The Supernatural Arctic: An Exploration

Shane McCorristine, University College Dublin

Abstract
The magnetic attraction of the North exposed a matrix of motivations for discovery service in nineteenth-century culture: dreams of wealth, escape, extreme tourism, geopolitics, scientific advancement, and ideological attainment were all prominent factors in the outfitting expeditions. Yet beneath this 'exoteric' matrix lay a complex 'esoteric' matrix of motivations which included the compelling themes of the sublime, the supernatural, and the spiritual. This essay, which pivots around the Franklin expedition of 1845-1848, is intended to be an exploration which suggests an intertextuality across Arctic time and geography that was co-ordinated by the lure of the supernatural.

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Introduction

In his classic account of Scott's Antarctic expedition Apsley Cherry-Garrard noted that "Polar exploration is at once the cleanest and most isolated way of having a bad time which has been devised".[1] If there is one single question that has been asked of generations upon generations of polar explorers it is, *Why?*: Why go through such ordeals, experience such hardship, and take such risks in order to get from one place on the map to another? From an historical point of view, with an apparent fifty per cent death rate on polar voyages in the long nineteenth century amid disaster after disaster, the weird attraction of the poles in the modern age remains a curious fact.[2] It is a less curious fact that the question *cui bono?* also featured prominently in Western thinking about polar exploration, particularly when American expeditions entered the Arctic

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[1] Apsley Cherry-Garrard, *The Worst Journey in the World*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1938), 12.
[2] Sarah Moss, *Scott's Last Biscuit: The Literature of Polar Travel* (Oxford: Signal, 2006), 93.

sphere in the 1850s, primarily seeking to rescue missing Englishmen. The apparent lack of much utilitarian or scientific purpose in Arctic exploration merely served to accentuate for contemporaries the emotional investment in voyages of discovery. The magnetic attraction of the North exposed a matrix of motivations for discovery service in nineteenth-century culture: dreams of wealth, escape, extreme tourism, geopolitics, scientific advancement, and ideological attainment were all prominent factors in the outfitting expeditions. Yet beneath this 'exoteric' matrix lay a complex 'esoteric' matrix of motivations which included the compelling themes of the sublime, the supernatural, and the spiritual.[3]

Also prominent in this esoteric matrix was the idea of sublime love, a type of polar erotics that drew its spiritual power and purity from the contrast between masculine endeavour amid horror and feminine fidelity on the home front: in this motif the woman was psychically connected to her male lover across the cartographic divide, transgressing even the boundaries of what was natural in the physical world. Such was the power of polar love to unite souls across space and time that it was inextricably linked to the supernatural, to the world of ghosts, haunting memories, and celestial melodies – features which were all performed in an environment of death or impending death. These ghostly aspects of polar exploration emerged in multiple locations: from narratives of Arctic service in the mid-nineteenth century, to little-known fictional ghost stories, to polemics, plays, and postmodern re-imaginings of polar disaster, indeed, to the very birth of spiritualism itself[4] – such concerns have shaped how the frozen north was represented and made meaningful in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This essay, which pivots

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[3] See Eric Wilson, *The Spiritual History of Ice: Romanticism, Science and the Imagination* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). Francis Spufford writes of "a second kind of polar history, largely uncharted; an intangible history of assumptions, responses to landscape, cultural fascinations, aesthetic attraction to the cold regions". Francis Spufford, *I May be Some Time: Ice and the English Imagination* (Faber: London, 2003) 6.

[4] David Chapin, *Exploring Other Worlds: Margaret Fox, Elisha Kent Kane, and the Antebellum Culture of Curiosity* (Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004).

around the Franklin expedition of 1845-1848, is intended to be an exploration that suggests an intertextuality across Arctic time and geography that was co-ordinated by the lure of the supernatural. And yet the Arctic supernatural is not strictly supernatural. On his successful completion of the Northwest Passage aboard the Gjøa from 1903-1907, which at times resembled a kind of pilgrimage to Franklin, Roald Amundsen wrote of an Arctic morning that was "dazzingly, supernaturally clear", when:

> Suddenly a gleam of light broke through the fog, and, as if by enchantment, there opened up before me a wide view out into the bright daylight; right in front of us, and seemingly quite near, the wild, rugged landscape of Cape York appeared suddenly like a scene from fairyland.[5]

As expressed here, the Arctic supernatural speaks of the transmutation of landscape and the enchantment of the explorer's 'second-sight': this is a visuality that re-presents a "fairyland" in which the esoteric content of Arctic exploration finds opportunity to emerge.

Polar Magnetism

The thanatropic impulses behind Arctic exploration find no better illustration than at the very moment of attainment – what Lisa Bloom calls "the coitus of discovery".[6] On reaching the magnetic north pole on Boothia Peninsula in 1831, James Clark Ross faced the realisation that there was literally no change in the landscape, no mountain or iron pole which could designate and acknowledge the achievement of the explorers:

> Nature had there erected no monument to denote the spot which she had chosen as the centre of one of her great and dark powers; and where we could do little ourselves towards this end, it was our business to submit, and to be content in noting

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[5] Roald Amundsen, *The North West Passage,* Vol.1 (London: Archibald Constable, 1908), 37.

[6] Lisa Bloom, *Gender on Ice: American Ideologies of Polar Expeditions* (London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 49.

