

THE ARCTIC SKY: INUIT ASTRONOMY, STAR LORE, AND LEGEND. By JOHN MACDONALD. Toronto, Ontario: The Royal Ontario Museum and the Nunavut Research Institute, 1998. ix + 314 p., colour and b&w illus., notes, bib., index. Softbound. Cdn\$29.95.

Based primarily on information about star lore and astronomy obtained from interviews with Inuit elders from Igloolik, *The Arctic Sky* comprises an impressive body of data illustrating the traditional importance of celestial phenomena to the Inuit. That this knowledge has been rapidly disappearing should come as no surprise and further validates the timeliness of the study.

In the introduction, the author remarks that explorers, ethnographers, and other observers of Inuit peoples have tended to see Inuit astronomy as a relatively unimportant aspect of their culture. Reasons presented to account for this apparent neglect vary, but tend to focus on the idea that geographical and environmental factors, such as starless summer skies and frequently hazy winter conditions, greatly diminished the usefulness of astronomical observations. The author does point out, however, that a number of prominent scientists, such as Franz Boas, Diamond Jenness, and Therkel Mathiassen, at least attempted to relate Inuit stars and constellations to those observed in Europe. In chapter 1, the author continues to project some uncertainty about the importance of Inuit astronomy by including statements such as, “The unfavourable viewing conditions of the Arctic’s spring and summer skies are in no way balanced by the region’s comparatively long, dark winters. The winter skies above Igloolik are frequently obscured or dimmed by a variety of atmospheric conditions including snow, blowing snow, cloud cover, ice fog.... Even the stars, through their reflected light, contribute significantly to their own dimming...” (p. 11). “These very real practical drawbacks to stargazing in Arctic regions during winter are easily overlooked” (p. 12).

At the end of chapter 1, the reader is left with the impression that there may have been good reasons why early investigators paid scant attention to the astronomical side of Inuit life. On one hand, the author acknowledges the “relative impoverishment” of Arctic conditions as far as stargazing is concerned; on the other hand, he emphasizes that the celestial knowledge of the Inuit was an indispensable part of their worldview. Undoubtedly both observations have merit, and both appear to be supported by data presented in later chapters of the book.

Beginning with chapter 3 (Stars, Constellations, and Planets), the reader is provided with an informative and interesting description of stars and constellations based on accounts by Inuit elders from Igloolik. Examples of the use of stars and constellations throughout the Inuit world are presented. The author states that *Aagjuuk* (the European constellation Aquila) was one of the most important constellations for all Inuit groups. *Ursa Major (Tukturjuik)* was similarly important for estimating the passage of time and finding one’s way. The role of the sun, moon, and

eclipses is presented in chapter 4. In addition to discussing Inuit creation myths related to the sun and the moon, the author provides excerpts from explorers’ and scientists’ reports describing feasts, taboos, and special ceremonies related to the two celestial bodies, particularly activities associated with the all-important return of the sun. Interesting references are made to various hypotheses put forward to explain the manifestation of Arctic hysteria. Chapter 5 includes a short, informative description of both Western and Inuit observation of atmospheric phenomena such as meteors, shooting stars, the aurora borealis, sun dogs, and rainbows. Not surprisingly, the aurora displays were most often associated with activities of the spirit world.

The importance of using celestial bodies as a means of navigating between camps and hunting areas is discussed in chapter 6. Finding one’s way was often a matter of survival, especially in the dark and on moving sea ice, when stars were used essentially to maintain a particular heading. Referring to Captain George Francis Lyon’s observations during his wintering in the Igloolik area in 1822–23, MacDonald emphasizes that no single method of wayfinding predominates. As one might expect, when it comes to navigating, the Inuit use all their knowledge about the environment. The chapter describes many elements used as navigational aids, including snowdrifts, wind direction, landmarks, vegetation, sea currents, water sky, mirages, and behaviour of sled dogs and other animals. Place names are particularly relevant to the discussion about travel and navigation. A friend of mine from Greenland, Inngi Bisgaard, last year completed an extensive kayak trip down the southwest coast of Greenland. On their way south, Inngi and her teammates stopped at various settlements to rest and to seek information about the best way to navigate the next stretch. From discussions with older hunters, they quickly learned that the place names all provided important, sometimes crucial, information about potential physical hazards one might encounter in particular areas. As the author points out, the spatial environment is, or was, part of a person’s cognitive map; the problem for many younger people today is that they lack the knowledge of such place names and are far more easily lost when traveling.

Chapter 7 presents an interesting discussion of time in the Inuit world before and after the introduction of Western clocks and calendars. The position of stars, the cycle of the sun and moon, and the migratory habits of animals were all elements used by the Inuit to judge time. Referring in part to observations made by anthropologist Franz Boas in the Eastern Arctic, the author discusses the ecological calendar of the Inuit, represented by thirteen lunar months, as the primary regulator of Inuit life. A table showing the Iglulingmiut calendar provides an excellent aid to the discussion. The progression of day and night was determined essentially by the position of the stars and the sun, depending on the season and latitude. Among the Iglulingmiut special attention was given to the revolving of the

constellation *Tukturjuit* (Ursa Major) around *Nutuittuq* (Polaris). In addition the easterly rising and westerly setting of *Aagjuuk* (Altair and Tarazed) were commonly used by Inuit across the Arctic to estimate the time of day.

The introduction of the Western calendar and observation of special days like Sunday resulted in interesting changes to Inuit society. The author points out that the concept of Sunday was quickly transmitted far beyond the region of direct Western contact, and that the Inuit soon found it convenient to replace the observation of a number of taboos with the observation of one single day.

In chapter 8, the author presents myths and legends touching on astronomical significance, as told by Igloodik elders. In chapter 9, the same legends are rendered in Inuktitut transcription. A selection of legends more or less on the same broad theme and representative of the entire Inuit world is provided in chapter 10, which demonstrates the role myths played in sustaining the Inuit perception of the Universe. The author cites Knud Rasmussen's observation about Inuit myths: "If in them there are things which

seem to be contrary to common sense, it is merely because the later generations are unable to grasp everything which, to their forebears, were obvious truths" (p. 210).

Once past a somewhat confusing beginning, the author of *The Arctic Sky* has provided an important contribution to one aspect of Inuit culture often overlooked or at least treated in a cursory manner. Considering how often the author refers to observations made by early explorers and ethnographers, one is not totally convinced that the subject of Inuit astronomy has been as neglected as is first stated in the introduction. This is a well-researched and worthwhile book and should be added to the shelf of any serious student of Inuit culture.

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