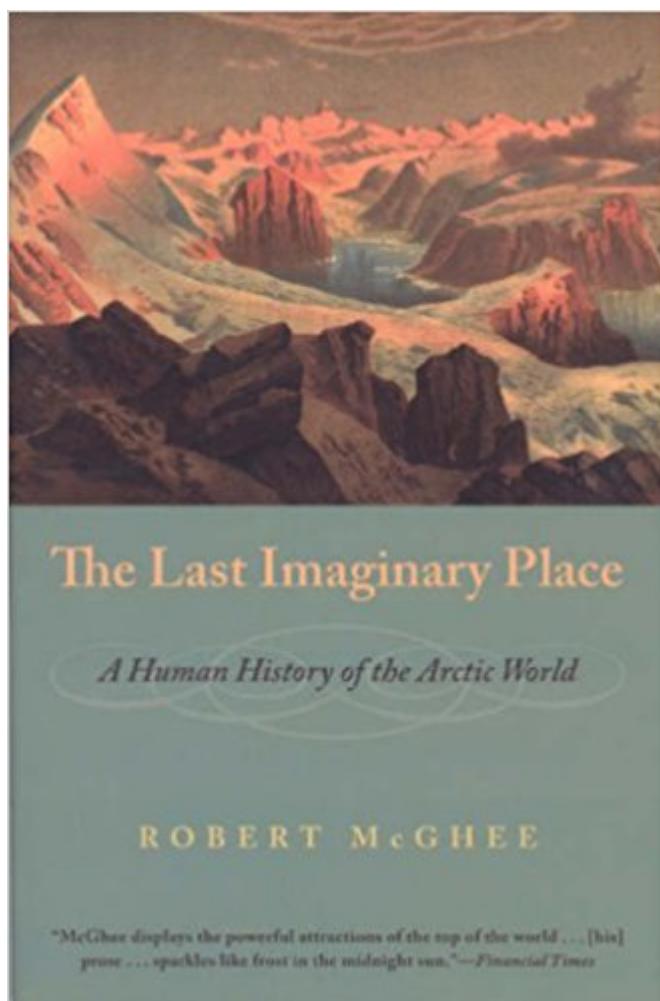


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The Last Imaginary Place: A Human History Of The Arctic World



Synopsis

The Arctic of towering icebergs and midnight sun, of flaming auroras and endless winter nights, has long provoked flights of the imagination. Now, in *The Last Imaginary Place*, renowned archeologist Robert McGhee lifts the veil to reveal the true Arctic world. Based on thirty years of work with native peoples of the Arctic and travel in the region, McGhee's account dispels notions of the frozen land as an exotic, remote world that exists apart from civilization. Between the frigid reality and lurid fantasy lies McGhee's true interest, the people who throughout human history have called the Arctic home. He paints a vivid portrait of Viking farmers, entrepreneurial Inuit, and Western explorers who have been seduced by the natural wealth and haunting beauty of this land. From lively accounts of fur trading, ivory hunting, and whaling to white-knuckle tales of the first, doomed expeditions, McGhee takes the reader on a whirlwind journey across this disorienting, dreamlike terrain that has fascinated mankind for centuries. "In prose infused by his position as curator of Arctic archaeology at the Canadian Museum of Civilization—which has taken him to sites in several countries—McGhee demolishes some persistent illusions about the white North . . . evocative."—Times Literary Supplement "[A] compelling account . . . [McGhee] believes that the Arctic is not so much a region as a dream—what he sees as a dream of a unique, attractive world . . . An archaeologist who has spent thirty years there, the author lets his love for the region shine through on every page."—Booklist "McGhee displays the powerful attractions of the top of the world . . . [his] prose . . . sparkles like frost in the midnight sun."—Financial Times "McGhee has written a sensitive, fascinating and extremely important book."—Canadian Geographic

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Customer Reviews

The myth of the Arctic as an untouched wilderness penetrated only by the most intrepid of adventurers and populated by primitive peoples who had to be tamed along with their wilderness takes a beating in this refreshing primer from McGhee, the curator of Arctic Archeology at the Canadian Museum of Civilization. Coupling personal memoir with a broad historical overview, McGhee's book offers a more realistic view of the present-day Arctic and shows that, far from being cut off from the rest of the world, the Arctic peoples traded with their southern neighbors for thousands of years and have both influenced and been influenced by these contacts. McGhee draws on his 30 years experience as an archeologist to demonstrate that large-scale human migrations have occurred around the entire North Polar region, particularly in the past 2000 years, and that the current Inuit, Sammi, Nenets, Chukchi and other Arctic peoples have long histories that can be documented archeologically and through oral and written records. McGhee devotes an entire chapter to the fascinating history of contact between the Vikings and the Inuit in the North Atlantic, which occurred over a period of 500 years, until circa 1400. A later chapter describes the exploitation of the marine mammals living around the Spitsbergen islands. While not comprehensive, McGhee's book is an excellent introduction to the Arctic's history, peoples and contemporary political issues. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

