

Book Reviews

White Horizon: The Arctic in the Nineteenth-Century British Imagination. By Jen Hill. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008. vii + 238 pp. Notes, bibliography, index.

White Horizon examines the relationship between nineteenth-century British Arctic exploration and the imperial culture of the day—a popular subject that has already been covered in some depth by such writers as Francis Spufford, Robert David, and Ian MacLaren. Therefore, any new writer venturing into this territory would do well to examine fresh sources or employ an innovative methodology. Unfortunately, Jen Hill does neither, and both her research and her analysis are superficial.

The overwhelming impression left by this book is that Hill knows very little about either Arctic exploration or the responses to it in nineteenth-century Britain. *White Horizon* is riddled with factual errors. By the time I began the second chapter I had noted many. For example, Hill confuses the details of John Ross's first voyage in 1818, his second expedition in 1829–1833, and Edward Parry's first expedition in 1819–1820 to such an extent that it is evident she has read none of the relevant primary sources. Then the assertion on page 41 that John Franklin's *Narrative of a Journey to the Shores of the Polar Sea* (1823) is a "ripping page-turner" prompted me to turn to the bibliography. What I found—or rather, did not find—there was astonishing.

As expected, the narratives of Ross and Parry were absent. Franklin's book is, in fact, listed among Hill's sources, but I seriously doubt that she has read it in its entirety. The section dealing with the expedition's desperate march from the "shores of the polar sea" back to its base is gripping enough, but the narrative as a whole can hardly be described as a page-turner. The bibliography shows that the only other narrative Hill has used is Clements Markham's *Franklin's Footsteps* (1853)—a comparatively unimportant book from which she quotes only a single passage. Nor are there any scholarly editions of Arctic journals among the works consulted (Hill does, however, borrow a few diary entries by George Back and Robert Hood from secondary sources).

Among secondary sources, the writings of William Barr, Barbara Belyea, Richard Cyriax, Clive Holland, Robert Richard, W. Gillies Ross, M. J. Ross, Ann Savours, Hugh Wallace, and David Woodman are nowhere to be found. Of the many articles published by Richard Davis, Ian MacLaren, and Ian Stone, Hill cites only one by Davis, two by MacLaren, and one by Stone. Standard nineteenth-century biographies, such as H. D. Traill's life of Franklin, are also conspicuous by their absence. The only twentieth-century biography listed is Geoffrey Lamb's *Franklin, Happy Voyager* (1956), an undistinguished work based on earlier secondary sources.

On what foundation, then, does Hill rest her claims about the place of the Arctic in nineteenth-century British culture? Mainly, it seems, on information about the northern expeditions derived from a few secondary sources such as Francis Spufford's *I May Be Some Time: Ice and the English Imagination* (1997) and Eric Wilson's *The Natural History of Ice: Romanticism, Science, and the Imagination* (2003); on her own responses to these recent retellings of Arctic stories; and on her knowledge of Romantic and Victorian literature. Hill frequently describes the supposed reactions of nineteenth-century readers to the Arctic narratives, but she puts forward no empirical proof at all that the Far North was actually seen in the way she claims. She does not draw on journalism, diaries, letters, or other traditional primary sources for her information about reader response. Instead, she provides her own interpretations of Franklin's first narrative and a few other nineteenth-century texts. These, she seems to believe, tell us all we need to know. However, in every case her reading is open to serious question.

Hill's chosen texts, besides Franklin's book, are Robert Southey's biography of Lord Nelson, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Eleanor Porden's poem *The Arctic Expeditions*, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Charles Dickens' articles in *Household Words*, Wilkie Collins' play *The Frozen Deep*, and the boys' adventure novels of R. M. Ballantyne. This is, mostly, very well-trodden ground. Only Southey and Porden (who is remembered today mainly as Franklin's first wife) are new. The serious attention given to Porden as a writer is certainly commendable. However, Southey's book seems distinctly out of place.

Hill's central thesis is that the "swashbuckling heroes" of the Arctic were culturally constructed in terms of an "irrefutable, 'hard' masculinity" which served to counter the idea that Englishmen could ever be vulnerable to "physical, psychological, and moral weakness." The Arctic, therefore, was "an ultimate space of white masculine self-reliance" (6). It was pictured by the British public as white and empty, devoid of human life (12). Hill argues that this construction of polar heroism began with Southey's account

of young Horatio Nelson's voyage to the Arctic as a member of Constantine Phipps's 1773 expedition. In particular, she places great emphasis on the story of an encounter between the future hero of Trafalgar and a polar bear. It was in the Arctic, then, that Nelson learned how to make a heroic display of manly physical prowess, and Southey deftly used the story to create an idealized image of what Hill calls the "national body." However, Hill's reading simply does not accord with the facts. Southey's biography highlights several episodes of boyish courage that took place before Nelson's Arctic voyage, and he presents the teenaged Horatio's pursuit of the bear as a foolhardy stunt, for which the young midshipman was rightly rebuked by his captain. The entire story of the Phipps expedition is summarized by Southey in only six paragraphs; the bear incident does not even receive a paragraph of its own. But, according to Hill, so powerful was the image created by Southey that readers of later narratives pictured overland explorations in the Canadian Subarctic as taking place "in the empty space of Phipps's Arctic Ocean" (42).

