"I hope none have miscarried": Letters and the Imaginary Space of the Arctic

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Abstract
This article addresses the way in which letters are part of the legend of Arctic exploration, along with maps, journals and published accounts. There are many kinds of letters associated with expeditions, from official letters, an intrinsic part of the paraphernalia of preparation, implementation and circulation, to personal letters, that may voice more contradictory messages. Beginning with Scoresby's letter to the Admiralty, the article engages with the proliferation of messages during land expeditions, and the buried notes beckoning to explorers at sea, before switching to the Gothic fragment found in a cairn – the last news of Franklin's lost expedition. Thus letters frame the fiction of heroic exploration, leading back to the narrative threshold of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein,* exposing the lure and gender politics of Arctic ventures.

Key-words: Arctic, circulation, *Frankenstein*, John Franklin, letter.

The nineteenth-century Arctic narrative spreads through print and visual culture, from panoramas and newspaper articles to explorers' narratives, as Potter (2007) and Cavell (2008) have shown. John Murray tapped into the period's taste for the unknown and turned exploration into an editorial adventure, including maps for instance in Franklin's 1823 *Narrative* and Finden's engravings of Hood's and Back's watercolours (like the two tiny canoes battling the green Polar sea), turning readers into armchair explorers. But there is a fringe of writing that, as Brazzelli (2014) or Craciun (2016) suggest, also belongs to this Grand Narrative. In a flickering, intermittent way, letters also contribute to the magnetic pull of the North in the British cultural imagination. Whether official or personal, letters are significant fragments that resist taxonomy, often opening an in-between space, mediating the official and the personal, the public and the private. It is their

ability to cross borders that we wish to study here, from official letters and homely letters, to ambivalent fictional letters.

1. Prelude: Scoresby's letter and the beginning of the tale

While *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* created a haunting poetic vision of the ice in 1798, paving the way for future journeys by casting a spell on people's imagination, climatic conditions and national confidence after the Napoleonic wars determined the return to the Polar maze (in spite of past failures, from Frobisher to Cook). Indeed, a letter sent by William Scoresby to Joseph Banks on the second of October 1817, may well have triggered the "concatenation"[1] of polar journeys that followed. Scoresby, a whaler-cum-scientist who had studied ice crystals, had noticed that there were fewer whales and less ice that year, and with impeccable *kairos* sensed that such conditions might favour exploration: "Had I been so fortunate as to have had the command of an expedition for discovery, instead of fishing, I have little doubt that the mystery attached to the existence of a north west passage might have been resolved" (Scoresby in Wood 2014: 127).

Joseph Banks trusted Scoresby, but Banks was an aging man on the wane; power really belonged to the younger Second Secretary to the Admiralty, John Barrow[2]. Barrow latched onto Scoresby's letter, which gave the scientific data needed to convince the Admiralty and the Government to fund a new expedition – but he refused to appoint Scoresby. No whaler would lead a British expedition – the honour was reserved for the likes of Parry, Buchan, or Franklin – Royal Navy officers who lacked the professional experience and the acumen of Scoresby. Thus the letter may have reached its addressee, and scored its point; it may also be said to have miscarried, since

[1] "Out of one of his letters to Sir Joseph Banks, bearing the date 2nd October 1817, arose that concatenation of modern expeditions in search of a *per* glacial navigation from the Atlantic to the Pacific, which has given to British sailors a reputation for courage, endurance, and discipline such as no other service could have established". (Scoresby-Jackson 2011: 118).

[2] In February, Barrow had published a eulogy of Britain's quest for the Northwest Passage since the Elizabethan era. This was a seminal article in many ways, since it also came under Mary Shelley's eyes, when she picked up a copy of the *Quarterly Review* and read a review of Byron next to it (D'Arcy Wentwood 2014: 125).

Scoresby was overlooked, and it took a long time before the missing link prompting the British return to the arctic was acknowledged.

2. A network of letters

The expeditions themselves rely upon their own neural network of letters, the talisman of the written word easing conquest. The first type of letter is official and practical, like the "cordial letters of recommendation" (Franklin 2005: 3) issued in London, meant to propitiate the representatives of the Hudson's Bay Company and the Northwest Company during Franklin's first expedition by land. To such *sesames* must be added an array of requests. Franklin's letter to the Colonial Department on February 19, 1824, for instance, lays down a complex year-long strategy – the Hudson's Bay Company must take wood to build a winter fort to Bear Lake at once, then the Hudson's Bay boat will bring guns, clothes, tea, etc; the last load will be carried by the members of the expedition themselves, in the Spring of 1825. (Franklin 1998: 290). But this is only a fraction of the planning involved: Franklin and Richardson are supposed to meet with, respectively, Beechey's ship in the East and Parry's ship in the West, along the Arctic coast. The practical and performative web of instructions is thus meant to increase the probability of such chance encounters, regardless of the unpredictable ice and weather.

