**Arctic Circles: Circuits of Sociability, Intimacy, and Imperial Knowledge**

**in Britain and North America, 1818-1828**

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In 1827, a thirty-six year old spinster named Jane Griffin was pulled aside by her brother-in-law in a London drawing room. As she noted in her diary, Mr. Simpkinson “asked if I had succeeded in meeting Captain F. [Franklin] in arctic circles, that being the report, & whether some cape or bay was not christened in our name.” The widowed polar explorer John Franklin had just returned from his third Arctic expedition, and had indeed named a “Cape Griffin” in Jane’s honour, and invited her to his house to find it on an oiled paper map. Together with Franklin’s sister, Mrs Booth, and his three-year old daughter Eleanor, Jane looked at the map and “saw names of a multitude of other friends – felt very nervous…”[[1]](#endnote-1) Franklin came bearing other gifts. He stopped by Jane’s house “begging acceptance of reindeer tongues and 3 prs shoes made by native Ind. [Indian] women” for her and her sisters.[[2]](#endnote-2) For his daughter, Franklin brought a corn husk doll made by a Mohawk woman, dressed in a beaded black wool skirt with beaded black leggings and a pink cotton dress.[[3]](#endnote-3) He gave a raccoon skin (prepared by Dene women at Great Bear Lake) to his fellow Arctic explorer, William Edward Parry, as a wedding gift. Parry had just celebrated his marriage to Isabella Stanley under a silken flag that she sewed for his upcoming expedition to the North Pole, and they spent their honeymoon aboard Parry’s ship HMS *Hecla* at Deptford. The raccoon skin ended up as a hearthrug.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Tony Ballantyne has argued that historians need to assemble a full and rich understanding of the British colonial information order “by identifying places of knowledge production, the role of ‘knowledgeable groups,’ changing shape of communication networks and technologies, and debates over the status of particular forms of knowledge.”[[5]](#endnote-5) This chapter seeks to do so by exploring the interlinked economies of exploration, patronage and marriage in Regency London and Arctic North America. Explorers’ gifts of names, artefacts, and specimens were intrinsic to practices of Arctic exploration, scientific sociability, and the circulation of imperial knowledge. Within metropolitan “Arctic Circles,” wives and family members of explorers did not passively receive gifts (often made by indigenous women) as either trinkets or tribute. They actively circulated and talked about them, together with field correspondence and scientific specimens. In doing so, they both acted as “gatekeepers” of information within networks of imperial knowledge, and attested to the characters and stability of their long-absent relatives. This chapter draws on the insights of the “new imperial history,” which sees the intimacies produced by colonial encounters as crucial to the formulation of colonial knowledge and as a source of endemic anxiety for both colonial society and authorities.[[6]](#endnote-6) It also understands the home as an imperial site, shaped by a “permanent impermanence” of mobility and separation, where contests of authority were catalogued and historicized, part of the ‘imperial lives’ that were prisms of the British empire.[[7]](#endnote-7) It sketches how educated women in the 1820s claimed a gendered authority over information as they helped their absent relatives to secure credibility as rational observers, trustworthy travellers, and attached domestic men who were fundamentally unaltered by their experiences in the field. Finally, it examines how both women and men accommodated episodes of frontier violence and intimacy within their homes, families, and futures.

**“Endeared to Me by Affliction”: The Traumas of the First Land Arctic Expedition, 1819-1822**

Captain Franklin was already famous when he began courting Jane Griffin in 1827, his name synonymous with the British search for the Northwest Passage. In 1817, the Second Secretary of the Admiralty, Sir John Barrow, argued that the search for the Passage would open up new whaling grounds for the British fleet, extend the British fur trade in North America, and forestall Russian incursions into British territory. Over the next decade, ten British naval expeditions attempted the Passage and the North Pole; all of them failed. Franklin led two overland expeditions across the Canadian Shield, while there were five attempts to take deep draught vessels into Lancaster Sound (three of which were under Parry), one attempt to try the Passage from Bering Strait, and two attempts at the North Pole (one each by Franklin and Parry). While the expeditions had scientific aims and instructions, fundamentally the search was driven by access to natural resources and lucrative markets, and was conditioned by violence, distance, privation, and ignorance. [[8]](#endnote-8)

