Iceland Imagined: Nature, Culture, and Storytelling in the North Atlantic by Karen Oslund (review)

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He presents provocative questions for environmental historians to ask concerning the Great Awakening, Reconstruction, and modern conservatism. Here, Fiege makes a brief but compelling case for thinking of W. E. B. Du Bois as a nature writer, challenging both traditional interpretations of Du Bois and the overwhelmingly white canon of nature writing.

Environmental scholars will surely read this book with great interest. It is also necessary reading for nonenvironmental historians interested in thinking about the American past in new ways. The book does not directly address questions of world history but could serve as a model for historians writing about environmental histories of major events anywhere in the world.

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Iceland Imagined: Nature, Culture, and Storytelling in the North Atlantic. By KAREN OSLUND. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011. 280 pp. $35.00 (cloth).

"*Iceland Imagined* examines how Iceland and the rest of the North Atlantic region, which includes Greenland, northern Norway, and the Faroe Islands . . . have been envisioned by travelers and observers from the eighteenth century to the time of the Second World War," Karen Oslund states in the introduction to this provocative book. But this is not her only goal, because the "book is also a cultural history of the North Atlantic as a European periphery. The North Atlantic, which was in the eighteenth century a marginalized region of the Danish-Norwegian kingdom, was gradually transformed—culturally, environmentally, and technologically—into modernity" (p. 7). *Iceland Imagined* deals therefore with both how the North Atlantic was perceived by observers coming from the outside and how the various areas in the region were slowly drawn into the "modern" world.

This is a tall order for a short book, because the North Atlantic, especially as it is defined here—stretching from Greenland's west coast to northern Norway—spans an immense geographic space that has a great variety of cultures. Moreover, it became a popular destination for European and American tourists and scientists in the period investigated in the book, and therefore Oslund has a large corpus of travel books to work with. She solves this challenge by focusing on a few fairly disparate themes—including travelers' visions of Icelandic

nature, accounts of Inuit hunting methods in Greenland, and language debates in the Faroe Islands—that together illustrate what can be called gradual "Europeanization" of the various societies in the region and the "domestication" of its natural environment. At the same time as the cultures of the perceived "savages" or "uncivilized natives" of the North were transformed into—or at least connected to—"Europe," the wild and exotic nature of the region was tamed by placing it into the scientific systems developed from the time of the European Enlightenment to the present.

Oslund's approach is clearly inspired by Edward Said's influential study *Orientalism* (cf. pp. x, 9–11). Using travel literature, she demonstrates how the outsiders ("the Europeans") constructed their image of the "Boreal" world. To them, the peoples of the region were primitive, poor, and simple, thus positioning the North in clear contrast with the "civilized West" or, in the nineteenth century thinking, with "Europe." Oslund convincingly demonstrates, however, that while what can be termed as the "Borealist" vision of the North was strikingly similar to the Orientalism analyzed by Said, these perceptions were not identical; "the North" was, after all, partly in "Europe" and the aim was always to bring it from the cold into the "European civilization."

Iceland Imagined can thus be read as a critical study of the construction of alterity; that is, of how "Europeans" defined themselves through their investigation—and imagination—of the "other." But it is striking though how uncritically Oslund accepts some of the fundamental premises of the Borealist eighteenth- and nineteenth-century discourses. Thus the basic geographic and cultural categories of the book—the "North Atlantic" and "Europe" on the one hand, and "the natives of the North Atlantic" and "the Europeans" on the other (cf. p. 155)—are not questioned in any systematic manner, in part, perhaps, because the North Atlantic looks equally exotic to her as it did to the explorers of the past. Travelers of today, she writes, feel the same "sense of confusion, of disorientation bordering on illness" as their eighteenth-century counterparts when they arrive in Iceland for the first time. "This confusion is one of the ways in which the traveler realizes that he or she has arrived in the borderlands, a place that is just slightly off the edges of the map of the known world" (p. 169). She observes similar exoticness in the Icelandic society. The modern appearance of Reykjavík is, for example, a mere façade, masking the Icelanders' obsession with their distant past: "The architecture and sounds of Reykjavík might be modern, but Icelandic history, as it is told in that country and elsewhere, is almost exclusively concerned with the remote past" (pp. 4–5), she writes, thus underlining the Icelanders' deviation from "European"

norms. Oslund revisits the theme of Iceland's otherness in the epilogue where she takes the Icelandic whaling policies and opinions of genetic research as an indication of the country's "traditionalism." The diversion from the hegemonic attitudes to whaling prompts Oslund to argue that "at least some of the North Atlantic natives are 'traditional whaling peoples'" (p. 169). She does not mention, however, that the connection between whaling and "traditionalism" is far from straightforward as the most aggressive whaling nation of today is hyper-modern Japan and that Icelandic authorities do not support whaling with reference to "tradition"—it would be difficult because Iceland has, in fact, a very short whaling history—but to the results of very modern scientific research on the number of whales in the Icelandic waters. So maybe these debates revolve around something other than a tension between "tradition" and "modernity."

