NATURE AND THE VICTORIAN IMAGINATION

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The Arctic Sublime

CHAUNCEY C. LOOMIS

During the nineteenth century, Arctic exploration aroused national interest in England. Preparations for Arctic expeditions were discussed extensively by the press, and their departures were usually accompanied by great fanfare. Their progress would be followed as closely as very limited communications allowed; reports by whalers or others encountering them would be printed in detail, and when there were no reports to print, there would be speculation about ice conditions, weather, and routes. The return of an expedition usually generated articles, dioramas, lectures, and perhaps a book or two. Narratives about Arctic exploration became very popular indeed. In 1859, Mudie stocked 1,000 copies of *Idylls of the King*, 2,500 of *Adam Bede*, and 3,000 of Leopold McClintock's *Voyage of the 'Fox' in Arctic Seas*.[1]

Arctic exploration aroused national interest partly because it had become a national enterprise. During the eighteenth century, it had ceased to be a commercial and often secret venture for merchants; the risks had proved too great for private enterprise, the chances for profit too slight. For centuries, the discovery of a commercially useful Northwest Passage had been the goal of most Arctic explorers, but by the time of the Napoleonic wars it had become evident that any passage in the Arctic would be navigated only with the greatest difficulty and danger. After the wars, in a series of expensive and well-publicized expeditions, the British navy rather than merchants pursued most Arctic exploration. These expeditions had practical, scientific, strategic, and even commercial purposes, but they also became a matter of national prestige. Many government officials, the press, and the public came to believe that somehow British manhood and British power were on the line in the continued search for a passage. In 1844, Second Secretary of the Admiralty John Barrow stressed prestige in a letter to the First

1. See Richard Altick, "The Literature of Imminent Democracy," in *1859: Entering an Age of Crisis*, ed. Philip Appleman, William Madden, Michael Wolff (Bloomington, Ind., 1959), p. 217.

Lord of the Admiralty, Lord Haddington. Arctic exploration, Barrow wrote, was "well deserving the attention of a power like England"; if England failed to pursue a search for a passage, he warned, she "would be laughed at by all the world."[2]

But concern for national prestige was only one cause of the fascination that Arctic exploration held for the Victorians. Deeply affecting their attitude towards it was their image of the Arctic environment itself. Harsh as the world actually is north of Latitude 66°33′, it is a playground compared to the seascapes and landscapes that haunted the Victorian imagination. In the minds of most nineteenth-century armchair travelers, Arctic explorers moved through an environment illumined by a "light that never was, on sea or land," and within that environment they took on an almost allegorical significance.

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From earlier generations the Victorians inherited images of the Arctic that had already been conditioned by the growing English response to the Sublime. Perhaps even the Elizabethans had responded with more than mere curiosity to what Claudio in *Measure for Measure* called the "thrilling region of thick-ribbed ice" (III. i. 123). Certainly sixteenth- and seventeenth-century explorers and chroniclers provided images that would impress later writers with a sense that in the Arctic Nature was somehow vaster, more mysterious, and more terrible than elsewhere on the globe—a region in which natural phenomena could take strange, almost supernatural, forms, sometimes stunningly beautiful, sometimes terrifying, often both. As John Livingston Lowes has demonstrated, Coleridge was moved by such a passage as this from Purchas:

> The fifth, wee saw the first Ice, which we wondered at, at the first, thinking that it had beene white Swannes, for one of our men walking in the Fore-decke, on a sudden began to cry out with a loud voyce, and said; that hee saw white Swannes: which wee that were under Hatches hearing, presently came up, and perceived that it was Ice that came driving from the great heape, showing like Swannes, it being then about Eevening.[3]

But even when the Elizabethan and seventeenth-century explorers evoked the strangeness of the Arctic, one suspects that they were more matter-of-fact than many later readers liked to believe, and in most of their writing they were incorrigibly businesslike, concerned more with seamanship and profits than with sublimity. If anything, in their accounts they tended to diminish the scale and power of the Arctic. Illustrations such as those by John White, a member of

2. Quoted in Richard J. Cyriax, *Sir John Franklin's Last Arctic Expedition* (London, 1939), pp. 20, 19.

3. Quoted in John Livingston Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Ways of Imagination* (Boston, 1927), p. 138. The passage is from Gerrit de Veer's "Northward to the Kingdomes of Cathaia and China."

Martin Frobisher's second Arctic expedition in 1557, typical of the time, reduced landscapes relative to the human figures within them. On the south coast of Frobisher Bay, the area that Queen Elizabeth called "*Meta Incognita*" is very impressive: thousand-foot cliffs rise sheer from the ice-strewn waters of the bay, and a dazzling glacier overarches the dark mountains that loom a few miles inland. White's illustration of Frobisher's men fighting Eskimos on the bluffs reduces this magnificent landscape to a few dwarfed hillocks and shows no glacier or bergs.[4] The very name "*Meta Incognita*" indicates how unromantic the Elizabethans could be about the Arctic. It may have a romantic ring to modern ears, but the value ("*meta*") that the Queen called unknown was strictly commercial.

