

Introduction: Northwest Passages and Exploration Cultures

And as the smart ship grew
In stature, grace, and hue,
In shadowy silent distance grew the Iceberg too.

Alien they seemed to be;
No mortal eye could see
The intimate welding of their later history
Thomas Hardy, “The Convergence of the Twain”

John Franklin’s 1845 expedition in search of the Northwest Passage remains the worst polar disaster in history, and the worst catastrophe in British exploration. Franklin’s disappearance, along with all 129 crew and his ships *Erebus* and *Terror*, also remains the most productive disaster: it transformed understandings of the Arctic in ways recognizable today. When Franklin’s ships failed to sail through the Passage or return home, numerous search ships were sent out, with searches continuing throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, funded privately and by British, US and Canadian governments. The Northwest Passage had been known as the early modern “maritime Philosopher’s Stone,” and in the nineteenth century as the Holy Grail of exploration.¹ The Franklin disaster and the cult built up around its so-called mystery transformed the lost ships and their relics into objects of desire that eclipsed the Northwest Passage itself as the Holy Grail of exploration.

The subject of popular culture spanning nearly 170 years – in panoramas, dioramas, paintings, museum exhibitions, relic displays, music, drama, fiction, television, film – the Franklin disaster and its searches have recently assumed a new geopolitical significance in Canada’s emerging identity as an Arctic power. In September 2014, the discovery of Franklin’s *Erebus* made global headlines. Involving multiple government agencies and private partners including Shell, this large-scale Franklin search has potentially significant repercussions in the “New North” unique to the twenty-first century: in Arctic waterway access and sovereignty claims, energy extraction, and indigenous and national heritage.² Canada’s incorporation of this quintessentially Victorian British explorer as a central figure in its new Northern Strategy for a rapidly warming Arctic is the latest twist in Franklin’s remarkable afterlife.

The convergence of Arctic and disaster began not with the “first” Arctic disaster, but with the beginning of the so-called heroic age of Arctic exploration itself in 1818. In that year the British Admiralty attempted to reach the North Pole and traverse the Northwest Passage in four ships, whose commanders included the young John Franklin, William Parry, and John Ross. The 1818 voyages were uneventful failures, but could be made to serve in the much longer history of “negative discovery,”³ and led to the large-scale resurgence of Arctic exploration efforts led by Parry’s and Franklin’s serial voyages beginning the following year. Franklin presided over two disasters: the first took place on this follow-up voyage in 1819–21, when he led a poorly planned overland expedition to survey the Arctic coast of North America, and lost most of his men to murder, starvation, and cannibalism. He returned to London, his faith in divine providence strengthened, to enjoy the popular success of his *Narrative of a Journey to the Shores of the Polar Sea* and fame as “the man who ate his boots.”

In retrospect the entwined fates of Franklin and Arctic disaster appear as inevitable as “the intimate welding” of *Titanic* and its “sinister mate,” the iceberg, in Hardy’s “The Convergence of the Twain.” But it took nearly two centuries of collective, international effort to produce this consummation of “Franklin disaster,” lending it the appearance of an artifact of history meriting more elaboration, more searches, more significance. Catastrophic losses of human life, from human or natural causes, are ubiquitous and timeless. But understandings of disaster vary historically and culturally: with the Enlightenment we see greater emphasis on the human and political (as opposed to the largely theological) dimensions of disaster (for example, in the ways income inequality or poor planning can precipitate disasters, which then paradoxically can become “wonderful economic stimulants,” as they did in Defoe’s works).⁴ In the early decades of the nineteenth century, it had been France’s devastating loss of the La Pérouse scientific expedition in 1788 that inaugurated as an international project the decades-long serial searches, salvage, and exhibition of disaster debris, a precedent acknowledged by the British as they took up their Franklin cause.⁵ The convergence of the “Franklin disaster” thus emerged in what cultural critics increasingly consider to be modernity’s constant state of disaster as perpetual emergency and fragmentation.⁶ One of the goals of *Writing Arctic Disaster* is to tell a story about Arctic exploration that shows the gravitational pull of the Franklin disaster, how it placed disaster at the center of Arctic exploration, in the future and in the past. Diverging from Franklin and his disasters is the first step if we are to “make the past less predictable.”⁷

