

Introduction

EXPLORATION AND SACRIFICE: THE CULTURAL LOGIC OF ARCTIC DISCOVERY

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Reprinted from *The Quest for the Northwest Passage: British Narratives of Arctic Exploration, 1576-1874*, edited by Frédéric Regard, © 2013 Pickering & Chatto.

The Northwest Passage in nineteenth-century Britain, 1818-1874

Although this collective work can certainly be read as a self-contained book, it may also be considered as a sequel to our first volume, also edited by Frederic Regard, *The Quest for the Northwest Passage: Knowledge, Nation, Empire, 1576-1806*, published in 2012 by Pickering and Chatto. That volume, dealing with early discovery missions and eighteenth-century innovations (overland expeditions, conducted mainly by men working for the Hudson's Bay Company), was more historical, insisting in particular on the role of the Northwest Passage in Britain's imperial project and colonial discourse. As its title indicates, this second volume deals massively with the nineteenth century. This was the period during which the Northwest Passage was finally discovered, and – perhaps more importantly – the period during which the quest reached an unprecedented level of intensity in Britain. In Sir John Barrow's – the powerful Second Secretary to the Admiralty's – view of Britain's military, commercial and spiritual leadership in the world, the Arctic remained indeed the only geographical discovery worthy of the Earth's most powerful nation. But the Passage had also come to feature an inaccessible ideal, Arctic landscapes and seascapes typifying sublime nature, in particular since Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* (1818).

And yet, for all the attention lavished on the myth created by Sir John Franklin's overland expeditions (1819-1822, 1825-1827¹) and above all by the one which would cost him his life (1845-1847), very little research has been carried out on the extraordinary Arctic frenzy with which the British Admiralty was seized between 1818, in the wake of the end of the Napoleonic wars, and 1859, which may be considered as the year the quest was ended. Strangely enough, for instance, John Ross's first expedition into Baffin Bay in 1818 has called upon itself very little, if any attention; and no serious book-length study exists on the many and extremely varied exploration parties, both maritime and overland, which followed Ross's attempt, including the thirty or so rescue parties which endeavoured to solve the mystery of Franklin's disappearance. This volume investigates the procedures through which the Passage became such a crucial, though contrasted, ingredient of British nineteenth-century culture and aesthetics.

Why, some might inevitably ask, not have restricted this survey to the first half of the century? The argument needs to be addressed in order to justify the time span retained. In

1854, John Rae arrived back in England with the first certain intelligence of the fate of Franklin's expedition.² Lady Franklin determined however on one more search expedition, giving its command to Francis Leopold M'Clintock, who in 1859 published an account of his 'discovery of the fate of Sir John Franklin and his companions' which went through many editions.³ M'Clintock also brought back with him documents he had found on King William Island providing evidence that Franklin's party had indeed found a passage, before Robert McClure therefore, who was thought to have been the first to discover the Passage on 26 October 1850 – although from a hilltop.⁴ There would be other research expeditions, but 1859 does remain a highly symbolic date, confirming both Franklin's death and his success in finding a route, which may therefore be said to mark the end of the quest. But certainly not the end of *the myth*, of a story exerting such a powerful influence on the human psyche as to be incessantly retold and reinvented. As an illustration of this ongoing process of mythologization throughout the nineteenth century, we choose to close this volume on a chapter dedicated to Millais's celebrated 1874 painting, *The North-West Passage*, a gloomy representation of British frustration, bathed in the cold light, not of Arctic promise, but of tragic mourning.

Frustration was not a new feeling in Arctic history. The first official mission of exploration launched by Barrow in 1818 – the year Mary Shelley's novel was published – was placed under the command of John Ross, whose reception in England after failing to identify Lancaster Sound as the entry to the Northwest Passage shows how an Arctic hero could – almost overnight – be turned into a national scapegoat, ridiculed by his former protector, lampooned by various caricaturists, contested by his own men.⁵ The history of British Arctic exploration was to be characterized by the proliferation of such conflicting narratives, a feature which profoundly contributed to the mythologization of the quest, a venture both fundamental in terms of self-knowledge – testing the limits of what was humanly possible, pursuing the unreachable – and yet laden with contradictory aspects. The Arctic was where the model of a sublime masculinity was constructed – Franklin's own narratives can be read as attempts to retrieve the purity of the Empire by conquering the ultimate virgin territory –, yet also deconstructed as hubristic gesticulation.

