

## *Conclusion*

### *Resonances*

If the Franklin search could be distilled down into one representation in popular culture, it is this: *Critical Position of H.M.S. Investigator* (44.3 × 61.2 cm) (Figure 0.2), created by the lithographer William Simpson and based on the work of Samuel Gurney Cresswell. The iconic image of the ship keeling to one side, about to be crushed by mountains of ice, the tiny faceless, depersonalised figures lost under a stormy sky, is frequently reproduced. It is no coincidence that, of the many hundreds of pictures produced from the Franklin searches, this one shows intense danger, heightened sublimity, and dark and light contrasts – the visual markers we have been led to expect on every heroic historical Arctic expedition. As Lisa Bloom has commented, ‘the difficulty of life in desolate and freezing regions provided the ideal mythic site where men could show themselves as heroes capable of superhuman feats’.<sup>1</sup> We have inherited a genealogy of commercial visual material from the nineteenth century that continues to multiply digitally. Images of ships imprisoned by the Arctic ice, darkness, and ferocious beasts resonate long after the details of the words have been forgotten.

By contrast, the many unpublished visual records stored in archives remain a forgotten part of the narrative. In part this is due to their presence in other documents, such as personal journals, and, thus, their contents are not individually catalogued. *Visual Culture and Arctic Exploration* has established the visual content and extent of neglected archival records from ships and examined these in light of more public and well-known representations of the Arctic. By combining practices and ideas from the disciplines of literature, visual culture, the history of art, and historical geography, I have analysed pictures and texts to uncover the nature of the on-board and metropolitan representation of the Arctic. This book has paid close attention to media type, contexts, and reception, moving from the visual culture aboard the ship to that of the metropole, noting that representations can change dramatically between the two venues. The

sharp focus on visual material counteracts the tendencies of cultural studies to focus on purely literary representations of the Arctic. By examining a wide range of media produced within a relatively short time span, this has contributed to knowledge beyond the broad surveys of visual culture with their emphasis on public representations.

Visual culture was deeply embedded in shipboard life, and the practice of drawing extended to all ranks on board. Although we would expect naval officers to produce topographical and scientific drawings, many drew for more personal reasons: to create a souvenir or keepsake, or to entertain their fellow expedition members, for example. Such pictures often have affective resonances, and even pictures done for more scientific purposes may show subjective responses. Illustrated periodicals produced on board mined the expedition members' situation to create a specifically Arctic humour, one that poked fun at their own interaction with the Arctic environment and overturned the sublime. These periodicals were not just created to pass the time during the long winter 'imprisonment' in the ice; they were also conceived of as mementos, to remind expedition members of 'old Arctic days',<sup>2</sup> suggesting an emotional attachment to their time in the Arctic. By examining on-board pictures, in conjunction with their associated texts, a far more complex visual matrix is revealed than that which entertained audiences in the metropole. This matrix incorporates traits such as familiarity, domesticity, humour, and emotional attachment, characteristics that were not generally associated with Arctic exploration.

Unlike the material produced on board, much of the metropolitan visual culture portraying the Arctic leaned heavily on imagination and on the lure of the sublime. Despite assertions that prints and panoramas used officers' on-the-spot sketches as their source, such pictures were altered as they were transformed for publication and exhibition. The result was a heavily coded Arctic, one that emphasised danger, incessant labour, masculinity, and the ever-present threat of shipwreck amidst towering icebergs. As the search wore on, the activities of expedition members were increasingly represented as a battle with nature, one in which icy wastes became an alibi for failure.

