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Extreme North – A Cultural History

*Die Erfindung des Nordens.
Kulturgeschichte einer
Himmelsrichtung*

review

This sweeping history of ‘the North’ explains its iconic status as an enduring source of inspiration for generations of adventurers, poets, writers, musicians and politicians.

Extreme North – A Cultural History traces the ideological history of the concept of the North through the centuries to the present day, with numerous references to British explorers and writers, including Auden and Waugh. The book covers a wide range of material relating to the North, from the *Edda* to the Ossian case, through Wagner and the pan-Germanic movement, to Ikea and ‘hygge’, and also includes chapters on the Inuit people and Iceland. Bernd Brunner’s deft handling of his material ensures *Extreme North – A Cultural History* is as entertaining as it is informative.

Brunner’s book offers an overview of differing historical perceptions of the North. It has been variously regarded as a no-man’s land of ice and nothingness, a place posing challenges to mankind (the North as the American second frontier, after the West, with the third frontier being the moon), as a rich source of myths and fairy-tales, and as the ultimate home of man as adventurer. The North is associated with human qualities such as courage, honour, strength and endurance. The author explains how the North came to be pitted against the concepts of the South and the Orient as places of ease, comfort and

enjoyment. Whereas the North is perceived as a character-building region of physical challenge, the South is associated with decadence and the development of the mind. Expeditions to Greenland, Iceland and the Arctic became widely popular throughout the nineteenth century. Eventually, from the end of the nineteenth century onwards, this fetishisation of the North led to a pan-Germanic cult, where all people north of the Alps were considered as a single superior ethnic group in contrast to the corrupt and self-indulgent Southerners, including Jews.

The cultural pull of the North continues to this day, with the Scandinavian countries becoming trailblazers for modern democratic society. We persist in maintaining a dualistic sense of the North – on the one hand we have the image of the tall, strong, blond, traditional Nordic hero, commandeered by neo-fascist groups, the popular ‘Game of Thrones’ TV series and Neil Gaiman’s fantasy novels, and on the other, the cosy perception of the Scandinavian countries as a place of happiness, ‘hygge’ and Ikea.

This is a brilliant, wide-ranging book which unpacks a multi-faceted and enthralling subject in ways that will resonate with a contemporary readership.

about the author

Bernd Brunner, born in 1964, has been writing critically acclaimed and highly entertaining books for more than ten years, dealing with topics that inspire a mixture of scientific investigation and cultural inquiry. His books have been sold in numerous countries.

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