References to the Arctic in eighteenth-century literature, although infrequent, show the effect of the growing interest in the Sublime. Mountains obviously played a greater part than the Arctic in the English experience during the eighteenth century, but Alpine and Arctic scenery share some of the qualities that Marjorie Hope Nicolson finds crucial to the Natural Sublime: "an asymmetry that violated all classical canons of regularity."[5] The elation of travelers who find "worlds that puzzle, amaze, astound, enthrall by their very differences from our own world"[6] is evident in the "excursion" prose and poetry of the period, where Arctic images are invoked whenever great imaginary overviews of the globe are offered to excite the reader's awe at the vastness of creation. Shaftesbury's *The Moralists*, Mallet's *Excursion*, and Savage's *The Wanderer* have passages describing what Shaftesbury's Theocles calls "the darkest and most imperfect parts of our map,"[7] and these passages all use the Arctic as a source of mystery, coldness, and vastness. They are wooden and conventional, however. Most eighteenth-century writers were ignorant of the Arctic and of Arctic narratives; in their work, it became a mere trope, a convenient source of stock phrases about "icy grandeur." Of them all, only James Thomson created images that are both powerful and credible, based as they were on his reading of actual travel accounts.[8]

The Arctic itself had to wait its turn; only with the coming of the great period of Arctic exploration in the next century would the public learn that the Arctic could arouse the same intense emotional responses as mountains. Professor Nicolson

4. This illustration was used on the cover wrapper of Samuel Eliot Morison's *The European Discovery of America: The Northern Voyages* (New York, 1971). Morison discusses White's work on this expedition in his text: pp. 523, 528–30.

5. Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1959), p. 32.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 15–16.

7. Anthony, Earl of Shaftesbury, "The Moralists," in *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed. John M. Robertson (New York, 1964), p. 119.

8. See Alan Dugald McKillop, *The Background of Thomson's Seasons* (Minneapolis, 1942), pp. 138–41. There was, of course, a great interest in the north as represented by such a work as *Ossian*, but essentially this interest was in the sub-Arctic.

quotes a famous passage from *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (III. lxii) that could apply almost as well to the Arctic as to the Alps:

> Above me are the Alps,
> The palaces of Nature, whose vast walls
> Have pinnacled in clouds their snowy scalps,
> And throned Eternity in icy halls
> Of cold sublimity, where forms and falls
> The avalanche—the thunderbolt of snow!
> All that expands the spirit, yet appals
> Gather around these summits.

"All that expands the spirit, yet appals." In that line, Byron expresses the ambivalence of emotions created by the Sublime. The Natural Sublime, suggesting in its magnitude the immensity of creation, and in its irregularity a natural order that is beyond man's ken, strains the soul of the observer. Part of him goes out to it in rapture; part of him withdraws from it in fear. It simultaneously reminds him of his own responsive vastness of soul, and of his mortal smallness in the universe. Exultation and terror, liberation and acrophobia, a mixed sense of triumph and defeat—these emotions vitalized responses to mountains in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and they would vitalize responses to the Arctic during the Victorian period.

Literary treatment of the Arctic remained conventional and lifeless even in its rather strained sublimity until Coleridge, steeped in the literature of exploration, allowed what Lowes called "the sensitive retina of that amazing inner eye"[9] to transform what he had read into the haunting images of "The Ancient Mariner." That poem, popular throughout the century, influenced the Victorian vision of the polar world; newspapers, magazines, and even the explorers themselves often quoted it. Its influence came not only from its images, but also from the situation it creates and the questions it provokes. The mariner is a human interloper in what Coleridge's gloss calls "the land of ice, and of fearful sounds, where no living thing was to be seen" (I. 55–59). He is a voyager in the sublime, privileged or doomed briefly to experience its power, mystery, and terror. Even the albatross itself, a "living thing" greeted by the Mariner and his fellows "as if it had been a Christian soul" (I. 65), seems to be an interloper in that ghastly world. In spite of the poem's

9. Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu*, p. 151. The polar scenes in "The Ancient Mariner" are south rather than north polar, but Coleridge's sources were descriptions of the Arctic rather than the Antarctic, and to many of his readers the distinction was (and is) unimportant. The differences between popular or literary images of the Arctic and Antarctic are interesting, but essentially the two regions were believed to be similar. The Antarctic, even less explored and more remote and "lifeless" (a quality discussed later in this essay), was even more intimidating than the Arctic, but it played a smaller role in the public imagination until the death of Robert Falcon Scott in the twentieth century.

apparent thematic conclusion that "the dear God who loveth us / He made and loveth all" (VII. 616–17), we are left with the question of what kind of God made and loveth the ice and the snow-fog. Coleridge anticipated one Victorian response to the polar world by making it an environment that provoked theological speculation and fear. In their awe of the Arctic, several midcentury explorers would burst out in their journals with the exclamation that often is more a question than an assertion: "God's ways are not our ways!"

