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V. Book/Journal Article Reviews

Give Me My Father's Body: The Life of Minik the New York Eskimo, by Kenn Harper, Steerforth Press, South Royalton, VT, 2000. $24.00 (cloth).

Melody Herr
Johns Hopkins University Press

When Arctic explorer Robert Peary came home in September 1897, he brought with him a thirty-ton meteorite, an ethnological collection, and a group of Polar Eskimos for the American Museum of Natural History, which were immediately put on display. No matter that four of the six Eskimos died: the Museum just removed them from temporary exhibits and catalogued in them permanent collections. Of the two surviving, one returned to Greenland the following summer, the other remained in the household of a Museum administrator, William Wallace. This little orphan named Minik became the "New York Eskimo" of the title, and the phrase aptly summarizes his oxymoronic life.

For the first few years, Minik enjoyed the privileges of a white, middle-class child. Then, when the revelation of a long-standing swindling operation at the Museum implicated Wallace, he resigned his post; and his façade of prosperity collapsed, exposing a structure of IOU slips. Almost simultaneously, his wife died. Relatives took in the Wallaces' own son while Minik remained with his destitute guardian who appealed to the Museum's president and Peary's patron, the multi-millionaire Morris K. Jesup, for the boy's support. Both Jesup and Peary, however, absolved themselves of all responsibility.

Living with Wallace in boarding houses and working beside ditch-diggers at poorly paid jobs, Minik

witnessed the other side of life in America. At times mistaken for an American Indian or a much despised Chinese immigrant, he experienced the indifference of a society that sucks the marrow and discards the bones-or exhibits them. The discovery of his father's skeleton hanging in a glass box at the Museum completed Minik's disillusionment. An Eskimo did not belong in New York, he decided; childhood memories beckoned him to Greenland.

When at last Minik returned in 1909, his relatives welcomed him heartily. As he struggled to learn their language and way of life, however, feelings of alienation once again overtook him, now a New Yorker in the Arctic. Recalling idyllic summers on the Wallace country estate, the landscape of memory once again pulled him. Within seven years, he was back in the States where he drifted from job to job. He died of the Spanish flu in 1918 in a New Hampshire lumber camp.

Throughout the book, Kenn Harper unmasks the inhumanity of treating another culture as a curiosity. Peary's cargo of 1897 typifies such an approach. The meteorite had provided Polar Eskimos with a ready source of iron ore; and when Peary claimed it for the Museum, he made them dependent upon sporadic trade. Yet, even while he encouraged the adoption of manufactured goods, he collected traditional clothes and tools to present to the gawking public, much as a magician shows his audience the white rabbit a moment before making it vanish.

Eskimos, both living and dead, completed the curio cabinet. In the name of science, the scribbling anthropologist noted their behavior, the inquisitive anatomist examined their bodies, the near-sighted curator numbered their skeletons. Meanwhile, the glory-seeking explorer who sacrificed their lives gave them a scant footnote in his treatise.

If at times Harper depicts these scientists as inhumane, he also shows the Eskimos as only too human. Having lived with Minik's people, now called the Inuit, he does not romanticize their harsh lives or sparse culture. They too, he demonstrates, could be guilty of laziness, pride, greed, and murder. Moreover, none of the characters are two-dimension saints or villains; even Minik appears sometimes as a traumatized victim, sometimes as an arrogant opportunist. Harper achieves this holographic effect by presenting the varying versions of the story available in surviving correspondence, museum records, newspaper articles, and, in particular, interviews with those in Greenland as well as those in the States who remember the New York Eskimo.

Thanks to the collective conscious pricked by the book's initial publication in 1986 and by the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) of 1990, Minik's father and the three other Eskimos now rest in their homeland. *Give Me My Father's Body* nonetheless retains all its original poignance in this timely new edition. Amidst confrontations over artifacts and remains, Harper reminds us that these political symbols hold intensely personal significance. His book will evoke indignation, disgust, guilt, and sometimes amusement—but also unconsolable sorrow.