



Arctic Spectacles: the Frozen North in Visual Culture, 1818–1875

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Source: Arctic, Antarctic, and Alpine Research, 41(2) : 280-281

Published By: Institute of Arctic and Alpine Research (INSTAAR),
University of Colorado

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1657/1523-0430-41.2.280b>

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Book Reviews

ARCTIC SPECTACLES: THE FROZEN NORTH IN VISUAL CULTURE, 1818–1875. By Russell A Potter. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, a Samuel and Althea Stroum Book, 2007. 272 pp., Appendix, Notes, Bibliography. pp. \$50.00 (hardback). ISBN 9780295986807. \$35.00 (paperback). ISBN 9780295986791.

This is a scholarly, extremely well-written book which interlinks 19th-century arctic exploration with the exposition of the Arctic in artistic and literary forms. The book is pleasing to the eye in many senses. The illustrations are evocative and well-chosen. The frequent play on words, not least in the title, engages the reader. The author's stated premise for writing the book is the fascination of western culture with the arctic regions. The time period considered, 1818–1875, much more than during the present, was a time when the Arctic was "imagined yet unseen." As the author states, it functioned for the 19th century much as the moon and outer space did for the 20th.

The era of 19th-century exploration developed in parallel with the emergence of media such as the panorama, the magic lantern, and ultimately, the illustrated press. This fortunate coincidence meant that the public fascination with visions of snow and ice could be satisfied through the means of these media, and a central theme of the book is the interleaving of exploration history with the dissemination of knowledge regarding the Arctic. Of particular interest is the discussion of the "panorama"—in its

DOI: 10.1657/1938-4246-41.2.280b

original form “a massive painting mounted in a continuous circle around the wall of a circular room and viewed from a platform at its center...” (p. 5). It was invented by Robert Barker who held three arctic “panoramas” at his Leicester Square establishment in London between 1819 and 1850. (A note of interest is that this location is now, and has been for many years, the prime site of another form of spectacle, the cinema.)

The chapters have intriguing titles such as “A Foretaste of Those Icy Climes: Britain’s Arctic Circles”; “The Killing Glitter of the Stars: Spectacles of the Search for Franklin”; and “Things Dimly Shadowed Forth: Picturing the ‘Last Dread Alternative’” all of which are examples of the use of the metaphors of visions, images, seeing, and illumination, which the author uses with great effect to cast light on his subject.

Some of the main topics considered are the preoccupation with arctic exploration in Britain and elsewhere, in particular the search for the elusive Northwest Passage; the loss of the Franklin expedition and its aftermath; the arctic panorama shows of Charles Francis Hall; the beginning of the photographic era; and the visions of the arctic regions by artists such as Sir Edwin Landseer (1802–1873) and Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900).

Church was accompanied to the Arctic in 1859 by his friend Louis Noble, a writer and nature-lover. Noble’s journal was later published as *After Icebergs with a Painter* (1861). As Potter states, “The two remained in ice-surrounded ecstasy, Church with his brushes, and Potter with his pen.” (p. 184). Potter matches eloquence with eloquence when he notes that Noble was “...one of the first to trace in ice the apocalyptic overtones of these icy masses of shattered creation.” (p. 184).

It is wonderful! I never dreamed of it, even while I have been reading of icebergs well described. As I sit and look at his broken work of the Divine fingers, —only a shred broken from the edge of a glacier, vast as it is —I whisper these words of Revelation: “and hath washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb”. It hangs before us, with the sea and sky behind it, like some great white robe made in heaven.

Louis Noble (1861, p. 184)

That works of literature such as Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (completed in 1817) drew on the Arctic for inspiration is relatively

well known. Potter’s book acquaints the reader with a whole host of lesser-known examples of the interweavings and interlinkings of the literary form with fascination for the Arctic, and its chief element, ice. Thus for example, the author Charles Dickens (1812–1870) was, apparently, a keen follower of the Franklin search. In 1856 he suggested to his friend, Wilkie Collins (1824–1889), another writer, the idea for a play concerning a party of lost arctic voyagers. When *The Frozen Deep* was first performed, in 1857, Queen Victoria herself attended, accompanied by Prince Albert.

To that white region where the Lost lie low,
Wrapp’d in their mantles of eternal snow;
Unvisited by chance, nothing to mock
Those statues sculpted in the icy rock,
We pray your company; that hearts are true
(Though nothings of the air) may live for you;

Charles Dickens, Prologue to *The Frozen Deep* (1856)

At the play’s triumphant performance in Manchester later that year, the 2000 people who attended, plus the cast, were reduced to tears. Potter asks: “...must Franklin’s own loss, so lately in the public eye, have been the great, displaced sorrow that, like some ice-choked river overflowing its banks, found its necessary and inevitable outlet in these otherwise modest performances?” (p. 147).

In addition to being a fascinating contribution to the study of the history of arctic exploration, the book is a welcome addition to the study of images, whether literal or metaphorical, and should be enjoyed by all those interested in the Arctic, or “The Frozen North.” An Appendix giving a list of the dates of arctic shows and entertainments, 1819–1896, plus an annotated chronological checklist, are useful additions to the book, which help the reader keep track of events.

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