> by mathematical numbers and signs, as with things of far more importance in the terrestrial system, what we could but ill distinguish in any other manner.[7]

This passage indicates that with the magnetic north pole devoid of occult significance, of even approaching the fabulous half-dreamt ideas associated with such a place on the map, Ross reluctantly retreated to the world of science and positivism in order to eek out some human meaning from an achievement so blank.[8] In a landscape named after the London gin merchant that funded the expedition, Ross's attainment of the north magnetic pole prefigures the instinctive responses of later explorers to the polar successes of the early twentieth century. Arthur Schopenhauer was fond of the idea that the devil can be heard laughing after copulation: what the attainment responses of Ross, and later Robert Peary, Frederick Cook, and Amundsen portray, is the post-coital lassitude of the explorer, the moment when the intuition that the explorer has been tricked into achievement is made meaningful by his intellectual baggage. The drives of Eros and Thanatos, psychoanalysis suggests, co-exist on the same level of motivation, and it is from this background that the obsessive feminisation of the Arctic landscape may be understood alongside the drive to polar destruction. From the castrative Ice Queen of the popular imagination,[9] to the regal coquettes carved into the ice to simulate Woman during the long polar winter[10] – the Arctic, the land

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[7] James Clark Ross in John Ross, *Narrative of a Second Voyage in Search of a North-West Passage* (London: A.W. Webster, 1835), 335.

[8] He goes on to note that his team erected a cairn at the site "only regretting that we had not the means of constructing a pyramid of more importance, and of strength sufficient to withstand the assaults of time and of the Esquimaux. Had it been a pyramid as large as that of Cheops, I am not quite sure that it would have done more than satisfy our ambition, under the feelings of that exciting day". Ibid., 336.

[9] See Shu-chuan Yan, "Voyages and Visions: Imag(in)ing the Arctic in the Victorian Periodical, 1850s-1870s", (*NTU Studies in Language and Literature* 16, 2006), 53-82.

[10] Michael Smith writes of New Year's Day celebrations in the Antarctic aboard the *Terror and Erebus*: "A few hands climbed aboard a nearby iceberg and hollowed out a rectangular-shaped 'ballroom'. At one end of the dance floor, magnificent thrones were chiselled from the ice for Crozier and Ross. The

beneath the Great Bear, was a gendered landscape where masculinity was performed, where Nature was something to be struggled against, and where death was imagined as a spiritually sanitised process of slipping away, of returning home to the snowy warmth of the land. The myth that freezing to death was somehow a pleasant way to die served to hide the ideological need for this expiration-as-homecoming in the Arctic sublime.[11]

The awareness that the Arctic explorer had crossed a cartographic boundary into a formerly mythical land was a recurring one in Arctic narratives. Of much concern to first-time explorers were the haunting epistemological uncertainties that the polar experience inculcated: with mirages, optical illusions, and sensory nightmares an almost daily occurrence, commanders were keen to stress the new aesthetic realities in the Arctic theatre, realities which seemed destined to scupper the coping mechanisms learnt back in England. William Edward Parry noted:

> It requires a few days to be passed amidst scenes of this nature, to erase, in a certain degree, the impressions left by more animated landscapes; and not till then, perhaps, does the eye become familiarized, and the mind reconciled to prospects of utter barrenness and desolation such as these rugged shores present.[12]

The implication was that polar exploration demanded a new type of visuality from a blank slate, an inner eye or spiritual vision which could help the explorer to adapt to the phenomenology inspired by such extreme, and horrific, experience. Of course this phenomenology was a cultural adaptation of Christian Europeans who – following the acceptance of Arctic explorers into English high society in the 1820s – made every decision, mental note, or textual observation with their

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artistic Hooker and Davis carved an 8-foot (2.4-metre) statue of a woman from the ice and named it Venus de Medici…In the meantime, 'Venus de Medici' drifted slowly away towards the melting waters of the north carrying a goodwill message signed by Crozier, Ross and the other officers". Michael Smith, *Captain Francis Crozier: Last Man Standing?* (Cork: Collins Press, 2006), 114.

[11] See Elisha Kent Kane, *The U.S. Grinnell Expedition in Search of Sir John Franklin: A Personal Narrative* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1851), 262.

[12] William Edward Parry, *Journal of a Second Voyage for the Discovery of a North-West Passage* (London: John Murray, 1824), 8.

reception back home in mind. From the beginning of the modern era of Arctic exploration it was clear that the language of the supernatural and the ghostly was used in conjunction with the sublime to try and express what Arctic exploration was like to those who had not travelled there. Central in this cultural explosion of Arctic imaginings were the panoramas and other visual spectacles on public display in Britain and Europe during the nineteenth century.[13] The supernatural horror with which many spectators envisioned the Arctic may be ascertained by a review of a panorama published in *Punch* magazine in 1850:

> Dreams I have had in my life, but as that view of the Arctic Regions, nothing so terrible. My blood freezes as I think of that *summer* even – but what to say of the winter? By Heavens, Sir, I could not face the sight – the icy picture of eternal snow – the livid northern lights, the killing glitter of the stars; the wretched marines groping about in the snow around the ship; they caused in me such a shudder of surprise and fright – that I don't blush to own that I popped down the curtain after one single peep, and would not allow my children to witness it.[14]

Here it is clear that the Arctic spectacle is perceived as a transgressive production redolent of some kind of sublime hell: the voyeurism of the adult is denied to the child for fear of the dangerous fascination of such an experience.

