BOOK REVIEW

Studying Arctic Fields: Cultures, Practices, and Environmental Sciences, by Richard C. Powell, Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017, 244 pp., $34.95 (soft cover). ISBN: 978-0-7735-5113-8.

The book is in part about the origins and early history of the Polar Continental Shelf Project (PCSP), but is much more focused on discussing and illustrating the complex personal dynamics that existed between the various components of the organization at its field base at the Canadian Arctic settlement of Resolute Bay.

I started to live in Ottawa (1960) shortly after the PCSP had been created, and I was fortunate enough to know several of the early researchers, including Fred Roots who was chosen to head the project. I was thus eager to read this analysis of the project; plus, when I moved to the University of Colorado in 1968, we developed a much smaller research group working out of the Inuit Settlement on Broughton Island (off Baffin Island), and I was interested to understand (in retrospect) differences in organization and personnel.

This book is very much written from the perspective of an ethnographer and thus it is much more about the culture of a large field station than about the field science that was and is conducted by the PCSP. That being said, chapter 1 very ably sets the establishment of the PCSP in the context of Canadian history and Canadian sovereignty, and especially the vision of the Prime Minister at the time, John Diefenbaker. The title of the project indicates the initial importance of exploring and defining the Canadian portion of the Arctic Ocean shelf, but over the years my impression is that there was a much greater emphasis on land-based studies across the environmentally varied Canadian High Arctic Islands.

For the reader not versed in the ethnographer’s language, this book at times can be difficult to understand and at times appears to use certain words excessively (e.g., “quotidian” was used rather than the commonly used “daily”). Nevertheless, most of us, whether in field situations or not, can relate to the hierarchy that Powell discusses at the Resolute Bay PCSP headquarters (HQ). There are the senior managers, the “Newfies” (who did most of the work), senior scientists (who are treated with kid gloves), pilots and mechanics, junior scientists, graduates and undergraduates, and then local residents and Inuit. The observations and the conclusions are based on the author’s residency at the PCSP HQ during the summers of 2001 and 2002, and a longer time perspective is based on conversations with some of the long-time employees of the PCSP. Obviously, given the mission of the PCSP, the overall focus in Resolute Bay was the logistics of serving the numerous field camps, but as the author notes this common goal has to weave a path through the various human elements that make up the totality of the operation. I doubt whether there are any issues involved with the PCSP that are not repeated in some form or another in any organization’s structure, thus this book can be read by those interested in Arctic logistics, plus others in, say, university departments, who will recognize common elements in structure and attitudes.

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