

LIGHT ON THE NORTHERN LIGHTS

THE NORTHERN LIGHT: FROM MYTHOLOGY TO SPACE RESEARCH. Brekke, Asgeir and Egeland, Alv. 1983. Berlin, Springer-Verlag. 170p, illustrated, hard cover. ISBN 3.540.12429.2. US\$42.00

This beautifully prepared book is a historical study of beliefs and research on the *aurora borealis*. Starting with references to the phenomenon in the work of the Greek philosophers, we are provided with an excellent discussion of the different explanations given in the mythology, literature and early science of Scandinavia. Native people of the sub-Arctic and Arctic often saw the Northern Lights as a manifestation of a vengeful supernatural power, whilst others believed it to be a reflection of flames from the Realm of the Dead. For others again, perhaps in more southerly latitudes where it was rarely encountered, the aurora was an omen of misfortune.

Yet from an early time there were also attempts to explain the phenomenon within some scientific frame of reference, as did the anonymous author of the thirteenth century *Konungs skuggsjá* [King's mirror]. That important text implies it was only observed at that time in more northern areas, which leads the authors of this book to suggest there have been substantial variations in its appearance over the centuries.

We are provided with a fine discussion of the treatment of the *aurora borealis* in poetry and imaginative writing, as well as a visual review of its treatment in art. The fine contemporary photographs, especially the coloured ones, document the great variation in form and colouring that the Northern Lights manifest. The discussion of the varying approaches to its study by scientists is very well done, at least for laymen with scant scientific understanding. My only complaint about the book is the quality of the translation. In such a finely produced book it is regrettable that one encounters, all too often, such fractured English as: 'Alfvén's theory is today the fundamental on which our understanding of the northern light is based' (p 136).

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SEA LAW AND THE POLAR REGIONS

EVOLUTION OF THE LAW OF THE SEA. Theutenberg, Bo Johnson. 1984. Dublin, Tycooly International Publishing. 261 p, maps, soft cover. ISBN 0.86346.042.9. £8.50, US\$12.50 (hard cover £16.50, US\$25.00).

This is a study of recent developments in the law of the sea with particular reference to their impact on polar areas. It proceeds not merely from a legal standpoint but also draws heavily on the relevant scientific, environmental and military background. Subtitled 'a study of resources and strategy with special regard to the polar areas', the work lays its principal emphasis on questions of natural resources and military strategy in the polar regions. The author states in his Introduction that he has deliberately abstained from elaborating complicated legal questions; nevertheless, his multi-disciplinary approach results in an illuminating exposition of the relevance of the new law of the sea to the Arctic and Antarctic.

The work is inevitably dominated by the United Nations Convention on the Law of