

Culture



Kevin MCMAHON, *Arctic Twilight: Reflections on the Destiny of Canada's Northern Land and People*, Toronto: James Lorimer and Company, 1988. Canada 16.00 (paper), 29.95 (cloth)

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Kevin MCMAHON, *Arctic Twilight: Reflections on the Destiny of Canada's Northern Land and People*, Toronto: James Lorimer and Company, 1988. Canada 16.00 (paper), 29.95 (cloth).

by Gurston Dacks
University of Alberta

This is a passionate, eloquent, personal book. The twilight it reports is the twilight of a people — the Inuit of Canada's North as McMahon encountered them while travelling as a journalist in the Arctic. McMahon records the multiple and nuanced layers of the destruction of the Inuit way of life. His account of the impacts of non-Inuit religion, disease, commerce and public administration is graphic, angry and compelling, but reveals little new to readers familiar with the North. More interesting are his comments on the subtle and fundamental ways in which non-Inuit culture and science have undercut Inuit epistemology and social integration. McMahon's vision is of a people irreparably damaged:

"The repressive weight of time and history are crushing the original (Inuit) understanding of nature... Mythology, through which the past was continually recreated in the present, is disappearing.... The apocalyptic Inuit are experiencing... is the fiery disintegration of the love between members of the community, between the old and the young, husbands and wives, parents and children; and, encompassing all, between the people and the land."

McMahon lays much of the contemporary blame for this desperate situation at the feet of two villains — the military-sovereignty nexus and television. He argues that the military historically drew a great many Inuit off the land, often away from the families, the most peripheral members of a marginalized society. He also argues that television has sundered the generations of Inuit, creating a youth who are unreflectively "aggressive, acquisitive, fashionable and egoistic", all traits which are grossly unsuited to living successfully on the land and for reproducing in the future the values and mythology which sustained the Inuit for so many generations in the past.

The book reports a second, larger twilight than that of the Inuit.

Indeed, as the argument unfolds, the Inuit become less the subject of the discourse and more the springboard for the reflections referred to in the book's subtitle. Ultimately, the Inuit appear, like the canaries once used in coal mines, as the most vulner-

able among us who demonstrate, by being the first to succumb, the morbidity of our practices. The evil which has doomed the Inuit — and us — is Progress, the modernity which has torn us apart from nature, from morality, from one another. In this sense, the twilight which has come most palpably to the Arctic is the twilight of humane civilization globally.

Arctic Twilight has significant strengths. The prose style, vigorous and engaging, will attract a popular audience, the intended readership. The presentation of McMahon's northern experiences and encounters is vivid and thought-provoking. Readers may not agree with all of the inferences which he draws from these experiences and from his use of an eclectic array of sources, such as Northrop Frye and Marshall McLuhan, to illuminate the global implications of the Inuit experience. The author's discussion of the North as a case study or alarm for the rest of us does not advance our thinking about such topics as global militarization, environmental degradation, consumer materialism and the cultural impact of mass-audience, commercial communications. However, McMahon's excursions in lateral thinking do challenge readers to think in new ways about the North.

They would be better equipped to do so if McMahon's jermiad were better balanced. The fate of the Inuit offers much to lament.

However, the author is so driven by his dismay that he dismisses positive developments. Their aboriginal claim may give the Inuit a very substantial degree of control over land use and wildlife management. With the settlement of the claim approaching, division of the N.W.T. will revive as a political issue. Should it occur, it will backstop the claim and position the Inuit to manage their relations with the forces of modernity with a strength that most peoples of the fourth world can only envy. It may be that the claim settlement and division will fail to live up to their promise. However, merely to dismiss them without substantive discussion is to deny the reader information necessary to understanding the future of the Inuit.

