



Imagining the Supernatural North

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IMAGINING THE SUPERNATURAL NORTH. Edited by Eleanor Rosamund Barraclough, Danielle Marie Cudmore, and Stefan Donecker. Edmonton: Polynya Press (University of Alberta Press), 2016. 328 pp., index. \$29.95 (softcover). ISBN: 9781772122671.

The introduction to IMAGINING THE SUPERNATURAL NORTH invokes Margaret Atwood's "True North," and in some ways this book is a long and colorful coda to that definitive essay. It explores the notion of the North as the realm of the supernatural within the European tradition from antiquity to the present day.

This is a North populated by gods, witches, real and imagined invaders, allegorical figures, monsters from the margins of maps, spirits, demons, and trolls. It has no firm geographical boundaries. In some cases, the concept of the North maps on to current understandings of the Arctic. At other times it is instead a cardinal direction, or a relative position. Ideas about supernatural aspects of the North diverged widely in the Western tradition, but the North remained the blank space on the map, an uncanny, hostile, but alluring place that proved a convenient screen for projecting hopes and fears, or acting as a foil for European conditions.

Sixteen scholars from twelve countries across Europe, North America, and Australia explore particular instances of the North's symbolic geography. Chapters proceed chronologically from Jewish lore and ancient Greek proverbs and myths; through views of monsters, spirits, and women in medieval and the early modern period; to nineteenth-century travelers' tales and naturalists' accounts; to modern reimaginings of Northern motifs in science fiction, black metal music, and identity politics.

Actors in each of these times show their own "*imaginatio borealis*," an imagined North. The ancient world looked North for invaders, gods, or intermediaries be-

tween gods and mortals who were both and neither. Medieval cosmology traded in that ancient dichotomy for more negative monsters and demons, and looked for their qualities in people—especially women. Witches and demons disappeared during the Enlightenment, replaced by an image of the North as a romantic landscape or a fatal beauty to be conquered. In the modern period, the idea of the North expresses a longing for the paranormal and mysterious, the spiritual, or the uncorrupted.

In some ways this book isn't about the North at all. While it turns on that symbolic geography, it roves over a variety of European topics in literature, history, and anthropology. Chapters review the theological/medical view of women held by medieval academics; the turn of sagas set in Greenland from realistic to fantastic landscapes and people; a forlorn dream-story by Johannes Koepler, published posthumously; and the appearance of Nordic supernatural themes in black metal and death metal. Of particular note is the last chapter, by Erica Hill, who takes on the implicit assumption that shamanism equals religious practice in the North. She argues that the Western focus on shamanism constructs a myth of its own, obscuring the beliefs and ritual practices of hunters and their wives that were the majority of religious activity in the contact-period circumpolar North.

If the category of the North as seen in this book seems sometimes too à la Lakoff, in the end it shows in what a variety of ways we can project otherness on a conveniently remote geography. Perhaps consciousness of the shadowy and persistent images our culture bears of the North can help us see more clearly the rapidly changing Arctic that is becoming our reality.

Notes and bibliographies throughout, and a really excellent index at the end, round out a good scholarly work. It belongs on the shelf of polar collections alongside *Arctic Discourses* and other works on construction of the North in Western thought. It will also fit well into collections on the history of Western science, literature, or religion.

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