The Spectral Arctic: a Cultural History of Ghosts and Dreams in Polar Exploration

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Author: Shane McCorristine

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Last year's prestigious AMC fictional drama *The Terror* traced the fate of John Franklin's crew from the moment the famous expedition in search of the Northwest Passage grinded to a halt in the Arctic ice near King William Island, in 1846, to the disappearance of second-in-command Francis Crozier, years later. The TV-series revealed an Arctic landscape at once empty in its vastness and ingested with a dreamlike quality. The Arctic unfolded as a place haunted by the supernatural as much as by Franklin and his men themselves, before and after their deaths. In a somewhat simplified form, *The Terror* captured (part of) Shane McCorristine's central argument in *The Spectral Arctic*. Though Victorians went to great lengths to paint the Arctic as a 'wilderness sublime' (p. 217) and its explorers as heroic examples of imperial spirit, both the landscape and the expeditions hold a spectral place in the history of Arctic exploration. McCorristine's book is mostly concerned with the significance of this place for the cultural production of the 'Arctic' as an idea and a narrative in Victorian Britain.

It does not suffice to write the history of (Arctic) exploration in terms of a 'great national effort', as Commander Franklin himself called it, nor simply as a matter of 'men and maps' (p. 4).^[1] [2] That realisation is not new in imperial historiography, which for some time now has turned its attention also to how explorers and colonisers imagined the regions they entered—historians have examined the construction of the 'other' in the heyday of Empire, a categorisation that extends also to the landscapes. Felix Driver and Luciana Martins' *Tropical Visions in an Age of Empire*, for example, has traced the components of the 'tropical' in Southeast Asia and northern Australia, and other scholars have done similar work on the conception of sub-Saharan Africa as the 'dark continent'.^[2] [3] Such categories were often deployed in service of the imperial project. In a similar fashion, by presenting the Arctic as a vast, cold emptiness explorers helped legitimise Britain's claims to the Far North. This book turns away from men and their maps and considers the history of Arctic exploration 'more like a mutable, unpredictable and opaque force which shadowed the ship' (p. 18). McCorristine enthusiastically peppers his prose with ghost, ship, and snow metaphors: tips of icebergs and dark icy depths feature throughout the text.

The Franklin expedition looms large over this book – understandably, given its lasting cultural impact and the many desperate attempts at communicating with the disappeared – though refreshingly it operates mostly

behind the stage, from where it propels the Victorian (and contemporary) imagination about the Arctic and inspires dreamlike ventures. Franklin's wife Jane is a more prominent force in *The Spectral Arctic* than John, and her role in the organisation of search expeditions for her husband is explored in detail. Those searches are both material and immaterial, physical and psychical, by ship and by mind. Strikingly, so McCorristine shows by a close reading of Jane Franklin's correspondence, these two modes of travel to the Arctic were not necessarily separated. The men on the ships searching for the Franklin expedition were sometimes informed by the mental maps of clairvoyant women; contrary to what was often presented as rational westerners encountering superstition abroad, explorers carried their own 'superstitious' behaviour with them on board. Including the spectral and the ghostlike into histories of exploration and shifting the focus to (British) women gives the book a particularly useful perspective to disentangle the intertwined notions of an imperial Arctic and the adventurous, male explorer. To do so, McCorristine engages with postcolonial theory throughout.

Stories of the uncanny sit uneasily within the mythology of 19th-century exploration, what McCorristine calls the 'heroic man versus harsh environment' myth (p. 16). The author points out how his aim is to 'stress the strangeness of men navigating, mapping and overwintering in the Arctic' (p. 228), something he achieves through spectral stories and alternative readings of previously studied sources. Imperial myths of masculinity have been under scholarly scrutiny for some time, successfully interweaving methods of body history and history of the senses and of emotions; shifting this scrutiny to colonial and exploration narratives of the polar regions – traditionally *terra incognita* for innovative imperial historiography – provides a refreshing and revealing viewpoint. By mid-century, as British quests of exploration pressed ever further land-inward for uncharted territory, the 'closing era of seaborne exploration' had set in and the seafaring explorer had begun to fade away from this grand mythology.^[3] [4] In the Arctic, however, still in the mid-19th century, oceanic exploration was as prestigious as it had been for the British Admiralty in earlier decades. This book is at its most convincing when challenging the 'rational masculinity' at the core of colonial explorations.

