

## Book Reviews

**PASSAGIERE DES EISES: POLARHELDEN UND ARKTISCHE DISKURSE 1874 [PASSENGERS OF THE ICE: POLAR HEROES AND ARCTIC DISCOURSES 1874].** Johan Schimanski and Ulrike Spring. 2015. Wien: Böhlau. 719 p, hardcover. ISBN 978-3205796060. 79€.

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To anyone interested in the reception of the Austro-Hungarian North Pole Expedition conducted by Carl Weyprecht and Julius Payer in the years 1872–74 and the study of Arctic discourse, the publication of this sizeable monograph is quite an event. Co-authors Johan Schimanski and Ulrike Spring have spent a number of years studying an impressive amount of archival sources on the return, public acclaim and media coverage of an expedition that had led to the ‘discovery’ of the archipelago of Franz Josef Land, an achievement that the Austro-Hungarian press largely tried to present as a manifestation of both Austro-Hungarian might and polar expertise, as well as an expression of multicultural national union, while rendering it as a ‘symbol of the power of European civilization and modernity’ (page 223 – all translations by the reviewer).

The expedition raised considerable interest internationally. Sir Henry Rawlinson, President of the Royal Geographical Society, sent a letter of congratulation shortly after the explorers’ return. *The Times*’ correspondent reported on the expedition in October. Julius Payer was invited to London to give a talk at the RGS in November 1874, attended notably by Francis Leopold McClintock. Payer was awarded the RGS’s Patron’s medal and Weyprecht the Founder’s medal in 1875, both gold medals going to the same expedition, a rare feat to occur and possibly a way also of trying to convince public authorities of the eminent interest in launching a new British polar expedition in response to tough international competition (see page 214–215).

In 1876, Payer’s account of the expedition was published in German, *Die österreichisch-ungarische Nordpol-Expedition in den Jahren 1872–1874* (Payer, 1876a); in English, *New lands within the Arctic Circle* (Payer 1876b); and in French, *L’expédition de Tegethoff* (Payer 1876c). Weyprecht was to become the initiator of the first International Polar Year (1882–1883) though he did not live to see the event. More recently, the expedition has become the main focus of Christoph Ransmayr’s remarkable postmodern novel *Die Schrecken des Eises und der Finsternis*, published in English in 1992 under the title *The terrors of ice and darkness*, amongst others. The Austro-Hungarian expedition of 1872–1974 is thus to be seen as an important enterprise in the history of polar exploration that certainly deserves close critical attention from various points of view, but that no single, major study had been dedicated to so far.

Given the wealth of archival material available, Schimanski and Spring have decided to devote their attention to the months following the explorers’ return in order to provide a detailed ‘reception study of a media event’ (page 18) in which the

Arctic mostly functions as a screen to project (central) European concerns and interest onto (page 26), although the expedition also brought back new knowledge that would lead to the adjusting of existing polar views. In their rigorous introduction, the authors outline their dual approach, oscillating between discourse analysis and historical contextualising. Part one is dedicated to the material, textual and graphic reception of public celebrations from Vardø to Vienna during the return of the ‘glorious modern Argonauts’ (page 209), as the Austrian press termed the explorers to Vienna, and then back home to various parts of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, paying attention to local cultural and political contexts. The second part looks at the expedition and its members in terms of identity: the ship as a microcosm of monarchy, the officers constructed by the press as polar heroes, the multiple ethnic identities of the crew and the importance of the expedition from a certain Austro-Hungarian point of view in demonstrating that the Empire is at par with other powers when it comes to solving the remaining mysteries of geography and one of the nations that continues to hold up the torch of humanity’s ideals, as the President of the Austrian Geographical Society put it during a speech (page 354–355).

Part three then focuses in more detail on what the authors call the ‘appropriation of the Arctic’ (title of chapter 9) and its ‘mediatisation’ (title of chapter 10), observing a shift in Arctic discourse during the 19<sup>th</sup> century from ‘the Arctic as a magic space largely out-of-reach to humanity [...] to a space that one can potentially observe, categorise and eventually control’ (page 396) and the use of the expedition for the purposes of business, transforming the return into a commercial event through the commodification of Arctic souvenirs while appropriating Franz Josef Land in relation to Austro-Hungarian concerns as the naming of places in the archipelago indicates. In part four, Schimanski and Spring look at what could be termed the literature of and about the expedition, including speeches, occasional poems (more than 30; quite a number of them in a satirical vein), plays, journalistic essays, and even fiction, for example Hungarian author Mór Jókai’s satirical novel *Egész az északi pólusig* – ‘Up to the North Pole’ –, first published in the review *Az Űstökös* in 1875.

Throughout their well-documented study, Johan Schimanski and Ulrike Spring aim at ‘shifting focus from traditional subject-related histories of exploration, i.e. the explorer, scientist, hero’ (page 545) to ‘local contexts in order to integrate the discourse, perspectives and perception of an important part of the population’ (page 546). There is no doubt that much has been gained through such an approach which allows them to foreground the idea that the reception of this expedition is largely to be seen in view of the dialectical relationship between home and the Arctic and an attempt to domesticate the latter for Austro-Hungarian purposes. From a social and political point of view, the expedition was useful to demonstrate the monarchy’s power outside and within after the Austro-Hungarian compromise of 1867, insisting for example on the competence and loyalty of expedition members coming from various ethnic groups in the monarchy. Such contextualising is without a doubt required to interpret the expedition’s reception

against the background of Austro-Hungarian history, as the authors affirm (page 348), though this might have included more references to the history of Arctic exploration.