Another pre-Victorian writer who used the Arctic effectively and significantly was Mary Shelley. Partly influenced by "The Ancient Mariner" when she wrote *Frankenstein* (the poem is cited early in the novel), she, too, anticipated the Victorian response to the Arctic by making it a setting within which human pride shows its folly in face of the immensity and inscrutability of Nature. *Frankenstein*, in fact, is almost prophetic: the changes that it traces in Walton's attitude towards the Arctic are similar to the changes that the Victorians would undergo. At the beginning of the novel, Walton tells Doctor Frankenstein that he would sacrifice anything for the success of his polar expedition and for "the dominion I should acquire and transmit over the elemental foes of our race."[10] This boast, made in the very midst of vast icefields, impels Frankenstein to tell his story, as both a confession and also a warning to Walton. *Frankenstein* is filled with landscapes, including Alpine landscapes, but none is wilder or more significant than the Arctic setting that frames the entire novel. Deeply impressed by his first hours with Frankenstein, Walton comments that "no one can feel more deeply than he does the beauties of nature." At this point, Walton believes in the sublime power of the Arctic to exalt the human mind and soul. He writes of Frankenstein: "The starry sky, the sea, and every sight afforded by these wonderful regions, seems still to have the power of elevating his soul from earth."[11] By the end of the novel, Walton has become aware of the more ominous aspect of the Arctic Sublime. It may expand and exalt up to a point, but finally what is human and finite in us, terrified on the brink of the mysterious abyss of nature, will draw back trembling from the inhuman and the infinite.

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In 1818, the year that *Frankenstein* was published, nineteenth-century British exploration of the Arctic began. In that year, the navy dispatched two squadrons into the Arctic; one was supposed to sail northward between Greenland and Spitzbergen, the other to search for a Northwest Passage in the little-known area north of the Canadian mainland. Neither succeeded: the first was stopped by a gale west of Spitzbergen, and the second barely penetrated the outer fringes of the Canadian Archipelago.

10. Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (New York, 1933), p. 17. 11. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

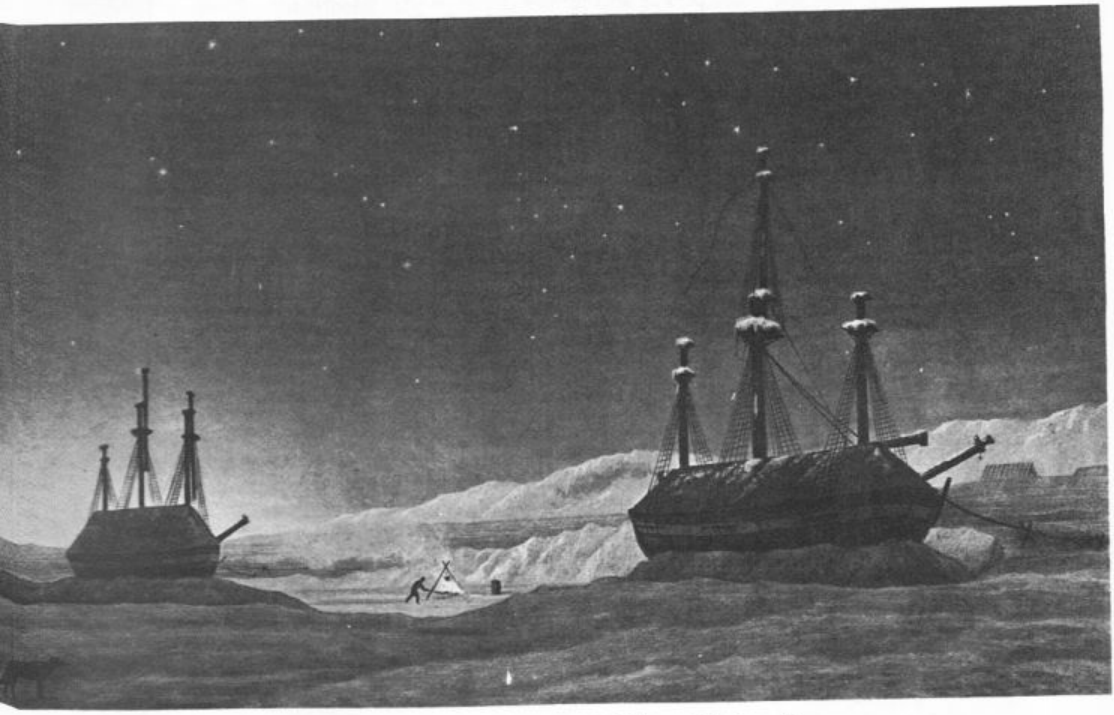
The failure of these preliminary expeditions and the many subsequent failures partly explain why Arctic exploration so captured the Victorian imagination. Each failure, especially the failures to find a passage, made the mystery of the Arctic more fascinating, the challenge more impelling. It seemed that Nature was manifested not only at its harshest but also at its most inscrutable in the unknown reaches of the polar world. The very fact that so little was known about it after centuries of exploration added to its power as a source of sublimity, and it became a challenge not only to man's strength and courage, but also to his imagination. What was there? an open polar sea beyond a rim of ice? a continent supporting an unknown civilization? a huge hole with a maelstrom whirling into it? All three theories were seriously held early in the century, and only late in the century would they be disproved.