An interesting example of how this desire of classifying Iceland and the North Atlantic in general as "the other," or of how the Borealist discourses structure the alterity of the "North," can be seen in a story which Oslund takes from a nineteenth-century description by the American poet and traveler Bayard Taylor of his visit to Iceland in 1874. One of the people Taylor met in Iceland was a seventeen-year-old Icelander by the name of Geir, who, to Taylor's amazement, proved to be fairly fluent in both English and German. Moreover, Geir had read some Shakespeare and was well versed in German and English romantic poetry. This struck both Taylor and Oslund as odd, because, as Oslund remarks, "Geir had never visited an English- or German-speaking country, in fact, had never left Iceland" (p. 126). Both fail to notice, however, that "the boy" was actually a student of the Reykjavík Latin School, where he prepared for university studies in Copenhagen. Some years later he actually completed a master's degree in linguistics at the University of Copenhagen and ended his career as the rector of his alma mater in Reykjavík. Geir Zoëga's story could, therefore, serve as an illustration of the multiple relations between a "periphery" and its "center" and how nineteenth-century Iceland was in fact tightly integrated into Danish "civilization." However, to both Taylor and Oslund, the boy's unexpected cultural proficiency highlights the imaginary lines between "the savage North" and "civilized Europe" rather than putting them into question.

This is not meant to imply that Karen Oslund is incorrect in her analysis. One can certainly find a number of inaccuracies in the book, but they are not of great consequence for her argument. (Laki is, for example, not "a glacier-covered volcano" and "the Skaftá mountain range" does not exist [p. 36]; the Hekla eruption of 1845 caused some

localized damage, but to claim that "much of the grazing land was once again destroyed, and the livestock died" [p. 50] is an overstatement; sheep were not brought to Iceland from the British Isles in the mid eighteenth century to repair the damage caused by the sheep scab plague of the 1760s [p. 69]—on the contrary, imported rams caused the plague; the statement that "building of highways and airports, only came with postwar foreign imports" [p. 102] is nonsensical; Tórshavn is not the smallest capital city in the world [p. 124]; Yann Gaos, the protagonist in Pierre Loti's novel *Pêcheur d'Islande* was not an Icelandic hero but a Breton fisherman [p. 130]; the letter ø is not a part of the Icelandic vowel set [p. 143]; the Act of Union between Denmark and Iceland did not expire in 1944 [pp. 13 and 149], rather Iceland abrogated the treaty.) My qualms with the book concern more what I see as Oslund's "Borealist" approach. Questions like "Where and what is Iceland? Is it part of 'Europe' or a technologically advanced and prosperous part of the 'third world'?" (pp. 6–7) frame her narrative, as they are posed in the introduction and repeated in a different guise in the epilogue (p. 169). The answers to these questions can only be, of course, based on subjective choices, because categories like "European" and "the third world" are human conventions rather than facts of life. Similar to "race" or "nations," analytical categories of this sort can serve as the basis for people's self-identification, but sometimes they are thrust on groups not to formulate their own knowledge of themselves but rather to explain the classifiers' own perceptions or prejudices. The Borealist discourses studied in *Iceland Imagined* are of the latter type; that is, the upper- and middle-class observers were not interested in how the Icelanders themselves perceived the world, because they came to experience the "exotic," and on the basis of that they constructed Iceland as the "other." Too often, *Imagining Iceland* sounds remarkably similar, and thus it reads not as a critical deconstruction of the Borealism of the past, but rather as a modern contribution to it.

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Faith and Fatherland: Catholicism, Modernity, and Poland. By BRIAN PORTER-SZŰCS. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. 496 pp. $55.00 (cloth).

With the exception of Italy, perhaps no other nation-state is more closely connected with Roman Catholicism today than Poland, and