



Ricard C. Powell. *Studying Arctic Fields: Cultures, Practices, and Environmental Sciences.* McGill-Queen's Native and Northern Series. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017. Illustrations. 264 pp. \$120.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7735-5112-1.

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Scientific field research at the Polar Continental Shelf Program (PCSP) is a mystery to most Canadians.[1] Few Canadians outside of the environmental sciences have probably heard of the PCSP, and even fewer will ever travel to the base in Resolute, Nunavut. Richard C. Powell's *Studying Arctic Fields: Cultures, Practices, and Environmental Sciences* introduces readers to this important High Arctic research station. But *Studying Arctic Fields* is not about the research that comes from the PCSP. Instead, Powell relies on two field seasons of ethnographic observation to uncover the social and cultural lives of PCSP scientists and the staff that keep the base operational. Blending his 2001 and 2002 observations with archival material and formal interviews, Powell shows how these social and cultural realities—and the High Arctic's environmental context—shape individual lives at the base and structure scientific field research there. In doing so, *Studying Arctic Fields* emphasizes the *human* dimension of field research, rather than its *scientific* importance. As Powell writes, “without the cultural life of Arctic fieldwork, there would not be any scientific practice” (p. 4).

Powell begins by contextualizing the creation of the PCSP and the development of High Arctic field research at the base. In chapter 1, he links the PCSP to ideas of Canadian nordicity and nation-

hood and argues that the Diefenbaker government founded the PCSP in 1958 to assert scientific sovereignty over the High Arctic. According to Powell, “this vision ... continues to pervade the contemporary activities of the PCSP” (p. 52). In chapter 2, he examines the theoretical underpinnings that grounded scientific field research in the 1960s and shows how scientists reconfigured—or, as he writes, “mangled”—their practices to adapt to the High Arctic (p. 74).

In the next chapter, Powell describes the physical layout of the PCSP complex. He shows how the organization of the base—and the formal and informal rules that moderate daily activities within these spaces—“influences the conduct of Arctic science” (p. 97). Chapter 4 then examines how the PCSP's field culture affects scientific activities and the scientists' identities. His observations reveal how scientists navigate the realities of High Arctic research and try to conform to dominant ideas associated with being a “good field person” at the PCSP (p. 124). In chapter 5, Powell describes encounters between PCSP scientists and Inuit in Resolute, with a particular focus on observations made during the 2002 Canada Day celebrations. He argues that settler colonial legacies continue to shape interactions between Inuit and PCSP scientists (who represent state presence in the High Arc-

tic) but also notes that Canada Day celebrations serve as an important moment to relieve community tensions. In chapters 6 and 7, Powell emphasizes the emotional dimensions of life at the PCSP, highlighting some of the challenges, frustrations, and micro-aggressions that further structure lived experiences at the base. His observations and additional interviews with scientists, graduate students, and base staff clearly point to the emotional toll that working at the PCSP has on many individuals. His discussions on misogyny, discrimination, and uneven power dynamics are particularly eye-opening and troubling.

Tension is a key theme throughout *Studying Arctic Fields*. Some examples include the tensions between science and politics, field research and adventure, scientific expectations and environmental realities, scientists and base staff, senior researchers and junior researchers/graduate students, and PCSP staff/scientists and Inuit. Throughout his work, Powell shows how these tensions affect the PCSP, field research, and day-to-day experiences at the base. Powell presents the relationship between science and Canadian politics as the dominant tension. There are multiple occasions where he highlights that this was a main topic of conversation during non-research hours (see pages 97 and 177-78 for two examples).

Studying Arctic Fields may leave some historians wanting more on the history of the PCSP. In chapter 2, for example, Powell discusses how field research practices developed there in the 1960s. But there is no discussion about if/how field practices evolved between the 1970s and the 2000s. It is also unclear what research findings or major publications came from the PCSP during this period. While I recognize that *Studying Arctic Fields* is an ethnography and not a history—and am sympathetic to the challenges Powell faced accessing relevant archival material at the Library and Archives Canada (pp. 193-94)—having more information on this would have elucidated the PCSP's significance to the Canadian scientific community

and further revealed how High Arctic field research practices had evolved since its founding. Further, it is surprising that Powell did not include a map or aerial photograph of the PCSP compound in chapter 3, where he provides a comprehensive written description of the base's layout. Either option would have been a useful visual aid.

Powell includes detailed methodological, theoretical, ethical, and historiographic discussions throughout *Studying Arctic Fields*. He uses these effectively to foreground his observations and arguments. Shockingly, though, he leaves one of his most significant methodological considerations until the final chapter. He notes that in 2000, a team of British documentarians—who “behaved arrogantly around the base and village”—filmed two scientists that summer (p. 164). The scientists later died in an unrelated helicopter accident. According to Powell, the entire incident affected how PCSP managers, scientists, and staff thought about British researchers like himself. “In many ways, I think this event skewed my entire fieldwork at Resolute, as well as my initial attempts to gain access to PCSP support and to conduct interviews with scientists long before I began any empirical research.... Some people were especially wary of me when I first arrived in the field in 2001” (p. 165). Such a serious methodological implication needed to be emphasized and explained in greater detail earlier in the book.

Studying Arctic Fields will be best enjoyed by geographers and environmental scientists, Arctic researchers, social and cultural historians, and historians of science and the Canadian North. Environmental scholars will find his observations about the impact that High Arctic landscapes, weather, and animals have on scientific field research particularly interesting. Indeed, it was surprising to learn how adaptable researchers had to be to High Arctic conditions. One could spend months preparing a project only to have to change it at the last moment because of uncooperative weather.

Powell's observations reveal an important aspect of scientific field research that is often overlooked—if thought about at all—by nonscientists. Readers will finish *Studying Arctic Fields* with a greater appreciation about how emotionally difficult field research can be and how the PCSP's spatial, cultural, and logistical realities affect scientists' lives and their research in the High Arctic. As Powell writes, "it is precisely the human dimensions of social life ... that most characterize the performance of scientific practices in the Arctic" (p. 19). *Studying Arctic Fields* should be praised for offering such unique insight into the previously hidden world of the PCSP.

Note

[1]. The research station was originally named the Polar Continental Shelf Project. It was renamed the Polar Continental Shelf Program in 2008. The author uses the former name when referring to it in a historical context.

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