On European maps, the circumpolar zone was a vast, tempting blankness. A Northwest Passage of trade and exchange already existed, however, as Inuit, Iñupiat and Chukchi carried on a massive trade in goods and furs from Ostrovnoe in Siberia to the Mackenzie River Delta in what is now the Canadian Northwest Territory, and perhaps beyond.[[9]](#endnote-9) Within this far-flung region and along its periphery, indigenous geopolitics were destabilized by the fur trade and by introduced diseases. Control over trade, trading partners, routes, settlements and hunting grounds exacerbated old hostilities and created new ones: between Dene Yellowknife and Slave (Hare) peoples on the Canadian Shield, between Dene and Gwich’in, between Dene and Inuit/Iñupiat groups across Alaska and Northern Canada, and between Iñupiat nations in northern Alaska.[[10]](#endnote-10) On the fringes of this region, European fur companies (the Hudson’s Bay Company, the North West Company and the Russian American Company) vied for influence as they were themselves riven by conflict with each other and with indigenous communities and middlemen.[[11]](#endnote-11) Both the British and Russian fur trade depended upon mixed race families, indentured labour, and indigenous alliances in order to survive intensely cold winters, long supply chains, and the constant threat of starvation.[[12]](#endnote-12) The territories through which many British and Russian expeditions passed were dangerous and unpredictable, requiring the patronage and support of powerful indigenous leaders in order to survive.

It was in this context that John Franklin made his fame, but at a terrible cost. On his 1819-1822 overland expedition, Franklin, Dr. John Richardson, Lieutenants George Back and Robert Hood, seaman John Hepburn, Inuit interpreters Tattanouek (“Augustus”) and “Junius”, and seventeen Canadian *voyageurs* ascended the Coppermine River to the “Polar Sea.” They had the nominal support of the warring fur companies, the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC), the North West Company (NWC), as well as the patronage of the powerful Dene Yellowknife leader Akaicho, who controlled the territory around Great Slave Lake. As the expedition retreated from the northern coast across the “Barren Grounds” of the Canadian Shield in September of 1821, it disintegrated into chaos as men died from starvation, exhaustion, or at each other’s hands. According to Richardson, one of the *voyageurs,* an Iroquois hunter named Michel Terohaute, murdered two men and deceived Richardson and Hepburn into eating them. When Terohaute later killed Lt. Hood, Richardson shot himin the head. Richardson and Hepburn pressed on to Fort Enterprise, where they found Franklin and his companions starving. Hepburn would later recall that, “inarticulate sounds, issuing from the nose like grunts, were their only means of conversation,” and Richardson wrote in his *Narrative*, “the ghastly countenances, dilated eye-balls, and sepulchral voices of Captain Franklin and those with him were more than we could at first bear.”[[13]](#endnote-13) On the brink of death, they were rescued by Yellowknife hunters. Franklin and Richardson saw them as superhuman; Franklin wrote, “contrasted with our emaciated figures and extreme debility, their frames appeared to us gigantic, and their strength supernatural,” while Richardson wrote to his wife, “these savages, as they have been termed, wept upon beholding the deplorable condition to which we were reduced.” [[14]](#endnote-14) After feeding, bathing, shaving, and nursing the emaciated men over several days (Franklin wrote that they “fed us as if we had been children; evincing humanity that would have done honour to the most civilized people”), they were taken to Akaitcho’s lodge to recover, alongside Akaitcho’s niece, “Greenstockings,” who was nursing her infant daughter, whose father was the murdered Lt. Robert Hood.[[15]](#endnote-15)

