

## Book Review

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Kobalenko, Jerry. *Arctic Eden: Journeys through the Changing High Arctic*. Vancouver: Greystone, co-published with the David Suzuki Foundation, 2010.

Jerry Kobalenko is, among other things, a hard-travelling historian of the Canadian High Arctic. He is a good writer and a skilled photographer who has hauled sledges some 6,000 miles on more than thirty-five Arctic expeditions. He has put in the time and the consistent, intense effort to understand and photograph the Canadian Arctic as few other southerners have been able. Photographs are central to *Arctic Eden*, and they do not disappoint. Mostly, but not always, they are clearly focused and thoughtfully composed. The attention here is on “the three easternmost jewels” of Canada’s northern archipelago: Ellesmere, Devon, and Axel Heiberg Islands. “They are the purest experiences,” Kobalenko writes: “All psychrophiles feel their allure” (5). (A *psychrophile*—the word is not glossed in the book—is a cold-loving organism.) Kobalenko’s *Arctic Eden* encompasses his travels on the land, its history, and the people he travels with. It tells of “the surprisingly sweet life of the snow walker,” of a North which “appeals to travelers who don’t like danger,” and of animals that “share the land with you” (1). It pays less attention to the people who live there today, however, and little to the “changing” Arctic its title promises.

*Arctic Eden*’s 170 photographs can be loosely grouped into thematic clusters: large-scale vistas, often from aircraft or mountain peaks; landscapes “humanized” by snow walkers and life in camp; historical sites that tell Kobalenko “stories” which he “loves” and to which he is attuned (for example, Pim and Beechey Islands, Fort Conger, Cape Hardy); and the apparently requisite shots of wildlife, which he admits is not his special interest: fox, walrus, hare, polar bear, muskoxen, Peary caribou, and the like. Often with impeccably blue skies offset by whiter-than-white snow and clouds, these images are situated in prose narratives that document his travels, which are in turn inter-cut by other, smaller sections, with titles like “Thirty-Three Snows,” “Cool Science,” “Travel Through the Seasons,” “Growing Pains” (on High Arctic plants), “Dealing with Polar Bears,” “Harum Scarum” (on the Arctic hare), “Northwest Greenland,” and so on. This fragmenting of the text into smaller sections—though not always clearly signaled by the book’s design—seems intended to increase the book’s accessibility. There is enough information for the reader to learn something, but not enough to frighten off a casual peruser’s gaze. One can open up this book pretty much anywhere and find an interesting photograph or snippet of text; and there is little need to read the book

straight through, from beginning to end. (Kobalenko's earlier book, *The Horizontal Everest* (2002), provides much more detail about Arctic travel and history.) This is an Eden for a non-specialist audience, for readers who want to take in grand and isolated landscapes from afar, and who are galvanized by dollops of information and travel-adventure narrative spliced into their landscapes and dreams. But is this an Arctic Eden fostered by beauty and not by fear?

The question, from Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, seems apt, in that Kobalenko has done his reading, but wears his learning lightly. Perhaps surprisingly, the Romantic and literary canons are here: Robert Louis Stevenson, Mark Twain, Thoreau, Lord Byron and Mary Shelley, Edgar Allan Poe, Robert Service, Margaret Atwood, even Antoine de St-Exupery. And the Arctic canon is knowingly if sparingly cited, with reference to the "adventurers" Stefansson, Peary, Frederick Cook, Adolphus Greely, Nares, Sverdrup, Shackleton, Scott, Charles Francis Hall, *et al.* Kobalenko gets very much right, of course, noting with respect to travel in Greenland, that "such reliable winds do not blow in the High Arctic" (43); that "the colder the snow is, the greater the friction" (42); and that "in the Arctic, silence has weight and shape. You can almost photograph it" (8). The reader understands these are things he has experienced.