The view from the nineteenth century

Unfortunately it is true today that “at the heart of every Arctic story stands John Franklin.”⁸ This is the case because the British quest for the Northwest Passage appears to us today through the eyes of the nineteenth century. Professional explorers, in the modern sense of one who explores an unknown place, first made their appearance in that century, with their own private clubs, costumes, props, and professional organizations. As such, the explorer is not a disciplinary formation, as is his near contemporary the scientist; he is a consumer product of the early tourism and travel industries developing in the nineteenth-century age of empire. The Raleigh Club (1827), the Royal Geographical Society (1830), the Hakluyt Society (1846), the American Geographic Society (1851), and The Explorers’ Club (1904), all contributed to the nationalist projects in which Victorians created their own precursors stretching back to early modern privateers, buccaneers, and merchant adventurers.⁹

These early modern and eighteenth-century precursors were in their day recognized as a diverse set of occupations and identities, which did not include explorer: *savant*, *voyageur*, *navigateur*, *philosophe*, herborizer, mathematician, mariner, privateer, whaler, traveler, adventurer, surveyor, factor, trapper, agent, interpreter. For Purchas and Hakluyt, those who prosecuted “navigations by sea, voyages by land, and traffiques of merchandise by both”¹⁰ were also pilots, knights, merchants, and “authours who voyaged.”¹¹ These occupations always included indigenous people along a spectrum of association and autonomy: for example, the high-ranking Polynesian Tupaia, who chose to travel with Cook; or indigenous leaders like the Chipewyan Matonabee, on whom Samuel Hearne, a legendary English surveyor, largely depended. Or the Dene woman known as Thanadelthur, enslaved by the Cree and engaged as an agent by the Hudson’s Bay Company in the early eighteenth century, whose extraordinary career we examine in Chapter 3.

The *OED* records only one pre-nineteenth-century use of the noun ‘explorer’ in the sense of a person “who explores a country or place.” In the small additional number of instances I have located, “explorer” carried a universally negative connotation of espionage or wandering, alien to the heroic Victorian sense we have inherited, and consistent with the eighteenth-century French usage of *explorateur* as a synonym for *spy/espion*.¹² In their age of high empire, Victorians working in institutions like the RGS and the Hakluyt Society fashioned a lasting professional image of the heroic explorer that we have inherited, even when we recast this figure as a villain. Through their eyes we see the Northwest Passage as an elusive end of a continuous quest originating centuries before, in the discovery of the New World and the dream of a passage from the Atlantic to the Pacific. The continuity of this quest is visible only by ordering the diversity of voyagers and voyages into a seamless line of explorers.

Looking back in a famous essay on “Geography and Some Explorers” (1924), Joseph Conrad mapped out this stadial history of the rise of the explorer, in which the science of geography is the protagonist, and its liberation from benighted medieval and early modern delusion is the climax. Medieval “fabulous geography” and early modern “geography militant” relied on “pure guesswork” and ideology, their inaccurate maps riddled with stubborn illusions like sea serpents, the Great Southern Continent, the Northwest Passage.¹³ “They were simple souls,” Conrad concludes. And yet not so simple, for they were possessed of an “acquisitive spirit, the idea of lucre in some form, the desire of trade or the desire of loot.”¹⁴ According to Conrad, what they lacked was disinterested science, and for that we have to thank James Cook, whose three circumnavigations changed the world and created the template of the scientific explorer the nineteenth century would idolize. “The dull imaginary wonders of the Dark Ages” disappeared, Conrad effused, and “were replaced by exciting spaces of white paper. Regions unknown!” Conrad’s chief examples of modern disinterested exploration were the attempts to locate the Northwest Passage by John Franklin and his colleagues, “whose aims were certainly as pure as the air of those high latitudes.”¹⁵

Progressive enlightenment remains central to such Whiggish accounts of the rise of professional sciences and of “exploration,” a poorly defined set of practices and people that became a naturalized feature of European and US imperial projects in the nineteenth century. In an important reassessment of Victorian exploration, Felix Driver examined the persistence of ideological, commercial, religious, and touristic interests within scientific geography throughout the nineteenth century. Driver’s *Geography Militant* is part of a larger critical turn in the history of sciences, emphasizing the role of cultural forces in shaping our histories of scientific modernity and its disinterestedness.

