

REVIEW

ARCTIC SPECTACLES: THE FROZEN NORTH IN VISUAL CULTURE, 1818–1875

*By Russell A. Potter, 2007. University of Washington Press, Seattle
Paperback, 258 pages, index, notes, bibliography, and a special appendix entitled "Arctic Shows and Entertainments, 1819–1896: An Annotated Chronological Checklist." ISBN 978-0295986807.*

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Russell A. Potter, a professor of English at Rhode Island College and the editor of the *Arctic Book Review*, has created a fascinating window to something mostly forgotten today: the western world's fascination with the Arctic during the nineteenth century and how it was depicted in visual culture. This nearly unquenchable interest in the Arctic, leading to its successful multifaceted portrayal for public consumption, was stoked by the various arctic explorers of this century, including many who barely survived to tell their tales. Ironically, many of their trips were launched to help rescue earlier explorers who didn't survive. At this time, the Arctic was still a little-known land of both beauty and danger and one ripe for conquering. It was a place as foreign as another planet is to us today, where heroic adventures could still be had. Nineteenth-century arctic exploration was a continuing soap opera of sorts. The many tales of hardship, suffering, and even death that were associated with these expeditions only added further interest for many people and fueled visual interpretations.

Sometimes realistic, sometimes not, the arctic visual culture of this time included book and (somewhat later) magazine illustrations, engravings, paintings, panoramas, magic lantern slides (shown in pre-electric projectors), and even early photographs, including some for sale at the 1876 Centennial Celebration in Philadelphia and the later stereo-view 3-D pictures created for the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago. My favorite of the early photographs shown in the book, however, is a rare

Ambrotype glass-plate picture from the 1850s of a dapper man in a top hat at a panorama show where he is seeing a romanticized painted background of an arctic inhabitant with caribou.

Related to this form of entertainment, the nineteenth century was also a time when public exhibitions sometimes included the display of living people from "exotic" cultures, so that Inuit people were at times shown alongside other arctic "curiosities." The book describes some of these types of events, including their often tragic results for the Natives removed from their homelands to other climates and diseases that claimed their lives.

As the subtitle indicates, the book first focuses on the year 1818 and three events. All relate to one of the underlying points of the book: growing popular fascination with the Arctic and yet how little was known about it. Chapter 1 starts with a quote from Mary Shelley's famous novel of 1818, *Frankenstein*, which was set in part in "those icy climes" of arctic mystery. Her fictional captain sails into open water at the North Pole, which was a popular misconception of the time. Turning to reality, under a British plan by Sir John Barrow (yes, the namesake for Barrow, Alaska), two real arctic expeditions were both launched in 1818. One commanded by David Buchan set off for the North Pole (and its presumed open water) while the second expedition, under John Ross, would search for Baffin Bay and attempt to locate the legendary Northwest Passage.

The latter was a long-sought prize that had been sought in vain by earlier explorers, including the late eighteenth-century legend, Capt. James Cook, who visited Alaska in the 1770s. And it was also one of the goals that drove many of the other nineteenth-century arctic explorers, including a young lieutenant under Buchan. This young man, along with the rest of Buchan and Ross' crewmembers, fortunately survived and returned home in the fall of 1818. While the Arctic had defeated them, they were not portrayed as failures but instead praised for their heroism and courage in surviving near disasters. Capitalizing on public interest from the two 1818 expeditions, in 1819, the London public was treated to an elaborately painted panoramic map of the "View of the North Coast of Spitzbergen," where Buchan had gone. It was displayed in two large circular rooms for which an entry fee was charged. It was a first for London and drew astonished crowds. Members of both expeditions became famous, and some were enticed to try again to conquer the Arctic, including, most notably, Buchan's prior-noted young lieutenant: the man later to be known as the ill-fated Sir John Franklin.

While public interest in these earliest arctic expeditions was great, and more panoramas would follow along with a rising flood of other types of arctic images to meet rising public demand, the real blockbuster was indeed Franklin's ill-fated expedition of 1845, which followed several earlier notable expeditions by the same man, with some also nearly ending in disaster. But his final disappearance after 1845 became a world mystery and a fourteen-year obsession to find out what happened to him and his men. Solving the mystery itself became a driving force for further expeditions, and with each one, more visual information was produced illustrating both the alluring beauty and enticing danger of the Arctic. The Arctic was thus portrayed as a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde kind of place, and the volume of illustrations about it only increased due in part to its "split personality."

Yet while telling about the obsession with Franklin and his own ill-fated obsession to find the Northwest Passage, Potter's book gives us many other fascinating arctic stories, including that of John Ross and what became of him after his earlier unsuccessful 1818 Arctic Expedition. Ross, a Scotsman who once dubbed Eskimos "Arctic Highlanders," ended up living for months with Inuit people over a decade later during a subsequent expedition. And these arctic adventures, too, would result in still more publicity and visual representations of the

Arctic. However, this didn't necessarily result in a truer understanding of its reality. A good example to the contrary was the 1835 exhibit in London of the northern "Continent of Boothia," a new and popular panoramic picture of the Arctic made of twenty-one panels. While reportedly based on Ross' expeditions, it incorporated earlier ideas of the Arctic. For many, the most popular feature of the new exhibit was the alluring way in which the sky was painted. Thus, people flocked to see arctic pictures sometimes as much for their artistic merit as their truth in representing the frozen north.

Photography arrived in time for Franklin and his 1845 expedition. It was the first one to be equipped with state-of-the-art Daguerreotype camera equipment. Accordingly, Franklin and members of his expedition were photographed before they left, and later engravings were based on these early glass-plate pictures. Otherwise, no other photos survive of their ill-fated trip. However, a multitude of images (often based on sketches) began appearing as early as the late 1840s of the various expeditions that tried to find Franklin. In 1851, a new panorama show opened for the London public, illustrating the search for him. Potter's book shows a rare handbill advertisement for it.

Another fascinating story in the book is that of American explorer Dr. Elisha Kent Kane, who helped turn attention from American Indians and the conquest of the American West to the Arctic. He, too, went in search of Sir John Franklin. However, Kane's untimely death in 1857, while in his thirties, only fuelled panoramic interpretations of his exploits that toured the United States even during the Civil War period of the 1860s. Interestingly, the year Kane died, a melodramatic play opened in London called "The Frozen Deep," which had been developed by Wilkie Collins, a protégé of Charles Dickens. Its arctic story, involving a supernatural subplot, was yet another way that the nineteenth-century public "learned" visually about the frozen north.

Potter's book concludes with more recent arctic expeditions, including one by American Charles Francis Hall, who returned from the Arctic in 1862, three years after the remains of the Franklin Expedition had been found. Thus, interest in Hall's expedition turned more toward the ethnographic revelations (and photos) he brought back of Inuit people of northern Canada. He also took some of them in person to visit Queen Victoria and London society in a disastrous pattern pioneered by earlier arctic explorers.

Other stories that conclude Potter's book include the history of the painted works of American artist Frederic Edwin Church and photographic artist William Bradford. Both were at the close of the Panoramic Era in the 1870s and the end of the period covered in the book. An interesting Epilogue added by Potter tells how in the 1880s and later, the ways of marketing images of the Arctic changed, in part due to the coming of motion pictures. Such are topics that other authors can, and do, explore in other books. But thanks to Potter, we have a most interesting and detailed history of this earlier period of how the Arctic entered the visual culture of the nineteenth century.

