

## ABOVE THE TREE LINE THE ARCTIC TURNS BLUE

An accomplished armchair traveler once remarked that "nothing has really happened until it has been recorded." (1) Others might add that travel and recorded history seem to be entwined in such a way that indigenous peoples with oral traditions are often included within, or excluded from the world's archives depending on the nature of their contacts with civilizations intent on expansion.

Until recently, the most northerly areas of the world have been isolated from a globalizing landscape that prides itself on the recording of both individual and entrepreneurial achievements. Boundaries to exploration and contact have long been set by limitations of technology and difficulties of establishing sustainable settlements in what were impenetrable Arctic environments.

Relatively hidden from history are three successive migrations that brought Asian peoples to the north of America, Greenland, and to the contemporary Scandinavian countries. Any evidence of these movements is distinctly absent in the pages of the colorful *Mappae Mundi*, medieval world charts that formed a vivid core for theological instruction rather than functional guides for mariners and navigators. Absent as well are these peoples' own adaptations to bleak conditions, their shifts from arctic ice to tundra and taiga and back again, and their disputes and modes of conflict resolution.

European diplomacy prior to the 15<sup>th</sup> century onset of the age of exploration was purposeful and exact. But it featured often complex attempts to incorporate Nordic kings and other higher status personnel into the political lineages of more southerly, warmer realms. Viking explorers, farmers, and fishing communities, left behind ample artifacts of their presence, coins and contours of New World settlements. However, their intricate sagas focus largely on their own plentiful successes in voyaging through sea ice towards an ultimate goal of forging coastal way stations in a bare wilderness.

Much later, 19<sup>th</sup> century expeditions failed to locate and to chart a mythic open sea at the top of the world in a search for economic enlargement. They, too, left behind tales, but these were sufficiently bizarre and horrific to prevent even the most enthusiastic of mariners from replicating their attempts. John Franklin tried twice to traverse the packed northern ice, moving in a westerly direction in the hope of reaching the Bering Strait, and to no avail. In place of the navigators' rich dreams came icebound ships and unprepared crews sporting soft sweaters and boots, rationed largely with insufficient, improperly canned food that resulted in deadly outbreaks of botulism. Years trapped in the northern freezer brought agonizing quests for escape routes along with debilitating disease, starvation, possible cannibalism, and ultimately, a total disappearance off the very face of the earth that was followed by decades of fruitless searches by other captains and crews through newly discovered yet equally ice-packed waters.

Contemporary efforts at bringing our scant cognitive map of the Arctic into clearer view have involved intensive preparations and solo aspirations with decidedly smaller, seaworthy craft.

Rowing along the vast edge of the earth's Nordic region is a unique experience, writes Jill Fredston. (2) The precarious journey that took her from the Alaskan Coast to Canada's northern province of Nunavut, thereafter to Labrador, down the western coast of Greenland and then on to Norway, was an anxious exercise in learning to look closely at the environmental challenge through which she had already passed while trying to anticipate a frequently compelling future that she had yet to confront. Jonathan Waterman traversed a similar icy pathway, but he put a love for kayaking to use in unfamiliar terrain and once almost drowned from the experience in sub-freezing waters. (3)

Both offer a record of the expected: A desire to camp close to the waters' edge so as not disturb the native people, the Inuit. An acquisition of knowledge about the merits of sealskin boots, seal oil, and sled dogs. And, of course, treasured glimpses of unspoiled ice sheets, unending wind-washed vistas, and beautiful geese and terns that inhabit craggy shorelines. There are as well almost cinematic meetings with the peoples of the north: Exposure to stories about those who survived nature's extremes by seeking a solitary vision, embedded in nature and suffering through a period of intense isolation. There are foreign words learned and written down, fishing techniques adopted and practiced, and friendships made through symbolic exchanges of smoked char and raw beluga.

But the modern adventurers found other relics that speak to a lack of prior social or cultural distance. Languages and diverse dialects are beginning to be lost, an effect of countless Europeans passing through, camping, and influencing the Arctic over hundreds of years. Tiny villages were found placed near shorelines laced with heaps of refuse and plastic bottles. There were encounters with remains of the foundations of ancient Viking sod houses interspersed with rusty barbed wire and crumbling wooden dinghies. The Inuit, many now transformed into locals, others still hoping to remain stewards of the land and the sea, were seen crowded into towns with dusty roads, not really representative of a still-enduring image of self-reliance, but increasingly dependent on the goods, news, and views of outsiders. (4) A much prized kayak had to be stored so as not to be vandalized.

The Arctic is not, nor was it probably ever, just a distant place for western marine wreckage located somewhere on the northernmost horizon. With warming temperatures, its once hidden histories are being enhanced and embellished, first by adventurers, and now by the skilled crews of ice breakers in search of needed energy resources. (5) Flags are being planted where summer brings an eased, welcome passage through the ice. Some animal species are in decline as others move northward accompanied by southern seeds, grasses and shrubs. One adventurer returns home exhausted, carrying with him a strong desire for an additional trip that will be built on past, hard-won experience. Another has already returned to study the environmental changes that are coming to the Arctic and its peoples.

Both believe that the already long-term links with the north will become more complex in the future, if not serious flashpoints for national competition and military rivalry. Having survived mostly alone in one of the earth's harshest of climates, they now struggle to give the people without records an ability to manage their own history.

(1) Attributed to Virginia Wolfe. (2) *Rowing To Latitude; Journeys Along The Arctic's Edge*. New York, North Point Press. (2001) (3) Waterman, John. *Arctic Crossing: A Journey Through The Northwest Passage and Inuit Culture*. Guilford, Connecticut, The Lyons Press. (2001). Griffiths, Rudyard. "The Blighted Environment Of The Urban Arctic." *National Post Online* (9/8/2009). Seidler, Christoph. "The Major Players: Who Is Winning The Arctic Game Of Monopoly?" *Spiegel Online* (6/11/2009); "Dramatic Biological Responses to Global Warming In The Arctic." *Physorg.com* (9/10/2009)