

Frédéric Regard, ed. *The Quest for the Northwest Passage: Knowledge, Nation and Empire, 1576–1806*.

Empires in Perspective 19. London: Pickering and Chatto, 2013. x + 190 pp. \$99. ISBN: 978-1-84893-270-8.

In the sixteenth century, Europeans began looking for the Northwest Passage. One after another failed, but they kept at it for centuries. This volume brings together essays devoted almost exclusively to what Britons, and later Americans, wrote about their search. Six of the nine pieces cover the period before 1633, and the last three range from the late 1760s to 1806. Throughout, the authors are as concerned with culture as with geography. All focus on the north because, as Sophie Lemerrier-Goddard and Frédéric Regard put it in the introduction, the “Arctic was where a specifically British ethos was born, the model of a heroic, sublime masculinity, in a world becoming more and more complex as the British Empire was reaching its zenith” (1).

Each author explores the ways that knowledge about these voyages circulated as well as the ventures themselves. This strategy is familiar to scholars of overseas expeditions, especially to those who analyze literary texts. Indeed, one of the most important figures in the field, Mary Fuller, has a chapter here. Characteristically excellent, her contribution focuses on northern voyages in the collections of the younger Richard Hakluyt, notably the second edition of his *Principal Navigations*, originally published in three volumes in London from 1598 to 1600.

The essays here reward close reading. Among the most penetrating are Lemerrier-Goddard’s study of the history of Sir Martin Frobisher’s last journey in 1578 written by George Best; Marc-Antoine Mahieu and Mickaël Popelard’s analysis of the too-often ignored texts associated with the English captain John

Davis in the 1580s, which includes a dazzling analysis of the list of Inuit words in Hakluyt's printed version of one of the narratives; I. S. MacLaren's close study of the also frequently neglected Thomas James, whose narrative contains descriptions of cold that can make a reader feel the frostbite; and Nathalie Zimpfer's reading of the narrative of Samuel Hearne, who went looking for the northern ocean from 1769 to 1772, a time when Anglo-American relations were fracturing. The authors' emphasis on the contents and circulation of texts, which can be found in each essay, will be of use to those who already know a fair amount about the search for the passage. Readers interested in new studies of empire, a topic of surpassing popularity among scholars of the English Renaissance at the moment, will similarly benefit from analyses trained on a large swath of the imperial horizon.

For all of its strengths, the volume does not quite live up to its potential. Most crucially, the book lacks maps. This is unfortunate since the Northwest Passage appeared on European maps as a geographical reality for centuries, even though no European explorer could find it. Maps circulated in books and individually and might have been seen by more people than those who could read the texts analyzed in this collection. For all of their errors, those mapmakers were basically right: the passage does exist, but it was frozen over during the centuries explored by the authors here. Further, there are gaps here that are hard to understand. There is no chapter on Henry Hudson, who made four attempts to find a water route from England to East Asia and likely died in or near the rather massive body of water known as Hudson Bay, which Europeans could enter via Hudson Strait. And what about the long period between the 1630s and the late 1760s? Were there no European efforts to find the passage or any books circulating in Britain or on the Continent that kept knowledge of these ventures alive?

Anthologies work best when they have some self-awareness. This is less a book about the quest for the Northwest Passage than an exploration of imperial themes evident in close reading of narratives. Why, one wonders, is this a topic of such interest now? Further, seven of the eleven scholars who contributed work here studied at the *École Normale Supérieure* in Paris. Did that shared experience shape the authors' way of approaching these English texts about northern expeditions? The links between culture and geography continue to require explication.

PETER C. MANCALL

University of Southern California