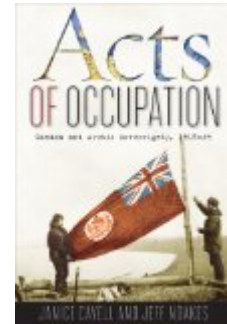


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Sovereignty after Duplicity

In 1918, at the close of the Great War, Canada gazed uncertainly northward. Where its sovereignty was secure, where it was threatened, and where it might be extended were not clear to Canada's government. Within seven years, the government had answered those questions and established a program. *Acts of Occupation: Canada and Arctic Sovereignty, 1918-25* interprets this policy transformation. Co-authors Janice Cavell (Historical Section, Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada) and Jeff Noakes (Canadian War Museum) uncover a web of deceit and secrecy among Canadian bureaucrats, Arctic explorers, and diplomats relative to extending and solidifying the nation's northern claims. Despite a lack of experience and acrimonious politicking—or perhaps because of it—Canadians in government forged a clear vision for their sovereignty claims, a vision that has largely survived.

One of the most accomplished and notorious explorers of the Canadian Arctic, Vilhjalmur Stefansson, had just returned from a five-year sojourn in the Arctic in 1918, and, like most explorers, he immediately searched for ways to get back to the North and turned again for support from the Canadian government. By turns charismatic and duplicitous, Stefansson developed grand plans for Canada's Far North (and his own prominent place in implementing those plans). Stefansson hoped to persuade the Canadian government and the reading public for whom he published much that developing the North commercially would benefit the nation and pro-

ceed quickly if officials and the public would only push back their "ignorance and prejudice" (p. 22).

Stefansson would take the lead. For example, he took actions to convert the North into a pastoral landscape, importing reindeer to raise domestically to compensate for the decline of musk oxen and its effects on indigenous economy and well-being. However, the mostly unexplored Beaufort Sea was his real target, it seems. Seeing potential glory in that arena, Stefansson desired Canada to claim Wrangel Island so that he could use it as a base for exploring. He schemed in multiple ways to interest Canada in asserting its sovereignty and influence throughout the Arctic. As these designs evolved and changed, Stefansson shifted rationales, changed his stories, misled, lied, and played political interests off each other. The government responded alternately with support, skepticism, and, ultimately, refusal.

Acts of Occupation narrates and explains Stefansson's machinations and Canada's bureaucratic perspective. Canada was much the neophyte in foreign policy in the 1910s and 1920s, a situation that revealed itself repeatedly and that Stefansson and bureaucrats both could exploit to serve their own needs.

For instance, Stefansson manufactured a "Danish threat" to the Arctic Archipelago, an act that sent Ottawa scrambling to formulate a policy. Denmark long had a presence in Greenland. Its most active Arctic explorer was Knud Rasmussen. Although he knew better,

Stefansson tried to convince Canada's prime minister and various public officials and civil servants that Rasmussen and the Danes had designs on the archipelago. Meanwhile, as part of the offensive, Stefansson and others led Canadian officials to view game conservation—especially enforcement of game laws—as a prime way to hem in the Danes and assert Canadian interests and sovereignty in the Far North. Natives hunted furs for trade, and musk oxen were declining in northern Greenland, so the Inughuit left Greenland to hunt, a strategy long used in a time of scarcity. As John Sandlos has shown us, Canada used game conservation to control indigenous populations; it seems, too, that Canada found it useful to forestall other nations, even when the incursion was imagined or exaggerated.[1]

The picture painted by Stefansson resembled this: The Danish presence in northern Greenland had corrupted the indigenous population, which now had to hunt further from home, thereby violating Canadian game laws just as Rasmussen was prepared to launch an expedition into the Arctic Archipelago. As Stefansson made clear, Canada required a stronger presence in the Far North to prevent such efforts. Fortuitously, he would volunteer to serve the nation by leading an expedition to the Ellesmere Island region, as well as investing in reindeer importation.[2] At the same time, Canada would establish a series of posts for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. These acts and posts would help transition Canada from simply “acts of possession” to “acts of occupation,” which would strengthen Canadian claim to and presence in the Arctic.

The explorer could not accomplish his plans alone; Stefansson needed bureaucratic help. In official circles, J. B. Harkin led the way in supporting Canada's northern interests. Harkin was a civil servant who spent most of his career in the Department of the Interior, where he was charged with enforcing the Northwest Game Act, which gave him his bureaucratic interest in the Arctic. When Stefansson informed the government of the hunting that was violating the Game Act and shared Rasmussen's plan, Harkin was set to assert Canadian interests. It was a perfect, if unfortunate, coalescence of events and personalities. As the authors characterize it: “In Harkin, as Stefansson probably realized, he had found the ideal mark: intelligent, energetic, and influential, yet ignorant of basic facts about the Arctic, in many ways naive, and exceptionally susceptible to any hint that Canada's interests were under threat” (p. 49). Cavell and Noakes thus set up the situation in 1919-20. Canada's Arctic claims were poorly articulated, and with a fear-

ful Harkin guiding nascent policy, the government acted largely in secret and insecurely.

The authors then expertly tease out this story as it developed over the next five years. International law advanced conflicting ideas about what constituted a legal claim over territory, and civil servants like Harkin were not best positioned to establish Canada's legal claim, while explorers presented their own inchoate understandings. Canada's position within the British Commonwealth further complicated its Arctic claims, as it was unclear what northern lands Great Britain had transferred to Canada in 1880. Moreover, Canada's foreign policy still largely ran through London, in a convoluted, inefficient diplomatic and bureaucratic maze. A great virtue of *Acts of Occupation* is the authors' careful reconstruction of these legal and political developments in clear prose and incisive analysis. What might have been a confusing morass of government offices and bureaucrats is instead a lucid account.

