

Robert McGhee. *The Last Imaginary Place: A Human History of the Arctic World.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. 296 pp. \$18.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-50089-8; \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-518368-9.



Reviewed by John Sandlos (Memorial University of Newfoundland)

Published on H-Canada (November, 2007)

In recent months, news of the Arctic region has burst across the pages of major newspapers as such issues as global climate change, access to the soon-to-be navigable Northwest Passage, and ownership over the polar region have pushed their way to the front of the public agenda. The Arctic, it seems, is destined to play a greater role in world affairs as nation-states jockey for control over marine waterways and the rich hydrocarbon deposits beneath a rapidly melting polar ice cap.

But has the Arctic ever truly been isolated from the rest of the world during the recent and even distant past? In his recent volume, *The Last Imaginary Place*, the archaeologist and curator Robert McGhee argues that, for the past millennium at least, the global circumpolar world has not been an isolated archipelago of barren and unchanging human communities. Instead, human communities in the Arctic have for centuries maintained strong links to other regions of the world through trade and cultural exchanges with European explorers and colonists. Although McGhee does not claim—in spite of his subtitle—to have written a comprehensive history of human habitation and occupation in the Arctic, he does provide an excellent overview of many epochal moments of contact and interaction among Arctic peoples, Arctic landscapes, and European newcomers on a global scale. Here, in one slim volume, we have masterful ac-

counts of human relationships to a variety of arctic environments: the Thule (i.e., early Inuit) culture's expansion into the eastern Arctic to take advantage of new trading opportunities presented by the Norse occupation of Greenland, Martin Frobisher's disastrous mining venture near Baffin Island, the intensive exploitation of natural resources on Spitsbergen Island, the difficult and, at times, disastrous searches for the Northwest and Northeast Passages, and the race to the North Pole that so captivated the public imagination in the early twentieth century. Add to this mix more modern material on industrial exploitation and the Cold War militarization of Arctic landscapes, and McGhee convincingly argues that the Arctic has for the past thousand years been less a terra incognita and more a familiar (if not always comfortable) place for outsiders and indigenous inhabitants alike.

If McGhee's book provides an important reminder that the Arctic has long been subject to global influences, perhaps its greatest strength is its intimate portrait of a diverse array of local places in the Arctic. In his professional capacity as an archaeologist, McGhee has traveled widely in the region, and he writes lucidly and with great passion about the natural and cultural features that he has encountered over a long career. Through McGhee's prose, the reader is transported to such fascinating sites as Qallunaat Island, the location of Frobisher's hard-rock

mining venture; the town of Lavrentia in Siberia, an indigenous community struggling between tradition and the irresistible tug of modernity; and the archaeological site of Ekven, an ancient village near the Bering Strait where the dig crew made their home in the Soviet-era military outpost that had once been granted the task of watching America at its closest approach to Asia. Rarely do historians have such intimate knowledge of and experience with the landscapes about which they write. McGhee's elegant prose manages to capture vividly the local places where past and present meet in the Arctic. This mix of the anecdotal observation and scholarly argument places McGhee's book comfortably on the boundary between academic and popular history, a beautifully written and well-illustrated volume that is at once informative, entertaining, and difficult to put down.

McGhee's combination of broad historical sweep and local anecdote has its drawbacks, however, as some issues and source material demand more depth and discussion than the author has provided. If the geographical sweep of McGhee's narrative does impressively transport the reader across the vast circumference of the polar world, the relatively brief volume remains necessarily episodic, providing glimpses of Arctic history over broad periods and vast expanses of space without always providing a coherent narrative to the entire book. And though I sympathize with the author's desire to appeal to a larger audience by abstaining from the requisite footnotes of a purely academic study, a more expansive bibliographical essay at the end of the volume might have proved a great aid to other scholars working to develop the still embryonic field of global Arctic history. Finally, McGhee's discussion of Aboriginal hunting practices in northern Canada proved problematic, particularly his argument that instances of Aboriginal mass slaughter of wildlife were the result of a religiously inspired worldview that understood hunting as a consensual agreement between predator and prey. Indigenous hunters, according to McGhee, thus saw no link between mass killing and potential declines and extinction of animal populations. Although there is some truth to this argument, there is a body of anthropological work that suggests a high degree of intentionality and awareness

of long-term trends in wildlife population levels among Aboriginal hunters. In addition, many of the stories of mass wildlife slaughters that populate the written record (and that have since formed the basis of conservationist and anthropological discourse on Aboriginal overkill) come from nineteenth-century Victorian sport hunters who idealized the principle of "one bullet, one animal," and who demonized Aboriginal hunters as a means to exalt their own "noble" approach to hunting animals. Finally, the anthropologist Shepard Krech, in *Indians, Animals and the Fur Trade: A Critique of Keepers of the Game* (1981), has argued that there may have been practical reasons for northern Aboriginal hunters to slaughter animals in excess of food needs. The barren ground caribou provided more than just meat to Dene and Inuit hunters: hides were essential for winter clothing and shelter and these could only be taken in late summer to obtain the highest quality material and avoid the deleterious impact of the warble fly. While it is certainly true that Dene and Inuit hunters often slaughtered more caribou than they could consume as food during this season, the hides they collected were absolutely essential for survival through the impending winter months. Thus, it becomes difficult to classify the resulting spoiled meat as waste. Although McGhee's discussion of Aboriginal overkill provides an important corrective to ideas of Aboriginal ecological harmony that still persist in the public discourse on northern hunting cultures, a fuller and more nuanced discussion would have captured many of the more intricate and complex aspects of the issue.

These are relatively minor criticisms of what is an important and distinctive contribution to the growing literature on Arctic history. McGhee's work will be of intense interest to students and researchers in the field of northern history, or to the general reader wanting to know more about such topics as Arctic exploration, northern indigenous people, or the Norse colonization of Greenland and North America. *The Last Imaginary Place* is not only a brave and path breaking attempt to situate the Arctic within the broader field of world history, it is also a finely written homage to the people who have inhabited and explored the circumpolar world for centuries.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-canada>

Citation: John Sandlos. Review of McGhee, Robert, *The Last Imaginary Place: A Human History of the Arctic World*. H-Canada, H-Net Reviews. November, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13808>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.