

## BOOK REVIEWS

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*Northern Lights: The Arctic Scots.*

By Edward J. Cowan. Pp. xv, 412.

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I met the late Edward J. Cowan in person only once, but it was memorable. In January 2017 I was visiting Dumfries and Galloway for a mixture of holiday and research and I spent an evening in the bar of the Ken Bridge Hotel outside New Galloway, on the banks of the Water of Ken. There were dark tartan carpets on the floors and a burger called ‘The Covenanter’ on the menu. I mentioned to the landlord that I was researching Robert Heron, an obscure and uncelebrated Scottish Enlightenment writer and translator who was born in New Galloway in 1764. The landlord told me that one of his regulars was a historian: ‘he’s the one to ask about that kind of thing’. Half an hour later the landlord nodded towards a grey-haired man who had sat down at the bar. I approached and introduced myself. As he turned, I recognised that this grey-haired man was the retired Chair of Scottish History and Literature at the University of Glasgow and one of very few people to have published on Robert Heron. He was cautious at first, probably unconvinced that it was pure chance that I, probably then the world’s only other Robert Heron scholar, had just happened to bump into him at his local. But soon he showed his famous generosity, curiosity, charisma, and ability to find a witty turn of phrase, and in the months and years after we continued to correspond about our shared interests. I helped a little with his edition of Heron’s private diary, which first appeared in the *Review of Scottish Culture* and was then republished by the European Ethnological Research Centre. He helped a lot with an article about Heron’s Arabian translations that I was writing for *Eighteenth-Century Studies*.

It is a broad generalisation, but whereas I was interested in showing how Scots like Heron had been involved in the darker aspects of British colonial conquest and empire, Cowan took a different approach. He wanted to ensure that hitherto overlooked Scots could proudly take their deserved places in history and, where appropriate, to celebrate their remarkable achievements and significant roles. This is certainly the thrust and contribution of Cowan’s richly detailed and highly readable *Northern Lights: The Arctic Scots*. The book aims to shed light

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on Scots' major role in nineteenth-century Arctic exploration, highlighting that many important figures in that important process came from Scotland (even, specifically, from Dumfries and Galloway). Cowan's motivation is to correct the fact that these Scottish Arctic explorers are little known and their contributions overlooked by historians. This includes not simply focusing on the major leaders of expeditions, namely John Ross, James Clark Ross, John Richardson, and John Rae. Cowan also estimates the presence of lower-ranked Scots on famous voyages: he guesses, for example, that those with the surnames Borland, Bruce, and Crawford aboard the *Dorothea* bound for the North Pole in 1818 were 'probably Scots' (p. 53). There is also a revealing line on Captain James Cook 'whose father was a Scottish farm-servant from Ednam in the Scottish Borders, a detail that most of his biographers ignore' (p. 6). Indeed, contra a tendency in histories of Arctic exploration 'to render Scots invisible by representing them all as English', Cowan seeks to 'restore national identities to all of those whose true origins have been obscured' (p. 17).

Some of the book's most memorable passages are when he engages vigorously with scholarship that has misrepresented Scottish cultural history in this way. One study is described as 'hogwash' (p. 4), and three pages are dedicated to a robust scholarly takedown of existing research on John Ross, with particular attention to a 'clueless academic' who makes 'elementary mistakes that would be unworthy of undergraduates' (pp. 49–50). Cowan is especially critical of scholarship that seems to be indefensibly chauvinist in its thrust and wording, for example about the 'low' cultures of Scotland. There is a cultural pride here: rather than describing Ross as merely 'of Scottish descent' as it is put elsewhere, Cowan asserts Ross' Scottishness, including in terms of his manner and sense of humour.

