

## CHAPTER ONE

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# HEART OF WHITENESS

In the opening pages of *Heart of Darkness*, the narrator names two of the great “knights” of British exploration, Sir Francis Drake and Sir John Franklin.<sup>1</sup> Readers can still place Drake, but most modern editions describe Franklin in a brief footnote as a nineteenth-century explorer who commanded an ill-fated expedition in search of the Northwest Passage. Joseph Conrad’s contemporaries needed no such note: for them, the reference to Franklin and his ships the *Erebus* and *Terror* evoked both nineteenth-century geography at the height of its promise and, more importantly, the eclipse of that promise, and the recognition of the limits of British exploration that was the legacy of Franklin’s spectacular failure. While the invocation of a doomed polar explorer at the outset of Conrad’s great critique of imperialism serves to foreshadow Marlow’s own horrific voyage up the Congo, the reference maps Arctic geography onto the national imagination, enfolding a literally white space into the heart of darkness. Thus, when Marlow speaks of white spaces on the map, a meditation on Arctic exploration and the limits of the European imperial project lingers behind Conrad’s image.

In 1844, Sir John Franklin was awarded command of the Arctic exploration ships *Erebus* and *Terror* and given an Admiralty mandate to find the Northwest Passage. The expedition’s departure was a kind of mass spectacle, with newspaper articles detailing its preparations and the public thronging to see the ships before they embarked in the spring of 1845. Franklin and his 130 men departed and, after calling in at Greenland on their way to the frozen seas, were never heard from again, despite numerous and concerted efforts to find them. The mystery of

what happened to these British seamen and the effort to discover and interpret the expedition's traces captured Britain's—and much of the world's—attention for years. A historian's description of the ships' provisions reads like the introduction to the greatest Arctic narrative ever written by its participants:

Enormous quantities of provisions and fuel were carried; china, cut glass, and heavy Victorian silver encumbered the ward-rooms; each ship had a library of twelve hundred volumes ranging from treatises on steam engines to the works of Dickens and Lever and volumes of *Punch*. . . . Slates and arithmetic books, pens, ink and paper were provided for classes during the winter; testaments and prayer-books were available for all; and a hand-organ, playing fifty tunes, ten of which were psalms or hymns, was purchased for each ship. Of special Polar equipment, except for scientific research, there was none apart from large supplies of warm underclothing and a few wolf-skin blankets.<sup>2</sup>

It is easy to read a distinctly “Victorian” narrative into the Franklin expedition's failure, one of men done in by knickknacks: taking silver tea services instead of lightweight sledges; wearing the blue cotton and wool of the British Navy in place of sealskin anoraks; reading novels and plays by Shakespeare in lieu of survival manuals. Under this rubric, Franklin's disappearance is a product of what we think of as Victorian hubris; the confidence that led Franklin to scoff at provisions for his rescue in planning his mission is a direct extension of the same self-confident assumption of privilege with which the British Empire claimed the globe. No wonder mid-century Britons so desperately wanted to find Franklin and his crew that over the next ten years dozens of Admiralty-affiliated and privately sponsored voyages embarked in search of the *Erebus* and *Terror*. Not surprisingly, the mystery of the ships' disappearance fuelled intense public interest: while editorials speculated about the missing men, families who visited the Arctic panorama at Vauxhall shivered to imagine the expedition's fate. For twenty-first-century readers, it seems as if the avidity with which the Victorians sought to retrieve Franklin was part of some pre-scient effort to arrest (or at least delay) the collapse of the British Empire and Great Britain's twentieth-century decline.

But of course that is an argument of hindsight, a narrative with Robert Scott's 1912 quest for the South Pole (and his Franklin-like failure) as its telos. The mid-nineteenth-century cultural preoccupation with

the fate of the Franklin expedition can be more fully understood in context of the wider and more long-term function of Arctic space in the British national-cultural imaginary. Even before Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, polar space had come to represent the limit of both empire and human experience. Exploring and mapping the Arctic was a self-conscious exercise in national masculine identity building perceived to take place in "empty" space, documented in best-selling expedition accounts that marketed a heroic masculinity that found its origin in representations of Trafalgar hero Horatio Nelson's early voyage to the Arctic seas, the Antarctic voyages of Cook, and a romanticized recollection of Henry Hudson. Framed in this heroic context, Franklin's disappearance reads as a form of cultural aporia, an incident of literal "lost passage" that revealed the important symbolic role of the Arctic in imagining national and imperial masculinity, and forced on Victorians a reluctant recognition that these models were much less stable than had been understood. In Franklin's failure to negotiate it, Arctic space was revealed—perhaps as unexpectedly for contemporary Britons as it is to us—to be central to the ways Britons imagined, justified, and even critiqued their nation and empire.

Building on rich archival investigations and fine analyses by Eric Wilson and Francis Spufford,<sup>3</sup> I argue in the pages that follow that the Arctic was a test limit for ideas the Romantics and Victorians had about themselves, a place in which they experimented with and made legible forms of identity and their attendant anxieties. In other words, the Arctic was as much ideological as physical terrain, one on which Britons could stage debates about domestic and imperial identities, far from British and colonial shores. Ian Baucom has argued in his investigation of English identity that Englishness "has consistently been defined through appeals to the identity-endowing properties of place," and that debates about identity are thus frequently spatialized, both in discussions that are framed with spatial metaphors and in military and other imperial actions that seek to define national and imperial spaces.<sup>4</sup> The Arctic in the nineteenth century was one such space, one that even as it was mapped by British explorers, remained out of the physical reach of ordinary people, and was thus paradoxically perceived to be accessible to all as a representational space, a blank page on which to draft different national and imperial narratives that either embraced or critiqued Britain's increased investments in imperial and colonial projects.

