Making Tracks: Karen Oslund

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In the "Making Tracks" series, RCC fellows and alumni present their experiences in environmental humanities, retracing the paths that led them to the Rachel Carson Center. For more information, please click **here**.

Imagining the Global Arctic
By **Karen Oslund**

In his *What W. H. Auden Can Do for You*, Alexander McCall Smith calls Auden "a poet of landscape." Many landscapes— Yorkshire, Oxford, New York, and Italy—among others, feature in Auden's poems, but he is also a poet of the sea in his *Letters from Iceland,* singled out by McCall Smith as "one of Auden's oddest books." *Letters from Iceland* does, in one of its poems about the sea, contain the line which is a source of one of the classic stories about Auden's working methods as a poet. The line which reads, "Every port has its name for the sea…and the North means to all, *Reject*" is the result of a printer's error in proof. Auden wrote the line as, "each *poet* has a name for the sea," but then gave into his tendency to "sacrifice meaning for sound" to the extent that he "says things which are not true just because he likes the sound of the words," and let the error stand.

While McCall Smith might be right in general about *Letters from Iceland* being odd, Auden is not very remarkable in this instance for saying things which are not true about Iceland just because he liked the sound of them. This book is usually described as a "travelogue" of Auden's journey to Iceland together with a friend, but it is actually more about his ideas about Iceland before the trip and his working out of those ideas as he traveled in the country. In this voyage, Auden was joining a tribe of European travelers to Iceland—including Joseph Banks, Richard Burton, William Morris, Konrad Maurer—and people who wrote about Iceland without ever having been there, like Jules Verne, in elevating his emotions and desires to find something in the North which he did not experience at home. For Auden, it was the idea of untouched nature and a life unspoiled by the forces of European modernity, something which surely did not exist in Iceland in 1936, if it ever truly had at all. For one group of Romantic travelers, a visit to Iceland and

the North was a journey back in time, and they hoped that the landscape, nature, and language of the country would remain preserved there in an unaltered state. But for other visitors, including many members of the Danish service bureaucracy which ruled the island from the late middle ages until the end of World War II, the Iceland they imagined was malleable and transformable, a place where reindeer and musk oxen could be moved from other Arctic places and thrive in an regulated and managed landscape.

This imagining of land and sea is an impulse for which I have a great deal of sympathy. I grew up in a place—Los Angeles, California—which is imagined far more frequently than it is experienced. Most of my childhood was divided into living first close to the sea, and being able to walk to a beach, and later, living within hiking distance of the foothills of Angeles National Forest. The leaps of faith that one has to make into order to live in such a landscape were always clear: natural catastrophes such as earthquakes, wildfires, and mudslides are events that simply occur on a regular basis. Houses just several blocks to the east of ours were destroyed by a mudslide when I was in middle school and those at the foot of a canyon half mile to the west were flooded just a few years later while I was in high school. The question that so many people ask about Iceland, (and even more often in my current study of Greenland and the Arctic), “why on earth do people live there?” honestly never occurred to me in early adulthood. It seems somehow logical that life in beautiful landscapes and seascapes entails risk. When I discovered while researching a history of science project that a catastrophic volcanic eruption in the eighteenth century made Iceland a site of discovery for geologists and brought a wave of European visitors with new theories about rock formation to the island, at the same time that the Danish administration considered evacuating some Icelanders from the island because of the devastation, I was curious enough to be drawn into a deeper study of this other beautiful and treacherous place on the other side of the world. In the mid-1990s, I made my first trip to Iceland to study the language and visit an Icelandic friend whom I had gotten to know. (Technically, it was my second trip: in 1971 my parents made one of the cheap-stopover visits to Reykjavík via Icelandair from Luxembourg to New York).

My study of the different ways of imagining and transforming the Icelandic landscape and nature was published much later and after a few more journeys (that is, in 2011) as *Iceland Imagined: Nature, Culture, and Storytelling in the North Atlantic*. Of the seven chapters in the book, the last one is the one that gets the most attention: it is about Icelandic whaling. Without rehearsing here the argument I made in that chapter completely, I had observed there that the contemporary politics of protests against

Icelandic whaling, Icelandic resistance to these international protests, and negotiations over regulations at International Whaling Commission were best understood not as a new phenomenon, but as a recasting of an eighteenth-century discussion about Icelandic nature between Icelandic natives and European visitors. Any discussion of whaling or whales tends to strike a chord in environmental humanities circles, and, through discussions, most often in disagreement with my colleagues; I explored the rhetoric of contemporary whaling politics in the North Atlantic in a handful of papers after the publication of my book.

What I quickly discovered, however, is that Iceland is in fact a rather poor vantage point from which to look at the history of whaling. The country simply does not have a very long or particularly well-documented whaling history relative to the global history of whaling (Vicky Szabo's book, *Monstrous Fishes and the Mead-Dark Sea: Whaling in the Medieval North Atlantic* is something of a counter argument here, but, despite two years of studying Old Norse, I am not a medieval scholar and am not up to the task of explaining disputes between thirteenth century Icelandic families in dividing up beached whales from an environmental humanities perspective.) As a modern historian, once I had finished looking at the records of the one viable Icelandic whaling company, the newspaper accounts, and a large archive of photos, including those of 1970s Icelandic protests against whaling, I didn't feel that I had very much else to say.