Most other travel and exploration during the century occurred in disconnected episodes (the search for the source of the Nile is one exception), but as the decades passed Arctic exploration began to assume a coherence that can almost be called a "plot." Before the eyes of the nation over the course of more than forty years, a magnificent story unfolded, a saga or an epic drama, and it had a cumulative effect on the public as expectations were aroused and tensions mounted. It occurred in three phases. The first phase, from 1818 to 1844, was a period of preliminary exploration. During this phase, the literate public learned a great many facts about the Arctic, but imaginative readers also formed images of it that transcended mere facts. The second phase, from 1845 to 1848, may be called simply "the Disappearance of the Franklin Expedition." The shock of this disappearance was great partly because of the popular images of the Arctic that had been formed earlier in the century. The third phase, "the Search for Franklin," lasted the decade from 1849 to 1859, but its effects continued for years after. It was the most intense period of Arctic exploration in history; during it many mysteries about the polar world were solved and a Northwest Passage was traversed at last. It also was the period in which Victorian awareness of the Arctic was at its most intense—and at its grimmest.

During the first phase, the British mounted a series of overland and maritime expeditions that added many small pieces to the jigsaw puzzle of the Canadian Archipelago, but left crucial spaces empty. Some popular heroes emerged: to the public such men as John Ross, James Clark Ross, George Back, Edward Parry, and John Franklin demonstrated British hardihood and courage even in their failure to find a Northwest Passage. They endured dreadful ordeals, persisted in the face of adversity, and returned to report new discoveries. And they wrote books. Not only did they add to geographical knowledge and pursue studies in hydrography, geology, botany, and other sciences, they also informed the general public of that

strange world in the Far North. Their accounts were usually reasonable and understated, for they were intent on giving rational and scientific descriptions of the Arctic environment, but the effect of their books on the public was quite other than what they intended.

One of the earliest and best of these accounts was William Edward Parry's *Journal of a Voyage for the Discovery of a North-West Passage* (1821), an elegant volume embellished with engravings and fold-out maps. Based on sketches made by two officers of the expedition, the engravings are subdued and accurate portrayals of the Arctic in various moods (see Fig. 61). Parry's text also is subdued. He devotes many pages to the mundane details of daily life aboard his ships, and when he does describe his surroundings, he indulges in no raptures. Unromantic as Parry's book was in its mode, however, it helped to create a popular image of the Arctic that was very romantic indeed. His very understatement, his calm and logic in describing the prodigies that he had seen, emphasize the strangeness and



61. "*H. M. Ships Hecla and Griper in Winter Harbour*," drawn and engraved by W. Westall A.R.A. from a sketch made on the spot by Lieutenant Beechey, from W. E. Parry, *Journal of a Voyage for the Discovery of a North-West Passage* (1821).

vastness of the Far North. Even when he comments on the dreariness of the winter landscape, he evokes sublimity:

> Not an object was to be seen on which the eye could long rest with pleasure, unless when directed to the spot where the ships lay, and where our little colony was planted. The smoke which there issued from the several fires, affording a certain indication of the presence of man, gave a partial cheerfulness to this part of the prospect; and the sound of voices, which, during the cold weather, could be heard at a much greater distance than usual, served now and then to break the silence that reigned round us, a silence far different from that peaceable composure which characterizes the landscape of a cultivated country; it was the deathlike stillness of the most dreary desolation, and the total absence of animated existence.[12]

The comfort that Parry took in the presence of other human beings indicates that he was no Romantic searcher after the Sublime, but it also effectively serves to emphasize the mute power and terror latent in that "death-like stillness."

The world seen by Parry, Back, Ross, and Franklin was remarkable in its own right, even as it was described by those stolid and factual men. It was a world in which the observer was always aware of light—or of its absence. For part of the year, the Arctic regions were so dazzling that they could blind, at other times they were murky with fog, and for months they were cast in the strange luminous darkness of winter. It was a world of phenomena that created weird visual effects: the parhelia ("mock suns"), the aurora borealis, and the "loomings" created by refraction could excite the poetic even in men like Parry or Ross. All the explorers also commented on the sounds of the Arctic. The thin cry of a bird, the roar of a glacier calving a berg, or the boom of pack splitting could suddenly shatter an almost absolute silence. Above all, it was a world made unstable by the movement of sea ice in all its different forms. The terror of pack or floe was its dual nature: it could pierce or crush the stoutest ship, yet it was also ghostly and protean, appearing and disappearing in a matter of hours. And of course, there were the bergs—multifaceted, multicolored even in their whiteness, immense beyond dreams.

For explorers and scientists, it all was natural and therefore subject to the scientific explanations that they gave in their accounts. Even they sometimes wondered about the Creator of such a world, however, and for readers with imaginations more romantic than theirs, the Arctic became almost unearthly in its sublimity. Edmund Burke, had he written his analysis of the sensational causes of the Sublime a century later than he did, might well have used the Arctic in his

12. William Edward Parry, *Journal of a Voyage for the Discovery of a North-West Passage from the Atlantic to the Pacific* (London, 1821), p. 125.

discussions of light and dark, sound and silence, obscurity, solitude, vastness, and magnificence as sources of sublime astonishment and terror.

