

HUGH M. FRENCH



The Periglacial Environment

THIRD EDITION

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The Periglacial Environment

Third Edition

Hugh M. French
The University of Ottawa



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The Periglacial Environment

Preface to First Edition

This book is intended for use by second- and third-year level geography students in universities or colleges of higher education in the United Kingdom. It is also suitable as a text for an undergraduate course on periglacial geomorphology at the honors level in Canada and the United States. On a more general level, the book may prove useful to high school teachers and other individuals interested or specializing in the physical geography of cold regions. I have assumed, however, that the reader will already possess some understanding of the physical environment, such as might be provided by a first-year physical geography or elementary geomorphology course.

In writing this book I had two aims in mind. The first was to give a realistic appraisal of the nature of the geomorphic processes and landforms in high-latitude periglacial environments. The second was to provide some guide to the recognition and interpretation of periglacial features in the now temperate regions of North America and Europe. The regional emphasis is oriented towards areas of which I have personal field experience, notably the western Canadian Arctic, central Siberia, southern England, and central Poland. Thus, the overall focus is more towards lowland, rather than alpine, periglacial conditions. Notwithstanding this comment, I have attempted to give a balanced world picture; important literature pertaining to other areas has been incorporated.

The reasons for writing this book are also twofold. First, the majority of students will never have the opportunity to experience, at first hand, high-latitude periglacial environments. However, since cold conditions prevailed over large areas of middle latitudes at several times during the last one million years, the appreciation of such conditions is essential for a balanced interpretation of these landscapes. Second, the vast northern regions of North America and Siberia are assuming an ever-increasing importance in man's quest for natural resources. Their development will be possible only if we understand the terrain and climatic conditions of these regions. For both these reasons, I hope this book will serve a useful purpose.

I have divided the book into three parts. Part 1 is a general introduction to periglacial conditions in which the extent of the periglacial domain and the variety of periglacial climates are briefly considered. Part 2 presents a systematic treatment of the various geomorphic processes operating in present-day periglacial environments. Wherever possible, I have attempted to show the relationship between process and form and to stress the multivariate nature of many landforms. The sequence of chapters is important since they are planned to be read successively. Part 3 serves only as an introduction to Pleistocene periglacial phenomena. Emphasis in this part is upon forms rather than processes and their interpretation in the light of our understanding of similar phenomena in present-day periglacial environments.

I have not attempted to be comprehensive in my treatment of the literature. By selecting information, I have attempted to give a viewpoint. Inevitably, this viewpoint is biased to

reflect my own prejudices and field experience. For example, if I had worked extensively in alpine rather than high-latitude lowland environments, probably I would not have given the same emphasis to permafrost, ground ice and thermokarst as I do. However, I believe a viewpoint is necessary since my experience with students is that they require some guidance in coping with the increasing volume of literature which appears each year.

I would like to acknowledge the help and encouragement given me by a number of individuals and organizations, without which this book would not have been written. The late Professor Jan Dylik of the University of Łódź, Poland, provided me with much inspiration and encouragement in the early stages, as well as friendship and hospitality. He was instrumental in planning the organization of many of the chapters and it is to be regretted that his untimely death in 1973 did not permit him to see the final product. Professors Ron Waters and Stan Gregory of the University of Sheffield, England, were also extremely helpful in encouraging me to write this book and identifying its basic thrust. In Canada, the opportunity to work in the Arctic since 1968 has been made possible by the active support of the Geological Survey of Canada and the Polar Continental Shelf Project. Numerous individuals both in Canada and the United Kingdom have helped in many ways, by discussion, providing material, and reading some of the early draft chapters; they include R. J. E. Brown, M. J. Clark, J. G. Fyles, P. G. Johnson, D. Mottershead, A. Pissart, D. A. St-Onge, R. J. Small, and P. Worsley. To all, I extend my thanks.

Last, and most important of all, the unfailing encouragement and support of my wife, Sharon, is acknowledged with deep gratitude and affection.

Hugh M. French
Ottawa, 1976

Preface to Second Edition

When I drafted the first edition of *The Periglacial Environment* over twenty years ago, I had worked in the cold, non-glacial regions of the world for only six years, mostly in the Canadian Arctic. Having previously completed my graduate studies upon the Pleistocene periglacial phenomena found on the Chalklands of Southern England, I looked to the polar region of North America as a natural analogue for the cold-climate conditions which had largely fashioned the Chalk landscape. Now, after nearly twenty more years of field work in many of the so-called periglacial regions of the world, I am not sure that a simple analogue exists. Instead, I am impressed by the complexity and diversity of periglacial environments, both today and in the past.

