

## Book Reviews

---

*People of the Lakes: Stories of Our Van Tat Gwich'in Elders / Googwandak Nakhwach'ànjòo Van Tat Gwich'in.* By Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation and Shirleen Smith. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2009. lxii + 391pp. Illustrations, maps, index, bibliography.

*People of the Lakes: Stories of Our Van Tat Gwich'in Elders / Googwandak Nakhwach'ànjòo Van Tat Gwich'in* is a rich collection of stories and oral accounts of Gwich'in elders that have shaped their lives and culture for generations. Some stories are thought to span millennia and provide the last remaining links to times long ago. The book begins with a brief history of the Gwich'in people and a review of the key objectives and drivers of this research effort. This is followed by stories from long ago, or *Yeenoo dài' googwandak*, stories of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The book ends with the oral history of today. Each section is divided into principal themes. For instance, long ago stories include fascinating and often colourful stories of the origins of the natural world, of mythical figures, and of historical events, such as first contact with Europeans. These accounts are accompanied by numerous remarkable photographs and sketches dating back to the mid-nineteenth century. Also provided is a useful glossary for the pronunciation of Gwich'in words, as well as the translation of Gwich'in into English and vice versa. An index allows for fast and effective searching of key words, places, and people's names. These tools allow the book to be more than a collection of stories, but also a useful educational tool for all readers, young and old.

What is immediately striking about the book is the level of community involvement in it and the local enthusiasm for the project. This was truly a community effort. It is the outcome of a ten year collaboration between anthropologist Shirleen Smith and the Vuntut Gwich'in First Nation, a rare example of a true research partnership between academic and non-academic partners in the North. This spirit of partnership is infused in every aspect of the book from its methodology to its organization and presentation of materials. This is a monumental achievement.

The focus and intent of the book is the transmission of local traditional knowledge to future generations, not the interpretation of the stories, which is often left to the reader. The emphasis is therefore on the unaltered words of the elders, collected through interviews and research on oral and written accounts from well over a century. A number of texts are directly translated from Gwich'in into English and in many ways remain in the voice of the speaker, which adds an element of richness, a soul to the stories of these remarkable people. One can almost hear their voices when reading the raw text (which is clearly indicated in red lettering). The book is chronologically structured, making it simple to understand. Short passages of text that accompany oral accounts provide the reader with basic contextual information. They are especially useful for outsiders trying to interpret the stories. These passages, although rich in detail, are not overrun with academic jargon.

Much care was given to the methods used in the collection of information for this book. Interviews were conducted on the land in various locations of special significance for interviewees and in the language of their choice. As such, about 80 percent of the interviews were done in Gwich'in, with skilled translators transcribing them into English. The interviews themselves were conducted by local people and involved a number of local youth. These opportunities provided innumerable benefits to the community, including technical training and the possibility of visiting sites of spiritual and cultural significance throughout traditional Vuntut Gwich'in lands—sites which were no longer accessible to many elders due to health and cost considerations. The emotional and spiritual connections of elders to these places were often revived during the project, an outcome that is evident throughout the book.

As an academic researcher interested in Vuntut Gwich'in culture and the meaning of First Nations stories, I sometimes felt ill-equipped to interpret the significance of the stories in the book, given the lack of contextual information. Readers may benefit from the inclusion of some commentary on the stories or a summary of previous works from which some traditional knowledge was collected. Such information would provide useful details for understanding the significance of the stories and add to their depth. Academic interpretations of the stories would have been an interesting addition to the book, although it is recognized that such perspectives were not the intended focus here.

In conclusion, the principal objective of *People of the Lakes* was to document Vuntut Gwich'in history on their traditional lands and to pass the knowledge of the elders, across barriers of language and changing

lifestyles, to future generations. The book does this and more. With this research, the Vuntut Gwich'in First Nation and Shirleen Smith have shown that community-based research can generate useful, deep knowledge that is relevant to a wide audience. Indeed, the book is a treasure, especially because a great number of the elders who participated in its production have passed away in recent years. Their stories might have been lost forever if not for this community-driven effort.

**Nicolas Brunet**, Department of Natural Resource Sciences, McGill University

***Russia and the North*. Edited by Elana Wilson Rowe. Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2009. 232 pp. Index, maps.**

Over the past decade, Russia, the largest Arctic state in geographic terms, has baffled the world with what has often been portrayed as a contradictory, protean strategy towards the North. One of the most controversial Russian actions involved the planting of a national flag on the seabed near the North Pole in 2007. The resumption of strategic bomber flights by Russia in the same year added to an international furor over re-emerging Arctic geopolitics that continues to echo today. Against this backdrop, not a few commentators have been moved to wonder if Moscow's assertive stance will elicit a "New Cold War" as climate change and technological advances increase access to arctic resources and territory. Other observers, however, insist that such febrile rhetoric is misleading, at best scaremongering, at worst verging on politically irresponsible. From their standpoint, Moscow's initiatives are in keeping with the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the most relevant regime for governing ocean space. These seeming inconsistencies—confrontational posturing on the one hand and commitment to international law on the other—inevitably bring up questions about which path modern-day Russia will choose for governing its changing northern spaces.

Those interested in unveiling the masks of Proteus are well served by Elana Wilson Rowe's collection of essays, *Russia and the North*. As its title tells us, the book is about key aspects of Russian ambitions in the area and how they are spelled out both domestically and on the international stage. Included are brief treatments of geopolitical interests pursued by other Arctic states such as Norway; but the book's major emphasis is on how Russia defines and deals with northern territories. The book begins with a synoptic overview of relevant strategic issues, including maritime claims and petroleum. Wilson Rowe seeks to understand Russia's kaleidoscopic