**Polar Travel**

Elizabeth Leane

Travel writing looms large in literary histories of the polar regions. The best-known Arctic and Antarctic texts have been and continue to be accounts of travel: official narratives, diaries, and memoirs by explorers – John Franklin, Robert F. Scott, Apsley Cherry-Garrard and others – and travelogues by professional writers such as Barry Lopez and Sara Wheeler. While the Arctic and Antarctic icescapes have both inspired influential works of fiction and poetry, such as Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s ‘Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ (1798), these too centre on tales of travel, drawing on polar exploration accounts for their detail.[[1]](#footnote-1) Many Arctic indigenous peoples are traditionally nomadic, so that storytelling and travel become intertwined in their cultures. But the originally oral and linguistically diverse nature of these cultures means that many of the most prominent Arctic narratives are those produced by travellers from elsewhere.[[2]](#footnote-2) The uninhabited Antarctic takes the dominance of the travel narrative to its apogee: all writing about the Antarctic from experience is travel writing of a sort, in that any encounter with the place is premised on a journey.

 In bringing the opposite ends of the Earth into the same frame, the category of ‘polar travel writing’ is both useful and problematic. Geographically symmetrical, the two regions have obvious climatic similarities as well as the same extremes of light and dark. For European cultures, both regions historically signified geographical limits that could be accessed only through the reports of a few intrepid adventurers. Both are symbolic ‘edges’ of the globe that can boast their own literal centres: the geographic poles. These real but non-tangible points became foci of national and masculine endeavour in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, culminating in ‘races’ between rival teams. A hundred years later, both regions feature prominently in the scientific and popular discourses around climate change, as environments particularly vulnerable to threat. It is no surprise that they are considered, for some purposes at least, interchangeable.

Such an easy conflation, however, ignores the significant differences between the far north and south. The Arctic is an icy ocean surrounded by land – land full of wildlife; long inhabited by diverse groups of indigenous peoples (including Inuit, Saami, and Chukchi); and now the sovereign territory of many nations, encompassing Greenland (an autonomous dependency of Denmark) and parts of Canada, Alaska, Russia, Iceland and Scandinavia. The Antarctic is a continent weighed down by ice-shelves kilometres thick, surrounded by an ocean, with no indigenous inhabitants, no permanent human population and no terrestrial animals bigger than a midge. No nation owns the Antarctic continent: seven territorial claims are put into hiatus (but not erased) by the 1959 Antarctic Treaty. Cartographically, due to the dominance of the Ptolemaic mapping tradition, the north has long been considered ‘up’ and the south ‘down’, a perceptual bias so taken for granted as to be unnoticeable, and all the more powerful as a result. A journey to Antarctica is always registered, at some level, as a journey to the Earth’s underside.

Arctic and Antarctic travel tales, broadly speaking, stretch back many centuries. Arguably the earliest Antarctic travel narrative belongs to Polynesian culture. Oral legend describes seventh-century Raratongan navigator Ui-te-Rangiora’s canoe journey to (in the translation of a nineteenth-century ethnologist) ‘a foggy, misty, and dark place not seen by the sun’, where he encountered ‘the frozen sea of *pia*’ (arrowroot, which looks like snow when scraped).[[3]](#footnote-3) Although it is impossible to prove their historical reliability, narratives of early canoe travel to the far south continue to circulate in contemporary Maori culture.[[4]](#footnote-4) While in Western culture Antarctica existed conceptually for many centuries before anyone encountered it – probably the first recorded uses of ‘Antarctic’ in English appears in a late fourteenth-century translation of Mandeville’s *Travels* (in a celestial context) – it was exploration narratives that brought the place, as it was materially encountered, into human consciousness.[[5]](#footnote-5) Early European narratives of Arctic travel are, like Ui-te-Rangiora’s, semi-legendary and second-hand: the Ancient Greek story of Pytheas’s voyage to ‘Thule’, the journeys of early medieval Celtic monks, the sagas of the Viking settlement in Greenland.[[6]](#footnote-6) From the fifteenth century, European voyages of exploration were venturing into the far north, in search of the Northwest and Northeast passages, and to a lesser extent the far south, as vessels sought a passage around Cape Horn.

No short survey can hope to do justice to the range of narratives produced over the last few centuries by travellers these two vast regions. Taking as its starting point James Cook’s circumnavigation of the Antarctic in the mid-1770s, this essay examines the development of the polar expedition narrative until the ‘conquest’ of the poles, before turning to the more personal and political accounts of encounters with far northern and southern places that have characterised the last hundred years. Both the far north and far south function for travellers in overlapping and sometimes contradictory ways: as places of adventure, heroism, trial, escape, transformation, simplification, renewal and, most recently, anxiety.