Therefore, the Arctic as an unfriendly place on the margins of the known world was made to reflect, as if through a glass darkly, the assumptions and terrors of European travellers and spectators. After apparently attaining the Northwest Passage, a feat he attributed to a higher power, Robert McClure sought refuge along the north coast of Banks Island in a place he termed Mercy Bay. After getting frozen-in for two years with his men starving and gradually going mad, during a conversation on how they should bury a man in the frozen ice, McClure and his companions perceived a faint figure coming towards them in the distance over the ice at the entrance to Mercy Bay. At first it was assumed, due to its pace and exclamations, that the figure was being

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[13] See Russell A. Potter, *Arctic Spectacles: The Frozen North in Visual Culture, 1818-1875* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2007).
[14] William Makepeace Thackeray cited in Yan, "Voyages and Visions", 69.

chased by a bear; then it was imagined as an Inuit screeching like a mad man.

> The stranger came quietly on, and we saw that his face was as black as ebony, and really at the moment we might be pardoned for wondering whether he was a denizen of this or the other world, and had he but given us a glimpse of a tail or a cloven hoof, we should have assuredly have taken to our legs.[15]

Examples of a hallucinatory nature such as this crop up again and again in Arctic narratives. Frequently this form of ghost-seeing was directed toward the animal world, sometimes the only other living things in the region. While man-hauling on the second Grinnell expedition in 1854, Elisha Kent Kane reported seeing a bear walking leisurely in front of him tearing up a jumper: however his fellow explorer on this mission argued that "this bear, in fact was a creation of the Doctor's fancy. He spoke of it at the time when he supposed that he saw it; but, although my eyesight was much better than his, I saw nothing of the kind".[16] English naval crews were proverbially superstitious and concerned about omens: like the episode of the albatross in Coleridge's "The Ancient Mariner", sailors directed much of their fear and hope towards birds in the air, a feature of polar life that disturbed some commanders.[17] However, perhaps more frightening, because it was more indebted to the aesthetic of the sublime, were the representations of lifeless polar Nature as gothic. For instance, during his attempt to reach the North Pole in 1909, Cook wrote of the Arctic in a sensational language that echoed contemporary supernatural fiction, and even prefigured the polar science-fiction of H.P. Lovecraft:

> I felt the terrible oppression of that raging, life-sucking vampire force sweeping over the desolate world. Disembodied things – the souls of those, perhaps, who had perished here – seemed frenziedly calling me in the wind. I felt under me the surge of the sweeping, awful sea. I felt the desolation of this stormy world within my

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[15] Sherard Osborn ed, *The Discovery of the North West Passage by 'H.M.S. Investigator': Capt. R. M'Clure, 1850, 1851, 1852, 1853, 1854* (Rutland, Vermont: Tuttle, 1969), 273.
[16] Cited in Chapin, *Exploring Other Worlds*, 152.
[17] Ross, *Narrative of a Second Voyage*, 112, 162.

> shuddering soul; but, withal, I throbbed with a determination to assert the supremacy of living man over these blind, insensate forces; to prove that the living brain and palpating muscle of a finite though conscious creature could vanquish a hostile Nature which creates to kill.[18]

Cook's vision of the north imagines exploration as a timeless struggle of man against an environment that is almost cannibalistic in its murderous intentions, where the souls of previous explorers remain to haunt the living. Cook's contrast between the disembodied, which includes both the ghosts of the dead and the vampiric nature of the north, and his own embodiment, draws attention to the power of will in this battle to achieve cartographic attainment.

Yet such a valorisation of the personal will was a new, and perhaps culturally American, development. In the early phase of Arctic exploration, from 1818-1845, commanders such as Parry, an evangelical, made obsessive appeals to providence and it was stressed in explorers' narratives that humans were at the will of the deity when on duty in the Arctic. John Ross wrote:

> In short, our whole voyage, from its commencement until its conclusion, will be found a wonderful chain of providential circumstances, affording an evident proof that those who 'go down into the sea in ships' &c., are, of all others, the most dependent on the Divine aid.[19]

From accounts of the ice-fields and the constant concern of crushing, getting frozen-in, or missing leads, it was evident that even before wintering-over in the Arctic, men on discovery service could quickly descend into madness with post-traumatic stress disorder clearly a major problem in all ranks. These polar experiences put explorers on the edge, at risk, an anxious race of adventurers willing to read the landscape to determine their fate.

