

Book Review: The Polar Regions: An Environmental History by Adrian Howkins

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*In **The Polar Regions: An Environmental History**, Adrian Howkins offers a concise but thoughtful history of the changing Polar regions, tracing the similarities, contrasts and contradictions that have shaped the landscapes of the Arctic and Antarctica – both at times viewed as wild and untamed, yet ripe for regular exploration; both subjected to devastating environmental degradation, but also protective measures. This digestible work captures the transforming identities and interconnected destinies of the Poles, and uses history to offer a sense of hope pointedly laced with an admission of human vulnerability, writes Michael Warren.*

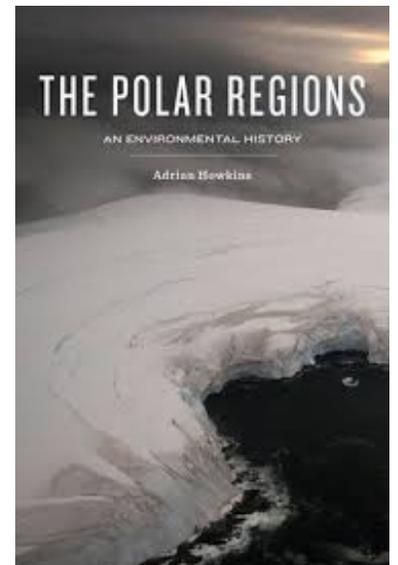
The Polar Regions: An Environmental History. Adrian Howkins. Polity. 2015.

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It's strange to think that where once explorers hauled their equipment stoically through the Polar landscapes, now David Cameron easily poses for 'Hug a Husky' photo-ops and tourists flock in comfort. As *Polar Regions: An Environmental History* shows, tourism is just one of the many peculiarities of the changing Polar regions. Adrian Howkins explains to readers how the Poles' bareness and mystery of untapped potential have shown humanity at its best, worst and most odd, including, respectively, exploratory exploits, devastating oil spills and the transportation of a heavily pregnant woman to create the first child born on Antarctica. Although substantially different, each of these events displays the traits and priorities of their respective human generations on a global scale. Howkins astutely navigates the changing generational priorities and quirky contradictions of the Poles to present a concise but thoughtful history.

Studies of the Arctic and the Antarctic cannot fail to acknowledge the contrasts and similarities between the two areas. The Northern Pole has an indigenous population, whilst its southern counterpart does not. Both are the coldest regions on Earth characterised predominantly by ice and snow to most. However, this similarity conjures an interesting contradiction: whilst in human minds the Poles are associated with the cold, they are simultaneously connected with warming – more specifically, global warming. The book is heavily framed around these contradictions, which are reflected in Howkins's grand chapter titles including 'Exploitation and Preservation', 'War and Peace' and 'Dreams and Realities' amongst others. Howkins effectively describes how these contradictions are the threads that both divide and unify the attributes of the Poles, and bind them to shared fates. One of the starkest examples is the Exxon Valdez oil spill of 1989, which obliterated wildlife in the Arctic but also acted as a political spur to protect the Antarctic in the form of the 1991 Madrid Protocol, which has shielded the entire Antarctic from industrial exploitation.

In the shadow of the aforementioned manmade risks, Inuit peoples often have a very different relationship with the Polar environment. Howkins shows how Inuits can achieve high levels of harmony with their surroundings, for example, by integrating the animals they hunt into shamanistic practices: 'Rather than understanding the successful hunting of an animal as chance or the result of skill, a shamanic view would see the animal offering itself to be killed. If the rituals are followed correctly, the animal is reborn and abundance is maintained.' This contract of interdependency is affirmed in Howkins's example: 'hunted seals [...] are assumed to be thirsty from living in the salty sea, and the dead carcass is given fresh water'. Although ostensibly there is a natural equilibrium, Howkins is quick to quell romanticising viewpoints which overlook both the hardships suffered from subsistence living as well



as how designating these societies as 'static' or 'without history' can make them suffer in the long run, as it is these sorts of 'noble savage' classifications that give rise to the justification of colonialism.



