

so too does this book contain some confusing “shifts in time and place, randomly [tacking] on accounts of other expeditions” in order to round out the frustratingly sparse records that Leigh Smith himself left behind (225). And what little we do learn about Leigh Smith as a man tends to confuse further: “his family’s dissent and his own illegitimacy,” coupled with his strange enduring obsession with his young nieces, don’t help to clarify his place in the larger context of late-nineteenth-century polar exploration as anything other than a “super-rich” tourist on the hunt for adventure (49, 226). Capelotti has painted an interesting portrait of an early extreme Arctic tourist, but ultimately Leigh Smith remains as remote and inaccessible as the islands he loved to explore.

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*Finding the Arctic: History and Culture Along a 2,500-Mile Snowmobile Journey from Alaska to Hudson’s Bay.* By Matthew Sturm. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2012. xiii + 258 pp., preface, introduction, acknowledgments, bibliography, index, color plates, maps.

The roster of books about the Arctic and Antarctic has grown in recent years by a nearly exponential degree. Concerns over climate change, melting glaciers, and the fate of charismatic creatures such as the polar bear, for example, have resulted in dozens of titles on the polar regions for both public and scientific audiences. That said, Matthew Sturm’s new book from University of Alaska Press, *Finding the Arctic*, stands apart as a welcome and wholly unique addition to the field.

In Spring 2007, Sturm, a snow scientist from Fairbanks, Alaska, led a group of fellow physicists, geologists, and adventurers on a snowmobile trek across Arctic Alaska and Canada. The officially named SnowSTAR expedition featured field work, research projects, data collection, and stops at several rural schools for scientific lectures. As the author makes clear, however, the trip’s real purpose was a quest for adventure and knowledge in one of the most mysterious places on the planet. The seven expedition members accordingly plotted their route to visit sites of cultural and historical significance.

As with most travel books, this one has a straightforward narrative structure, and each of its twelve chapters covers a different section of the trail. Among the many locations visited by the snowmobilers are the routes taken by explorers Alexander Mackenzie (1789) and John Franklin (1821); the spot where the Mad Trapper of Rat River was killed in a shootout

with Mounties in 1932; and the ruins of Fort Confidence, a Hudson's Bay Company outpost on Great Bear Lake. The author provides detailed but concise historical accounts of all of these places. Interspersed with the text are numerous sidebars—brief explanations mostly of scientific concepts and the physical geography of the Arctic.

Sturm is an engaging writer who explains scientific topics with a clarity not always found in popular science writing. He is at his best when describing the almost childlike glee—fully intended as a compliment—he and his fellow travellers experience when making even the smallest of discoveries. His tale of throwing a snow knife simply for the marvelous “sprong!” sound it makes when striking the snow cover is a delight.

As might be expected, the scientists often fixate on observing the natural environment and puzzling over such riddles as the distributive pattern of lakes and why a particular rock formation looks the way it does. As satisfying as those pursuits may be for both the snowmobilers and readers of Sturm's clear prose, the author wisely puts people at the centre of his book. He writes, “Looking back on the route we chose, the places we visited, and the trip's most memorable experiences, I now realize that to find the soul of the Arctic, one needs to look at the people of the Arctic—past, present, and future” (232). Sturm and his companions visit the tumbledown cabins of some early settlers whose names will be unknown to most readers. In describing their tactics for survival and then juxtaposing the past with those who live in the Arctic today, the author establishes a historical and cultural continuity based on the resilience and adaptability of humans. It is a point numerous writers have made in hundreds of books and articles—but Sturm is among the first to this reviewer's mind to make it in such a humble, experiential manner.

Although the men of the SnowSTAR expedition visited a number of schools along the way, Sturm writes very little about the students they met and educational programs they presented. It's too bad, because one suspects the children asked insightful questions as only children can. What happened when the scientists' observational knowledge met the students' experiential knowledge of Arctic life might have formed the basis for a riveting chapter. Its absence seems like a missed opportunity.

Richly illustrated with hundreds (yes, hundreds) of color photographs and maps, *Finding the Arctic* is that rarest of travel books—one that combines adventure, history, and science to create a portrait that both elucidates the place and leaves its mystery intact.

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