

## BOOK REVIEW

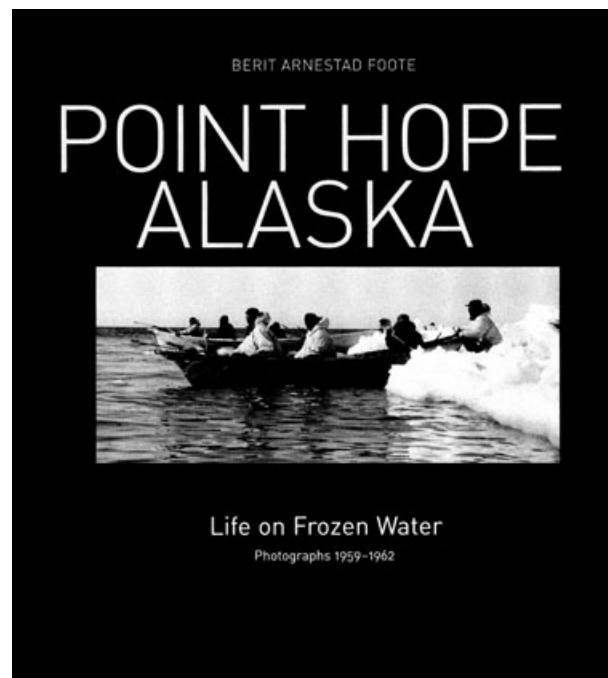
Review of *Point Hope Alaska: life on frozen water*, by Berit Arnestad Foote (2009). Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press. 244 pp. ISBN 978-1-60223-065-1.

This beautifully illustrated book documents three years in the life of Point Hope, Alaska. Point Hope has been a whaling camp site of the Inupiat people for over 2500 years, based on archaeological studies. Up until the 1950s, the settlement here had remained much as it had been since its inhabitants first began having contact with outsiders. Missionaries, school teachers and supplies had arrived from the USA in the 20th century, as the Territory of Alaska started to receive greater attention from the government and people of the “lower 48” states. But in the 1950s, two rather momentous events conspired to change Point Hope, and the rest of rural Alaska. In 1959 Alaska became the 49th state of the Union. One year earlier, the nuclear physicist Edward Teller proposed to the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) that they explode an atomic bomb 100 times more powerful than the one dropped on Hiroshima in north-west Alaska, in order to create a man-made harbour. The site selected by the AEC was Ogotoruk Creek, 50 km south-east of Point Hope. This proposal seems ludicrous to most people in the 21st century. Indeed, the author’s brother-in-law, Joseph Foote, described it as “harebrained but frightening” in his essay near the start of the book. Nevertheless, the project was adopted by the AEC, under the code name of Project Chariot. The full story of this bizarre chapter in American history has been very well told in Dan O’Neill’s book, *The firecracker boys* (1994).

Project Chariot brought a young American geographer, Don Foote, and his Norwegian wife, Berit Arnestad Foote, to Point Hope. They formed part of the team of scientists sent to determine the effects of the nuclear blast on the surrounding environment. Berit arrived in November 1959, and ended up staying three years at Point Hope, or TikiGaq, as it is called by the indigenous population. This book represents a photographic album of her time there. It presents a fascinating ethnographic study of a people who, at that time, were still maintaining the essential elements of a traditional hunter–gatherer lifestyle. There were no cars or trucks in Point Hope at that time, and no snowmobiles. Transportation was by foot, dog sled or skin boat. Winters were spent in flimsy-looking wooden shacks or sod houses. Much of the summer was spent in

**Correspondence**

Scott Elias, Geography Department, Royal Holloway, University of London, Egham, Surrey, TW20 0EX, UK. E-mail: S.Elias@rhul.ac.uk



canvas tents. Hunting was the primary occupation of the men. The different seasons of the year initiated the hunting of various prey animals, including caribou on land and various marine mammals at sea. But, these people and their ancestors chose to settle at Point Hope because it offers excellent opportunities to hunt hump-back whales.

There is very little text in this book. It is almost completely devoted to the author’s photographs. Fifty photos are reproduced in colour, and more than a hundred black and white photos are provided. The book itself is in a rather large format: 25 × 28 cm. Because the photographs were snapshots taken with an ordinary camera of 1950s vintage, many of them appear quite grainy in these large-format reproductions. However, this does not really detract from the book. In fact, it adds a sort of naive charm. Berit Foote was not a professional photographer, but if she had been, she probably would not have been given such complete access to photograph the intimate details and daily lives of the inhabitants. Therein lies both the beauty and usefulness of this exceptional book. Looking at these pictures gives you a set of very vivid impressions of what life was like for the Inupiat of Point Hope at this critical juncture in their history. It quite literally documents their passage from traditional



hunter-gatherers into residents of the 49th state of the Union. Parts of the traditional whale hunting lifestyle remain in Point Hope and other Inupiat villages today, but it will never be the same as it was before contact with people from outside the Arctic.

The pictures are placed in groups, depicting the different seasons of the year. Many of the photographs show how hard the life was. The native people were battling the elements: the bitter cold of winter, and the ever-shifting pack ice in spring and early summer. They were battling the mighty whales, not from the safety of some modern, iron-clad whaling ship, with cannon-fired harpoons, but from small skin umiaks, using traditional weapons. Survival, both of the individual and of the community, was not to be taken for granted. The village had faced starvation only a few decades earlier, as documented by Charles Brower in his classic book about life in Arctic Alaska, *Fifty years below zero* (1942). The people had to rely on each other in order to survive. Whale hunting involved all the able-bodied men of the community. Whale carcass butchering involved all of the adults. This was the fierce, frightening, dangerous side of life at Point Hope, and it is well documented here. But, there is another side of life, in the home, at clan gatherings and at play. The pictures in this book capture the cosy feel of family life, with kids playing, women sharing chores and

men sitting around a fire at a hunting camp. The good humour of these people shines through, time and again. There is much smiling and laughter. There is an indelible mark of *community* shown here.

That small community was galvanized by the threat of destruction brought by Project Chariot, and they eventually managed to defeat their high-powered foes in Washington, D.C.: Project Chariot was cancelled in 1962. The people of TikiGaq founded a Native Alaskan environmental movement that is still active today, almost 50 years later. Ironically, the AEC scientists wanted to test their nuclear civil engineering plans in north-west Alaska precisely because they thought there was nothing of value there—no one would care what happened. This book documents precisely what would have been destroyed: a fascinating and rich native culture.

Scott Elias

## References

- Brower C. 1942. *Fifty years below zero: a lifetime of adventure in the Far North*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Co. Reprinted in 2008, Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing.
- O'Neill D. 1994. *The firecracker boys. H-bombs, Inupiat Eskimos, and the roots of the environmental movement*. New York: St. Martins Press.