Image Credit: Arctic Ocean Sea Ice, 9 September 2009 (Patrick Kelley, US Coast Guard)

Not all external perceptions of indigenous Arctic populations are positive. Some environmentalists in Alaska have viewed them as an obstacle to achieving an Edenic paradise of unhindered wilderness. Meanwhile, during the 1970s, when nations were working towards a zero-catch quota of whales (a complete ban on commercial whaling), the question arose of Inupiat (native Alaskan) whaling: if Inupiat whalers use modern equipment and techniques, does this count as traditional whaling? Heavy with the burden of history given the maltreatment of north indigenous communities by previous US policy, US policymakers achieved the concession of some continued indigenous whaling. Shelley Wright's [Our Ice is Vanishing/Sikuvut Nunguligtuq: A History of Inuit, Newcomers, and Climate Change](#) (2014) is a good complementary read for understanding Arctic perspectives from an indigenous vantage point and in more depth.

Human ingenuity in the face of dangerous conditions is another *leitmotif* throughout the book. The early chapters of *The Polar Regions* vividly record the breakdown of the human body due to afflictions like scurvy. The Polar regions were originally the domain of intrepid heroes forged out of the freezing temperatures. However, after the first wave of explorers came the advent of the belief that the Polar regions could not just be conquered, but also inhabited. Canadian explorer Vilijhalmur Steffanson believed a 'Friendly Arctic' had the potential to be a flourishing bastion of humanity. This viewpoint was anathema to Roald Amundsen, the leader of the first successful expedition to the South Pole, who in 1927 fulminated: 'some adventurous spirits, seeking a fresh thrill in the North, may be misled by this talk about the "friendliness" of the Arctic [...] certain death awaits them.'

Both explorers, with vested interests, were at loggerheads over the image of the Poles and the optimum means for mankind to assert its grip over them, if possible. Later in the twentieth century though, it was not how the human body conquered the Polar environments that was integral to global perceptions, but the mode of technology through which this was undertaken. Howkins recalls how the USA and USSR constructed their inland South Pole stations using very different methods: the USA used airplanes to effortlessly airlift their materials, whilst the USSR deployed convoys of large ice tractors with 'brute force mentality'. The Antarctic therefore served as a canvas to show very different sides of humanity.

With the book standing at 251 pages, Howkins has created an easily digestible history, but readers will be tantalised by where more detail could have been included – such as the 1930s Soviet scientists drifting for months on stations based on floating sea ice. It would also have been good to see greater inclusion of how the Polar environments have captured the imagination of writers and artists: for example, Mary Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein* (1818), which opens in dangerous arctic waters, or the sublime painting of Caspar David Friedrich, *The Sea of Ice* (1823-24). These cultural outputs inspired explorers and framed perceptions of the Poles among policymakers and populations.

Nonetheless, Howkins is able to capture the changing identities and interconnected destinies of the Poles, and uses history to offer hope – whether through the restoration of seal populations in the aftermath of overfishing or the ban on CFCs leading to the slowing of the expansion (and even a decrease) of the ozone hole. In the characteristic fashion of the author, on the final page of the book this optimism is pointedly laced with an admission of human vulnerability and respect in the face of what cannot be completely understood: despite human interventions, ‘Polar environments retain a visceral hostility that reminds us that nature can never be fully conquered.’

Michael Warren completed an MSc in Empires, Colonialism and Globalisation at the LSE in 2012, and graduated from the University of Sheffield (studying on exchange at the University of Waterloo, Ontario) with a BA in Modern History in 2011. He researched on an open data project for Deloitte and the Open Data Institute, and worked for the All-Party Parliamentary Health Group and as a Management Consultant in Health and Public Service at Accenture. He is a Policy Adviser at the Professional Standards Authority. [Read more reviews by Michael Warren.](#)

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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