Besides, within each of these ventures, letters make it possible to open channels of information back and forth. As often as possible, bulletins are sent to London and the Admiralty, with samples, measurements and drawings. Among the members of the expedition, letters provide the only means of telecommunication before the invention of phone or radio. But they must be carried, and once again this implies tremendous effort and delay. In October 1820, George Back braves hundreds of miles to return to Fort Providence with two voyageurs and two Indian couples; they have to climb "a towering, almost perpendicular rock", eat some *tripe de roche*, and Back falls through ice when walking over a lake; as soon as they get there, one voyageur retraces his steps with an Indian couple, reaching Fort Enterprise after walking alone for 36 hours in a snowstorm:

> As soon as his packet was thawed, we eagerly opened it to obtain our English letters. The latest were dated on the preceding April. They came

by way of Canada, and were brought up in September to Slave Lake by the North-West Company's canoes. (Franklin 2005: 222)

The letters' journey is wondrous too.

As the tale unfolds, letters become more dramatic. Clipped messages are exchanged after the disastrous march across the Barrens, when Back and a couple of their Canadian "voyageurs" are looking for the Indians, while Franklin is struggling to survive at Fort Enterprise with the other remaining voyageurs, on the verge of starvation. Belanger (a voyageur) appears with a note from Back, saying he has failed to find the Indians and requires instructions. Franklin carefully packs (and leaves in the fort) the journals of the officers, the charts and a letter to the British Under-Secretary of State, then ventures in search of Back (with Benoit and Augustus, a voyageur and an interpreter); he falls, breaks his snow-shoe and must crawl back to Fort Enterprise, but not before writing a note to Back, and a letter for "the gentleman in charge of" Fort Providence, should Benoit "miss Mr Back" (p. 391), clearly an impossible journey for such a weak man. Letters, here, become the last thread of control over chaos, the last attempt not simply to communicate, but to make impossible feats possible through the talismanic virtue of the written word, on the razor edge between sanity and insanity. Once saved by the Indians, the indefatigable Belanger and Back walk to Fort Providence, so that food and the letters from England may be retrieved. Those include the "gratifying intelligence of the successful termination of Captain Parry's voyage" (p. 415); that is to say, the ironic news that, however successful, Parry had returned as early as October 1820, making the desperate venture along the coast up to Point Turnagain an absurd gamble[3]. Moreover, though by that time the rival Hudson's Bay Company and North-West Company had merged, they refused to grant the goods that were promised as a reward to the Indian chief Akaitcho and his men.

Thus letters are meant to prompt a circulation of information that should foreshadow the circulation of ships and goods via the Northwest Passage. However, this circulation of notes fails to be

[3] Parry had indeed ventured further than anyone before, due to exceptional weather conditions, he sailed again 1821-1823, but did not repeat the feat: he never got close to Franklin.

performative, and suggests the fantasmatic nature of the whole attempt.

3. Letters that miscarry: opening the space of colonial fantasy

Holding the thin, fragile, yellowing paper of such letters in the McCord Museum brings home Derrida's notion that archives trespass on privacy:

> It is thus, in this domiciliation, in this house arrest, that archives take place. The dwelling, this place where they dwell permanently, marks this institutional passage from the private to the public, which does not always mean from the secret to the nonsecret. (Derrida 1995: 2-3)

Among them, for instance, Franklin's 1845 last letter to his niece Sophy Cracroft (written aboard the *Erebus*) mostly conveys the "separation the Arctic literally and symbolically demands between males 'away' and females 'at home'" (Hill 2008: 7). The woman is the addressee, the man sails away; for Jenn Hill, "[e]xploring and mapping the arctic was a self-conscious exercise in masculine identity-building taking place in an "empty" space in print culture". (p. 7) Towards the end of the second Franklin expedition by land, an 1826 letter written by Richardson to his wife reveals how such letters operate within a complex system: this letter will reach Mary at the same time as the one sent a month before; she has time to reply "addressing your letter to be left at the Post Office New York to be called for"; and Richardson, tracing the respective journey those last letters are about to take, hopes that none of his former letters "have miscarried"[4].