In that regard, the shifting representations of Arctic exploration and geography in nineteenth-century discourse provide a remarkably rich

corpus of material to trace larger cultural discussions relating to gender, nation, race, and empire. In the chapters that follow, I examine widely read early polar exploration accounts and, in turn, the literary texts they influenced. I am not arguing for a hidden polar subtext that, when brought to our attention, reveals heretofore inaccessible meaning. Rather, I seek to include Arctic space in the complex cultural imaginary that critics such as Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak have encouraged us to read for its unexamined articulations and justifications of imperial practices. Certainly, for nineteenth-century readers, the Arctic was not in any way a “hidden” subtext nor limited to the paratextual polar engravings from Bewick’s *History of British Birds* that Charlotte Brontë describes in her opening chapter of *Jane Eyre*. Popular depictions of Arctic endeavor and its relationship to a metropolitan populace ranged widely, from George Cruikshank’s satirical skepticism of the scientific value of the much-lauded 1819 Arctic expeditions in his engraving “Landing the Treasures” to Arctic-themed dinner parties to sheet music celebrating ice floes, such as Frost’s “Arctic Expeditions Galop.” In this context, it shouldn’t surprise us that when accusations of cannibalism were leveled at the missing crew members of the *Erebus* and *Terror*, Charles Dickens’s popular journalism documented an Arctic obsession he later displaced into melodrama in his production of and performances in the play *The Frozen Deep*, written with the sensation novelist Wilkie Collins.

As I examine in the following pages, there is a genealogy of polar narrative in the nineteenth century, one that starts with masculinist exploration accounts, embraces domestic and sensation fictions of mid-century, and ends with the overtly imperial genre of boy’s adventure fiction of George MacDonald and R. M. Ballantyne. British Arctic narrative is traceable through three distinct phases that correspond with different periods of British colonial encounter and expansion: an early phase during which Britain’s main imperial focus is on the West Indies and fears of miscegenation and disease, a second phase in which the disappearance of Franklin coincides with unrest and resistance to British rule in India, and a third phase, following the discovery of the Northwest Passage, that accompanies Britain’s expansion into Africa and its recognition that its imperial preeminence would not last.<sup>5</sup> In each of these periods, Arctic space was a literal and metaphorical terrain on which Britons seeking to navigate between and integrate national and imperial identities mapped British values, a “pure” space conceived as being separate from not only from the problematic political, racial, and

economic relations of empire, but from potential class conflict at home. In articles, novels, plays, and poetry, the Arctic was a landscape on which assertions and critiques of nation and empire could unroll at a literal “safe distance.”

#### FRANKLIN'S DISAPPEARANCE

What is known of Franklin's 1845 expedition is a fragmented tale, assembled over an expanse of space and time: hundreds of thousands of square miles of territory were covered in more than 150 years of searching and speculation. The *Erebus* and *Terror* left England in the spring of 1845, laid up in western Greenland for a transfer of supplies, and then departed in search of the Northwest Passage. At the end of July, two passing whalers noted them. Afterward, silence.

With no word from the expedition by spring of 1847, the Admiralty shipped extra supplies of pemmican to Canada's northern trading posts, but stopped short of launching a rescue mission. When William Parry's 1819 mission had not been heard from for three years, a search expedition had been discussed, but in the end he had turned up. Why shouldn't Franklin? The official search for the *Erebus* and *Terror* started in 1848. Franklin's companion from his first Arctic expedition, Sir John Richardson, joined Hudson's Bay employee Dr. John Rae on an overland expedition designed to intersect with Franklin's likely coordinates; from the Bering Strait, the crew of the H.M.S. *Plover* worked eastward, while Sir James Clark Ross and the men of the *Enterprise* and the *Investigator* made their way west from Greenland. In the most active searching period of the next ten years, nearly forty expeditions, both Admiralty-sponsored and privately funded, worked over the same geography. Franklin's first winter quarters were discovered on Beechey Island in August 1850, but they revealed nothing of the fate of the expedition. In 1854, John Rae learned from native sources that Franklin and his men had perished of starvation, and reported to England that “[f]rom the mutilated state of many of the corpses, and the contents of the kettles, it is evident that our wretched countrymen had been driven to the last resource—cannibalism—as a means of prolonging existence,”<sup>6</sup> a discovery the public was reluctant to accept. Finally, in the spring of 1859, the men of the *Fox* expedition commanded by Sir Francis Leopold McClintock discovered a cairn that cached a document from Franklin's expedition signaling that all was well with the expedition in spring of 1847, but altered in April

1848 to indicate that the *Erebus* and *Terror* had been deserted, Sir John Franklin had died in June 1847, and twenty-three others had perished. McClintock continued his search and in May 1859 found abandoned longboats and three corpses of British sailors. The rest of the bodies were assumed dispersed in Arctic space.