Just as we prefer them now, stories of adventure, danger, and death predominated in the nineteenth-century media. Positive images, surviving amply in the primary record, were certainly less well represented by the media. This was noticed at the time as being misleading by expedition members themselves and the transformation of the Arctic experience, in words and pictures, was apparent to those who participated in the expeditions. Edward Belcher commented on this in his narrative *The Last of the*

*Arctic Voyages* (1855), when he described the loss of the hired transport ship, the *Breadalbane*, in the ice in 1854. This event, he surmised, 'will doubtless be magnified into something grand and sublime, perhaps got up for amusement at one of the minor theatres, and frighten the loving wives of some of our married men'.<sup>3</sup> Even Sherard Osborn, whose narrative *Stray Leaves from an Arctic Journal* (1852) gives a largely positive view of the Arctic, confessed: 'I am free to acknowledge, I have "piled the agony" to make my work sell.'<sup>4</sup> Osborn here acknowledges the appeal of 'agony' and the attraction of the human mind to representations of pain. Isaac Israel Hayes, who published a narrative of a harrowing boat journey on Elisha Kent Kane's disastrous expedition, noted that the polar regions were associated with 'the wildest fancies and the most repulsive conclusions'. This was, he felt, due in part to the fact that 'the expeditions which have particularly attracted the general notice of the civilised world, have been the disastrous ones'. He described the published reports of the Arctic regions thus: 'Vast seas covered with masses of ice rushing to and fro, threatening to crush the most skilful navigator – towering bergs ready to overwhelm him – dangerous land journeys – cold, piercing to the very sources of life – savage beasts, and scarcely less savage men – isolation, disease, famine, and slow death.'<sup>5</sup>

The close analysis of visual records from the Franklin searches has revealed the complexity behind nineteenth-century prints and exhibitions. As pictures transform, so too do their associated words. As skies darken, ships' positions become 'perilous'. Words and pictures work together to tell a convincing story in a commercial marketplace. These transformations from private to public remind us that nineteenth-century publications cannot be seen solely as representing the perceptions of 'explorers'. By closely reading contemporary reviews, the accessibility and power of an Arctic panorama has been revealed, and my research shows that expensive items like large colour lithographs could be seen, if not necessarily purchased, by all social classes. Reviews also betray a concern with 'truth' in visual representation, suggesting that there was an underlying distrust of popular visual culture as a source of information. Victorian culture was an integral part of shipboard life, exemplified in theatricality, lavishly illustrated periodicals, and the practice of drawing and writing that was not confined to the higher officer classes. Indeed, the Arctic search ships can be viewed as microcosms of Victorian culture. By examining the archive, I have demonstrated that drawing, as much as writing, was a key part of expedition members' response to the environment. Its practice was as important for personal reasons, for emotional ones, as it was for scientific

ones or to add to knowledge. The impact of colour imagery, still novel in the mid-nineteenth century, aboard a ship overwintering in the Arctic is significant in recognising the centrality of the visual to the expeditions.

The image of the nineteenth-century Arctic – an eternal space of winter associated with man's 'against-all-odds' battle with nature – is complicated by the evidence. In the archive, that Arctic is often represented as a familiar, local, social, and humorous place. Expedition members' desire to create 'souvenirs' and the expectation of future nostalgia are evident in the visual and written archive. As Carolyn Strange argues,<sup>6</sup> polar exploration, in this case the refuge of the Arctic winter, could inspire genuine cheerfulness and humour. The winter, thought of negatively in the media as an 'icy prison', was often referred to as a 'sojourn' by expedition members, and the darkness provided a time to rest before the sledge journeys of spring. Domesticity and 'feminine' activities, which we would not generally associate with polar exploration, were necessitated by the experience of wintering in the Arctic. This mode of hibernation is well represented through the intimate, personal, and humorous depictions of winter life shown to us in the illustrations and text of on-board periodicals. For the public back in the metropole, however, the Arctic winter was more likely to be associated with horror, pain, and difficulty.

The study of visual culture and travel literature benefits from an interdisciplinary approach, one that attends to human and physical geographical contexts, employs art historical analyses, and incorporates close readings of image and text together. By working across disciplines, other aspects of the visual and cultural histories of Arctic exploration have been brought to light. In-depth archival work reveals the importance of tracing, where possible, the archival sources for published versions; attending to geography shows the important regional differences in the Arctic that affected its representation; examining pictures and texts together can reveal disjunctions that signal more complicated histories.