He deems Franklin's journey "full of peril and difficulties, but more successful than could have been hoped, under such circumstances"[5], and so little coast must be left to map that Beechey

[4] John Richardson, Letter to Mary Richardson, November 10, 1826; McCord Museum archive, Montreal. I wish to thank here the McCord Museum, as well as the students and teachers of the Montreal/Paris 3 doctoral seminar.

[5] During this second journey, Franklin was plagued by fog, and here Richardson kindly refrains from saying that he was more successful in his survey along the other side of the coast than his superior officer.

"can scarcely fail in completing it"[6]. Yet the letter's disenchanted conclusion is a far cry from the tone of published texts praising the elusive but forthcoming discovery:

> The search after the passage has employed three centuries but now that it may be considered as completed, the discovery will I suppose be committed like Juliet to the tomb of the Capulets, unless something more powerful than steam can render it available for the purpose of commercial gain. (Richardson 1826)

The mock-Shakespearian image suggests that even for such a loyal, determined doctor-cum-explorer as Richardson, the quest for the Northwest Passage is a Romantic construct, rather than a viable means of communication.

And the letters that do miscarry might be read as symptoms of that national fantasy, that failed romance of the North turned Gothic nightmare. One may think of Franklin duly writing letters to his wife Eleanor towards the beginning of the second expedition by land, while she had already died, unbeknownst to him.

But the real measure of Arctic romance are the messages that abide by the Admiralty's scenario and testify to the belief in, and longing for, an impossible meeting. During the first expedition, Franklin sailed from the mouth of the Copper-Mine river "tracing the deeply-indented coast for five hundred and fifty-five geographical miles" (Franklin 2005: 342). In spite of the voyageurs' opposition (terrified as they were of sailing in the two bark canoes with a dwindling store of pemmican), Franklin stubbornly carried on until the 18th of August, far too late in the season. His decision was to cost the lives of Hood and many of the voyageurs; it can only be understood in the light of his hope of meeting Parry somewhere along the coast, so that they would not have to retrace their steps. In spite of the bitter decision to turn around at the ominous, aptly named Point Turnagain, Franklin claims at that point of the *Narrative* that his "researches, as far as they have gone, favour the opinion of those who contend for the practicability of a North-West Passage" (p. 342) and expresses his "sanguine hopes" (p. 343) that Parry will solve the riddle. And he fondly imagines Parry finding

[6] This time indeed, Beechey and Franklin were relatively close.

a post erected at the mouth of Hood's river, "with a flag upon it, and a letter at the foot of it, which may convey to him some useful information" (pp. 343-344).

The small body of text buried at the foot of the post functions as a national landmark, as well as a votive, performative ritual. In this dizzying aleatory whirl of rendezvous and meeting points in an unknown, uncharted immensity, it is an attempt to inscribe British coordinates upon the blank page of the Arctic. Addressed to Parry or some later explorer, the note is an open letter, gesturing to whoever may come. The strategic plan turns into endless expectation, the symptom of a desire that can never be fulfilled; the buried letter is a loose thread in a deceptive plot, in the tangled skein of Western prejudices and preconceptions – it will never reach its destination, never give its gift of map and coordinates. Madly posted at the bottom of a pole (a meagre one, never the North pole), somewhere along the coast, by the mouth of a river, what it really signals is the fatal possibility of erring, the unhinging of imaginary space and the meeting of the Real, the bleak reality of the a-signifying landscape. Precisely because it fails to reach its destination and speaks of the colonial project as an impossible match, the endlessly deferred letter is the cipher of imperial desire.

The same wild hopes recur during the second expedition, as Franklin still clings to the dream of meeting Parry or Beechey. On the 23rd of March 1826, Franklin sends McVicar at York Factory three pages of questions for the Indians: "A report has just reached us, as to the probability of Capt Parry wintering this Season on the Northern Coast of this Continent" (Franklin 1998: 363). Though the clues are somewhat sparse (the rumour concerns an unskinned deer, saws and axes) he asks him to forward a letter to Barrow, since the Admiralty and the British public must be told the good news. Along the coast, like Beechey, he erects a landmark and buries a letter "announcing our arrival, the object of the expedition, and the Latitude Longitude & Variation last observed" (p. 238). Once again, letters were meant as a kind of magic seed that might blossom into an encounter that was never to take place.