We suggest however that with Franklin's disappearance in the ice between 1845 and 1847, a paradigmatic shift occurred in late-Victorian British imagination, as the nation's patriotic feelings seem to have been fueled less by the sublimity of sacrifice than by a sense of loss and mourning. Swinburne's elegy 'The Death of Sir John Franklin' (1860) turned Franklin's quest into an epic story of a suffering hero subsumed by the icy wilderness, while Millais's painting represented not an Arctic landscape, but an old seaman agonized with doubts as to the possibility of success, perhaps even as to the usefulness of such unproductive expenditures. But again, had not this shift started to affect British culture earlier? Had not Caspar David Friedrich's *Das Eismeer* (1823-4), also called 'The Wreck of the Hope', been inspired by William Edward Parry's – Ross's second in command's – narratives?⁶ In the nineteenth century, the discovery of the Passage was not the end of the story: the Arctic posed a particular case, not only because its exploration was finally thought of as commercially insignificant, but also because blind hubris, failure, and loss were finally construed as being not incidental to the search of the Passage, but *central* to it.

Modernity, or from risk to expense

That exploration comes with some unavoidable element of risk is an old truism, although today, in the era of hand-held GPS and satellite radio, the danger that any well-outfitted traveller will become lost is considerably diminished. Indeed, the foolhardy individual who carelessly embarks into the wild today is, if rescued, more likely to be presented with a bill for services than a medal. In 2009, when the inexperienced British backpacker Jamie Neale was rescued after becoming lost in the remote Blue Mountains region of Australia, he faced harsh criticism, even though he donated £8,000 to the rescue teams who found him – after all, he had earned more than £100,000 by selling his story to a television network, and he had originally promised to split the money.⁷ Yet even if he had handed over the whole amount, he would probably not have repaid the full cost of his rescue. A search by air consumes tremendous amounts of fuel and man-hours, and a ground search – even when assisted by volunteers – can be still more expensive. In 2008, when a man who gave the name ‘Dave Roberts’ had to be rescued from Alaska’s remote Brooks Range the operation was estimated to have cost \$144,000. In the face of mounting criticism for his arrogance in having gone into the area with inadequate gear and planning, he quickly returned home to Australia, after which the *Anchorage Daily News* ran the headline ‘Into the wild without a clue, hiker rescued, then gets rude’.⁸

At the South Pole, for that matter, any latter-day Shackletons who hope to make a cross-continental trek must now pay for their rescue in advance, whether they end up needing it or not. Contingency plans must be approved, and caches of emergency supplies of food and fuel laid in, either by aircraft or tractor, before initial permission for any kind of expedition will be granted; the few outfitters who guide parties there charge upwards of \$40,000 per person, in part to recoup these costs. Risk, it seems, has become an expense rather than an enticement, and costs must be accounted for.

This is doubtless a very sensible policy, but it also suggests that humanity has finally come to a point where, save for a few very highly specialized circumstances, risk has become something to be avoided, or at least ‘managed’. The popular response to a person who engages in almost any behaviour perceived as ‘risky’ – whether this means tight-rope walking, drug use, or unprotected sex, is now one of condemnation: ‘How dare you take on such needless risk – don’t you realize the cost to society?’

Such an attitude toward risk is a fairly recent development in human cultures, and indeed would be quite incomprehensible to most of our ancestors. For much of human history, risks were simply a fact of life, and the technology to limit them nonexistent. To take but the most prominent example: the greatest cause of mortality in human history has been the vast number of communicable diseases – among them such formerly fatal childhood illnesses such as measles, mumps, and rubella – for which we now have effective vaccines. In the case of armed conflict, of course, risk and protection have performed a long and elaborate dance, with weapons evolving to penetrate armour, and armour evolving to deflect new weapons – and even today, there is no absolute way to protect a soldier in an active conflict. Were we to demand that war become risk-free, we would be demanding, in essence, an end to war. The general understanding of this grim equation

prevents such a demand from gaining much of a foothold, except among those who oppose war in any form. Nevertheless, in civilian life, we have largely accepted the notion that if we do nothing to limit risk we ought to be *individually* responsible for its consequences. Gum disease? You should have brushed more regularly. Lung cancer? Hey, no one forced you to smoke those cigarettes.

The ‘accursed share’

Yet for nearly all of human history prior to the twentieth century, the problems of human fragility and mortality were regarded as the inexorable price one paid for being alive. So many, and so unfathomable, were the forces arrayed against the persistence of an individual life, in fact, that the survival of the whole – the community, culture, or nation – was regarded as far more important the survival of any one person. Simply to be alive was to risk death, and aside from active attempts at suicide, or – by the nineteenth century – alcohol or drug abuse, the death of any one individual was as fateful and impersonal an affair as another. In such works as the *Danse Macabre* or ‘Dance of Death’, a medieval parable depicted in hundreds of woodcuts and church frescos, Death in the form of a skeleton danced in turn with peasant, Pope, Emperor, child, and soldier; the final step was the same for each – a fall into a ready grave.

