theories and methodologies

The Frozen Ocean

ADRIANA CRACIUN

We'll get crushed by the ocean but it will not get us wet.
—Isaac Brock, "Invisible" (2007)

"THERE IS NO SEA WITH WHICH OUR AGE IS SO IMPERFECTLY ACQUAINTED AS THE FROZEN OCEAN," WROTE THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY RUSSIAN hydrographer Gavriil Sarychev, "and no empire which has more powerful motives and resources for extending its information, in this quarter, than Russia" (iii). Russia's Great Northern Expedition of the 1730s and later expeditions, like Sarychev's in 1785, mapped the shores of the Arctic Ocean across continental Asia, an impressive feat by any century's standards. Meanwhile, the American shores of the Arctic Ocean remained entirely unknown to the European empires (England, France, Spain) most interested in passing to and from the Pacific and Atlantic oceans via the Northwest and Northeast passages. Alexander MacKenzie, Samuel Hearne, and John Franklin, each traveling with native people, walked thousands of miles to reach the Frozen Ocean, leaving in their wake the occasional human disaster and an unimpeachable record of publishing successes, like MacKenzie's *Voyages from Montreal to the Frozen Ocean* (1801) and Franklin's *Narrative of a Journey to the Shores of the Polar Sea* (1824).

While the Arctic coastlines gradually became visible thanks to the treks of the British and the Russians (and the Arctic coastal people on whom they depended), the interior of the Arctic Ocean remained the least understood maritime space on the planet, as it still does today. With such an inviting absence of knowledge, one could imagine virtually anything to inhabit the Arctic Ocean—mysterious continents, ice or land bridges joining America and Asia, ice-free passages, temperate utopias, and gateways into the planetary core or into other dimensions, crowned by multifarious visions of the North Pole (Hayes; Mirsky; Spufford). The significance of Arctic speculations for European Enlightenment efforts to envision global circuits of commerce, culture, and knowledge (see Craciun) remains invisible in recent interdisciplinary work on both eighteenth-century globalization and the oceanic

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(Steinberg; Horden and Purcell; Lambert, Martins, and Ogborn). Simultaneously fluid and solid, turbulent and rigid (but rarely tranquil), the Frozen Ocean posed unique problems for oppositional "ideologies of land and sea" that, as Christopher Connery has shown, were fundamental to the ability of capitalist models of global power to eclipse "a host of other visions of maritime space" ("Ideologies" 179).[1] I will focus on Britain's well-publicized attempts to dominate Arctic exploration in the second half of the eighteenth century and in the nineteenth century, when Britain's maritime power, the basis for European hegemonic models of "the ocean as global space" (177), reached its limits in the Arctic. Because of the Frozen Ocean's exceptionalism, elemental ideologies of oceanic fluidity became obstacles to the Europeans charged with traversing these icy seas like any other oceanic space. Both the widespread Anglo-European resistance to the existence of a Frozen Ocean and later British attempts to territorialize such an oceanic space illuminate how the world's greatest maritime power struggled unsuccessfully to assimilate the Arctic into its globalizing vision of providential oceanic fluidity and help explain why it switched its attention to the continental exploration of Antarctica by the end of the nineteenth century.

In 2010, when an ice-free Arctic Ocean open to commercial shipping may be only a few decades away, we are participants in the newest turn in the struggle to make the Arctic conform to temperate and tropical models, as diverse national, transnational, and indigenous groups stake their claims in new disputes made possible by the Arctic's increasing fluidity. Posing unusually complex problems for maritime and international law (see Pharand), as well as for questions of transcontinental indigenous belonging, environmental protection, resource extraction, and scientific collaboration, this unique oceanic space continues to test our partial models (of the international, the global, the planetary, the universal, the elemental) with uncommon force.

Frozen Ocean and Open Polar Sea

Enlightenment metropolitan consumers were connected to the global marketplace through the world's oceans, considered by the English as providentially disposed to their commercial empire. Elizabethan merchant adventurers had prioritized a passage through the Frozen Ocean to India and Cathay to "feed those heathen nations with our commodities" (Hakluyt 437). In *The Worldes Hydrographical Description* (1595), John Davis maintained that God decreed both that the ocean could not freeze and that the northernmost Arctic was habitable, "for otherwise nature should bee monstrous, and his creation wast" (222)—in fact, the Greenlanders he encountered were "blessed" with "perpetuall light, and never know what darknesse meaneth, by the benefit of twylight and full moones" (223). Establishing a trans-Arctic trade would elevate the English to "monarks of the earth and commaunders of the Seas," inspiring "deadly horrer in her adversaries" (227). By the eighteenth century, resistance to the Frozen Ocean, now revised according to the free-market ideals that demanded freedom of the seas instead of mercantilist monopolies (Steinberg), was so widespread that Europeans mounted serial "voyages of delusion," battling the Frozen Ocean through sheer willpower and seapower, in search of "the maritime Philosopher's Stone" (Williams 151).

