p. 101). Auden and Ravilious, the author claims, were both formed as artists by place: "place is Auden's chief subject, almost Ravilious' only subject" (p. 103).

Graphic art is a proven medium for representing the ambiguities of meaning and the nuances of real and imaginary north. Consider the visual creations of Zembla and Naboland (pp. 109ff). Zembla is a lost kingdom overcome by a Communist revolution (p. 109), a place of ice and glass, a place of illusions, "a feeling quite as much as a place," a "distillation of northern Europe defined by exile, pastness and remoteness" (p. 110). Naboland is the surreal goal of expeditions from pre-war Europe, its landscapes showing traces of former civilizations (pp. 116-117), evoking ideas of imperial cultures without people, of empty places (p. 121). The stillness of northern landscapes provide the background for Knut Erik Jensen's film *Stella Polaris* (1993): the mirroring fjord, windswept rocks, the barely moving rowing boat, the few flowers lingered over lovingly, the bed of the fjord through the glassy water, the outline of a trawler at anchor with the mountains of the north just visible in the distance (like Ravilious's *Norway* 1940)—all about the love of place (Finnmark)—a summary of one Scandinavian idea of north (p. 163). In his *Brent av Frost/Burnt by Frost* (1997) Finnmark is shown as deserted only when its settlements are destroyed by the retreating Nazi armies (p. 161). Jensen's films thus play with two contradictory notions of north: the north as beautiful, the goal of the voyage home, and the disaster of a dream, suddenly falling into the icy water. (p. 165). Johannes S. Kjarval, the Icelandic painter, also loves the austerities of the Icelandic landscape and his work shows the impact of his long physical immersion in the landscapes that he painted.

Among these diverse and heuristic ideas of north, how or where do geographical accounts figure? “The phenomenon of magnetic north was for centuries explained by geographers and cartographers as deriving from the existence somewhere in the unexplored northlands of an actual lodestone of gigantic proportions: the magnetic mountain” (p. 51). Mercator’s (1569) map placed the magnetic mountain somewhere between Asia and America. Accounts of early geographical explorations represented the north not as a place, but rather as a series of trade routes. Apart from the quests for the north-east and north-west passages to the Orient there were “roads” described—the amber road, the fur roads (sea otter, beaver, ivory, narwhal tusk, and so on)—some highly local, some stretching for thousands of kilometers.

Geographers have learned and have much to learn from creative writers. The hero in Selma Lagerlöf’s *The Further Adventures of Nils* dreams of the north as isolated, bleak, and negative: warmth, civilization, brave Sami people, trees, animals and vegetation can reach only so far north (p. 68). The Polish journalist Mariusz Wilk, wrote that “Russian reality, especially in the North, has no form: expanses here are endless, mud is bottomless, settlements are shapeless” (p. 47). On time and seasonality, twentieth-century literature and film have provided outstanding insight. “The northern summer,” the author notes, “known for its brevity, uncertainty, as prodigal with light as the winter is starved of it” (p. 121). In Bergman’s films such as *Smiles of a Summer Night* (1955), and *Wild Strawberries* (1957), the northern summer is often a time of healing and resolution, but for the hero of Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt* (1867), northern summer is an image of all that he has left behind (p. 128). In Erik Skjoldbjærd’s film *Insomnia* (1997) the far north is destructive, invasive, unnatural (p. 128). The sense of northern place and awareness of passing time are at the center of Tove Jansson’s *Summer Book* (1972), the change of season and the discord within the household bring the embodiment of winter, solitariness, and negation (p. 130).