Hill then goes on to the story of the first Franklin expedition. As a result of starvation, the male British bodies of the expedition members were reduced to a state of great physical, if not moral, weakness. There was nothing "swashbuckling" about either this episode or Franklin's manner of telling it. Yet, according to Hill, as the "strangely logical result of a narrative invested in the objectification of the body," the "diminution of the physical body" was "staged so that the national or ideological body ... [ould] come to the fore" (48). In other words, Franklin's admission in his narrative of his own and his companions' weakness was somehow contrived so as to paradoxically reinforce the public image of a "hard," heroic masculinity triumphing over the empty white space of the Arctic.

Hill believes that the compass bearings and other geographical information contained in Franklin's narrative were of great interest to readers, serving to remind the explorer's audience "where, within a fraction of a degree, he is in relation to Greenwich and the Thames, paradoxically and insistently linking explorer and reader, voyager and home, by measuring the distance between them. It is precisely this distance ... that sharpens the focus of the narrative onto the body of the explorer, making his a prosthetic national body that stands in for the citizen/reader at home" (43). In fact, both readers and reviewers expressed their irritation with such details, which were accordingly omitted from the abridged editions produced for wide popular consumption.

Next, Hill turns to women's representations of the Arctic and its heroes. In her view, the intention of both Mary Shelley and Eleanor Porden was to

“critique masculinist geographical projects” (54). This may well have been Shelley’s aim, but (as Hill acknowledges) the Arctic frame of *Frankenstein*, in which Victor recounts his story to the explorer Robert Walton, was not an integral part of the novel as it took shape in its author’s imagination. It is absent from the first draft, and was added only at a later stage, possibly for no better reason than to increase the book’s sales. Moreover, since the publication of Charles Robinson’s research on the extensive contributions made to the manuscript by Percy Shelley, it has become problematic to categorize *Frankenstein* as a woman’s writing, or to consider it purely in terms of Mary Shelley’s intentions as an author. Hill’s discussion of Porden—potentially the most original and interesting part of her book—is flawed by her evident discomfort with the fact that Porden admired and celebrated Arctic heroism. In the chapter on *Jane Eyre*, the theme of masculine conquest fades from view almost entirely, leaving the reader to wonder why this section was included in the book at all. The obvious Arctic elements in Charlotte Brontë’s novel (for example, Jane’s reference to the northern scenes depicted in Bewick’s *British Birds*) have already been considered at some length by Francis Spufford. Hill goes further, arguing that Jane’s ordeal at Lowood School is meant to recall stories of Arctic hardship. However, the parallels she draws seem forced, and she ignores the fact that the deaths at Lowood take place in the summer, and are caused by typhus fever—a disease that evokes comparisons with the tropics rather than with the Far North.

Another chapter deals with the well-known controversy set off by John Rae’s 1854 report of cannibalism on the last Franklin expedition. This is the least original part of the book, and one which strongly resembles Lillian Nayder’s article “The Cannibal, the Nurse, and the Cook in Dickens’s *The Frozen Deep*” (published in the journal *Victorian Literature and Culture* in 1991). Nayder argues that the figure of the Scottish servant in *The Frozen Deep* reflects an English tendency to consider the Scots and the Irish as uncivilized, semi-savage peoples who were not unlike the Inuit. Taking up this theme, Hill suggests that, in his attack on Rae (who was a Scot), Dickens intended to draw parallels between his opponent and the Inuit, or—as Hill claims they were widely known—the “Arctic Highlanders.” In Hill’s view, by this skilled rhetorical ploy Dickens excluded all but Englishmen from the ranks of the manly Arctic heroes. Here Hill’s inadequate knowledge of Arctic history has led her seriously astray. John Ross gave the name Arctic Highlanders to a particular group of northern Aboriginal people, the Inughuit of northwestern Greenland. Ross (who, like Rae, was Scottish) certainly did not intend the name as a slur, and it was never used for all Inuit. Rae’s Aboriginal informants were referred to by Dickens and the other

journalists of the time as “Esquimaux.” Moreover, John Richardson, William Penny, Robert McClure, Leopold McClintock, and many other explorers of whom Dickens wholeheartedly approved were Scottish or Irish.

In her final chapter, Hill examines R. M. Ballantyne’s tales of northern adventure. She notes that many incidents in these books do not accord with the supposed ideal of “hard,” white masculinity. According to Hill, such episodes could not by any logic (however strange or paradoxical) be converted into affirmations of heroic British masculinity. Instead, they “indicate[d] that the limited number of standard Arctic tropes and plots available had by this point in the century undermined their very value in clarifying British masculinity. Despite trying to make these tropes new by linking them to the triumphal genre of adventure, Ballantyne’s repetition of them in an otherwise confident genre only gestures at their exhaustion and the potential exhaustion of the values they were understood to perpetuate” (167–168). Hill does not attempt to reconcile this claim with the undeniable fact that the books were extremely popular.

To sum up, Hill begins her book by putting forward a clearly stated thesis which is contradicted by many of the facts she later presents. Undeterred, she either ignores the discrepancies or invokes whatever convoluted explanations seem necessary to reconcile the facts with her claims. The credibility of her arguments is further undermined by inadequate primary and secondary source research and the numerous errors that have resulted from it (not all of which are listed in this review). The idea that British readers pictured the Arctic as uninhabited is ludicrous. The explorers’ narratives and the various journalistic commentaries on them were filled with accounts of the Inuit and the Dene. These accounts were sometimes highly racist by today’s standards, but no one who has read them could possibly claim that northern Aboriginal people were absent from nineteenth-century British literature. In the Romantic and Victorian eras, images of the explorers, the landscapes they traversed, and the peoples they encountered were far more complex than Hill’s jargon-laden yet simplistic analysis suggests.

Janice Cavell, historian, Foreign Affairs and International Trade Canada; adjunct research professor, Carleton University.