*Arctic Eden* is written in an attractive and ironic prose, and reveals an approachable figure of a writer at work. The author combines senses of humour and proportion to both understate and extol his accomplishments. And so we learn, for example, that "Although it's hard to grasp this until you've done it, skiing some 250 miles in May is pretty easy" (152). (One wonders if his novice sledding partner, Bob Cochrane, "L.A. Bob," would agree.) The book has a reflexive and summarizing feel to it, as Kobalenko's memory becomes active. We find touching nods to his wife, Alexandra, principal model and digital imagist extraordinaire; to Bob, who mentally "was steel"; to the land itself, its beauties and stark, silent spaces; and to the challenges Kobalenko has faced in finding funds, travel partners and life companions, in foregoing children to continue his work—the writing, travel and photography which constitutes an expression of his "evolving love for this High Arctic" (8). This is, at least in part, a portrait of an adventure-travel writer-photographer long ago come of age. Beyond the sketches of the land and its history, what emerges is the image of a man no longer quite young, who is reflecting back on a life spent pursuing his "obsessions." He is a figure with "quixotic leanings" (134), a Canadian Don Quixote still "tilting at windmills" some thirty years after his first trip north (175). He claims "not to have grown up," and speaking also for his wife, observes "that maturity continues to elude us" (149). He speaks of the "reptilian stubbornness that Arctic travelers tap into" (130), and of moving ahead of less

experienced partners on the trail, including his “new girlfriend” (soon to be his wife; 148). He claims to want to “live like a philosopher, but it’s hard when you’re just a happy lark that likes to sing in beautiful fields” (176).

*Arctic Eden* succeeds on many fronts, and could not have been assembled by any other writer, in that it is based on singular experience. The book has been justifiably celebrated in numerous reviews. These tend to read more as hagiography than as critical appraisal, however, as marketing devices trafficked in the popular press, not substantive engagements or critiques. Reviews tend to function as necessary currency in the adventure-travel, wildness-as-beauty coffee table genre; some of the praise on *Arctic Eden*’s dust jacket—by Pat Morrow, Ed Douglas, Lawrence Millman, Maria Coffey, and Thomas Hornbein—will surely come around. Much of it has been well earned, remember. But when Millman claims this prose “begs comparison” with Barry Lopez’s in *Arctic Dreams*—a writer noticeably absent from the book jacket hagiography—one senses that the limits of accurate reporting have been breached.

By means of disclosure, I have travelled to a number of these places, and others in the High Arctic besides, some of them with Mr. Kobalenko, particularly on Ellesmere Island. I field-produced the film project he references (p. 185) for “Canadian Geographic Presents.” Some of the photographs and incidents he describes—the skier descending Mt. Barbeau (cameraman Glen Crawford, p. 128-29), Mt. Barbeau from a plane; paleontologist Richard Harington (116); the search for Greely’s cart (125); and others—derive from this project. And so I have some sense of, and respect for, his accomplishments in travelling from Cape Hardy on Devon Island to Pim Island on east-central Ellesmere, or overland from Alexandra to Grise Fiords. These are significant feats. But when Kobalenko cites Stefansson, author of the notorious *The Friendly Arctic*, from *The Northward Course of Empire* (hardly itself an innocent screed), that “When we stop to analyse the expression, ‘a good climate,’ we find that what we really mean is a good climate for loafing” (55), I must admit one of my eyebrows was raised. And then this, in a photo caption which accompanies an out-of-focus hiker: “No trails, but no need; in the gentle, treeless High Arctic, hikers can go wherever they want” (127), I was surprised, when what with ice caps and glaciers, polynyas and cliffs, this is not only inaccurate but also possibly dangerous advice. Ellesmere is hardly “gentle”—as other images in *Arctic Eden* make clear. Reading Kobalenko’s text in concert with his title, which obviously figures a friendly Arctic, the reader begins to notice other things besides.