Laura Brown has identified a surge in oceanic mythmaking in British literature during the relative maritime tranquility following the Peace of Utrecht (1713); in poems like Edward Young's *Ocean* (1728) and *Imperium Pelagi* (1729), as in writings by Daniel Defoe, "ocean is the material substance whose fluidity makes possible both commerce and a global empire, the solid, land-based British *imperium*" that circulates virtue and civilization (115). Yet the polar seas remained impassable to European commerce, posing problems both practical and philosophical:

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Practically, how could one pass through the barrier of ice and to China and India, perhaps even to the paradisiacal ice-free pole? Philosophically, why would nature or God withhold entire regions from Europe's commercial access, making them so inhospitable as to be seemingly lifeless and incapable of cultivation, improvement, even traversal?

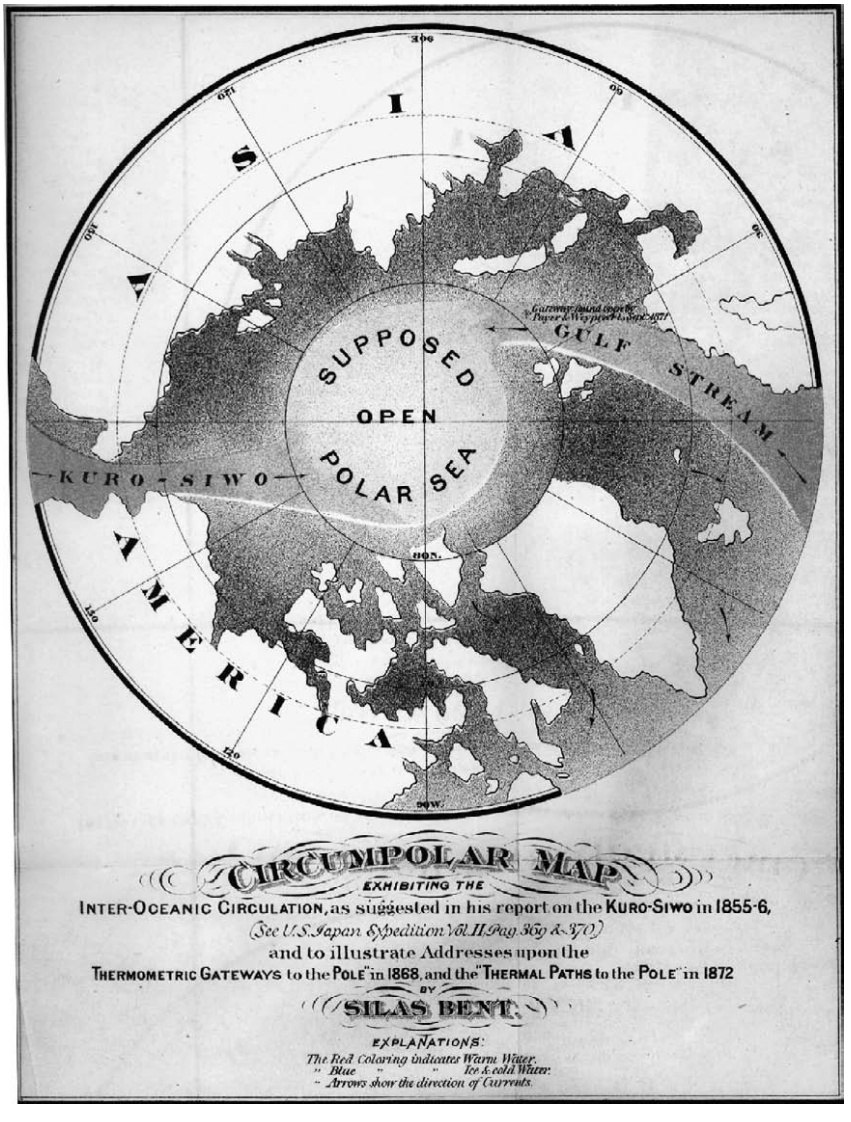
The Frozen Ocean was imagined to threaten not only the global reach of Britain's commercial flows but even the nation's physical and moral existence. William Cowper's poem "On the Ice-Islands Seen Floating in the Germanic Ocean," inspired by the extreme winter of 1798–99, voices a terror that the icebergs recently seen in the North Sea might extinguish the climate of European civilization. These "horrid wand'rers of the Deep" bring with them the end of empire, art, and cultivation (contrasted with Apollo's floating island, Delos, bearing "[h]erb, fruit and flow'r") and a terror of spiritual damnation, extrapolated to global extinction (511). Despite ice's lifelike qualities (see Wilson), its incompatibility with terrestrial cultivation made it a byword, as in Cowper's poem, for demonic and deathly forces, or at least for the absolute limits of human dominion.