Richard C. Powell has commented on the absence of twentieth-century geographies of the North. Furthermore, the Arctic seems to lend itself to a 'depressingly simplistic narrative that dominates public understandings of the circumpolar north'.<sup>7</sup> The modern polar imaginary is dominated by Antarctica. Indeed, in Ireland the historical narrative revolves around the heroism of two main actors: Tom Crean and Ernest Shackleton. In particular, the study of the visual culture of Arctic exploration has been neglected, which has implications for how we view the polar regions today. Now, as in the nineteenth century, the modern perception of the circumpolar North, if any, is of a region largely empty, eternally covered in ice and

snow. The legacy of the nineteenth-century imagery of perpetually snow-clad regions still reverberates in the modern imagination. This perception of the North as an eternally cold and icy wasteland makes it easy for people to disregard the fact of global warming and to continue with their everyday lives. With climate change in the Arctic more severe than elsewhere, many implications are evident: human impacts are being felt in the region, and, at the same time, the opportunities for economic exploitation provided by ice-melt highlight the contested nature of Arctic space and increasingly threaten the traditions of Indigenous peoples.<sup>8</sup> The words written in the booklet that accompanied the panorama *Summer and Winter Views of the Polar Regions* (1850) now seem strangely prophetic: 'for all purposes of commerce or traffic, the Arctic regions must remain a sealed book to the human race, until some vast change shall occur in the temperature and in the meteorological arrangement of the globe.'<sup>9</sup> One hundred and seventy years later, that 'vast change' is upon us.

The discovery of Franklin's ships highlights the problematic use of Franklin and the search expeditions to support claims for Canadian sovereignty over the waters of the archipelago, as the claim of Canadian sovereignty over the Northwest Passage is contested by other countries such as the US, which views the passage as an international strait. If Canada can demonstrate that the Northwest Passage constitutes 'historic internal waters' citing centuries of British exploration as evidence of use, the country will have a stronger claim for sovereignty over the archipelago.<sup>10</sup> However, as Byers has stressed, 'the strongest element in Canada's claim is the historic occupation by the Inuit, who have hunted, fished, travelled and lived on the Northwest Passage for millennia'.<sup>11</sup> Adriana Craciun argues that the locating of the *Erebus*, after six search seasons, was presented as the 'lynchpin in Canada's historic sovereignty of the Arctic archipelago and of the Northwest Passage'.<sup>12</sup> In addition, the sponsorship of Shell, which owns a large number of oil and gas leases in the North American Arctic, in the search seeks to connect their energy exploration and exploitation of the Arctic to the heroism associated with Victorian Arctic exploration.<sup>13</sup>

The emphasis on the 'man versus nature' trope, heroic failure, and suffering in the published material, particularly in the visual material, has become the standard mode of viewing the Arctic. Our present-day relationship with the Arctic, and with its history, is still dominated by these published pictures and texts, while the on-board histories – local, intimate, and domestic – have remained largely concealed. This book has uncovered and examined records of the Franklin search expeditions that previous critical scholarship has largely overlooked, thereby revealing a version of

the Arctic search that is far more complex than a story of man's battle against nature.

*North Star Mount* (Figure 1.8) (14 × 22.5 cm), a small watercolour (likely faded with time) in the National Library of Australia, serves to remind us that the nineteenth-century Arctic was more than an icy wasteland, a theatre for the moral sublime.<sup>14</sup> The torn, unsigned, and unassuming picture that shows an Arctic summer is only one fragment of a large visual archive that tells the story of the Franklin search in a very different way, an archive that is fragile, neglected, and scattered around the globe. Perhaps the green hills, calm waters, and fresh blue skies depicted here off north-west Greenland will explain the reaction of a midshipman from Cobh, Co. Cork, aboard the *Herald* in Panama on hearing news of their orders to participate in the search for Franklin: 'We were all, of course, in high spirits at so unexpected and welcome a change. As for myself, I was delighted; nothing could be more charming and novel than a cruise to the Arctic regions.'<sup>15</sup>