Fortunately, but also unfortunately, one does not have to travel very far from anywhere on the globe to find a great deal of material on the slaughter of whales and sea mammals. In Greenland, there is not only a long history of catching whales (too long in fact for the historian, in fact, more for the archaeologist) but also a painstakingly complete archive. There, I could find a much deeper archive on whaling, and one written in a language I already knew, as the same Danish bureaucracy that wanted to transform Iceland also managed Greenland. Every letter sent and received in North Greenland, where most of the whaling took place, in the eighteenth century was copied first, so the records usually exist in both Copenhagen and Nuuk, although large number from South Greenland were lost in the 1950s when the Danish ship transporting them sank. Furthermore, if one has at any point, however badly, studied medieval Icelandic history and language, following the route of Eirík the Red westward from Iceland to Greenland feels like a natural journey. After having studied what the state attempted to do with their northernmost agricultural economy, I thought it would be interesting to see how this same state treated a northern hunting and fishing economy. How was whaling managed

before international regulation in 1946, and what results did this management have for both animals and humans living under it?

From Greenland, it really is only a short jump across the Davis Strait to whaling in the Canadian North. Here, the records also turn out to be quite good, but not because the state played any great role. Rather, for individual reasons: if you were a captain of a whaling boat in the Hudson Bay over the Arctic winter in the nineteenth century, one of your chief enemies, besides darkness and cold, would be boredom. If the ship had left from New Bedford in New England, it was probably a temperance ship into the bargain, so there was (at least strictly legally) not even alcohol on board. So anything that happened, especially if Inuit natives showed up with deer to trade for tobacco, or if you hoped that they might because your men were dying of scurvy and needed fresh meat, was an event to write about.

Whales seem like a large enough subject in and of themselves, but, in reading the documents from both sides of the Davis Strait, it quickly becomes clear that Arctic whaling involves much more than whales. The whale hunt was the meeting of indigenous and Western hunters and their tools, languages, and cultures, and it was also the way in which many muskoxen, caribou, seals, reindeer and other Arctic animals met their deaths. Men living in the Hudson Bay over a long winter and the two adjoining summers needed fresh meat, and it was the hunting of these animals which, even more than the whales, spurred the Danish colonial administration of Greenland and the newly-empowered Canadian state to act about problems of Arctic animal management.

My project at the RCC, *Seals, Muskoxen, and Whales: Arctic Nature Management in the Long Nineteenth Century,* is a history of animals and hunting in the global Arctic. The global Arctic has been divided between the Danish, Canadian, American, and Russian states, which have employed vastly different strategies and approaches towards nature and hunting management—from centralized paternalistic cameralism in the east, to laissez-faire neglect and private commercial management in the western end. But the state in its various incarnations is always something of a remote actor in the Arctic. Capitals like Copenhagen and Washington, DC, are very far away, and people living in these centers of power tend to know very little about the actual lives of the inhabitants of the northernmost edges of their counties—one reason perhaps why *imagining* has been such an important theme in the study of the Arctic and the North. In my project, through analyzing the impact of hunting on a number of different Arctic animals, not just whales, I am trying to determine what difference divergent state policies could make for animal

populations. On both sides of the Davis Strait, the record seems to mainly reveal failures and catastrophes nearly averted: the Danish state's impotence in halting the English whalers' smuggling trade, and the near-extinction of the musk oxen hunted by whalers on Canadian islands before the state finally stepped in. Whatever the state's intentions, they often fell short in the encounter with native hunters, foreign whalers, or nature itself in the Arctic. At the RCC, I was able to explore these ideas in conversations with colleagues who were experts in hunting in Canadian history, whaling history, catastrophes in Russian history, marine environmental history, and Scandinavian environmental history. Through these conversations, my project took on new dimensions beyond the interest in North Atlantic whaling politics which had led me along this path.

Life in Munich at the RCC is in the end, however, nourished not only by the libraries, the scholarly community, but also by the Isar River. This is an idiosyncratic opinion, but I was born in one port city, grew up in another, and have never lived for any length of time away from the sea. Bavaria is the most landlocked place I have ever lived, but the Isar seems to hold great importance for the inhabitants of the city. They divert it, restore it, produce energy from it, fish in it, and surf on it. And riverine landscapes are also dangerous ones. In May-June, 2013, following rainfall which had been as much as twice the yearly average in some areas of southern Central Europe, parts of Bavaria, including the city of Passau, to which a RCC *Betreibsausflug* had been planned, flooded. Twenty-five lives were lost in the floods in Germany, the Czech Republic, and Austria. Having just returned to the RCC from a visit to Nuuk where a snowstorm had cancelled the Air Greenland flights the day before I arrived, I was reminded that what dangerous and exotic landscapes look like can differ very much from each other. Earthquakes and mudslides are not the only kinds of reoccurring natural catastrophes and chestnut trees in biergartens look different after coming back to them from Nuuk. It's important to once in a while reconsider what exotic landscapes are and how much our imaginations shape them.