

**POLAR IMPERATIVE: A HISTORY OF ARCTIC SOVEREIGNTY IN NORTH AMERICA.** Shelagh Grant. 2010. Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre. xiv +540p, illustrated, maps. Hard cover. ISBN 978-1-55365-418-6. Canada and USA \$39.95, UK £26.50.

The jacket of Shelagh Grant's new book proclaims that it is based on 'thirty years of groundbreaking archival research.' In her introduction, she emphasises her 'large collection of photocopied archival documents', arranged in 'fifty-nine three-ring binders' in such a way as to permit 'easy verification of precise details.' *Polar imperative* covers the full span of time from prehistory to the present. Even though it deals only with Alaska, Greenland, and Arctic Canada rather than with the entire circumpolar region, it is obviously an unusually ambitious undertaking, one that would certainly require at least thirty years of industrious digging through archives and careful organisation of the resulting material.

Regrettably, the book has no bibliography, and so I began my assessment of it by examining the notes. It soon became apparent that almost all the archival material has already been used by Grant in her two earlier books, *Sovereignty or security? Government policy in the Canadian north, 1936–1950* (1988) and *Arctic justice: on trial for murder, Pond Inlet, 1923* (2002). Assuming that Grant began the research for *Sovereignty or security?* in the early 1980s, she does indeed draw on archival work that commenced thirty years ago. However, her examination of unpublished primary sources covers only a narrow slice of time (from the 1920s to the 1950s), and it was done mainly at Library and Archives Canada. Grant's Canadian research was supplemented by forays into American government records for the Second World War and Cold War periods. With a few minor exceptions, the rest of *Polar imperative* is based entirely on secondary sources.

From the professional historian's point of view, this fact certainly raises concerns about any claim the book might have to be an authoritative account. However, given the very broad scope of her subject, a book synthesising the existing secondary literature would be no small achievement. But Grant explains that she has excluded many secondary sources because they did not pass her 'rigid litmus test of accuracy and applicability.' This appears to mean that work by other scholars whose interpretations differ from those in her previously published books and articles is simply ignored. Grant makes no reference to several relevant works by historians including William Barr, Lyle Dick, John Sandlos, Kerry Abel, Kenn Harper, and the writer of this review. (For an earlier controversy over interpretation between Grant and one of these authors, see Grant 2005; Harper 2005).

In essence, what Grant has done is to enshrine her own, far from uncontested, views on twentieth-century Canadian Arctic history within an unusually broad narrative. Despite its allegedly hemisphere-wide geographical focus, the book is really about Canada and about various supposed threats to its northern sovereignty from the United States. Greenland

seems to have been included mainly because American military activities there during the Second World War and the Cold War mirrored the situation in Canada – the focus of Grant's *Sovereignty or security?* Most of the material on Greenland is taken from the histories by Finn Gad and Richard Vaughan rather than from such sources as the extensive collection of primary documents on Greenland sovereignty matters amassed by the late Trevor Lloyd and held at Trent University. For information about Danish exploration and colonisation efforts, Grant could also have drawn on the many articles (some of them in English) published by such journals as *Meddelelser om Grønland* and *Geografisk Tidsskrift*, and on the voluminous published records of the Eastern Greenland case (Permanent Court of International Justice, 1931–1933). But the expeditions to northern Greenland led by Ludvig Mylius-Erichsen, Knud Rasmussen, Lauge Koch and others are ignored, even though they were strongly motivated by sovereignty concerns. With regard to Canadian fears about Rasmussen's alleged plan to establish Danish sovereignty over Ellesmere Island, Grant ignores the evidence that this plan existed only in the imaginations of explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson and certain Canadian officials (see Lloyd 1979; Cavell and Noakes 2009).