**Publish or Perish: Expedition Accounts**

‘Now for the run home and a desperate struggle to get the news through first. I wonder if we can do it’.[[7]](#footnote-7) These words of Robert F. Scott, written in mid-January 1912 as his team turned back from the South Pole, came under scrutiny when his journal was posthumously edited for publication: the phrase ‘to get the news through first’ was deleted. Explorers like Scott knew that success in publication and exploration were interdependent, but there was no need to alert readers to this.[[8]](#footnote-8) Thus the original diary’s record of a struggle for publication, becomes, in its edited version, a struggle for survival. Both the entry and its excision point to the same conclusion: if you were a polar explorer, then writing publicly about what you did, and being the first to do so, was just as important as *what* you did.

 This kind of rush to publication produced what might be considered the earliest properly Antarctic travel narrative. James Cook’s second expedition of 1772­–5 was the first to cross the Antarctic circle, at one point reaching over 70°S, and (unknowingly) coming within a hundred miles of Antarctica itself. The official expedition narrative, *A Voyage toward the South Pole, and Round the World* (1777) would thus provide an auspicious starting point for the far southern travel writing genre – had Cook not, to his chagrin, been beaten to the publishers by a crewman’s unauthorised version.[[9]](#footnote-9) John Marra’s *Journal of the* Resolution’*s* *Voyage* (1775), published anonymously only six weeks after the expedition’s return, instead has the best claim to initiating the genre.

Marra’s struggle to find language to convey the first impressions of the Antarctic ice highlights the challenge of using a home-grown vocabulary to capture an alien environment. In his description of ‘ice islands’, architectural, maritime and mythological metaphors jumble against one another: ‘a most romantic prospect of ruined castles, churches, arches, steeples, wrecks of ships, and a thousand wild and grotesque forms of monsters, dragons, and all the hideous shapes that the most fertile imagination can possibly conceive’. Even penguins are gothic in Marra’s account, their continual ‘screaming’ adding to the ‘horror of the scene’.[[10]](#footnote-10) Cook’s description of Antarctic icebergs is far more detached, interested in their geometry, consistency and possible provenance, but his much-quoted pronouncement on the region – ‘Lands doomed by Nature to perpetual frigidness; never to feel the warmth of the sun’s rays; whose horrible and savage aspect I have not words to describe’[[11]](#footnote-11) – displays a similar groping for language. This sense that the continent exceeds description has since become an ironic cliché of its travel literature.

Like Cook’s, many national polar expeditions forbade the publication of members’ journals or narratives, at least until the official version had appeared. The leader’s account, often produced at government expense and with the imprimatur of officialdom, usually became the received (if not the only) version. Thus, with occasional exceptions, early published impressions of the polar regions are those of a small minority. This domination of official accounts has obscured the diversity of travellers, who included the working-class and ethnically diverse crews of whaling and sealing vessels, as well as the indigenous people who assisted and sometimes joined exploring parties in the Arctic. While not all polar expedition leaders were themselves social elites,[[12]](#footnote-12) the persistence in popular polar – and particularly Antarctic – histories of an outdated ‘great man’ approach has produced a canon of far northern and southern travel narratives built around individual ‘heroes’ – a canon that has only recently been challenged and broadened.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Dozens of official expedition narratives were published in the nineteenth century, many of them from voyages in search of the Northwest Passage (or, indeed, in search of those in search of the Northwest Passage). Antarctic expedition leaders including William Parry, John Ross and John Franklin and their Antarctic counterparts, such as Charles Wilkes, Jules Dumont d’Urville and James Ross, all published detailed accounts of their journeys. Normally multi-volume publications, these narratives were expensive to produce and purchase. Nonetheless, they could become bestsellers when the events of an expedition were particularly dramatic, as in Franklin’s *Narrative of a Journey to the Shores of the Polar Sea* (1823), which recounted an overland journey in Northwest Canada that famously saw its members reduced to eating their boots. With the disappearance of Franklin’s third expedition in the late 1840s and the ensuing international search, the popularity of Arctic expedition narratives reached its peak. American explorer Elisha Kent Kane’s *Arctic Explorations* (1856), for example, sold 65,000 copies.[[14]](#footnote-14)

For the most part, national expeditions were not altruistic ventures: extending empires, forging strategic trade routes and scouting out potential resources were all strong motivations for early polar travel. Some travellers had quite explicit commercial motivations. European whaling vessels ventured into the Arctic from the late sixteenth century, and Cook’s reports of plentiful wildlife triggered decades of exploitation of southern fur seals in the subantarctic and Antarctic islands. However, these working travellers tended not to publicise their commercial secrets by going into print. There were exceptions, for those who had unusually high cultural capital or could boast specific achievements: they include whaler/explorer William Scoresby’s *Journal of a Voyage to the Northern Whale-Fishery* (1823) and Antarctic sealing captain James Weddell’s *A Voyage Towards the South Pole Performed in the Years 1822–24* (1825), which publicised his besting of Cook’s farthest south. Accounts continued to appear during the factory whaling period in Antarctica, including Norwegian magnate Lars Christensen’s *Such is the Antarctic* (1935), but they were never as internationally prominent as the more glamorous exploration narratives.