One shared feature of social histories of the sciences in the last few decades is the movement away from narratives of innovation, priority, and discovery, and toward a focus on scientific cultures and social collectivities. As Nicholas Jardine and Emma Spary summarize in *Cultures of Natural History*, “Rather than presenting natural historical knowledge as generated by isolated individuals working wholly within the domain of the mind,” in focusing on scientific culture they “wish to portray natural history as the product of conglomerates of people, natural objects, institutions, collections, finances, all linked by a range of practices of different kinds.”¹⁶ Driver’s “exploration culture” similarly situates institutions of geographic science (such as the Royal Geographical Society) within “the wide variety of practices at work in the production and consumption of voyages and travels.”¹⁷

Histories of literature, of the book, and of authorship similarly are increasingly approached through the collectivities, intermedial connections,

and social spaces and networks in which they take shape. Thus we speak of book culture, manuscript culture, print culture, oral culture, etc. – heterogeneous collectivities that do not neatly supersede one another but often coexist in what Roger Chartier describes as “sets of transformations.”¹⁸ Historians of the book and more broadly of print emphasize the social settings and practices, the strata of laborers, financiers, mediators, publics, artisans, and government agents, involved in producing print and printed books along with authors. Like historians of the book, scholars of authorship increasingly consider authorship as shaped within collectivities located in a social nexus (e.g., the literary, the literary circle, the periodical, the coterie, the family, the salon, the center of calculation, the laboratory, the coffee-house) instead of in the imaginations of geniuses or savants.¹⁹

Writing Arctic Disaster synthesizes these cultural approaches to both exploration and textual inscription and examines how changing codes of authorship, publication, and the materiality of writings transformed British Arctic voyaging and its histories. By shifting our focus from explorers as first-person authors and voyage commanders in a cumulative maritime history to the manifold social agents and contingencies involved in generating exploration and exploration writings, this study synchronizes maritime and exploration history with current practices in histories of the book and of authorship. Arctic exploration histories have traditionally followed a trail of narratives, from the voyages of Martin Frobisher and Henry Hudson in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, to the mid-eighteenth-century advances of James Cook and Samuel Hearne, to the post-Waterloo voyages of William Parry, John Ross, and Franklin. These histories are greatly beholden to early modern and eighteenth-century editors and compilers but are often uninterested in the status of those incorporated heterogeneous texts beyond their merits as sources or narratives, whether for literary, generic, or historical analysis.

When we bring textual studies into play, key features of exploration history can also be characterized as features of the history of print and of authorship, as is the case with the watershed year of 1818. Within Britain’s Arctic history, 1818 is a pivotal year, marking the break with what Glyn Williams called “the voyages of delusion” – the eighteenth-century Arctic voyages driven by commercial and military interests but fatally invested in the persistent myths of an ice-free Pole and navigable Northwest Passage. When the Admiralty launched four ships in search of the Passage and Pole in that year, it presented this endeavor as initiating a new era of naval scientific exploration. These Admiralty voyages, building on Cook’s legendary circumnavigations before the Napoleonic wars, established a more formal relationship between naval voyaging and shipboard science than was present in the earlier informal alliances between virtuosi like Banks and Lord Sandwich, First Lord of the Admiralty.