From the early voyages it was established that the Arctic was in some way unspeakable and unimaginable for armchair travellers. Of all the great polar explorers in the nineteenth century John Ross was perhaps

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[18] Cited in Anthony Brandt ed., *The North Pole: A Narrative History* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 2005), 377.
[19] Ross, *Narrative of a Second Voyage*, xii.

the most appalled by the Arctic experience and most tormented by the sensory deprivation which years of snow and ice, and ice and snow, could engender. It was from this personal sense of horror that Ross sought compassion from the public on his return in 1833 from four winters spent in the Arctic, propagating the frozen north as a pitiless environment devoid of all picturesque elements, and therefore, any heroic or exciting tales that could enchant his readers. Rather, as part of his strategy of 'negative exploration', Ross sought to limit and nullify the artistic and poetic representation of this "most abominable climate".[20] Ross wrote:

> For readers, it is unfortunate that no description can convey an idea of a scene of this nature; and, as to the pencil, it cannot represent motion, or noise. And to those who have not seen a northern ocean in winter – who have not seen it, I should say, in a winter's storm – the term ice, exciting but the recollection of what they only know at rest, in an inland lake or canal, conveys no ideas of what it is the fate of an arctic navigator to witness and to feel.[21]

Ross's consistent indictment of the region in the age of over-wintering, and negation of any artistic attempts to express it, serves only to illuminate the ability of the terrible sublime to expand the spirit, even as it appals: with different and contradictory levels of meaning present in the same psyche, the irruption of the Arctic into European imagination from 1818 suggests the existence of a new breed of explorers who consciously lived on the edge of human experience, but unconsciously sought to reconfigure Hearth, Home, and Heaven through a new type of human expression, a new phenomenology of exploration on the margins of what could be written about. This was achieved through the establishment of sensory polarisations in arctic narratives: life/death; light/dark; blank/mapped; friendly/unfriendly; homely/uncanny. It is at the interface of these binaries that the supernatural emerges as a disquieting factor in the explorative process.

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[20] See ibid., 109-10, 141, 346, 424.
[21] Ibid., 87.

The Fate of Franklin No Man May Know

It was clear that for the Admiralty, the military dominance and imperial power of Britain in the early-nineteenth century brought responsibilities in the sphere of exploration – a kind of cartographic white man's burden. John Barrow, who ran the Admiralty from 1804-1845, argued that if Britain failed to search for a Northwest passage in the Canadian Arctic she "would be laughed at by all the world".[22] Britain had opened both the eastern and western doors, the argument went, and to neglect the actual penetration of the Northwest Passage would not only be foolish, but would open Britain up to a type of historical derision much feared by the post-Napoleonic imperial administrators, flush with success and keenly concerned to flex their technocratic might in a geographical quest that was also a geopolitical quest, now that the spectre of Russia turned its gaze towards the Arctic too. The largest such quest was the naval expedition commanded by John Franklin, with the Irishman Francis Crozier as second-in-command, which left England in May 1845 to seek the Northwest Passage. After communications with some whalers the ships HMS *Terror* and *Erebus* disappeared into the Canadian archipelago and 129 men, the elite of a sailor-nation, were never seen by Europeans again. Almost nothing was known for sure about the voyage and this situation, in itself, was enough to lead to speculations and imaginings which were explicitly or implicitly supernatural in theme. Nature abhors a vacuum, it is said, and in the discourse of Arctic exploration the *horror vacui*, the fear of being subsumed into the landscape without leaving any records or evidence of presence, was the dread of all who ventured north. Polar exploration reinforced the idea that there is nothing more unsettling than a disappearance which leaves nothing but silence and echo in its wake. The searches for Franklin's expedition, which commenced in 1848, would seek to allay the fears which this disappearance had unearthed in the Western psyche: they would map the blank spaces into which the *Erebus* and *Terror* had vanished and would complete the Northwest Passage in the process. However, crucially, the searchers

[22] Cited in Richard J. Cyriax, *Sir John Franklin's Last Arctic Expedition: A Chapter in the History of the Royal Navy* (London: Meuthen, 1939), 20.

would stress that Franklin had "forged the last link" in this quest, thereby ventroliquising a victory that never occurred, narrating a story that was never told. In this era of investigation Franklin and his men, therefore, became ghosts: officially dead since 1854, they lived on in the public imagination and the memory of loved one's back home, open to textualisation in the absence of any authoritative story.

In his book *Enduring Dreams: An Exploration of Arctic Landscape* (1997) John Moss observed:

> When you enter Arctic narrative, you enter every narrative of the Arctic ever written. When you enter the Arctic in person, you become part of the extended text. When you write the Arctic to affirm your presence in the world, you become in writing an imaginative creation.[23]

With the loss of the Franklin expedition the Arctic narrative became a privatised entity. Traditionally the log-books and journals of the officers on discovery service were given to the Admiralty which had a close relationship with the London publisher John Murray. In this arrangement there was not much scope for minority reports or contesting voices: furthermore themes of a sensational, violent, or unworthy nature were mostly repressed in the narrative signed off by the expedition commander.[24] In the 1850s, with the entry of the Franklin expedition into a public sphere of debate and dissension, all this changed as every polar explorer could tell their own ghost story and be relatively confident of publishing success. From William C. Godfrey's counterblast to Kane's bestselling *Arctic Explorations*, to the narratives and counter-narratives

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[23] Moss, *Scott's Last Biscuit*, 105.