Kobalenko speaks of the endless light of the Arctic without qualification, when this is the case only in the long summer, of course (when he tends to travel). The photographs of

kayakers, we might notice, reflect staged photo ops, and not actual kayak expeditions (we too pulled this trick on the film project). The images themselves are extensively digitally reworked—something which the armchair reader might wish to learn, in that it literally changes our “image” of the Arctic. His travels take him “above the Mosquito Line,” and he explains that he has little experience with insects in an Arctic Eden; but then on Devon Island and later, close to Fort Conger, he is swarmed (130). Inuit from Greenland are typified as “nomads” (161), an old if still current trope, when in fact they have been “home” there for hundreds of years (and by contrast to whom Kobalenko might seem a restless wanderer). But “common sense is overrated,” we read, when in fact there is a great pragmatics of the trail at work on these journeys, in which “The Law of Maximum Takeable Risks” is always in play (113). Contradictions such as these appear to have no place in paradise.

More substantively, Ellesmere Island “has never had permanent settlements” (158)—overlooking Grise Fjord, not to mention long-term residencies by the Thule, and the Dorset before them, at Bache Peninsula and elsewhere. He tells of “an old Thule sled runner” he found, “the first Paleo-Eskimo artifact to turn up on western Axel Heiburg” (52), when in fact the Thule are not Paleo-Eskimos, which changes the artifact’s provenance by some 1,500 years. Similarly, “the Paleo-Eskimo skulls” stored in a stove by Greely’s men at Fort Conger are surely also Thule remains. These misprisions speak to a casual if consistent scanting of the indigenous record in the North, which will perhaps go unnoticed by the majority of readers. For Kobalenko, “The official photographers on most northern expeditions produced stuff of mainly historical interest: ethnographic portraits of local Inuit and gang shots of the ship’s crew” (182), when by contrast I have seen Inuit treat these images with joyous attention, as precious family albums, archives of cultural memory.

Recounting an unnamed pilot’s tale of imaginary old-time Inuit gathered at a bird cliff, he tells us he “could picture those ancient Inuit too” (141). But in fact we witness few actual Inuit in this book. This absence, in the photographs as well as in the author’s experience, is worth commenting on, in a book that claims to document “the Changing High Arctic.” In Kobalenko’s Eden, “modern residents are few; ghosts are its most conspicuous inhabitants” (8). This would be news to residents of Resolute Bay, Grise Fiord, and Northwest Greenland. With this the Inuit, as well as resident *qallunaat*, southerners, are effaced from the land, and from the processes of historical change of which they are crucial agents. These matters are of some import, I submit, in that here is someone communicating to a broad and interested reading public about an increasingly important and rapidly changing geo-political archipelago in an era when the rush for

Arctic resources is in full swing. Many readers will have little chance to test these statements against places they will never see.

Regarding climate change, Kobalenko tells us: "I was a slow convert to the idea of global warming. Too many fellow adventurers paid lip service to it. Their self-important and inaccurate statements made me cringe" (53). He identifies and ridicules the "inflated prose" that too often describes the Arctic (34). Fortunately for readers of this book, "subtle minds can find great beauty in this kind of landscape" (5). Indeed, here we are privy to "the hyper-refined sensibility of a High Arctic traveler" (35). To some, these statements might seem self-important and inaccurate, if not inflated. "Ultimately, the North is a matter of perception" (5), we discover, in an observation that appears phenomenologically suspect. (Stand in a blizzard, and see if you grow cold.) Of the Stewart Islands off southeastern Ellesmere, he and his partner become "in all likelihood, the only living persons to set foot on them" (157); and a backpack trip to Floeberg Beach (accessed from Alert) "had the obscure distinction of being the northernmost backpack trip ever done" (95). These achievements, however ironized and qualified, are celebrated nonetheless, as the old colonial tropes of Arctic "discovery" and Peary-style "firsts" that cannot be held at bay.