Of course, there were always some risks that not everyone chose to take, war chief among them. What is often forgotten in that becoming a soldier, in some ways, once had a kind of sacred function; the shaving of the head of a recruit, like the tonsuring of a monk, indicated a special code of conduct, and a changed status with regard to law and honour. Long before the great religions, those who were to go to battle underwent mystical training and observed special taboos – after all, they were about to behave in a way that, in the ordinary, civilian world, would violate the most central precepts of society. In a profound sense, they were preparing themselves for sacrifice, a sacrifice that would renew the life on their communities, just as the slaying of the fatted calf renewed the faith of the Israelites, or burning hecatombs courted the favor of the Olympian gods. Indeed, it’s this ancient belief that, in order to honour the fates, or the gods, or God, one must sacrifice or *lose* something of value, even a life, which has been the most consistent of human touchstones across cultures and continents from the earliest human civilizations.

The French writer Georges Bataille spent the last years of his life on his great but little-known work *La Part maudite*,⁹ translated as *The Accursed Share*. In a chapter written as early as 1933 (‘La notion de dépense’), Bataille argued that sacrifice or ‘expenditure’ (*dépense*) was the one absolute necessity of all human civilizations. Whatever energy cannot be used in growth, Bataille argued, ‘must be lost without profit; it must be spent, willingly or not, gloriously or catastrophically’.¹⁰ In his view, war, human sacrifice among the Maya, or the Northwest Coast potlatch – were all forms of sacrifice essential to their respective societies. This idea sounds strange to us today, who have come to believe that, whatever its occasional caprices, capitalism – which demands that *all* profit be plowed back into maintenance and growth – is the best way for a society, and indeed for the world, to thrive. And yet, for most of our history, even the wealthiest and most

successful civilizations have given sacrifice a sacred status. We still do so today – for war only – but our awareness of this is muddled by our mixed feelings about the terrors of modern warfare, along with the belief, cultivated by some leaders today, that a modern and ‘professional’ army can wage war successfully without undue sacrifice.

Yet in the not too-distant past, there was one other human activity, also fraught with immense risk, which held both the sacred sense of sacrifice and the faith of peace-loving citizens: the exploration of new worlds. This is not to say that explorers set sail with a deliberate plan of self-annihilation; far from it. Just as a soldier, heading into battle, knows that he or she may well be killed, whatever the outcome of the conflict, the explorer knows that there is no absolute causality between sacrifice and success. And yet, for both, the *willingness* to sacrifice themselves is essential, for without it there can be no possibility of success. To be averse to risk, for either soldier or explorer, would be to abrogate the very summons that gives their task meaning, as well as to undermine the collective support with which their actions are meant to be regarded by society. Both must embrace their fates, and defy them; as Hamlet puts it just before his fateful duel with Laertes:

If it be now, ’tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all. Since no man has aught of what he leaves, what is ’t to leave betimes?¹¹

We today can readily read the heroic spirit that these lines contain, even if, when we turn our minds and judgments back to our present business, we are all too eager to praise those who act ‘responsibly’ and condemn those who risk all. So how did we reach a place where we could recognize such heroism but fear to enact it?

Explorers, capitalists and colonizers

The answer to this question has everything to do with the history of exploration. For, while war has always had an elevated, heroic myth to support it – however far from the present reality of any given war it may have seemed – the myth of the discoverer is of more recent vintage. Like other sorts of heroes, explorers have, when their lives are examined in detail, shown in their character an admixture of much that is good, much that is bad, and some that is indifferent. It is how they manage the greatest challenges, how they comport themselves in the face of dread, and how – if they do manage to return – they respond to adulation, that makes them singular. We know that, on some level, their motivations may be mixed – but we expect them to live up to their best, and to regard success and failure dispassionately. Fame, should it come, is another test, and perhaps the most difficult of all, for if heroism is scarce, real humility is even scarcer.

The fame of new discoveries has always redounded on their discoverer, along with, should things not work out as hoped, the blame. At the dawn of the era of European exploration, fantastical stories of cities of gold, fountains of youth, and sea routes to the Orient spurred many voyages of discovery, raising expectations to the point where hardly any success would seem sufficient. Sir Martin Frobisher, who found a route to the Arctic

shores of Baffin Island in the sixteenth century, was disappointed when a broad waterway he took to be a route to the Pacific turned out to be a dead end.¹² In consolation, he picked up a few of the black rocks which lay upon the shore, and in their dark glitter thought he saw veins of gold; on this basis he was granted a fleet of ships with which to establish a new and profitable colony for Queen Elizabeth. The Queen, less sanguine than her Captain, dubbed the new land 'meta incognita' – value unknown – a prescient name, as it turned out, when the many tons of black stones Frobisher brought back turned out to be – well – black stones.¹³

