

## Damn the North Pole!

First exploration had to be defined. English familiarity with the qualities of polar landscape followed a rising curve – until at the end of the nineteenth century, for example, the igloo was a universally understood icon of polar living. (In children's encyclopedias of 1900 Eskimos waved outside igloos, as Red Indians saluted the reader from teepees and Japanese displayed houses built of paper.) A prosperous England's voracity for trade did some of the work of familiarisation. The poles were of course brought home in a very literal sense, as objects, among the flood of objects from around the world. It is no more surprising to reflect that the Victorians had the Arctic represented in their underwear (in the form of corset-stiffening whalebone from the Northern Fishery), than that their houses might contain samples of Malay gutta-percha, Indian inlaid wood, or an elephant's foot umbrella-stand from Africa – though it is a slight shock to discover that London's streetlights were entirely powered by whale-oil before the invention of coal-gas. But the poles had also to become the setting for familiar actions; the idea of an expedition had to take root, with its repertoire of behaviour.

For this reason, it is important to see the change brought about in perceptions by the Admiralty's decision to push polar exploration by the Navy after Waterloo. Sir John Barrow, the Admiralty Secretary, who as a boy had gone whaling (and written a poem about the Arctic modelled on 'Winter' in Thomson's *Seasons*), sent out expeditions in surplus warships. They kindled the interest on a mass scale that his own experience had fired privately, in himself. Barrow had an integrated plan which called for multiple efforts along the different avenues of approach to the Arctic. 1817 was a hot year in the far North, clearing large areas of ice; there was intense activity. But to

three voyages made before 1822 in particular – by John Ross, William Parry, and John Franklin – can be traced many of the themes which would dominate later response to exploration. The experience of this period originated alike many of the practices (some disastrous) that would shape the British record at the poles, and the ways in which it was thought of. Certain incidents from the three journeys immediately revealed their imaginative potency, recurring repeatedly in commentaries. Ross, for example, sent to probe the Canadian Arctic from the Atlantic side in 1818, met a tribe of Eskimo on the north coast of Hudson Bay. These people showed a wonderfully satisfying ice-bound innocence of Europeans: they took the sailing ships for creatures with wings, they protested that Ross could not possibly have come from the south since only ice lay in that direction, and, faced with glass skylights, asked what kind of ice that was. The encounter, ‘which’ – wrote Ross – ‘never can be forgotten by those who witnessed and enjoyed it’, established an instant tradition for future meetings, and set a pattern of imaginative expectations. Parry, a rather critical second-in-command to Ross on that occasion, had his first chance the next year. He was strikingly more successful in covering the miles of ice-choked sea: he also invented a style for ships that overwintered in the Arctic. While the darkness grew, and the thermometer dropped, the crews of his *Hecla* and *Fury* did calisthenics, danced to a barrel-organ, read a shipboard newspaper, and watched amateur theatricals. As well as being adopted by the Admiralty as a standard morale-boosting ploy, this image of tenacious jollity proved irresistible to the public. Strangely snug, paradoxically homely, it seemingly made parlour games a way of defying the elements. Meanwhile the land component of Barrow’s plans required a journey by foot and canoe northward across Canada towards the Arctic coast. Lieutenant Franklin, in charge, brought back a darker, yet equally compelling image of exploration, crucial in fixing the courage of the enterprise in the public mind. During their overland return, Franklin and his three naval companions had starved, suffered, and all only just escaped dying at the hands of a French-Canadian guide who turned murderous. One did die, Midshipman Hood; but he had been reading *Bickersteth’s Scripture Help* at the moment of his untimely end, and the thought of such fidelity-unto-

## DAMN THE NORTH POLE!

death, combined with unflinching descriptions of the rotten reindeer intestines, shoe leather, and lichen that the party ate, imprinted themselves on readers of the expedition narrative. Franklin helped start the perception of polar exploration as an activity both physical and moral, dreadful and inspiring. Reading the account thirty-five years afterwards, when in the polar *cause célèbre* of the century Franklin had vanished on a new expedition to the Canadian Arctic, Dickens felt himself 'filled with a sort of sacred joy'.

