



**Oheň na sněhu** (Fire on Ice), subtitled *Mýty sibiřských lovců* (Myths of Siberian Hunters, Prague Argo, 1998, 116 pp., translated by Jiří Horák); and second, a volume entitled **Grónské mýty a pověsti** (Myths and Legends of Greenland; Prague, Argo, 1998, 314 pp., translated by Viola and Zdeněk Lyčka), reviewed by Oldřich Kašpar.

The Prague publishing company ARGO, which has earned a fairly high reputation by its editions of quality writings in many fields not excepting those of history and ethnography, has most recently enriched this country's book market by a fresh pair of interesting books. First, a rather slender volume of mythological and folklore narratives of Siberian ethnic groups, published here under the poetic name **Oheň na sněhu** (Fire on Ice), subtitled *Mýty sibiřských lovců* (Myths of Siberian Hunters, Prague Argo, 1998, 116 pp., translated by Jiří Horák); and second, a volume entitled **Grónské mýty a pověsti** (Myths and Legends of Greenland; Prague, Argo, 1998, 314 pp., translated by Viola and Zdeněk Lyčka).

Not so long ago the same field was charted in a remarkable way by Pavlína Brzáková, a student of Ethnology and Mongolian Studies at Prague's Charles University, who published two collections of texts: **Goromo Goroló** (Stories of the Siberian Evenks, Prague, Citadela, 1966); and **Jamtana** (Stories of the Siberian Nentsy, Prague, Citadela, 1997). If Brzáková based her endeavour directly on material gathered during her own field expeditions in Siberia between 1991 and 1995, and, inspired by Ladislav Novák's earlier exploit (*Písně vrbového proutku*, Prague 1965), did not hesitate to experiment with the language of her translation, Horák's work exemplifies the classic concept of a publication destined for

the broadest circle of readers. While no cue is offered as to the identity of the ethnic groups that have produced the various "Siberian texts," the latter encompass the full scale of genres, from myth down to "animal fairy-tale", narrated in a witty, cultured language. One can only regret that the author has failed to supply at least a rudimentary list of sources he used during his work on the book (even a brief bibliographic note would have been more than welcome). As it is, the said "deficit" considerably reduces the book's value for the concerned reader. This critical remark notwithstanding, Horák's book can be regarded as an interesting contribution to the discovery of the still largely uncharted field of exotic folklore.

The first comprehensive look at Greenland's mythology and folklore to be published in this country, **Grónské mýty a pověsti** draws primarily on Knud Rasmussen's famous trilogy, **Myths and Legends from Greenland I-III** (1921-1924), and the same author's posthumously published three-tome anthology, **Inuit Narrative (Greenlandic Legends and Myths) I-III**, 1981.

It is hardly necessary to introduce in these lines Knud Rasmussen (1879-1933); suffice it to recall that he was a scholar and public activist (whose grandmother was a Greenlander) who spoke Greenlandic and was familiar with the cultural tradition of the Inuit people, prepared for his career from early youth. His lifelong endeavours as a scholar and collector involved the translation of the majority of Greenlandic myths and legends into Danish, which actually preserved this heritage not only for future folkloristic and other study, but also for the treasury of world literature.

He gathered most of the material for his work during a Danish literary expedition carried out between 1902 and 1904, when he recorded primarily myths of the previously isolated Inuit community on Greenland's east coast, and of the polar Inuit inhabiting the island's northernmost part. The remaining texts were collected in the relatively milder climatic zones of the south and west coast of Greenland.

While reading Inuit narratives, one should be aware, perhaps more acutely than ever, of the fundamental and generally known fact that all of the tales, which had been until then passed on exclusively by oral tradition, bear all of its characteristic features. That is to say, when deprived of the appropriate repertoire of gestures, facial expressions and changes of voice colour, none of which are naturally translatable into written form, these narratives may strike the "unseasoned" reader as somewhat clumsy and monotonous. Equally "unpalatable" and colourless is the outward appear-

rance of some of the legends whose main purpose used to be the whiling away of time, and ultimately even the "lulling" of the audience to sleep.

The mythological corpus of the Inuit encompasses all the texts of the classic repertoire known from other peoples' lores. Naturally enough, it contains cosmogonic myths explaining the origin of the celestial bodies and the creation of the Earth; etiological myths; and even reflections, in their own right, of the "mythological history" of the Inuit people.

It should be pointed out here that in recording the individual narratives Knud Rasmussen systematically avoided any interference with their original structure, and subsequently, in his translations, he took similar pains to stick as closely as possible to their original form, including specific attributes of the narrators' rendition and style. He strove to incorporate into his books the maximum number of Inuit oral genres, while by no means forgetting to provide an explanatory introduction dealing with the Inuit spirit and imagination. Much credit is due to the editors of the Czech selection from Rasmussen's work, for having included its parts that are of true substance in the above sense. Viola and Zdeněk Lyčka also deserve praise for a highly accomplished, erudite and, above all, faithful translation;

And Zdeněk Lyčka for an interesting, instructive introduction and postscript. Importantly, the book also contains a vocabulary of basic terms and bibliography, thereby corresponding even to the needs of a fairly demanding reader. Finally, one should mention the book's witty albeit perhaps somewhat unorthodox illustrations by Martin Velíšek.

Both of the reviewed books significantly enrich the bibliography of Czech translations of foreign folklore-based texts.