As *The Spectral Arctic* shows, the Arctic imagination was not only concerned with the 'heroic man' myth – the expanse of ice as testing ground for British masculinity – but also with an *imaginatio borealis*: the North as a place inhabited by the inexplicable, a Romantic landscape in which to walk and daydream and get lost. This imagination predates the heyday of British imperialism, as the edited volume *Imagining the Supernatural North* shows.^[4] [5] Margaret Atwood summarised this imagined North as 'uncanny, awe-inspiring in an almost religious way, hostile to white men, but alluring', a place that 'would lead you on and do you in [...] drive you crazy, and finally [...] claim you for its own'.^[5] [6] The Arctic was a place of fluid boundaries: between land and sea, between symbolic and spectral, conscious and unconscious, scientific and magical. On these unstable intersections, stories were shaped.

These are stories at odds with 'modernity'; despite their cultural resonance in the psychology of the 'modern experience' they were pushed to the margins in history – a development that parallels traditional historical writing on manifestations of the supernatural and uncanny. After an introduction in which McCorristine establishes the parameters of his argument but does little to situate the study within a substantial body of scholarship on the 'modern' supernatural in Britain, six chapters follow, each focusing on a particular branch of the spectral central to the Arctic imagination: travel, imaginary geographies, mesmerism and clairvoyance, spiritual routes, and the lasting imaginary impact of polar expeditions in contemporary culture (and politics).

That is ambitious for one book, and McCorristine shows considerable skill in presenting these topics as vital components of a larger story. The dreams and ghosts in the title are almost entirely of British making. Though understandable given its scope, and though it is hinted at every now and then throughout the book, the reviewer cannot help but wonder how the 'other side' in this cultural encounter – the Inuit voices – experienced spectral shifts in 'their' Arctic caused by British exploration. Those voices remain, for the most part, opaque and all the more fascinating because of it, as for example the persistent Inuit lore of a ghost ship sailing ever south, thought to be Franklin's spectral ship. McCorristine wisely focuses mostly on the spectres

of the Franklin expedition. The first chapter, 'Toward no earthly pole', hones in on the limits of the image of the Arctic explorer as a man 'inscribing British power and its ideals of enterprise and knowledge on an ever-unfinished map' (p. 22), and it stresses the necessity of including non-canonical sources into the history of exploration. It lays out an approach that has become possible through a reappraisal of certain kinds of sources previously dismissed as ephemeral to the history of polar exploration.

The uncanny, the unexplainable, and the supernatural in modern Britain have been the subject of a growing corpus of interdisciplinary scholarship for some time. McCorristine's previous book, *Spectres of the Self: Thinking about Ghosts and Ghost-seeing in England, 1750–1920*^[6] [7], successfully built on the methodological framework created by historians of witchcraft, spiritualism, and ghosts, like Owen Davies, Peter Marshall, and Keith Thomas. *The Spectral Arctic* complements and positions itself confidently within this corpus, which through various empirical lenses has mostly done away with the flawed but longstanding notion of a modernity devoid of magic and has instead drawn up a 19th century of re-enchantment by incorporating realms of imagination and experience into modern cultural history. This became possible by looking at 'non-authoritative' voices in records. What this first chapter does well is establish that explorers and the press were not the only authorities to shape British perceptions of the Arctic, but that non-explorers also played a significant role in exploration histories. Imperial exploration was a quest for knowledge, and when this quest left blanks others stepped in to provide alternative ways to fill them. *The Spectral Arctic's* source material reveals how other minds imagined the polar regions in myriad ways. They voiced their ideas in private diaries, in magazines, oral traditions, and correspondence, but also in fiction and, notably, in the visual and material cultures of Victorian Britain. There are important differences in tone and content between authoritative and 'non-authoritative' sources: McCorristine points out how the spectral and the supernatural are filtered out of print and official correspondence of explorers with home, so that a sterile narrative of rational, healthy men 'penetrating' a primordial, female Arctic represented either as fatal beauty or harsh mistress could be maintained. When turning to other sources, 'marvellous stories' deemed unfit for publication and often brimming with emotional, sensational, and uncanny details emerge – not only revealing the spectral, but also (home)sickness and bodily flaws.

