

John R. Bockstoe. *White Fox and Icy Seas in the Western Arctic: The Fur Trade, Transportation, and Change in the Early Twentieth Century.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018. 344 pp. \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-22179-4.

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The Arctic has long been framed as a place of boundless economic potential. The promise of undiscovered land holding untapped natural resources has been part of the Arctic imaginary for centuries. In more recent years, climate change and the resultant melting of sea ice has led to a renewal of such speculation, with new shipping routes in the region offering the prospect of trade and tourism to flourish in previously inaccessible areas. *White Fox and Icy Seas in the Western Arctic* studies the historical economics of the Arctic through a meticulous analysis of the fur trade in the early twentieth century. Building on his earlier contributions—*Whales, Ice, and Men* (1986) and *Furs and Frontiers in the Far North* (2010)—John Bockstoe examines the complex trading relationships that were established in securing, processing, and commercializing the fur of the Arctic Fox (*Vulpes Lagopus*). Spanning the years 1899 to 1950 and focusing on the “Western Arctic,” an area encompassing over two thousand miles from eastern Chukotka to Canada’s Boothia Peninsula, the book covers a considerable spatiotemporal range. It draws from a wide array of historical sources including correspondence between traders, diary entries, ethnographic studies, and extracts from local newspapers. These sources are combined with intriguing accounts provided by both indigenous

and non-indigenous residents who had firsthand experience of working in this cosmopolitan economy. Bockstoe has spent many years living and working in the region and this experience shines through across the entirety of the book.

The introduction is comprised of two chapters. The first is an examination of the establishment and subsequent abandonment of Fort Ross, a Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) trading post on Somerset Island, which Bockstoe describes as a “paradigm” (p. 1) for the rest of the narrative in the book. The second breaks down each stage of the fox pelt commodity chain and examines each in detail, beginning with the locating and trapping of the fox itself and ending with the marketing of the processed furs to consumers in Europe and North America. While the format provides the reader with a great deal of essential information regarding the nuances and complexities of the fur trade, the arrangement of these chapters unfortunately gives the impression of a series of ‘false starts’ before the core narrative of the book gets underway.

The remainder of the book does not suffer from such issues and is structured in a suitably chronological way. Part 2 begins by examining the early maritime trade in and around the Bering Strait at the end of the nineteenth century. The author explores the links between the emergence of

this trade and the sudden social and economic impacts that resulted from the 1897 gold rush which transformed the demography of the area within a matter of months. An important aspect that Bockstoce highlights in these chapters, and across the book as a whole, is the economic relations formed as a result of trade between indigenous and non-indigenous communities, particularly the Yup'ik, Chukchi, and Inupiat people. Mutually beneficial systems of trade were regularly formed between these groups, and Bockstoce explains that this often resulted in a breaking down of the expected brokers of certain materials, with manufactured goods being frequently exchanged in both directions. The narrative is usefully illustrated with contemporary photographs that highlight further the close, though not necessarily unproblematic, relationships which were forged in the region as a result of these increasingly pervasive practices of commerce.

The book also draws attention to the contrasting geopolitical climates emerging within the two states situated on either side of the Bering Strait, which would go on to have enduring legacies throughout the twentieth century and beyond. As the author demonstrates, geopolitical concerns were never far away from those active in the fur trade on both the Russian and the American sides of this narrow channel of water, and the book travels between the two exploring how the legalities surrounding territorial borders were negotiated and, in some cases, subverted. These geopolitical relations are then brought sharply to the fore in the third section of the book. Chapter 5 studies the socioeconomic consequences of the Russian Civil War and the subsequent establishment of the Soviet government, and explores the chaotic governance of the entire Chukchi region that came about as a result. As Bockstoce explains, the implications of these events for the fur trade were profound in that traders were forced to comply with changeable regulations during this period, with goods being regularly seized or confiscated. Focusing on individual traders, the book explores the dif-

ficulties that were faced as a result of this ad hoc, incoherent, and at times corrupt system of governance, and attention is drawn to the way certain settlements and ports in the region were impacted severely as a result.

During the same years, the eastern side of the Strait experienced a period of comparative economic stability and chapters 6 and 7 explore what Bockstoce terms the heyday of the fur trade in both Alaska and Canada. Economic growth in Alaska allowed for an expansion of settlements along the north coast which were supported by increasingly reliable transport routes to towns such as Barrow and Point Hope that permitted supplies to reach the residents all year round. Bockstoce argues that the Native communities in the region also benefited from the increasing abundance of manufactured goods, allowing them to disperse themselves across the North Slope area. As chapter 7 explores, some crossed the border into Canada, resulting in what the author describes as “competition” with the Siglit and the Gwich'in communities. Bockstoce explores the economic inequality that developed between these different communities as a result of varying engagement with the fur trade and, using Knud Rasmussen's anthropological observations, draws attention to the differences in adoption of commercial trading between the East and West regions of Canada. The HBC's westward expansion is also explored in this chapter and the centuries old company's struggle to keep pace with the bustling world of the Western Arctic fur trade is discussed.

After this boom period for the fur trade, the fourth and final part of the book studies the decline of the industry. The 1929 economic collapse which led to the Great Depression is given as one factor, but so too are changing fashion tastes in Europe and the Southern states. In Russia, meanwhile, the Soviet state had now taken full ownership of the fur trade in the Chukchi region and had begun a process of reeducation, or as Bockstoce suggests, “sovietization” (p. 208), of the local popu-

lation. Central control of the trade through the *Sojuzpushnina* soon followed, meaning that while Russia became the world's largest fur exporter, the Chukotka region saw few of the profits from this. Low prices on the opposite side of the Strait during the 1930s and 40s meant that hunting and trapping was largely unprofitable and the Northern region of Alaska depopulated considerably as a result. In Canada, the HBC was able to buy out many of the smaller trading companies, which led essentially to the monopolization of the fur trade. This was compounded in the 1930s by the restriction of trapping licenses by the government to Alaska Natives and a few non-Natives who had already acquired them.

What Bockstoce does well in the book is to allow the vast array of firsthand accounts to reveal the tangible impacts of these wider economic forces. His precise knowledge of the region also aides the reader in getting a sense of the knowledge and skill required to profit from this challenging environment. What could perhaps have been more prominent in the book are the struggles faced by those communities who, having been swept up in these commercial practices, were then left to find new livelihoods and strategies for survival once commerce had left the area. Nonetheless, the book is a valuable addition to scholarship on this politically and culturally important region and would be useful to anyone seeking to get a clear sense of the significant socioeconomic changes that took place during this period.

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