For Franklin, Richardson, and Hepburn, the trauma of Fort Enterprise was transformative, and the basis of both intense religious conviction and fraternal friendship. As Jonathan Lamb has observed, afflictions like scurvy could cause “despair and joy [to be] blended in a moment of suspense in which privation and pleasure were dilated to fantastic extremes.”[[16]](#endnote-16) Franklin later wrote to his brother of his “positive happiness from the comforts of religion as in the moments of greatest distress,” while Richardson wrote to his wife that his imminent death, “produced a calmness of mind and resignation to His will… that I could not have previously hoped to attain.”[[17]](#endnote-17) Franklin would say that the other men were “endeared to me by affliction,” particularly Richardson, whom he saw as a brother.[[18]](#endnote-18) Indeed, they wrote the manuscript of *Journey to the Polar Sea* together in London in 1822, where they were joined by Richardson’s wife Mary.[[19]](#endnote-19) Over time, their families intertwined. After Mary’s death in 1832, Richardson married Franklin’s niece Mary Booth, and their first two sons (both of whom died in infancy) were named John Franklin and Henry Hepburn Richardson.[[20]](#endnote-20) All of them repeatedly referred to their experiences on the Barren Grounds as a time of peace rather than horror; Franklin would often refer to his desire to enjoy the “meditation and reflection” of Fort Enterprise, and years later, when Franklin took command of HMS *Rainbow* in the Mediterranean, Hepburn wrote to Richardson, “I trust that He who was his comforter and guide on trackless barren Lands Will be very mindfull (sic) of his servant while crossing the Mighty Deep.”[[21]](#endnote-21)

**‘He a Discoverer, Forsooth!’ Navigating Scientific Sociability & Polar Matrimony**

There was a radical disjuncture between the profound vulnerability of the field and the glittering social world to which Franklin and his British companions returned, and where they also had to make their fame. The social world of polite science in Regency London thrived on Arctic voyages and on the “curiosities” and “lions” they produced. As James Secord, Gillian Russell, Samuel Alberti and others have demonstrated, the public lectures, dinner parties, soirees, salons, and *converzationes* of the London Season were central to the discussion and diffusion of science.[[22]](#endnote-22) As Russell has observed, metropolitan gentility were able to ‘assimilate and activate’ information by ‘circulating, talking about, and looking at’ the ‘curiosities’ that explorers brought home.[[23]](#endnote-23) Scientific soirees in the 1820s brought elite men and women together in conversation with celebrated travellers, writers, musicians, artists, and scientists, lending the aristocrats who invited them the ability to claim “intellectual leadership for the nation.”[[24]](#endnote-24) Historians of science see this exclusive world of scientific sociability as the genesis of the scientific institutions, networks, that developed later in the century, which both demarcated the “amateur” from the “professional” and restricted (or eliminated) women’s participation.[[25]](#endnote-25) The acquaintances of explorers and their families in the 1820s included Maria Graham, Maria Edgeworth, Mary Somerville, Caroline Herschel, and many others. Within these circles, women could enjoy a degree of scientific and literary distinction – so long as they positioned themselves strategically, obtained the sponsorship of a male mentor, and constantly, as Mary Orr has put it, “dressed [their] learning in the modesty of potential female error.”[[26]](#endnote-26)

During the heyday of Arctic expeditions from 1818 to 1828, these social circles became Arctic circles. Ships bound for the Northwest Passage and the North Pole were equipped and dispatched at the height of the Season, and visiting them became one of its highlights. Franklin wrote to his sister Isabella Cracroft in 1818 that “Deptford has been covered with carriages and the ships with visitors every day since they were in a state to be seen.”[[27]](#endnote-27)  Jane Griffin was one of many who minutely inspected the crew’s sleeping quarters on John Ross’s departing expedition in 1818, while other young women flirted with the officers, and watched the Inuit interpreter, Jack Saccheuse, paddling his *qayaq* in the Thames.[[28]](#endnote-28) The visitations gave way to balls aboard the departing ships – in 1824, 320 guests crowded aboard Parry’s HMS *Hecla*, beneath rigging hung with lanterns and flags.[[29]](#endnote-29) When the ships and expeditions returned, leftover food was incorporated into dinner parties featuring Arctic delicacies like bison tongue, musk-ox steak, reindeer haunch and pemmican, or lead-soldered tins of preserved meats opened decorously at the table.[[30]](#endnote-30)