"On some level, adventurers believe that life is mythic, and we want to write our story, in miles and degrees of wonder," explains Kobalenko (119). But Eden signifies a founding idyll and totalizing order, a moment of fullness and unitary identity at the origin, when desire coincides with reality, and landscape with language. It is a good place and a no-place simultaneously, a place that never has been, and never will be. It is a marketing device, an imaginary plenitude, an imagined conceit and narrative construct, a utopia: a *topos* that never existed, as Thomas More, who coined the phrase, well knew. It certainly doesn't describe contemporary Nunavut, with a suicide rate some eleven times the Southern norm. Narratives in the book which contradict its title, by positing the real against the imagined, appear to go unnoticed, though they are many. "Greely did not realize how inhospitable the High Arctic could be" (120), we are told, while a graduate student is overheard on the radio begging to get out of camp because "the Arctic terrified him" (114). Companions leave after one day on the trail; the author himself will not cross Axel Heiburg alone, as it is "too dangerous for one person" (34); while Bob, a former Marine, says of traveling in the Arctic that "Jungle training felt like play. This is more like war" (75). Floeberg Beach on Ellesmere in fog is a "land indescribably bleak" (101), and we read of "the true hell north of Eighty-Three" (101). Rather than pretending we have been banished from a garden, and as if the social conditions and regional politics of today's Inuit do not exist, or the ongoing rush for

Arctic resources—a real locus of Arctic change—is the figment of someone’s imagination, we would do well to explore what is in fact changing in the Arctic. This history of the Arctic is from the explorer’s side, a subtle articulation of the expansion of the European episteme into Northern space.

Kobalenko claims that it is hard to be a philosopher and that he has “never been much of an environmentalist” (176). He is a “traveler, not a scientist,” an “adventurer” celebrating the present, “a square peg on a round planet.” The “change” to which his title alludes is not one of the people, but of climate; it is a natural history, without a human element, and for the most part apolitical. Not a scientist, he finds it “hard” to write about climate change. His most penetrating observation is that spring comes ten days or so earlier now; and “when I imagine the future, I see a different Arctic. One in which Ellesmere Island has North America’s last downhill resort” (177). This is a quixotic reference, a lark. He imagines the Inuit would “welcome milder, shorter winters, like everyone else would, with only a hint of nostalgia,” but no Inuit are presented to speak for themselves (177). This is hardly psychophilia; it is also deeply misguided. Residents of Point Barrow struggle today with ice that won’t support bowhead whales they land in spring; residents of northern Foxe Basin struggle with deep, soft snows that make winter travel and camping difficult, and with long “shoulder seasons” in spring and fall when the ice is unsafe for travel. Arctic peoples who live on permafrost do not welcome disappearing shorelines and eroding substrates; those whose livelihoods still lean on stable sea ice are troubled by change. A writer who claims to speak for the Inuit might wish to speak *with* them about the changing Arctic, and thus pay off his title.

“The Arctic has never been static,” at last we learn (177)—fair enough, nothing is. But when we read, by means of a meaningful conclusion, that “Only one thing is clear: if the change continues, the High Arctic will not be something new, it will revert to something old” (177), readers might call balderdash! The context here is that Ellesmere supported beavers four million years ago, and turtles long before that. But humans were not yet around, of course, and the island then was at a much lower latitude on the earth’s surface, with different regimes of daylight and biospheric conditions; the comparison is between apricots and oranges. Pop philosophy from an experienced psychophile should amount to something more, and better, than this.

Kobalenko at one point reminds us that “polar bears are not blank slates on which to project one’s idealism about nature” (89). Neither is the changing Arctic. And yet one could argue that this is not a text designed to bear up under such close scrutiny. It encourages us to dream of an Eden that has never been, and to identify with a happy lark expressing his Arctic love. It is on the northern slopes of Axel Heiberg Island where

Kobalenko feels “that I’d reached a limit of wildness that I’d never equal. ... The scene was haunted and fabulous, not beautiful so much as sublime—that intriguing word that takes awe and adds overtones of horror” (41). The Sublime Arctic? A more accurate title, perhaps, but not necessarily a better one, given this book’s audience and intentions.

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