By the later nineteenth century, with readerships expanding, publishers and newspaper reporters began to create, rather than simply report, dramatic adventures in the far north and south. The ill-fated *Jeanette* expedition towards the North Pole, and the *Southern Cross* expedition, which conducted the first-land based exploration of Antarctica, were both funded by media barons (respectively James Gordon Bennett Jr, who published the *New York Herald*, and George Newnes, whose portfolio included *The Strand Magazine*).[[15]](#footnote-15) Even if an expedition was not sponsored by a publishing outlet, a book or media deal could help to defray expenses. This put pressure on leaders, who were not always accomplished writers. Ernest Shackleton, Richard Byrd, Douglas Mawson and Robert Peary all at times used ghostwriters or leant heavily on other expedition members to produce the required narrative. ‘First-hand’ accounts were thus often highly mediated.

Relying on funding from an expedition narrative had its pitfalls: a venture perceived as disappointing or boring could mean poor sales. Even a ‘conquest’ did not guarantee a bestseller if it seemed too easily done. When Leon Amundsen, whose brother Roald had successfully led a Norwegian team to the South Pole in late 1911, tried to negotiate an advantageous English publishing deal for the expedition narrative, he was beaten down: ‘Your brother does not seem to have had any exciting adventures’.[[16]](#footnote-16) Being, and writing in, Norwegian also did not help, although Leon’s respondent contrasted Roald’s style disparagingly with that of his mentor and countryman Fritjof Nansen, author of bestsellers *The First Crossing of Greenland* (1890) and *Farthest North* (1897). The British exploration tradition, notes Francis Spufford in an Antarctic travel essay of his own, was ‘very literary [. . .] almost willing to give higher priority to eloquent descriptions of journeys than to the journeys themselves’.[[17]](#footnote-17)

It is unsurprising, then, that the two texts most often identified as the ‘classic’ polar travel narratives of this period – Scott’s *Journals* (originally published as *Scott’s Last Expedition* in 1913) and Apsley Cherry-Garrard’s *The Worst Journey in the World* (1922) – both emphasise the value of the story as much as action. The expedition they describe – the *Terra Nova* expedition (1910–12) – was itself presented by the media within a series of narrative frames: initially a quest for the South Pole; then, with Amundsen’s unexpected turn to the south in late 1910, an exciting ‘race’; and finally, with the British polar party’s forestallment by the Norwegian team and eventual death only miles from a depot, a national tragedy. Knowing that he would be unable retrospectively to shape his diary entries into a smooth narrative, the dying Scott emphasised the worth of the ‘tale’ itself as a justification of the journey. ‘Had we lived’, he wrote towards the end of his famous ‘Message to the Public’, ‘we would have had a tale to tell [. . .] which would have stirred the heart of every Englishman. These rough notes and our dead bodies must tell the tale.’[[18]](#footnote-18) The ‘roughness’ of his ‘notes’ lies not in his style (Scott’s literary ability is about his only quality that all commentators agree on) but in their journal format: the raw material from which polar narratives were usually built. The poignancy of Scott’s journals lies in each entry’s lack of knowledge of what will follow. Despite the posthumous editing, and Scott’s own increasingly explicit knowledge that he was writing a public rather than a private document, his *Journals* seem to give a compellingly direct conduit into his experiences.

While the attraction of Cherry-Garrard’s *The Worst Journey in the World* is in some ways the opposite – it offers the wisdom of hindsight rather than the immediacy of experience – the primacy of story is similarly at its heart. Publishing ten years after the fact, the classically trained Cherry-Garrard had some distance from the expedition, in which he served as assistant zoologist. Writing a memoir rather than an official account, he was able to venture personal opinions, reflections and psychological evaluations (advice from his neighbour George Bernard Shaw also did not go astray). He complemented these with excerpts from his own and others’ diaries and letters as well as published reports and narratives, thus producing a polyvocal effect that contrasted markedly with Scott’s *Journals*. But Cherry-Garrard’s major narrative move was to shift focus from the polar tragedy to another journey, the ‘Worst Journey’ of his title: a six-week trek that he undertook in midwinter, with Edward Wilson and ‘Birdie’ Bowers (both of whom later died alongside Scott), to collect eggs from an emperor penguin colony (Wilson thought the embryos would provide vital evolutionary information). Cherry-Garrard begins the long chapter recounting this expedition by quoting a line from Scott’s diary that foreshadows the latter’s ‘Message to the Public’: ‘It [the journey] makes a tale for our generation that I hope may not be lost in the telling’.[[19]](#footnote-19) After his account of the journey itself, in which the three men suffered temperatures down to -60˚C, the loss of their tent, and various other unimaginable trials, Cherry-Garrard reports that the penguin eggs, duly deposited in the British Museum, were indifferently received. The quest was evidently for nothing; or rather, for itself, because the endurance of the narrative – ‘the telling’ – becomes its only proof of worth.

