

North by Degree: New Perspectives on Arctic Exploration

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Book Reviews

NORTH BY DEGREE: NEW PERSPECTIVES ON ARCTIC EXPLORATION. Edited by Susan A. Kaplan and Robert McCracken Peck. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society (Lightning Rod Press, Volume 8), 2013. 488 pp. + 16-page color insert. \$50 (softcover. ISBN 978-1-60618-923-8, \$45.

Arctic exploration is about heroic men struggling to set new boundaries in a desolate, cold and snowy environment, or is it? NORTH BY DEGREE: NEW PERSPECTIVES ON ARCTIC EXPLORATION has collected 15 scholarly papers into a single volume, all intended to contextualize Arctic expeditions. Susan A. Kaplan and Robert McCracken Peck organized a three-day international conference on Arctic exploration held in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in May 2008. The conference celebrated the 100th year anniversary of Peary's North Pole expedition, but the organizers consciously strived to highlight some of the lesser known aspects of Robert Peary and Frederick Cook's "Race to the Pole" and contemporary expeditions. This book is a final collection of the presented research papers looking at different facets of Arctic expeditions from 1850 to 1940.

Researchers place different expeditions and famous Arctic explorers in a context of nationalism and identity, of contacts between cultures, of race and gender, and of technological advances. The book also focuses on the Arctic regions in the eye of the public as it was shown in popular books, art and artifacts of that era.

I found of special interest the papers investigating the roles of Josephine Peary and Matthew Henson during both the Greenland expeditions as well as back at home in the United States after the successful discovery of the North Pole.

Josephine Peary embarked on the Greenland expeditions in 1893. This was a most uncommon undertaking, and her decision to accompany and support her husband was publicly frowned upon (or envied?) by other Arctic explorers. The research paper analyzes her decision in the context of feminism of the time. Mrs. Peary made perhaps a bold move to join, but then successfully carved out a more traditionally feminine role for herself. She kept the living quarters in Red Cliff in North Greenland civilized and tried to boost morale with a homey touch to the dark winter. Her daughter, Marie Ahnighito Peary, was born in Greenland in 1893. The Inuit called her "the snow baby"—they had never seen such a white baby. After returning to the United States, Josephine wrote about her experiences in two books, which brought this Arctic expedition to life for a large audience of women and children.

Matthew Henson, an African American, was Robert Peary's personal assistant for 22 years. Henson participated in all expeditions and was known to be the best dog musher, and praised for his ability repairing and driving the dog sledges. He connected well with the native Greenlanders and learned their language, so he served as a crucial interpreter within the expedition team. His portrait depicted in the book shows a strong, capable, confident, if slightly amused, man leaning on a dog sledge aboard the S.S. *Roosevelt*. Henson reached the North Pole on 6 April 1909, together with Robert Peary and four Inuit companions. Back in the United States, newly unemployed Henson choose to sign a contract for a six-month lecture tour, despite commander Peary's mandate to all of his men to stay away from the public. It is fascinating to

read the analysis of the public response to an African-American hero, at a time when segregation laws were still in effect. Journalist accounts reflect a divided public, some write about Henson with respect, others doubt his ability, and all accounts openly talk about his skin color and race in a way that is inconceivable now.

I always love old photographs of expeditions. NORTH BY DEGREE is richly illustrated with familiar photos of distinguished gentlemen with big dreams, wild-eyed bearded explorers, ships stuck in ice, primitive and cramped housing arrangements, and photos of celebratory gatherings and medal ceremonies at scientific societies. Many of these photos come from the archives of the Peary-MacMillan Museum at Bowdoin College in Maine. Unique photos are collected in a paper on Arctic imagery and decorative arts. They illustrate how Arctic exploration made it into household life as silverware, ceramics, and children's toys. Ships, Eskimos, and sea ice feature together with the odd lion and wild roses as "Arctic scenery" on plates. This decorative art shaped the views of the public in the 19th century.

NORTH BY DEGREE: NEW PERSPECTIVES ON ARCTIC EXPLORATION is a collection of history and social science research papers, and not all papers have the same rigor and depth. It certainly is not a popular science book.

If you are keen to delve deeper into the world of Arctic exploration, interested in a look beyond the cliché of white male explorers struggling in the face of adversity, open to learning more about the role of indigenous people in supporting expeditions, and finding out how our common perception of men in the Arctic was shaped by societal interests, then this book is for you.

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