

"Oil and Amulets" fails on several levels

Lauritzen, Phillip; Oil and Amulets, Inuit: A People United at the Top of the World; Breakwater Books Ltd., (1983). by Don Mitchell

By now the pattern is familiar. A young, earnest white journalist travels from wherever he lives to the arctic to visit the Inuit and describe the cultural discongruity occasioned by the oil and gas industry's intrusion into what had been until recently an alien land. The journalist invariably brings to his task an uninformed romanticism and departs, at least to some extent, disillusioned. How disillusioned depends on two factors: the personality of the journalist and how much fun he had on his trip. Last year's preeminent example of this genre of journalism was David Boeri's *People of the Ice Whale*.

One of this year's entries is *Oil and Amulets* by Philip Lauritzen. The plot is fairly simple. In 1977 Lauritzen, a Danish journalist now living in Greenland, attends the first Inuit Circumpolar Conference in Barrow. On the way home he tries as closely as scheduled and charter airplane service will permit to retrace the route across the Canadian arctic

along which the explorers Knud Rasmussen and Peter Freuchen traveled in 1924 during the Fifth Thule Expedition. In this fashion Lauritzen drops in for a day or two at such places as Inuvik, Tuktoyaktuk, Churchill, Rankin

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Inlet, Resolute, Nanisivik, and Frobisher Bay. In 1983 he returns to Frobisher Bay to cover the third Inupiat Circumpolar Conference which established the Alaska Native Review Commission.

Along the way, however, Lauritzen tape records interviews with Inuit Leaders including Charlie Edwardsen and Jimmy Stotts of Alaska, Sam Raddi, the President of COPE, John Amagoalik, President of Inuit Tapirisat of Canada, and David Aglukark, chairman of the Keewatin Inuit Association.

Excerpts from the interviews, descriptions of the history or present status of ANCSA and the

various land claims movements now underway in Alaska and the Canadian arctic, and notes made while wandering around the above-mentioned towns, form the body of the book. Unfortunately, the body has no spine. For whatever reason, Lauritzen did not (or could not?) decide which of these three ideas should be the focus of the book around which the other two would revolve. Consequently, the outcome is a confusing muddle which fails on all three levels.

The effect of individual personality on the course of human history is a topic of consistent interest and debate. Aside from being in the right place (Alaska) at the right time (the discovery of oil at Prudhoe Bay), the success which the Alaska Native community experienced in persuading the Congress to settle its aboriginal claims is in large measure the story of the courage and commitment of the young Native leaders who fought for the cause. The same is undoubtedly true today in the Canadian arctic. Consequently, a book which tells the world more about the men and women fighting for the rights of their people in the Northwest Ter-

ritories would be an important contribution to arctic scholarship. Regrettably, the portions of the interview transcripts reprinted in *Oil and Amulets* shed little light on the men Lauritzen has gone to considerable trouble and expense to visit.

The portions of the book dealing with the history of the land claims movements in the arctic leave a similar feeling of frustration. The interrelationship between Inuit aspirations for a socially and economically just settlement of their aboriginal land claims and the increasingly

"Is Oil and Amulets worth reading?...probably not."

relentless intrusion of multinational natural resource development corporations into Inuit territory is a subject of exciting topicality. However, the history and status reports on the various land claims movements which Lauritzen pastes between his interviews and travel notes provide little real information on the subject. And if his scholarship dealing with the Canadian land claims movements is as lackadaisical as his scholarship dealing with ANCSA, the book is more a hindrance than a help in providing an interested reader the straight story. Although Lauritzen cites *Alaska Native Land Claims*, the ANCSA textbook prepared by the Alaska Native Foundation, as a reference source in his bibliography, his description of the enactment of ANCSA indicates that he has bought Hugh Gallagher's revisionist history in

Etok—A Story of Eskimo Power hook, line and sinker. Regardless of the breadth of Charlie Edwardsen's extraordinary contributions to the enactment of ANCSA, Lauritzen's homage to Charlie as the man who near singlehandedly forged the settlement is more a testament to his gullibility than an expression of his competence as a historian.

Lastly, despite the extensive notes Lauritzen diligently scribbled in the bleak, prefabricated motel rooms where he spent most of his nights, *Oil and Amulets* conveys little descriptive feeling for an interesting corner of the earth which most of us will never visit. The following description of Tuktoyaktuk on the coast of the Beaufort Sea is a typical example: "He was looking out over the houses. Some of them were old and some dilapidated—that's what they looked like at any rate."

As a critic once pointed out somewhat disparagingly about the work of the late American author Jack Kerouac, there is a substantial difference between typing and writing.

Is *Oil and Amulets* worth reading? For non-Natives interested in the Inuit land claims movement, probably not. But for Natives interested in their own history and future, probably so. Because maybe the exasperation which reading such a pedestrian piece of work about their own people might engender will inspire a Native who's not now planning on it to become a journalist. Because until Native people start telling the world their own story, they will continue to have it told for them by journalists like Philip Lauritzen and David Boeri.