

**The Last Imaginary Place:
A Human History of the Arctic World**

Robert McGhee

The University of Chicago Press 2007

A book review by [Danny Yee](http://dannyreviews.com/) © 2009 <http://dannyreviews.com/>

Combining archaeology, history and anthropology, *The Last Imaginary Place* is a history of humans in the Arctic. McGhee also includes some literary history, touching on the place of the Arctic in the imagination and the ways in which this has differed from the reality on the ground, and elements of travel narrative, drawing on his own experiences working on digs.

Relatively more attention is given to less well-known topics, and less to those such as the race to the North Pole or the Vikings in Vinland. And there's an attempt to capture subaltern perspectives, of the sledge-pullers who manned European overland expeditions and of those indigenous explorers whose own journeys can sometimes be dimly discerned.

McGhee begins with mythology, focusing on the recurring theme of an Arctic paradise. This goes back to the classical world, but continues down to modern times in science fiction and conspiracy theory. "The legend of the Arctic as a distant paradise has been with us since the time of Homer, and a myth of such antiquity will not fade away merely because of the ephemeral reports of a few Arctic explorers, or the scanning eyes of satellites".

Tuniit hunters led the settlement of Arctic North America, with a distinctive toolkit suggesting shamanic practices similar to those of Siberia and indicating occupation of the area for nearly five thousand years. They fared poorly in contact with Inuit and other outsiders, however, and their last community appears to have perished from disease around 1900.

A visit to the Chukchi peninsula offers McGhee the frame for a brief history of the indigenous peoples of Arctic Siberia and their encounter

with imperial Russia and its Soviet and post-Soviet successors. "The Brezhnev period ... were golden years for the people on the margins, whose way of life could not be supported by any rational economic system. The collapse of the Soviet Union has left the people of northern Siberia bereft of both their traditional way of life and of the socialism that supplanted it."

A chapter on the Vikings focuses on the Greenland settlements, but also touches on their Norse and Icelandic background, and continues down to Greenland's modern history.

With the Inuit, McGhee argues that theirs was not a slow progress eastwards from the Bering Strait, but a long-distance journey of exploration and settlement directly targeting the bowhead whales of Baffin Bay and the iron available from the Norse settlements. More recently, he describes the forced resettlement of Inuit into the barren High Arctic, in pursuit of Canadian geostrategic goals in the Cold War and following confused ethnographic clichés.

A chapter on the Northeast Passage covers the British and Dutch expeditions by Willoughby and Barents, but also the Russians who used coastal navigation in conjunction with the north-south rivers, the explorations of Bering, and the loss to ice of the *Saint Anna*, *Karluk*, and *Chelyuskin*.

Frobisher's gold mines were the New World's first corporate mining fraud. After an initial voyage to Baffin Island in 1576 and a followup in 1577, the lure of gold and a speculative fever brought a small fleet in 1578, which spent a month on what is now Qallunaat Island, quarrying 1200 tons of worthless rock. McGhee, who has written a whole book on this episode, suggests that it played a key role in creating English claims on North America.

A bleak chapter documents the destruction of Spitsbergen's fauna by British, Dutch and Basque whalers and Russian Pomors hunters. After the whales were rendered for oil and the walrus hunted for tusks and oil, they turned to smaller animals and eventually to the eggs of migratory birds. "Having found this Arctic oasis already stripped of its whales and

walrus, bears and reindeer and foxes, late-comers had to content themselves with the last and smallest species that could be destroyed for profit."

An outline of the tragedies involved in European exploration of Hudson Bay describes Henry Hudson's journey in the *Discovery*, which ended in mutiny, and Jens Munk's near-death encounter with undercooked polar bear meat. On land, McGhee contrasts Samuel Hearne, who lived with the Dene for two years and reached the Arctic coast, with John Franklin's bumbling overland expedition. He also considers the possibility that an expedition of Huron Indians seeking land went north to Hudson Bay and from there sailed around Labrador back to the St Lawrence.

He has less on the modern period, but McGhee touches on the creation of "exploration" as a goal independent of economic and political concerns, and the literary boom that accompanied it. He glances at the loss of the Franklin expedition, the race to the Pole, and the Cook/Peary controversy. And a final chapter considers the state of the Arctic's indigenous peoples and the challenges they face.

The Last Imaginary Place is a great read, which I highly recommend to anyone at all curious about the Arctic. It is obviously not comprehensive, but it extends into areas which aren't well-trodden, including quite a bit that was new to me. And with the stories it does tell in detail, it provides enough depth and texture to be engaging — I found it hard to stop reading many of the individual chapters.

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