

Imagining the Arctic – Heroism, Spectacle and Polar Exploration. Huw Lewis-Jones (author). 2017. London, New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd. 433, hardcover. ISBN 978-1-78453-658-9. £79,-, US\$ 120,-.

Imagining the Arctic by Huw Lewis-Jones provides a refreshing new perspective on the history of Arctic exploration in the 19th and early 20th century. Instead of focusing on the history of the various, mainly British, polar expeditions, Lewis-Jones analyses the perception of these expeditions in the UK, the wider cultural and political framework and, probably most important, the transformation process from Arctic explorers to British national heroes – often including elements of spectacle or even circus.

Imagining the Arctic is divided into six main sections that seem at first to be somewhat unrelated to each other. While reading through the book, however, it becomes obvious that they are carefully selected areas of enquiry that fit together like a puzzle, with the grand picture only to be seen when all the parts are finally connected.

Lewis-Jones convincingly argues that the perceived history is by no means the same as the actual history of British Arctic exploration and that stories like the well-known episode of ‘young Nelson and the polar bear’ developed their own dynamic and have become a mainstay of public knowledge regardless of whether the actual historic event behind the story might have been extremely minor and/or evidence for the respective event is incomplete or missing at all. When Lewis-Jones makes the statement that if a scientist wants anyone to listen she/he should focus on the juicy bits and leave the science itself to those who care for details (p. 306) he provides an insight that is well known to most scientists as media supported/sponsored expeditions of sometimes questionable scientific relevance but with a ‘hero’ at the centre of the story will always gain more public recognition than the bone-dry results of an international working group of scientists. It is probably the greatest strength of the whole book to demonstrate that this phenomenon is not only 21st century, but existed all through the Victorian era and even earlier. Realizing that the heroes of Arctic (and Antarctic) exploration of the past used the media available to them very much the same way as modern heroes of the polar regions are using social media when bicycling to the South Pole or doing a marathon on a remote Arctic island, is a most healthy exercise for any polar historian and after having read *Imagining the Arctic* there is simply no way to avoid such thinking.

Nevertheless, Lewis-Jones is not a revisionist historian of the British activities in the Arctic as the obvious goal of the book is not challenging the traditional narrative, but adding an important facet to a history that was way too often understood as a simple straightforward story of exploration. By focusing on the perception of polar research in the UK he demonstrates that Arctic (and Antarctic) research was not an endeavour that was carried out in remote polar regions, but that gaining public support in the UK itself was equally important for the success of the expeditions and that polar explorers of the Victorian era understood how to use the media of the 19th century just as well as modern adventurers understand the use of social media.

Therefore the book is not only a relevant addition to the bookshelves of the small group of professional polar historians and a general readership interested in the history of polar exploration, but an equally relevant read for everybody interested in communications and media history. Furthermore, Lewis-Jones clearly demonstrates that the status of hero depends at least as much on the ability to gain media and public attention as on the actual achievements of an explorer in the field.

Although Lewis-Jones does not apply a typical and complete revisionist approach he deconstructs the narratives of the heroes of the Arctic to a certain degree by providing an alternative to the ‘great man’ approach that is still much too often the main approach of most new publications within the field of polar history.

Completely oversimplified, it might be stated that Lewis-Jones showcases how and why heroes were made alongside an understanding that these men simply reached this status due to their own activities.

The book is well illustrated with most of the illustrations being contemporary cartoons, book illustrations, posters for public lectures, etc. Unfortunately, the quality of the reproductions is not always absolutely convincing as all the illustrations are provided as b/w in-text publications and the finer nuances of the original prints are often somewhat lost. The notes and index are up to the standard to be expected for a scholarly book, but a bibliography would have been a useful

addition for any reader interested in using the book as a starting point for further reading and research into the history of polar exploration.

Altogether *Imagining the Arctic* by Huw Lewis-Jones needs to be recommended to any professional polar historian as well as the casual reader interested in the history of exploration of the Polar Regions. While clearly being an academic title *Imagining the Arctic* is also an entertaining book that is easily accessible despite its

scholarly quality. Thus it might be also recommended to the reader interested in travelling to the Arctic, whether actually planning to travel to the high latitudes or just being an armchair explorer longing for the North Pole. (Ingo Heidbrink, Dept. of History, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA 23529, USA (iheidbri@odu.edu))

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