But was there something distinctively Scottish about the Arctic voyages and voyagers described in the book? Cowan explores the double meaning of the *Arctic Scots* of the title, referring both to those Scottish people who visited the Arctic and also to a kind of superimposition of Scottish cultural geography onto the peoples who lived there. Scottish explorers certainly brought specifically Scottish (even south-west Scottish) attitudes and prejudices. Ross was under the misapprehension that there was an Inuit king or chief who lived in a large stone house in a quasi-feudal social arrangement. Cowan explains that this 'was sheer nonsense, the wishful thinking of a Scottish patrician who was engaged in building himself a fine new mansion in Stranraer' (p. 182). Ross had also named the indigenous people he encountered 'Arctic Highlanders', making a direct comparison to the Gaelic-speaking communities in northern and western Scotland, and noting the customs and characteristics that Greenlanders and Scottish Highlanders apparently held in common. This Scottish-centric naming did not end there. Like the contemporary New Caledonia and Nova Scotia in Canada, not to mention the Douglas Fir tree, Cowan mentions many, many examples of Scots claiming and naming Arctic geographical features and places (including places of obvious cultural importance to the Inuit) after Scottish places or people. The powerful Scottish politicians

Henry and Robert Dundas were particularly well represented in Arctic toponymy ('Sycophancy could prove a useful, if tedious, tool!' p. 30).

Cowan also argues that, notwithstanding 'appalling atrocities' (p. 5), 'arrogant assumptions' (p. 7), 'regrettable' exploitation (p. 17) and 'certain racial assumptions' (p. 179), these Scots were, on the whole, more open-minded and less violent than other British explorers. They were, Cowan suggests, inspired by ethnological and geographical interest more than conquest. Scots 'networked with the existing inhabitants' (p. 8), learnt from them, and understood their relationship as one of mutual dependence. This characterisation is partly supported by Cowan's interesting telling of the story and role of the Inuk interpreter John Sacheuse. However, Chapter 7, which focuses not on a specific voyage or explorer but on the relationship between the Scots and the Inuit, does not really support the idea of benevolence and interdependence. The picture is rather one of patrician – even supremacist – ethnological curiosity, and Cowan describes various techniques the Scots used to maintain their superiority and to inspire awe and fear in the indigenous people they encountered.

This becomes significant in light of Cowan's explanation that his approach is 'to view the Greenlanders and the Inuit through the eyes of Ross and his successors as they perceived the peoples of the Arctic' (p. 31). Cowan is humble about his limited knowledge of the indigenous cultures, languages, and naming conventions of the Arctic and accepts that his perspective is necessarily partial. For an alternative perspective on the encounter, we 'must await much needed studies written by the remarkable Inuit themselves' (p. 31).

A major element of Cowan's research seems to have entailed reading the many contemporarily published accounts and autobiographies of the Scottish Arctic explorers and then retelling their stories in his own vivid and clear language. It helps that Cowan is an extremely skilled storyteller. His descriptions of some of the Scots' first sustained interactions with the Inuit, for example, contain imagination-stirring references to flute performances, Shetland fiddlers, and a proto-international football match between the Kalaallit and the Scots. He draws out the role of Scottish musicians both for encouraging bonding with newly encountered indigenous people and for keeping up spirits among the crew, including on slow journeys through ice. Cowan also shows his eye for stirring detail when he shares the voyagers' packing lists – including large quantities of snuff, red thread, cowrie shells, and pickled walnuts. He communicates clearly how ambitious these voyages were: not just looking for an elusive sea passage from the Atlantic to the Pacific in difficult conditions, but also mapping islands, taking soundings, exploring the sea bed with new instruments, and conducting considerable ethnographic research. The author wears lightly the amount of historical material he has ambitiously amassed and arranged so that the reader can digest it. The whole reading experience is leavened with poetic turns of phrase, surprising biographical details and bizarre episodes. Cowan has an unmistakable style which at times approaches that of a stand-up comedian, with

entire paragraphs apparently designed as the set-up to an amusing punchline closing sentence, liberally punctuated with exclamation marks. It helps, too, that the many colour illustrations, including portraits, satirical prints, and photographs of relevant locations, are extremely high quality.

What about the bigger picture? In lieu of a conclusion that might organise the foregoing mass of historical detail into a series of overall arguments, the final chapter has a post-script or epilogue tone that summarises the legacies of the various individuals the book has highlighted. Here and elsewhere in the book Cowan occasionally spells out, very helpfully, the particular achievements, contributions, mysteries, legacies, or even major misjudgements of the men involved. Ross, he reckons, 'has some claim to be remembered as one of the greatest "Arctics" of the nineteenth century, just on the crazy side of right and the right side of crazy' (p. 345). In terms of putting these Scottish individuals and their remarkable roles on the historical map, Cowan's final work is a memorable and important contribution.

*Phil Dodds*

*Lund University, Sweden*