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# Our Ice Is Vanishing / Sikuvut Nunguliqtuq: A History of Inuit, Newcomers, and Climate Change by Shelley Wright

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***Our Ice Is Vanishing / Sikuvut Nunguliqtuq: A History of Inuit, Newcomers, and Climate Change* by SHELLEY WRIGHT**

McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014  
\$35.96

Reviewed by **BENJAMIN O'HERAN**

Shelley Wright's *Our Ice is Vanishing / Sikuvut Nunguliqtuq: A History of Inuit, Newcomers, and Climate Change* comes at an important time in Canadian history. This year marks the 150<sup>th</sup> year of Canadian Confederation or Canada's 150th birthday. Canada150, as it is being called, asks *all* Canadians to celebrate everything and every event that has made Canada, Canada. As most Canadians get ready to celebrate with maple leaf flags and fireworks, many Indigenous communities and activists demand that Canadians critically reflect on both the celebration of Canada150 and the meaning behind it.

Canada150 comes two years after the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Final Report and subsequent lack of action by the federal government, provinces, and territories to enact their recommendations. Canada's history of unfulfilled treaty relations, 1,017 to 4,000 murdered and missing Indigenous women, girls, and 2-Spirit individuals, and lack of basic social services for many communities leads many Indigenous peoples to consider Canada150 to be Colonialism150. Celebration is a continued reminder that the celebration of "Canada" comes at the cost of Indigenous self-determination, sovereignty, and livelihood.

These contesting narratives and histories set the backdrop for Shelley Wright's new book. Wright traces the long and tumultuous relationships between Inuit communities in Nunavut and Greenland and

various groups of non-Indigenous newcomers. This is a very ambitious project, tracing hundreds of years of interaction between the Inuit and Viking, British, Danish, Canadian, and American newcomers. Situating them as southerners or *qallunaat* ("big eyebrows" in Inuktitut), Wright does an admirable job of synthesizing the complex history of Inuit/newcomer relations for those unfamiliar with Inuit/*qallunaat* history.

This is both the strength and weakness of *Our Ice Is Vanishing / Sikuvut Nunguliqtuq*. The book chronologically traces these long and complicated relationships using a variety of sources ranging from the oral histories of the Inuit to Viking sagas. Wright also engages Inuit traditional ecological knowledge and *qallunaat* scientific research to document the contemporary effects of anthropocentric climate change. The book encompasses three historical arcs: the arrival of newcomers, colonization of the Inuit and the Arctic by *qallunaats*, and post-colonial relations between *qallunaats* and the Inuit after the creation of Nunavut.

The first part of the book looks at arrival. Wright examines the early history of the Inuit and then explores how both Europeans and Inuit explored the Arctic. She includes Viking accounts of the Inuit and the failed attempts by imperial Britain to cross the Northwest Passage, and then pivots from Eurocentric tales of discovery to stories of legendary Inuit heroes Kiviuq and Qitdlarssuaq. Yet throughout the early chapters newcomers largely remain in the background. *Qallunaats* would not adjust their worldviews, beliefs, and means of survival to exert significant influence over the Inuit and the Arctic.

We see this changing when colonization becomes the norm of

Inuit/*qallunaat* relations. Inuit and Canadian ideas of sovereignty jostle for legitimacy as Wright documents Canada's early colonial efforts. Beginning with the establishment of detachments of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and the execution of Nuqallaq by the RCMP, militarization and violence play a central role in Canada's colonial efforts. Canadian colonialism intensifies with the forced relocation of Inuit communities to unfamiliar lands and waters and the kidnapping of Inuit children to be taken to residential schools far away from their families and communities.

Overt colonialism transforms into a complicated post-colonial relationship as Wright documents the struggles and jubilation of the creation of Nunavut. After a century of Canadian colonization, the Inuit sought to reassert themselves as the legitimate sovereign of their lands and waters. Only in the final chapters does climate change enter the picture, complicating the Inuit's relationships to *qallunaats* and their preexisting relationships to the lands, waters, and other non-humans (a bit odd for a book that has climate change in its title).

The contest of narratives in *Our Ice Is Vanishing / Sikuvut Nunquligtuq* seems to act as a microcosm for the unfolding debates around Canada150 celebrations and Colonialism150 counter-narratives. Because of this, the book is both an important intervention, as well as a potential reinforcement of *qallunaat* impressions of the Inuit. At the heart of this debate is the question: what is the purpose of *Our Ice Is Vanishing / Sikuvut Nunquligtuq*? Is it to inform *qallunaats* about the complicated and neglected relationship they have with the Inuit? Or does it demonstrate to Canadians the

importance of the Inuit in the mythical Canadian nation-building process? While Wright tries to inform readers of the former, most *qallunaats* would probably read *Our Ice Is Vanishing / Sikuvut Nunquligtuq* as the latter.

The reason for this is the continued centering of *qallunaat* histories and perspectives throughout the book. For example, while the stories of the Vikings' interactions with the Inuit were interesting, it would have been better to center Inuit stories of the Vikings as Rachel and Sean Qitsualik-Tinsley do in their book *Skraelings*. While appealing to *qallunaat* interests by allowing them to see how their ancestors interacted with the Inuit, I thought that the task put forward in our age of reconciliation would have been to let the Inuit tell their own stories of us *qallunaats*. For those wanting this perspective, I would recommend Emilie Cameron's *Far Off Metal River: Inuit Lands, Settler Stories, and the Making of the Arctic*.

Yet Wright engages in a high-level of criticism. If I had no prior knowledge of Inuit/*qallunaat* relations, I know that I would have found this book useful in informing me of this history, as well as challenging my preconceptions of Canadian exceptionalism and our colonial relationship with the Inuit. However, the TRC and Colonialism150 demand that we *qallunaats* be unsettled in the (re)telling of stories about us, something that *Our Ice Is Vanishing / Sikuvut Nunquligtuq: A History of Inuit, Newcomers, and Climate Change* does not quite accomplish.

**BENJAMIN O'HERAN** is a PhD student at the University of British Columbia's Political Science Department. His research centers on the possibilities of multispecies governance, Indigenous/settler relations, and environmental politics.