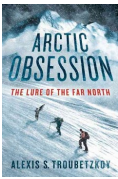


Arctic Obsession: the lure of the Far North



One of the earliest historical reports of a far northern, snow-covered place was by

Pytheas who sailed out of what is now Marseilles in 325 B.C., and discovered a place he called Ultima Thule, a six day journey north of Britain. No one knows exactly where his ship landed but people believe that it may have been Iceland, Greenland, Norway or the Shetlands. Pytheas described the remarkable midnight sun and reported that the sea surrounding Thule was "neither sea nor air but a mixture like a sea-lung that binds everything together."

In the following centuries the Romans and medieval scholars called the Far North "the kingdom of the dead" where the Cyclops lived "in a place of chaos, the abysmal chasm." In those days scholars also believed that the North Pole was a "gigantic metallic rock rising out of the ocean." This book presents a highly readable overview of Arctic exploration beginning in 325 B. C. up to the beginnings of commercial use of the Northwest Arctic Passage in the 21st century. If you followed the December news story about the people of Nome, Alaska being rescued by an oil tanker that had just completed a winter run through this new arctic passage, you know what I'm talking about.

Troubetzkoy's subtitle says it all. When you read about explorers starving to death, or eating each other to survive, you know that the pull of the north is incredibly strong.

The narratives recounted here demonstrate our human capacity to explore the new and far-away as well as learn about vastly different cultures under the most demanding weather conditions.

I've read many books about the Arctic, and this book introduced me to many facts that I had never heard about. For instance, I learned about the blond Inuit (Eskimo) who lived in the Coppermine area of western Canada. Stefansson, a Canadian of Icelandic heritage, traced them down after hearing rumors about their existence. In 1910, he discovered this people who had never seen rifles or knives and who lived very primitively. What amazed Stefansson, an anthropologist and linguist, was how their language showed many Icelandic patterns. He questioned whether this group had descended from white men who had left Iceland centuries before and married Inuit women upon reaching the New World.

The Scandinavian explorers, Stefansson included, as well as Nansen and Amundsen (who led the first successful mission to the South Pole and was also the first to complete a sea journey through the Northwest Passage) used a different approach from the British and other explorers. What they did was spend years with the native people of the region and adapt their clothing, food, and lifestyles to life in the Far North. Using native guides and following native lifestyles enabled them to succeed where others have failed.

The book also offers my favorite recent book quote. It was written in a journal by a member of the doomed Franklin Expedition, "There was *no tripe de roche*, so we drank tea and ate some of our shoes for supper."

Two other books on this fascinating subject include Fridtjof Nansen's Farthest North and Glyndwr Williams' Voyages of Delusion: the quest for the Northwest Passage.

Posted by Dory L. on February 8, 2012

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