[24] A notable exception is the account of Robert Huish who, supported by Barrow, lambasted John Ross for turning back from Lancaster Sound on seeing the imaginary 'Croker Mountains'. When Ferdinand Wentzel met the survivors of the first Franklin expedition he wrote: "It is to be presumed, as they themselves will be publishers of the journals which will appear, that they will be cautious in not exposing their own errors and want of conduct. In fact one of the officers was candid enough to confess to me that there were circumstances which must not be known; however it is said that 'stones sometimes speak'". Cited in Robert McGhee, *The Last Imaginary Place: A Human History of the Arctic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 225.

of Ranulph Fiennes and Mike Stroud in recent years, accounts of polar exploration share the awareness that the explorative monologue has become radically decentred and polyphonic as the notion of the disaster has progressively journeyed inward, towards the realm of psychological darkness. No doubt, had there been any survivors of the Franklin expedition, the world would have been presented with multiple accounts which varied in tone, reliability, accuracy, and, probably, the level of guilt assigned and assumed. In aesthetic and literary terms, something happened after Franklin; something that was once imagined as pure had been lost. Beau Riffenburgh traces this transformation: "Knowing that the Franklin expedition had disappeared forever was terrible, yet sublime. But knowing that the men of the expedition had died slowly of scurvy and starvation was different. The reality and proximity of the horror had eliminated the sublimity".[25]

Of course this had all happened before. Disaster, rumours of cannibalism, polar love, horror: all had been in the public mind since Franklin's first expedition to map the northern coast of Canada some twenty-five years previously. On this trek between 1819-1822 two of Franklin's subordinates, George Back and Robert Hood, both aged twenty-two, and both artists, fell in love with the same woman – Greenstockings, a Yellowknife teenager, as close to a femme fatale figure as the Arctic gets. When the Englishmen's rivalry got out of hand and an early-morning duel was arranged, Franklin was forced to sabotage the denouement to this melodramatic narrative. Back was later sent south on a daunting journey to secure food supplies for the expedition, while Hood was killed by the crazed Iroquois voyageur Michel Terohaute. This was the same voyageur who had probably kept Hood and two other Englishmen – Dr. John Richardson and John Hepburn – alive on the flesh of a dead companion, disguising the food as that of a wolf carcass. When Richardson shot Michel in the head a few days later he explained that the principles of this cannibal "were unsupported by a belief in the divine truths of Christianity, were unable to withstand the pressure of severe distress".[26] This medico-religious statement throws into stark

[25] Beau Riffenburgh, *The Myth of the Explorer: The Press, Sensationalism, and Geographical Discovery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 31.
[26] Brandt ed., *The North Pole*, 130.

contrast Richardson's earlier note in his journal for the same day where he wrote that shortly before Michel was killed he,

> for the first time, assumed such a tone of superiority in addressing me, as evinced that he considered us to be completely in his power, and he gave vent to several expressions of hatred towards the white people, or as he termed us in the idiom of the voyageurs, the French, some of whom, he said, had killed and eaten his uncle and two of his relations.[27]

Is this an early account of 'Wendigo psychosis', a pious justification for extra-judicial murder, or evidence of colonial-cannibalistic guilt? Representing Michel as a savage pagan reverting to type under the stress of Arctic starvation merely draws attention to his grievances, grievances which seem age-old and primeval in their intensity. History emerges here as a haunting narrative of wrongs committed and justice denied, the disasters of previous generations surviving as accusing spectres, indicting and exposing human malevolence. In this context Margaret Atwood has written how "Fear of the Wendigo is twofold: fear of being eaten by one, and fear of becoming one".[28] The Elizabethan explorers John Davis and William Baffin had been surprised to find that the Inuit they encountered were not man-eaters:[29] with the Franklin expeditions of the nineteenth century it is the cannibal from within, rather than without, that must be defended against. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why Franklin was, after this expedition, perennially known as the "man who ate his boots", (a relatively common occurrence in the north): does this not disguise a relief that he did not eat other things? With the imperialist mapping of the unknown throughout the nineteenth century it would become more difficult to continue to imagine the cannibal as the monstrous Other, as the fearful savage lurking on the margins of the map, hungry for Christian blood. Such a development found its apotheosis later when rumours of cannibalism again attached themselves

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[27] Ibid., 128-9.
[28] Margaret Atwood, *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 67.
[29] See Augustine Courthauld ed., *From the Ends of the Earth: An Anthology of Polar Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), 84-5, 110.

to the name John Franklin and a cultural reaction, led by Charles Dickens, attempted to banish such fears from polite discourse.

The power of polar love was not only recognised within the Back, Hood, and Greenstockings triangle. After reading Franklin's 1823 narrative, in which he referred to Greenstockings as a "young lady…already the object of contest between her countrymen" and "has belonged successively to two husbands, and would probably have been the wife of many more",[30] Eleanor Franklin ventrolquised the figure of Greenstockings in a poetic love letter to her husband:

> Return! And the ice shall be swept from thy path / I shall breathe out my spells o'er the land and the sea; / Return! and the tempest shall pause in his wrath, / Nor the winds nor the waves dare be rebels to thee! / Spread thy canvas once more, keep the Pole-star before thee, / 'Tis constancy's type, and the beacon of glory; / By the lake, by the mountain, the forest and the river, / In the wilds of the north, I am thine, and for ever![31]

Greenstockings, in Eleanor's voice, figures as a personification of the Arctic, the elemental idea which has drawn her husband north away from her. The Arctic Woman controls the weather, the land and the sea: she inhabits the whole sphere and offers the possibility of consummation wherever exploration leads the explorer. In these narratives Greenstockings has been transmuted into a communal idea for English visitors to the north, an idea to be shared, fought over, and ultimately used, but who, in the absence of any personal testimony still resembles a character in a romantic Arctic narrative created far away from the Yellowknife territories of northern Canada.

