

ARCTIC ARTIST: THE JOURNAL AND PAINTINGS OF GEORGE BACK, MIDSHIPMAN WITH FRANKLIN, 1819–1822. Edited by C. STUART HOUSTON and with a commentary by I.S. MacLAREN. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994. ISBN 0-7735-1181-4. 403 p., maps, colour illus., appendices, notes, index. Hardbound. Cdn\$45.00.

Dr. C. Stuart Houston has previously edited and published *To The Arctic by Canoe, 1819–1821: The Journal and Paintings of Robert Hood, Midshipman with Franklin* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1974) and *Arctic Ordeal: The Journal of John Richardson, Surgeon-Naturalist with Franklin, 1820–1822* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1984). Now, with the publication of this handsome volume *Arctic Artist: The Journal and Paintings of George Back, Midshipman with Franklin, 1819–1822*, he has completed a significant trilogy by making available to the public the personal journals of all three Englishmen who served under John Franklin on his ill-fated first overland expedition to the Canadian North.

A reader who expects these journals to be truly personal, revealing inner thoughts and emotions and thereby casting radical new light on official published accounts, will be disappointed. On such expeditions as Franklin's, journals written by junior officers were personal in that each individual was responsible for keeping his own account of his own experiences and observations, but they were decidedly not private. Hood, Richardson, and Back dutifully recorded their individual experiences in their journals, but they also knew that after the expedition their writing probably would be scrutinized by men of authority. Even allowing for revisions they might make, given the probability of such an intimidating readership their journals were no place to indulge in deep and honest self-revelation. They were self-censored, and the voices we hear in them are generally restrained, even impersonal. Aspects of George Back's personality—fashionably ironic, warmly affectionate, sometimes playful, sometimes meditative—emerge far more clearly in a letter to his brother written from Fort Chipewyan (included in the book as Appendix 1) than they do in his journal.

Nevertheless, his journal does reveal in flashes something of the man and his immediate reactions to his remarkable experiences on the expedition. Back was more extroverted and impulsive, and perhaps more imaginative, than his colleagues; there are times when he cannot contain himself. As Dr. Houston stresses, for example, he sometimes praises the voyageurs, showing an appreciation of their strength and stamina, but he also at times lashes out at them. He records his response to their complaints during a portage across some high hills:

The Canadians complained here of a want of provisions though they well knew—by having more—they must suffer for it hereafter—still, they are of that gormandizing [*sic*] disposition as to be never satisfied without wallowing in profuseness—and as long as any part remains—so little do they reflect on the requisitions of the morrow—or possess the least idea of economy—that they never cease

grumbling till—they get it—There are few circumstances more galling to the feelings—than to be with a set of people over whom you have no immediate controul [*sic*]. (p. 78)

In our comfortable environments we tend to underestimate the psychological strains of old-fashioned exploration, strains that stem not only from its dangers and discomforts but also from the forced, long-lasting, and often abrasive company of others. Especially for an ambitious, perhaps high-handed, young man like Back, the company of a “set of people over whom you have no immediate controul” would indeed be galling.

There are other such brief moments of self-revelation. Back sounds a rare personal retrospective note when, briefly unable to walk because of inadequate footwear, he is bound by rope to a sledge and recalls the five years that he spent as a boy-prisoner in France, an experience that “made me something averse to being tied, (even by friends)” (p. 102). And in other places he shows a sympathy for and admiration of the Indians and Inuit that is telling (although he also often lashes out at them as he does at the voyageurs). One touching moment in his journal comes when Indians catch fish and give them all to the white men. Later Back asks why they did not eat some of it themselves. “‘We are accustomed to starvation,’ said they, ‘but you are not’” (p. 96).

And, as Ian MacLaren points out in his extensive Commentary, Back reveals another important aspect of his self not just occasionally, but throughout his journal. He was chosen for the expedition largely because of his skill as an artist, and his aesthetic judgment often comes into play in his writing as well as in his sketches. MacLaren stresses the fact that Back is constantly on the lookout for the right scene, pouncing on it with delight when he finds it. To a large extent, his aesthetic responses are conventional, in that he has been trained to recognize as worthwhile those scenes that fulfill his sense of the qualities of the picturesque. In an interesting, brief passage that precedes an extended description of Portage la Loche, he reveals how selective his artist's eye can be: “A person who has been travelling some time through a country without having beheld any particular object to attract his attention beyond the common wild scenes of an uncultivated prospect will feel an admirable sensation of astonishment when he arrives at the end of Portage la Loche—” (p. 54). The “common wild scenes” are those with no apparent aesthetic order to them—just mile upon mile of aesthetically shapeless wilderness, of interest perhaps to a cartographer, geologist, or naturalist, but not to an artist of the picturesque like Back.

The volume is valuable partly because it contains forty-nine plates, almost all of them good reproductions of Back's original sketches. MacLaren's commentary provides informative background on aesthetic theory and practice during Back's period, and also on the training of topographical artists by the military. Back was caught in a world between the utilitarian and the expressive arts, having to do his duty as a topographical artist on an official expedition, while also clearly desiring to give outlet to his more aesthetic impulses. MacLaren analyzes the results in detail.