These were foundations for the future. Most important, however, in signalling that an imaginative era had opened, was the nature of the task that had been decided on by John Barrow of the Admiralty. All the expeditions he orchestrated were seeking out, from different directions, the North-West Passage – the theoretical sea connection between the Atlantic and the Pacific. Since it was already clear that the strait, if it existed, must be at too high a latitude to be easily navigated, hardly any trading advantage could be gained by the nation that contrived to penetrate it. The mission was therefore one of geographical discovery for its own sake. Unlike Captain Cook, Parry and Ross and Franklin were not heard commenting on the uselessness of their finds, and their voyages could be seen, depending on your point of view, as either gratuitous or pure. Not that the voyagers had yet developed the genteel Victorian distaste for money as a motive, it needs saying. Schooled in the Napoleonic wars, when prize-money was the great incentive for naval victories, these sailors were far franker than their later counterparts about the close relationship between glory and booty. They wanted the cash bonus the Admiralty offered for a successful expedition. Parry was quite happy to see his crew cheered up by contributions to his *North Georgia Gazette* like the nonsense verse that began, 'The moon, resplendent orb, shines bright I ween,/Its brilliance is just like our soup-tureen', and ended

Fired with fresh ardour, and with bold intent,  
Our minds shall, like our prows, be westward bent,  
Until Pacific's waves pour forth sweet sounds,  
Chiming to us like – *Twenty thousand pounds!*

But however loudly the cash-registers chimed in the minds of hopeful sailors, the embracing of discovery as an end in itself gave exploration a distinct imaginative status, backed by the apparatus of official publicity. Returned officers of polar expeditions could expect to see their narratives accepted by prestigious publishers; there was regular coverage of expeditions in the serious reviews, including condensed extracts of those narratives; and explorers, who had perhaps set off grateful for a full-pay posting in the shrunken peace-time Navy, found themselves celebrities when they docked in England.

Doors opened for them into new social worlds: London society, the literary scene, the kind of clubs to which a hero might be admitted where a simple Navy man might not. The Navy was, anyway, in the process of gentrifying. Though it remained a distinct caste among the other subtle castes of genteel English life, it was shedding the rough-and-ready image of the eighteenth century, along with the social mobility that meant naval officers were not always fit for drawing-rooms. The Arctic captains were themselves of the generation that would cease to speak of money in public. And drawing-rooms received them. John Franklin, a dour if kindly Lincolnshire provincial, found himself taken up by literati and socialites. If it had not been for the Arctic, he would never have become engaged to his first wife, Eleanor Porden, for she ran a salon, and had been elected to the Institut de France at sixteen on the strength of her scientific poem 'The Veils'. By the time of his disappearance in the '40s, many threads of family and acquaintance wove him to the bookish, cultivated part of the Establishment. He was a well-connected man, with Tennyson for a nephew-in-law. (He had not been impressed, however, at their first encounter, when the poet sprawled full-length across three chairs and smoked a cheroot. 'Uncle Franklin rather indignant', noted his niece Catherine in her diary.) The social success of the explorers contributed to the imaginative visibility of exploration. People from the world of the arts who had not particularly noticed the polar coverage in the journals, or paid much attention to the increasing presence of polar books on John Murray's excellent list, might find themselves sharing a mantelpiece with an explorer at a party; and the Arctic made a social entrance into their minds. Questions could be

## DAMN THE NORTH POLE!

asked. What *is* an iceberg like, sir? Is it true that some are a most beautiful blue? Even those fastidious types who let a person's standing determine the mental houseroom they gave a subject might now, seeing an explorer deep in conversation with the unimpeachable Lady L—, discover that exploration was rude and barbarous only in an exciting way. One might go over oneself. One might permit oneself to be thrilled. I understand you *ate your boots*, Captain: how remarkable.

