

## Book Reviews

**THE POSTCOLONIAL NORTH ATLANTIC. ICELAND, GREENLAND AND THE FAROE ISLANDS.** Lill-Ann Körber and Ebbe Volquardsen (editors). 2014. Berlin: Nordeuropa Institut der Humboldt Universität. 422 p, softcover. ISBN 978-3-932406-35-5. €49,80. doi:[10.1017/S0032247414000965](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032247414000965)

The colonial past of Africa, the Middle East or South-East Asia, just to name a few, has been well documented. Much research has been done to unveil the mechanisms, structures and consequences of colonialism on the modern nation states in these regions. But would one link colonialism with a country like Iceland or the Faroe Islands? Is colonialism not linked to the subjugation of an indigenous population like in Greenland?

These are certainly questions which go beyond a traditional framework of postcolonial inquiry, especially when dealing with a population of European descent as in Iceland or in the Faroe Islands. But these are exactly the questions that the authors of this impressive volume have set out to tackle. One could also claim that this book revisits the paradigms of colonialism and ultimately postcolonial studies. That being said, the authors have not chosen a deconstructing approach or a complete reset of postcolonial theory, but they rather contribute and therefore expand our understanding of the different directions and characteristics of colonisation, colonialism and postcolonial analysis.

The volume is subdivided into three major parts, as already the title of the book implies: Six articles deal with the facets of colonialism in an Icelandic, five in a Faroese and lastly five in a Greenlandic context. An introduction by the editors sets the theoretical framework of the book while William Frost provides a short analysis of the term ‘North Atlantic Rim’. This, in this reviewer’s opinion, is certainly interesting, but does not really require a separate article and could have been dealt with in the introduction as Körber and Volquardsen anyway deal with the linkage of the three countries and in how far this ‘North Atlantic Region’ is a definable region in the first place. Moreover, Iceland and the Faroe Island were never occupied in the sense as the occupants subjugated an indigenous population, contrary to Greenland, of course. So what links these regions? Can they be considered postcolonial at all? After all, they were and still are in one way or the other linked to Denmark. Körber and Volquardsen purposefully do not provide a definite answer to this question, but let the contributors deal with asymmetrical power relations in their own way: ‘Therefore, when the title of this book puts forward the idea of a “postcolonial North Atlantic”, this does not mean that the authors and editors agree on definitions and applications of concepts of colonialism and postcolonialism’ (page 18). This approach is certainly beneficial and provides a non-confined insight into this new layer in postcolonial studies while explaining the absence of a concluding chapter.

It is certainly always a challenge to deal with every single contribution of a compiled volume such as the present in a short book review. Therefore, let me make some general

remarks on the content of this book and then highlight some of the articles therein. As in postcolonial studies commonly found, a strong focus in *The postcolonial North Atlantic* lies on literature analysis. To this end, in all three parts of this volume there are chapters that screen the existing (historical) literature through a postcolonial lens 1. on the respective region (such as on Iceland’s depiction in historical travel diaries in Hálfdanarson’s contribution), 2. self-representation by national authors (for example in Skarðhamar’s chapter on the Faroese *Í hvarsins hjarta* (Hoydal 2007), or 3. literary adaptation to changing conditions in Greenland in Volquardsen’s chapter, just to name a few. Moreover, other elements mirroring national identity, such as Greenlandic theatre as in Just’s article or the role and dealings with the Danish language in the Faroe Islands under decolonising circumstances in Mitchinson’s chapter, are evaluated.

While when reading this review the reader might think that these chapters may not correspond to his or her field of interest or expertise it is noteworthy that they are highly political and provide an important contribution to the political discourse on national identities and cultural production in (sub-)Arctic countries. Indeed, the political dimension of this book cannot be stressed enough and constitutes one of the major assets of this work, potentially challenging one’s own society’s generation of certain narratives. One of these, for example, is the motto ‘back to nature’ and the human/nature or culture/nature divide. Here, Reinhard Hennig’s chapter which deals with the Icelander’s Magnason’s bestselling novel *Dreamland* (Magnason 2006) comes into play. Hennig re-evaluates the book under the notion of ‘ecocriticism’. ‘Ecocriticism’ constitutes a predominantly American discipline which challenges ongoing environmental issues in a literary form, most famously done in Rachel Carson’s *Silent spring* (Carson 1962). While the American ‘ecocritics’ have by and large established the ‘back to nature’ narrative, Hennig shows how Magnason debunks this divide and how Icelandic identity is closely linked to cultural and natural interconnectedness. This corresponds to more general findings from, for instance, regime analysis that highlights the importance of regime adaptation to changing environmental conditions as ‘the vast importance of ecological feedbacks for societal development show that social and ecological systems are not merely linked but rather *interconnected*’ (original emphasis; Galaz and others 2008: 148). It is therefore interesting to see in how far science, for example by having created the concept of ‘socio-ecological systems’, and literature in the form of Magnason’s work reach the same or at least similar conclusions and what significance these findings have for different disciplines and contexts.

