

THE DREAM OF THE NORTH. A CULTURAL HISTORY TO 1920. Peter Fjågesund. 2014. Amsterdam: Rodopi. 572 p, illustrated, hardcover. ISBN 978-90-420-3837-0. 125€.

There are book titles that attract a reader's attention through their catchiness. The same certainly goes for Peter Fjågesund's *The dream of the north* which raises images of romanticism of the glory of the northern hemisphere. Only the subtitle reveals that this impressive work is something significantly more than a mere depiction of the 'romantic north': it is indeed *A cultural history to 1920*.

On more than 500 pages Fjågesund embarks on a journey which lasted him eight years of complete and which takes the reader through times of war, times of discovery and times political and cultural changes. Written in a way which makes this a somehow personal account by the author, 'the dream of the north' is not really a dream as such, but rather a change in European power centre perception of the northern latitudes which is caused by and reflected in political changes, technological advancements and the expansion of power spheres based on hunger for resources.

Fjågesund's structure of the book is what this reviewer finds especially noteworthy as it is designed to be a very distinct kind of an historical encyclopaedia. This means that he has screened European history through a northern/Arctic lens and depicts and interprets key European events in the respective power centres based on their impacts on northern discovery and their impacts on how the northern lands, Scandinavian countries or the Arctic regions are perceived and ultimately utilised. The reader therefore does not only gain a significant insight into north- or Arctic-related literature at the respective time, but also into the complexities of European history. Moreover, the reader gains significant insights into key events for and key facts of polar exploration and in which socio-political environment they occurred. The structure of the book then enables the reader to use it as a reference book to understand these as the six chapters, albeit interwoven, constitute single-standing, well-formulated texts: *Finding a footing: The north before 1700*, *Preparing for take-off: The early eighteenth century*, *The great watershed: 1750–1790*, *Fastening the grip: 1790–1830*, *The northern heyday: 1830–1880* and *The closing circle: 1880–1920*.

But apart from the historical facts that are presented here, Fjågesund furthermore places the political events into their context with cultural achievements. After all, this is a 'cultural history'. For example, his linking of the political climate in England with regard to Denmark with Shakespeare's *Hamlet* or *Julius Caesar* is intriguing, making this work very valuable in students of Scandinavian studies.

Throughout this rich and detailed history of European northern history, Fjågesund notes that 'as the present work is primarily concerned with a historical survey of how the north was actually perceived from antiquity up to the time of the first World War, meaning a period in which indigenous perspectives were hardly heard or registered, they will play a correspondingly modest part in the account' (page 28). Indeed, any northern or Arctic indigenous history is by and large absent here, making this the most significant downside of the book robbing it of a significant contribution it could have had as a

key work for understanding the history of the north. Although the focus is not on the north itself, but on the perception of the north as a 'periphery' from the then-perceived 'centre', references to aboriginal history and the linking of European and non-European perceptions would have the relevance of this work. As it is it fosters to some degree cultural relativism as it takes too little into account the interchange of cultural elements between northerners and non-northerners.

Here it seems worthy to recall Bernard Williams' famous quote: 'For standard relativism, one may say, it is always too early or too late. It is too early, when the parties have no contact with each other, and neither can think of itself as 'we' and the other as 'they'. It is too late, when they have encountered one another: the moment that they have done so, there is a new 'we' to be negotiated' (Williams 2007: 69). For an increasingly non-relativist cultural history to be achieved reference to works like Eber's *When the whalers were up north* (Eber 1989) or Grant's *Arctic justice* (Grant 2002) as examples of indigenous, in this case Inuit, perspectives on European Arctic exploration would have been beneficial. The relevance of the indigenous side of the cultural historic coin with regard to European presence in the Arctic becomes evermore relevant when taking into account the recently discovered vessel of the Franklin expedition, either *HMS Terror* or *HMS Erebus*, and its reflection in Inuit oral history.

Apart from the missing indigenous perspective, this reviewer found Fjågesund's reliance on Mills' *Exploring polar frontiers* (Mills 2003) slightly exaggerated. While without a doubt a standard reference work, other works, for example *Charting the sea of darkness* by Donald Johnson on Henry Hudson (Johnson 1993) or *Meta Incognita* by Thomas Symons on Martin Frobisher (Symons 1999) would have been beneficial and would have widened the spectrum of secondary literature for a better understanding of the different socio-political contexts. Similarly, Fjågesund's occasional usage of Wikipedia sources this reviewer found rather inappropriate and more scientifically sound references would have made sense and would not have been difficult to find.

This being said, all in all Fjågesund's *The dream of the north* is a very impressive work and is highly recommended for those seeking to understand a cultural history of northern or Arctic perception in Europe. Its accompaniment by maps and other illustrations as well as quotations from poems and other literary works are helpful in understanding the north's reflection in the arts and in literature. Unfortunately the book ends in 1920. However, readers interested in the perception of the north, this time from a northern perspective, are advised to refer to Volquardsen's and Körber's work *The postcolonial North Atlantic* (Volquardsen and Körber forthcoming). Until then, Fjågesund has created a reference book which has earned a place as a standard work for the cultural and social sciences with a northern focus. It is highly recommended especially for Scandinavian Studies institutions. (Nikolas Sellheim, Faculty of Law, University of Lapland, PO Box 122, 96101 Rovaniemi, Finland (nikolas.sellheim@ulapland.fi))

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