What is typically obscured in this heroic narrative of naval exploration of the Arctic is the publication component of this new arrangement. The First and Second Secretaries to the Admiralty, John Wilson Croker and John Barrow, had substantial ties to the prestigious Tory publisher John Murray II, and his influential journal the *Quarterly Review*, which Croker edited and for which Barrow wrote hundreds of articles. Through this association, in 1813 Murray was able to secure legal status as official “Bookseller to the Admiralty and the Board of Longitude.” This publishing privilege marked a break from earlier, informal relationships between publication and exploration, like those enjoyed between Cook and Banks and the publishing house of Strahan (which held prestigious royal printing patents). Strahan published all three official Cook accounts in illustrated quartos but this publication history was marred by serial disputes.²⁰ The Strahan editions had to compete with unauthorized publications by officers and crew (and most famously the naturalists Georg and Johann Forster), and the first Cook voyage account, compiled by John Hawkesworth and written in Cook’s voice, made many controversial revelations the Admiralty was keen not to have repeated in the future. The success of Cook’s voyages and of their illustrated publications in inspiring both curiosity and controversy was a turning point in publication as well as in exploration history, making the voyage account authored by the ship’s captain increasingly important to the business of exploration.

The last eighteenth-century voyage in search of the Northwest Passage before outbreak of the wars in 1793 also illustrates the importance of textual and authorship questions in shaping exploration histories. In that 1792 voyage of the *Beaver* sponsored by the HBC, the captain, Charles Duncan, was officially instructed “on his return home to publish the whole or any part of his Discoveries made during the course of his voyage.”²¹ The secretive HBC’s unprecedented instruction that the captain publish, not merely write, an account of discovery was a result of the seismic shift in the relationship of exploration to publication located at the turn of the nineteenth century. But in the case of the ill-fated *Beaver*, the captain/would-be author had a complete mental collapse upon discovering the absence of the Passage. Appearing on deck clutching a locked chest full of his papers, Duncan threatened suicide and confessed to murder. “The Capt. Delirious calls out for all the Divels of hell to come seize him and that he was in hell,” wrote the first officer, despairing that “The Capt. appears to be Insane.”²² Duncan spent the voyage home nailed to the floor of his cabin. The Hudson’s Bay Company’s internal report on Duncan’s failure reads like an alternative version of Captain Walton’s Arctic obsession in *Frankenstein*, one in which the novel’s nested narratives fail to reach any reader:

Capt. Duncan, prior to his sailing, entertained the most propitious assurances that he should discover the often sought for North-West Passage; and he felt the Disappointment so severely, that whilst on his voyage home he was attack'd with a Brain Fever, the effects of which wholly prevented him from delivering a Journal of his Voyage.²³

Had Duncan succeeded in authoring and publishing an account of his Arctic voyage as officially instructed, the voyage of the *Beaver* would be remembered not as the “the last and the least efficient of all the expeditions . . . for the discovery of the North-west Passage” – the end of the Dark Ages before the Admiralty took over in 1818, as Barrow considered it. Rather, the 1792 voyage of the *Beaver* would be seen as the first of the new kind of Arctic voyages sailing under the command of an explorer and published author. Today Duncan is remembered as neither explorer nor author, but his extraordinary breakdown may be echoed in Mary Shelley’s romance of Arctic madness and near mutiny in *Frankenstein*, which may have drawn on glimpses of Duncan in Barrow’s writings in the *Quarterly Review*.²⁴

One of the arguments of *Writing Arctic Disaster* thus is that the watershed year of 1818 – the origin or end of most Arctic histories – has eclipsed the publication component that made the 1818 naval exploration programme, and the modern figure of the explorer, conspicuous across cultural spheres. This marriage between exploration and a particular form of publication was so successful, at such a pivotal time, that its underlying assumptions have since become naturalized. The broad contours of exploration history have been the same ever since, and that is a problem.