With its nostalgic tone and disillusionment with post-war Britain, *The Worst Journey* can be read as ‘the culmination of, and an elegy for, the nineteenth-century cult of the explorer’.[[20]](#footnote-20) Though many polar expedition narratives followed, the genre began to turn away from official reports and towards narratives of personal encounters with place.

**Encounters with Polar Places and Peoples**

These kinds of encounter required a consciousness of dwelling in the polar environment rather than simply moving through it. While American naval officer Richard Byrd wrote accounts of his flights in the late 1920s and 1930s over both the north and south poles, the book for which he is best known is *Alone* (1938), in which he describes five dark months spent deliberately isolated in a small hut in Antarctica’s interior. Unlike his earlier ‘factual, impersonal narratives’ the book is, in Byrd’s words, ‘intimate’ and focussed on ‘feelings’.[[21]](#footnote-21) Yet *Alone* is no less a performance of masculine hardiness than the narratives which preceded it: indeed, Byrd saw the simplicity of the experience as promising a newly ‘rigorous existence’ at a stage when polar travel had been ‘softened’ by increasing mechanisation.[[22]](#footnote-22) Time, not distance, and stasis rather than movement, become the measure of manly endurance in *Alone*.

There was, in a sense, a precedence for this focus on dwelling and interior existence in polar travel writing. Expeditions north and south would commonly overwinter deliberately, in a ship and/or a purpose-built hut. The way in which the expedition members dealt with this situation was a source of narrative interest. A planned overwintering often involved elaborate leisure activities, such as theatrical performances, concerts and a house ‘newspaper’ (sometimes published on the expedition’s return), to guard against the spectre of ‘polar depression’. An unanticipated stay was far more difficult. Frederick Cook’s *Through the First Antarctic Night* (1900), for instance, relates the increasing mental fragility of the men of the *Belgica*, which became trapped in the Antarctic sea ice over winter. Enforced isolation could also produce surprising insights. In 1912, Morton Moyes, a member of the Australasian Antarctic Expedition, was inadvertently left alone for almost three months in a hut on an ice shelf (and without the radio contact available to Byrd). Moyes’s retrospective reflections give a keen sense of his disturbingly noisy and seemingly animate surrounds: ‘I could at times think of all Antarctica as [. . .] a slow-brained sentient being bent on making a man part of itself [. . .] sprawled gigantically over nearly six million square miles, immovably gripping the southern cap of the earth – deceptively solid and lifeless but actually full of movement and change, with a low amoebic vitality.’[[23]](#footnote-23)

 Where Frederick Cook considered entrapment over the Antarctic winter to be entirely ‘destructive to human energy’, the Arctic had ‘more redeeming features’: ‘There the white invader has the Eskimo to assist, teach and amuse him.’[[24]](#footnote-24) Authors of Arctic exploration texts readily exploited this perceived ability of the ‘Eskimo’ (or ‘Esquimaux’) to ‘amuse’ Western observers – in this case their readers. Nineteenth-century British polar explorers were ‘generally positive, if patronising’ in their attitudes,[[25]](#footnote-25) their descriptions of exotic customs and attitudes of the people they encountered acting as an interesting anthropological diversion from (in Parry’s words) ‘the more important, although less difficult task of relating the proceedings of the expedition’.[[26]](#footnote-26) The Inuit were consistently othered in exploration accounts, considered at best quaint and fascinating, and at worst bestial, barbaric and ‘Stone Age’.[[27]](#footnote-27) Such a condescending attitude was a necessary defence: the image of one’s own heroic adventure was hard to sustain in the face of whole communities mundanely and successful inhabiting the same hostile environment, especially when one’s own survival could depend on their assistance.[[28]](#footnote-28) Robert Peary allegedly reached the North Pole as part of a six man-team: himself, African American Matthew Henson (who wrote his own account of the journey, *A Negro Explorer at the North Pole* [1912]), and four Inuit men, Ooqueah, Ootah, Egingwah and Seegloo.[[29]](#footnote-29) Although Peary, in his account *The North Pole* (1910), acknowledges the central contribution of Inuit people to the journey, his language is consistently condescending: they are ‘my Eskimo’ or ‘faithful Eskimo’.[[30]](#footnote-30) Peary devotes several chapters to describing the Inuit groups he encountered, with titles such as ‘The Odd Customs of an Odd People’, in which he constantly describes them as ‘childlike’ or ‘children of nature’.[[31]](#footnote-31) Their ‘value’ to the world, Peary confidently states, is their role in helping him discover the Pole.[[32]](#footnote-32)

