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BOOK REVIEW

Science, environment and empire on the frozen continent

Adrian Howkins: Frozen empires: An environmental history of the Antarctic Peninsula. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, 286pp, $35 HB

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In the century since Great Britain made the first formal claim of sovereignty over the peninsula region of the Antarctic, fears that each of the now seven claimants to various pie-shaped pieces of the continent is "not doing enough" to justify their contested (and, in the case of Britain, Argentina and Chile, overlapping) territorial claims rise with predictable certainty. Just last year, for example, the Australian government was "being warned Australia is in danger of losing its position as an Antarctic leader, as well as its claim over the frozen continent, unless it maintains funding for its scientific research program" (Norman 2016). As Adrian Howkins outlines in *Frozen Empires: An Environmental History of the Antarctic Peninsula*, scientific research activities played the same role in the 1980s, when British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher celebrated the fact that British scientists working in Antarctica had discovered the "hole" in the ozone layer, thereby playing a central role in "the first measures to control pollution on a global scale" while simultaneously "strengthen[ing] Britain's presence in Antarctica" (198). In Antarctica, science and political power are mutually reinforcing. This, as Howkins points out, is no accident. Even before the so-called freezing of sovereignty claims by the 1959 Antarctic Treaty, science and the production of environmental knowledge became the central supporting pillar of political power over the continent. It is now taken for granted within each of the countries which make historic claims to Antarctic territory that scientific activity is a basic requirement for, and justification of, participation in the Treaty system.

The nature of this symbiotic relationship, and its historical development, however, is rarely questioned. There remains very little recognition—both in

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popular imaginations and in the scholarly literature—of the normative and political power of the production of scientific environmental knowledge, in Antarctica and elsewhere. Antarctic science is valorized and often mythologized as being for "the good of humanity." While this is certainly true, as Howkins readily acknowledges, this characterization also serves to perpetuate and reinforce current political power structures that privilege certain players over others. In *Frozen Empires*, Howkins offers a timely and much-needed intervention on this topic.

The book traces the volatile political history of the Antarctic Peninsula, which is, by any measure, the most politically contested region of the continent. Since the early twentieth century, the region has been the site of overlapping and contested territorial claims by Chile, Argentina and Britain, which have—more than once—erupted into violence. Howkins' detailed study of the history of Latin-American involvement on the continent, based on a formidable depth and breadth of archival research, is a significant contribution in itself. *Frozen Empires* goes a considerable way toward correcting the gap in English-language histories of Antarctica, which tend to privilege English-language sources and perspectives or focus solely on the Falklands War. Instead, Howkins offers a close look at Chile and Argentina's long relationship with the continent from discovery until the 1990s, and how different cultural understandings, changing domestic political regimes and international developments meant that the two countries were at times allies, but mostly competitors, in Antarctic affairs, the broad consequences of which were to weaken both countries' claims against that of Great Britain.

But while the book focuses particularly on the tense relationship between these three claimants, it also makes a much broader contribution to understandings of the Antarctic continent and the history of empire and decolonization more generally. In Howkins' detailed study of Chile and Argentina's contested and conflicted relationships with Antarctica, he clearly and convincingly outlines how Latin-American "environmental nationalism" emerged as a direct challenge to British imperial claims to "environmental authority." While Chilean and Argentinian claims were based on specific national, cultural and geographical links to the region, British claims to Antarctic territory were—and still are—based on the more general assertion that British abilities to understand, explain and protect the Antarctic environment justify and even necessitate continued political control of the region (to the exclusion of those countries who do not possess such authority). As one Chilean General pithily observed, "In Antarctica the weapon is science…there is a war for dominion and the weapon is science" (142). In the end, as Howkins traces in detail, this idea of "environmental authority" won the war, and won it convincingly. In the process, "science became a normative activity" (9) and continues to protect and reinforce political power structures. Unlike the ice sheets, empire is not yet "melting" in Antarctica.

Frozen Empires thus offers a direct challenge to the ongoing assumption that Antarctic history exists outside of histories of empire. The 1959 Antarctic Treaty, which commits signatories to the pursuit of "peace and science," did not signal, as is widely assumed, the decolonization of the continent, but its continued imperial domination. By helping to place Antarctica back into its rightful place in imperial history, Howkins adds to the small but significant body of work challenging the

traditional heroic narrative of Antarctic history pioneered by gender studies scholars such as Bloom (1993). In addition, *Frozen Empires* also offers a new case study that clearly links environmental history to the study of diplomacy, empire and decolonization. In doing so, Howkins answers Dorsey's 2013 call for diplomatic historians to "go green" and address international environmental treaties and international environmental movements. The "best book," Dorsey wrote, "would be one that dug into both the formal diplomacy and the powerful cultural forces at work, not to mention the science and economics at the root of the issue" (37). In *Frozen Empires*, Adrian Howkins does all of that, and more.

Frozen Empires also deliberately complicates the narrative of Antarctic science as a universal and uncontroversial good. As Howkins unequivocally puts it, "Antarctic science has almost always been political, and stark divisions between 'good' science and 'bad' politics are erroneous. This is not to say that scientists or policymakers have not believed in this distinction, but these beliefs attest to the rhetorical power of science as a political tool" (209). Within this wry acknowledgment that some scientists, convinced of the apolitical nature of their work, might take exception to his arguments, we also find Howkins' significant contribution to current political debates. In the context of growing alarm around climate change, and Antarctica's central place as both a symbol and victim of global warming, oversimplifications and historical mythmaking are both unhelpful and potentially damaging. *Frozen Empires* outlines the historic role of science and environmental authority on the Antarctic continent in perpetuating empire, and reinforcing current political power structures. The book sharply illuminates the naivety of the belief that science exists outside of politics. It is surely our collective failure—as scientists and historians—to acknowledge and understand this assumption that, at least in part, explains the failure of many to anticipate, and mitigate against, the politics—as opposed to the science—of climate change. *Frozen Empires* demonstrates, in short, the significant role that historians can and should play in environmental politics.

References

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