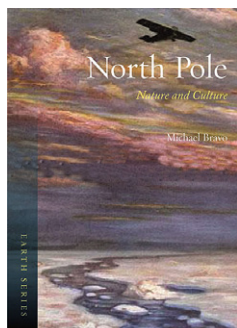


North Pole: Nature and Culture

Michael Bravo. 2019. Reaktion Books. 254 pages and 111 illustrations, 62 in colour. 24.95 USD, Cloth or E-book.

Michael Bravo, Head of Circumpolar History and Public Policy Research at the Scott Polar Research Institute, Cambridge, United Kingdom, has written a rather unusual book. As the title suggests, it deals with the North Pole, but it is extraordinarily eclectic, ranging from classical writings on the polar regions, through the speculations of renaissance geographers, to accounts of polar exploration in the 18th through 20th centuries, and includes diversions into different sorts of poles (astronomical, geographical, magnetic) and polar exploration in cartoons and satirical writing. We meet Madame Blavatsky, Scipio Africanus, Herakles, and Baron Munchausen, among many others. Some are characters we might expect to see at the North Pole (Peary, Amundsen, Nansen), while others come as a total surprise (Mary Shelley and Frankenstein, Ptolemy, Bal Gangadhar Tilak).

This is not a book for those who primarily want factual information about the North Pole, although some of that is included. It is more likely to appeal to those who enjoy a ramble through miscellaneous polar ‘factoids’. Among the great names of polar travel, Peary gets quite a bit of space, although the controversy about where he actually got to is referenced but not described in detail, and Cook only gets passing mention. Steffanson, although never attempting to



approach the pole, gets fairly extensive treatment, but I felt that Nansen got rather short shrift.

There is much in the book to be cherished regarding the impact of the pole on literature and art, and there are some lovely and, I suspect, little-known, images. However, I was constantly asking myself whether the book is really serious or a very well-disguised send-up of arcane scholarship. For example, after mentioning the section in Winnie-the-Pooh where Pooh finds a pole (he “just found it”) and Christopher Robin announces that it must be the North Pole, Bravo makes the following suggestion (p. 158):

Milne, diverging from ethnonationalists who elevated the status of the North Pole to that of an ur-site of Aryan origins, recognised it for what it was, the essential point of origin in a mathematical projection but philosophically no more special than anywhere else ...

The book is very attractively produced and illustrated on wonderful glossy paper. It is very entertaining to thumb through and browse and only the most diligent student of things polar is likely to be familiar with all the material covered. However, the Pooh excerpt given above is just a rather extreme example of the book’s generally over-erudite and, to my mind, over-elaborate, approach to the topic. Recommended for generalists and romantics. Not recommended for those only wanting information on polar exploration.

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