

***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: The Arctic in the Nineteenth-Century British Imagination*, by Jen Hill, offers a literary history of Arctic exploration narratives. Examining a range of nineteenth-century texts, Hill probes the roles played by these narratives in constructing British imperial masculine identities, arguing that the Arctic offered a blank space where British authors projected the enactment of imperial identity and asserting that the exploration and mapping of the Arctic was simultaneously a process of exploring and mapping British character. Hill uses this analytical approach to study issues of gender, nation, race, and empire as they were worked out in nineteenth-century British literature. Tracing developments in this literature, she argues that arctic exploration narratives reflect shifting concerns about British identity and reveal the ultimate instability of masculine imperial identities.

Hill's analysis begins with an examination of Robert Southey's *Life of Nelson* and John Franklin's account of his 1819–1822 overland expedition to the Arctic coast. These accounts, Hill argues, express a concept of British masculinity in which the testing of the male body against the harsh, cold, pure Arctic environment reveals a national character capable of overcoming any landscape. However, Hill also points out that Franklin's account of the near death of his men from starvation, and its hints of cannibalism, highlighted the limits of the male body, emphasizing that the national character symbolized by that body could be destabilized by the Arctic's harsh environment. Thus, Hill contends, the Arctic both reveals and threatens the body and the civilized character of that body.

The central and perhaps most innovative section of the book addresses Arctic narratives written by women and analyzes the Arctic as a space for exploring ideas about nation, gender, and empire. Examining Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the poetry of Elizabeth Porden (who, perhaps not coincidentally, was also John Franklin's first wife), and *Jane Eyre*, by Charlotte Brontë, Hill argues that each of these authors presented a different image of women's role in the culture of British imperialism. Porden, for instance, embraced the imperial project and asserted women's equal participation in it by claiming for them the qualities brought out by male exploration, including courage, fortitude, and endurance. By constructing exploration as a primarily imaginative activity, Porden claimed for women the power of authorship and, therefore, the ability to participate in identity creation. By contrast, Hill argues that the depictions of violence and loss

in *Frankenstein* offered a profound critique of the exclusion of women and the domestic that Shelley saw at the heart of the imperial identity offered by Arctic exploration. Unlike Porden, for Shelley it was not enough to include women in the imperial identity; the entire project had to be reconsidered. Brontë went a step further, Hill contends, by inscribing the Arctic onto the domestic British landscape of *Jane Eyre*. In this narrative, British space becomes Arctic space and Jane becomes an Arctic explorer, which places women at the heart of the nation-making project. However, Brontë's work is not an uncritical rehearsal of the masculine exploration epic. Rather, as Hill points out, the celebrated author was well aware of the costs of hardship and the ways it can undermine an explorer's virtue. In this way, Hill highlights the contested nature of what initially seems a fixed imperial identity.

After this intriguing analysis, Hill revisits the discussion of cannibalism that haunts the history of nineteenth-century Arctic exploration. In this section, she examines Charles Dickens' reaction to John Rae's reports of potential cannibalism in the lost Franklin expedition. As Hill and others have argued, Rae's claim threatened the image of the heroic British explorer capable of preserving his civilized character under any conditions. By contrast, in his efforts to stimulate a shudder of disgust at the prospect of cannibalism in the audiences of his journal, *Household Words*, and the play, *The Frozen Deep*, Dickens sought to reinforce a widespread faith in the civilized character that separated Britain from other nations and, more particularly, from the uncivilized savages of imperial territories.

Despite Dickens' efforts, Hill maintains, the static identity embodied in the Arctic explorer-hero became increasingly unstable in the late-nineteenth century. She points to the work of Wilkie Collins to illustrate that late-imperial masculinity had become a multiple, adaptable, domestic identity; the static Arctic hero belonged to an earlier age. She also argues that R.M. Ballantyne's attempts to set imperial boys' adventure narratives in the Arctic reveal the limits of the imperial identity because, while the genre's plot structure rested on the geographical dominance of colonial space as a means of asserting the superiority of British identity and empire, the impossibility of establishing civilization in the region demonstrated the limits of British imperial power. According to Hill, the contortions required to produce the necessary plot resolutions in these adventure narratives exposed the stable imperial narrative and its attendant account of civilized superiority as a fantasy.

