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BOOK REVIEW


Gordon W. Smith has long been known to historians of northern Canada as the author of two pioneering articles published in the 1960s (1961, 1966). However, the work to which he dedicated the greater part of his career was a massive study of Canadian Arctic sovereignty from 1870 to 1982, which remained incomplete and unpublished when he died in 2000. Sometimes working on contract for Canadian government departments and sometimes using his own resources, Smith spent the years from 1968 until his death on this task. The first part of the study has now been released in an abridged version, which fills nearly 500 pages of a large-format book.

As these facts indicate, Smith’s intention was to produce the ultimate reference work on Canada’s northern sovereignty, not to write a narrative history that would appeal to general readers. The editor, Whitney Lackenbauer, argues that making Smith’s magnum opus available to academics, policymakers, and students will provide “a strong basis for subsequent research” (p. xiii). Indeed, it is unrivalled in its breadth, and much invaluable information in these pages is not readily available elsewhere. Commendations are certainly due to those responsible for making an electronic version freely available on the publisher’s website.

However, there are drawbacks of which potential users of the book should be aware. Lackenbauer indicates that this portion of the manuscript was written in 1973 and that Smith’s failure to publish it during his lifetime “is more a testament to his perfectionism and his continuous search for new information than evidentiary shortcomings” (p. xiii). Yet an examination of the footnotes shows that the manuscript as printed does not cite any secondary literature published later than the mid-1970s, even though many such works drew on archival material not available to Smith. In some cases, Smith’s long endnotes discuss primary documents not used in the main text, providing evidence of his continued intensive research. Nevertheless, it is clear that the manuscript was never thoroughly revised to incorporate Smith’s new archival findings from 1973 on. Lackenbauer has contributed some welcome and valuable editorial updates, but these are not frequent. “Rather than trying to integrate additional secondary sources,” he writes, “I have appended a list of further readings that provides readers with a sampling of scholarship on subjects covered in this book that has appeared in the past few decades” (p. xix).

The book thus almost certainly does not represent Smith’s final conclusions on all points, and it contains a number of significant errors not corrected by either the author or his editor. To give but one of many examples, Smith here maintains it is highly unlikely that explorer Joseph Bernier would have made his famous 1909 sector claim without government authorization (p. 194). However, Yolande Dorion-Robitaille’s book on Bernier, published in 1978 and based on an extensive collection of Bernier’s personal papers (now in the Bibliothèque et Archives...
Nations du Québec), long ago made it clear that he did in fact far exceed his orders on this occasion. Smith was unquestionably aware of this book—he is mentioned in Dorion-Robitaille’s acknowledgements—but he did not alter his manuscript. Anyone using Smith’s work for reference purposes, then, must do so with a clear awareness of its limitations.

Another drawback to the posthumous publication of Smith’s decades-old and largely unrevised manuscript is that he did not have the opportunity to acknowledge the assistance he received from other scholars. Smith’s correspondence with Arctic geographer Trevor Lloyd—preserved among Lloyd’s papers in the Trent University Archives—shows that Lloyd read the draft manuscript and offered much valuable input. In particular, Lloyd’s extensive archival research on the 1920s convinced Smith to modify his analysis of the supposed threat to Canadian sovereignty posed by Danish explorer Knud Rasmussen. (Lloyd’s groundbreaking research, sadly, remains unpublished, but Jeff Noakes and I used it as the foundation for our work on the same period in our book [2010]). Lackenbauer has pointed out Lloyd’s important role in one of his editorial notes (p. 433), but it seems likely that others among Smith’s Arctic colleagues also rendered assistance, about which we may never know.

In terms of archival material, whatever the scope of Smith’s later investigations may have been, the files referenced in the existing text do not represent anything close to the full range of Arctic sources available at Library and Archives Canada—the repository at which the great bulk, if not all, of Smith’s research was done. Smith is credited by Lackenbauer with having also done research at the National Archives of the UK. However, Smith himself made it clear in one of his articles that he used the microfilmed copies of Colonial Office documents held in the Canadian archives. The series CO 42 is the only set of British records extensively cited by Smith; had he in fact made a research trip to London, he would likely have gone through the relevant Foreign Office and other files of which there are no copies in Ottawa.

One point on which the book, even in its unrevised state, does outshine others is its use of published Canadian government documents, such as annual departmental reports, parliamentary debates, and Orders-in-Council. Smith’s detailed research into these voluminous and often neglected sources will be of considerable use to scholars. It is, however, regrettable that Orders-in-Council are usually cited merely by number, without any more detailed references to either the published versions in the Canada Gazette or the unpublished orders in the records of the Privy Council Office.

In terms of interpretation, Smith’s general concluding statement that by 1939 Canada’s claim to the Arctic islands was firmly established can hardly be questioned. However, this optimistic conclusion is tempered by Smith’s strong belief that the sector theory, on which Canada appeared to rely for much of the period covered by this volume, had no validity. Smith’s predisposition against the theory led him to downplay evidence that in the 1920s, Canadian officials held to a much more sophisticated and defensible version than the one previously popularized by Bernier and his ally, Senator Pascal Poirier. In 1925 civil servant James White wrote a detailed analysis of the sector concept, which Smith dismisses in an endnote as “a rather superficial rehash of familiar arguments” (p. 450). In fact, White’s paper was a key milestone in the development of Canada’s Arctic policy.

Smith was and is a major figure in the writing of Canadian Arctic history. The publication of the study to which he devoted so many years is both a fitting tribute to his memory and a service to future scholars. However, the work (or at least this first installment of it) also needs to be considered as a product of the early 1970s, from which the results of both its author’s later dedicated research and the evolving historiography of the field are largely absent.

References
Smith G.W. 1961. The transfer of Arctic territories from Great Britain to Canada in 1880, and some related matters, as seen in official correspondence. Arctic 14, 53–73.