The explorers were also talked about. We have a reflection of that talk in the occasional and satirical verse of the period, the kind of writing that records the surface of a moment. Byron – an expert out of his own experience in the ways of instant fame – made a swift polar allusion in his ‘Vision of Judgement’ of 1822. The poem was a rejoinder to unctuous official visions of the soul of George III flying straight to heaven, and Byron subverts the solemn celestial setting by being frivolously contemporary. Hot news from the Arctic had a natural place among the other topical bric-à-brac. St Michael is just issuing forth to do battle with Satan over possession of the baffled king (“for by many stories,/and true, we learn the Angels all are Tories”), when a flash from the hinges of the pearly gates

Flung over space an universal hue  
Of many-coloured flame, until its tinges  
Reached even our speck of earth, and made a new  
Aurora borealis spread its fringes  
O'er the North Pole; the same seen, when ice-bound,  
By Captain Parry's crew, in ‘Melville's Sound’.

A few years later, someone asked Coleridge for a verse autograph. Installing his porridgy West Country name in a line offered him a small verbal challenge. Remembering the buzz in the newspapers, remembering perhaps the walking tour he had made in the Hartz Mountains in 1799 with William Parry's two younger brothers, he wrote:

Parry seeks out the polar ridge;  
Rhymes seeks S. T. Coleridge.

There at least the fragment stops in the respectable volume of

Coleridge's *Collected Works*. In fact the doggerel impulse produced two more lines, utterly unpolar:

— Fit to grace a lady's album,  
Or to wipe her baby's small bum.

Becoming public property had its disadvantages. Explorers' reputations ceased to be decided entirely professionally. Details of the success or failure of individual expeditions were amplified into public arguments over the rival merits of different commanders, conducted by fascinated partisan factions whose sole experience of exploration came through the pages of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* or the *Quarterly Review*. It was now possible to be an enthusiast of polar exploration as an activity, rather than as a source for information about meteorology, or zoology, or the earth's magnetic field. And along with the abstracting of exploration from practical benefits there came an increasing interest in that ultimate abstraction, the North Pole, although none of the expeditions at this stage was aimed towards it. Cook had won respect for the navigational skill required to reach the high southern latitudes he did, but it was now that the meticulous absorption began in achieving a Farthest North, measured by a creeping progress up through the seventies of Arctic latitude to  $80^{\circ}$  north,  $81^{\circ}$ ,  $82^{\circ}$ ,  $83^{\circ}$  . . . The North-West Passage had, in fact, its own intangible magic as an idea, in the shape of a connection to the series of Elizabethan voyagers who had first searched for it, and who offered a national tradition of endurance and sea-doggery the nineteenth-century English were eager to claim. But the North Pole outbid it — as an end to the round earth, as an intelligible terminus of effort. Nor need the North Pole refer exclusively to the exact spot on the map at  $90^{\circ}$  N. The whole Arctic regions were spoken of, familiarly, as 'the North Pole'. Where had Parry, Ross, and Franklin been? To the North Pole. 'I was very happy, keeping up every body's spirits at the North Pole,' says the comical cook of the North-West Passage expedition in Wilkie Collins' later melodrama *The Frozen Deep*.

For every enthusiast, there was naturally somebody to point out the absurdity of growing excited over an artificial point, a geographical construction. Sydney Smith did so gently, with the Scots philosopher

## DAMN THE NORTH POLE!

Leslie, an idolater of the North Pole who had been persecuting Smith's colleague Francis Jeffrey, the editor of the *Edinburgh Review*, with talk of it. As Leslie raised the subject for the umpteenth time, Jeffrey's patience snapped. 'Oh, damn the North Pole!' he shouted, and (he was on horseback) galloped away. The task of soothing Leslie's ruffled feelings fell to Smith, clergyman, diner-out, and wit so effective that tragic actresses had to be removed from his presence in convulsions of laughter. 'My dear fellow, never mind,' he breathed, all sympathy. 'No one cares what Jeffrey says; he is a privileged person; he respects nothing, absolutely nothing. Why, you will scarcely credit it, but, strictly between ourselves, it is not more than a week ago that I heard him speak disrespectfully of the Equator!'

