Jonathan Lam

Prof. Germano

HUM324 – Polar Imagination

11 / 01 / 2021

Response to *Land of Wondrous Cold*

I was reading through our classmates' responses, and the idea of the "narrative" of the explorations and of climate change, as opposed to some sort of bland history or jumbled collection of events, is reflected in several of the responses. Tony, for example, mentions the reappearance of the Erebus and Terror. I was confused when initially reading this, and upon a quick search, it turns out that it was indeed the same ship as in the doomed Franklin expedition. (Aside: I am not sure why we haven't seen earlier mention of the Erebus and Terror and their previous Antarctic expeditions. When confirming that the two ships were the same ones used in the later Franklin expedition, I wasn't sure if I had found the correct one, as both ships were originally warships as mentioned later in the book. Wikipedia also lists five ships named HMS Erebus and nine ships named HMS Terror, adding to the confusion. There are also volcanoes named Erebus and Terror on the Antarctic continent.) This seems not too surprising, as the world of famous Arctic explorers and Arctic exploration ships is small: for example, Crozier was a member of the Ross Antarctic expeditions and also second-in-command on the Franklin expedition, and Ross (both James and John) were sent to search for the lost Franklin Expedition. As Tony also mentions in his response, this gives the ship a character, a history. Without this information when reading the previous accounts of the Franklin expedition, my view of the ships were that they were ordinary exploration ships, perhaps something like whaling ships, ill-prepared for the ice. Armed with this knowledge, we now know that the Franklin explorers had the assurance of two of the finest exploration-purposed ships in the world, with the confidence of surviving a longer- and similarly-ice-laden trip to the Antarctic. I can imagine that this may have given the Franklin expeditioners too much confidence in their ship to think about learning the ways of the Inuit people for

survival, in the same way that the Titanic was “unsinkable.” This extra knowledge also more strongly contrasts with the dinky little boat and six-man crew led by Amundsen in 1906 that was the first to actually traverse the North-West Passage.

The idea of the nonfictional narrative is also mentioned in Sanjana’s response, in which she mentions D’Urville’s wife Adelie, and the similarity to the tragedy of Sir and Lady Franklin. I too noticed this, and thought this to be the first instance of romance encountered in our readings thus far; Lady Franklin’s is also the story of a tragic love, but it is not presented to be romantic in the way that D’Urville and Adelie kept a secret promise to each other. This gives rise to his study of the natural sciences to prevent an onset of madness – without the description of the romance, I believe that the latter fact would be much less potent.

The piece of the narrative that I found to be most capturing was the moments when the discovery capture the botanist, Hooker. Cindy also mentions the enrapturing image of the sheltered flower that Hooker finds. However, I find equally if not more fascinating the moments when the seeds of continental drift theory begin to materialize in his brain, when “the world of Kerguelen opened before him like a book” (Wood 51), also on the same island. This is the tip of the iceberg into a much deeper theory – literally on a global scale – which is significant in the theory of global climate change patterns (as Wood explains through much of the book). Similar moments have have also presented themselves to Hooker when he notices the likeness of plant species on spatially distant bodies of land, which is the foundational moment for the theory of continental drift, and (via association with Darwin) also important evidence for the theory of evolution.

Looking at these three pieces in the narrative – the background on the Terror and Erebus, D’Urville’s romance, and the origin of continental drift – none are strictly necessary to tell the narrative of Arctic exploration, or of climate change. The previous accounts have gotten away with omitting these details, instead stating statistics about the water level change if all the glaciers were to melt, and of the dates and writings and skeletons left behind by the Franklin expedition. Providing these details

of what the characters knew or saw, rather than simply the aftermath of their expeditions, makes for a much more tantalizing narrative. By collecting and connecting these narratives, we can make better inferences about what the explorers felt or were motivated by, and we can even get closer to reliving their moments of joy or discovery.