It was easy to put a foot wrong in the search for patronage. Naming geographical features after notable men could give rise to either pleasure or censure. Mary Russell Mitford privately condemned John Ross (who turned his ships around in Lancaster Sound in 1818 after sighting a mirage that he named the “Croker Mountains” after the Secretary of the Admiralty) writing, “He a discoverer, forsooth! All that he did was to go about christening rocks, capes, bays, and mountains after all the great men, dead and living, whom he thought to gain by, and then to come home and write a huge quarto about nothing.”[[31]](#endnote-31) Furthermore, most of the Arctic officers had little education, for their late childhood and adolescence had been swallowed up by war. As Parry wrote to his parents in 1820, “I begin to feel that a life spent at sea since 12 years of age does not qualify one altogether to write such an account as the public expect in print.”[[32]](#endnote-32) Whether at intimate dinner parties, evening soirees and lectures, or private conversations, these were opportunities to fill in the blanks on the “lion’s” education, an opportunity provided by his own efforts to fill in blanks on maps.

In this milieu, Franklin’s first wife, Eleanor Porden, wrestled with how to incorporate his Arctic trauma into both their marriage and their respective careers. Eleanor was an independently wealthy poet, who published under her own name with John Murray (who also published all official naval expedition narratives), was a member of the French Academy of Sciences and a frequent visitor to the Royal Society. In 1816, she had written a scientific epic, “The Veils” in 1816, which she followed with *The Arctic Expeditions* in 1818.[[33]](#endnote-33) She ran her own salon, called “The Attic Chest.” As both an author and as a fixture in circles of scientific sociability, she tried to help Franklin navigate these unknown shoals – but frequently found herself running hard up against both the trauma and the intimacies his expedition had wrought. On their return from North America in 1822, Franklin and Richardson eschewed the limelight as they huddled up together in their cramped quarters in Frith Street to write the narrative.[[34]](#endnote-34) Before setting foot on British soil, Franklin wrote to Eleanor that he was dreading the “disagreeable task” of writing the book.[[35]](#endnote-35) He would later describe it as, “a sad plague,” “irksome,” and “a wearying task,” even as Eleanor counselled him, “you write well enough if you would but fancy so, and would write ten times better if you did but like it. You want nothing but what you don’t like – practice.”[[36]](#endnote-36) Eleanor sent Franklin invitations to her parties, but he seldom attended them, and when he did, seemed constrained and out of sorts. He told her that while he enjoyed small circles of friends and improving conversation, he objected to insincere “heterogeneous assemblages where forms and parade abound,” where he might be tempted “to assume individual merit for results … [due to] the superintending blessing of a Divine Providence.”[[37]](#endnote-37)

Shortly after Eleanor and Franklin were engaged in 1823, he and Richardson retreated to their apartments to write their accounts of the events on the Barren Grounds. Franklin would later write to his aunt, Ann Flinders that, “the recollection of scenes which had been soothed by time and reflection, so distressed me that I felt quite unequal to correspondence with any of my friends.”[[38]](#endnote-38) Eleanor responded to the long silence – and to the men’s preference for each other’s company – by writing them each a Valentine’s poem in the name of “Greenstockings” (Akaitcho’s niece, and the mother of Robert Hood’s child), entitled “The Esquimaux Girl’s Lament.”[[39]](#endnote-39) It included the stanzas:

I through the snow & the Forest would guide thee

On the ice-covered Lake I would gambol beside thee

With the thongs of the Reindeer thy buskins would weave

And dress thy light meal as thou slumber’st at Eve

Nay Frown not! Thou knows’t such moments have been,

Though cruel as False, thou could’st calmly depart,

Thy Comrade too truly has pictured the scene

And my form – but thine own, it is drawn on my heart!

Nor think in thy Green Isle some Fair one to wed,

For in tempest and snow shall my vengeance pursue,

My bidding at noonday shall darken the air,

And the rage of my climate shall Follow thee there.