Frobisher was typical of the early era of English sea-captains; he had little use for what was unprofitable, and found being a privateer far more rewarding than being an explorer. Men of his sort were military commanders first, and saw new discoveries as merely another kind of conquest. These Elizabethans formed companies of 'gentlemen adventurers' – but the 'adventure' in them was, like 'venture capital', an investment of time and material with hopes of monetary increase. One of these, the Hudson's Bay Company, founded in 1670 by Royal charter of Charles II, still exists as a commercial concern, running several chains of retail outlets as well as a financial services company. For companies such as these, commerce was the ultimate goal, and risk – unavoidable at first – was something they actively sought to control. Inevitably, the land itself, along with its inhabitants, was exploited to the greatest possible limits in order at first to justify, and later to sustain, the larger project of colonialism. Thus, even as they stood at the summit of human achievement, men such as Frobisher, Drake, and Raleigh, stepped into a swamp of human shortcomings; their accomplishments as navigators are ever shadowed by their roles as capitalists and colonizers.

All of which suggests that, in order for explorers to ascend to a truly heroic level, they somehow must stand above, or outside of, commercial concerns. In this sense, they had to become the enemies of the useful. For, to the extent that their labors were undertaken to find profitable resources – forests, minerals, fisheries, or navigable routes – they would be captains of commerce only, rather like corporate executives with boats. And, so long as they, like land-bound investors, sought to 'manage' risk and maximize gain, they could not be a part of the sacred world of the sacrificial. Exploration would have to become a lot more like war, and a lot less like work, in order for this to happen; what was needed in fact was a *greater* risk, and a lesser gain, at least for the individual explorer. And more: as with war, there needed to be some *casus belli*, some greater good or motive which could justify and make mythic the men who undertook such risks, striving toward some goal which was, or at least could seem to be, utterly above the pedestrian world of mere *work*.

Skirting the shores of loss

It was not until the nineteenth century that a suitable ideal, an unimpeachable *casus explorationis* arose, in the form of the new understandings of the word 'Science.' Science before had essentially been a name for what was *known*, or for established methods; now, it was fast becoming a name for what was not known, and for the methods required to understand it. This was especially true in the new realm of 'natural sciences',

particularly biology and anthropology, but it soon extended to geology, terrestrial magnetism, and feats of mechanical engineering, such as the steam-engine or the Suez Canal. And, as it happens, one of the most storied voyages into the Arctic regions, that of John and James Ross in 1829-1833,¹⁴ perfectly illustrates not only the economics of loss, but also the degree to which Science was emerging as the highest and most auspicious of altars upon which to sacrifice men and materiel.

John Ross had already been tutored by hard experience as to the value of an expedition which skirted the shores of loss; although his 1818 voyage in command of *HMS Isabella* had re-charted vast swaths of Baffin Bay, and included the first visit to the Inughuit of Etah, the farthest north inhabitants on earth,¹⁵ he was roundly condemned on his return for not having risked more. Sir John Barrow, ever the driving force of British Arctic efforts, ridiculed his expedition as a ‘few months’ voyage of pleasure’,¹⁶ and although Ross received the expected promotion, he never again received a naval command. The other Polar expedition launched that same year, led by David Buchan and John Franklin,¹⁷ was driven back by treacherous ice which nearly destroyed their two vessels, and yet on their return they were celebrated as heroes of Arctic navigation, and Franklin was quickly dispatched on another expedition. The lesson was clear: to explore the Arctic and avoid peril was not to explore at all; the laurels belonged to those who risked all, even if they charted not an inch of new coastline, nor sailed into a single unknown sea.

Ross had plenty of time to simmer in his resentment over what he always believed had been unfair treatment, but so long as the British Admiralty continued to send its own expeditions – most of them commanded by his former second, he could do nothing. In the wake of Parry’s 1827 expedition, which was regarded as in many ways a last, best effort, Ross for his second expedition applied to the Admiralty with a plan to seek the Northwest Passage in a ship powered by steam. Steam, the wondrous engine of the Industrial Revolution, brought the magic of Science to bear upon the mystery of the frozen zone; Ross also believed that the ships previously sent had been too large, and drawn too much water, to navigate the shallow coastal waters of the interior passage. In this he was doubtless correct, but the Admiralty had had quite enough of the Northwest Passage; such glory as could be harvested from the endeavour seemed to them to have played out.