The Arctic into which Franklin disappeared had a history as a proving ground of a heroic British masculinity associated with national and imperial identities. Admiralty-sponsored Arctic exploration expeditions participated in what Gary Kelly has identified as “the remasculinization of culture” in the second decade of the century,<sup>7</sup> and the rigor of male-only Arctic expeditions discovered and articulated a masculinity positioned in opposition not only to women at home and to upper-class male dandies in the metropole, but to colonial threats as well. In the exploration accounts generated by the first wave of Arctic missions, the Arctic was understood to be an arid and cold space that stood in masculine opposition to the torrid humidity of the tropics. Numerous widely read polar exploration accounts, such as John Franklin’s own 1821 *Narrative of a Journey to the Shores of the Polar Seas*, examined in detail in chapter 2, manufactured both swashbuckling heroes and a familiar “Arctic,” one in which a narrative of exploration often became a narrative of survival that foregrounded the explorer’s embattled body while providing evidence of the resilience, ingenuity, and staunchness associated with British national character.<sup>8</sup> The resulting irrefutable, “hard” masculinity answered threats of effeminacy, miscegenation, and vulnerability to physical, psychological, and moral weakness associated with Britain’s tropical colonies.<sup>9</sup> In the early century, the Arctic was thus a space that could provide a counter to the troubling moral questions raised by domestic economic reliance on slavery and other forms of colonial exploitation, an ultimate space of white masculine self-reliance.

Yet perhaps because the Arctic of the early century was a male-only space of physical exploration, it was a fertile imaginary location for female writers in the early century. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Mary Wollstonecraft, and others had shown that English women could travel the world but, as Admiral Croft’s wife in Jane Austen’s *Persuasion* (1816) laments, explorations of the North Seas were off-limits to women. The companionate marriage of the admiral and his wife is disrupted only by the admiral’s Arctic duty, a disruption that Mrs. Croft recounts precipitated her only illness. In this small detail, Austen may be seen to gesture at the disruptive potential of a national identity that privileges males—the admiral is identified only by his naval affiliation throughout the

text—as well as trying to make visible national demands on women that remain largely invisible in a culture that glorifies and allegorizes male participation in war and exploration. The separation the Arctic literally and symbolically demands between males “away” and females “at home” in the early part of the century anticipates the gendering of separate public and private spheres that both coalesced and gained ideological force as the century progressed. It should not be surprising, then, that in 1818 both Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Eleanor Anne Porden’s *The Arctic Expeditions* use the polar world as a space in which to imagine and critique women’s position in narratives of scientific and national progress.

In providing her critique of masculinist knowledge projects with Arctic bookends, Mary Shelley not only underlines women’s exclusion from such projects but also draws our attention once again to how Arctic space, although geographically peripheral, was understood as a place for British self-realization. Robert Walton’s appetite for discovery is set in motion when as a youth he reads exploration accounts in his uncle’s library. As a result he believes that the Arctic will be a place where, if he “put[s] some trust in preceding navigators,” “snow and frost are banished” and he will be wafted to “a land surpassing in wonders and in beauty every region hitherto discovered on the habitable globe.”<sup>10</sup> Work by Mary-Louise Pratt and others has made visible the way travel writing “produced ‘the rest of the world’ for European readerships,” and in turn how the resulting narratives produced the origin and originators of the journey by expressing and perpetuating the cultural mores, biases, and behaviors of the explorers.<sup>11</sup> Yet authors and readers of exploration accounts understood this early on as well; in 1710 the Earl of Shaftesbury observed of voyage narratives that they were “in our present days what books of chivalry were in those of our forefathers.”<sup>12</sup> Voyage narratives, like earlier books of chivalry, outlined and historicized codes of gendered heroic behavior that then performed local functions. When Walton’s discovery of Victor Frankenstein and the monster in a frozen, hostile Arctic coincides with the mutiny of Walton’s crew and the failure of his mission, the texts Walton trusts are shown to be faulty. Shelley suggests that their lie encompasses both polar geography and the “heroic” males who produce and document that geography in exploration accounts.

In similar fashion, when Franklin failed to reappear a few years after his 1845 departure, not only did he fail to produce an account of Arctic travel, he failed to produce the legible heroic masculinity on which

larger national and imperial projects relied. The ensuing rescue fever and public debate—including Rae’s famous assertions of possible cannibalism among the party—developed in Franklin’s absence and the multiple volumes of Arctic expedition accounts generated by the parties sent in search of the lost expedition make up the second phase of Arctic obsession in the nineteenth century.