By the 1870s, the Arctic in general perhaps no longer appeared as unimaginable as the authors seem to suggest at one point in relation to the trope of Arctic sublime (page 453). Still, the readings of the source material clearly reveal how dependent Austro-Hungarian discourses about the Arctic were on the topoi one had come to expect at that stage: that is icebergs, polar night, midsummer night sun, polar lights and polar bears. This may not come as a big surprise to specialists, but it is an important point to stress in view of the tropology of Arctic discourse and the idea of projecting time and again the same views or images onto the Arctic. Another important result is the foregrounding of the expedition's return as a media event to be read against the background of sensationalism and the development of mass media. The Arctic seemed to offer an ideal venue for conjuring up feelings of pathos strong enough to make the audience want to discover more in the following issue. The Austro-Hungarian expedition's evident function in this respect and perhaps even pioneering role in a central European context is a factor that has not been looked at previously in such depth. Finally, the study also confirms the idea that the Arctic was

largely subject to appropriation from the outside, be it from other Arctic countries like Norway or those European states that had been present in the Arctic for a long time such as Britain or France – and newcomers like the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, pursuing her dream of *Austria felix* farthest north.

*Passagiere des Eises* is indispensable reading to anyone interested in the Austro-Hungarian North Pole Expedition and a major contribution to the study of Arctic discourse that one would gladly see come out in English too. (Jan Borm, University of Versailles Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines, 47, boulevard Vauban, 78280 Guyancourt, France. ([jan.borm@uvsq.fr](mailto:jan.borm@uvsq.fr))).

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**A HISTORY OF THE ARCTIC. NATURE, EXPLORATION AND EXPLOITATION.** John McCannon. 2012. London: Reaktion Books. 349 p, illustrated, hardcover. ISBN 978-1-78023-018-4. £25.00.

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Before I start the review of this book, please allow me to apologise. Because as the title of this volume, already published in 2012 without having been reviewed in *Polar Record*, implies, the main focus is historical. However, I'm not a historian. It is therefore not possible for me to review this book based on a historian's expertise. But as you will see, this is not necessarily bad. Because while the title and scope of this outstanding book are without a doubt historical, it is not an academic history of the Arctic, but rather written as a novel. Of course, the main protagonist is not a person, but a geographical region and McCannon shows great talent in conveying prehistorical, historical as well as contemporary data to a lay reader by having written *A history of the Arctic* in a way that spans captivating narratives on the natural environment, people and peoples living in the far north. Or let me put it this way: while containing an almost insatiable wealth of information, this book is incredibly fun to read!

McCannon's book is subdivided into seven chapters, six of which constitute distinct time periods: pre-history to 1500 CE, 1500–1800, 1800–1914, 1914–1945, 1945–1991 and 1991 to the present. Chapter 1 provides the *Origins: introduction and environmental overview*. Here, the reader is made acquainted with the natural history of the Arctic while also the key species, in the sense as being a target of human exploitation, are being introduced. Compared with the other chapters, this is rather short and with *Encounters: prehistory and early history to 1500 CE* the joy of reading this book really starts. One of the reasons is the wonderful way in which the reader gains access to information that one would not encounter that frequently. Of course, having studied the Arctic, the Bering land bridge, for instance, as being key to the population of the Americas or the

different stages in the population of Greenland, is not unheard of. Yet McCannon does not state these as indisputable facts, but rather discusses them within frameworks of other theories, just to reach specific conclusions. And therefore the diversity in historical inquiry is unveiled, broadening the reader's understanding of how to interpret historical evidence.

And the further history proceeds towards the present, the more the reader understands the vital and mostly economically-driven history of the Arctic, a narrative that certainly is of high relevance today still. While in the past it was primarily furs, coal, gold and ultimately power that pushed Europeans into the north, it now appears to be the need for hydrocarbons, a fact that McCannon will also refer to later on in his book. But while history becomes graspable and the present volume is certainly wonderfully comprehensive, the reader needs to bear in mind that it is not necessarily new information that McCannon reveals, nor is his approach new. In other words, *A history of the Arctic* is primarily a European history of the Arctic. It is the Europeans that force their hegemony upon the natives all across the circumpolar north and the book does not consider the aboriginal history of the Arctic. For example, McCannon refers to the hostility between the Chukchi, Koryak and Itelmen that united as a response to Russian oppression (page 109) or the 'mutual detestation' of the Ob Nentsy and Khanty (page 150). Yet the reader is left in the dark as to why these peoples had major differences. Here, McCannon could have entered new grounds and he could have made the book make a bigger contribution to the understanding of Arctic history than it already does.

Indeed, this is further emphasised by the fact that the chapter *Crusades: 1800 to 1914* is a broad overview of the European 'discoveries' of the Arctic, meaning a short overview of polar exploration. While for the lay person this is truly enlightening and certainly of great interest, more advanced scholars of polar history will not necessarily find new information in this chapter. This contributes to the impression that the goal of this volume is not to present new historical findings or