When it came to Arctic exploration in the modern age the emotional and esoteric investment in such activities so outweighed any common-sense or utilitarian judgement in these ventures that failure and hardship were celebrated, and disaster could create instant celebrities. As John Rae, an intrepid explorer who worked for the Hudson's Bay Company put it: "The way to get into credit…is to plan some…scheme…and after having signally failed, return with a lot of…reasons – sufficiently good

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[30] Cited in Rudy Wiebe, *Playing Dead: A Contemplation concerning the Arctic*, new ed. (Edmonton: Newest Press, 2003), 40-1.
[31] Cited in Spufford, *I May be Some Time*, 112.

to gall John Bull – for your failure".[32] Franklin had been congratulated in 1822 for returning home with the loss of only Robert Hood to his name: on the debit side, about a dozen voyageurs and Inuit had died of starvation, exhaustion, abandonment, and murder on his expedition. A Samuel Beckett quote suggests itself here: "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better." Franklin did, in fact, try again, with another land expedition north between 1825 and 1827: mercifully on this occasion the expedition did not descend into disaster.

With some fifty separate missions sent out to seek information about the Franklin's final expedition from 1848, the searches could be read as an exercise in male anxiety, as a protracted investigation into masculine loss. Joseph Conrad's narrator in his novella *Heart of Darkness* referred to the explorers Sir Francis Drake and Sir John Franklin as "knights all, titled and untitled – the great knights-errant of the sea".[33] On the other hand, Franklin could be imagined as a bumbling and rather pathetic explorer playing hard to get, probably sublimely trapped in an Open Polar Sea, frozen in with his men, awaiting a suitable suitor like the impotent figure of the Fisher-king in grail mythology. Indeed, it is easy to see some of Franklin in the character of Conrad's Kurtz: both were representatives of the colonial order dispatched into a blank nothingness where horror and the end of civilisation beckons, not from the natives encountered, but from the very assumptions and delusions of the technocratic mind where whiteness and darkness are confused and, ultimately, interrelated. By the time Marlow finally captures Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, the enigmatic figure is crawling on all fours through and towards the darkness: this exemplifies the magnetism of what Conrad calls "the fascination of the abomination".[34] Here Conrad's idea of "militant geography", inspired by this classical era of exploration, has morphed into a kind of *Katabasis*, a journey to the underworld – a journey into a personal 'heart of darkness'. It is significant in this regard that at the end of Conrad's narrative Marlow makes an eerie visit to Kurtz's fiancée – "the Intended" – just as Leopold McClintock visited

[32] Rae to George Simpson, 19 November, 1852. Cited in Riffenburgh, *The Myth of the Explorer*, 18.
[33] Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (London: Penguin, 1995), 17.
[34] Ibid., 2.

Jane, Franklin's second wife, to pass on his findings in 1859. Like Marlow, McClintock could only offer a disjointed and possibly dishonest narrative with which Jane Franklin could find solace. Jane, the 'Penelope of the Arctic', who like her Greek forebear, was imagined as patiently and passionately awaiting the return of her lover, could surely also hear the words that so haunted Marlow: "the horror, the horror".

One of the many commentators on the Franklin searches noted with despair that "every exertion has failed to penetrate the gloomy mystery hanging over the fate of the lamented Franklin and his gallant companions; in vain have we tried to life the awful veil: hidden from our eyes, he and they have become, and all that concerns them, their joys or sorrows, as it were, a sealed book to us".[35] This allusion to hidden text, to "a sealed book" was not casually made for the link between bones and words, between the text and the corpus which writes it, was a common one during the whole episode. In one of her letters to the Admiralty in 1856 Jane Franklin pleaded,

> that a careful search be made for any possible survivor, that the bones of the dead be sought for and gathered together, that their buried records be unearthed, or recovered from the hands of the Esquimaux, and above all, that their last written words, so precious to their bereaved families and friends, be saved from destruction.[36]

The still-continuing search for a chest containing the expedition's log-books and journals, perhaps hauled by Francis Crozier and his remaining men on their march south, may be yet another Arctic chimera given that such records probably ended up as the playthings of Inuit children, oblivious to the historical investment of the West in lost manuscripts. The inability, or unwillingness, of Franklin to leave records in cairns as he progressed through the archipelago still jars to this day. Certainly, such a textual aporia was a mistake that Scott would not make on his last expedition in the Antarctic, writing literally to the very end.[37]

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[35] John Brown, "*The North-West Passage, and the Plans for the Search for Sir John Franklin*. A Review" (London: E. Stanford, 1858), 2.
[36] Cited in Sheila Nickerson, *Disappearance: A Map* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 78.
[37] See Moss, *Scott's Last Biscuit*, 135-6.