McGhee writes in this compelling account, "the sea ice and the midnight sun, the whales, walrus, reindeer, the flaring aurora, and the endless winter night are viewed only as scenes and players in the human history of the polar zone." He presents this history as a part of what he calls the global history of human endeavor, exploring such themes as the Arctic in ancient thought; the role fur traders, whalers, and ivory hunters who benefit from an extreme range of seasonal variation; and the rapport between hunter and the hunted. He recounts life in Arctic Siberia, Vikings and Arctic farmers, life among the Inuit people, ice and death on the Northeast Passage, gold mining, and the early exploration of Hudson Bay. He believes that the Arctic is not so much a region as a dream--what he sees as a dream of a unique attractive world, the last imaginary place on earth. An archaeologist who spent 30 years there, the author lets his love for the region shine through on every page. George CohenCopyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This

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I am a fan of Dr. McGhee's work and this book details the various ethnic groups that have lived throughout the Canadian Arctic over the past three to four millennium. Terrific plates of the artifacts found over the years accompany each chapter. The author deals with the entire known and supposed history of the Dorset Culture of paleo-Eskimos - my area of interest and the main reason for my purchase of the book. Although published in 1996, coming out in 2001 in paperback, the material is timeless for my purposes. The author takes archaeological material and develops a tale based on the known data, which he does with all his books, making the text readable and interesting. I highly recommend this book for those readers having an interest in the topic.

The arctic has long held a fascination for Europe and North America. It has led to numerous exploration parties and not a little mythology associated with the adventurers who undertook these missions. Archeologist Robert McGhee blends historical analysis with keen observation and strong writing to present a compelling account of Western Civilization's fascination with the Arctic. McGhee begins with a study of the geology of the Arctic, noting that it was geology that proved that the Earth was older and more dynamic than religionists had argued. The ideal place that documented that fundamental fact was the concept of the Ice Age, and the data demonstrating that was found in the Arctic. He comments, "the fact that we think of the 'Ice Age' as an established fact of prehistory is one of the triumphs of nineteenth-century science. For most of that century, science and theology fought an extended battle over the nature of the world and mankind" (p. 12). That realization finally took hold when Arctic explorers brought back evidence supporting it. From there McGhee proceeds chronologically through the history of the Arctic, focusing successively on the hunter-gatherer tribes that claimed the region as their own, Viking incursion into Greenland and other parts of the northland, the Inuit and their evolution over time, the search for the fabled Northwest Passage, and the quest for the pole, and the European quest for power in the geopolitical sweepstakes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The expression of a unique history of an exotic Arctic region makes "The Last Imaginary Place" a wonderful reading experience. It is a very fine introduction to the history of the region and its place in Western Civilization.

fascination book on the high arctic

for the archaeology fiends out there, this is a perfect read. i had no idea there was so much

prehistory in the arctic!

Canadian author Robert McGhee's 2005 "The Last Imaginary Place" is his highly readable human history of the Arctic. An archeologist with decades of field experience in the Far North, McGhee brings to his narrative a sense of continuing wonder at the rugged but beautiful Arctic and of respect for its native inhabitants. McGhee starts with the proposition that the Arctic has been consistently portrayed with more imagination than facts by outside observers, beginning at least with the ancient Greeks. The facts may be more interesting, as the author sketches a still evolving thesis of human habitation by successive waves of migrants. Within the North American Arctic, those waves are identified as the ancient Tuniit, the more recent Inuit, and finally various European groups. McGhee has some interesting thoughts on the interactions between the successive waves of inhabitants and the effects on the exploration and exploitation of a difficult environment where death is often the consequence of failure. A hidden gem is the account of the little-known journey by Samuel Hearne from Hudson's Bay to the Arctic Ocean and back during 1769-1772, in company with Dene hunters and a rare success among frequently misguided and/or disastrous expeditions. At book's end, he notes the struggle of native Arctic peoples to adapt to outside governance and to the possible effects of climate change. McGhee offers some strong opinions on the issue of sovereignty in the Far North, and on the still controversial details of several Polar expeditions. The reader may take or leave these as desired. Oddly, McGhee insists on identifying Alaskan Inuit groups as Eskimos, a term considered archaic; his description of development in Alaska is similarly un-nuanced. "The Last Imaginary Place" is highly recommended as an entertaining and educational read on the human history of the Arctic realm.

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