In the poem, Eleanor reckoned with Franklin’s indebtedness to the Yellowknives as she imagined the labor of indigenous women who made snowshoes and clothing for the expedition, alluded to their usefulness as guides and sources of geographical knowledge, and acknowledged their role as sexual partners. She was simultaneously trying to come to grips with Franklin’s relationship with Richardson, which she signalled by sending him a duplicate Valentine – in which each man was the other’s “Companion” who also “pictured the scene and my form.” At times, Eleanor blamed Richardson for Franklin’s increasing religious severity and desire for seclusion, but they later became friends; when the Richardsons returned to Edinburgh in June of 1823, Eleanor wrote to Franklin that she supposed the separation “to be the most trying you ever encountered. You have been together so long and in such situations that he must be more than a brother to you.”[[40]](#endnote-40) Ultimately, Eleanor seems to have concluded that as Franklin’s future wife, she was one of a constellation of his companions, and that their marriage would always be relational to his other intimacies. She signalled as much on her own body on their wedding day in August of 1823. She had her wedding dress embroidered with flowers taken from his narrative and named after Franklin, Richardson, and the dead Robert Hood: the *Eutoca franklinii*, *Heuchera richardsonii,* and *Phlox hoodia*.[[41]](#endnote-41) She died of tuberculosis five days after Franklin and Richardson left on their second expedition in February of 1825. Months later, Franklin and Richardson unfurled the silken flag Eleanor had sewn over Fort Franklin on Great Bear Lake, and wrote home to tell their relatives all about it.

**“My Letters to You I Consider Addressed to All”: Correspondence and Credibility in Arctic Circles**

Eleanor Porden Franklin was not alone in her struggle to reconcile frontier intimacies and traumas with domestic life and metropolitan society. Arctic explorers’ wives and relatives acted as gatekeepers of information in the 1820s, and helped to establish explorers’ trustworthiness and credibility as truthful, reliable, rational men within webs of scientific and imperial knowledge. As the authors of a recent collection have argued, correspondence was a vital media “by which knowledge was exchanged and the credibility of the author or bearer of the letter was established,” and field correspondence was especially important as a means of securing trust at a distance.[[42]](#endnote-42) Explorers’ perilous journeys could render them suspect as well as famous, especially when their success depended upon indigenous intermediaries and vernacular agents. In their absence, relatives could attest to explorers’ domesticity and respectability, brandishing letters and presents as evidence of their unchanged character. In doing so, they may have drawn on the role of maritime relatives in the naval, merchant, and fishing fleets, who often possessed both power over absent sailors’ legal and financial affairs as well as privileged information about their whereabouts and activities.[[43]](#endnote-43) Relatives selectively shared field correspondence, conveying information to their social circles that would not be made public until the expedition narrative was published. Presents, souvenirs, and mementos that explorers sent home were distributed through families’ social networks in a ceaselss search for patronage. The traffic went both ways, as family members shared important news and gossip in their own correspondence, sending books, domestic articles (from mittens to marmalade), and, importantly, gossip, to men in the field.

Private letters gave families privileged, early news of the expedition that only the Colonial Office or Admiralty might possess, and were therefore highly valuable in circles that thrived on the curious and unique. Explorers cautiously encouraged this practice. Parry wrote to his parents in 1818 that “my letters to you I consider addressed to all” and urged them to circulate his letters to their friends and family. Correspondence sent via passing whaleships or birch bark canoes was also a valuable insurance policy, a way to ensure that some version of the expedition’s proceedings would circulate amongst friends and patrons.[[44]](#endnote-44) On his third expedition in the winter of 1822-23, Parry constructed a letter to his parents so that certain pages could be removed and shared with a select circle.[[45]](#endnote-45) On the Second Land Arctic Expedition (1825-1827), Richardson asked Mary to pass along extracts of his letters to all of their family, to Franklin’s family, and to his professional contacts (of whom Robert Jameson, Dr. William Hooker and Mrs. Hooker were among the most important).[[46]](#endnote-46) As a junior officer on the same expedition, Edward Kendall habitually asked his mother and sisters to share his letters, in particular with anyone who might be instrumental in getting him promoted.[[47]](#endnote-47) One letter usually had to suffice for many – especially since, as Kendall reminded his mother, “Paper is too precious in this part of the world to be wasted.”[[48]](#endnote-48) This contributed to the intimate and privileged nature of the correspondence, reaffirming the importance of domestic ties stretched by time and distance.[[49]](#endnote-49) It also made correspondence highly valuable. The press actively sought explorers’ private letters, partly because they were thought to contain the most honest and truthful account of the events of the expedition, and partly because of the sense of intimacy they conveyed.[[50]](#endnote-50) Franklin ordered his officers in 1825 to “strictly prohibit their friends from publishing their accounts.” [[51]](#endnote-51) Parry wrote his parents on his second expedition in 1820, “I beg and intreat (sic) you that this letter may only be shewn to your own circle of friends – but by no means published in any shape.”[[52]](#endnote-52)

