

BOOK REVIEW

By WALLY OLSON

ESKIMOS AND EXPLORERS

By Wendell H. Oswalt, Chandler and Sharp Publishers,
Novato, Calif. 1979 \$15.00

Dr. Oswalt has taken on the awesome task of summarizing the historical contacts between Eskimos and Euroamericans across the entire arctic and subarctic and done the job with masterful expertise.

For more than twenty years, Wendell Oswalt has studied the Eskimo cultures and has published many books and articles on the subject. He is well-respected by fellow anthropologists and historians for his thoroughness and clarity. This book represents a major undertaking for any scholar. Eskimos were first contacted by the Norsemen about the year 1000 a.d. in Greenland and Labrador. From there on, there were intermittent contacts in northern Canada and finally the Russians approached the Eskimos from the other end of the arctic.

The book then, covers more than eight hundred years of contact and spans the entire northland. *Eskimos and Explorers* is more than just history; each section has a brief but accurate description of the different types of Eskimo culture encountered. Even those who know very little about Eskimo culture will be able to understand the variations he presents. The reader will also discover why certain stereotypes of Eskimos arose because of the time at which each group was contacted. For instance, the average postcard picture of Eskimos show them in snow block igloos which were really a special adaptation peculiar to the people of the high arctic.

There were Eskimos, such as the Chugach or Kodiak, who never saw a polar bear or snow block house. But because the people of Canada were the first Eskimos to be described, their particular way of life has been presented as 'typical'. In fact, the largest concentration of Eskimos was probably in Western Alaska and these people had a much different life style and environment.

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Another point that Oswalt brings out is that each explorer or early writer brought with them a set of biases or assumptions which colored their contacts and descriptions. The reader has to remember that these voyagers were steeped in Western culture and beliefs and judged the Eskimos by European standards. Because of the various backgrounds of each writer, some found the Eskimos "dirty savage, crude and pagan". Others describe them as "honest, well-organized, highly adaptive with sincere religious beliefs." No doubt there was as much variation between the different Eskimo groups and individuals as there was among the observers.

Dr. Oswalt has had to be very concise. Some sentences are extremely succinct and the reader may want to re-read them to get the import of each phrase. The final chapter, "before and After Explorers" does a fine job of summarizing the effects of contact upon the Eskimos and their most recent adaptations right down to the snowmobiles and Land Claims Settlement. It would have been nice to have more than just twenty-five pages to cover modernization in the arctic, but it might have thrown the entire work out of perspective. His comparative approach to public administration and policy — or lack of it — gives the reader a broader picture than is usually presented in a book on Eskimos.

Throughout the book, the author tries to be objective and succeeds very well. All Eskimos are not naive, happy, smiling little children. Nor are they vicious, cunning, evil and barbaric. They are presented as people with all the virtues and vices found among any culture. The reader learns that Eskimos are not like a box of crackers, all stamped to the same pattern; they are individuals and groups with a variety of personalities and cultures.

Some scholars will look askance at the text because there are few footnotes and little of the traditional trimming of academia. Oswalt is too much of a scholar to have to support each statement with a reference to every statement. If he had tried to cite every item, the footnotes would be longer than the text. He has taken a neat alternative. At the end of each chapter there is a section of notes with references to the issues or questions in the chapter along with the names of authorities or experts. If the reader likes, he or she can extend their reading by use of these notes or the excellent bibliography.

There are only two suggestions that this reviewer would make to improve the text. First, the maps showing the times and places of contact are located at the end of the text. I think it would have been a little more useful to have this at the front, or in sections, so that the reader could picture a little better the sequence of contact. Secondly, the portion on the linguistic relationships could be expanded somewhat. Linguists in Alaska and Canada have been devoting a great deal of time and effort to arrive at a better understanding of the relations between the dialects and their findings are very informative. Trained Eskimo linguists are emerging and their insights provide valuable insights to the cultures.

To produce such a book, and do it well, demands exceptional dedication, painstaking research and years of experience to grasp the broad picture of Eskimo culture. Wendell Oswalt has all of these qualities and for many years to come, students, scholars and just the average interested person will be thankful for the work he has done in the study of *Eskimos and Explorers*.