

## REVIEWS

*Peter Fjågesund*

*The Dream of the North: A Cultural History to 1920*

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IN writing *The Dream of the North: A Cultural History to 1920*, Peter Fjågesund has created a fine companion piece to Peter Davidson's similarly titled *The Idea of North* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005) published just under a decade earlier. Strikingly, although the title of Davidson's work alludes to 'ideas' (perhaps implying an emphasis on intellectual abstraction) and Fjågesund's to 'dreams' (suggesting reverie and fantasy), it seems to me that it is Davidson's work which is — to my mind — more dream-like in form and content, foregrounding sensory experiences, impressions and feelings, whilst Fjågesund's book explores abstract cultural and political ideas in a slightly fuller, more conventionally orderly (chronological) fashion. Taken together, the pair provide a wonderful introduction to the way in which ideas and dreams of the North have intertwined over time, especially in Europe and North America, with Fjågesund tracking their progress up to 1920, and Davidson to the present day. Physically, *The Dream of the North* is a handsome hardback, with a crisp, attractive cover design; high quality paper; and many illustrations, several in colour. Thankfully, given the very large number of people and places presented in this volume, the publisher has also provided a detailed index, which (according to a short spot-check) appears to be accurate.

Fjågesund, a literary historian specializing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, is frank from the outset about the limitations of 'white, western' ideas of the North from before 1920 'in which indigenous perspectives

were hardly heard or registered', and about the fact that these are shared to a large extent by his own book (28). Whilst this is true, it is only fair to say in Fjågesund's defence that he has flagged this problem up throughout the text, and made efforts to draw attention, where he could, to such figures as Matthew Henson (429), who he clearly hopes will be studied more closely in future — by some of his readers, at least. Likewise, whilst there is no denying the crushing dominance of men on almost every page of this book, Fjågesund is equally aware of this additional problem, and has spotlighted the presence of women and children (309, 466 n. 17) wherever possible, for instance with a whole section on Madame de Staël (288–95).

Given the sheer quantity of information Fjågesund has chosen to present, his decision to divide this book into six chronologically arranged chapters (plus Introduction and Postscript) was extremely sensible, providing a solid framework for description of development over time, across Europe and North America, and allowing readers to dip in, period by period, for a richer understanding of its wealth of factual detail. The first chapter surveys the whole period from Antiquity up to 1700, whilst the remaining chapters focus in detail on forty- to fifty-year chunks after that point, and are themselves structured more thematically than the book as a whole. (For example, Chapter Three, on 'The Great Watershed: 1750–1790' contains subsections called 'The Problem of Progress', 'Discovering Britain's North', 'Arctic Adventures' and so on.) At the same time, Fjågesund has taken considerable care to sew his tale neatly together, constantly glancing backwards and forwards in time and across place. Indeed, one of the loveliest features of this text is the joy its author takes in identifying fascinating chronological coincidences: some connecting events in his book with others described at different points therein, some stretching beyond its pages to make contact with touchstones of world history, such as the publication of the King James Bible, or the storming of the Bastille (79, 187). Throughout, passages which could have tended towards slightly arid factual reporting are considerably enlivened by notes on coincidences of this kind, as well as by Fjågesund's engaging, polished literary style (for instance describing the Grand Tour as a 'university on wheels' (191)) and eye for the startling, humorous and absurd (such as the tale of Joseph Moxon, 131). In fact, Fjågesund's knack for unearthing and showcasing nuggets which could doubtless be turned into real cultural treasures — with a little artistic licence — has the potential to make this text a highly valuable sourcebook for contemporary creators of all kinds, including dramatists, composers, novelists and visual artists. (What might such a person make, for example, of an eighteenth-century attempt to blend stories by Saxo and Ossian into a grand drama called *Frode og Fingal* (328), or of the sixteen-

hour-long conversation which sparked the career of Adam Oehlerschläger (322), or of an early nineteenth-century 360° panorama of Spitzbergen, set up in Leicester Square, London (280–81)?)

More obviously, this book will yield fascinating insights for anyone currently wrestling with ‘ideas of North’ for professional purposes. My guess is that this will apply not just to cultural historians, but to people like policy makers and cultural leaders, who may perhaps find discussion of ‘Northern’ identities at the heart of their daily business and long for an accessible, clear, big-picture survey of the development of these, which ties such perceptions to even bigger-picture themes, such as the impact of the Reformation, in such a way that all readers will emerge feeling genuinely better-informed by the closing page. It is very much to Fjågesund’s credit that he has been able to construct a survey which is fit to meet such needs, and which would, for exactly the same reasons, be of enormous use to students at the very beginning of their careers — from the final years of high-school onwards — and to academics who feel the urge to peek over the boundaries of their specialist subjects, every so often, to remind themselves of some of the deeper, more powerful currents which carry (and have carried) their work, and that of their predecessors. Lastly, I hope very much that *The Dream of the North* finds its way onto the shelves of some high-street bookshops, and from there into parcels destined for pleasure-reading North-enthusiasts of all kinds, and all ages, both in the North and beyond.

This is not to say that Fjågesund’s book is utterly flawless of course. Traditionalists — like me — may well wince at each of its (admittedly rare) references to Wikipedia (for example, 89 n. 60), and sticklers for visual perfection — less like me — may be mildly bothered by a rash of rogue spaces (486), or the tiny font used for indented citations. On the other hand, the only factual error I spotted, as a medievalist, was a reference to ‘Viking’ laws which are in fact High Medieval (102) — in my view, a minor slip of a kind almost inevitable, given the very ambitious scope of this work. None of this, however, seriously detracts from a marvellous resource which has clearly been designed with true usefulness to a wide range of readers constantly in mind, and to which I, for one, anticipate returning for inspiration many times.

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