Despite a growing contrary fascination with the "stupendous" wealth of Arctic marine life, which according to the whaler-scientist William Scoresby, Jr., evinced "the Bounty of Divine providence, in furnishing such a profusion of life in a region so remote from the habitations of men" (13), the Frozen Ocean was often thought to threaten European civilization as part of catastrophic climate change. Reports by Scoresby and other whalers in 1817 that the Greenland seas appeared virtually ice-free were publicized by the British Admiralty in its campaign to commission a series of Arctic expeditions beginning in 1818. Scoresby wrote to Joseph Banks, president of the Royal Society, that he observed approximately "two thousand square leagues (18,000 square miles) of the surface of the Greenland seas, included between the parallels 74° and 80°, perfectly void of ice, all of which had disappeared within the last two years" (qtd. in Barrow 202). Where had the ice gone? According to John Barrow, Second Secretary to the Admiralty, the vanished ice marked the end of the four-hundred-year-old cooling trend in the northern hemisphere (known today as the Little Ice Age). Barrow had good news: the "principal cause" of Britain's centuries of "chilliness" would disappear along with the Greenland ice (208). And this meant that an ice-free Arctic Ocean was in reach of his explorers: "A sea of more than two thousand miles in diameter, of unfathomable depth . . . and in constant motion, is not likely to be frozen over at any time" (222). Ignoring or discrediting the contrary experience of whalers like Scoresby (who had reported the vanished ice but maintained that the polar ocean was frozen), nineteenth-century proponents of the Open Polar Sea theory combined Barrow's unfounded (except in the annals of literature) assumption that such a large body of water could not freeze with other hypotheses: that isothermals suggested warmer temperatures further north than latitudes allowed; that ice formed only close to land and that an ocean would thus be iceless at its center; that salt water could not freeze in such quantities; that Russian accounts of polynyas indicated entrances to the much-sought "polar basin"; or that a planetary system of warm currents opened "thermometric gateways to the pole" (fig. 1).

But the Frozen Ocean attracted even more passionate devotees than did the Open Polar Sea. By the mid–nineteenth century, new theories of the prehistoric extent of Arctic ice began to see it not as a recent harbinger of modern "chilliness," as had Barrow, but as the vestige of a glacial period in which the Frozen Ocean had swallowed continents whole. Nineteenth-century fears of creeping glaciers, like Cowper's speculations on the climatic powers of wandering icebergs,

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placed the natural boundaries of the Frozen Ocean at the center of anxieties over climate change, just as today the withdrawal of glaciers and Arctic ice signals the reverse environmental catastrophe (Carey). Thus, the first European to encounter the sixty-mile-long, four-hundred-foot-high wall of the Humboldt Glacier in northern Greenland, Elisha Kent Kane, struggled to describe to his readers this corner of the Greenland ice sheet that dwarfed Alpine glaciers. This "ice-ocean," wrote Kane, was of continental dimensions, part of a "mighty crystal bridge . . . pouring out a mighty frozen torrent into unknown Arctic space" and connecting Greenland to North America (225–27). The scale of this terrestrial "ice-ocean," its mysterious communication with "unknown Arctic space," fused both the rigidity and the fluidity associated with the Frozen Ocean by combining ocean and glacier into a moving continental mass: "Here was a plastic, moving, semi-solid mass, obliterating life, swallowing rocks and islands, and ploughing its way with irresistible march through the crust of an investing sea" (228). Kane maintained his faith in the Open Polar Sea despite having glimpsed the Greenland ice sheet, both possibilities coexisting in "unknown Arctic space."



This turbulent unknown Arctic space, in which explorers typically found themselves immobilized, inverted Western assumptions about active (male) historical agents traversing passive (feminine) spaces. Spatial disorientation was accompanied by the extreme temporal distortions reported by all Europeans encountering the length of polar night and day (a "wonderfull difference from al the rest of the world" in temporal cycles [Davis 223]). This experience of what Foucault termed *heterochrony*, "when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time" (26), catalyzed the creation of compensatory countersites, eccentric Arctic heterotopias. Connery argues that "the ocean's fundamental inappropriability has produced a strange and troubled oce-

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anic consciousness, one disturbed not only by questions of place and substantiality and the categories appropriate to oceanic space but also by unanswerable questions about the meaning of human maritime activity . . ." ("Sea Power" 688). European maritime activity in the Arctic was stranger and more troubled than in any other oceanic space-time, I suggest, precisely because the elemental properties of the ocean seemed to disappear altogether, replaced, often with little apparent warning, by a hybrid form of the terrestrial.