Explorers knew, however, that their letters were not the only accounts of their voyage that their families received. They also saw snippets of intelligence from vernacular and indigenous sources. Over long winters, rumors about the expeditions circulated through both Yellowknife communities and the HBC’s posts, and eventually filtered back to the London office in senior officials’ correspondence.[[53]](#endnote-53) Similarly, when whalers “spoke” each other in Davis Straits, men swapped stories, letters, parcels, and artifacts to be taken back to Britain - and, if they had it, news about Arctic exploring ships.[[54]](#endnote-54) Even as they relied on vernacular agents, explorers cautioned their families that their intelligence was unreliable. Parry warned his parents in 1818 that the whalers carrying his letter “may like to tell wonderful stories about us,” and that “every seaman’s account of us will be greedily devoured and quickly circulated.”[[55]](#endnote-55) In March of 1821, Richardson urged Mary not to believe any of the rumors she might hear from the HBC, since, “We have already been hemmed in by a nation which we have never seen and attacked by another which has not even heard of us, in short we have been disposed of a thousand different ways … you are to believe nothing except what you have under my own hand.”[[56]](#endnote-56) In 1825, Kendall cautioned his mother that “this is the very country of exaggeration… the most absurd falsehoods are circulated and credited, losing in their passage from fort to fort about as much as a snowball does in running downhill.”[[57]](#endnote-57) After Franklin’s first overland expedition, they had good reason to be wary. News of the starvation and cannibalism had preceded the survivors’ return in 1822; Eleanor wrote to Franklin that “it was enough to frighten all your friends.”[[58]](#endnote-58)

Alongside these accounts, specimens and artefacts also made their way back to Britain via explorers’ families. Like the expeditions and their officers, these travelling objects depended upon the domestic culture of the fur trade and its mixed-race families. Unions between fur traders and indigenous or Métis women were ubiquitous in British North America, granting men access to widespread kinship and trading networks, as well as to women’s skills and labour.[[59]](#endnote-59) These families were indispensable to overland expeditions. Indigenous guides, translators, and European fur traders were all encouraged to bring their families to expedition forts so that the women could make shoes and clothing. Dene women also gathered and prepared faunal specimens for Dr. Richardson. Before they left England in 1825, Franklin wrote to Peter Dease, George Simpson, and several of the chief factors to ask that “the Indian women [procure] these specimens,” because of their experience in dressing furs, adding “the women know how to stuff them too well to need description from me.”[[60]](#endnote-60) On the same expedition, Kendall later sent an “Esquimaux woman’s fur jacket” to his mother, with instructions to forward it to Dr Tract at the Liverpool Institution, writing, “He is one of the Astronomical Society to which I hope to belong on my return and it may get me [his vote].”[[61]](#endnote-61)