Empty Arctic space, despite or because of its removal from colonial spaces, had helped to define a form of British masculinity that enabled and naturalized British rule of colonial spaces. Coinciding with Britain’s increasingly complicated relationship with India and larger public debate on the relations between Britain and its empire, this mid-century era of polar discourse draws comparison between Arctic purity and racial whiteness. In this period, even more ideological pressure was put on polar endeavor, with Arctic exploration paradoxically understood as an imperial project that took place in a “pure” space outside of empire. As the journalist Henry Morley documented in Charles Dickens’s *Household Words* at the height of popular concern with the disappearance of the Franklin expedition in 1853, the remote Arctic was not a colonial or imperial space in any ordinary sense:

Typhoons, hurricanes, and tropical heats, Inner Africa, Central America, China, Japan, and all such topics interest us; but there are not tales of risk and enterprise in which we English, men, women, and children, old and young, rich and poor, become interested so completely, as in the tales that come from the North Pole. We would rather hear of travellers among the snowflakes and ice floes than among cypress and myrtle; and we have good reasons for our preference. Snow and ice are emblems of the deeds done in their clime. . . . The history of Arctic enterprise is stainless as the Arctic snows, clean to the core as an ice mountain.<sup>13</sup>

Morley makes clear the place of the Arctic in the binary constructions that justified empire when he contrasts the “clean” space of the Arctic with the “dark” continents of Africa, Asia, and South America. By the nineteenth century, hope of any fast route to China via an as-yet-undiscovered Northwest Passage was gone, and thus the Arctic stood outside of the economic relations that defined Great Britain’s relationships with colonial spaces. Linked to “pure” scientific and geographic curiosity instead, polar space was understood to be free of the exploitative eco-



conomic relations condemned in abolitionist rhetoric of the early century and by mid-century Britons anxious about incipient and unchecked imperial expansion. For those such as Benjamin Disraeli who argued that imperial expansion was important primarily as an expression of Britain's destiny and greatness on the world stage, successful navigation of the Northwest Passage would be a symbolic achievement that articulated and naturalized Great Britain's imperial destiny.

Essential to a "stainless" Arctic in these formulations is its un-peopled emptiness—Morley ignores the native presence, perhaps because their nomadic traditions made them invisible<sup>14</sup>—which enables Arctic exploration to be morally stainless as well, in contrast to Morley's list of "Inner Africa, Central America, China, [and] Japan," names that metonymically represent the "dark" populations against which Britons defined themselves. If Arctic exploration was "stainless" because it lacked economic motive, it also seemed pure because British mapping of and imperial claims on the Arctic were not threatened by the moral and racial threats of slavery and miscegenation present in traditional colonial and imperial encounter. In addition to participating in the discourse of racial hygiene that imperial and nationalist discourses would come to rely on later in the century, Morley's rhetoric of purity and "whiteness" makes abundantly clear to his contemporary readership that the history of Arctic exploration is important *because* it is a "white" history about white Englishmen in a white space. Peopling his Arctic with white explorers and their deeds only, Morley not only makes a distinction between expansion into polar lands and other colonial spaces, but reveals that British investment (literal and psychological) in the Arctic is as a symbolic space, a blank space on which to map white deeds that in turn produced a legible national identity, one that could be transported back to the metropole.

The national identity embodied by Franklin and his men was represented in tales of Arctic exploration, which, as Morley describes, do important national work: "For three hundred years the Arctic seas have now been visited by European sailors; their narratives supply some of the finest modern instances of human energy and daring bent on a noble undertaking, and associated constantly with kindness, generosity, and simple piety" (245). The static, ahistorical Arctic landscape in which specific "instances of human energy and daring . . . and . . . kindness, generosity, and simple piety" occur, enables readers of Arctic accounts to dehistoricize, generalize, and transform those qualities into "emblems" of behavior at "the core" not of Morley's ice mountain, but of the British

subject (245, 241). In “Unspotted Snow” the three-hundred-year history of Arctic exploration coincides with England’s own written history since Elizabeth I, and becomes then part of the shared, mythic national past that Ernest Renan identified as essential to national identity. By hitching Arctic exploration to Britain’s history, Morley’s article concisely reveals the place of the Arctic in what Lauren Berlant has called the “national symbolic,” the “shared spatial and temporal experiences [that] reflect, perform and/or affirm” a national subjectivity.<sup>15</sup> In this symbolic system, efforts at mapping Arctic space did not only produce scientific knowledge in the form of temperature and magnetic readings, but were to their nineteenth-century audience expressions both of the cartographic project of empire and of national identity.

In addition to enabling us to further connections between national and imperial identities, looking at the Arctic’s role in nineteenth-century Britain helps us to understand how Britons perceived and accounted for their newly expanding empire and to consider more widely the role of space and geography in nation and empire. Certainly nations and empires have borders, but as Benedict Anderson famously writes in his study of national identity, nations are “imagined communities” that are not coextensive with geographical borders, nation-states, or ethnic identities.<sup>16</sup> Yet geography remains part of that imagining, with people inhabiting or populating spaces that are clearly defined as national, extra-national, and other—spaces that in turn may define who can be a national subject. Anderson’s influential theory makes visible the force of the “idea” or imaginary component of nation, an abstraction that transcends the geographical outline of the state. Yet even for scholars who follow Anderson, the spatial component of nation (and empire) is still assumed somehow to correspond to that mapped “real” geography on an atlas. This spatial component of national identity increasingly has been shown to be more complex.<sup>17</sup> As David Harvey has pointed out, spaces are discursively constructed, and “the imaginary of spatiality is of crucial significance in the search for alternative mappings of the social process and of its outcome”; it follows that understanding the imaginary of spatiality is also important to mapping both history and identity.<sup>18</sup> In other words, how Britons perceived and structured the geography both of their nation and of their expanding empire necessarily influenced the many social processes by which individuals became Britons.