The accounts of the explorers had an immediate effect on the public imagination. By the late 1820s, interest in Arctic exploration had spread even into the hinterlands of England. In Haworth, the young Brontës made a hero of Edward Parry. Apparently Emily in particular admired him; his name appears frequently in her juvenile fantasies, and the fact that her fictitious Parry was not primarily an explorer does not mean that Arctic exploration was beside the point. Winifred Gérin has noted that Emily was fascinated by those parts of Bewick's *History of British Birds* describing the Far North, and young Anne's particular hero was one "Captain Ross," probably John Ross, the explorer with whom Parry was closely associated.[13] That Charlotte, too, was attracted to the Arctic was indicated years later in the opening passage of *Jane Eyre*. Possibly she had Emily in mind when she described Jane sitting on a window seat allowing her imagination to work on Bewick's description of the northern habitat of seabirds: " 'the vast sweep of the Arctic Zone, and those forlorn regions of dreary space,—that reservoir of frost and snow, where firm fields of ice, the accumulation of centuries of winter, glazed in Alpine heights above heights, surround the pole, and concentre the multiplied rigours of extreme cold.' " Jane comments: "Of these death-white realms I formed an idea of my own: shadowy, like all the half-comprehended notions that float dim through children's brains, but strangely impressive."[14] Many other children and adults of the 1820s and '30s were "forming ideas of their own" about the Arctic, and their ideas, like Jane's, were a compound of fact and fantasy touched with the power of the Sublime.

The effect of these preliminary expeditions and the books written about them went beyond England. Parry's book was translated into French in 1822, and perhaps it was the French edition that influenced Caspar David Friedrich when, in 1824, he painted "Die gescheiterte Hoffnung"—"The Wreck of the Hope"[15] (see Fig. 62). Not that Friedrich needed a factual account as the basis of his painting: it is fantasy, a scene from a nightmare, informed more by Friedrich's personal and metaphysical despair than by any facts. But the Arctic setting of the painting is significant. The massive slabs of ice that dwarf the disappearing ship, the pinnacled bergs in the background, and the mottled blue cast of the sky may not be accurate renderings of the Arctic itself, but they are powerful images of what the Arctic was

13. Winifred Gérin, *Emily Brontë: A Biography* (Oxford, 1971), pp. 12–15.

14. Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (London, n.d.), pp. 2–3.

15. See Irma Emmrich, *Caspar David Friedrich* (Weimar, 1964), p. 101. The book mentioned by several German scholars as an influence is "Captain Perry's 'Narrative.' " The authoritative bibliography of Arctic publications, *The Arctic Bibliography* (Washington, D.C.: Arctic Institute of North America, 1953), II:1957, lists no "Perry," but does mention the French translation of Perry.

becoming in the minds of many imaginative persons. Much of the power of Friedrich's painting comes from its lifelessness. No living thing appears in it, and if anything does still live in the sinking ship, it is in the process of being swallowed up by the inorganic. It was precisely such supposed lifelessness in the Arctic that was beginning to fascinate the public. Actually, as explorers often pointed out, parts of the Arctic nourish much fauna, its seas are rich with life, and Eskimos inhabit its southern portions, but these facts were conveniently ignored in favor of the image of lifelessness. With its floes, bergs, and glaciers, its mists and snows, its storms and calms, the Arctic by midcentury came to suggest the cold vastness and indifferent powers of the inorganic cosmos.

That the symbolist Friedrich chose to shipwreck hope in an Arctic setting was both significant and prophetic. One might speculate that Friedrich had read Mary Shelley as well as Edward Parry, because, like *Frankenstein*, "The Wreck of the Hope" foreshadowed the future of Victorian Arctic exploration.

Hope was indeed the dominant feeling at the beginning of the next phase. By 1845, when the navy dispatched Sir John Franklin on his third and most important expedition, no one underestimated the challenge that he faced, but there was nevertheless a general sense of confidence and optimism. The Franklin Expedition was intended to be England's greatest effort in the search for a Northwest Passage, and the navy felt so assured of success that it made no contingency plans for search and rescue. The press was stridently assertive. After twenty-five years of almost constant Arctic exploration, some skeptics were beginning to question its practical value; to them *Blackwood's* replied tersely: "The evident design of Providence in placing difficulties before man is, to sharpen his faculties for their mastery."[16] *Blackwood's* seemed to have no doubt that the mastery would come.

England had a considerable material investment in the Franklin Expedition. His ships, the *Erebus* and *Terror*, were superbly equipped, and his 128 men were the cream of the Royal Navy. The nation also had an emotional investment in the expedition, perhaps more than it realized. Franklin himself, famous after two previous expeditions, seemed to embody those English qualities that would make him overcome all difficulties. He was persistent, pious, and courageous, and he had at his command the best of British technology and science as well as the best of British manhood. Although national pride was involved in the Franklin Expedition, the symbolic value of the expedition went beyond mere patriotism, partly because the popular image of the Arctic had become so awesome. The Franklin Expedition was not simply carrying the Union Jack into the Arctic; it was carrying Western man's faith in his power to prevail on earth. If Franklin could find and navigate a

16. "The Navigation of the Antipodes," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, November 1847, p. 516.