Grant's treatment of the periods outside her core areas of interest is often detailed, but it is uneven and short on analysis. Her attempts to link past events with current developments such as climate change are sometimes thought-provoking, but many of the parallels she draws between past and present seem forced and unnecessary. For example, she remarks that the displacement of one Inuit group by another during the Little Ice Age was 'the first known challenge in the western hemisphere to the modern concept of Arctic sovereignty' (page 39). But how could people who did not know about, let alone subscribe to, this concept have challenged it? This attempt to judge events in Inuit history by present-day standards is surely ill-advised.

For the story of British exploration in the Arctic archipelago and the machinations of its chief promoter, John Barrow, Grant's main source is Fergus Fleming's *Barrow's boys*, a well-known and popular secondary work, but one in which several inaccuracies can be found. Grant echoes one of these when she writes that Barrow thought the North Pole 'was a rock or pile of rocks surrounded by open water' (page 102). Grant's account of nineteenth-century British naval exploration from John Ross to Leopold McClintock (who is incorrectly referred to as a whaling captain) is extensive, even describing Edward Parry's 1827 attempt to reach the North Pole from Spitsbergen, which took place outside the North American Arctic and had no bearing whatever on later sovereignty disputes. In contrast, the American expeditions led by Elisha Kent Kane, Isaac Hayes, and Charles Hall – on the basis of which the United States could potentially have made territorial claims in northern Greenland and Grinnell Land (the central portion of Ellesmere Island), though it did not choose to do so – are dealt with in a very cursory manner.

Instead, Grant focuses on Henry Howgate's abortive plan to establish an American 'colony' (as he called it) in Grinnell

Land. Howgate's plan was rejected by Congress, yet Grant hints, without substantiation from archival sources, that the expansionist spirit behind the American government's purchase of Alaska was turning towards the Canadian archipelago (page 172). Grant also suggests that British officials were deeply concerned about the Howgate plan, and that their fears helped to spur the official transfer of the Arctic islands to Canada in 1880. But as she points out, Colonial Office correspondence from the late 1870s shows that Britain would not have contested an American claim to Grinnell Land (pages 159, 160–168). In other words, the British government was willing to let the Americans have Grinnell Land if they wanted it. The only logical conclusion is that the Americans did *not* want it.

Continuing her theme of aggressive US expansionism, Grant argues that the expedition led by Donald MacMillan in 1925 was in fact, as Canadian officials feared at the time, part of a US government scheme to acquire lands in the Arctic archipelago. She alleges that Secretary of the Navy Curtis Wilbur (whom she erroneously calls Wilbur Curtis) enthusiastically supported the plan. Here her main source is American historian Nancy Fogelson's *Arctic exploration and international relations, 1900–1932*. A much more detailed and fully researched account of the MacMillan expedition is given in *Dangerous crossings: the first modern polar expedition, 1925* by John Bryant and Harold Cones. As Bryant and Cones demonstrate, Wilbur was never more than a reluctant supporter of MacMillan's plans (Bryant and Cones 2000: 31, 37–38), and ultimately neither he nor the State Department backed the idea of American expansion in the far north. Ottawa had claimed the Arctic as far north as the pole; the Americans did not recognise this claim as valid because the Canadians had not yet established effective occupation throughout the archipelago. But, according to their own criteria for Arctic sovereignty, the Americans could not have claimed any of the islands without themselves establishing occupation there. The fact that they never actually attempted such occupation certainly casts doubt on the theory that Washington long felt an expansionist lust for Canadian territory.

For Grant, however, US military activities in both the Canadian north and Greenland during the 1940s and 1950s are proof that the expansionist spirit of the nineteenth century lived on. She refers to the 'messianic drive' of the American high command and suggests that even though formal agreements with Canada and Denmark were worded so as not to violate the sovereign rights of those countries, both the Canadians and the Danes suffered a '*de facto* loss of sovereignty' over their northern territories (pages 282, 286, 290–291, 317, 319–320, 324). While there can be no doubt that the Americans often behaved in a high-handed, insensitive manner, their ultimate aim was to triumph over the Germans and later the Russians. A few individuals may have harboured visions of an Arctic empire, but most Americans wanted northern bases in order to advance their cause, not for the purpose of undermining other nations' territorial rights. Both Ottawa and Copenhagen were willing Cold War allies of the United States, but they took care to safeguard their own territorial interests.