Back's journal ultimately adds very little to our actual

information about the Franklin expedition. Dr. Houston in his postscript to the journal usefully ticks off what new information it provides, and the list is short. Back, after all, was not present at the violent crisis in the expedition when Hood and then Michel were shot, and he makes no mention of Greenstockings, the young woman over whom he and Hood supposedly contended. On the other hand, his journal does seem to hint at the possibility of more cannibalism after Beuparlant died, although it is a very faint hint, and it also provides new detail on Back's search for help at the bitter end of the expedition. The journal also gives vivid images of the Indians whom the expedition encountered, most of descriptions manifesting the mixture of admiration and distaste that characterized so much of the European response to "primitive peoples."

But the main value of Back's journal is that it records, albeit in a rather tight-lipped way, the toughness and courage of those nineteenth-century explorers of the North. The voyageurs, the Indians, and the Inuit, who spent most of their lives in that austere environment, were tough and courageous, but so were many of the explorers themselves—no matter how one evaluates their motives or their methods. Neither Dr. Houston nor Ian MacLaren gives enough credit to Back for his sheer hardihood, his stamina, or his courage. (MacLaren attributes most of his behavior to ambition, as if ambition stood alone in the human psyche, absorbing and negating all other qualities. Only at the very end of his essay does the word "courageous" appear, and one senses that it is used grudgingly.) The image I am most left with after reading the book is typically understated by Back. By September 23, 1821 it was evident that the expedition faced disaster. Back went ahead of the main party with three of the men across the frozen tundra. After eleven hours of trudging, famished, he made a meal of tripe de roche and then set out again. "I began now to feel excessive weakness, and was obliged to use a stick to support myself—but notwithstanding this assistance I was driven backward by the wind—The night was cold" (p. 176).

Terse and understated as it is, that is a telling picture of an arctic ordeal—and of the stamina and courage needed to survive it as Back did.

Chauncey C. Loomis
Professor of English
Dartmouth College
Hanover, New Hampshire, U.S.A.
03755

CIRCUMPOLAR RELIGION AND ECOLOGY: AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF THE NORTH. Edited by TAKASHI IRIMOTO and TAKAKO YAMADA. Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press, 1994. xiii + 458 p., index. Hardbound.

The twenty-five papers contained in this attractively bound volume were originally presented at the inaugural meeting of the international Northern Studies Association, convened in 1991 at Hokkaido University in Sapporo, Japan. The occa-

sion brought together anthropologists and northern specialists from seven countries to exchange ideas on connections between natural environments and traditional and contemporary religious beliefs and practices, and on the distribution of common cultural features among indigenous peoples of the Eurasian and North American arctic and subarctic zones. The result, though neither systematic in approach nor comprehensive in coverage, nonetheless offers a worthwhile sampling of descriptive detail and theoretical viewpoints on a rapidly-changing part of the world.

In keeping with the conference's organization, the editors have grouped the papers in six sections. The first, "Northern Studies: Past and Present," contains two very different pieces: Tatsujiro Kuzuno's account of customary Ainu religious beliefs and their reflection of the natural world, and Frederica de Laguna's longer essay, the symposium's keynote address, on the development and accomplishments of American and European research in circumpolar prehistory and ethnology. Her discussion of A.I. Hallowell's "historico-geographical" interpretation of widespread bear ceremonialism is especially pertinent to the symposium's overall ethnological perspective. The next four sections, each entitled the "Religion and Ecology of ...", consist of ethnographic cases or comparative studies of the peoples and cultures in four geographic zones: Japan and Siberia, the Alaskan and Canadian Arctic, the Canadian Subarctic, and far-northern Eurasia. (The glaring omission of Greenland is unexplained.) Each of these sections, in turn, concludes with brief comments from discussants who are not themselves northernists; their common purpose is to point out leading similarities and differences between circumpolar cultures and cultures elsewhere, some as far afield as Africa and Papua New Guinea. The book closes with Takashi Irimoto's "Anthropology of the North," a discussion of some of the major themes touched on during the symposium as a whole.

As one might anticipate in a volume of conference proceedings, the reader discovers here a loosely woven and occasionally uneven patchwork of essays whose styles of analysis and interpretation vary no less than do the myriad ways humans comprehend and order and act in relation to the natural world around them. Given that nearly all the papers here are devoted to high-latitude hunting cultures, however, a few common (and expected) themes inevitably do emerge from the lot; the material and intellectual dimensions of human-animal relations and of survival strategies in harsh conditions are prominent among them. These main themes are plainly evident in Part II (Japan and Siberia), where three authors—Spevakosky, Watanabe, and Yamada—offer varying views of the symbolic and productive importance of animals and animal cults in traditional Ainu practice and belief. Other papers in this section include Hamayon's on Buryat and Mongol shamanism as a means to control nature, and Obayashi's historical reconstruction of basic subsistence among the ancient Emishi of Japan.

In Part III on the Eskimos and Inuit of arctic Alaska and Canada, a brief contribution by Black and longer ones by Kishigami and Turner range over somewhat different ground,