The Arctic became a cultural register within 'domestic' British popular culture, where it took on various lives of its own, necessitating the integration of myriad sources, both printed and manuscript. Most manuscript sources used in *The Spectral Arctic* are found in the Scott Polar Research Institute in Cambridge, tellingly also Jane Franklin's archive. It is to McCorristine's credit that he has brought these often disparate, scattered sources together and woven them into a convincing argument of the 'dream-work' that constituted the imagined Arctic. When tapping into this cultural register, it becomes apparent that the distance between faraway Arctic regions and Britain did not diminish the vibrancy with which the Arctic was imagined across Victorian society, quite the contrary. The supernatural enables us to discern international spectral communities of transference and visions – a 'community of sensation', McCorristine described it in *Spectres of the Self* (chapter 4). In many ways, then, *The Spectral Arctic's* recurring themes are communication, connection, reaching out, and the production and distribution of information across a spectral geography.

Instead of stories of isolation and emptiness, McCorristine excavates stories that connected the Arctic to 'home', explorers to Inuit. Chapter two, 'Spectral geographies of the Arctic', draws those connections by looking at how the explorer observed and moved through the Arctic landscape, whether by ship, on foot, or in dreams. Drawing from private journals, this chapter effectively conjures up an Arctic in which to wander, to grave-dig, or to gather geographical information were *strange* actions, ingested with 'dreaminess and reverie' (p. 78), and taking place within a geography that was simultaneously material and spectral. At this point it would have been useful to situate the explorers' dreamy travels and travails more explicitly within scholarship that links the supernatural to mental states, as Carlo Ginzburg did with shamanism in *Storia Notturna* (Turin, 1989. Translated as *Ecstasies* (London, 1990)[7] [8]) and, more recently, work that has considered alternative and 'interim' states of consciousness in colonial settings.[8] [9] The Arctic, then, did not solely exist in Britain as a space in which to project otherness. As well as outlining *what* was known and imagined—the cultural production of the 'Arctic'—the book also establishes how that knowledge was distributed, curated, and controlled within a knowledge hierarchy.

The third chapter, on the deployment of mesmerism and clairvoyance in the search for Franklin and his crew, shows the limits of that hierarchy and builds on McCorristine's contribution to *Imagining the Supernatural North*. [9] [10] At sixty pages this chapter can be somewhat disorienting to readers, because it leads into lengthy passages on the cultural impact of mesmerism and clairvoyance, and because of its thematic closeness to the next chapter, which shifts emphasis to the involvement of spiritualists in the Franklin affair. McCorristine sees a transition in the supernatural ways of dealing with the disappearance of the Franklin expedition from mesmeric clairvoyance to spiritualism and séance, a shift he situates around 1850-1852, shortly after the Fox sisters experienced their 'rapping'. Taken together, these two chapters lay out a web of connections and responses to the disaster, in which the figure of Jane Franklin comes to the fore and in which "'plain, ignorant, common looking" maidservants from Bromsgrove, Worcestershire [were] able to maintain a community of sensation binding together elite networks and individuals' (p. 121).

Spectral histories are intensely gendered histories; clairvoyant and spiritualist women travelled to an imperial space imagined as masculine, and they established spiritual connections between Britain and the Arctic that—importantly in a period when news from the Arctic was scarce and travelled slowly—offered ways of communication that were instantaneous and therefore seemingly unmediated. These chapters usefully complement Adriana Craciun's *Writing Arctic disaster: Authorship and Exploration*. The fifth chapter shifts focus to the emotional registers deployed in the aftermath of the Franklin expedition by analysing the British perceptions of polar exploration through the prism of gender and romantic (haunted) fiction. These often dramatic renderings of Arctic expeditions served as a cultural catharsis for British people after disaster had struck, McCorristine argues.

The Arctic and the Northwest Passage were places of Empire long before Franklin disappeared, and they are places of Empire still. John Dee (1527-1608/9), Queen Elisabeth's adviser and court magician, argued for the exploration of a potential Northwest Passage as an important asset to English imperial claims in the sixteenth century. If the Arctic was constructed conceptually in support of such power structures, its alternative, spectral character (and that of Arctic exploration) disrupted hierarchies of knowledge and empirical discourse. The final chapter, 'The spectral place of the Franklin expedition', and the afterword trace the cultural impact of the Franklin voyage in contemporary culture. Just as in the 19th century, 20th- and 21st-century fiction revels in spectral Arctic motifs. And as in the Victorian age so too do these motifs exist in tension with contemporary geo- and cultural politics in the modern day. After a lengthy overview of Franklin in fiction – *The Terror* is mentioned – McCorristine shifts to how the Franklin expedition is once more deployed in service of matters of sovereignty, national identity, and economic interest. A haunted history is never past. In the 21st century, the re-telling of the Franklin expedition in terms of heroic exploration and the searches that eventually led to the discovery of the *Erebus* (2014) and the *Terror* (2016) were intended to ingest the Arctic with a Canadian identity ('Canada's moon shot', the *Toronto Star* headlined when the *Erebus* was discovered) – and to add leverage to the Canadian claim of Arctic oil and gas reserves. Not coincidentally, Shell was involved in the search for the Franklin vessels. Touching upon

