

occasionally trips over sentences where the English version does not reflect this mastery, and there are occasional minor errors in the spellings of Inuktitut words.

This book will be very useful for people traveling to Ukkusiksalik National Park (everyone planning a trip there should read it), as well as to students and teachers. It will also appeal to those who enjoy learning about the Arctic and its history. Most importantly, the book is a well-balanced source of information for young Inuit who, whether or not they have family connections to Ukkusiksalik, are hungry for better understanding of the past to help them find their bearings in a time of sustained and rapid change.

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ALASKA'S SKYBOYS: COWBOY PILOTS AND THE MYTH OF THE LAST FRONTIER. By KATHERINE JOHNSON RINGSMUTH. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015. ISBN 978-0-295-99508-3. xiii + 267 p., b&w illus., notes, bib., index. Hardbound. US\$34.95.

Despite this book's title, *Alaska's Skyboys: Cowboy Pilots and the Myth of the Last Frontier*, and the sepia-toned image of a bush plane soaring over Alaskan snowcapped mountains on its cover, Katherine Johnson Ringsmuth's Alaska aviation history centers only upon the area of Alaska that would eventually become the Wrangell–St. Elias National Park and Preserve and its surrounding communities (“the Wrangells”). Ringsmuth moves beyond the formulaic bush pilot biography as she seeks to illuminate the complicated relationship between the Wrangells' aviators, the federal government, and the American psyche. Ringsmuth also explores the greater social influences that have molded the public's romanticized view of Alaska and its bush pilots as 20th century manifestations of the 19th century concept of frontier and repackaging of the cowboy romance.

Perhaps Ringsmuth's greatest strength and weakness in undertaking this line of research is that she is not, herself, an aviator, a fact she bluntly puts forth in the book's opening line: “I am not a pilot” (p. xi). Aviation aficionados reading the book may pick up on that fact when occasional inaccuracies about aircraft types occur, such as her description of the Douglas DC-3 (p. 3). Those from non-aviation backgrounds will appreciate the lack of technical jargon and language highly specific to the aviation industry.

*Alaska's Skyboys* emphasizes the role that government investment has played in the advancement of the air transport industry in Alaska and asserts, quite rightly, that this crucial element of Alaska's aviation history is often overlooked by those advancing the cowboy narrative.

Ringsmuth begins with a discussion of Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis as it deals with “the growth of democracy, rugged individualism and American exceptionalism” (p. 14), and from there illustrates how the development of air transport in Alaska's Wrangell Mountains has been framed in the public eye as a reinterpretation of this idea. *Alaska's Skyboys* recounts the major economic influences on the development of air transport—mining, mail delivery, scientific research, and military, hunting, and conservation activities—as it grew to become a fixture of everyday life in Cordova, Valdez, and other Wrangell Mountain area communities. Ringsmuth focuses on several early bush pilots—Charles “Harold” Gillam, Robert “Bob” Campbell Reeve, M.D. “Kirk” Kirkpatrick, and perhaps the most amusingly nicknamed, Merle “Mudhole” Smith—who have strongly influenced the development of the air transport industry in the Wrangells. While she highlights some of the structural changes that have occurred within the industry, for example, the shift from those early single pilot operators to larger corporations, she notes the continuing drive to capitalize on Alaska's reputation as a “pristine wilderness—a luxury quickly disappearing on America's new industrial, technological, and progressive frontiers” (p. 129), thus clinging to the frontier imagery. Ringsmuth concludes with a discussion of how late 20th century conservationist movements involving the Wrangell Mountains area have affected the way aviators interact with the territory that has become Wrangell–St. Elias National Park and Preserve as government regulation has effectively fenced in their former frontier.

Scholars of Alaska aviation may find Ringsmuth's depth of research similar to Ira Harkey's (1999) biography *Noel Wien: Alaska Pioneer Bush Pilot*. Ringsmuth's research and documentation is both thorough and evident throughout the book, sometimes to the detriment of the narrative. In this respect, *Alaska's Skyboys* struggles somewhat to find its pacing and flow. Ringsmuth occasionally digresses to topics only obliquely related to the main theme, leaving the impression that it was some juicy tidbit dug up during research and considered too interesting to leave out. The book finally reaches its stride approximately two-thirds of the way through, when the frontier skyboy theme again comes into focus, in the context of post-war sport hunting in the Wrangells.

The greatest disappointment about this book is that the skyboy thesis is not more consistently supported throughout the text. Future editions of this volume would benefit from more careful copy-editing, a tighter narrative structure, and the verification of technical details pertaining to aircraft operations. Descriptions of the early pilots, while informative, could be condensed significantly and still provide valuable support for the frontier argument. Typographical errors throughout the book are apparently the result of overreliance on word processor spell check software. While most of these errors are minor and can be interpreted from context, they do detract from the authoritative level of the work.

Even with these shortcomings, Ringsmuth's *Alaska Skyboys* is more thoroughly researched and impartially presented than many Alaska aviation historiographies. *Skyboys* would be a valuable addition to the libraries of scholars of mining, aviation, and the environmental movement in Alaska. Ringsmuth has undertaken the formidable task of countering the common and often detrimental cowboy pioneer narrative coloring a century of Alaska aviation. This book is for any readers who wish to broaden their own established notions of "The Last Frontier." It also provides valuable insights for upper-level history students, any students of Alaska aviation, and general readers who wish to deepen their understanding of the aviation industry in Alaska. Readers expecting another collection of pilots' daring exploits will, for the most part, be disappointed. While those types of bush pilot dramas can be engaging, they often serve only to support the frontier misconception, so it is hardly surprising that Ringsmuth diverges from that overdone approach throughout her book. In an era when safety is the highest priority to government administrators, airlines, and certainly passengers, changing the narrative and the way pilots think of themselves and their predecessors may literally make the difference between life and death. Unfortunately, the \$34.95 list price seems slightly high, although not out of line for the type of publication. For those interested in the topic, *Alaska's Skyboys* is nonetheless worth the purchase price, both as a reference work and for casual reading.

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