

Ísleifsson, Sumarliði and Daniel Chartier (eds.): *Iceland and Images of the North*, Québec: Presses de l'Université du Québec 2011, 611 p.

The extensive anthology *Iceland and Images of the North* is edited by Icelandic historian Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson (University of Iceland) in collaboration with literary scholar Daniel Chartier (Université du Québec à Montréal, Canada). The book contains contributions by scholars in the fields of imagology, images of the North and Icelandic culture who cooperated on the international INOR research project.

The book consists of a wide range of articles covering various topics and time periods divided into the two chapters „Historical Images“ and „Contemporary Images“. Some of the primary issues discussed are national stereotypes and narratives, relations between national, regional, and international ideas about the North, ranging from the Middle Ages to today's branding, tourism, and banking industries. The disciplines and approaches represented are e.g. imagology, ethnography, literary studies, branding theory and cultural studies. Several of the contributions in the chapter on „Historical Images“ focus on the origins and utilisations of dominating narratives about Nordic and Icelandic identity.

Aside from his introduction on ideas about national identity and various

stereotypes of the North, Sumarliði R. Ísleifsson also contributes with an article on early foreign accounts of Iceland and Greenland. This article is a rare example of a comparative review of how dystopian and utopian associations connected to the periphery have shaped accounts of the imagined geographies of these two countries to this day. The approach is in line with Ísleifsson's earlier imagological studies, and focuses on European accounts from before the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In these accounts, Iceland and Greenland both exhibit similarities and distinctions. In both cases, Ísleifsson argues, projections as well as idealisations have governed the descriptions. Ísleifsson shows, how many of the early descriptions connected both countries with diabolic, uncivilised and magical powers – a tendency that decreased in the late 1700s. When Iceland is concerned, the dominating image of the North went from being distanced from the civilised European centre towards an idealisation – what Ísleifsson calls the notion of a „Hellas of the North“.

Through the ages there have, however, existed both negative and positive descriptions, reflecting an ambivalence that still exists in current accounts. Some of the descriptions emphasise the simple lives of

both Greenlanders and Icelanders in harmonic coexistence with nature – images that are still used internally and externally. Many of the descriptions are characterised by a liminality of otherness, and a key question has been: are the populations human, non human or even diabolic?

Ísleifsson ascribes much of the development of the external images to the mechanism of associating the unfamiliar with floating boundaries and abnormality. The points of his article concerning ideas about connections between climate and identity as environmental determinism resonate in several of the other contributions in both chapters showing imagological *leitmotifs* through history.

Ideas about the North have formed notions of the role of Iceland in relation to Europe, but, as literary scholar Julia Zernack argues in her article, it has also formed principal ideas about Germanic culture. Zernack contributes with an account of how Icelandic or Old Norse literature and mythology have been central within ideas about Germanic culture and the formation of German national consciousness.

In her article on racist caricatures in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, anthropologist Kristín Loftsdóttir links globalised racism, Scandinavian exceptionalism and the inherent role of racism in Icelandic ideas of purity

and nationalism. In this way, Loftsdóttir nuances the republishing of the children's book *The Ten Little Negroboys* in 2007 to let it transcend its national specificity as well as using it as an optic for the analysis of the cultural history of a potential national blind spot.

In the chapter „Contemporary Images“ several writers contribute with articles about developments in Icelandic self-representation and the aggressive branding policies leading up to the recent economic crisis. They analyse the use of narratives and symbols of ethnicity and cultural heritage – several of them address how foreign ideas about the island are used for profit.

In his contribution, geographer and tourism scholar Edward H. Huijbens presents a critical analysis of the simplifications of heterogeneity in the current image building of Icelandic companies and institutions. By emphasising the elements of violence in the act of forcing certain images to the foreground, Huijbens challenges nation branding with an approach that focuses on a complex and ever-changing sense of place. He argues against the governing logic of a fabricated image used when Iceland is branded as a tourist destination and highlights the important issue of the continued influence of neo-environmental determinism. The connection between people and land is

often emphasised to create the chosen country – and nation brand – a continuation of the historical narratives of otherness and purity used in the strategic process of commodification.

Assisting editor and literary scholar Daniel Chartier contributes with an article about the use of stereotype in children's drawings representing „the North“. Here, Chartier discusses the benefits of a cross-disciplinary study on how discourse influences ideas about geography – specifically ideas about Iceland as place and the North as concept. Chartier analyzes how the artworks draw on the North as a shared idea and how the discourses of the North and Iceland influence each other. Furthermore, he discusses the role of scientific reflection and criticism in processes of change or strengthening of stereotypisation. The focus on imagological perspectives and *idées reçues* draws parallels with articles in the previous chapter. The examination of the intersection of national and universal ideas is also in line with Loftsdóttir's approach.

The anthology's contributions are not only of a high quality, but what is more, they form a whole through interconnected themes and theories resulting in mutual expansions. The book offers a broad – as well as deep – insight into the cultural history and continued development of stereotypes about Nordic geographies. By

approaching ideas about place and collective identity, literature, branding of heritage and landscape and social issues the volume is an important contribution to the field and has the potential to inspire and challenge its readers.

*Ann-Sofie N. Gremaud (Copenhagen)*