One approach to the problem of exploration history’s tendency to repeat the self-serving mythmaking of Victorian authorities is to uncover “the hidden histories of exploration,” from its irrational pursuits, to its violence, to its erasure of the agency of indigenous people. In these respects Glyn Williams’ *Voyages of Delusion* and Pierre Berton’s *Arctic Grail* have revealed the irrational goals and destructive effects of pursuing the Northwest Passage in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Janice Cavell and Beau Riffenburgh have uncovered the widespread cultural dissent visible in nineteenth-century periodical and newspaper culture that critiqued, parodied, and sensationalized the official endeavors in Arctic exploration. Inuit perspectives on and contributions to these histories have come increasingly to the forefront of these discussions.²⁵ They reveal the long-lasting effects of these nineteenth-century intrusions into the Arctic, a history in which indigenous people were visible in the accounts of many nineteenth-century voyagers like Parry, Ross, Hall and Schwatka in their many years of extensive contact with different Inuit groups. Together this scholarship has deflated the Anglocentric triumphalism of Arctic discovery and naval science that the Admiralty had worked so hard to build.

But whether Arctic explorers are heroes, villains, or a more nuanced combination of the two, they remain published authors of books. Why is this so? Given the dramatic changes in navigation technology, in the motives for voyaging, in Britain's political and imperial institutions, in the rise and fall of the fur trade and of whaling, in indigenous interests and encounters, and in Britons' ability to reach different regions of a dynamically fluctuating environment – why should one element within this complex array of moving parts remain fixed? What happens if the apparent continuities of authorship and publication that we rely on when we assemble our histories of exploration are actually discontinuities? What would the history of Arctic exploration look like when approached from different disciplinary perspectives, those of the history of authorship and of material texts?

Victorian Arctic?

The major humanistic studies of the Anglo-American Arctic we do have, by Moss, Spufford, Bloom, David, Robinson, Potter, Hill, MacLaren, and Cavell, have focused on literary and/or visual culture of the nineteenth century. “For much of the century images of the Arctic were as much in the Victorian consciousness as those of Africa and other areas of empire,” writes David in his important survey.²⁶ “Polar exploration had a special place in the heart” of British culture according to Spufford, because “its representations gained a life of their own” in rich seams of aesthetic, literary, visual, and spectacular forms.²⁷ But Arctic icescapes and tundra presented more of a challenge to European aesthetics perhaps than any other region – categories of the beautiful and the picturesque were difficult to map onto Arctic spaces, as Ian MacLaren has shown. Thanks to David's and Potter's work especially, this nineteenth-century imagination is now fully visual, its literary forms immersed in the multimedia mass culture of panoramas, lantern shows, exhibitions, stereographs, paintings, theater, lectures, and early film. And within this broad range of visual culture, the monochromatic Arctic we retain from black-and-white Victorian engravings and photographs is now as richly colorful as the Arctic skies, seas, and places themselves.²⁸

Writing Arctic Disaster is indebted to this important body of work, even as it seeks to undo one unhelpful conceptual vestige of “the British imagination” of the nineteenth century: the Arctic as empty, unoccupied, blank, and timeless. Spufford's important insights into how this Victorian version of the Arctic was a projection of multi-ethnic Britain's anxieties about “racial whiteness” and “imperial masculinity” have been developed further by Jen Hill and other scholars. Hill in *White Horizon* draws largely on Victorian literature and argues that for “the nineteenth-century British imagination,” “the Arctic is important as a geography that is not a

geography (because perceived as blank), as an imperial space that is not part of empire (because there are no economic and colonial goals in its exploration), and as a place that is everywhere . . . because it is nowhere” (16). Similar US colonial fantasies of the Arctic as “a *tabula rasa* where people, history, and culture vanish,”²⁹ as Lisa Bloom argued, or as a “hyper-textualized” wilderness myth serving Canadian national identity created by and for outsiders, are also now part of our critical consensus.³⁰