The idea that the recovery of living text, the precious voices of the disappeared and ghosts of the past, could aid in coming to terms with the Arctic surfaces in the writings of Vilhjalmur Stefansson, who encountered a cairn on Prince Patrick Island, a landscape named in honour of Irish explorers through the name of the Queen's son. Here on June 15th 1915 Stefansson opened a message deposited there by McClintock on June 15th 1853:

> There was a thrill about unrolling that damp and fragile sheet and reading the message from our great predecessor which had been lying there awaiting us for more than half a century. We felt it as marvelous that his steady hand was so legible after so long a time. It brought the past down to us, quite as wonderfully as it did for me five years later to talk in London with McClintock's wife, still hale and charming, and with his sons, and to be shown the manuscript diary of the day he wrote this message.[38]

Here the text is the life: the ink laboriously thawed out in the Frozen North is akin to blood in its immediate connection with fellow-explorers and with the lover back at home. In his autobiography Stefansson was unable to resist using such an episode to question the disappearance of the Franklin expedition, now explicitly envisioned as a textual absence. "It seems curious to me", he wrote, "that tiny messages, a few inches long when rolled, can be found so easily in the vast expanse of the Arctic while a great expedition like Sir John Franklin's, with two ships and more than a hundred men, can be almost completely lost".[39]

Of course, a record of the Franklin expedition was found by McClintock's team. The record at Victory Point on King William's Island established the date of Franklin's death as June 11th 1847, relatively early in the expedition, thereby maintaining Franklin's image as clean and heroic, offering a counter-narrative to the Inuit testimony transmitted by John Rae, which suggested that cannibalism had taken place on the expedition. McClintock's precarious narrative reconstruction and tracing of events, while gothic in implication, confirmed that Franklin had neither eaten nor been eaten by humans.

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[38] Cited in Nickerson, *Disappearance: A Map: A Meditation on Death and Loss in the High Latitudes*, 111.
[39] Ibid.

This was the great achievement of McClintock: he was knighted for his investigations and lauded by Victorian England as something close to a ghostwriter for the Franklin expedition. Perhaps most importantly, however, the record discovered at Victory Point represented a voice, a presence, something tangible in a landscape previously imagined as an horrific vacuum, mysteriously textless and devoid of a tale to be told. In his late essay "Geography and Some Explorers" Conrad, who described the Franklin expedition as "the darkest drama perhaps played behind the curtain of Arctic mystery" also wrote of how McClintock's *The Voyage of the 'Fox' in the Arctic Seas* (1859) enthralled him as a boy. Indeed, the most important connections between *Heart of Darkness* and *The Voyage of the 'Fox'* are literally intertextual. In his account McClintock had described, in remarkably restrained language, the sheer amount and variety of unnecessary baggage hauled by the surviving members of the expedition during the march towards the Great Fish River in 1848. McClintock wrote of silver cutlery and plate, clothes-brushes and other grooming instruments, slippers, and even "three articles with an owl engraved on them".[40] He also mentioned finding some devotional works including a profusely annotated Bible and a copy of *The Vicar of Wakefield*. This absurdist relic-hunting finds its uncanny echo in Conrad's novella as Marlow, on the trail of Kurtz, encounters an abandoned station where he picks up a book on seamanship with notes in the margins: in an ironic echo of McClintock's narrative Marlow observes, "Fancy a man lugging with him a book of that description into this nowhere and studying it – and making notes – in cipher at that! It was an extravagant mystery".[41]

Conclusion: Famine Gothic

In September 1837, George Back dramatically beached the sinking HMS *Terror* at Lough Swilly on Donegal coast, barely surviving an Arctic expedition to the northern shores of Hudson Bay. By 1839, the refitted ship was under the command of Francis Crozier and on its way to the Antarctic regions alongside the *Erebus*, under the command of his friend

[40] Brandt ed., *The North Pole*, 218.
[41] Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, 66.

and fellow Arctic veteran James Clark Ross. Yet before it entered the treacherous pack ice the expedition stopped off for some months at Van Diemen's Land where Governor John Franklin, alongside his indefatigable wife Jane, was attempting to reform aspects of the colony in the face of the covert opposition, and sometimes open hostility, of influential figures in the administration there. The arrival of the two polar commanders, therefore, and especially the dashing Ross, offered an exciting diversion in the parochial and isolated polite society of the island.

By all accounts love was in the air before the expedition had even left for the polar region for by this stage Crozier was infatuated with Franklin's niece, the flighty and flirty Sophy Cracroft. As Michael Smith puts it in his recent biography of Crozier, "Crozier was sighing for Sophy and Sophy was yearning for Ross, while in the background a strait-laced Lady Franklin kept her mild infatuation with Ross under strict control".[42] Such libidinal connections should be kept in mind because they played a crucial role in the idea of polar love during the period.

On being offered command of the *Erebus* again in 1845 to seek the Northwest Passage James Clark Ross, weary of polar exploration, recently married, and now a father, stays at home for the sake of his family. Lower down the list of intended candidates, Franklin, through the perseverance of his wife, who wished to restore his position after the debacle in Van Diemen's Land, gained the command of this expedition. Meanwhile Crozier, the love-struck bachelor, whose hand had been refused by Sophy, jumped at the chance of polar service, despite, or even because of, premonitions of disaster and death.

Such a biographical situation has led to Crozier emerging, in the burgeoning subgenre of fictional Franklin novels in the 1990s, as the most interesting character in the expedition, a psychological case study in polar melancholia and repressed sexuality.[43] This is perhaps because of the logistical reason that Franklin died early for novelistic purposes, but also because Crozier has been imagined as a complex figure more in

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[42] Smith, *Captain Francis Crozier*, 90.