the cultural, economic, and geographical politics surrounding polar exploration, it would have been interesting to include in its spectral history the role of the Hudson's Bay Company, which functioned as a semi-autonomous colonial state and the employees of which often encountered the indigenous populations in the decades preceding scientific explorers. Other institutions of empire do feature, from museums to zoos to the Royal Geographical Society, which took on the role of promoter of the 'national hero' from its founding in 1830. These institutions legitimised empire in the Arctic as everywhere else by effectively silencing spectral voices.

In conclusion, *The Spectral Arctic* is a valuable study that adds an important perspective to the vein of scholarship that offers a revaluation of the role of the supernatural in Victorian modernity by highlighting how it was steeped in colonial discourse and then nimbly offering an alternative way in. McCorristine's argument, that the spectral is a valuable perspective into imperialism and exploration, is a powerful one, and opens up the field to larger histories of spectral empire that can disrupt the tired 'core/periphery model'. The account of the clairvoyants' searches for Franklin, for example, shows striking similarities to that of the Prussian explorer Leichhardt who disappeared in the Australian Outback in 1848 (p. 136); a disappearance that also sparked clairvoyant travels. Did other colonial powers experience dreams and ghosts differently, in the Arctic and elsewhere?

This is a thought-provoking, inspiring book, important in its approach to the study of the supernatural, and timely in its challenge of polar exploration and cultural encounters in the Arctic. The artistic perspectives to those cultural encounters (of both Inuit and Western artists) are beautifully curated in the recent exhibition 'Polar encounters: 200 years of contemporary and historical polar art' at Bonhams in London. *The Spectral Arctic* is, moreover, freely available in open access.^[10] [11] McCorristine shows how the Arctic was not frozen in time, but a historical, embodied, and spectral place in which people moved, thought, and dreamt. This is plenty for one book, though one cannot help but wish that *The Spectral Arctic* engaged more with other spectral histories of the British Empire. That is not a criticism; it is a call for larger, comparative studies that take seriously the cultural power of dreams and ghosts in the history of Empire. *The Spectral Arctic* addresses an under-researched subject that should be of interest to anyone working on the history of the Arctic and Empire. How we think about the Arctic in its 19th-century forms – spectral and other – affects our approach to the Arctic today. The past can haunt the present, so argues McCorristine in his afterword, 'it hangs around in landscapes, bodies, dreams and stories' (p. 233). In turn, so much is clear, we in the present haunt the past.

[1] [12] Franklin, 1854, 11, quoted in McCorristine, p. 201.

[2] [13] Felix Driver and Luciana Martins, *Tropical Visions in an Age of Empire* (Chicago, IL, 2005).

[3] [14] Dane Kennedy, 'British exploration in the nineteenth century: a historiographical survey', *History Compass*, 5, 6 (2007), 1879–1900.

[4] [15] *Imagining the Supernatural North*, ed. Eleanor Rosamund Barraclough, Danielle Marie Cudmore and Stefan Donecker (Edmonton, AL, 2016).

[5] [16] Margaret Atwood, *Strange Things: the Malevolent North in Canadian Literature* (Oxford, 1995), p. 22.

[6] [17] Shane McCorristine, *Spectres of the Self: Thinking about Ghosts and Ghost-seeing in England, 1750-1920* (Cambridge, 2010).

[7] [18] Carlo Ginzburg, *Storia Notturna* (Turin, 1989. Translated as *Ecstasies* (London, 1990)).

[8] [19] See, for example, Johannes Fabian, *Out of Our Minds: Reason and Madness in the Exploration of Central Africa*

(Berkeley, CA, 2000).

[9] [20] Shane McCorristine, 'Mesmerism and Victorian Arctic Exploration', in *Imagining the Supernatural North*, pp. 149–64.

[10] [21] <<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/ucl-press/browse-books/the-spectral-arctic> [22]> [accessed 14 August 2018].

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