Ross then sought private backing, but here he faced a curious but highly significant hurdle: the Longitude Prize, still in effect, which offered £20,000 to anyone who could traverse the Passage from east to west. Ross initially believed the Prize would be an incentive; after all, why wouldn’t any sensible private backer be happy to anticipate some recompense for his efforts? And yet, the opposite proved true: potential backers refused any public association with Ross’s scheme, because funding such an expedition would be seen as an attempt at private *gain*. Gain, of course, was the name of the game in private business, but to attach gain to an endeavour which – were it to have any claim on public gratitude – must first and foremost be about risk and *loss*, was to spoil the whole affair. Ross finally obtained the support of London gin magnate Sir Felix Booth, but Booth refused to act until the prize was withdrawn. Early in 1828, the Longitude Act was, in fact, repealed, and although those who led the effort – among them John Wilson Croker,

the First Secretary of the Admiralty – believed that it would ‘set to sleep all absurd projects for finding the North Pole’,¹⁸ in fact the opposite occurred. Booth, freed to support Ross without the appearance of private gain, outfitted the expedition fully, with the belated recognition and assistance of the Admiralty itself.

Ross’s expedition, as it turned out, was to comprise a loss of truly epic proportions: he lost his ship, the *Victory*, which he abandoned deep within the dead-end inlet he christened after the Prince Regent, several of his men, and came closer to losing his life as had any British explorer of the heroic age. While his ship was iced in the first winter, he encountered the Netsilik Inuit, who doubtless saved his and his men’s lives by aiding them in hunting and fishing; at the same time, his enterprising nephew, James Clark Ross, departed the ship and travelled overland, locating the north magnetic pole, a spot with perhaps more immediate scientific significance than the geographical pole, and which was, inevitably, confused with it later in the popular press. Further attempts to free the *Victory* met with failure, and Ross led his men on an overland retreat to a cache of stores from the earlier wreck of *HMS Fury*, abandoned by Parry in 1825. Sustaining themselves on these, they made it through to the following summer – their fourth – and were rescued by a passing whaler, which as fate would have it was the *Isabella* of Hull, the very ship Ross had commanded in 1818, now in private service.

The effect of Ross’s rescue and return was electrifying: he received not only a knighthood (in fact, several of them, from sundry nations), but all the public fanfare he had missed in 1818, including a Panorama of his expedition in Leicester Square, a vast outdoor pageant with 70-foot high papier-mâché icebergs at Vauxhall Gardens, and an exhibition of his own paintings in a London gallery. There also, of course, had to be a book; since John Murray, the Admiralty’s usual publisher, was not in line for the rights, Ross decided to publish the book by subscription. Here, alas, he made his only stumble; by putting out his narrative in an elaborate and expensive folio, with long lists of well-known subscribers, he opened himself to the criticism that he was, after all, in it for the money; he may have earned the adulation of portions of the public, but at the expense of a higher sort of nobility which could only be preserved by avoiding profit, or even the appearance of profit. As it happened, both Ross and Booth were voted substantial funds by Parliament, but as these were spontaneous and not expected rewards, made as it were in compensation for loss, they did not impugn their recipients.

One other result of Ross’s expedition was a Parliamentary hearing, the testimony of which offers yet another précis of the curious mathematics of loss. Barrow himself was always defending exploration as an answer to the sacred calls of nation and Science, and deprecating the utilitarians who ever asked ‘cui bono?’. And yet, despite the bad blood between him and Ross, Ross’s replies to the inquiry exemplified the essential elements of the anti-utilitarian argument. Thus proceeded the question and answer:

Q: ‘From your experience of these seas, do you conceive that any further attempt to discover the north-west passage would be attended with great danger?’

A: ‘I do.’

Q: ‘And if successful, would it be attended with any public benefit?’

A: 'I believe it would be utterly useless.'¹⁹

This might have been taken as a discouraging answer, and it is quite possible that is how Ross intended it. Nevertheless, much like the freeing-up of Felix Booth's purse by the removal of any 'useful' result, Ross's reply returned the search for the Passage to the realm of quixotic quests, noble deeds, and the passionate encounter with the unknown – for if the passage had a use, then its discovery would be no more glorious than flushing out a clogged pipe. A useless passage, and only such, was a worthy goal for a mighty nation and its 'knights-errant of the sea'.²⁰

Of the utility of futility

Of course, it is not only when the issue is one of a 'private' expedition, but even more so when the matter of public funding for exploration is debated, that 'useful' and 'useless' serve as lines of demarcation. The enormous expense of the various government-sponsored searches for Sir John Franklin was used, at the time his final fate was discovered by M'Clintock in 1859, as a rationale to put an end to such endeavours. The public mood did not shift until the British Arctic Expedition of 1865-76, and the apparent failure of that party, with commander George Strong Nares's famous declaration that there was 'no thoroughfare' to the Pole,²¹ shifted it right back again; the British government would never again fund a major Arctic expedition. The American Arctic explorer Robert Peary, whose 1909 claim upon the Pole is much disputed, obtained most of his funds from private sources, although he certainly had the support of, and some material assistance from, the United States Navy. Perhaps the great powers had decided that such endeavours were no longer meaningful, given that most of the habitable globe had been mapped; perhaps a century of world wars and genocide proved too crowded a stage for such things to find room.

