

**Yves Labrèche**, researcher and lecturer in anthropology, Collège universitaire de Saint-Boniface

***Encounters on the Passage: Inuit Meet the Explorers.* By Dorothy Harley Eber. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008. xxii + 168 pp. Appendices, illustrations, bibliography, notes, index.**

The Canadian Arctic is a land haunted by the past. The popular imagination swells with well-rehearsed narratives gleaned from the logbooks and journals of northern exploration: perilous journeys, ice-locked ships, the mysterious locations and remains of vanished expeditions. Amongst Inuit populations, an equally poignant remembrance of history prevails, with oral accounts of traditional culture and “the way things were” continuing to inform and impact everyday life. For centuries, these two brands of Arctic history—the written and the spoken—have remained largely independent of one another, circulating within their often exclusive social and cultural spheres. However, the recent push of scholarship to reconcile these mediums has resulted in the emergence of a new scholarly practice in which the multiple voices of indigenous communities are revealed and explored alongside the established historical canon.

Dorothy Harley Eber’s *Encounters on the Passage: Inuit Meet the Explorers* typifies this new trend. Having already demonstrated her proficiency in documenting and preserving Inuit oral tradition through such well-known works as *When the Whalers Were up North* and *Pitseolak: Pictures Out of My Life*, Eber now assumes the daunting task of using these narratives to reinvestigate the history of Inuit-explorer contact in the Canadian Arctic. Her work juxtaposes the widely recognized texts of Arctic explorers with a series of parallel Inuit accounts collected over twelve years of interviewing in various Nunavut communities. While the goal of the book is ultimately to foster a new and more holistic understanding of cross-cultural encounter, Eber’s narrative also contains a theoretical subtext that addresses the perseverance, reliability, and mutability of indigenous oral tradition. As one of her Inuit informants, Tommy Anguttitauruq, admitted during an interview, “Every time the stories are told, maybe they’re a little bit different; there’s a little bit added and maybe some things left out” (xviii). Questions regarding the past, present, and future of oral tradition as a medium for preserving historical narratives weigh heavily throughout this text.

Eber organizes the contents of her book in a roughly chronological fashion. Martin Frobisher's pioneering Arctic expeditions in search of gold and a strait to China (1576–1578) are examined at the outset, while the first successful navigation of the Northwest Passage by Roald Amundsen (1903–05) is addressed at the end. The narrative of events is greatly enhanced by the inclusion of an addendum with expedition timelines, maps, and dated routes of travel. From the opening descriptions of Frobisher's first, and ultimately disastrous, encounter with Baffinland Inuit, the reader is given a sense of the complexity and multiplicity of interpretations that often underlie textbook versions of the past. Frobisher's oft-cited descriptions of "native hostility" are critically revised through the introduction of Inuit voices—firsthand accounts of contact transmitted over generations—detailing the cultural misconceptions and general confusion surrounding the encounter between Inuit residents and newcomers. Re-reading encounters through the lens of these handed-down stories, one better understands the circumstances underlying such confrontation, especially the differences in physical appearance and worldview that ran so deep that each group had trouble acknowledging the other as human. As another Inuit informant, Inookie Adamie, told the author, "The old stories say that the Inuit were so terrified of these white men in rowboats that thinking they were not of this world, they started shooting arrows at them" (6).

As Eber enters into discussion of early nineteenth century Inuit encounters with the traveling parties of Sir William Edward Parry and Sir John Ross, the relationship of oral tradition to written history comes into focus. Many of the descriptions offered by both Inuit and sailors are surprisingly similar accounts of events. After listening to one Inuit informant relate how her ancestors first encountered explorers, the author notes how her interview was akin to "hearing essentially the same story John Ross told in his book, but from the Inuit point of view" (xiv). The charm of *Encounters on the Passage* lies primarily in the attention it gives to the cultural details that Inuit narratives contribute to the factual skeleton of history. There are humorous anecdotes about the mistaken uses of trade goods and the wonderment of coming face to face with entirely new traditions, expectations, and cosmologies. In equal measure, however, there are terrifying accounts of meeting gaunt and starving sailors, "doomed strangers in strange clothing" (xx), which are still, to this day, recited as children's ghost stories throughout the North.

The core of Eber's book addresses the lingering mystery surrounding the disappearance of the Franklin expedition and the numerous rescue ships sent to retrieve its ill-fated crew. This section of the work attests to

the potential of Inuit oral tradition to “fill in” the gaping lacunae in history books. Unlike preceding sections, there is little dialogue here between explorer and Inuit recordings of events; Franklin’s side of the tale is absent save for hints left by the expedition’s residual scatterings of sailors’ skeletons and ship artefacts. Inuit accounts of the expedition’s demise, on the other hand, are as numerous as they are chilling. In her review of Inuit oral history dealing with the Franklin tragedy, Eber concentrates on three main issues: the whereabouts of Franklin’s grave; the location of the two ships used in the expedition; and the crew’s last, desperate march across the Arctic. While many new avenues of explanation and possibility are opened up through these accounts, it is likely that most will lead to dead ends. After all, conflicting descriptions of recovered ship goods, ghostly sightings of sailors, and fireplace trails may pique the curiosity of readers but inevitably do little to lift the shroud of ambiguity that continues to hang over Franklin’s disappearance.

Ultimately, *Encounters on the Passage* is both a captivating and useful read for a general audience as well as those with more vested interests in Arctic history and the dynamics of cross-cultural encounter. It delights in its subtle details of Inuit contact with European explorers and traditions, and its use of oral narratives permits an intimate view of the ways that the early European presence became imprinted on the lives, imagination, and cultures of Arctic populations. Most important, however, the book acknowledges and helps preserve Inuit voices of the past, voices which succumb each day to new, challenging encounters with the demands of global society.

**Brendan Griebel**, Department of Anthropology, University of Toronto

*Arctic Spectacles: The Frozen North in Visual Culture, 1818–1875.* By **Russell A. Potter**. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007. ix + 258 pp. Illustrated.

This book is a visual delight. There have been too few books on Arctic history that deserve to be described as “lavishly illustrated.” The large format of *Arctic Spectacles* (8.5” x 10”) and the many colour illustrations place it in a league of its own. Its only real competitor in this area is Ann Savours’ *The Search for the North West Passage* (St. Martin’s Press, 1999), which, indeed, has even more pictures. However, the reproductions in Savours’ book are considerably smaller, thus diminishing their impact. In Potter’s volume, the reader is easily convinced that, for nineteenth-century