The dominant models of nineteenth-century British identity consider geography, but primarily as the representative boundary of cultural difference. For example, Linda Colley’s important model of British

national identity understands it as coalescing in opposition to Others (particularly the French) in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but is concerned primarily with cultural, political, and linguistic difference.<sup>19</sup> Yet it was Napoleon's imperial agenda, as expressed in France's geographical expansion, that contributed to the long conflict between Great Britain and France in the early century in which Colley locates the oppositional strategies of national identity-formation. Not coincidentally, the first wave of polar exploration followed closely on the heels of war's end: if conflict with France strengthened British identity, what would take its place? The departure of three different Northwest Passage discovery missions in 1818, including Franklin's first voyage, occurred in answer to this question. Championed by John Barrow, long-time Secretary to the Admiralty and himself an Arctic veteran, as a way to provide economic support to naval officers now out of work after the Napoleonic wars, the simultaneous expeditions of John Ross, John Franklin, and William Parry were conceived of as a military assault on the secret of the Northwest Passage. Barrow well understood that peace with France had negative implications for England's sense of itself as a nation, and invoked nationalism as a rationale in his championing of Arctic exploration throughout his forty-year tenure in Admiralty administration. In his letter supporting funding for Franklin's ill-fated 1845 mission, Barrow links Arctic geography to a British domestic interior, picturing the Arctic as an empty room, just waiting for an English presence: "If [exploration of the Northwest Passage is] left to be performed by some other power, England by her neglect of it, having opened the East and West doors, would be laughed at by all the world for having hesitated to cross the threshold."<sup>20</sup> Thus, for Barrow, Arctic space is already British, and imperial expansion is a form of national security.

Anticipating Thomas Carlyle, Barrow understood that the effects of industrialization and mechanization—the very processes that for Benedict Anderson enable the spread of print capitalism and culture responsible for national identity—posed a threat to British character, one answerable for Barrow by further polar exploration. He also understood the metonymic relationship between England's seamen and England itself, and if the end of the naval-intensive conflict with France threatened the British Navy, so too did increasing mechanization. "It is admitted," Barrow continues in his proposal in support of Franklin's 1845 expedition, "that the arctic expeditions have produced a finer set of Officers and Seamen perhaps than any other branch of the Service. . . . We have much need of increasing such men, now that Steamers are

supplanting our best Seamen” (158). The “purity,” to use Morley’s word, of a national identity produced, refined, and tested in Arctic space, existed for Barrow in some sort of eternal space, a space not simply outside of socioeconomic practices, but outside of modernity itself. In this way, the Arctic as proving ground for Britishness removed from that identity traces of its historical roots in Four Nations conflict or conflict with Europe. In a geography pared to its essentials, a geography that was neither colonial nor national space in any traditional sense, one could discover or reveal an essential identity.

The geographical remove of the proving ground of British identity to an Arctic periphery conveniently removed it from colonial locations. Following Edward Said, Simon Gikandi argues that colonial spaces were “indispensable spaces of self-reflection” for Britons, and that “Englishness” was “a cultural and literary phenomenon produced in the ambivalent space that separated, but also conjoined, metropole and colony.”<sup>21</sup> Colonial spaces are therefore essential to British identity, and the ubiquity of the imperial in nineteenth-century discourse pointed out by Patrick Brantlinger and others only emphasizes yet more insistently the usefulness of the Arctic in debates with implications for national and imperial identity.<sup>22</sup> For Britons, the empty white Arctic was a concrete space that could function as abstraction where other forms of abstraction failed.<sup>23</sup> In other words, its geographical distance from both colonies and metropole literalized its perceived disengagement from the economic, social, and political debates about colonial and imperial projects and as such, as Lisa Bloom has argued in her discussion of polar space and American imperialism, the Arctic “literalized the colonial fantasy of a tabula rasa where people, history, and culture vanish,” an emptiness in which to celebrate “empire without the mediating disfigurements associated with the actualities of a colonial state.”<sup>24</sup>

While abstract economic and statistical representations might enable some politicians and intellectuals to sidestep larger ethical and moral questions of colonial encounter and exploitation, racial difference was an insistent and material reminder and disruption of those abstractions. The Arctic once again provided a convenient solution: although Arctic exploration accounts made native populations and traditions known to their readers, native migratory traditions ensured their evacuation from the Arctic in the popular imagination, an erasure enabled by the representation of polar space in two hundred years of exploration accounts as uninhabitable. As Henry Morley’s insistence on Arctic purity as a synecdochic expression of Englishness revealed, the national identity established there

was understood to be racially pure, and thus an examination of its construction and representation complicates discussions of British identity that understand it as coalescing in opposition to a racial Other in a hegemonic system wherein the metropole dominates the periphery. Indeed, Britain's investment, both representational and economic, in Arctic exploration throughout the nineteenth century would seem to suggest that writers and politicians were altogether cognizant of what we now understand were often more complex or "rhizomatic" relations between metropole and periphery. The Arctic relation of white man and white landscape, one in which the British explorer and his tale took on allegorical significance, provided refuge from such complications in a legible plot of national behavior and geographical triumph, one that could resolve or at least ameliorate uncomfortable questions about nation and character raised by imperial excesses and foreign policy debacles abroad, as well as national unrest, poverty, and speculation at home.