Smith made delicate, conversational comedy out of Leslie's fixation. His joke was a sort of *reductio ad absurdam*. If you can revere a geographical concept, you must also be able to slander one; since we all know that a libel on the Equator is absurd, an admiration for the North Pole must be too. However light his tone (reflected Sydney Smith about his Edinburgh writings) he prided himself that he always made sound sense, and this wordplay with Leslie can be counted as part of the same mission to restore minds distempered by enthusiasm to everyday balance. A now-forgotten controversy over church governance would bring a reminder from Smith to the high-minded that they lived 'not in the abstract, timeless, nameless, placeless land of the philosophers, but . . . in the porter-brewing, cotton-spinning, tallow-melting kingdom of Great Britain': and what had that to do with wild ideas? Constitutionally sensible, he was not likely to understand the attraction of the North Pole.

More derisive, yet better attuned to the irrationality they attacked, were the satirical prints that greeted the return of the early Arctic expeditions. One in particular, by Cruikshank, catches the crowd hysteria aroused by the expeditions, and the willingness to think of polar features as real, recoverable objects. *Landing the Treasures, or Results of the Polar Expedition!!!* shows the triumphal march up Whitehall of a naval party who have all, without exception, had their noses frostbitten off. The officer leading wears a paper nose, for dignity. They have huskies with them, shrunk down to spaniel size,

and a block of granite; and the sailors carry scientific specimens that burlesque the real trophies secured for the British Museum. Among other things there is 'RED SNOW for the B.M.', there is a dull-looking bird marked '—? Sabini' skewered on the end of a bayonet, there are 'WORMS found in the Intestines of a Seal by a Volunteer'. A John Bull type in the foreground comments dourly that the country has enough gulls, dogs etc 'without going to the North Pole for them'. But the principal prizes, which are also the ones exciting the spectators, have nothing to do with this sorry collection. The sailors are staggering under the weight of *Ursa Major*, drawn as a polar bear with the seven stars of the constellation shining on its side ('It's a good thing I've lost my nose,' remarks the sailor acting porter for the rump), and Jack Frost brings up the rear of the procession, holding a narwhal's horn. Leaping, cavorting onlookers cry: 'I see Jack Frost! I see Jack Frost!! Huzza! with the North Pole in his hand!! Huzza!' And: 'Huzza! they have got *Ursa Major* – as I live! Huzza!!' And: 'I see it! I see it! The North Pole by Jupiter!! I'll cling to it like a *leech*. Huzza! Huzza!!'

Cruikshank's print satirises two things: the inutility of exploration, which brings home such tawdry curiosities at the cost of so many noses, and the ignorance of the crowd, which believes that stars and poles might be portable. (The latter attack, on credulity, is taken up with an additional racial slur in a less distinguished cartoon of 1824. An Irish mother dances for joy as a letter from her sailor son is read aloud to her. 'The North Pole – be der powers Pats fortins made anney how – och murdther he's found the North Pole and der boy's *bringing it home with him* – what'll *Capt Parry* be sayin to that?') Look a little closer at the Cruikshank and the disenchantment reveals itself as total. *Ursa Major* is only a badly cured animal stuck with stars like gilt studded on gingerbread; the ivory 'North Pole', reads its label in minuscule writing, is to be 'used in Common, as a walking-stick'; while Jack Frost himself, despite his bristling frosted hair and his powder-puff loincloth, is probably just an Eskimo. 'If they kill the dogs & stuff 'em! what will they do with Jack Frost?' asks a sailor at the extreme end of the procession. 'Cut his throat, & stuff him also . . . I supposes,' replies another.

