

White fox and icy seas in the western Arctic. The fur trade, transportation, and change in the early 20th century. John R. Bockstoce. 2018. New Haven & London: Yale University Press. xv + 327 p, illustrated, hardcover. ISBN 978-0-300-22179-4. USD 40.00.

Historical books can be a challenge for the non-historian like myself. When reading a historical treatise, I sometimes cannot avoid asking myself the question: are all these details really necessary? And are these details really relevant for the narrative? Luckily, those historical books that I have reviewed for *Polar Record* have been extremely thought-provoking and inspiring. And *White Fox and Icy Seas in the Western Arctic* also follows this trend. For this book, while being extremely rich in detail, is an impressive study of the rather recent history of the Western Arctic, which is defined as including Chukotka, Alaska and northwestern Canada, from the late 19th century to almost the mid-20th century. John R. Bockstoce is not merely telling a story of the fur trade in the region, but he has managed to create a narrative that tells of the endurance, the harsh environmental conditions and the uncertain economic markets that accompanied the people living in the Western Arctic. He shows what an important influence the fur trade, particularly stemming from Arctic, or white, fox (*Vulpes lagopus*), has had on life and living in that region of the Arctic.

Contrary to what the reader unfamiliar with the history of Arctic exploitation might expect, it was by no means the colonisers that exploited the indigenous flora, fauna and the people; both newcomers and local indigenous groups, particularly in Alaska and Canada, worked together to establish a profit-driven industry that decimated fox populations drastically. The book therefore does away with the notion of the exploited and oppressed indigenous people(s) of the Arctic, but rather showcases how they were indeed colonised, but became themselves active agents in the newly established economies, and how they became an integral part of the early 20th century fur trade.

This being said, the book also shows how little consideration indigenous groups—and indeed human life in general—received in the colonising efforts of Russians, Americans and Brits alike. All in the interest of sovereignty and profit from the fur trade. For instance Vilhjamur Stefansson's claim for Wrangel Island and the Soviet response did not care for the wellbeing of university students, trappers and Alaskan Eskimos, who all were parties to this quest, but instead merely circled around British and Soviet hegemony, respectively. Of course, this is far from being a new finding, but in the context of Bockstoce's narrative, it is good to remember how the fur trade and colonising efforts went closely hand in hand.

But this is not to say that the book only touches upon the larger picture of the fur trade. On the contrary (and here detail comes into play again), Bockstoce skillfully weaves the grander narrative into life on the ground. He gives detailed insight into the logistics of trapping, fur processing and trade, describes different techniques and equipment and puts a very human face on trapping and the fur trade by introducing various historical figures that in one way or another influenced the trade, its peak and its collapse. With the help of extensive archival research, Bockstoce is able to flesh out the characters of these figures and, paired with his lively and colourful way of writing, the reader is able to place himself in the environment of the Western Arctic fur trade. I personally was able to picture life and living at that time, and I could not help myself thinking that some parts of this book would even serve as part of a script for an historical TV series, such as the Netflix series *Frontier*. This is furthermore underlined by the many pictures that accompany the written text and that provide the reader with a visual impression of life and people at that time.

Bockstoce is indeed a great writer, who has managed to encapsulate the realities of fur trading through a greatly spun narrative. It is sentences like the following that make it unmistakably clear how far-reaching the fur trade—in light of the hundreds of thousands of furs that were traded—was: “Before the customer acquired the fur garment it would have passed through many hands on the way, gaining value at each step and helping to provide a livelihood for many persons: the trapper, skinner, flesher, tripper, trader, baler, city collector, drummer, sorter, sample man, auctioneer, broker, dealer, grader, dresser, stamper, scraper, flesher, bleacher, dyer, pointer, manufacturer, designer, cutter, joiner, nailer, finisher, glazer, jobber, factor, resident buyer, and retailer” (p. 50). It is consequently not merely the fur trade that is the focus of the book, but rather the fur industry. Especially for me, who has done field research in the Newfoundland seal fur industry, the detailed insights into the lives of trappers, traders, native

peoples, explorers, etc., which were all linked to the fur trade are extremely interesting and make the industry significantly more comprehensible, particularly from a human perspective. Different motives drove different people to engage in this industry, and while the fox populations were decimated, the different ethics towards people and the environment place this history into a context that is of relevance today. This book is therefore recommendable to a wide readership. On the one hand, historians and those interested in Arctic history will find this book fascinating. On the other, scholars and practitioners engaged in the fur trade or any other trade in animal products should read this book.

Lastly, and in light of the 18th Conference of the Parties of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) in Sri Lanka in May 2019, policy- and decision-makers as well as business executives should read this book in order to learn about the “do’s” and “don’ts” of fur trading. Learning from and with the past is made easy with John Bockstoce’s impressive book. (Nikolas Sellheim, Helsinki Institute of Sustainability Science (HELSUS), University of Helsinki, PO Box 4, 00014 Helsinki, Finland (nikolas.sellheim@helsinki.fi))

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