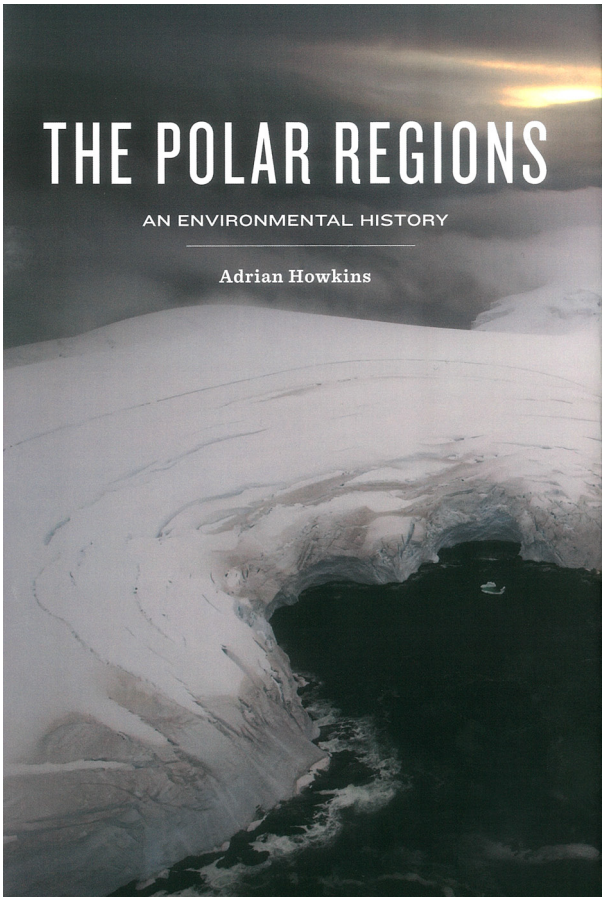
Polar Research

Review of *The polar regions: an environmental history*, by Adrian Howkins (2016). Cambridge: Polity Press. 251 pp. ISBN 978-0-7456-7080-5.

Adrian Howkins sets out to deliver an environmental history—a study of human interaction with the natural world over time—of the polar regions covering both the Arctic and Antarctica in a comparative perspective. Attention is focused on the period after 1800. Readers are offered a gripping history that succeeds marvelously in weaving a very diverse set of themes, perspectives, accounts, places and histories into a fast-paced narrative of fewer than 200 pages. There are many interesting stories and reflections in here both for the environmental historian and for those interested in polar history in general. Much more than just an environmental history, the book also covers the history of polar science and polar exploration—thematically staying quite close to mainstream polar history. At the bottom line, this book offers an inspiring starting point for reflecting upon the big lines in polar history.

The author is keen to avoid the shortcomings and pitfalls of environmental determinism—how the physical environment pre-disposes societies and states towards particular development trajectories—a position that is frequently criticized throughout the book. Instead the focus is shifted towards the different perceptions of the polar environment, adding a dynamic layer of meaning and interpretation to human–nature interactions. Here we have Howkins' preferred level of analysis, and where he is at home and at his best. Among the dominant perceptions, he identifies the twin narratives of the "friendly Arctic" and its more common counterpart, the picture of a hostile and barren polar emptiness, giving rise to geographies of hope and despair.

The author should be credited for his efforts to create a multifaceted and kaleidoscopic narrative. The book provides a highly useful introduction to developments and perceptions of the polar regions in Russia and the Soviet Union, particularly during the Cold War, a topic that is still in need of further attention in the international literature. I was particularly captivated by the chapter on the Cold War. In the polar regions, both superpowers engaged in a techno-scientific race to



demonstrate environmental authority and mastery over nature, in this way trying to demonstrate the superiority of their respective socio-economic systems. Howkins also highlights the dramatic difference between the fate of the Arctic (militarized and bristling with nuclear weapons) and the Antarctic (demilitarized and devoted to science and peace) during this period. He sees this striking difference in development as a strong argument against deterministic interpretations of history.

While the book offers an excellent, highly readable general overview, the impression becomes more mixed when turning the attention to historic details. Take as an example the chapter on colonial rule in Greenland. Historically, Danish rule in Greenland has been seen by many observers as a particularly benevolent kind of colonialism. Howkins sets out to deconstruct this rosy picture. While this is a highly laudable aim for critical scholarship, the author seems to lose some of the impartiality of representation for the sake of criticism. Let me try to exemplify this point.

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Danish rule is portrayed as brutal, stupid and arrogant (p. 120–123), particularly in its resettlement policy. This may be true, but the critique, substantiated by partial truths, is taken a bit too far. Take this passage: "Responding to the threat that Norway might challenge Danish sovereignty to eastern Greenland, Danish colonial authorities moved an entire Inuit village [which?] to demonstrate that Danish subjects were occupying the entire habitable coastline. This move [. . .], revealed a profound lack of understanding among Danish administrators for the connection between Greenlanders and their local environment" (p. 120). The author is probably referring to the resettlement of 83 Inuits from Tasiilaq (Ammassalik) to a new settlement, Ittoqqortoormiit (Scoresbysund) in 1925.

The problem? First, it was not a whole village, but rather a fraction of a much larger population of around 700 inhabitants. Second, the author fails to add that the resettlement was as much a measure to lessen an immediate danger of overpopulation, local conflict and years of declining catch in and around Tasiilaq. Despite initial setbacks, hunting turned out to be up to five times more profitable in the new area. These are pertinent matters for an environmental history. Against this background, this is not a simple and straightforward story that revealed a profound lack of understanding of the connection between Greenlanders and their local environment. Throughout history, Inuit hunters have been in constant movement, following the animals of prey and reacting to the constant changes in the physical and biological environment. I cannot help thinking that the author steps out of his declared analytical framework to underpin a post-colonial criticism.

The chapter on Greenland rests mainly on older actor accounts, with only a few references to more recent scholarship available in English. Overlooking a substantial body of newer literature (e.g., Sørensen 2006; Beukel et al. 2010) has given rise to a host of misrepresentations. Danish colonial policy in the interwar period is depicted as a kind of "high modernist" rule, a concept used by the American anthropologist James C. Scott to denote technocratic rule of experts whose unfaltering confidence in science and technology is aimed at modernizing society and reordering the natural world. I would argue that this concept better characterizes the technocratic policies implemented in Greenland after the Second World War, supplanting the paternalistic and often quite conservative colonial policies pursued before the war.

Another round of fact-checking could have benefitted the book enormously. We are told, for instance, that cryolite mining was taking place in the late 1930s (p. 122) when it actually began in the 1850s. On the next page, we read that there were several such mines, when, in fact, there has never been more than one cryolite mine in Greenland. Again, new literature is readily available (Berry 2012). The fairly short introduction to the Danish anthropologist and explorer Knud Rasmussen (p. 24) includes six easily recognizable spelling errors and misunderstandings (e.g., that his mother was one-quarter Inuit and that Kalaallissut is the Greenlandic dialect of Inuit language). It is hard to avoid inaccuracies and blunders altogether, but their sheer number in this short section made me wonder just how many I did not notice when the author was dealing with subjects less familiar to me. As a reference work—to pinpoint my argument here—this book should be used with some precaution.

References

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