[43] See, for instance, John Wilson, *North with Franklin: The Lost Journals of James Fitzjames* (Allston, Massachusetts: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 2000); Dan Simmons, *The Terror: A Novel* (London: Bantam, 2007).

tune with the Arctic than his colleagues. Almost becoming a Scandinavian explorer *avant-la-lettre* in the literature of the end of the twentieth century, Crozier's doom-laden empathy with the cruel environment of the Arctic is inextricably linked to the parallel themes of polar love and presentiment of disaster.

Certainly, such intuitive/erotic motivations lie at the heart of the many supernatural tales set in the Arctic which directly, or indirectly, reference the Franklin expedition in the aftermath of the expedition. Works such as *The Frozen Deep* (1857) a play written by Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins, "The Shadow of a Shade" (1869) by Tom Hood, and Arthur Conan Doyle's ghost story "The Captain of the 'Polestar'" (1883) imagined the attraction of the polar regions in terms of a sexuality of the supernatural. In these works the Arctic became a theatre of psychical courtship, consummation, and even transubstantiation as the Woman, envisioned through the idea of the North, was fatefully bound to her lover by supernatural means.

Yet perhaps the most compelling representation of Crozier comes, not from any nineteenth or twentieth-century fiction, but from some Inuit testimony, collected by Charles Francis Hall in the 1860s, which recounted how an officer, possibly Crozier, approached the Inuit on King William's Island begging for some seal meat for himself and his small group of men. For Hall, the discovery that these Inuit soon moved on and left the remnants of the expedition to its fate shocked and appalled him and accelerated his disenchantment with the inhabitants of the northern regions. Yet for this essay this haunting image of the starving Commander Crozier provides a passageway into Irish history, and a fitting conclusion to this exploration.

Just as the sixteenth-century adventurer Martin Frobisher at first believed the Inuit he encountered to be "Porposes, or Ceales, or some kinde of strange fishe", so too did Edmund Spenser, another Elizabethan adventurer, imagine the native Irish he encountered through the animalistic and exotic language encoded within the colonialist enterprise. Indeed Spenser went some distance in creating a type of 'famine gothic' in his work *A View of the Present State of Ireland* (1596), where he describes the victims of the Munster Famine of 1581:

> Out of every corner of the woods and glens they came creeping forth upon their hands, for their legs could not bear them. They looked like anatomies of death; they spake like ghosts crying out of their graves; they did eat the dead carrions, happy

> where they could find them; yea, and one another soon after, insomuch as the very carcasses they spared not to scrape out of their graves. And if they found a plot of watercresses or shamrocks, there they flocked as to a feast for the time, yet not able long to continue there withal; that in short space there were none almost left, and a most populous and plentiful country suddenly left void of man and beast. Yet sure, in all that war there perished not many by the sword, but all by the extremity of famine which they themselves had wrought.[44]

In this passage starvation, cannibalism, and the supernatural are complementary forms of extreme experience: the native Irish have, by virtue of their desperation, become imagined as ghosts creeping on all fours, beyond the pale of human society, feeding on themselves. This same type of famine gothic resurfaced and received its uncanny repetition in two contemporary and inter-linked disasters of the mid to late 1840s, both coming at the tail end of the Little Ice Age.

These disasters were the Franklin expedition and the Great Irish Famine, and it is at the interface of these two events that we should look in order to bring out more aspects of the Arctic supernatural. As Chris Morash has noted, one of the most recurring tropes of Famine journalism and testimony was the idea of the starving peasant as a "living skeleton", a "walking skeleton", or a "breathing skeleton".[45] Such gothic imagery was reinforced by the accounts of English travellers who reported barely escaping with their lives from starving "wolfish" victims. With incidents of cannibalism, suicide, infanticide, disappearance, and countless dead from exposure in Ireland it is no great jump to travel north to the Arctic where the picked men of the Royal Navy were undergoing similar miseries and were chapters in the same meta-narrative of empire. In this regard one is struck by the banal observation of an old Inuit woman which so affected McClintock: "'they fell down and died as they walked along'".[46] Both disasters became unspeakable, articulation became frozen in horror. Spenser had noted how the Irish peasantry he observed "spake like ghosts crying out of their graves". Such ghostly voices from the

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[44] Edmund Spenser, *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, W.L. Renwick ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 104.
[45] See Chris Morash, "Spectres of the Famine", (*Irish Review* 17-18, 1995), 74-9.
[46] Brandt ed., *The North Pole*, 208.

depths paralysed the investigators who sought for truth on both sides of the Atlantic. Describing the Famine, a correspondent for the Society of Friends wrote: "We have no language to convey to you any adequate idea of the amount of misery to be found on every side".[47] In a similar manner, as the traditional ballad "Lord Franklin" has it, "The fate of Franklin no man may know / The fate of Franklin no tongue can tell". The idea that to speak as a ghost is to be without language – that suffering is somehow beyond expression – unites the ghosts of the Franklin expedition and the Irish Famine in a bond of Victorian disaster and exposes the darkness residing deep within the heart of the imperial quest. If the writing of history is the practice of giving voices to the ghosts of the past then the idea of the Arctic supernatural can function as a way of approaching such articulation: by dealing with the spectres that wander in polar limbo, the living once more re-articulate what the past actually means.

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[47] Cited in Morash, "Spectres of the Famine", 77.

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