It is to be presumed that Cruikshank's crowd would line the street

## DAMN THE NORTH POLE!

with equal alacrity to see any other exhibition of oddities. The site of the satire is London, and it functions to record one parade among many that decorated the urban scene. Life in the capital was notorious, as the eye of satire saw matters, for momentary prodigies and temporary witless crazes. But Cruikshank nonetheless proves himself acute at observing the balance of elements that sustained this particular excitement. For one thing, the observers shout huzza on the rooftops because the 'North Pole' has been brought home, because it has entered Whitehall and London can see it, digest it, claim it. Home is the frame within which the North Pole makes sense as a prodigy of nature, even if all geographical sense is thereby abandoned. Then, there is the way that the actual productions of the polar regions – even the red snow refers to an actual discovery by Ross, of an area where a cherry-coloured lichen dyed a snowfield – are outweighed by the romance of them, as represented by the Great Bear and the intangible treasure of 90° N. At the root of an excitement structured like this must lie a perception of the polar regions as essentially blank, a space so devoid of anything except worms and gulls and curious snow that its potential for being discovered becomes its defining characteristic. The last two stars of Ursa Major, incidentally, point the way to the North Pole's celestial companion, Polaris.

Interestingly, therefore, this kind of excitement about the Arctic is in agreement – in a peculiar, ultimate sense – with the common-sense refusal to be excited. By preferring the symbols of polar-ness over anything more material, the enthusiast implicitly agrees with the satirist that the physical features of the place are not worth getting worked up about; there is not enough there to make a practical motive for excitement. The difference between them turns on their view of motives that are not practical.

Of course, the Arctic is not blank, or featureless, or uninhabited. There may have been less tangible incentive to explore it than there was for other areas (although whaling tended to follow exploration in the Arctic, as trade followed the flag elsewhere around the nineteenth-century globe); the expeditions nevertheless returned a mass of data from their encounters with a landscape rich in its own peculiar properties. The Arctic demanded swift attention to the behaviour of

the ice that so dominated its scenery. It can even be argued that the success and failure of different British expeditions of the period reflects the degrees to which they were, and were not, imaginatively captured by a vision of the Arctic as bleak, blank, hostile. Those explorers least able to perceive the Arctic as it was – indifferent rather than harsh, full rather than empty, a problematic dwelling space rather than a moral playground – were also least likely to survive there.

But the perception of Arctic emptiness also allowed much more wild and florid ideas of the region, for blank space, like blank paper, can be scribbled over with the wishes of the onlooker. There was a steady thread of fantasy concerning the poles in the nineteenth century, ranging from tall stories to mad geographical theories: and this is leaving aside the deliberately fanciful use of the frozen North in children's stories and fables. The kind of fantasy I mean involved real belief, even if only in the form of a con-trick, or a transparent delusion. It is as if the acknowledged status of the North Pole (and the South) as points both known and unreachable, real and not, allowed ideas to attach themselves to them that were likewise half-respectable, half-real, half-baked. 'I try in vain to be persuaded that the pole is the seat of frost and desolation,' says the narrator of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, which she wrote between 1816 and 1817, before the return of the Admiralty's explorers, and framed with a polar sub-plot; 'it ever presents itself to my imagination as the region of beauty and delight.' He means no paradox. On the very first page of the novel Robert Walton, who will meet Victor Frankenstein and his hideous creature out on the ice-floes of the polar sea once his chartered ship has set sail, is confiding to his sceptical sister back in England his adherence to the notion of a literal polar paradise. Of gentle birth, yet only half-educated, he has filled his mind with the travel narratives and geographical speculations which 'composed the whole of our good Uncle Thomas' library'. The temporary difficulties of the ice behind him, he expects to set sail across placid waters, and claim fabulous continents. Though at this date the uncertainty of the evidence about the polar regions gave some genuine credibility to arguments for an open polar sea, neither evidence nor experience plays any part in Walton's quest. The pole that fascinates him is a pure book-learnt

## DAMN THE NORTH POLE!

construction of the imagination; he feels only impatience at its actual ice and cold as he encounters them; it is, precisely, a space cleared on the map for him to fill with daydreams of discovery.

