

Book Review

The polar regions. An environmental history. Adrian Howkins. 2015. Cambridge: Polity Press. 248 p, hard-cover. ISBN 978-0-7456-7080-5. £20.
doi:[10.1017/S0032247416000413](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032247416000413)

Broadly understood, environmental history studies how humans are shaped by their environment and how the environment is in turn shaped by them. More specifically, this relatively recent area of inquiry examines the complex relationships between environmental perceptions, human activity and the material environment. In this pioneering work, Adrian Howkins makes the polar regions for the first time the subject matter of a yet untold environmental history. In doing so, he develops three main claims: that the histories of the Arctic and the Antarctic are enriched by studying them together; that they offer a good opportunity for thinking about important environmental themes; and that they are characterized by contrast and contradiction.

The book is neatly organized into six chapters where these contrasts and contradictions are put center stage: *Myth and history* tells the story of the poles up to 1800s; *Scarcity and abundance* reviews the evolution of both subsistence and commercial seal hunting and whaling; *Nature conquered, nature unconquered* focuses on polar (and bi-polar) explorers; *Dreams and realities* presents some attempts at economic development at the beginning of the twentieth century; *War and peace* shows the very different roles played by both regions during the cold war and the consequences for each; and *Exploitation and preservation* deals with environmental conflict and resolution around the poles in the last decades.

In chapter 1, Howkins underlines one of the starkest differences between the Arctic and the Antarctic, namely, the respective presence and absence of human communities in them, their scale and chronological extension. While north of the Arctic Circle people have been living for thousands of years, Antarctica has no indigenous population and its first recorded sightings occurred only in the nineteenth century, with more established human settlements starting a century later. It is no surprise, then, that this first chapter focuses above all on the early history of the Arctic. The work of the Danish anthropologist Knud Rasmussen and his development of 'Eskimotology' is presented as a 'modern, scientific creation myth of the Inuit' (page 27). Meanwhile, the five-hundred years settlement and then mysterious disappearance of the Norse in Greenland in the fifteenth century is taken as a case study to criticize oversimplifying theories of environmental determinism.

Chapters 2 and 3 are those in which Howkins's two first claims seem best supported. In the realm of seal hunting and whaling and in the realm of exploration and conquest, many of the individual actors and nations involved were indeed bi-polar and transferred their skills and knowledge from one extreme of the world to the other. The Norwegian and British figure most prominently among them, with their seal hunters and whalers turning south after over-exploiting Arctic marine living resources; and with explorers like Roald Amundsen and James Clark Ross learning from their Arctic experiences to then conduct their Antarctic exploits. All along, Howkins locates

the individual stories within a wider political and economic context, in which both the need for industrial development (where elephant seal blubber and above all whale oil were key ingredients), as well as nationalist and imperialist interests serve to explain the growing attention and activity over the most remote regions of the world. Two key environmental themes that run throughout the book are also introduced here: the Arctic and the Antarctic are conceptualized as 'resource frontiers', where continuous expansion and a sense of unlimited abundance were built into short-term extractive business models with the consequent over-depletion of resources. Unlike in the Arctic (where commercial seal hunting and whaling co-existed with traditional Inuit subsistence seal hunting and whaling), Antarctica offers an idealized case study of the 'tragedy of the commons', helped by the geographical isolation and a non-existent history of common property resource use.

In chapter 4, the contrast between imagined futures for the polar regions and their actual reality during the first half of the twentieth century is brought into focus. In the north, Vilhjalmur Stefansson stands as the paradigmatic Arctic booster, with his best-selling idea of a 'friendly Arctic' where it was purportedly possible to live off the land year round, despite his failed attempts to prove it. In the south, Richard Byrd's unsuccessful quest for building a 'Little America' in the middle of the Ross Ice Shelf (where the American *ethos* would be restored to balance) is a clear example for Howkins of how the will to believe something clashes against material possibilities.

Chapters 5 and 6 present the political and economic developments from the second half of the twentieth century until nowadays. From the mid-1940s to the 1990s, Howkins shows how the Arctic and the Antarctic were shaped by east-west hostilities, with very different consequences for each. Given its strategic importance, at the height of the cold war the Arctic was highly militarized both by Soviet and American powers. This had a high environmental and social toll, particularly due to the pollution caused by Soviet nuclear blasts and mining in the high north as well as by the forced contact with the outside world to which the Inuit were subject with the arrival of the U.S. military to northern Greenland. Thanks to its remoteness and perceived lack of immediate economic value, Antarctica by contrast became a nuclear-free continent dedicated to peace and science by virtue of the Antarctic Treaty (AT) of 1959. In terms of resource exploitation and preservation, the Exxon Valdez disaster in 1989 is suggestively presented as a pivotal event that had a deep impact on the environmental politics of Antarctica. At a time where the last details of the Convention on the Regulation of Antarctic Mineral Activities (CRAMRA) were being negotiated, this environmental catastrophe served as a palpable demonstration that the last remaining wilderness of the Earth should better be protected. The CRAMRA was thus replaced by the Protocol on Environmental Protection of 1991, making Antarctica one of the most regulated environments in the planet. Meanwhile, the growth of polar tourism is presented as a model of ambivalence, where the financial exploitation of pristine landscapes seems to be the price to pay for the creation of 'polar advocates', who will later help defend the preservation of polar wildernesses.

There is much more in this book than one can possibly cover in a short review like this. Among many other smaller environmental histories engagingly told are those of the native Aleuts who were forced by Russian sea otter and seal hunters to work for them in the mid-1700s; the obsessive quest by European powers for an open north polar sea during the nineteenth century, despite all evidence to the contrary; and the conflict and negotiation between national government, federal state, developers, environmentalists and native communities after the discovery of oil in Alaska in 1967. There are also a number of thought-provoking theses that deserve closer inspection. For example, that the rise of Antarctic seal hunting was determinant for the loss of interest of Russia over its American territories in the nineteenth century, and that the development of international whaling in the second half of the twentieth century was tightly intertwined with the power play of cold war actors.

To be sure, in a condensed book like this that spans through so many different topics, one will always find omissions. Particularly noticeable to this reader were the absence of any allusions to the role played by Nazi Germany in Antarctic politics during the 1930s and 1940s; and the ways in which parties with sovereign claims over the Antarctic have sought to exercise that

sovereignty in spite of the existence of the AT, not only through scientific research (the power of knowledge), but also through actual human settlements (the power of effective occupation).

In concluding, Howkins presents the polar regions as places where what he calls 'geographies of despair' co-exist with 'geographies of hope' (page 180). On the one hand, even for moderate environmentalists, the ruthless over-exploitation of resources, pollution, and climate change give reason to tell declensionist narratives of the north and south. On the other hand, some of the most stringent environmental protection measures on earth and the predominance of science give reason to think that humans might choose to do things in a more enlightened spirit in the poles. For those wishing to make up their minds in the matter, this book is a must-read. By offering a broad panorama of the many topics of environmental history to be developed around the poles and by complementing the chapters with a thorough bibliography and index, it is a welcome addition to the literature (Alejandra Mancilla, Centre for the Study of Mind in Nature (CSMN), Faculty of Humanities, University of Oslo, PO Box 1020, Blindern 0315, Oslo, Norway / Chilean Antarctic Institute, Punta Arenas (alejandra.mancilla@ifikk.uio.no)).