Nevertheless, the very same cultural and economic arguments, though long dormant, were immediately resuscitated at the onset of the US/Soviet 'Space Race'. The speech by US President John F. Kennedy which opened this initiative was delivered on 25 May 1961, and couched the argument in both nationalistic and economic terms: he spoke of taking a 'leading role in space achievement', and how reaching the moon would be 'impressive to mankind', while at the same time acknowledging that no other mission would be 'so difficult or expensive to accomplish'. He was frank about the cost, asking for 531 million dollars in fiscal year 1962 alone, and projecting seven to nine billion dollars over the life of the program (in the end, it cost more than \$25 billion). And yet, even over all these other concerns, Kennedy couched his argument in nationalistic and quasi-military terms, much as had those who praised the 'Nelsons of the North' in Victorian Britain:

Finally, if we are to win the battle that is now going on around the world between freedom and tyranny, the dramatic achievements in space which occurred in recent weeks should have made clear to us all, as did the Sputnik in 1957, the impact of this adventure on the minds of men everywhere, who are attempting to make a determination of which road they should take.²²

By ‘road’ here Kennedy alluded to the cold-war binary of capitalism and communism, couched as ‘freedom’ versus ‘tyranny’; by setting such a lofty goal, the space programme would function as a sort of advertisement for freedom, as well as a demonstration that those who already had ideological superiority also possessed greater technical skill. In many ways this resembled the old knightly conceit, that God will give victory to the just. Despite this, there were, as Kennedy anticipated, quite a few people who asked ‘cui bono?’ – the more so as the 1960’s unfolded into a time of social turmoil, the ‘war on poverty’, and increasing urban decay. This criticism reached its epitome in the Gil Scott-Heron 1970 rap, ‘Whitey on the Moon’:

A rat done bit my sister Nell.
(with Whitey on the moon)
Her face and arms began to swell.
(and Whitey’s on the moon)
I can’t pay no doctor bill.
(but Whitey’s on the moon)
Ten years from now I’ll be payin’ still.
(while Whitey’s on the moon)
The man jus’ upped my rent las’ night.
(‘cause Whitey’s on the moon)
No hot water, no toilets, no lights.
(but Whitey’s on the moon).²³

The futility and irrelevance of the moon landing are established rhetorically by the repeated refrain, juxtaposed against the urban rat-infested poverty that could, presumably, be solved if resources directed to the moon were re-deployed here on Earth.

While this kind of criticism was never directly addressed by NASA or other space advocates, they were certainly aware of it, and throughout the programme sought to highlight the beneficial side-effects of the moon effort, from Tang breakfast drink to Pillsbury’s ‘Space food sticks’ to more technical accomplishments such as Teflon-coated fabric or mechanical arms. To this day, NASA touts these developments, which it calls ‘technology transfers,’ on its website.²⁴ Of course, all of these technologies could have been developed independently, but it was their use in space that drove development, and which provided ideal material for later commercial development and advertising. Much like the use of tinned food, which was touted in Arctic expeditions from Parry’s voyage of 1819 onwards, or specially-developed products such as Borden’s Meat Biscuit or American Powdered Milk – both used by the American Arctic explorer Dr. Elisha Kent Kane, who searched for Franklin in the 1850’s²⁵ – the value of which derived from the tacit or explicit endorsement of explorers, and which inevitably spurred sales.

The shift from the moon ‘race’ to the development of programmes such as Skylab and the Space Shuttle also marked a shift in rhetoric; while landing on the moon was a sort of bravura one-off, what this new age demanded was a more open-ended ethos of exploration, one that could not be satisfied with a single mission or accomplishment. With the shuttle program, notably, the names of the shuttles and their prototypes were

deliberately chosen with an eye to their exploratory connotations: *Enterprise* (OV-101), which was not only a name with Star Trek and US Navy associations, but that of *HMS Enterprise*, a ship engaged in the Franklin Arctic search; *Columbia* (OV-102), which recalls Christopher Columbus; *Challenger* (OV-099), evoking *HMS Challenger* and its service leading the first global marine expedition; *Discovery* (OV-103), which was also the name of Henry Hudson's ship; *Atlantis* (OV-104), which suggests an undersea, 'lost city' à la Jules Verne, and *Endeavour* (OV-105), which was explicitly named after James Cook's famous vessel. These names collectively cast a warm, exploratory glow on the work of these shuttles, even though in fact they were never designed to leave Earth orbit, and did not explore any new 'space' as such.