62. David Caspar Friedrich,
"*Die Gescheiterte Hoffnung*"
(reprinted courtesy of Kunsthalle, Hamburg).

Northwest Passage after almost three centuries of failures, Western man would seem somehow to demonstrate his capacity to conquer Nature at its most mysterious and intimidating. In an essay entitled "Navigation of the Antipodes," written after Franklin had sailed but before there was alarm about his fate, *Blackwood's* allowed with uncharacteristic generosity that the exploratory urge was not monopolized by the English—that it was European, and could be attributed to one main European quality: "To the European alone is allotted the master quality of energy; and by that gift he drives the world before him."[17]

The European nations and the United States shared some of England's emotional involvement with the Franklin Expedition. Joseph Conrad, reminiscing about his boyhood reading in "the storm romance of Polar exploration,"[18] recalled that the British Arctic explorers were internationally seen as idealists, "whose aims were certainly as pure as the air of those high latitudes where not a few of them laid down their lives for the advancement of geography." According to Conrad, among them all ("Seamen, men of science, it is difficult to speak of them without admirative emotion") the figure of Sir John Franklin dominated, and his fate was "a matter of European interest." Conrad also recognized that the international shock at Franklin's fate came partly from tragic irony—from the terrible difference between expectation and actuality:

> As gradually revealed to the world this fate appeared the more tragic in this, that for the first two years the way of the *Erebus* and *Terror* Expedition seemed to be the way to the desired and important success, while in truth it was all the time the way of death, the end of the darkest drama perhaps played behind the curtain of Arctic mystery.

As Conrad noted, the shock came gradually. Franklin sailed in 1845. The navy did not send any search expeditions until 1848, and it did not take serious alarm until these expeditions returned to report they had found no trace of Franklin. Only then did it begin to dawn on the English that Franklin, his two ships, and his 128 men had utterly disappeared into that strange, cold world that had begun to haunt their imaginations. The image that they had created in their minds had given added significance to Franklin's sailing: it had made the expedition seem more glorious in its aims. In spite of, or perhaps because of, the terror associated with the Arctic, the positive aspects of its sublimity had dominated. Not only had it become a challenge, it also had become an attraction in another way. Marjorie Nicolson, discussing the "space-intoxication" of some late seventeenth-century philosophers, mentions their sense of man's response to the vastness of space: "In his divine

17. *Ibid.*, p. 533.

18. Joseph Conrad, "Geography and Explorers," *Last Essays* (London, 1926), p. 16. The quotations that follow are from pp. 14–16.

discontent lay his greatness. He grew with that he attempted to comprehend. Mind and spirit released from finite bonds, he became in part the thing he sought."[19] There was a feeling that if Franklin went out into the Arctic and mastered it, man would somehow be enlarged in mind and soul. Instead, the Arctic had swallowed him, obliterated him. As expedition after expedition sailed into the Canadian Archipelago and returned with only minor scraps of information about what had happened to Franklin, the dream turned to nightmare, and the full terror of the Arctic Sublime began to be felt.

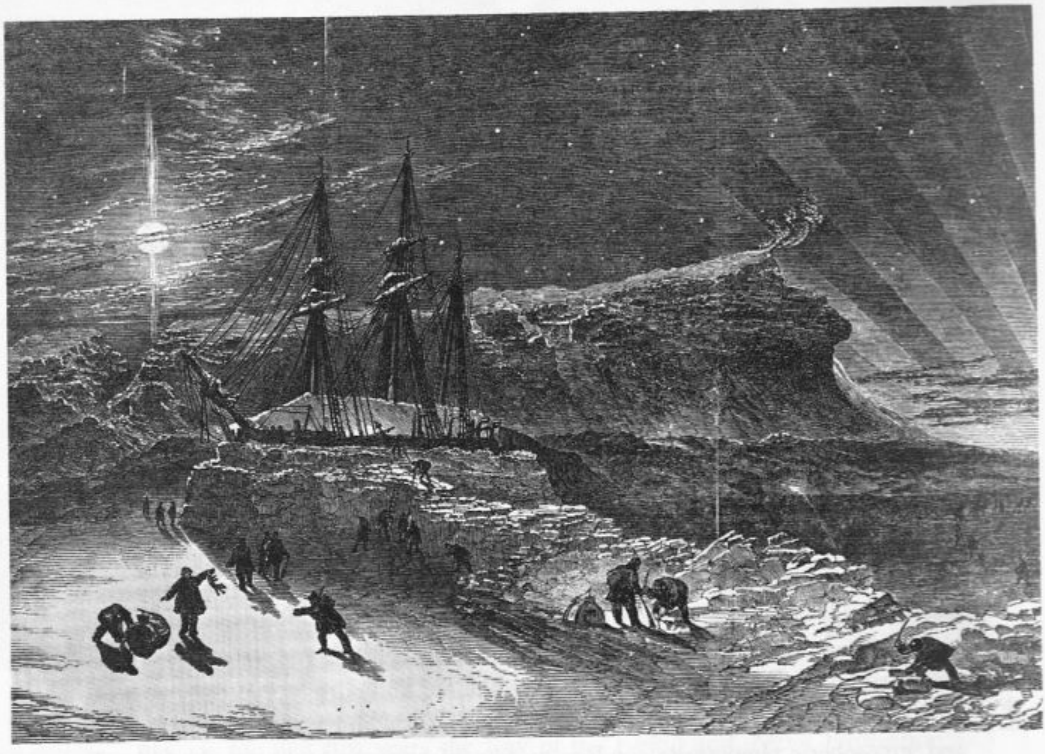
During the first five or six years of the search, however, the Arctic was still seen as sublime, even if its terror was becoming too real for comfort. This was the period of the most intense Arctic exploration in history, and many of its mysteries were solved at last. The public followed the search with a fascination undiminished by the growing fear that nothing would ever be discovered about Franklin's fate. Many of the explorers' accounts were published, most of them well illustrated, and panoramas of the Arctic became popular in London. Both maintained a sense of its sublimity. In the winter of 1850, the *Illustrated London News* described "Burford's Panorama of the Polar Regions," which had been inspired by one of the early search expeditions (see Fig. 63). The panorama contained a summer and a winter scene: "In one half the circle we may contemplate the awful majesty of the Polar seas at summer midnight; turning from which we find ourselves in the midst of noon, but it is the noon of an Arctic winter in all its sublime severity. . . . Glaciers and atmospheric phenomena conduce to give effect to the background and local peculiarities. Splendid arches of crimson light, the Aurora Borealis, and the pale moon, shed a wild and weird glory on iceberg and vessel."[20]

