

PETER FJÅGESUND:

The Dream of the North: A Cultural History to 1920.

Studia Imagologica 23. Rodopi, Amsterdam and New York 2014.

Pp. 575.

ISBN: 978-90-4203-837-0.

Early in 2015 the present reviewer caught sight of a press report to the effect that in April that year Canadian government marine archaeologists would begin exploration of the wreck of the 'Erebus', Sir John Franklin's flagship on his ill-fated Northwest Passage expedition in 1845. The vessel was located in September 2014 and the ship's bell had already been recovered. I would have paid no attention to this story had I not recently finished reading Peter Fjågesund's remarkable cultural history of 'the North' up to 1920, in which the Franklin expedition features as one of several important thematic spines. We learn of the inspection of the 'Erebus' (and three other vessels) at the Royal Dockyards in Deptford in the summer of 1818; of the young poet Eleanor Porden's paean of praise to these 'adventurous Barks'; of the ship's reappearance (now with steam engines) as part of Sir John Franklin's 1845 expedition; of the subsequent anxieties about its progress; of the organised searches for the missing voyagers; of contact with Inuit informants; of leaked reports of cannibalism among the dying crew; of Lady Franklin's tireless cultivation of her lost husband's memory; of Oxbridge prize essays reflecting on the expedition; of the appetite for accounts of such adventures from private lending libraries; and, not least, of the ambiguities and poignancies that find memorable expression in John Everett Millais' 'North-West Passage' painting from 1874.

As noted earlier, the Franklin expedition reaches out beyond the

confines of Professor Fjågesund's volume to present-day marine archaeological investigations – and, we might add, to initiatives from the British Ministry of Defence, the Westminster Abbey authorities and also supporters in Orkney finally to recognise the crucial role of John Rae in investigating Franklin's disappearance and exploring the Northwest Passage himself. It was because of his association with the cannibalism rumours that Rae became a late Victorian *persona non grata* amongst those who sought to celebrate Sir John Franklin's real and imagined achievements.

The importance of the Northwest Passage also reaches back into the early chapters of Professor Fjågesund's book. The forces that fuelled the Franklin expedition (discussed in detail in Chapter 5) serve as a leitmotif throughout. In Chapter 1 we learn of Henry VIII's lack of interest in such explorations, of the enthusiasm of the Venetian Giovanni Caboto (John Cabot) and (later) Richard Hakluyt, and of the high hopes invested (literally) in the expedition of Martin Frobisher and the gold-rush that never was. All such expeditions set sail against a background of newly published maps, monographs and scholarly editions (notably the pioneering 1470 edition of Tacitus's *Germania*), whose northern perspectives would filter down into art and literature (as, in the early seventeenth century, from *Hamlet* to John Donne's 'Epithalamion'). By Chapter 3 we find Daines Barrington, newly appointed Vice President of the Royal Society, offering enthusiastic support for the highly technologised but ultimately futile Phipps expedition to the Arctic (1773-75), a venture that signalled the British government's awareness of the strategic importance of the region, whilst also highlighting the absence of judicious scepticism among the participants and their institutional backers. In Chapter 4 we learn that the redoubtable Sir John Barrow, Second Secretary of the Admiralty, may well have been responsible for the sudden republication in 1818 of Barrington's *Tracts on the Probability of Reaching the North Pole* (1775), now retitled as *The Possibility of Approaching the North Pole Asserted*, and we are reminded that immediately before the publication of his 1775 volume Barrington had produced his enterprising *The Anglo-Saxon Version from the Historian Orosius, by Alfred the Great, together with an English Translation from the Anglo-Saxon* (1773), with

its accounts of the early northern voyages of Ohthere and Wulfstan. Ultimately, in Chapter 5, it was Barrow, by now an octogenarian, who selected the sixty-year-old Franklin as commander of the 1845 Arctic expedition.

In Professor Fjågesund's discussion of the Franklin expedition and its antecedents, and indeed throughout the book, we become familiar with the two levels on which the mass of primary material is organised: the surface narrative teems with ships, explorers, expeditions, map-makers, new technologies, travelogues, poetry, paintings and, even, philology; while, as thematic mood-music, we become aware of questions relating to familial, civic, regional and national 'heritage', imperial prestige, European geo-politics, Whitehall intrigues, competition for research funding, tensions between science and religion, and much else besides. These twin structural handrails enable the reader to watch safely from the deck as the author navigates potentially unfathomable seas of wide-ranging incident and detailed reference with assurance and clarity.

The book has six lengthy chapters, following a briefer introduction in which key issues (nation building, regionalism, high and low culture, perceptions of nature, the North's rediscovery of its own roots, the effects of the Reformation) are identified. The author notes in his 'Postscript' that 'since the Second World War, ideas about the North have largely been associated with political ideas on the far right' (p. 30). This may surprise those readers who have rather tended to associate the North with concerns about global warming, whaling, sustainable fisheries, Alaskan oil spills, native multiculturalism, not to mention photo-opportunities for politicians to 'hug a husky' on the polar icecap. Such readers at least will not require the author's reassurances that the cult of the North delineated in his book offers a 'wider spectrum of elements'. The chapter titles confirm the volume's chronological sweep: 'Finding a footing: The North before 1700', 'Preparing for Take-Off: The Early Eighteenth Century', 'The Great Watershed: 1750-1790', 'Fastening the Grip: 1790-1830', 'The Northern Heyday: 1830-1880', 'The Closing Circle: 1880-1920'. There follows a 40 page bibliography and 30 page index of names, places and key themes. The volume has been carefully seen through the press; I spotted only one apparent

typo (Linnaeus for Linnaeus, p. 147).

Readers with a specialist interest in this or that aspect of the vast territory covered by Professor Fjågesund's study may well miss references to particular individual scholars or volumes or perspectives. However, those same readers are more likely to marvel at the impressive array of primary and secondary literature (including many volumes of very recent vintage) that the author has assembled and absorbed. Amid the broad brush-strokes of the overall account, each chapter offers many moments of arresting detail, as, for example, references to the publication, republication, dedications, patrons and translations of key primary texts. The brief but telling discussion (pp. 171-73) of the pre- and post-Hanoverian succession cultural politics of Sir Richard Blackmore's now rarely read (to put it mildly) Miltonic 'heroick epics' *Prince Arthur* (1695) and *Alfred* (1723) caught the present reviewer's eye, particularly in the context of analysis of the heavily politicised old northern awareness developing throughout Scandinavia at much the same time.

In his 'Postscript' Professor Fjågesund notes that in the early stages of his project, 'the ambition was to take the presentation up to the present time' (p. 497), before it became clear that the demands on space (and, no doubt, on time and energy) would have been unsustainable. He also observes that with the increase of academic and scientific specialisation, 'a multi-author format would be more appropriate as a means of charting the complex development of the North, and perhaps especially the Arctic, during this period'. This may well be so, but the present reviewer, no great admirer of inadequately coordinated, minimally edited and soulless multi-author volumes generated by endless conferences, is grateful to have had Professor Fjågesund as his single-handed and insightful guide. In its own way *The Dream of the North* represents as heroic a trek over (frequently) unfamiliar northern terrain as that of many a frostbitten arctic explorer, and, arguably, is more fruitful than many.

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