

BEYOND THE EDGE. Gerald Johnson. 2011. Minneapolis: Bascom Hill Publishing Group. xiv + 94p, Illustrated, hard cover. ISBN 978-1-935098-16-4. \$39.95 doi:10.1017/S0032247411000167

It is always dangerous to review a book whose subject personally engulfs the reviewer. Some insight is to be gained by such involvement but, on the whole, the risks outweigh the benefits. By obligation, such a reviewer should reveal his special interests from the start. That way any hard feelings achieved will be well referenced.

Beyond the edge is a brief history of the search for the northern edge of the earth, the piece of land that is furthest from the equator and nearest to the pole. In less than 100 pages the author summarises arctic events of the last 2000 years leading up to the geographical knowledge of the present. Like the reviewer, the author is both cursed and blessed with his own personal interest in the topic. In 1968 he participated in a significant expedition to extreme north Greenland to survey the region of Cape Morris Jessup in the illustrious companionship of Eigel Knut, one of the figures of the text. This first hand entry into this part of the world led the author to pursue an academic interest in the broad history of polar exploration. In this book he deals with several controversial figures, weaving through the historical heat of the controversies with a well mannered and civilised tone that benignly neglects the inherent poisons of the topic.

My involvement with the far north began when I was a teenager, studying Eskimo dialects in the Alaskan Arctic. An incident on the spring sea ice of the Bering Straits, which had me illegally crossing into the Soviet Union, was to trigger a life long passion for ‘transcending’ the edges of things. Exploring the mountains, islands and ice shelves at the northern edge of Canada thrust me into the northernmost reaches of Greenland in 1995. A year later I conducted a formal expedition into the same area to find the world’s most northerly land. This expedition put me into history with several characters, among them both the best and the worst that humanity has to offer.

The historical figure that the author is most interested in is Robert Peary, to whom he devotes several chapters. It is Peary’s life that is the heart of the text and it is Peary’s life that provides the key turning point in the book’s story line. Whenever Peary’s name comes up in the realm of arctic lore it is almost immediately followed by the word ‘controversy’. Johnson’s account of Peary’s life smooths it out considerably, showing admirable authorial skill in making the story coherent without being comprehensive. Peary’s chief antagonist Frederick Cook is hardly mentioned.

The author’s gentlemanly approach is evident from the book’s beginning. From the realms of early Greek speculation, through the adventures and misadventures of the nineteenth century leading up to Peary’s authentic and inauthentic conquests, the text pursues a sobriety of tone that always conveys a mood of historical accuracy. Johnson can be a skillful writer and his pages can be a pleasure to read.

The mood of coherence breaks down when the text arrives at the turn of the present century. Prior to that, the historical landmark events were relatively simple. In 1900 Peary reached Cape Morris Jessup and declared that he had found *Ultima Thule*, the northern land edge of the world. In 1969 it was

determined that Kaffeklubben Island was, in fact, a few hundred meters north of Cape Jessup.

But then in 1978 a small doubtful piece of moraine debris was found surfacing in the outskirts north of Kaffeklubben. As a non-tectonic, depositional feature it was sitting precariously on the continental shelf with an uncertain past and a more uncertain future. The question arose as to what to make of it. In the innocence of the times, this feature, called Oodaap, was declared the new *Ultima Thule*, the new edge of the earth. But its fragility as a land mass was soon to confuse the definition of what an island is. It was destined to become the first of Johnson’s poetically constructed ‘ghost islands’.

In a series of expeditions from 1995 to 2007 I was to have the fortune and misfortune of finding several of the others. My own metaphor for this new archipelago fell out of an almost accidental comment I made in Paris in 2005. In an interview with Radio France, I was asked to describe these mysterious islands in a few words. Almost without thinking I said, ‘Eh bien. Elles sont comme des chiens égarés.’ This translated to the British press as ‘the Stray Dog Islands’. A new myth was to emerge from this characterisation, different but complimentary to the ‘ghost island’ myth.

Johnson ends the time line of his book with a 2008 Danish expedition that confirmed the existence of an island which my 2003 expedition had discovered. I had named this island with the number, ‘83 42’ to emphasise the uniqueness of its latitude. The Danish scientists who visited on the day of the eclipse of 1 August 2008 renamed it ‘Eklipse O.’ Johnson leaves his story here. In doing so he sidesteps considerable inter-personal controversy, associated with the ‘ghost islands’ as well as with Peary. But the full, uninhibited, human story of the ‘ghost islands’ would test the skills of a Dostoyevsky for handling the perverse. So it may be wise that he did so (Yet were I the author and the author my critic, I could tell a tale as would wrestle the muddy depths from paradise and...). But Johnson is an honorable man and I leave him his discretion.

The text ends up missing out on more, however, than merely personal controversies. There is an historical grand finale to the events he is pursuing. His book neglects that grand finale, leaving the knowledgeable reader with a feeling of a tale half told. It is clear from the beginning that Johnson’s historical focus is strictly as a poetically inspired explorer. His authorship is well circumscribed in that respect. As such, he shows little interest in the political and economic results of the periods of exploration he describes. He does not hint at the new era that is opening up in the northern seas, the ecological, economic and political changes that are about to engulf the region. He does not explain how those ghostly stray dogs of the poets will soon be used to extend territorial claims for accession to new resources in the opening polar Mediterranean. He does not explain how, at this historical stage, *Ultima Thule* is no longer to be discovered, but rather created, not by the imaginations of romancers, but by the dredge ships of man.

After two readings of *Beyond the edge* it is apparent to me that, as an author, Johnson’s heart is firmly planted in the edenic ethos of exploration. It is an ethos he wishes to view cleanly; and in the final analysis, I must say, that I admire the nobility of his approach. It is, in its own terms, authentic and he tells a tale that is authentic as far as his heart is willing to take it. (Dennis Schmitt, 2217 Grant St, Berkeley, CA 94703, USA.)