 With the North Pole ‘conquered’, however, popular travel narratives began to appear in which indigenous Arctic cultures were a primary subject, rather than an intriguing aside. In publications such as *My Life with the Eskimo* (1913) and *The Friendly Arctic* (1921), anthropologist and explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson urged low-latitude visitors to adopt the practices and technology of the Inuit (while still perpetuating the ‘Stone Age’ stereotype), and recast the far north as a welcoming and abundant rather than a hostile and desolate place. Also popular at this time was *Across Arctic America* (1927), by explorer-ethnologist Knud Rasmussen, himself born in Greenland and of Inuit descent. Rasmussen’s book describes his epic dog-sledge journey, with two Inuit, Qavigarssuaq and Arnarulunguaq, from the far northeast of Canada to Nome, Alaska. Rasmussen (whose expedition generated a ten-volume report as well as his popular book) was fascinated by the Inuit’s stories, which he recorded or where possible had Inuit people themselves record in writing.[[33]](#footnote-33) His work suggests that, for the nomadic peoples of the region, oral narratives encoded important geographical information as well as generating a ‘powerful sense of belonging’.[[34]](#footnote-34) *Across Arctic America*, with its ‘combination of heroic Arctic exploration and intimate familiarity with Inuit culture’,[[35]](#footnote-35) looks back to the traditional expedition account and forward to more recent travel texts in which engagement with indigenous cultures is often an intrinsic part of the author’s encounter with the region.

**Gendering the Poles**

Certain aspects of the interaction between exploration parties and Inuit communities were missing from expedition narratives. Relations between explorers and Inuit women were not uncommon, with Peary, Henson and Steffanson fathering children during their expeditions. The erasure of these relations from their narratives is one component of a broader absence of women in polar travel texts, an absence that goes beyond the often-observed male domination of the genre of travel writing as a whole. Anthologies are a useful indication. *The Mammoth Book of Polar Journeys* (2007) offers forty extracts, with just two of them written by women, Catherine Hartley and Lynne Cox; both are Antarctic travel tales, and both date from the twenty-first century. *The Ends of the Earth: An Anthology of the Finest Writing on the Arctic and Antarctic* (2007) offers thirty-nine extracts, seven of them by women, but the earliest is from the 1990s. While the North American, Indian and Far Eastern volumes of *Nineteenth-Century Travels, Explorations and Empires* (2003) all feature multiple contributions by women, the polar volume offers none.[[36]](#footnote-36) Delineating and challenging the discursive construction of the polar regions as masculine spaces has been one of the most active areas of research on polar travel narratives.[[37]](#footnote-37)

 Women have lived in the Arctic, of course, for as long as men, and like men often provided unacknowledged support for polar expeditions, sometimes joining exploratory teams (Arnarulunguaq, mentioned above, is one example). Non-indigeneous women published narratives of far northern journeys from at least the later nineteenth century, by which stage parts of the Arctic were amenable to leisure travel. Examples include Susannah Henrietta Kent’s *Within the Arctic Circle* (1877), which focusses on northern Scandinavia; Josephine Diebitsch-Peary’s *My Arctic Journal* (1893), which relates a year’s stay in Greenland as part of one of her husband Robert’s expeditions; Ella Wallace Manning’s *Igloo for the Night* (1943),Mena Orford’s *Journey North* (1957) and Myrtle Simpson’s *Home is a Tent* (1964), all of which recount periods spent in the Canadian Arctic accompanying working husbands; and Agnes Cameron Dean’s *The New North* (1909) and C.C. Vyvyan’s *Arctic Adventure* (1961), again dealing with Canada, but focussing on journeys made at the authors’ own instigation. Unsuprisingly, the authorial strategies these women used to write themselves into the male exploration tradition vary significantly. Kent, for example, ‘feminizes’ the far North as a safe and attractive place for women travellers by playing down dangers as well as her own hardiness.[[38]](#footnote-38) Vyvyan, by contrast, strategically appropriates the role of the male adventurer, emphasising the wildness of the region she and her companion traverse, as well as their own intrepidness as travellers.[[39]](#footnote-39)

 Published accounts of women’s travels at the other end of the Earth are far sparser. Recreational travel to and within the Antarctic did not begin until the later twentieth century, so prior to this a visitor to the continent was inevitably part of a (male-only) work programme: whaling, exploration, science, diplomacy, military service. The only way for a woman to visit the Antarctic at this stage was via an attachment to a man, usually as a wife. Probably the earliest published observations of Antarctica by a woman appear under male authorship: Christensen’s *Such is the Antarctic* includes extensive quotations from the diary of Lillemor Rachlew, who travelled with a whaling factory ship in the 1930s as a companion to Christensen’s wife.[[40]](#footnote-40) When women did publish their own narratives, such as Jennie Darlington’s *My Antarctic Honeymoon* (1957) and Nan Brown’s *Antarctic Housewife* (1971), their titles advertised their non-threatening, spousal roles.