Literary accounts have and still can enrich geographical descriptions of regional landscapes and life. Canada, like Russia, extends very far north. For Jacques Cartier Canada was “the land God gave to Cain”—a place of exile (p. 187). Here the idea of north is associated with sadness—perhaps, the author suggests, because many immigrants from Scotland and Ireland went there involuntarily, displaced by the Highland Clearances and the potato famine (p. 189). Yet Canada remains a locus classicus for the vision of the north as a place of spiritual cleansing and healing, a powerful antidote to the greed

and decadence of modernity, and the location of a dignified and integrated life in which man takes his rightful place in the world of nature (p. 191). The geographer interviewed in Glen Gould’s radio documentary (1967) says: “the north is a land of very thin margins,” and “A nation is great that has a frontier—Canada has one—the north” (p. 193). The Group of Seven sought a new aesthetic to express the essential Canadian-ness of untouched northern landscapes (p. 194). Adrienne Clarkson, Governor-General of Canada, recently pleaded for “an exploration of the new humanism of the North” (p. 198), to hearing what the North itself can tell us, citing Henry Beissel: “The Arctic Circle is a threshold in the mind, not its circumference. North is where all the parallels [similitudes as well as longitudes] converge to open out ... into the mystery surrounding us” (p. 199).

The Idea of North might well have been entitled *Ideas of North*. Diverse, ambivalent and often contradictory ideas are exposed in this volume. Other queries could be raised. North in this book is seen almost exclusively as Arctic, and most views aired come from the Northern Hemisphere. As the historically more densely settled hemisphere, this record is naturally more accessible, but one wonders about ideas of north among the inhabitants of the southern hemisphere? There, given geographical realities, is north not the direction of warmth and light and south the direction of cold and dark, a place of exile or of healing?[2] And do former immigrants from the Northern Hemisphere to countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Chile, Argentina, or South Africa have different ideas of north from those who have traditionally lived in those spaces?

Secondly, the book has dwelt extensively on deterministic ideas about the “inferiority” of northern people and places. One might, however, question whether this penchant for boosting cultural self-importance by demeaning the other has much to do with cardinal direction. Surely “superior” peoples have managed to find “inferiors” in places eastwards, westwards, or southwards from them? The lethal combination of arrogance and ignorance, of inflated self-images and disdain for others, has surely more to do with racism, greed, and biased educational curricula than it does with cardinal direction per se?[3]

Thirdly, the text dwells almost exclusively on the aesthetics of place and their emotional associations. The role of the bio-physical environment, and the fascinating flora and fauna discovered during polar explorations, receives little attention, even though these have been dealt with

extensively in the literature. One misses references to this body of writing.[4] The absence of an index and a bibliography in this book is regrettable. For the themes addressed do genuinely transcend disciplinary boundaries, and one way to promote future dialogue would surely be to inform one another of mutual interests.

These limitations notwithstanding, Davidson's *The Idea of North* is likely to win applause from a wide audience within geography and the humanities. For its brisk style, its wide perspectives, and its consistent attention to the personal and contextual aspects of artistic creation, it beckons fresh horizons for scholarly dialogue. As journey or as destination, as place or as mirage, as exile or as home, the North Star evokes reflection and wonder.

The journey into the Arctic in search of treasures and marvels comes round in a circle (p. 66): a movement from the unaffected rapacity of the Renaissance, harvesting amber, fur, and the horns of unicorns to the complex appropriations of our own time, seeking both oil and shamanic enlightenment, while at the same time longing

to believe that the Arctic can remain a reservoir of peoples undamaged by civilization, a natural world, unexploited, pure.

Notes

[1]. Gaston Bachelard, *La poétique de l'espace* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1958).

[2]. See Hong-Key Yoon, "Geomentality and the Construction of Regional Knowledge: Examples from New Zealand and Korea", in *Text and Image. Social Constructions of Regional Knowledges*, ed. A. Buttimer, S. Brunn and U. Wardenga (Leipzig: Institut für Länderkunde, Beiträge zur Regionalen Geographie, 1999), pp.256-265.

[3]. Buttimer et al., *Text and Image*. [4]. See for example, B. Lopez, *Arctic Dreams. Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape* (London: Macmillan, 1986); J. Moss, *Enduring Dreams. An Exploration of Arctic Landscape* (Concord: Anansi Publications, 1994); and J. Moss, ed., *Echoing Silence. Essays on Arctic Narrative* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1997).

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