Aimed at a scholarly audience, this book is part of a larger cultural turn in the academic history of polar exploration over the past two decades.

This recent work has often focused on the cultures surrounding British and American expeditions during the long nineteenth century, particularly Franklin's. The emphasis on the cultural geography of the Poles seems to have emerged in response to the domination of the history of exploration by biographies of famous explorers and analyses of the successes and failures of particular expeditions. This work often treats the polar regions as a blank backdrop against which explorers enact their parts, suffering and enduring—or, better still, suffering and dying—to illustrate how to be heroic. By contrast, the cultural turn in the history of polar exploration has done much to explode this image of the Arctic, revealing it as a landscape replete with cultural significance that actively shaped the construction of these heroic narratives.

In fact, Hill explicitly highlights her debts to two scholars at the forefront of this cultural turn: Francis Spufford (*I May Be Some Time: Ice and the English Imagination*, London: Faber and Faber, 1996) and Eric Wilson (*A Spiritual History of Ice: Romanticism, Science and the Imagination*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). Indeed, she deals with many of the same texts as Spufford and Wilson, including *Jane Eyre*, Franklin's journals, Rae's letters, and Dickens' furious response. However, Hill ultimately takes a different course than these authors by probing not only the place of ice in the English imagination, but by exposing its role in imperial culture. By focusing on the place of exploration in this culture, Hill makes clear the political work performed by exploration narratives and connects them to larger historical patterns and developments.

Perhaps Hill's most important contribution is her refusal to treat polar exploration as a world apart. This stance addresses a key analytical issue in the history of polar exploration and circumpolar history in general. In our imagination, the North and the Poles often remain places beyond the frontier, outside the world of the everyday. Thus our histories can replicate the exploration narratives that create the Arctic as a separate place and the practice of exploration as an isolated practice cut off from the mundane and the domestic. However, *White Horizon* effectively exposes the links between the world at home and the world "out there." In highlighting these connections, Hill creates space to consider the place of women in the culture of exploration. Many recent exploration histories focus on masculine identity, and Hill too concentrates on masculinity, but her analysis also addresses women's voices. Her insistence on giving space to women's exploration narratives is an important contribution to the study of polar exploration because, while women were excluded from physical participation in expeditions (unless they were indigenous women), they

were actively engaged in the creation of the narratives that shaped both their identities and the practice of exploring.

In addition to making such important contributions, *White Horizon* raises a number of issues that deserve to be taken up in greater detail in future work. For instance, Hill makes a convincing case for the role of Arctic exploration in informing nineteenth-century British imperial identity by alluding to changing depictions of the Arctic and exploration as the British imperial context changed over time. This connection opens up exciting new ways of understanding both the practice and culture of exploration, as well as the interaction between imperial context and the structure of Arctic narratives. Moreover, investigation of the relationship between Arctic exploration narratives and those from other sites of imperial exploration could provide important insights. Such comparisons would place Arctic work within the context of exploration more generally and help build a broader picture of both the place of exploration in imperial identity and the political dimensions of Arctic exploration narratives. This work would reveal patterns common throughout the literature of imperial exploration and illuminate whether or not the Arctic performed cultural functions different from those performed by other regions.

Central to such comparisons and to Hill's work is the recognition that polar exploration has not taken place in isolation. Its practice and meanings have been influenced by historical circumstances, even as exploration itself has had important consequences for broader historical developments. In the end, Hill's commitment to maintaining an awareness of this connection reminds us of the ongoing need to treat exploration as deeply connected to its historical context and of the valuable insights that can be gained from such an awareness.

**Marionne Cronin**, Research Associate, Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science and Technology, University of Toronto