Not all such letters failed to reach a reader. Buried letters remain adrift, spectral presences waiting to be revived, as when, in 1915, Vilhjalmur Stefansson found a message deposited by McClintock in 1853 (during the search for Franklin):

> There was a thrill about unrolling that damp and fragile sheet and reading the message from our great predecessor which had been lying there awaiting us for more than half a century. We felt it as marvellous that his steady hand was so legible after so long a time. It brought the past down to us, quite as wonderfully as it did for me five years later to talk in London with McClintock's wife, still hale and charming, and with his sons, and to be shown the manuscript diary of the day he wrote this message. (Stefansson in McCorristine 2010: 63)

Like living skin, the letter unfolds, making it possible to reach out for the "hand"[7], the handwriting but also the very hand of a previous explorer, resurrecting romance: "Here the text is the life: the ink laboriously thawed out in the Frozen North is akin to blood in its immediate connection with fellow-explorers and with the lover back at home" (McCorristine 2010: 63). It is a wonder, for Stefansson, that search parties attempting to shadow the vanished expedition may find such tiny messages, but not the actual bodily remains of Franklin and his gallant crew. For McCorristine the buried letter becomes the textual body, literally the metaphor that stands in for the lost men.

But sometimes the buried message fails to revive the past, like the hybrid document, a cross between an official form, a log, a message in a bottle, a letter or a testament, discovered by Hobson and McClintock in 1859. The paradoxical document is a heterotopia[8] in itself. The form bears a few lines printed in different languages, asking for the document to be sent to the Admiralty, but all those languages (English, French, Spanish, German, Danish) are European languages, plotting a lifeline that is in itself alien to the Arctic. The "letter" may operate as a proof of presence, but it offers at best a deconstructed plot. It begins at the top with a date, May 23, 1847, a longitude and latitude, the names of the ships; then follows the signature of "Sir John Franklin Commanding the expedition", to which is added with a flourish, "All well". But Crozier's scribbling in the margins unleashes a very different tale, like an unravelling ball of yarn. Franklin died less than a month later, on June 11th, 1847;

[7] We may think here of popular ballads and Stan Rogers' song: "Ah, for just one time, I would take the Northwest Passage, / to find the hand of Franklin, reaching for the Beaufort sea".

[8] A concept Foucault applies to ships, for instance (Foucault 1984: 49).

the *Erebus* and the *Terror* were abandoned on the 22nd of April 1848. The remaining men are to head on foot for Back's Fish River on the next day, the 26th of April. This split, schizophrenic document projects the reader within the realm of the event, the catastrophe, the hereafter[9]. The letter itself is a diseased body; writing goes viral, gnawing the edges of the form, with this tale of disaster where things do not quite add up, in a tantalizing riddle that can never be solved in the absence of a proper log. An epistemological challenge, the letter becomes the men's monument, the cairn a cenotaph. Or, in Derridian terms, "the archive in question would be a ghost archive, heteronomous, metaphorical, an errancy" (Appelbaum 2009: 109). With this scribbled form[10], the Admiralty shifts from the fairy-tale message of would-be mythical encounters to the Gothic inscription of disaster. The message in the cairn remains a stunted landmark, a letter that reaches out yet miscarries.

4. The epistolary frame: exploration's "hideous progeny"[11]

In this light, the epistolary frame of *Frankenstein* becomes more intriguing. Adriana Craciun makes a fascinating link between the Franklin expedition and *Frankenstein*, quoting an 1821 letter to George Back (written before the harrowing ordeal began[12]), where John Richardson playfully compares an Indian woman to Frankenstein's creature, an allusion that was censored by his biographer (Craciun 2016: 95).

Critics have often failed to pay attention to the Arctic opening of *Frankenstein*; for Peter Brooks, Walton's sister "has no more existence in the novel than a postal address".(Brooks in Hill 2008: 56) The letters were seen as a Gothic frame, a witness's account helping to suspend disbelief before the supernatural/scientific creation

[9] Poe's purloined letter was an elegant letter turned inside out like a glove, disguised and soiled with dirty handwriting; the document here is both letters at the same time, the official document and its own reversible double, turned inside out.

[10] It was printed in newspapers and struck people's imagination.

[11] "And now, once again, I bid my hideous progeny go forth and prosper". Mary Shelley, "Author's Introduction to the Standard Novels Edition (1831)", in *Frankenstein* (1994: 197).

