

The Iconic North: Cultural Constructions of Aboriginal Life in Postwar Canada by Joan Sangster

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The Iconic North
Cultural Constructions of Aboriginal Life in Postwar Canada

by Joan Sangster

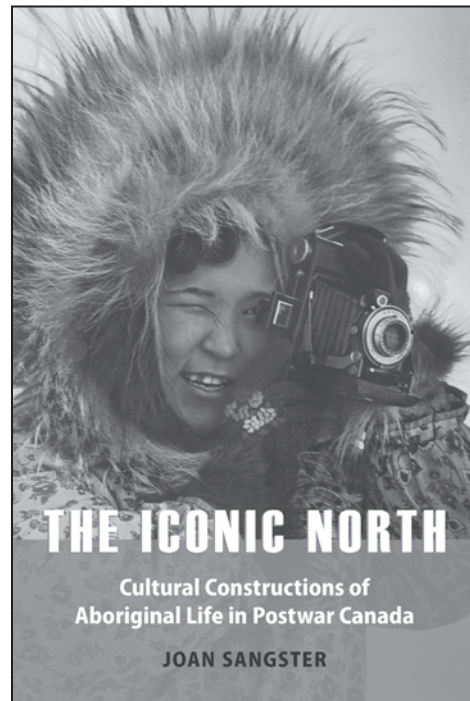
Vancouver, BC: UBC Press, 2016. 391 Pages. \$34.95 Paperback. ISBN 978-0-7748-3184-0 <ubcpress.ca>

In the post-war period the North gained greater importance to the Canadian economy due to its abundance of natural resources. Accompanying this increased attention to the economic possibilities of the North was government intervention, increased Southern presence, and pressures to modernize the region and its peoples. Joan Sangster's *The Iconic North: Cultural Constructions of Aboriginal Life in Postwar Canada* speaks to these trends by presenting readers with a new study of the images and representations that non-Indigenous Southern (and sometimes Northern) Canadians constructed about the North, its environment, and Indigenous peoples from the mid-1940s to 1970.

Sangster clearly locates her study in the North above the 60th parallel with most attention on the Arctic. She makes clear in her introduction that her goal is not to examine the North from Indigenous or Northern perspectives, but to examine the images and discourses *about* the North and what these cultural representations can teach readers about the ways the Canadian colonial project unfolded in the North in the postwar period. She examines these cultural representations through six case studies—two examinations of writing by white women visiting the North (travel writing, memoirs, novels, and poetry); a textual and visual analysis of settler accounts of the environment and Indigenous peoples of the North in *The Beaver*; two visual analysis case studies of the representations of Northern Indigenous peoples in

the TV series *RCMP* (1959-60) and National Film Board (NFB) films between the late-1940s to late-1960s; and an analysis of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women (RCSW) commissioners' visits to the North.

Sangster is a professor of gender and women's studies at Trent University and is active in the Frost Center for Canadian Studies and Indigenous Studies. *The Iconic North* is her entrance into Northern history, but Sangster has published widely in women's history and labour history—both areas she incorporates into her study of



the North. *The Iconic North* has an impressively strong foundation of Northern historiography and an elaborate discussion of colonialism in the introduction in which she identifies the importance of examining internal colonization in the North. Sangster's work helps readers understand how colonialism persisted into the postwar period, shaped Canada's understanding of the North, and influenced the development of Northern economies and government administration. The greatest strength of this work is Sangster's ability to insert women into the narrative of northern colonialism—this is no easy feat and one that is needed within northern and colonial studies, especially during a period of industrial transition in the North.

Sangster asks how did cultural producers construct images of northern Indigenous peoples; why did these representations come about when they did; and what were the consequences of these representations? While Sangster argues that the wide range of sources she used (personal memories, imaginative reconstruction, social and scientific documentation, and journalism) make it difficult to provide one solid answer to her questions, both individually and together her case studies make clear that during the postwar period Southern Canada saw the North as a frontier to mould to Southern economic, cultural, and political desires. These images were crafted by and for Southern white audiences and did not represent reality in the North. However, her research demonstrates that though the images bore little resemblance to reality, they were powerful in shaping public opinion of the North and Indigenous peoples.

Sangster manages to show the ambivalent and contradictory nature of colonialism; for example, in her case study of *The Beaver* Sangster argues that the magazine promoted ideas of integration and cultural

tolerance while simultaneously reinforcing colonial images and paternalism, and glossing over the systemic socioeconomic problems northern Indigenous peoples faced. In her examination of NFB films she notes that the two main themes of documentaries about Inuit life were either intended to preserve the cultural heritage of a “dying people,” or to promote modernization and a cultural makeover. In both cases, the message of these documentaries was that Inuit ways of life were coming to an end.

Sangster's focus on women (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) is the greatest strength of this work. Travel writing is a commonly used source to examine perceptions of the North, but Sangster's use of women's travel writing offers new perspectives to her readers because female writers tended to focus on elements of life that male travel-writers overlooked: gender, families, and relationships with Indigenous people. Her examination of the RCSW also offered Indigenous testimony about life in the North and in this case study Sangster manages to highlight the complex relationships that female colonizers shared with northern Indigenous women and the fractures felt within colonial society.

This work is about the visual and textual representations of Northern Canada and the inclusion of eighteen images greatly helps readers connect with the arguments Sangster puts forth. However, throughout the book Sangster refers to multiple photographs that are not included in the book. It would have been more beneficial to include more of the photographs she analyzes in detail and fewer ‘stand-alone’ images. Maps are a noticeable absence in this work, especially as Sangster's case studies jump around geographically and at times she deals with areas that are not always commonly known to readers outside of northern scholarship. Finally, there are

two instances of providing misspelled or incorrect scholars' names (6,22).

The Iconic North is a timely contribution to northern studies as the North has received media attention recently with the ongoing Protect the Peel campaign in the Yukon, increased mineral and oil exploration and extraction across the territorial North, and discovery narratives around the Franklin shipwreck. This work is a thought-provoking and exciting contribution to the fields of colonial studies, Indigenous history, and northern studies offering new knowledge and perspectives. The one flaw of this work is the absence of views from Indigenous northerners themselves which leaves the reader wondering how the colonized experienced the impacts of this

cultural imagination—however, Sangster makes clear this was not her goal and she calls for historians to take on this task in future work. Furthermore, she includes three brief examples in the conclusion of Indigenous-produced sources that challenge the images discussed in the book. I would recommend *The Iconic North* to any social science scholars of the Arctic (and the North generally), Indigenous studies, and gender history. Though some of the chapters are theory-heavy, *The Iconic North* is also a great read for anyone who is interested in the history of the Canadian North.

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Sister Soldiers of the Great War
The Nurses of the Canadian Army
Medical Corps

by Cynthia Toman

Vancouver, British Columbia: UBC Press, 2016. 312 pages. \$95.00 hardcover. \$39.95 paperback. ISBN 9780774832144 <ubcpress.ca>

Cynthia Toman's *Nursing Sisters* explores the experiences of the 2,845 nursing sisters who served with the Canadian Army Medical Corps (CAMC) during the First World War. They were leaders within a complex and dynamic medical military organization that administered care to wounded soldiers under difficult and dangerous conditions. There were two times more nursing sisters than there were doctors at the front; every one of the 761,635 wounded soldiers in the C.E.F passed through the hands of a CAMC nursing sister.

