



History Program
University of Northern British Columbia



History Master's Theses completed at UNBC



Stevenson-Waldie, Laura

2001

**“The Sensational Landscape:
The History of Sensationalist Images of the Arctic, 1818-1910,”**

Supervisor: William Morrison
UNBC Library call number: G630.G7 S74 2001

ABSTRACT

This thesis is a study of the public perception of the Arctic through explorers' journals and the modern press in America and Britain. The underlying question of this thesis is what exactly was the role of the press in forming public opinions about Arctic exploration in general? Did newspaper editors in America and Britain simply report what they found interesting based upon their own knowledge of Arctic explorers' journals, or did these editors create that public interest in order to profit from increased sales? From a historical perspective, these reasons relate to the growth of an intellectual and social current that had been gaining strength on the Western World throughout the nineteenth century: the creation of the mythic hero. In essence, the mythical status of Arctic explorers developed in Britain, but was matured and honed in the American press, particularly in the competitive news industry in New York. where, the creation of the heroic Arctic explorer resulted largely from the vicious competitiveness of the contemporary press.

Although the content of published Arctic exploration journals in the early nineteenth century did not change dramatically, the accuracy of those journals did. Exploration journals up until 1850 tended to focus heavily on the conventions of the sublime and picturesque to describe these new lands. However, these views were inaccurate, for these conventions forced the explorer to view the Arctic very much as they viewed the Swiss Alps or the English countryside. These images demonstrated very little factual accuracy. In fact, British exploration journals of the Arctic in the early half of the nineteenth century were enhanced by the skills of hired ghost writers and book editors, such as John Murray, who wanted to sell as many copies of the journal as possible. To do this, the journal had to made as exciting as possible to sell many copies.

The creation of the modern press and the replacement of the sublime and picturesque with sensationalism helped to change these older conventions. With sensationalism, the new image of the Arctic was still at a variance from what we now think of as reality. One reason was for this was the desire the explorers and of American and British newspaper editors, such as James Gordon Bennett in New York, to make the Arctic as exciting as possible. Another reason was that these explorers went to the Arctic with preconceived notions of what the region was like, thanks to the early expedition journals which highlighted the sublime and picturesque qualities of the region. The explorers had become sensitive to the information that confirmed their

preconceptions and often ignored contradictory evidence. These errors of perception continued right into the 1860s by journalists and newspaper editors who had little experience with the areas they wrote of.

Tragically, during the nineteenth century it was not the accuracy of the reporting of these explorers such as Sir John Franklin, John Rae, Robert Peary, and Frederick Cook that was of the utmost importance to the press or public, nor was it their scientific achievements, nor even their attainments. What counted was the tragedy, failure, hardship and controversy. If Franklin had lived to tell about his 1845 expedition, if Dr. John Rae had never discovered bodies on King William Island, or if Cook and Peary had agreed that they could share the attainment of the North Pole, there would be much less interest in them today. By being shrouded in mystery in the press and writing about the tragedy of death, suffering and cannibalism, these explorers were elevated to mythic status in the press, a status which is difficult to shake even a century later. If an embellished story sold thousands of copies, the editors had no problem with deepening that embellishment. To the vast majority of newspapers in New York and London, this kind of ennoblement of Arctic explorers – and its subsequent sensationalized stories – was far more important than any scientific knowledge that would come from the expedition of the conquest of the Arctic.