Walton's story is only the outer rind of *Frankenstein*, a frame for the central narrative. But as Walton listens to the long history of flight and terror told by the emaciated fugitive he has taken aboard, the parallels grow between Victor Frankenstein's irresponsible dream of creating life, and Walton's own polar reverie. Walton's story reproduces Frankenstein's in miniature. Both men are devotees of what has been called 'Promethean science', the period's heady sense that the powers of nature might be appropriated for humanity, as the titan Prometheus stole the fire of the gods. The later popularity of *Frankenstein* has left a wholly Gothic image of this, strong on lightning bolts and fizzing retorts; but a truer reflection of the contemporary excitement can be seen in – for example – Coleridge's remark that he went to Humphry Davy's scientific lectures in order to 'replenish my stock of metaphors'. Promethean science was poetic, hubristic, consciously marvellous. At its centre there figured a daring, definitively *male* experimenter, a Columbus of intellect, who might steer to shores of unsuspected knowledge – or assemble a patchwork monster from the spoils of the graveyard. And Victor Frankenstein himself recognises the common nature of their projects. It is the reason he imparts the cautionary tale of his life to Walton. 'One man's life or death were but a small price to pay' (Walton is saying)

for the acquirement of the knowledge which I sought, for the dominion which I should acquire and transmit over the elemental foes of our race. As I spoke, a dark gloom spread over my listener's countenance . . . at length he spoke, in broken accents: 'Unhappy man! Do you share my madness? Have you drunk also of the intoxicating draught? Hear me; let me reveal my tale, and you will dash the cup from your lips!'

The penalty for Victor's madness is death: ultimately his own, and the monster's, but first those of his wife, relations, and best friend. Walton's fate is a less lethal one. After a mutiny among his crew, and a graphic demonstration that the North is ice to its heart, we see him turning his ship around at the end of the novel, presumably to return,

chastened yet unscathed, to England. Mary Shelley means more however, than that those who dare too much are punished. She does not so much rebut the claims of Promethean science as pursue its consequences, organising the events of Victor's downfall as persistent failures to provide for the scientific discoveries he fathers; and she tests the elated language he and Walton have in common for solipsism and irresponsibility. Their gender is important. Both men fail to ground their raptures in an emotional intelligence associated throughout the novel with women; in Walton's case, with his sensible sister, whose reservations about his enthusiasm for the pole, though never appearing in the text, make up the unheard position against which he tries to justify himself. She possesses the warmth of a home, and the literal children so scarce in a novel filled with monstrous births, and the metaphorical offspring of the mind. He, aiming for an imaginary oasis at the pole, inherits only a waste of cold.

And here the reader has to ask whether the cold that Walton gets isn't really the fulfilment of his desires, for all his protestations. It was a cold northern breeze in St Petersburg on the first page of the book that ruffled his imagination: 'Inspired by this wind of promise, my daydreams become more fervent and more vivid.' It was the polar part of 'The Ancient Mariner', he confesses at one point, that settled his childhood 'attachment to, my passionate enthusiasm for, the dangerous mysteries of the ocean'. And when Coleridge's 'ice, mast-high' does 'come drifting by/As green as emerald' about his ship, it seems the rightful landscape for his fantasies, the proper realisation of cold and detached enthusiasm. (Mary Shelley found the material for her Arctic in Coleridge, in a library book about Siberia, and in Percy Shelley's paeans to the Alps, which they were visiting together when she first conceived *Frankenstein*.) Walton perhaps gets what he did not know he wanted. He is made to inhabit, and to shiver in, a physical corollary to his thinking. Poetic justice.

If the pack-ice is primarily conceived as the climactic setting to the battle between Victor and the monster – if Walton is really only an extra in the main drama of the book – he learns at least, from the scenes he witnesses, what the meaning of the place he has sought out actually is. Victor, weighing in to help Walton stem the mutiny, delivers a chilling