[12] One of the voyageurs turned to cannibalism, shot Hood, and was shot by Richardson, who had also probably been made to eat human flesh.

scene[13]. But this is no manuscript found in an old dusty chest. The pastiche of epistolary exchange is more than mere *parergon*, it is a living frame which is entwined with Victor's tale, in a network of correspondences[14].

Frankenstein owes much to the (at the time unexplained) climatic change of 1816, "the year without a summer", with its constant spell of rain and frost, as the ashes of the eruption of Mount Tambora spread and cooled Europe; this indirectly led to the Villa Diodati bet (Mary, Percy, Polidory and Byron vying to write the best short story); paradoxically, this also led to the simultaneous warming of the poles and Scoresby's letter (Wood 2014: 124-126).

The novel taps into the Romantic sublime; the meeting between creature and creature on the ice of the Alps echoes Percy's *Mont Blanc*, while Walton refers to *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*[15]:

> I am going to unexplored regions, to 'the land of mist and snow;' but I shall kill no albatross, therefore do not be alarmed for my safety, or if I should come back to you as worn and woeful as 'the Ancient Mariner'. (Shelley 1993: 10)

One senses the pull of the North, leading to the final (offstage) oxymoron, the monster's funereal pyre on the ice. Besides, with the crew's ominous discontent, we are not far from Friedrich's eerie 1824 *Sea of Ice*, inspired by Parry's journeys, with its pyramid of broken ice devouring the ship which dwindles into details. Yet Shelley's choice is topical as much as aesthetic.

Walton's opening letter is sent from Russia, echoing contemporary rivalry (Barrow claimed that letting the Russians discover the Passage would be akin to national suicide). Walton's musings in the opening letters, his anaphoric incantation directly echo Barrow's own unshakeable belief in the theory of the Open Sea:

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[13] Letters function as a reality checkpoint in the novel, like the copy of Safie's letters Walton sends to his sister, as Zonana points out.

[14] The circulation of letters is part of the textual patchwork, turning the novel into a body composed of *disjecta membra*, like the creature.

[15] Coleridge drew inspiration from the journeys of Cook and Shelvocke. We might add that, just as the wedding guest cannot choose but hear, a spellbound Walton listens to the woeful tales of Victor and his creature.

There, Margaret, the sun is for ever visible […] There – for with your leave, my sister, I will put some trust in preceding navigators – there snow and frost are banished; and sailing over a calm sea, we may be wafted to a land surpassing in wonders and in beauty every region hitherto discovered on the habitable globe. (p. 4)

Walton's Arctic is a construct, an imaginary projection; the expedition can only encounter the Real, the ominous Other which fails to be pliable, both the resisting ice and the monster.

Interestingly enough, Victor himself identifies geographic and medical hubris: "Unhappy man! Do you share my madness?" (p. 17)[16]. Thus the letters become part of the novel's ethical and philosophical debate, as Walton wonders which course to take. Geography is a metaphor for ontological erring. Victor falls into error[17] because he fails to foresee the consequences of his act; his singular error goes viral, decimates the system[18].

This may bring to mind the letter written to James Ross on July 9, 1845, by Francis Moira Crozier, captain of the *Terror* and second in command of the expedition, confiding how "sadly alone" and full of forebodings he felt:

All things are going well and quietly but we are I fear sadly late – […] What I fear is that from our being so late we shall have no time to look round and judge for our selves, but blunder into the Ice and make a second 1824 of it –[19]

As if foreseeing such a "blunder" and its dire consequences, the novel's epistolary matrix must be read obliquely as a critique of Imperial geography.

[16] Indeed, Walton evokes Victor's tale in maritime terms, a metaphor which binds together the two attempts: "Strange and harrowing must be his story; frightful the storm which embraced the gallant vessel on its course, and wrecked it – thus!" (p. 20)
[17] See Giora Hon's "fall into error": "error is associated with unavoidable ignorance, – when one gropes, so to speak, in the dark. Metaphorically, a mistake occurs when one goes wrong on terra firma, but going astray in one's exploration of terra incognita amounts to an error". (Hon 1995: 12)
[18] Like Coleridge's poem (with the spontaneous unmotivated murder of the albatross), the novel explores the capacity for cruelty in Victor and the creature.
[19] http://www.canadianmysteries.ca/sites/franklin/archive/text/CrozierRoss_en.htm, last accessed June 10, 2016.