*My Antarctic Honeymoon* is fascinating for its double-edged narrative, the author demurely deferring to then-conventional wisdom that the Antarctic should remain woman-free while simultaneously delivering a devastating account of male incompetence on the ice. Darlington stayed on Stonington Island (Antarctic Peninsula) in 1947­–48 as part of the U.S. Ronne Expedition, during which her new husband was in charge of the aviation programme. In *My Antarctic Honeymoon*, she constructs her journey as a quirky turn of events over which she had little control and her own presence as an amusing anomaly in a rightfully masculine space. Her narrative of self-transformation, from a citified, make-up-and-perfume-applying naïf to someone accepted as a member of the team, set a pattern which later women travellers would also adopt (for example, Hartley in *To the Poles without a Beard* [2002])*.* Despite this achievement, Darlington is often apologetic for her presence, eventually declaring that women do not ‘belong’ in the Antarctic because ‘Any weak link endangers the whole’.[[41]](#footnote-41) And yet her outsider’s perspective on the expedition produces a tale of disorganisation, hurriedness, incompetence, lack of preparedness, ‘bunkhouse bitching’ and squalor that makes Antarctic exploration look like so much masculine (and nationalist) posturing.[[42]](#footnote-42)

**Contemporary Polar Travel Narratives**

Another few decades would pass before a travel writer addressed the sexism endemic in Antarctic occupation head-on. It was left to Sara Wheeler, in her much-acclaimed *Terra Incognita: Travels in Antarctica* (1996), to directly challenge the image of Antarctica as a continent for ‘frozen beards’,[[43]](#footnote-43) although she pays homage to explorer/writers such as Scott and Cherry-Garrard. *Terra Incognita* adeptly weaves the narratives of Wheeler’s own Antarctic journeys together with observations on the continent’s human communities, cultural resonances, historical legacies and unique environment. By this time, travel to the Antarctic had been opened up for both women and men, through the rise of cruise tourism (available since the 1960s but becoming popular only in the 1990s), ‘writers residencies’ in various national programmes (Wheeler’s route), and the expansion of scientific activities. A series of important travel narratives ensued, including Diane Ackerman’s essay ‘White Lanterns’ in *The Moon by Whalelight* (1991), biologist David Campbell’s *The Crystal Desert* (1992), Jenny Diski’s *Skating to Antarctica* (1997), Peter Matthiessen’s *End of the Earth* (2003), and Helen Garner’s ‘Regions of Thick-Ribbed Ice’ (2001). New modes of travel produced new anxieties, such as those of the writer-tourist entering a supposedly ‘pristine’ environment. Diski, whose travel memoir is simultaneously a working through of childhood trauma, responds by revelling in her unheroic approach: interior spaces dominate her narrative, from the ice rink she loved as a child to the small cabin of her cruise ship, and she leaves readers wondering whether she actually stepped onto the continent. Garner expresses an ironic desire to erase both tourism and representation from the continent’s history and return it to an imaginary blankness: ‘I fiercely wish I had no prior inkling of this place, that everything I’m looking at were completely new to me [. . .] People with cameras are busybodies, writers are control-freaks spoiling things for everyone else, colonising, taming, matching their egos against the unshowable, the unsayable.’[[44]](#footnote-44)

Arguably the most influential polar travel writer of the late twentieth century, however, is Barry Lopez. *Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape* (1986) draws together his musings on the region’s wildlife, landscape, history and indigenous people, gathered over five years travelling in northern Canada. *Arctic Dreams* is widely acclaimed as a travel-writing classic; Robert Macfarlane considers Lopez ‘the most important living writer about wilderness’.[[45]](#footnote-45) Far less known than his Arctic experiences are Lopez’s travels on the opposite side of the world. Sponsored by the US National Science Foundation as part of its writers-in-residence programme, Lopez travelled to Antarctica over several summers in the late 1980s and early 1990s. His experience of the far south, however, was very different from his Arctic travels. While he published a series of articles from his southern journeys, no equivalent of *Arctic Dreams* emerged. Lopez found the Antarctic ‘a difficult landscape to enter, to develop a rapport with […] my entreaties for conversation met almost always with a monumental indifference’.[[46]](#footnote-46) In a later interview, he emphasised the contrast between the two polar regions: the Antarctic is ‘white, just like the Arctic, but that’s it. They are fundamentally different places’.[[47]](#footnote-47)