The Arctic's literal geographic separation from quotidian issues was furthered by the participation of Arctic exploration in scientific and geographic knowledge projects, which helped to establish the perception that both the Arctic and the identity reified there were apolitical and ahistorical. Yet Arctic exploration affirms the link between geography and political projects.<sup>25</sup> The career of the Arctic veteran Clements Markham, for example, instances geographical and imperial connection in a particularly vivid way. Born in 1830, Markham was important in the development of the Royal Geographic Society first as secretary (1863–1888) and then as president from 1893–1905. His early years were spent in the Navy and as a young officer, he found himself on an Arctic exploration ship in search of the Franklin expedition, documented in his 1852 account, *In Franklin's Footsteps*, the first of more than twenty-seven volumes produced by his travels. After leaving the Navy, Markham pursued geography, literally traveling the globe in the latter half of the century to produce accounts as various as *A Quichua Dictionary and Grammar* (1863), *Missions to Thibet* (1877), and a history of Peru (1880). His most memorable achievement, however, underlines the link between geographical science and empire: in 1860 Markham was responsible for the importation of cinchona—the source of quinine—from South America to India for cultivation, resulting in fewer malarial infections for both the British in India and the native plantation labor forces on which the economy relied. This imperial contribution by Markham alone affirms John Barrow's sense of the Arctic as a proving ground for imperial males.

The title of Markham's first book, *In Franklin's Footsteps*, indicates his sense of his own genealogy and trajectory as a heroic explorer, citizen, and author. Later, as president of the Royal Geographic Society, Markham was responsible for sponsoring Robert Scott's Antarctic expedition of 1901; that Scott, like Franklin, would die on a polar mission closes the circuit. The chronological torch-passing from Barrow to Franklin to Markham to Scott reveals polar genealogy to be entirely male, and not surprisingly the narratives of national identity produced there privilege male national participation. Building on gendering of Arctic experience explored by Southey, Franklin, Mary Shelley, Eleanor Porden, and Jane Austen in the early century, mid-century discussions of the Franklin expedition and the homosocial nature of Arctic exploration addressed fears of female contamination associated with both colonial spaces and British domesticity.<sup>26</sup> The Arctic itself was gendered male: unforgiving, but constant, a geography that corresponded to an ideal and thus would bring out the best in the men who mapped it. As a result, the Arctic could produce a British male separate from the moral space of British domesticity so clearly associated with female authority. When Sarah Stickney Ellis famously claimed moral primacy for women in *The Women of England* (1839), she situated the civilizing forces of religion, education, and gentle manners in middle-class women. While early century exploration had participated in the re-masculinization of public culture, the masculinist fantasy of mid-century Arctic exploration promised to reappropriate domestic and private authority to males and the public sphere.

But as Morley's hyperbole and Franklin's own experience on his first mission indicate, there are dangers in locating authority in an overly embodied national masculinity: any failure of Franklin and the men of the *Erebus* and *Terror* was a failure of British character. Perhaps the Arctic, rather than being proving ground to and evidence of a British male uniquely suited to dominating the natural world and other countries, instead points out his limit. It follows that the national obsession with discovering the bodies of Franklin and his men was as much driven by a desire to find the heroic masculinity understood to have been forged by polar exploration as it was by curiosity about the men's fates. As such, the human bodies—first thought to be living, later widely accepted as dead—that were the object of almost thirty years of search expeditions had a metonymic relation to Britain's imperial endeavors, part of a metonymic chain that extended to Britons at home. Not only did

Franklin himself embody a national masculinity that was then deployed at home, but the libraries of sermons, working pipe organs, and fine crystal listed on the expedition manifest were the same material possessions found in middle-class sitting rooms.

The trail of detritus from the Franklin expedition—parts of uniforms, tin canisters, cloth, rope, and wood fragments, images of which were reproduced in the *Illustrated London News*—that search expeditions came across and brought back to England resisted oracular efforts made to read it. The persistence of the “stuff” of the Franklin expedition in light of the seemingly complete disappearance of the sailors, and the resistance of the fragmented material to interpretation, were articulations of the larger tension between crass materialism and human values that underlay the arguments of so many Victorian intellectuals, among them Thomas Carlyle, whose 1841 *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* exhorts Britons to embrace and perpetuate heroism and hero worship as an antidote to the commercialism and moral erosion of the modern era. The pieces of silverware and officers’ buttons the search parties turned up in place of the missing sailors’ bodies formed a grim proposition that “things” might have staying power while humans did not, a proposition in the face of which the entire idea of a resistant, reproducible, or “hard” British masculinity collapsed.

In the end, if the Arctic was for Britons a place to reify, stabilize, and naturalize a definition of Britishness that could provide an antidote to increasingly unstable and multiple versions of Britishness that existed at home and in the colonies, the metonymic chain broken by the missing bodies of the Franklin expedition had far-reaching implications for the stability of Britain’s sense of itself not only as a nation, but as a colonial and imperial power. The identification of metropolitan readers with successful narrators of earlier expeditions had affirmed their own un-self-conscious placement at the authoritative center of an empire. Franklin’s absence and the failure of the search missions that sought him forced upon these readers a recognition of the possible bankruptcy not only of the national masculinity embodied in Franklin, but of the sense of an empire controlled from the metropole. The great blank Arctic expanse on which Franklin had promised to write an imperial narrative revealed itself to be a potent, life-taking force that turned on and absorbed the British explorer. As a result, Great Britain might be compelled to envision itself as an icebound Arctic exploration ship: immobile, surrounded by hostile, uncaring forces, and shockingly vulnerable.