And once again, NASA had to defend its budget, and explain over and over the value of 'manned spaceflight'. There was not much talk along the lines of sacrifice and other quasi-military terms, with the notable exception, of course, of the loss of two of the shuttles – *Columbia* and *Challenger* – with all hands. Here, the rhetoric easily re-embraced the notion of the ultimate nobility and good of loss, never more so than in the speech written by Peggy Noonan for Ronald Reagan in the wake of the loss of *Challenger*:

It's all part of the process of exploration and discovery. It's all part of taking a chance and expanding man's horizons. The future doesn't belong to the fainthearted; it belongs to the brave. The *Challenger* crew was pulling us into the future, and we'll continue to follow them.²⁶

And then, perhaps most notably, Reagan went on to evoke what might, for many of his listeners, have been a wholly unexpected name:

On this day 390 years ago, the great explorer Sir Francis Drake died aboard ship off the coast of Panama. In his lifetime the great frontiers were the oceans, and a historian later said, 'He lived by the sea, died on it, and was buried in it.' Well, today we can say of the *Challenger* crew: Their dedication was, like Drake's, complete.²⁷

Thus again, the knights-errant of the sea, only now in space, the 'final frontier'.

Sacrifice and the unreachable

In both the era of Arctic exploration and that of our own moon and solar system, the question of loss, and sacrifice arises – and not only because, as in any such endeavour, some loss is inevitable. After all, some loss of life comes as the price of many sorts of human activity: the American embrace of the automobile, for instance, regularly takes between 30,000 and 40,000 lives each year, and yet the individual act of driving a car has no such symbolism, no such nobility. It is, in fact, so routine that it is almost invisible. Exploration, in order to be sacred, must involve loss and sacrifice, but they must be of a particular kind: they must be voluntarily undertaken, they must serve some higher purpose, such as Nation or Science, and they must be done by individuals who have been

marked for special service. In a sense, it is precisely war by other means, and indeed the vast majority of British and American Arctic explorers, as well as most astronauts, came from Naval or military backgrounds. Even in their retirement – when they live to enjoy it – they carry a special aura, a special quality as representatives of what is best in humanity. They do not, of course, always and inevitably live up to these ideals in every detail of their personal lives – but even when, as happens, an astronaut falls from grace, the larger image remains untarnished.

We are now in a most peculiar era, both with respect to exploration *and* to war. NASA is ending its manned space program, quite possibly forever, and turning its attention to unmanned missions. Some of these have met with remarkable success, taking images of distant moons, the head of active comets, or landing on and exploring the surface of Mars. And yet, without the human element, none of these exercises can perform the service to humanity which actual explorers accomplish. Similarly, in war, many tasks are performed remotely; unmanned drones hunt down the enemy (or those we believe to be the enemy), and cruise missiles rain down destruction accurately hundreds of miles away from the battlefield. The American public, with its ‘volunteer’ military, is told that, when it comes to war, many goals can be accomplished with minimal sacrifice – and yet, strangely, many of its goals go unmet, and the human and economic costs of war have far from vanished. One should not, of course, deify sacrifice for sacrifice’s sake; such an ethos has been the hallmark of fascist and totalitarian regimes, and in fact opposes and nullifies the noble human impulses it pretends to glorify. It must be sacrifice *for*, and sacrifice for some ideal or standard which is both difficult and costly to reach – which is in fact, ultimately *unreachable*. There may be some earthly utility in the endeavour, but it cannot be merely useful. In all these things, human beings – complex, well-prepared, aware of the risks – are the one essential and recurrent element.

¹ J. Franklin, *Narrative of a Journey to the Shores of the Polar Sea, in the years 1819, 20, 21, and 22* (London: John Murray, 1823); *Narrative of a Second Expedition to the Shores of the Polar Sea, in the years 1825, 1826, and 1827* (London: John Murray, 1828).

² K. McGoogan, *Fatal Passage: The Story of John Rae, the Arctic Hero Time Forgot* (NY: Carroll & Graf, 2002), p. 209.

³ F. L. M’Clintock, *The Voyage of the ‘Fox’ in the Arctic Seas: A Narrative of the Discovery of the Fate of Sir John Franklin and His Companions* (London: John Murray, 1859).

⁴ See S. Osborne, *The Discovery of the North-West Passage by Robert Le Mesurier McClure* (1856; Tokyo: Hurtig, 1969), pp. 139-40.