Despite these marked differences, new anxieties surrounding global warming reinforced the joint identity of the polar regions in the public imagination. Although the impact of temperature increases is far more visible in the Arctic, both regions act as visual manifestations of climate change as well as scientific evidence of its existence. Some contemporary polar narratives, such as Joanna Kavenna’s *The Ice Museum* (2005) and Wheeler’s *The Magnetic North* (2009), incorporate due acknowledgement of environmental issues while maintaining a focus on place, history and community. Others, such as Meredith Hooper’s *The Ferocious Summer* (2007) and Ed Struzik’s *The Big Thaw* (2009), make the impact of the warming environment on the polar ice and ecosystem their main subject, or use polar travel as a springboard to discuss the politics and science of climate change more generally, as in Elizabeth Kolbert’s *Field Notes from a Catastrophe* (2006). Once portrayed as hostile enemies that explorers fought to conquer, the poles now appear more often in travel narratives as victims of humanity’s insatiable needs.

However, new representations produced by new materialities tend to adapt rather than replace previous visions. Where manly polar explorers once reported from the frontier of ‘civilisation’, now intrepid – and often female – scientists and journalists deliver ‘frontline report[s] on climate change’ (to use Kolbert’s subtitle) or give ‘eye-witness account[s]’ of what happens when ‘climate change [comes] thumping at the door’.[[48]](#footnote-48) The polar regions have undergone many physical changes and accumulated many different layers of meaning over the centuries in which travellers have recounted their experiences there, yet the figure of the heroic traveller/writer endures, repurposed for new kinds of journeys.

