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Author: Willem Van Geel

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Global Histories: A Student Journal

Friedrich-Meinecke-Institut

Koserstraße 20

14195 Berlin

Contact information:

For more information, please consult our website www.globalhistories.com or contact the editor at: admin@globalhistories.com.

The Polar Regions: An Environmental History

By Adrian Howkins, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016. Pp. 248,
Hardback, £20, ISBN 978-0-7456-7080-5

REVIEWED BY WILLEM VAN GEEL

Willem graduated magna cum laude from University College Utrecht in 2014, where he studied Liberal Arts & Sciences and specialized in history, philosophy and international relations. Since then, he has pursued his transnational research interests by undertaking an MA in Global History at both Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin and Freie Universität Berlin. He is currently in the process of writing his MA thesis on Antarctica in twentieth-century global history.

Antarctic sealers caused Russians to lose interest in Alaska by 1867; the 1920 Spitsbergen Treaty influenced the Antarctic Treaty System; and the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska made Antarctica the most protected environment on the planet. These are just three of the intriguing connections Adrian Howkins draws between the far north and the far south in his latest publication. As an expert on mid-twentieth century Antarctic history, Howkins has now expanded his view to the north and written his most ambitious work yet. *The Polar Regions* presents pioneering research that studies the interconnectedness of the Polar Regions – as well as other parts of the world – by applying an environmental history approach. This approach leads Howkins to balance the interplay between material environments, human perceptions thereof, and human actions, to present a fresh reevaluation of polar history in an interconnected world. Throughout this short but concise story that deals with a wide range of periods, themes, and perspectives, the author has cleverly interwoven three arguments: (i) histories of the Arctic and Antarctic are enriched by studying them together; (ii) these histories offer good opportunities to think about important environmental themes; (iii) and these histories are marked by contrast and contradiction, not offering simple messages of positive and negative.

Howkins' environmental history is told through six rich chapters divided by theme as well as chronology. "Myth and History" explores polar history before 1800 and links the far north and the far south through their status in mythologies. Furthermore, by blurring the lines between myth (imagined constructions) and history (actual events), it shows how culture and human perception construct understandings of place and political power. "Scarcity and Abundance" looks at the development of both subsistence and commercial hunting of seals and whales up to the twentieth century to illustrate how material environments shaped human actions in polar history. Howkins links sealing and whaling not only to global markets, but also to debates on resource frontiers and uses Garrett Hardin's *tragedy of the commons* concept as an analytical tool throughout. Howkins directly

contributes to the wider debates on this postwar concept in applying it to a period and context in which it rarely appears.¹ Here, more so than in later chapters, he successfully showcases the versatile applicability of the term.

“Nature Conquered, Nature Unconquered” examines how the same institutions and even the same individuals were involved in the exploration of both poles, taking experience from one side of the world to the other. It also describes the disastrous effects the environment could have on the bodies of explorers and firmly roots this story in imperialist projects. “Dreams and Realities” is likewise based on environmental histories of imperialism but investigates the early twentieth century visions of economic development of the Polar Regions. It uses the debate surrounding Vilhjalmur Stefansson’s notion of an inhabitable and “friendly Arctic” to critically reevaluate imperial visions as diverse as Richard Byrd’s Little America base in Antarctica, the international coal mining in Spitsbergen, South American nationalist claims to Antarctica, and Danish administration in Greenland. Together, these two chapters speak to the existing literature on the links between environmental and imperial history. They directly refer to the work of historians such as Christina Adcock and Edward J. Larson, but could just as easily be connected to that of Richard Drayton or, more specifically, Pascal Schillings.² As Howkins indicates in the introduction, studies of the Polar Regions can make valuable contributions to this literature by questioning the very reasoning behind imperialism: “why bother with making sovereignty claims to an unproductive expanse of ice?” (p. 13).

The remaining two chapters move into the post-WWII period. “War and Peace” considers how communism and capitalism competed for superior displays of environmental authority in the highly militarized Arctic and relatively peaceful Antarctic during the Cold War. It uses the strongly diverging environmental outcomes of this era – the pollution and destruction in the Arctic on the one hand and the lack thereof in the Antarctic on the other – to challenge environmental determinism. Finally, “Preservation and Exploitation” shows how environmental issues such as resource extraction, climate change, and polar tourism have increasingly shaped the political histories of the Polar Regions over the last few decades. Interestingly, here Howkins highlights the difficult role indigenous Arctic communi-

¹ The term was first popularized by Garrett Hardin, “The Tragedy of the Commons,” *Science* 162 (1968): 1243-1248. For a starting point into the literature on the concept, see Frank van Laerhoven and Elinor Ostrom, “Traditions and Trends in the Study of the Commons,” *International Journal of the Commons* 1 (2007): 3-28.