Most of the letters that family members sent to explorers in the field do not survive. Extracts of some of Mary Anne Kay’s letters (copied out by Franklin in 1825-27), however, give a tantalizing glimpse into how Eleanor Porden Franklin’s seventeen-year-old niece acted as a “gatekeeper” of information for her uncle. As she built her own reputation as a young woman of taste, accomplishments, and connections, Mary Anne simultaneously gathered and circulated information for her uncle in the field. Scientists and naval officers visited her at her home in Greenwich, and asked her to include excerpts of reviews and accounts of their experiments in her letters, which she combined with summaries of her own reading and notes on public lectures that she attended.[[62]](#endnote-62) She scrupulously reported on the latest news of the Astronomical Society, the Royal Observatory, the court martial of a fellow Arctic explorer, Parry’s debut as the Hydrographer of the Navy, and her own recent expedition prospecting for fossils at Folkstone. At Greenwich, she inspected departing exploring ships (including Phillip Parker King’s to Australia) and passed judgment on them. She also passed on gossip, telling Franklin in one letter that Parry was trying to get up a new expedition to the North Pole (which she described as, “a six months trip founded in all essential points on a plan of yours laid down I believe in 1819,”) but the general opinion in Greenwich was that he was too sanguine, not least because “he is grown enormously fat (of which he had no need) and has suffered a good deal with his head….”[[63]](#endnote-63) Intriguingly, she also asked Franklin to “give Miss Greenstockings a kiss” for her, flippantly acknowledging (as her aunt had) her uncle’s cohabitation with and dependence upon indigenous women.[[64]](#endnote-64)

When family members circulated correspondence and information, they testified to absent explorers’ credibility. They demonstrated to metropolitan social circles that even under duress, explorers’ honour and moral integrity remained intact, and therefore that their perceptions and observations could be trusted. This was enormously important, for the reason that formed the basis of the explorer’s authority was often disordered by disease, by hunger, and by distance, isolation, and dislocation – precisely the kinds of perils that had attended Franklin’s 1819-22 expedition.[[65]](#endnote-65) Yet the explorer’s authority – and popularity – also partly derived from the fact that they placed themselves in peril for the sake of science. As Dorinda Outram has neatly put it, their bodily vulnerability was key to the moral economy of the knowledge they produced, as their physical suffering lent authenticity to their testimony about far-off places.[[66]](#endnote-66) When their family members circulated explorers’ private letters, they helped them walk this line, even while the men were in the field. Their correspondence could function as testimonials to their safety, competence, and detachment from the world they observed, while it served as valuable evidence of their authentic experiences.[[67]](#endnote-67) This was augmented by the Arctic souvenirs and libraries that were a part of the family home, as sisters and nieces were enjoined to pull down a copy of Samuel Hearne or Alexander McKenzie’s travels to compare Franklin and Richardson’s progress on their maps – and, of course, show them to others, alongside letters marked with longitude and latitude in lieu of addresses. [[68]](#endnote-68) These letters, with their embedded versions of the narrative yet to come, were valuable precisely because they were personal, presumably confidential, and fundamentally domestic. Amidst both the mixed-race society of the forts, and the homosocial society of their own chambers, explorers insisted that their compasses pointed resolutely “home,” with all of its grounding moral attachments. In this way, they helped to establish the essential connection between truth, credibility, and gentlemanly status that was essential to securing trust in their observations.[[69]](#endnote-69)

In their correspondence, explorers subsumed potential threats of intimacy and violence within both deprecating banter and professed longing for home and “society.” In their letters from their second overland expedition from 1825-1827, Franklin, Richardson and Kendall took pains to point out their ample provisions, domestic comforts, and good relationships with the Hudson’s Bay Company and the Yellowknives, assuring their families and friends that their minds and bodies were intact.[[70]](#endnote-70) Kendall wrote to his mother and sisters to describe the expedition’s ascent up the Canadian river system, that “this hard marching agrees extremely well with me I assure you there is no extra fat on my bones nor any fear of appoplexy (sic).”[[71]](#endnote-71) Richardson wrote to Mary that at every trading post they had been met “with the utmost civility and attention,” and that the abundance of provisions provided by the HBC meant that “compared with our last journey this promises to be a party of pleasure.”[[72]](#endnote-72) In one letter, he described how “all the rank and fashion of Bear Lake” had attended a Christmas ball at Fort Franklin in 1825, “their raven hair dripping with unguents prepared from the marrow of the rein-deer, and their expanded countenances ornamented with twin rows of ivory teeth gracefully contrasting with their lovely bronze features wheron streaks of lamp black and rudge (sic) were harmoniously blended.”[[73]](#endnote-73) Franklin, for his part, characterized “conversation” in North America to his sister-in-law Sarah Kay as: “expatiating on travelling either in Canoe or on snowshoes – the arrival, the sending for, or the want of Meat or Fish – the driving of dogs – the appearance or going away of an Indian… and perhaps the thread of these is stopped by the … squalling of an unruly child – or the growling and fighting of some ungovernable dogs.”[[74]](#endnote-74) In their private chambers, Franklin and Richardson told their families, they ate home-made pickles and marmalade, wore their home-knitted mittens, drank cherry brandy, swaddled themselves in woollen blankets, and played chess – all, Franklin wrote to Mary Anne Kay, “so that we have daily mementos of you.”[[75]](#endnote-75) As they assured their readers of their longing for the “Society” they had despised when they were actually at home, they simultaneously reassured their families that frontier domesticity was really defined by nostalgia for home, and not boisterous multi-ethnic families in the fur trading fort at the edge of a continent.