A political dimension of a different sort is presented by Rebhan and his evaluation of the Faroese debates on membership of the European Communities (EC) between 1952–1964 and 1970–1974. Here, he applies a lens of ‘postcolonial politics’ and considers the degree to which the Faroese position within the Danish realm, that is as a union or an independent state, contributed to the decision not to join the European Communities. During the first negotiation process the unionist and

secessionist parties disagreed over whether or not to join the EC as part of the Danish realm and only de Gaulle's veto against EC expansion in 1963 prevented the Faroese parliament from a final vote. With the adoption of the EC's Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) in 1970 the outcome of the consideration process was in unison against EC membership, irrespective of the unionist or secessionist stance of the Faroese parties. However, although membership was based on the Faroese themselves, 'they could never fully free themselves from the reality of postcolonial politics' (page 236).

Also Körber's article on the history, socio-cultural and political environment of the Greenlandic flag constitutes a significant contribution to Arctic political literature making the importance of the flag as a means for self-identification ever more understandable. She further engages in a short, but powerful discussion on the mapping and naming of places in Greenland and links these issues with cultural production in film and performance. Once again, the political dimension of flag-creation and mapping especially in a postcolonial region cannot be underemphasised.

The information provided and approaches applied in this volume are stunning and only minor things, such as some typos, can be taken issue with which however do not challenge the integrity of this volume. For example, I would consider it debatable whether Britain and the United States 'occupied' the Faroes and Iceland respectively (page 11 and 12). Also Körber's translation of the term 'Qallunaat Nunaat' which she translates into 'Land of the Danes' (page 374) is certainly true in a Greenlandic context, but would on a circumpolar scale be translated into 'Land of the non-Inuit'.

In conclusion, *The postcolonial North Atlantic* is an outstanding book that fills a gap in Arctic literature. While tilting towards the cultural and literary studies, lawyers, political scientists and students of International Relations are advised to make use of the multifaceted information provided in this volume. Especially the latter two will find themselves confronted with analyses of political processes that go beyond traditional methodologies. The editors have very convincingly succeeded in shedding new light on and creating new approaches for studies of the (sub-)Arctic. (Nikolas Sellheim, Faculty of Law, University of Lapland, PO Box 122, 96101 Rovaniemi, Finland ([nikolas.sellheim@ulapland.fi](mailto:nikolas.sellheim@ulapland.fi)).

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**TRANSFORMATION OF THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT IN WESTERN SØRKAPP LAND (SPITSBERGEN) SINCE THE 1980s.** Ziaja Wiesław (editor). 2012. New York: Jagiellonian/Columbia University Press. 95 p, softcover, illustrated. ISBN 978-8-323332-312. £34.50.

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This slim volume (92 pages) reports on approximately 25 years of landscape change in Sørkapp Land, the southern peninsula of Spitsbergen, the largest island of the Svalbard Archipelago. Field research was conducted by a team of Polish scientists from Jagiellonian University, the legacy of an initial visit to the region by physical geographer Zdzislaw Czepe during the International Geophysical Year 1957–1958. His interest in the research potential of the area was piqued, which led to a series of interdisciplinary summer expeditions beginning in 1980. The emphasis was on mapping abiotic and biotic features at a large scale (1:25 000 – 1:50 000). This resulted in a baseline of spatially detailed data that another team was able to repeat in an effort to detect change after another quarter century had passed. The 2008 team included two members of the original expeditions in the early 1980's.

The *Introduction* briefly outlines the Polish team's interest and timeline of activities. The slightly longer sub-section *Study area* gives a concise overview of the peninsula's geography, Pleistocene natural history and rationale for establishing baseline studies here, namely relatively easy access. The rest of the book consists of four sections: *Methods and materials*,

*Components of natural environment, Environmental and landscape changes, and Conclusions and prognosis for environmental change*. The second section comprises nearly half of the total text (38 pages) and describes abiotic features: bedrock, climate, glaciation, terrain relief and waters. Landscape units were first mapped utilising panchromatic air photos from 1961. Later infrared photos, digital elevation models and high-resolution satellite imagery (SPOT, ASTER), from 1990 onward, were used to track changes in land cover, including glacial surface area and elevation. 28 vegetation units were mapped based on relevés (a unit of plant community or vegetation analysis in the European phytosociological tradition) using the Braun-Blanquet method, but phytosociological tables of the floristics are not included. The detected changes in landscapes, glacier elevation and vegetation are presented in a set of six maps (scale 1:50 000 – 1:75 000)

The latter half of the book is devoted to describing the changes detected and putting them into context. Average winter air temperatures have warmed by *circa* 2°C over a 20-year period from the decade 1980–1989 to the decade ending in 2009. Not surprisingly, the mass balance of glaciers has generally decreased and they have receded in extent. Another factor, which the authors emphasise, is the rapid growth of the reindeer population in the 1990s. The reason given is the establishment of South Spitsbergen National Park in 1973 and a cessation of hunting activities. As of 2008, grazing and trampling by some 170 reindeer was considered a 'new geomorphic feature affecting large areas of western Sørkapp Land' (page 64). No figure is given for the amount of surface area affected, but the photo in Fig. 21 (page 66) showing 'destruction' of small sand