

DOWDESWELL, J. and M. HAMBREY. 2002. *Islands of the Arctic*. Cambridge, etc., Cambridge University Press. 280 pp. ISBN 0-521-813336, hardback. £25.00/US\$38.00.

At first sight this has the look of a coffee-table book: colour photographs on almost every page, often covering two pages, and 25.5 cm square. Readers could settle for simply looking at the photographs and reading the very well-annotated captions. The pictures span the circumpolar islands from Svalbard, through Franz Josef Land, Severnaya Zemlya, the New Siberian Islands, Wrangel Island and round to the Queen Elizabeth Islands in the Canadian High Arctic. Most of the pictures were taken by the authors, who have visited most of the places they write about. At the end of the book they declare their intent: "it is our hope that this book will enhance the enjoyment of those who come to the islands of the Arctic, and awaken the interest of those who have yet to appreciate its unique landscapes, wildlife and peoples". At the very least I would hope that all the tourist ships heading north would have a copy in their library, as it is a most comprehensive book. It does, however, have limitations (see below).

The authors cover all aspects of the Arctic islands. Chapter 1 is a description of the region's geography. The next two chapters describe its 4×10^9 years of geological history, including plate tectonics, and its weather and climate, with some reference to the palaeoclimate. By chapter 4 we are into a subject of primary interest to this journal's readership, i.e. glaciers and ice sheets. The effects of glaciers on the landscape and how they have changed with time are well covered. Chapter 5 stays within the ice framework, this time examining icebergs and sea ice. Once again, partly in response to our modern concerns with climatic change, sea ice is addressed in the context of global warming. In chapter 6, the effect of a cold climate on the landscape is described, permafrost and the features associated with permafrost included. Then there is a chapter on coasts, rivers and lakes. Thus, as befits the authors' physical geography backgrounds, the first seven chapters cover the physical environment. That leaves two chapters for the animals, plants and human geography, followed by a final one with thoughts on the future: the impact of anthropogenically induced climatic change on the region, and the Arctic's place in global climate.

Putting together a volume covering all aspects of the physical and human landscape must have been a daunting task, requiring wide-ranging knowledge on the authors' part. It also required a deep and broad library of photographs. The authors have done over 40 years of fieldwork in the Arctic islands, and the scope of the book shows that during that time they were not only studying glaciers (their primary research area), but also keenly observing other aspects of the region. Their breadth of knowledge is admirable.

But the book has limitations. I only wish that those responsible for its layout and the quality of the photographic reproduction had shown the same level of dedication, or knowledge, as the authors. The photographs dealing with ice landscapes, whether it be glaciers, the sea, sea ice, frozen lakes or icebergs, all look as if they were taken through a

blue filter and are not always sharp; I cannot believe this is the fault of the authors who took most of the pictures. It is a pity, as, properly reproduced, this volume would have been worth purchasing for the pictures alone. Moreover, the authors cannot escape their disciplinary bias, so there are more pictures of physical landscapes than of floral, faunal and human equivalents. Furthermore, Svalbard dominates, understandably so, given the authors extensive work on this particular island.

This is not a book for the specialist. As the authors say, it is more for the uninformed tourist. Browsing through it would prepare tourists for what they are going to see and experience, but would not provide them with in-depth understanding. Topics such as why sea ice is different from lake ice are flown through. It is as if the horse is led to water and not allowed to drink. But then how can this be achieved in a volume where the text is secondary to the pictures? To overcome this discrepancy (an intentional one I think) I would like to have seen much better maps and some figures illustrating processes. The maps are very plain. One, for example, showing explorers' routes to the pole, along the Northeast and Northwest Passages, across Greenland, etc., uses a single colour even when the routes cross each other. The maps include only a fraction of the place-names referred to in the text, which makes the descriptive text hard to follow. One map appears twice, presumably to save the reader from having to hunt for it, as the maps are not numbered. The topic of glaciers lacks a well-drawn diagram, which could easily have shown the accumulation and ablation zones, and the flow vectors, supporting and expanding on the description in the text.

The text itself is largely descriptive and fairly exhaustive. It is also rather ponderous, with very few light stories to create atmosphere. In some ways, the volume is a kind of illustrated lexicon of things and places in the Arctic islands. If it were no more than this, the text would not be too useful since a laborious search through it would be necessary if one wanted to find out something about, say, a particular bird. However, if the indexing is good, one can overcome this problem. So I checked the index and it is good. You want to know about the brent-geese? Go to the index which will point you to page 220. You only get a sentence there, but what more can you expect when the volume covers just about everything?

If you are interested in the Arctic islands and wish to own a fine collection of photographs of the region with a wide-ranging discussion of the geography, geology, glaciology and flora and fauna, this is a book worth having. Just don't expect too much in terms of in-depth discussion or explanation. For that type of information, you will want to go to the "suggested further reading" list and take it from there.

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