**Conclusion**

In order to make their careers – and to survive – Arctic explorers and their families had to navigate the overlapping “Arctic Circles” of London’s scientific soirees and North America’s polar regions. Within these circles, similar questions of trustworthiness attended exploration, marriage, friendship and science, especially given the profound vulnerabilities that polar exploration laid bare. Their wives, families and friends shored up explorers’ reputations by sharing private correspondence, gifts and specimens – the trinkets and snippets from the edge of the world that testified to their creditability as rational, domestic men. In doing so, families testified that up to this point, on this date and at this place, the absent men were still whole and unaltered, trustworthy observers of all that they surveyed. As they operated this information economy, polar relatives claimed a tenuous authority over information. As privileged recipients of letters, they might know as much as the Admiralty or Colonial Office about explorers’ plans and accomplishments, but they likely never knew the full extent of the traumas and liaisons of the field. As Eleanor Porden Franklin knew very well, any expectations of conjugality and domesticity were always and inherently relative to the relationships forged in the field, from the brother officers “endeared by affliction” to indigenous women and men upon whom they depended.

That these stories are legible today is due to the work of explorers’ relatives as archivists. Families preserved volumes of correspondence, some of which they compiled privately for family histories, some of which they donated to other biographers, and some of which they kept for themselves, which were later donated to polar and maritime institutions.[[76]](#endnote-76) They also kept those artifacts that spoke in some way to traumas and stretched intimacies of the field. The corn-husk doll that Franklin brought home for his three-year-old daughter is one of them, now on loan to the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich.[[77]](#endnote-77) Eleanor Porden’s “Greenstockings” poem, which evoked the faithlessness and abandonment that she, the Dene woman, and their daughters endured, is perhaps the most enigmatic of them all. Franklin and Richardson kept their copies carefully, as did their wives and descendants. More than two decades later, Franklin wrote it down from memory and sent it to his second wife, along with his last letter from HMS *Erebus* on his final, fatal attempt on the Northwest Passage in 1845.[[78]](#endnote-78) His daughter, Eleanor, kept her own copy in Derbyshire, separate from the papers held by her estranged stepmother and cousin, Sophia Cracroft. Sophia’s executors provided an excerpt of the *Erebus* version to Franklin’s biographer, H.D. Traill in 1896.[[79]](#endnote-79) The three most important women in Franklin’s life – his wife, his daughter, his niece – kept his first wife’s powerful evocation of an abandoned indigenous woman. It might have been simply a curiosity or a remembrance. But it might also have been because it hinted at the myriad vulnerabilities laid bare by environments, distances, violence and unknown intimacies as a matter of course in British polar exploration.

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75. NMM FRN/1/9, John Franklin to Mary Anne Kay, Fort Franklin, Great Bear Lake, 8 November, 1825; RGS SGB/1/4, George Back to John Back, Great Bear Lake, 19 February, 1827. [↑](#endnote-ref-75)
76. The most significant repositories are in SPRI, DRO, NMM and the RGS, though there are considerable collections elsewhere in the UK and Australia. [↑](#endnote-ref-76)
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78. RGS SJF/7/5 “Miss Greenstockings to her faithless admirer.” This version of the poem, in John Franklin’s handwriting and in which several stanzas are transposed (as though it was written from memory), is identified as having been sent with Franklin’s last letter from the *Erebus*, [↑](#endnote-ref-78)
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