## GOING AFTER FRANKLIN

I hope to demonstrate in this contextualization of Franklin's disappearance in the first two phases of nineteenth-century Arctic narrative that paying attention to how nineteenth-century Britons approached, represented, and used extraterritorial polar space can nuance our broader understanding of national, colonial, and imperial identities and practices in the nineteenth century. The Arctic that this project is concerned with is not the "real" Arctic, for as the following chapters will show, Britons had no use for the complex material realities of Arctic environment or well-established native cultures and traditions. As Henry Morley so clearly articulates, 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 (on Arctic-themed menus, in panoramas, in paintings) because it is nowhere.

In accounts from the earlier part of the century, the Arctic was a space perceived to make distinct the difference between human and "nature" even as it defined and naturalized a heroic British masculinity. This led to a mid-century investment in Arctic navigation as a triumphant nationalist narrative, captured by Henry Morley's characteristic excess:

Unfading be the laurels of our northern navigators thus won by exercises of all the finest qualities of manhood! Let us be glad, too, that we have one unspotted place upon this globe of ours; a Pole that, as it fetches truth out of a needle, so surely also gets all that is right-headed and right-hearted from the sailor whom the needle guides. (245)

Yet Morley's hyperbolic assertions in 1853, as well as the multiple, speculative accounts of the voyage that circulated in place of the anticipated authoritative Admiralty-authorized account that would have been authored by Franklin, betray uneasiness about Franklin's disappearance. What if Arctic whiteness did not produce a distinct, readable, and reproducible masculinity? What if the bleak desolation of polar terrain absorbed British males rather than making them stand out in sharp relief? If white Arctic space was indistinct and horizon-less, might white British male identity be the same? Franklin's disappearance disrupted



“right-headed” and “right-hearted” certainties about gender, race, nation, and empire that Arctic expeditions and their accounts were counted upon to deliver. The third phase of representing the Arctic in the nineteenth century grappled with these rents in the Arctic canvas.

While rescue missions read the polar landscape for traces of the crew of the *Erebus* and *Terror*, Britons read published expedition accounts—from earlier missions as well as those generated by search missions—for reassurances about the British masculinity that the loss of Franklin imperiled. Read through the lens of possible failure, these accounts reveal the active disconnect between the “idea” or symbolic function of Arctic exploration and its actuality as experienced by the British explorer. One standard trope of polar accounts, for instance, is the experience of overwintering in pack ice. The originary tale of a shipboard winter in the ice was written by William Parry, who, locked in the ice with his men during an 1819 expedition, waited for the thaw, an explorer who couldn’t explore, patiently measuring the distance away from his goal that the ice inexorably dragged him.<sup>27</sup> Passively enduring—like the women waiting for them at home—Parry’s men and the others who followed them turned to domestic pursuits, including Bible study and needlecraft, as well as diverting theatre evenings. This shipboard routine became the oft-repeated staple of Arctic accounts generated by the Franklin rescue missions, and in its repetition we see that increasingly the Arctic the British male is thought to dominate instead effeminizes him.<sup>28</sup> Certainly overwintering in pack ice returns the domestic sphere and its attendant moral authority to British males, but it does so at the cost of making them women—quite literally in the case of the sailors who cross-dress as women in shipboard theatricals. Far from clarifying or delivering a heroic masculinity dependent on gender divisions practiced at home, the Arctic suggested that gendered behaviors were situational.

If in the Arctic men could behave as women, at home the mobilization of search missions for Franklin gave women a national public venue in which to redefine and assert their otherwise private role of moral influence. Lady Jane Franklin was a paradoxically public widow, a figure who, while grieving, still managed to influence politics, travel the world, meet foreign heads of state, and maintain a grueling social schedule. In her letter to Lord Palmerston asking for reversal of the declaration and for new funds from Parliament to continue the search, one sees Lady Jane’s negotiation of widowhood in both her supplicant tone and her self-portrait as a suffering woman. She expresses her disbelief and

disappointment that her government should abandon not only her husband and the men under his command, but the woman who must wait for him, resourceless: "Though it is my humble hope and prayer that the Government of my country will themselves complete the work they have begun, and not leave it to a weak and helpless woman to attempt the doing that imperfectly which they themselves can do so easily and well, yet, if need be, such is my painful resolve, God helping me."<sup>29</sup> Alternately exploiting the morbid economy of sentimentality that surrounded the death of a beloved spouse and asserting that her husband's disappearance did not automatically equate to his death, Lady Jane challenged and changed Admiralty policies and parliamentary budgets, raised a private navy by soliciting wealthy, influential donors to support Arctic missions, and helped shape Britain's foreign policy with the United States. In contrast to Victoria's careful gendering of her withdrawal as a womanly reaction to grief ten years later, Franklin's active public presence navigated a careful line between appropriate female behavior and unseemly assertiveness that gained her the following observation by an Orkney boatman: "If the wife is such a man, what can the husband be?"<sup>30</sup> These were questions of identity the Arctic was supposed to safely resolve at a distance, not raise insistently at home.