In autumn 1854, however, the nation's image of the Arctic and its attitude towards Arctic exploration began to change. On October 23, 1854, the *Times* printed a report by Dr. John Rae, who had recently returned from a Hudson's Bay Company expedition in northern Canada. The report contained the first real evidence of what had happened to the Franklin Expedition. Rae had met Eskimos who told him that some years before they had found the emaciated bodies of many white men along the shores of King William Island. The idea that Franklin's men had died of starvation and scurvy was bad enough, but the report contained a further statement that created, as one contemporary remembered for the rest of his life, a "shock of horror that had swept across the civilized world."[21] From the

19. Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory*, p. 143.

20. *Illustrated London News*, 16 February 1850. The following issue, February 23, contains an illustration of the panorama.

21. Quoted in Robert Louis Brannan, introduction to *Under the Management of Mr. Charles Dickens: His Production of "The Frozen Deep"* (Ithaca, 1966), p. 14. The quote is from Hendrik Van Loon's *Van Loon's Lives*. The man who remembered "the shock of horror" was Van Loon's father.



63. *Burford's Panorama of the Polar Regions—the "Investigator" Snow-walled in for the Winter*, from *Illustrated London News*, 23 February 1850.

Eskimos' description of the condition of the bodies, Rae stated, it was evident that "our wretched countrymen had been driven to the last resource—cannibalism—as a means of prolonging existence."

There was immediate public reaction to Rae's report. Rae's own honesty was questioned by some, and many doubted the veracity of the Eskimos. In a series of articles in *Household Words*, Charles Dickens expressed the outrage and disbelief felt by much of the nation. The Eskimos were "a gross handful of uncivilized people, with a domesticity of blood and blubber."[22] Against such savages, Dickens placed the "brave and enterprising"[23] British explorers, who, because of their character and training, would be incapable of taking that "last resource." Dickens was so caught up in the affair that he joined with Wilkie Collins to produce an elaborate and expensive private theatrical, *The Frozen Deep*, which dramatized the

22. Charles Dickens, "The Lost Arctic Voyagers," *Household Words*, 9 December 1854, p. 392.
23. Dickens, "The Lost Arctic Voyagers," *Household Words*, 2 December 1854, p. 365.

nobility of some Arctic explorers faced with terrible deprivation. Robert Louis Brannan, in the introduction to his edition of *The Frozen Deep*, analyzes Dickens's emotional response to Rae's report. Dickens had read Franklin's popular account of his first expedition: "For Dickens, the principal interest of the journal lay not in the new geographical discoveries, but in the reaction of the men to forces of Nature that dwarfed and threatened to destroy them. . . . In defending Franklin, Dickens defended his own faith in man's power to endure under stress, and the source of this power lay not so much in man's reason and will as in man's heart."[24] Dickens may not have shared the popular sense of the Arctic Sublime, but he did share the general belief that the Arctic was a natural environment that put man's nobility to an ultimate test. He simply refused to believe that the best of British manhood would fail that test. Even the Arctic could not break them.

The nation as a whole apparently refused to accept the part of Rae's report that mentioned cannibalism; after a brief burst of horror, the press ignored it, possibly out of pity for the families of Franklin's men and for Lady Franklin, who had become famous in her ordeal. But the nation did begin to accept the idea that Franklin and his men were all dead. The initial excitement about the disappearance and the search was replaced by a grimmer sense of frustration and loss. Even *Blackwood's*, usually enthusiastic about Arctic exploration, began to question its value. It decided that Franklin and his men were martyrs to science, which it called "a placid Juggernaut, a Moloch with benevolent pretensions."[25]

It was almost anticlimactic when, four years after Rae's report was published, Leopold McClintock finally reached the western shores of King William Island to find many bodies and some pathetic relics, including a brief message that had been buried in a cairn. McClintock did not confirm the report of cannibalism, but neither did he find all the bodies, and his description of what he did find was grim enough. There would be later doubts and speculation, but what had happened to the Franklin Expedition was at last essentially clear. Franklin had died early in the expedition; his ships had been either crushed by the ice or deserted by their crews; the men had died one by one as they tried to walk south to the Canadian mainland.

The British gradually came to terms with the disaster. In spite of the horror of Rae's report and McClintock's grim discoveries, they were able to salvage something positive by stressing the courage and self-sacrifice of those who had died on the expedition and those who had searched for it. The whole affair is still seen today, perhaps with good reason, as a noble chapter in the history of exploration.

