

***City for Empire: An Anchorage History, 1914–1941.* By Preston Jones. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2010. xvii + 214 pp. Preface, introduction, appendices, notes, bibliography, index, b&w illustrations.**

City for Empire: An Anchorage History, 1914–1941 is Preston Jones's second book about Alaska. His first, *Empire's Edge* (2006), chronicled the social development of Nome in the years 1898 to 1934, and was largely well-received for focusing on the everyday lives of Nomeites and thus penetrating the many myths and legends that populate most histories of the gold rush town on the Seward Peninsula. Jones takes the same approach to Anchorage in *City for Empire*. He limits his focus to how residents of Anchorage lived, worked, and played, and how public life was similar to and different from the experience of Americans in the rest of the country. More broadly, the book traces the city's role in the westward expansion of American "empire," to use the author's terminology.

In the Introduction, the author sets out four goals for the book—to describe the social development of Anchorage in the given time period, place the city in a broad national context, explore the international tensions brewing in the Pacific and their effect on Anchorage, and show that racial and ethnic relations in the city were largely harmonious. That's quite a challenge, especially for a book whose text runs just 139 pages. *City for Empire* uses a thematic approach. Chapter headings give a clear idea of the book's structure and dimension: "War," "Socialism," "Nature," and "Transition," to name a few. The book features no traditional narrative, which often leaves the reader guessing as to where it's all going.

Jones is an indefatigable researcher. He draws on the usual archival records, but also cites whatever other printed material he could get his hands on, including diaries, letters, and photographs in private collections. He describes in precise detail what magazines residents of Anchorage were reading, what churches they attended, crimes they committed, how they married and divorced, and so on. The author's eye for detail even leads him to count the number of foreign-sounding names in early phone books. The end result, however, is an orgy of evidence that obscures rather than clarifies. The sheer volume of citations is wearying, especially in the absence of an event- or character-driven narrative that might help to focus the reader's attention. The book is all theme and no story, thus its analysis of Anchorage's public life is unmoored from Anchorage itself.

Jones notes the city began in 1914 as a labourers' camp for the Alaska Railroad then pushing its way into the Interior. But the book contains not a word about the actual founding of the city—why there and not someplace

else?—and precisely how a temporary camp came to grow into Alaska’s largest city, especially when Juneau, Fairbanks, and even Nome, Seward, and Valdez all had such considerable head starts. Surely there are reasons, but none are to be found in this book. In addition, Jones names none of Anchorage’s mayors, councillors, bank officers, newspaper editors, federal officials, and other city leaders in this time period. Granted, the book’s stated intent is to explore only how public life evolved in the city’s first three decades—but do these actors have no agency at all in the process? There is also no substantive mention of the Alaskan environment. If Anchorage’s position is vital to American geopolitics, as Jones claims, shouldn’t the land and climate be characters in the story? That the author makes clear his book is not a general overview of Anchorage’s early history does not free him from the obligation of contextualizing the material within that history.

The deliberately narrow focus provides fascinating snapshots of everyday life in early Anchorage. But they are just that, snapshots, which unfortunately lead the author to make unsupported conclusions. To cite one example: Jones asserts some of Anchorage’s immigrant population deflected hostility and demonstrated their loyalty during the First World War by taking English language and American history courses in night school. For evidence he notes foreign-born students accounted for nearly one-third of all night school students in 1918. The statistic misleads. The point is not what percentage of students were immigrants, rather what percentage of the total immigrant population were students. If the number is low, the claim would seem to be moot. But even if the number is high, who is to say the action effectively insulated those studious newcomers from suspicion? Racism and discrimination take forms not always reflected in police reports and newspaper articles, two of Jones’s preferred sources that are credulously cited time and again. It is this type of myopia that results in blithe assertions such as, “In Anchorage, then, racial and ethnic equanimity was the norm so long as one’s wartime loyalty was unquestionable” (55). That’s quite a claim to base on night school records. (This reviewer is not being pedantic; sweeping assertions of this type pop up on almost every page.) A scholar with a more critical eye might have wondered whether xenophobia rarely made it into public records precisely because its victims were anonymous nobody’s with neither social capital nor ready access to the courts, newspapers, and other civic institutions. The book’s almost total lack of developed counter-arguments is perplexing and a shortcoming of the work. Just as frustrating is the author’s habit of dismissing the occasional bit of antithetical evidence as either isolated or inconclusive. In acknowledging that all German male immigrants age fourteen and older were required to register at the Anchorage

post office and supply four photographs of themselves, for example, Jones writes only that the process was completed “without a glitch” (58). One suspects the Germans saw things differently.

City for Empire makes an important contribution to Alaska historiography. This reviewer has no doubt Jones’s book will be used by many historians for its extraordinary level of detail on the lives of everyday Alaskans in the interwar period. As a whole, however, the book falls well short of its ambitious goals.

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***A Woman in the Polar Night.* By Christiane Ritter. Vancouver: Greystone Books, 2010. 215 pp. Maps, photographs.**

In 1933, Christiane Ritter, an Austrian painter, received a letter from her husband, Hermann Ritter, an explorer and researcher who was living in Spitsbergen, an Arctic island north of Norway. He wrote, “Leave everything as it is and follow me to the Arctic” (11). Ritter is at first reluctant because, like most Europeans of her generation, she believed the Arctic to be a frozen, lonely place unfit for human habitation. However, she eventually sets off from Hamburg on a cruise ship that drops her at King’s Bay on Spitsbergen, from where she travels further north with her husband to a small hut on a point called Grey Hook on an uninhabited coastline. *A Woman in the Polar Night* was first published in Germany in 1938 as *Eine Frau erlebt die Polarnacht* and then in England in 1954. Ritter describes the polar night and the polar day in prose that Lawrence Millman, in his 2010 introduction, notes is “so quietly ecstatic and so lyrical that it would make most actual poets green with envy” (5). Ritter is at first appalled at the tiny, primitive shack, and the “ghastly country” with its unrelenting rain and fog, and a landscape of bleak stones surrounded by sea. The book is the story of her gradually awakening appreciation and love of the beauty and peace of the North. Her hope is that others will be inspired by her story and come to understand, as she does, the satisfaction of a life with few material possessions, dictated only by the changing moods of the seasons.

In the beginning, Ritter worries about starvation, scurvy, and lack of “real” food, but soon learns to cook and appreciate the seal and wild birds that her husband Hermann and their companion, Karl, shoot. As their stores of domestic food diminish and they come to depend completely on wild-game, hunting and the search for food become all-consuming interests and Ritter begins to realize how quickly they have developed a harmony and