There are far too many details to recount in a review, but general outlines and trends remain reasonably clear. Stefansson pushed to get government funding to lead an expedition and, more generally and persistently, to support any of his many schemes to develop the Far North, from reindeer raising to colonizing Wrangel Island, a place far from any legitimate Canadian claim. When one door closed on Stefansson, he knocked at another, including going to London to lobby his case; and when one of his rationales was discovered to be false or seen to be unpersuasive, he would concoct another one, including the near-preposterous claim that Japan was about to claim Wrangel Island. Harkin initially was persuaded by Stefansson's characterization of the Danish threat; however, Harkin soon lost faith in Stefansson's veracity and ability. Still, Harkin agreed to the necessity of Canada establishing its official presence more firmly in the Arctic and pursued the plan in secrecy. Officials broke their secrecy when Stefansson blundered with Wrangel Island, sending a party there to claim the island that Stefansson always presented as a cornucopia of resources and economic potential. When the claim was publicized in spring 1922, Canadian officials were perplexed and many outraged, for the island seemed far beyond what Canada was willing to claim and administer. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union announced its position that the party was violating Soviet sovereignty. Then, news reached the public that four of the five in the party had died, belying the optimistic northern vision Stefansson always promoted. Indeed, the deaths sent Stefansson's reputation plummeting in public and official circles to depths from which

they never recovered in Canada. Misleading statements in Stefansson's publications outraged government officials, but portrayed him as the betrayed party.[3]

What emerged in the aftermath of this debacle was the sector theory of sovereignty, which has since guided Canadian Arctic sovereignty policy. By 1925, Americans and Norwegians were inquiring about or preparing to explore lands north of Canada. Unlike in 1920, this time the Canadian bureaucracy responded with more professionalism and less paranoia. Having established police presence to enforce game laws in the eastern Arctic, Canada felt its Arctic sovereignty more secure. Meanwhile, James White, a geographer in the Department of Interior, developed the sector idea and wrote a memo in 1925 that the authors call "the true source of Canada's official sector claim" (p. 227). Based on old maps and treaties, White saw the northern Arctic islands as part of a "clear and unified geographical entity" within a triangular area (the sector) going north to the pole (p. 228). This position gave Canada a strong position when Norwegians and Americans threatened to explore and claim northern spaces. The Canadian sector claim established effective sovereignty, and ensuing years saw various bureaucracies strengthening Canada's official northern presence, part of the general strengthening of the state of which this was a critical episode.[4] As the authors conclude, "it was by grappling with northern sovereignty issues that politicians and civil servants developed the competencies required to cast off British tutelage and attain true independence in the conduct of their nation's external affairs" (p. 261).

Much recommends the book. Cavell and Noakes conducted thorough research, digging deep in multiple archival holdings. Because of the narrow time examined, they could follow every lead to its conclusion, often through multiple layers of archives and deliberate misdirections by the cast of characters. Also, *Acts of Occupation* is a well-written narrative that takes what might have been a dull account of bureaucratic and political wrangling and turns it into an exciting and significant book.

Also, *Acts of Occupation* raises interesting questions about individuals' ability to influence history. These days, scholars are far more likely to employ structural factors for causal explanations than one person's charisma. Although biographies still sell well, serious scholars tend not to ascribe major shifts to individuals and their efforts. However, Cavell and Noakes make a plausible case that a small number of individuals, through

doggedness or obstinacy, did much to shape the Canadian government's response and policy toward Arctic matters, especially sovereignty. The main goat in this story clearly is Vilhjalmur Stefansson. However, the authors note an important irony: "Although Stefansson's name was spoken only with distaste in Ottawa, many of the bureaucrats who had rejected his plans nevertheless subscribed to a northern vision that owed more than a little to his influence" (p. 255). Stefansson may have lied or misled the public or government officials, and he most certainly always pursued his own self-aggrandizement, but the explorer and his actions prompted serious consideration and activity from official Canada toward the Arctic in a way nothing before had. And his vision of political and economic development was mimicked by many of Canada's leading men. At certain times and places, then, it seems clear that individuals can make a difference albeit not always as they would choose.

Reviewing *Acts of Occupation* for H-Environment is also somewhat challenging. It is not an environmental history and makes no claims to be. However, the book does make some observations germane to the field. Perhaps most interesting is that government interest in the Arctic that precipitated this sovereignty crisis and resolution came at least putatively because of questions over game conservation. Wildlife decline because of overhunting and the incursions of colonial economies disrupted Inughuit subsistence patterns, pushing them into land Canada wished to manage. An environmental problem partially led to the series of events that culminated in the sector theory of sovereignty in Canada's Arctic. Environmental historians can sometimes justifiably be accused of not paying close enough attention to political or diplomatic history. *Acts of Occupation* can remind us that environmental and diplomatic factors can entwine. Furthermore, it may extend the dialogue between scholars of sovereignty and environment, because at their roots questions of sovereignty remain questions of nature and place. Ultimately, a nation establishing sovereignty is asserting claims over the people, the flora and fauna, the lands and waters. These environmental and theoretical questions may be prompted when environmental historians delve into this interesting story.

Notes

[1]. John Sandlos, *Hunters at the Margin: Native People and Wildlife Conservation in the Northwest Territories* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007).

[2]. Stefansson never led such an expedition.

[3]. At the same time all of this was unraveling, Stefansson was involved in a public and at times damaging and at times petty argument with his co-leader, Rudolph

Martin Anderson, from the Canadian Arctic Expedition.

[4]. The Soviet Union used its own sector claim for lands north of the mainland; see p. 244.

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