² Christina Adcock, “Tracing Warm Lines: Northern Canadian Exploration, Knowledge, and Memory, 1905-1965” (PhD diss., Cambridge University, 2010); Edward J. Larson, *An Empire of Ice: Scott, Shackleton, and the Heroic Age of Antarctic Science* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011); for Richard Drayton, for example see *Nature’s Government: Science, Imperial Britain, and the “Improvement” of the World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000); for Pascal Schillings, see “First at the South Pole: the production of geographical ‘matters of fact’ during the Norwegian Antarctic expedition, 1910-12,” *Historical Social Research* 40 (2015): 219-238.

ties find themselves in when they get caught between economic developers and environmental activists. He also further investigates the close links between the far north and the far south as the influence of the Exxon Valdez oil spill on banning all mining and marine pollution in Antarctica so powerfully shows.

The chapter titles clearly illustrate Howkins' third central claim: polar history is marked by contradiction. This is additionally emphasized throughout each chapter as we are often reminded of the presence of indigenous human communities in the Arctic and their absence in the Antarctic as well as the current popular image of the Polar Regions which directly links icy environments to a warming planet. The strongest contrast however is the repeated presentation of the Polar Regions as a scarce, wild, and unspoiled environment with the promise of abundance, power, and spoils in the future. At times, this constant creation of dichotomies starts to feel exaggerated and the recurring imagery of light and darkness simply forced. Polar tourism appears as one of the few human activities to exist in a grey zone for both exploiting polar environments and raising awareness and money for their preservation. This is easily one of the most fascinating discussions found in the book and it would have been fruitful and relevant to his central aims if Howkins had further expanded on this line of discussion.

In fact, other parts of the book would also have benefited from more elaboration. Each of the chapters tells an intricate and decades-spanning history in a mere 20 to 30 pages, whereas these might well warrant full books by themselves. It is a testament to Howkins' skills as a researcher and historian that he largely succeeds in presenting a convincing environmental history of the Polar Regions in merely 188 pages. Although he does not explicitly reflect on this, Howkins can therefore be placed among the growing number of historians who embrace *longue durée* approaches – recalling David Armitage and Jo Guldi's plea from 2014 or even Sebastian Conrad's recent observations.³ While this forces Howkins to argue as concisely and clearly as possible – and he does this admirably – it also leads to some inevitable omissions. Omissions are certainly to be expected from an ambitious study like this one, but some still form a reason for surprise as the reader would have expected their inclusion. One such notable exclusion is the role of nineteenth-century fiction in shaping the environmental perceptions of polar explorers and policymakers. For examples, just think of Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Poe's *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, and Melville's *Moby-Dick*.

Furthermore, some of the topics that are included would have deserved more attention or nuance. The first chapter for instance does a good job of criticizing European primacy in Antarctic history and mentioning alternatives to European modern scientific creation stories in polar history, but these alternatives are largely left unexplored. At times Howkins seems to be calling for alternative narratives

³ See David Armitage and Jo Guldi, *The History Manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); and Sebastian Conrad, *What is Global History?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

rather than providing them or simply leaves the reader wondering how he expects others to pick up on these narratives. Additionally, the first chapter does not discuss its claim that Captain Thaddeus von Bellingshausen was the first to sight Antarctica, while a specialist like Howkins should at least have pointed to the ongoing debate about the first sighting of the continent. Similarly, his portrayal of 1950s Antarctica seems rather simplistic for an expert such as himself. His account of the Antarctic Treaty dedicating the continent to peace and science for instance appears more triumphalist than in his previous work. Moreover, he flat out ignores recent studies that have questioned the influence of scientific cooperation during the International Geophysical Year of 1957-58 on the treaty negotiations.

Despite these issues, Howkins is careful not to lean too much towards a certain side in addressing larger debates as he there again emphasizes contrasts and contradictions. This becomes the most apparent in the conclusion, which is entitled “Geographies of Despair and Hope”. For Howkins, over-exploitation of resources, pollution, and climate change give reason for despair, while recovering seal populations, far-reaching environmental protection measures, and climate research foster hope. Although his claim that both perspectives are needed to prevent declensionist narratives from leading to paralysis or triumphalist ones leading to hubris and his desire to emphasize these contradictions in order to create space for constructive discussion are appealing, he again overplays the dichotomy. Howkins would have done well to elaborate on how he imagines these sharply distinct narratives to grow more connected or on what constructive discussion could take place in the space between them.

Ultimately though, this approach helps Howkins to steer clear of preaching either on behalf of environmental activists or that of business interests, which in itself is impressive considering the highly politicized topics he deals with. He maintains an academic tone throughout the book that is both engaged and distant enough to analyze this material. Therefore, his analysis might help some to make up their minds about a desirable future for the Polar Regions, but will fall short for those who have made up their minds already. The conclusion that both declensionist and triumphalist narratives of polar history can contribute to another is ultimately persuasive at its core and it might be unfair to expect Howkins to have all the answers and nuances as historians are only just opening up this field. This book then should be read as introducing new directions of research for the polar historian. It contains enough information to be educational and enough ambition to be inspirational to the general reader and the polar expert alike. Not only is *The Polar Regions* a convincing new take on polar history, it is also the most global history of the Arctic and the Antarctic yet.