This partial view from the nineteenth century of an unpeopled, empty, timeless, and blank “Arctic of words”³¹ is reflected in the critical focus on ice in literary and visual studies. The Gothic icescapes in *Frankenstein* and Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” or in magnificent paintings like Church’s *The Icebergs* and Friedrich’s *The Sea of Ice* (1823–24), evoke a polar sublime with rare power. Ice and icescapes not only disoriented and intrigued mariners, they dazzled writers, painters and spectators. Their curious atmospheric, optical, and acoustic effects inspired generations to imagine new natures and new “systems of images,” connecting the “polar wastes . . . to life we recognise.”³² Adrift from any specifically Arctic geography (as Coleridge’s south-polar setting suggests) or lifeworld, the ice in question is metaphoric, “spiritual,” and iconic – a wonderful prism through which to explore aesthetic possibilities then and now. The visible absence of sublime icescapes from *Writing Arctic Disaster* is due in part to the success of this earlier work in establishing the centrality of what Chauncey Loomis termed the nineteenth-century “Arctic sublime.”³³

The contradictions and ideologically corrupt visions of an empty and uninhabited Victorian Arctic are thus well established. Rather than recirculating more examples of such imperial bad faith in order to unmask them, I think a more pressing need now is to dismantle the critical mechanisms that allow this temporally, spatially, and discipline-specific discourse to continue to stand in for British perceptions and experiences of the Arctic as a whole.

Arctic exceptionalism

The blank and empty Arctic does not extend back in time for Britons, and of course it never existed for Inuit. Nor does it await modern scholars to enlighten its ideological illusions and “Dark Ages.” That is the view from the nineteenth century that we need to unlearn. Anglo-American humanists have been slow (compared to natural and social scientists, and Scandinavian humanists) to reincorporate Arctic researches into scholarship outside the nineteenth-century tradition noted above. The history of science has fared slightly better in acknowledging how Arctic exploration (and from the 1840s, Antarctic exploration) conducted aboard naval

expeditions pursued projects in geography, magnetism, navigation, astronomy, etc. in line with the mainstream of field sciences elsewhere.³⁴

A form of Arctic exceptionalism – the product of humanistic neglect and of a social science approach drawn from area studies – has meant that the ways in which the Arctic historically featured in a broad range of metropolitan discourses still remain difficult to see. A quick sketch here of how the Arctic was visible, populated, and integrated within larger global flows in earlier periods is intended to be suggestive and by no means exhaustive. Beginning with Frobisher's three attempts to colonize and mine Meta Incognita (Baffin Island) in the 1570s, we should place England's initial interest in the Passage squarely within the Elizabethan era's gold fever. Frobisher's capture of Inuit people (the first of many Inuit captives and visitors to the British Isles), and his associates' textual and visual creation of "savages," made lasting impressions on savants, the English public, and popular cultures, long before the unpeopled Arctic became visible as such.³⁵ In the seventeenth century, the whale oil rush brought Greenland and Spitzbergen (Svalbard) into close commercial proximity with Holland and England, and thus with their cultural, political, and scientific spheres.

Before the missionary projects of the nineteenth century were imposed on Africa, the sponsoring associations concerned had tried to "improve" the Inuit in Greenland and Labrador, and the Sámi in Sweden (Lapland) in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. These early Arctic missionary networks form overlooked links in the subsequent development of global missions and "imperial natural history, botany in particular,"³⁶ as Michael Bravo has argued. But also important is the resistance to missionary efforts in the larger scale Hudson's Bay Company efforts to explore and expand into Arctic territories, something I take up in subsequent chapters as an important exception to British endeavors in other theaters of exploration.

The Arctic was regularly incorporated into Enlightenment debates regarding anthropology, philology, migration, the natural sciences, and imperial boundaries. Enlightenment anthropology and philology puzzled over the circumpolar Arctic's unique convergence of continental and national taxonomies of culture, physiognomy, and language. Herder and Anquetil-Duperron (a key figure in Said's *Orientalism*) produced the kind of "universal histories" that have become synonymous with an Enlightenment Eurocentrism, but as I have written elsewhere, for both thinkers the circumpolar Arctic offered a potentially radical challenge to the solidifying borders of racial and geographic categories.³⁷

The Arctic featured prominently in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scientific investigations of the shape of the earth, magnetism, climate change, geology, botany, zoology, hydrography. The wild profusion of Arctic animal life, not its absence, was a frequent subject in eighteenth-century life sciences. Enlightenment big science projects often had Arctic components. For example, the international geodetic expeditions of the