The last twenty years has also seen a dramatic expansion in our understanding of the geomorphic conditions, especially permafrost, which typify these environments. A distinct process-oriented geomorphology, termed *geocryology* or *permafrost science*, has developed in North America and elsewhere, building largely but not exclusively upon Russian concepts and principles. There has also been an integration into periglacial geomorphology of modern instrumentation and technology. At the same time, rapid advances in Quaternary dating techniques mean that our understanding of Pleistocene events is now more precise.

Underlying much of our interest in the cold non-glacial regions of the world is an appreciation of the natural resources known to occur in such regions. For example, the oil and gas resources of the Western Siberian Plain, some of the largest in the world, necessitate an understanding of the tundra and taiga environments. Modern environmental protection attitudes dictate that the exploitation of these resources is undertaken in a manner which minimizes harmful impacts upon the terrain, flora, fauna, and indigenous peoples of these regions. The same is true in North America, and in many of the alpine periglacial regions of the world. Finally, the significance of the cryosphere, of which the periglacial domain is an important component, is now being examined in the context of ongoing and predicted global changes. For various reasons, it is thought that global climate changes will be first apparent and most magnified in the high latitudes. Hence, there is an urgent need for the monitoring of change in the boreal forest, tundra, and polar desert environments.

For all these reasons, a second edition of my earlier work is justified. My aim has been to incorporate the results of these new developments while at the same time not altering the overall level, scope and organization of the book. I have tried to maintain the original flavor and style; however, many chapters are new and others have been entirely rewritten. The volume also looks different since I have deliberately tried to incorporate a large number of new or different diagrams and photos. As with the first edition, my selection of material is deliberately subjective; I have not attempted a comprehensive coverage of the literature, and the book is certainly not meant to be reference text. Rather, the second

edition continues to be my own personalized view of the cold non-glacial environments of the world. There is a heavy emphasis upon those areas with which I have familiarity, such as the North American and Eurasian polar and mid-latitude lowlands. The alpine, high-altitude periglacial environments of middle and low latitude are not neglected but, because there is a relative abundance of accurate up-to-date information available elsewhere, I feel justified in my lack of emphasis in this area. A second omission in the coverage of this book, also apparent in the first edition, is the relative lack of examples from the southern hemisphere, especially the ice-free areas of Antarctica. Here, I plead my partial ignorance. Finally, the extensive periglacial region of the Qinghai-Xizang (Tibet) Plateau has so far not been adequately described in the western literature, yet it is the same size as the North American or Eurasian periglacial regions. Thus, I have attempted to incorporate, wherever appropriate, data from this unusual environment.

Throughout my academic career I have taught in the Departments of Geography and Geology at the University of Ottawa. This has been a fruitful and productive milieu for pursuing my periglacial interests. I have been fortunate in supervising, over the years, a number of talented and energetic graduate students and employing undergraduate field assistants, all without whom my visits to the Arctic would have been much lonelier and certainly less productive. In this regard, special mention and warm appreciation must be given to the stimulus provided by Paul Egginton, Toni Lewkowicz, David Harry, Wayne Pollard, Dana Naldrett, Lorne Bennett, Julian Murton, and Baolai Wang. They have contributed much to my understanding of the geomorphology and Quaternary geology of the cold non-glacial regions of the world. At the same time numerous colleagues, both in Canada and elsewhere, have encouraged me, or collaborated with me; these include Mike Clark, Jan Gozdzik, Cheng Guodong, Charlie Harris, Stuart Harris, Alan Heginbottom, Alfred Jahn, Johannes Karte, Vyacheslav Konishchev, Eduard Koster, J. Ross Mackay, Derek Mottershead, Troy Péwé, Albert Pissart, Anders Rapp, Nikolai Romanovskii, Mike Smith, and Link Washburn. Several colleagues, sadly no longer alive, have also influenced me: the late Roger J. E. Brown was instrumental in encouraging me to become more involved in the geotechnical aspects of permafrost, and in the administration of permafrost science and engineering in Canada; the late Brian Rust, my longtime friend and colleague in Geology at the University of Ottawa, always provided critical support and fostered in me an appreciation of Pleistocene and Recent sedimentation. Finally, NSERC and PCSP have generously provided operating grants and Arctic logistics respectively over a twenty-five year period, and I have received close support and cooperation from many officers of the Geological Survey of Canada and from the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, both agencies located in Ottawa.

My secretary, Pierrette Gouin, has provided outstanding service in the preparation of the text.

To all mentioned above, I owe a debt of gratitude since this second edition is as much their work as it is mine.