Grant's understanding of the term '*de facto* sovereignty' is unusual. She states (without citing any source) that the term 'is usually applied in the negative, as in the case of a loss of economic, political or military control over a specific area by a sovereign nation' (page 13). However, the phrase '*de facto* loss of sovereignty' has no meaning in international law. The legal concept of sovereignty is absolute: a state either has sovereignty

over a given territory or it does not. Once sovereignty has been established, and recognised by other nations, it is not easily lost. For the US to have acquired sovereignty, it would have had to publicly demonstrate an intention to possess the far north, then exercise the powers of a sovereign state there without protest or opposition from Ottawa (amounting to an abandonment by Canada of its title and an admission that the region was a *terra nullius*, which the US was free to occupy). Quite obviously, this did not happen, nor did the American government seriously wish it to. The very fact that the Americans made formal diplomatic agreements with Canada about the north was an implicit, and important, acknowledgement of Canadian sovereignty. On the few occasions when US military personnel behaved in a way that was inconsistent with Canada's sovereign rights, Ottawa always protested firmly. Therefore, no matter how much the US presence may have grated on Canadians' national pride, there was no loss of sovereignty, *de facto* or otherwise.

Grant's secondary research on the Second World War and Cold War periods has not been comprehensively updated since the publication of *Sovereignty or security?* over twenty years ago. For example, one of her endnotes cites an 'unpublished manuscript' by Graham Rowley; the work in question was published in 1992. Grant takes some new material from websites maintained by private individuals, one of which is described in her note as 'the SAC [Strategic Air Command] website', although the site has no official standing. At the same time, she ignores such valuable US government publications as Kenneth Schaffel's *The emerging shield: the Air Force and the evolution of continental air defense, 1945–1960* (1991).

Grant's discussion of contemporary Arctic issues and her general conclusions have much to recommend them. Her call for greater Inuit participation in the decision-making process certainly cannot be faulted; indeed, her sympathy for the Inuit point of view is among the most attractive features of the book. Many of her prophecies about the future are reasonable, but others seem somewhat exaggerated and alarmist. For example, she suggests that if Canada does not soon take a more active role in protecting the northern environment, the United States may unilaterally step in as the guardian of both fragile Arctic ecosystems and the Northwest Passage, leading to yet another '*de facto* loss of Canada's sovereign authority' (pages 415, 447–448, 451). Surely there are enough real Arctic problems to worry about without concocting such scenarios.

Overall, the positive features of *Polar imperative* are outweighed by an inadequate grasp of international law, several unconvincing historical arguments, selective use of secondary sources, and by numerous factual errors. Few writers could cover such a broad subject without making occasional slips, and it might seem churlish for a reviewer to place too much emphasis on them, but even considering the ambitious scope of the book, the number of factual mistakes seems worryingly high. For example, Grant states that Iceland is 'not geographically located in the western hemisphere' (page 289) and one of her maps indicates that the western boundary of Canada's sector claim is marked by the 160th W meridian (page 243; the actual boundary is the 141st W meridian). In the Cold War chapter, she refers more than once to 'interceptor bombers', a type of aircraft unknown to military historians. Many similar examples could be cited. There are also numerous minor slips in place and personal names: Alexandra Fjord appears as Alexandria Fjord, British explorer Sherard Osborn as Sheard Osborne, Canadian scholar Donald McRae as Donald McCrae, and Dr William Wakeham (a civilian employee of the Canadian government)

as Captain William Wakeham, RN. The Icelandic assembly, the Althing, becomes the 'Alping' due to a false transliteration of the character indicating the 'th' sound in Icelandic. The ambition Grant shows in her attempt to produce a sweeping account of North American Arctic history is admirable, but *Polar imperative* is a seriously flawed book. (Janice Cavell, Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada/ Carleton University).

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