⁵ See R. Potter, *Arctic Spectacles: The Frozen North in Visual Culture, 1818-1875* (Seattle and London: The University of Washington Press, 2007), pp. 49-51.

⁶ W. Schmeid, *Caspar David Friedrich* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995), p. 108.

⁷ ‘Jamie Neale, the backpacker who cost \$100,000, signs celebrity agent deal’, *The Times* (London) 17 July 2009, at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article6715905.ece> ([accessed 28 September 2012]).

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- ⁸ See 'Alaskans angry at 'stupid' Aussie', *The Australian*, 6 December 2008, at <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/alaskans-angry-at-stupid-aussie/story-e6frg6tf-1111118241154> [accessed 28 September 2012].
- ⁹ G. Bataille, *La Part maudite* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1967).
- ¹⁰ Bataille, *The Accursed Share, Volume One: Consumption*, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1991), p. 21.
- ¹¹ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. B. Raffel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), V.ii.205-210 (p. 217).
- ¹² See D. Hayes, *Historical Atlas of Canada: Canada's History Illustrated with Original Maps* (Vancouver: Douglas & Macintyre, 2002), p. 34.
- ¹³ On this first 'Gold Rush', see S. Lemercier-Goddard and F. Regard, 'Introduction' (pp. 1-14), and S. Lemercier-Goddard, 'George Best's Arctic Mirrors' (pp. 55-70), in F. Regard (ed.), *The Quest for the North-West Passage: Knowledge, Nation and Empire, 1576-1806* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2012).
- ¹⁴ J. Ross, *Narrative of the Second Voyage of Captain Ross to the Arctic Regions, in the years 1829-30-31-32-33, compiled principally from the evidence of Captain Ross and his Nephew, Commander Ross, before the Committee of the House of Commons* (London: Henry Renshaw, 1834).
- ¹⁵ J. Ross, *Voyage of Discovery Made under the Orders of the Admiralty in His Majesty's Ships Isabella and Alexander for the Purpose of Exploring Baffin's Bay and Inquiring into the Probability of a North-West Passage* (London: John Murray, 1819).
- ¹⁶ J. Barrow, *Voyages of discovery and research within the Arctic regions, from the year 1818 to the present time: under the command of the several naval officers employed by sea and land in search of a North-west passage from the Atlantic to the Pacific; with two attempts to reach the North pole. Abridged and arranged from the official narratives, with occasional remarks* (London: John Murray, 1846), p. 54.
- ¹⁷ F. Beechey, *A Voyage of Discovery towards the North Pole: performed in His Majesty's ships Dorothea and Trent, under the command of Captain David Buchan, R.N.; 1818; to which is added, a summary of all the early attempts to reach the Pacific by way of the Pole* (London: Richard Bentley, 1843).
- ¹⁸ The History of Parliament Online, biography of John Wilson Croker, at <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1820-1832/member/croker-john-1780-1857> [accessed 28 September 2012].
- ¹⁹ Ross, *Narrative of the Second Voyage*, p. 138.
- ²⁰ The phrase is Joseph Conrad's and his examples are Sir Francis Drake and Sir John Franklin; see 'The Heart of Darkness', *Blackwood's Magazine*, vol. 165 (Feb. – Apr. 1899), p. 194.
- ²¹ See P. Stearns, *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), vol. 1, p. 219 (entry for 'Arctic').
- ²² Original text of speech from the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum website, at <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Ready-Reference/JFK-Speeches/Special-Message-to-the-Congress-on-Urgent-National-Needs-May-25-1961.aspx> [accessed 28 September 2012]; figure on cost of Apollo program from the U.S. House of Representatives, Subcommittee on Manned Space Flight of the Committee on Science and Astronautics, *1974 NASA Authorization, Hearings on H.R. 4567, 93/2, Part 2*, p. 1271.
- ²³ G. Scott-Heron, 'Whitey on the Moon', in *Now and Then: The Poems of Gil Scott-Heron* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2000), p. 21.

²⁴ ‘Space Program Benefits’, at http://www.nasa.gov/50th/50th_magazine/benefits.html [accessed 28 September 2012].

²⁵ E. Kane, *Arctic Explorations : the Second Grinnell Expedition in Search of Sir John Franklin, 1853*, ‘54, ‘55 (Philadelphia: Childs and Peterson, 1856).

²⁶ R. Reagan, ‘Address in Memory of the Seven Astronauts Killed in the Space Shuttle Challenger Explosion’, in R. Torricelli and A. Carroll (eds), *Our Own Words: Extraordinary Speeches of the American Century* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2000), pp. 367-8.

²⁷ Reagan, ‘Address in Memory of the Seven Astronauts Killed’, p. 368.