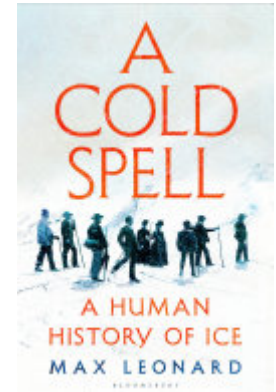


Max Leonard. *A Cold Spell: A Human History of Ice.* London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023. xx + 298 pp. Ill. \$18.76, paper, ISBN 978-1-5266-3117-6.



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Leonard Puts the Ice in “Environmental Cr-ice-is”

In his new general-audience book, *A Cold Spell: A Human History of Ice* (2023), the writer Max Leonard chronicles the ways in which people from temperate regions have encountered and used ice throughout history. Struck by the disconnect between the calving glacier on a pub TV and the iced drink in his hand, Leonard wonders how it is that people like him are asked to care about ice far away when they encounter it in ordinary settings on a daily basis. In pursuing this thought, and reading widely about the various human interactions with ice as a substance, he finds himself convinced that “a history of ice could be an alternative history of us” (p. xvi), “us” being readers who live in the part of the world he calls “home” (Britain and western Europe, roughly speaking).

What follows is a whistle-stop tour of ice throughout history. The first two chapters focus particularly on deep pasts, reconstructing human

relationships with ice based on cave paintings and mummified human remains. We then quickly skip to the early modern period, when the Dutch and British reveled in wintery landscapes during the Little Ice Age, and when proto-venture capitalists set sail for the Arctic in search of the Northwest Passage. After a brief introduction to seventeenth-century ice science, we learn about the long history of ice in food consumption and preservation, the latter leading into an account of early “cold-chains” and the development of refrigerated networks in the nineteenth century. Staying in this century, we then follow British tourists as they encounter the cold stuff in the European Alps, before learning about the discovery of ancient animal remains in glaciers that challenged existing understandings of the earth’s deep past. Subsequent chapters deal with the role of ice in nineteenth-century medical practice, twentieth-century war-

fare, and postwar attempts to “meddle” with the world’s frozen water on a planetary scale.

Leonard is not the first to write a book about ice and human history.[1] Some previous works are included in his select bibliography, featuring a somewhat unusual selection of both accessible general-audience literature such as Mariana Gosnell’s *Ice* (2005)—which starts in much the same way as Leonard’s book, with the contrast between an ice cube and Arctic sea ice—and specialized academic literature—notably Joanna Radin and Emma Kowal’s *Cryopolitics* (2017) and Kostas Gavroglu’s *History of Artificial Cold* (2014).[2] A series of articles in the journal *Weather* by Hisami Nakamura and Julyan Cartwright, which offer a more comparative focus between Japanese and European understandings of snow and ice in science and literature, are also cited as a source of inspiration. A conspicuous absence in Leonard’s bibliography, however, is Klaus Dodds’s *Ice: Nature and Culture* (2018). It also tells the multifaceted story of human interactions with ice, including its geopolitical, cultural, and leisurely aspects, although it pays more attention to contemporary and non-Western (in particular polar) contexts.

The strength of this book lies in its ability to reveal connections between different interactions with ice. The morbid process by which Alpine glaciers disgorge the remains of unfortunate climbers and soldiers is the same as the process by which paleontologists and archaeologists are given insights into past fauna and cultures (insights which, as Leonard claims, fundamentally changed the way people understood the history of the world). That these remains were so intact is linked to the use of ice’s cooling properties in medical procedures, or the transport and preservation of foodstuffs. In addition to helping preserve food, ice was also enjoyed alongside it: as a gastronomic item, but also as an environment for recreation and artistic expression. In fact, ice pervades art and literature, from Hendrick Avercamp’s paintings to Kurt Vonnegut’s *Cat’s Cradle* (1963).

The latter was inspired by the author’s brother, who worked on weather modification and cloud seeding in the mid-twentieth century—another issue in which ice played a prominent role. Indeed, this period was a heady one in the history of ice science and its practical applications, from the invention of snow-making machines for movie sets and ski resorts to the construction of ice-based aircraft carriers and underground ice bases in Greenland.

As this summary suggests, the theme of ice in human history invites many different perspectives, which Leonard—to his credit—looks to do justice to. Yet his whistle-stop approach also has its drawbacks. His choice of stories in particular is quite idiosyncratic. There are large discrepancies in length between stories, with some being mentioned in a paragraph or two while others occupy sizable chunks of chapters. Certain sweeping claims about ice in human history rest on thin examples or bodies of scholarship, and some chapters with large themes feature only two or three examples (which make you think, Why these?). The reader is prepared to expect mainly British stories given the author’s emphasis on his “home,” but the stated purpose of avoiding polar narratives is somewhat undermined by the inclusion of a chapter devoted mainly to European expeditions into the Arctic. There is also a marked preference for morbid stories, not just in the chapters about ice mummies. A clearer sense of how Leonard selected his episodes in the human history of ice would have been welcome. Indeed, he does occasionally put himself in the narrative through anecdotes from his research: reading a book in the Wellcome Library; visiting the Aiguille di Midi. But at times his presence is paired with explicit judgements on the (in)correctness of past ideas and scientific understandings, which for historians trained to avoid positivistic narratives may be somewhat grating.

A Cold Spell is ambitious, not just in its scope but also in its aim. A concept Leonard repeatedly

returns to throughout the book is that of “cryopolitics,” specifically as it is defined by Michael Bravo in his contribution to Radin and Kowal’s volume. [3] Bravo’s call for a renewed sense of connection between different forms of ice provides the driving impetus for this book: “My hope is that by bringing ice into a more intimate sphere, by trying to understand the richness and complexity of our relationship with it and restoring the sense of wonder, the catastrophe happening in remote places will become more tangible” (p. xviii). In so doing, Leonard joins a chorus of writers, artists, scientists, and activists striving to make ice a more present substance in the collective memory and imagination of those living in temperate regions, for whom ice is not a defining feature of their environment.

At a time when this substance is becoming both less and more present, respectively in the sense of its rapid disappearance and our increasing awareness of this disappearance, books like Leonard’s will become ever more common. Readers with a general interest in the topic will certainly come away thinking of ice not just as an endangered faraway landscape, but as a substance intimately tied to our histories of science, commerce, leisure, radicalism, art, and war.

Notes

[1]. Indeed, not even the first in the past few years. See, for instance, Fred Hogge, *Of Ice and Men: How We’ve Used Cold to Transform Humanity* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2022); and Amy Brady, *Ice: From Mixed Drinks to Skating Rinks—A Cool History of a Hot Commodity* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 2023).

[2]. *Cryopolitics: Frozen Life in a Melting World*, eds. Joanna Radin and Emma Kowal (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017); Kostas Gavroglu, ed., *History of Artificial Cold, Scientific, Technological and Cultural Issues* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2014).

[3]. Michael Bravo, “A Cryopolitics to Reclaim Our Frozen Material States,” in Radin and Kowal (2017), 27-57.

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