
This monograph, based on the author’s doctoral dissertation, aims to redress what Cavell considers a lacuna in the historiography of nineteenth-century British Arctic exploration. Contending that previous scholars have paid insufficient attention to the positioning of these expeditions within British imperial culture, she studies their representation and reception in that nation’s popular press. She concentrates primarily on examples from the 1820s and 1850s, and uses four authors – John Barrow, John Franklin, Leopold McClintock, and Sherard Osborn – as focal points for discussion. Cavell posits the existence of a “connected” narrative of British Arctic exploration in this time period. This overarching narrative, or metanarrative, drew upon the descriptive published accounts by the leaders of Arctic expeditions and associated material – extracts from such accounts, correspondence from explorers to their family and friends, and critical reviews of accounts – that was published in daily, weekly, and monthly newspapers and journals. Her extensive quotation and analysis of this latter, evanescent material revives these lively, yet lesser-known contributions to Arctic discourse.

The study takes its inspiration from scholarly work published in the last twenty years in the areas of British cultural history and the history of print culture. Cavell convincingly applies the insights of Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund regarding serialized fiction to this Arctic corpus. In this reading, each Arctic expedition may be considered a new installment in an ongoing story of epic proportions. The author considers this narrative to have begun with John Ross’s first Arctic voyage in 1818 and to have ended with Leopold McClintock’s return to England in 1859 and his confirmation of Franklin’s fate. Hence “the failure of so many expeditions mattered less when they were perceived as parts of a larger whole, and as episodes whose true significance might not be apparent until the story was finished” (27).
Cavell is much concerned to determine the response of working and middle-class readers to this narrative, but admits to the paucity of evidence. Her pragmatic compromise is to endow those journalists who regularly reviewed the geographical and literary progress of Arctic knowledge with the additional identity of a typical reader, though not without acknowledging the problems inherent in this characterization. The author’s familiarity with and command of the salient periodical literature is one of the book’s strengths.

Leading her readers through decades punctuated by various episodes of exploration and representation, Cavell asserts that the political, social, and artistic dialogues of nineteenth-century British culture informed the written commentaries on and constructions of Arctic exploration. The figure of the heroic Arctic explorer incorporated aspects of popular romanticism, nationalism, and muscular Christianity. Audiences and critics carefully measured the textual presentations of such figures against certain rhetorical ideals, such as the performance of an “authentic” narrative voice, and personal virtues, such as humility, patience, perseverance, and Christian faith. The general reception of and identification with such figures varied. Cavell demonstrates that there was a marked increase in public engagement with Arctic explorers and their primary sponsor, Lady Jane Franklin (and a corresponding disengagement from the British government and the Admiralty), as the search for John Franklin intensified in the 1850s.

Cavell’s study, however beguiling, has some structural drawbacks. Her chronological presentation of the material is awkward. She opens and closes the book with separate analyses of the same personalities and events in 1859–60. This choice not only necessitates the repetition of material, but also bars the reader from fully engaging with the first chapter until s/he has read the last. Moreover, as the author’s arguments are predicated on developments over time, beginning at the “end” of the story gives her conclusions unwonted authority, a presumption underlined by the baffling lack of a standard conclusion at the book’s close. The insertion of a chapter midway through the book that considers the British naval discourse in the nineteenth century also forces the reader to slide, confusingly, from the 1820s to the 1850s and, at the next chapter’s opening, back again.

The author’s engagement with secondary literature is uneven. The bibliography has received almost no attention since the book’s previous incarnation as a dissertation: of the seven citations of works
published since 2003, three are the author’s own. Recent literary and historical work by scholars of polar exploration such as Jen Hill and Michael F. Robinson is absent, as is the older, but now standard contribution of Lisa Bloom. Cavell’s narrative frequently touches upon the relationship of Arctic exploration to other nineteenth-century cultural narratives, such as romanticism, nationalism and populism, and science. However, her bibliography includes few recent scholarly analyses of such phenomena, and her footnotes rarely refer to those she has consulted. Moreover, some of her assessments contribute little to her overall argument. With unclear intent, she revives a dead debate in the Canadian historiography of Arctic exploration (4–7), and has somewhat dismissive and unnecessary brushes with the work of major scholars such as Michel Foucault, Edward Said, and Bernard Smith. This mixed, sometimes clouded, deployment of relevant and irrelevant literature mutes the force of the book’s arguments.

The main contribution of Tracing the Connected Narrative lies in its attentiveness to lesser-discussed repositories of nineteenth-century representations of the Canadian Arctic. It also coincides fruitfully with a renewed attentiveness to Canada’s imperial history, spearheaded by Phillip Buckner and others. Scholars interested in one or more of its themes will find it informative and enjoyable, and may use it with due critical care.

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Dorothy Eber aims to understand the Franklin tragedy on and near King William Island from the point of view of Inuit oral history. With Encounters, she, like David Woodman, has made an enduring contribution to exploration history from the Inuit perspective. Most scholars study it mainly from a White perspective, which amounts to an impoverished history, also known as a mystery, because, being predicated on written sources, it relies on an archive that contains but a single document written by any of the 129 Britons on the voyage once HMS Erebus and Terror disappeared into the Arctic archipelago