In 1877, thirty years after the expedition disappeared, Tennyson wrote a brief poem for Franklin's cenotaph in Westminster Abbey:

24. Brannan, *Under the Management of Mr. Charles Dickens*, pp. 17, 19.
25. "Travellers' Tales," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, November 1855, p. 589.

Not here! the white North has thy bones; and thou,
Heroic sailor-soul,
Art passing on thine happier voyage now
Toward no earthly pole.[26]

In their imaginations, the British people, and other peoples as well, had voyaged with Franklin "toward no earthly pole." They had created in their minds an Arctic that was at least partly imaginary in its sublimity. Their imagined Arctic was a place of terror, but even in its terror it was beautiful in the sublime way that immense mountains or the vast reaches of space are beautiful. Like the sublimity of mountains or space, the sublimity of the Arctic partly depended on its imagined emptiness as well as its vastness and coldness. It was imagined to be not only inhuman but even inorganic, and that was part of its beauty, terror, fascination, and challenge. It was an environment within which a cosmic romance could be acted out: man facing the great cold forces of Nature and surviving if not prevailing over them.

The fate of the Franklin Expedition soured the romance and at least partly subverted the image of the Arctic Sublime. It was one thing to imagine the expedition disappearing into the Arctic forever: that would have been terrible, but in a way sublime. It was another thing to know that the men of the expedition had died slowly in an agony of scurvy and starvation. Bleeding gums, running sores, and constricted bowels are not sublime.

And, in spite of attempts to ignore it, there was still the specter of cannibalism. In 1864, Sir Edwin Landseer, haunted by the fate of the Franklin Expedition, painted an Arctic scene bitterly entitled "Man Proposes, God Disposes" (see Fig. 64). It is a lurid painting—shocking and unforgettable especially if one remembers the hopes that preceded the expedition and the possibility of cannibalism during its last weeks. There are touches of sublimity in the background, with its mist and icebergs, although even the background seems too claustrophobic to be wholly sublime. In the foreground, Landseer displays his virtuosity as a painter of animals. The polar bears that dominate the painting are horrible partly because we sense that Landseer's anatomy is accurate and that he has only slightly exaggerated their bestiality. On the left, one bear, the musculature of its snout and forehead straining, shreads part of a Union Jack; on the right, the other bear lifts its jaws from a human ribcage as it crunches a bone with an obscene expression of relish on its face. Landseer probably did not intend to evoke the idea of cannibalism, but, given the story of the Franklin Expedition, he has done so. Even without the suggestion

26. Alfred Tennyson, "Sir John Franklin," *The Complete Poetical Works of Tennyson*, Cambridge Edition (Boston, n.d.), p. 487.

of cannibalism, the painting and its title indicate an almost violent emotional backlash from the Franklin Expedition and from the romanticizing of the Arctic that had been associated with it. Landseer's image of Nature in the Arctic is quite other than sublime; he has portrayed the brute animal force of Nature, not its inorganic sublimity.

The popular sense of the Arctic Sublime was not entirely destroyed by the discovery of the fate of the Franklin Expedition. In the United States, which had been involved in the search for Franklin, interest in the Arctic remained intense through the century. Even as Landseer was painting "Man Proposes, God Disposes," the Americans Frederick Church and William Bradford were creating their splendid Arctic seascapes, the best ever painted. In England, there was a revival of interest in the Arctic in the mid-seventies, when a British expedition tried to reach the North Pole, and with it came a revival of the rhetoric of the Sublime. Soon after the return of the expedition, an enthusiast wrote:

> There can be no question that in the frozen wastes and the snowy wildernesses lurks a powerful fascination, which proves almost irresistable to the adventurous spirit. . . . Whether the spell lies in the weird magnificence of the scenery, in the splendours of the heavens, in the mystery which still hovers over those far-off seas of ice and remote bays, or in the excitement of a continual struggle with the forces of Nature, or whether all these influences

64. Sir Edwin Henry Landseer, *Man Proposes, God Disposes*, Royal Holloway College, London.

> are at work, we cannot stop to inquire. But it seems to us certain that the Arctic world has a romance and an attraction about it, which are far more powerful over the minds of men than the rich glowing lands of the Tropics.[27]

He had a point. Even today, the Arctic retains something of its sublimity in the imaginations of many persons, and it remains a popular setting for science-fiction romances and adventure stories.

But much of the vitality of the Arctic Sublime was lost in the second half of the nineteenth century, and most attempts to sustain it have been as conventional and as self-consciously fictive as the references to the Arctic in eighteenth-century poetry. The real reason for this loss of vitality was not the fate of the Franklin Expedition. Exploration itself, which stimulated the public imagination in the first half of the century and thereby helped to create a sense of the Arctic Sublime, also helped to subvert it. By the end of the century, although the North Pole had not yet been reached, the Arctic had been thoroughly explored, studied, and mapped, and its geographical features had been domesticated with names—Victoria Island, Prince Regent Inlet, Coronation Gulf, Thackeray Point. The mystery was gone in fact if not in fiction. The Sublime cannot be mapped.

27. *The Arctic World: Its Plants, Animals and Natural Phenomena* (London, 1881), p. 1. The expedition was the Nares Expedition, 1875–76.