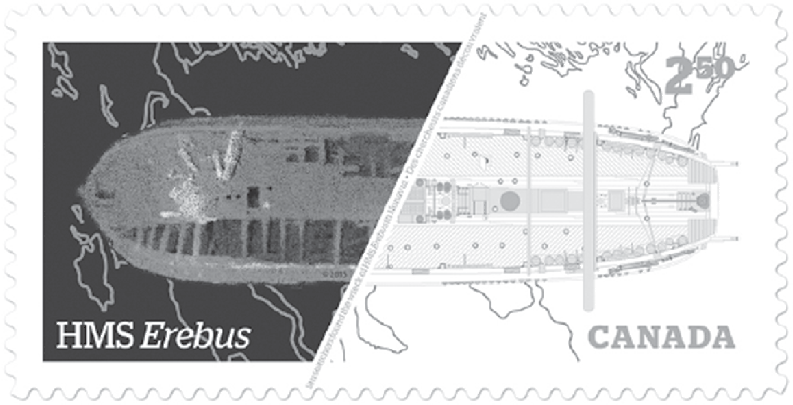
This raises the question of the silent (silenced?) addressee. We never have access to Walton's sister's response, which presumably miscarries and fails to reach him, though he begs her to write to him "by every opportunity" (p. 11). Jenn Hill contrasts *Frankenstein* with Eleanor Porden's *The Arctic Expeditions*, published in 1818. Porden's poem celebrates Arctic explorers, like an open letter to the likes of Parry and Ross; Porden embraces the forbidden foreign space and reclaims it, as a textual area of intensity open to a woman's imagination[20]. Thus both Shelley and Porden "use the polar world as a space in which to imagine and critique women's position in narratives of scientific and national progress" (Hill 2008: 7), but from radically different angles. For Hill, Shelley was "trying to make visible national demands on women that remain largely invisible in a culture that glorifies and allegorizes male participation in war and exploration" (p. 7).

The whole tale is addressed to Mrs Saville, but she remains at home, defined by her husband's name, attached to "sa ville", moored to the world of cities, cut off from the Arctic. Insisting on the homosocial dimension of Walton's longing for a friend "who could sympathize" with him (Shelley 1993: 8), Shelley draws attention to the politics of gender and challenges exploration's fantasmatic hubris: "there is a love of the marvellous, a belief in the marvellous, intertwined in all my projects" says Walton (p. 11). Just as Virginia Woolf in *Three Guineas* refuses to make a gift, to be hailed by the letter she has received and to countersign its rhetorical demand, a case of counter-interpellation, as Regard (2002) argues, Mary Shelley's ventriloquizing of explorers' letters may well be a case of rhetorical subversion, indeed a "postal address" in the other sense of the word. Walton's sister hovers beyond the frame, excluded, her repeated warnings unheeded. Walton's dreams are to be ironically debunked by his actual journey. Just as Woolf imagines the life of Shakespeare's sister, equally gifted but doomed by gender, Mary Shelley forces us to envisage Walton's sister, tantalizingly out of reach, silenced and cut off, yet the ultimate addressee of the entire tale. Thus these

[20] This appealed to Franklin and Eleanor was to become his unlikely wife on his return from his first expedition by land.

letters that may or may not miscarry are an intrinsic part of Mary Shelley's "hideous progeny": they deliver the unspoken, unseen tale of the gendered politics of arctic exploration, further opening a space of "dissensus", to use Rancière's concept, as opposed to the consensus of colonial print culture.

Thus letters cast their own light on the panorama of Imperial tactics for conquering the North; they may also reveal its implosion, as when John Rae's 1854 letter to the Admiralty that disclosed the fate of Franklin and the infamous "content of the kettles", was surprisingly reprinted *verbatim* in newspapers, triggering scandal in a Frankensteinian split, where the monster turns out to be the product of the self. Let us end with a perhaps fitting image, the postal stamp that was issued to celebrate the discovery of the fabled *Erebus* in 2015. Canadian Prime Minister Ben Harper hailed this as the solution to a great mystery, a triumph for Canadian identity – thus in a way reading the archaeological find as a letter reaching its destination, a text that may stamp Canada's supremacy in the Arctic as legitimate, in the context of global rivalry for geological exploitation (regardless of deep ecology). Let us see the stamp, rather, as a symptom of the ongoing wonder of lost ships, and of the circulation of a message that might still miscarry…



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