When the Admiralty finally removed Franklin and his men from the roster of crews in the Navy List, Lady Jane promptly changed out of mourning and started to dress in bright colors. Intended as a vibrant testament to her belief that her husband still lived, her clothing was in stark contrast to the indistinct whiteness of the landscape that had absorbed him, a landscape that by mid-century seemed to have an endless ability to absorb money, ships, and men with barely a trace. The Arctic was now a place of erasure rather than of the promised clarity, its emptiness interrupted by British dead; in effect a literally whited sepulchre.

In place of the bodies it absorbed, however, Arctic space volunteered only a reflection and mystification of British desires. If in winter there was no day, in summer there was no night. Minds benumbed by malnourishment and exposure had to comprehend phenomena such as "parahelias," a ring of false suns created by the atmospheric refraction. The "blink"—light reflected from snowfields or pack ice onto the undersurface of clouds—caused halos around the sun, as well as mirages resembling mountain ranges and even exploration ships. In *Franklin's Footsteps*, Markham writes of the shifting, unstable environment he encountered, one that called into question all perception:

Sometimes an iceberg is raised up into the shape of a lofty pillar, at another a whole chain of them will assume the appearance of an enormous bridge or aqueduct, and as quickly change into a succession of beautiful temples or cathedrals of dazzling whiteness, metamorphosed by the fantastic wand of nature. Ships too would in appearance rise up and stand on their heads, with the main trucks of the real and imaginary one touching. The grandeur of the scenery was rendered tenfold more beautiful and strange by these wonderful effects, and during the hard work of pressing through the ice, our weariness was relieved by beholding this magnificent panorama, constantly changing and presenting new and more beautiful shapes, like the varying configurations of a kaleidoscope.<sup>31</sup>

The kaleidoscopic, shifting nature of Arctic space resisted standard interpretive models, both scientific and aesthetic, and brought into question the explorer's strategies for making sense of the world, an uncertainty that extended to perceptions of the larger work of Arctic narrative in culture. By mimicking man-made objects such as aqueducts and cathedrals, the polar landscape reflected a distorted Englishness back at the explorers, a distortion that in turn revealed the protean, constructed nature of civilization itself.

The uncertainty about landscape and natural phenomena Markham voices extended to British identity and the "civilizing" project of the empire. On the one hand, recognition that British bodies and Arctic landscape were conjoined conflated the search for Franklin with mapping Arctic geography for the British Empire, and answered critics who wondered about squandering resources in search of corpses. On the other hand Franklin's literal joining of Arctic landscape in death erased the difference between human and "thing" on which definitions of civilization rested and called not only the search for Franklin but all of Arctic exploration into question as logical practice.

If earlier Arctic accounts were valuable for their insistence that national identity was not dependent on cultural or racial Others, then post-Franklin accounts were less certain of this. The men of the Franklin search vessel *Investigator* for example, iced in for months and starving, had resigned themselves to a long and improbably successful walk out of the Arctic to the south when Captain McClure and his lieutenant were baffled by the approach of a human figure:

On getting within a hundred yards they could see from his proportions that he was not one of them. [He] began to screech and throw up his hands, his face as black as your hat. This brought the captain and lieutenant to a stand, as they could not hear sufficiently to make out his language. He was a considerable way ahead of his sledge—a solitary man, and that man as black as Old Nick. McClure says he would have turned and run if he had seen a tail, or a cloven foot. . . . He at length found that the solitary stranger was a true Englishman; an angel of light he says. (39)

The promised clarity of Arctic space somehow does not enable McClure and his men to recognize another Englishman. On the empty snow, the Briton is “black” (perhaps darkened by frostbite), his language an incomprehensible “screech”; he is not only racially different, but perhaps supernatural. McClure’s account has him mistaking the figure not for a devil, but for an Inuit, proof that the Arctic erases difference. When the figure replies to McClure’s hails, “I’m Lieutenant Pim, late of the *Herald*, now of the *Resolute*. Captain Kellett is with her at Dealy Island,” the Arctic “Dr.-Livingstone-I-presume?” moment reveals the workings of national identity in a place largely empty of the usual markers of identity and difference.<sup>32</sup> The movement of Pim from devil to native to dark stranger to, finally, Englishman, echoes the instability of the landscape itself as described by Markham, and undermines the stability and legibility of national identity Arctic narratives so forcefully sought to assert.

In addition to forcing them to reflect on the rather slippery nature of national identity, the McClure–Pim encounter also revealed to readers that Arctic space was not, in fact, empty or indeed blank: it was filled with white British and American explorers. McClure’s misrecognition of Pim completed the Northwest Passage: McClure’s ship had started from the west, Kellett’s from the east. That the moment of uniting the coasts through a Northwest Passage is anticlimactic seems an expression of a sense of Arctic exhaustion by the explorers themselves, one shared at least in part by the British public. This exhaustion is a hallmark of the late phase of Arctic narrative. By 1876, one reviewer could comment that recent polar exploration narratives “could be characterised in the Stud-Book of literature as ‘Sire, Scissors, out of Dam, Paste-Pot’” and speak distastefully of a “wilderness of rechauffée print.”<sup>33</sup> For readers, Arctic purity had become Arctic sterility when once-potent tropes