Hugh M. French
Ottawa, 1995

Preface to Third Edition

It is more than 30 years since I wrote the first edition of this text. In hindsight, that was a bold, possibly premature, venture that justified the *Second Edition* in 1996. Now, the last 10 years has witnessed continued advances in periglacial geomorphology, geocryology and Quaternary science. These have been combined with a growing awareness of the importance of high latitudes in the context of global climate warming. It is now widely accepted that high latitudes will be significantly impacted. Several positive feedback mechanisms will accentuate climate warming. These include progressive shrinkage of the snow and sea-ice covers and the thaw-degradation of permafrost. The latter will release increasing amounts of greenhouse gases (CO_2 , CH_4) into the atmosphere. A different group of recent concerns relate to the nine million or more people, mostly in Russia and northern Eurasia, who live in the periglacial environments. Their future health and economic well being are issues that need to be addressed. Closely linked is the fact that high latitudes contain significant natural resources, notably hydrocarbons and minerals, the future exploitation and development of which is almost inevitable. For all these reasons, there is a continued need to understand the periglacial environment, and a third edition is required.

Although the overall plan of the book remains the same, all chapters have been rewritten or reorganized. However, the balance of the text remains unchanged. There is a deliberate emphasis upon cold-climate weathering, permafrost, ground ice, and thermokarst (Chapters 4–8). This is because I believe these topics lie at the heart of periglacial geomorphology and supply the solid scientific base upon which the discipline rests.

The third edition continues to be my personalized view of the landscapes of the cold, non-glacial regions of the world. As before, it does not attempt a comprehensive coverage of the literature. At the same time, I have attempted to give a balanced interpretation. The professional reader may find fault in my treatment of certain controversial topics, such as cold-climate weathering, the relative importance of azonal versus permafrost-related processes, and global climate change. The geotechnical reader will find my treatment of ground freezing, certain geomorphic processes, and the engineering aspects, to be descriptive and somewhat superficial. Likewise, techniques of investigation, either in the field, laboratory, remotely-sensed, or involving numerical simulation, are brief. On the other hand, I hope that my treatment is sufficiently provocative and in-depth as to stimulate further research.

There are some areas where I have deliberately not ventured far. As in earlier editions, I have continued to emphasize high latitude, at the expense of alpine, periglacial environments. This is because other colleagues have more in-depth experience of the latter, especially in the mid-latitudes of the world, and of mountains. Glaciers, and surface snow and ice in general, I also leave to others, yet an understanding of these topics is clearly relevant to modern periglacial geomorphology. I am also conscious of the vast amount of Quaternary knowledge now available and the sophistication of dating and other

techniques. Therefore, I view my treatment of Pleistocene periglacial environments in Part III as merely an introduction to a highly specialized field that deserves separate treatment. The same must be said for Part IV. I have always been aware of the need to apply periglacial knowledge and believe that periglacial geomorphology should not be a narrowly focused academic discipline. Part IV serves as an introduction to a field that deserve separate and much fuller treatment elsewhere.

For nearly forty years, I have conducted field work in the cold, non-glacial environments of the high latitudes. Since publication of the *Second Edition*, I have undertaken additional fieldwork in Antarctica and Svalbard. I am grateful to the Italian Antarctic Program (PNRA) for providing the opportunity to work in Southern Victoria Land in the late 1990s, and to GAP Adventures for allowing me to visit the Falkland Islands, South Georgia, and many localities in the Antarctic Peninsula in 2005–2006. As regards Svalbard, I thank UNIS and Professor Ole Humlum for inviting me each spring between 1999 and 2004. In recent years, I also commenced Pleistocene periglacial investigations in the mid-latitudes of eastern North America, notably the Gaspésie Mountains of Québec, Canada, and the Pine Barrens of Southern New Jersey, USA. I have attempted to incorporate all these recent experiences into the third edition.

The *Second Edition* owed much to the research of my Arctic graduate students at the University of Ottawa. A number continue to provide me with inspiration. Equally important, in my role as Editor-in-Chief of *Permafrost and Periglacial Processes* (PPP) between 1990 and 2005, my interaction with numerous authors, reviewers and Editorial Board members has broadened significantly my understanding of periglacial geomorphology, geocryology, and Quaternary science. Finally, I have received invaluable support, guidance and encouragement from numerous good friends and colleagues, several of more than thirty years standing. The latter include the late Alfred Jahn, J. Ross Mackay, the late Troy Péwé, Albert Pissart, and Link Washburn. To all the above, I express my sincere thanks because you have all contributed, in numerous ways that you cannot recognize, to the third edition.

Finally, I thank Jill, who patiently allowed me the time to read, write, and travel in the periglacial world.

Hugh French
Ottawa, 2006

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