It may be that McMahon's northern experiences blinker his understanding. While it is impossible to comprehend the North without experiencing its small communities, the North is equally obscure to observers who, like McMahon, have not also experienced the politics of the territorial capitals and of Ottawa. McMahon has fingered only some of the pieces of the puzzle. McMahon's lack of balance may result from selective reporting, a possibility suggested by his penchant for exaggeration. His observation, which reflects his abhorrence of the mental-

ity which promotes sovereignty through the expansion of armed excess, that "...the (Canadian) military is given a *carte blanche* accorded to no other department" (147) must astonish observers of the last twenty years of military spending. McMahon's assertion that "our society refuses to seriously question, consider or debate the social change inherent in new technologies" (238) can only leave the reader wondering what he reads.

In the end, *Arctic Twilight* tells us more about Kevin McMahon than about the Inuit. The immediacy of his anecdotes and the breadth of his reflections merit reading, but the prudent reader will want to leaven the heady effect of this book with more authoritative works such as Hugh Brody's *Living Arctic*.

Regna DARNELL, *Edward Sapir: Linguist, Anthropologist, Humanist*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990. 480 pages, U.S. \$29.95 (cloth).

by Dick Preston
McMaster University

Sapir is anthropology's one generally acknowledged genius. The scholarly events surrounding the centenary of his birth make clear his continuing value for us. Several collections of papers and the first of the 16 volumes of *The Collected Works of Edward Sapir* have already been published; others are at various stages of preparation. During our planning for the Centenary Conference in Ottawa, Regna Darnell commented that we would soon know more about Sapir than any other anthropologist. She was right, and she has made a major contribution to this fact.

This important book provides the many Sapir enthusiasts, both present and future, with the full context of Sapir's myriad activities. None of us knew even most of this context, and so the book serves to both broaden and correct our impressions. For this reason it is prerequisite for our various further efforts in understanding, extending, testing and otherwise working out the wonderfully wide scope of Sapir's examples and implications for our continuing intellectual inquiry.

Regna Darnell has put together a full record of what we know, positively, about Sapir's life, with special focus on his professional relationships. This is no mean feat, since it requires critical facility in the wide range of interests and activities that Sapir engaged in during a very full and intense life. Few

anthropologists have the intellectual breadth to undertake such a study; Darnell has specialist expertise in linguistics, ethnography, and institutional history, and has drawn on a wide range of personal communication, unpublished material, and her own years of critical thought on Sapir's work and place in the professionalization of anthropology.

The book, then, covers its very broad scope with a purpose and an organizational scheme and scholarly expository style that are very much Darnell's. Twenty-one chapters follow a life course sequence, with the modification of some parallel chapters covering different career interests that were worked out at approximately the same time.

His first 17 years are given a very brief but interesting overview. Somewhat more detail is given for his undergraduate and graduate years at Columbia, beginning with a heavy concentration on languages and a second sustained interest in music, apparently heading for a career in Germanic philology. Then, in his third year, he tried an introductory anthropology course, and simultaneously, began a two year graduate seminar with Boas, completing it and his MA at the end of the fourth year, with a summer's fieldwork on Wishram Chinook. Darnell gives us a review of his thesis, on one of Herder's essays. The fifth year was doctoral work in languages, and the summer was a return to Washington and fieldwork on Takelma for his dissertation. The sixth year was dedicated to broadening his general anthropological competence (with the exception of physical anthropology, which apparently never interested him).

At this point, Darnell begins the finely and fully detailed history of Sapir's professional career, which I can scarcely summarize in this review. The four page table of contents will give you a good sense of what is covered. Darnell has done a very successful job of writing a history of Sapir's professional career, and begins, and then leaves to others, the more subjective side of intellectual biography, and the further working out of the vistas he showed us. What is missing, for me, is the sense of his underlying optimism about the potential of excellent ideas to give humankind an understanding and amelioration of their world - which Sapir sustained through the early hopes and later discouragements of many unrealized or failed collaborations with other intellectually excellent people; a few during fifteen years in Ottawa, many more during six years at Chicago, and the final eight years at Yale.

After several others had thought the task too formidable, Regna Darnell took on a tough job, did a