1. See e.g. Jessica Richard, ‘“A paradise of my own creation”: Frankenstein and the Improbable Romance of Polar Exploration’, *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 25.4 (2003), 295–314; John Livingston Lowes, *The Road to Xanadu: A Study in the Way of the Imagination* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1927), especially ch. 9; and Bernard Smith, *Imagining the Pacific: In the Wake of the Cook Voyages* (Carlton, Vic.; Melbourne University Press, 1992), ch. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Eric Heyne, ‘Literature, North American’, in Mark Nutall (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of the Arctic*, vol.2 (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), pp 1186–91, at p. 1186. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. S. Percy Smith, ‘Hawaiki: The Whence of the Maori: Being an Introduction to Raratongan History’, *The Journal of the Polynesian Society* 8 (1899), 1–48 at pp. 10–11. Later commentators argue that the account may have been influenced by European travel stories. See Peter Buck, *Vikings of the Pacific* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959 [1938]), pp. 116–18. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See e.g. Ken McAnergney, ‘In My Mind I’m Goin’ to Antarctica’, in Ralph Crane, Elizabeth Leane and Mark Williams (eds.), *Imagining Antarctica: Cultural Perspectives on the Southern Continent* (Hobart: Quintus, 2011), pp. 115–21. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The *Defective Version of Mandeville’s Travels*, ed. M. C. Seymour (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002 [c. 1385]), pp. 78–80. Here the adjective appears as ‘Antertyk’ or ‘Antertyk(e)’. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Moss, *Scott’s Last Biscuit*, pp. 3–4, 29–56, for a detailed discussion of these early narratives. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Robert Falcon Scott, *Journals: Captain Scott’s Last Expedition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 377, 470. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Expeditions overwintering in Antarctica would themselves normally take large libraries, including numerous travel accounts. See e.g. *Catalogue of Books of the ‘Discovery’ 1901* (n. p.: n. pub., [1901]), pp. 9–11. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Naturalist Georg Forster’s unofficial narrative of the expedition also beat Cook’s to press, by a matter of weeks. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. John Marra, qtd in Alasdair McGregor (ed.), *Antarctica: That Sweep of Savage Splendour* (Camberwell, Vic.: Viking-Penguin, 2011), p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. James Cook, *A Voyage towards the South Pole, and Round the World*, vol. 2 (Adelaide: Libraries Board of South Australia, 1970), p. 243. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Cook came from a working-class background, and Scott’s family had financial struggles. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See Ben Maddison, *Class and Colonialism* *in Antarctic Exploration, 1750–1920* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2014), pp. 6–7. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Peter Kitson (ed.), *Nineteenth-Century Travels, Explorations and Empires: Writings from the Era of Imperial Consolidation 1835–1910*, vol. 1, *North and South Poles* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2003), p. 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Such deliberate generation of exploration news was not unique to the polar regions – Bennett had funded Henry Morton Stanley’s expedition in search of David Livingstone. See Beau Riffenburgh, *The Myth of the Explorer: Press, Sensationalism and Geographical Discovery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), which includes Arctic case studies. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Robert Donald, Letter to Leon Amundsen, 15 March 1912, Brevs. 812, Nasjonalbiblioteket**,** Oslo. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Francis Spufford, ‘On Observation Hill’, *Granta* 67 (1 Sept. 1999), 241–53, at p. 250. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Scott, *Journals*, p. 422. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Apsley Cherry-Garrard, *The Worst Journey in the World: Antarctic 1910-1913* (London: Picador McMillan, 1994 [1922]), p. 235. The original source of the quotation is Scott, *Journals*, p. 259. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Carl Thompson, *Travel Writing* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Richard Byrd, *Alone* (London: Harborough, 1958), p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See Byrd, *Alone*, p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Morton Moyes, as told to George Dovers and D’Arcy Niland, ‘Season in Solitary’, *Walkabout* 30 (10) (Oct. 1964), 20–23, at 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Frederick Cook, *Through the First Antarctic Night 1898–1899* (London: C. Hurst; Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1980), p. 295. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Kitson, ‘Introduction’, in Kitson (ed.), *Nineteenth-Century Travels*, pp. xvii–xxxiii, at p. xxx. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. W. E. Parry, *Journal of a Second Voyage for the Discovery of a Northwest Passage from the Atlantic to the Pacific* (London: John Murray, 1824), p. xviii. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. For more detail see Thompson, *Travel Writing*, pp. 130­–­33; Kitson, ‘Introduction’, pp. xxx–xxxiii; Spufford, *I May Be Some Time*, ch. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Kitson, ‘Introduction’, p. xxix [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Peary’s claim was questioned at the time, and has continued to be disputed since. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. See e.g. Robert E. Peary, *The North Pole* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1910), pp. 23, 24, 64, 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Peary, *The North Pole*, pp. 68–75. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Peary, *The North Pole*, p. 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Michael Bravo and Sverker Sörlin, ‘Narrative and Practice – an Introduction’, in *Narrating the Arctic: A Cultural History of Nordic Scientific Practices* (Canton, MA: Science History Publications, 2002), pp. 3-32, at 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Bravo and Sörlin, ‘Narrative and Practice’, 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Fredrik Chr. Brøgger, ‘The Culture of Nature: The View of the Arctic Environment in Knud Rasmussen’s Narrative of the Fifth Thule Expedition’, in Anka Ryall, Johan Schimanski and Henning Howlid Wærp (eds.), *Arctic Discourses* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2010), pp. 82–105, at p. 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. See Kitson (ed.), *Nineteenth-Century Travels*. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. See e.g. Lisa Bloom, *Gender on Ice*: *American Ideologies for Polar Expeditions* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Victoria Rosner, ‘Gender and Polar Studies: Mapping the Terrain’, *Signs* 34 (2009), 489–94; and Gretchen Legler, ‘The End of the Heroic Illusion: How Three Generations of Women Writers have Changed the Literature of Antarctica’, *The Polar Journal* 1 (2011), 207–24. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Heidi Hansson, ‘Henrietta Kent and the Feminised North’, *Nordlit* 22 (2007), 71–96. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Heather Smyth, ‘“Lords of the Word”: Writing Gender and Imperialism on Northern Space in C.C. Vyvyan’s *Arctic Adventure*’, *SCL/ÉLC* 23(1) (1998), 33–52. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. See Jesse Blackadder, *Chasing the Light* (Sydney: Fourth Estate-HarperCollins, 2013), p. 418. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Jennie Darlington*, My Antarctic Honeymoon: A Year at the Bottom of the World* (London: Frederick Muller, 1957), p. 179. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Darlington, *My Antarctic Honeymoon*, p. 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Sara Wheeler, *Terra Incognita: Travels in Antarctica* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1996), p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Helen Garner, ‘Regions of Thick-Ribbed Ice’, *The Feel of Steel* (Sydney: Picador-Pan Macmillan, 2001), pp. 13–34 at p. 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Robert Macfarlane, ‘Seeing the Light’, *The Guardian* 3 Jan. 2005, available at https://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/apr/02/featuresreviews.guardianreview35. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Barry Lopez, ‘Informed by Indifference: A Walk in Antarctica’, *Harper’s Magazine* 276 (1988), 66–8. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Barry Lopez, qtd in ‘Imagining the Arctic and Antarctic’, *The Book Show*, ABC Radio National, Australia, 18 Jan 2008. Online: www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/bookshow/imagining-the-arctic-and-antarctic/3293530#transcript. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Meredith Hooper, *The Ferocious Summer: Palmer’s Penguins and the Warming of Antarctica* (London: Profile, 2007), p. xviii. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)