One surprising strategy for coping with this volatile space was to build on it, to urbanize, domesticate, and inscribe it as if it were any other imperial territory. In her comparison of the methods of claiming territorial possession utilized by early modern European explorers, Patricia Seed has noted the distinctively English preference for using marks of physical habitation—fences and other enclosures, houses—to claim new territory. Performing an ephemeral exercise in oceanic dominion, British voyagers would build on water as well as land because they often found the two indistinguishable. Looking at British voyagers' novel reactions to captivity on the Frozen Ocean, we can see how a familiar litany of sins (Eurocentrism, desire for mastery over "nature") contributed to their failures, but my interest is in the unique properties and the ideological fluidity of the Frozen Ocean that the struggles of these alien visitors illuminated.

Arctic London

Among the nineteenth century's most devoted students of the Frozen Ocean was John Ross, who had fallen out with the Admiralty in 1818 after failing to sail through an ice barrier that Barrow insisted was not there. On his next Northwest Passage voyage, Ross and his men were trapped in the ice for four years, during which time he had ample opportunity to contemplate, analyze, and paint the Frozen Ocean, which became his home and nearly his grave. An ocean of stone is what he pictured for his audience:

> [R]emember that ice is stone; a floating rock in the stream, a promontory or an island when aground, not less solid than if it were a land of granite. Then . . . imagine these mountains of crystal hurled through a narrow strait by a rapid tide; meeting, as mountains in motion would meet, with the noise of thunder, breaking from each other's precipices huge fragments, or rending each other asunder.
> (*Narrative* 152)

But even moving mountains were no match for British pluck. If the Frozen Ocean "were a land of granite," then perhaps unlike other ocean spaces it could be mastered through enclosure, habitation, inscription.

Ross's curious painting of a terrestrial fragment of retreating ice depicts the precariousness of the fantasy of dominion over the Frozen Ocean held by these marooned men, aided for years by Inuit (fig. 2). Instead of an erratic boulder suggesting the powerlessness of solid rock encountering a glacier, Ross pictures errant ice orphaned by the ocean, barely visible as a sliver of blue beyond the brown cliffs. Adding insult to injury, Ross had personally inscribed the name of his ship (*Victory*, like Nelson's ship at Trafalgar) and the date onto "the pyramid": "Victory / 19 Sept. 1829 / JR."[2] He inscribed this victory over the ice in his manuscript version of the *Narrative of a Second Voyage*, though not in the published book. No longer a trackless waste or sublime expanse, the ocean is contained, inscribed, and shaped into a mathematical abstraction, with a familiar name and a monumental function incorporating the Frozen Ocean into a built environment.

Ross's miraculous escape from the Frozen Ocean after four years gave hope later to those searching for the nineteenth century's Arctic cause célèbre, John Franklin and his lost 1845 expedition. The story of the disaster and the

FIG. 1

Silas Bent, *Circumpolar Map, Exhibiting the Inter-oceanic Circulation*, 1872. Bent was a United States naval hydrographer and advocate of the Open Polar Sea. Bent's version of the theory relied on the "thermometric gateways" pictured here, as elaborated in his *Address*, from which this map is taken. Courtesy of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Library.

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dozens of subsequent searches is well known, but of interest to our thinking on the oceanic are the surreal heterotopias that searchers established while frozen in during the 1850s. Edward Belcher's *The Last of the Arctic Voyages* (1855) recounts the *Assistance*'s search for Franklin, including its 1853–54 wintering near Beechey Island, the site of three Franklin-expedition graves. Belcher describes a close escape from being crushed by a shifting ice floe, after which the searchers built on the grounded floe a virtual Arctic London, named Victoria Town. Naturally, the centerpiece of Victoria Town was the Crystal Palace, built of ocean ice (fig. 3). As Belcher recounted:

> I determined instantly on the construction of a Crystal Palace, perhaps to live, like its predecessor, in history! The officers were summoned, the ground lines marked out, navvies sinking the foundations, moulds made, blocks sawn out, and the first house in Victoria Town well in progress before we retired to rest; its dimensions were eighty feet in length by twenty feet in width. . . . I must say that their work was as accurate as if Her Majesty had intended to inspect it in person. . . . (59)

The dynamic ocean ice is quickly transformed into static building blocks by the efficient naval machine, whose monument to Victorian industry was one of the earliest replicas of the original Crystal Palace.[3] The Arctic Ocean ("[o]ur old enemy, the external floe" [61]) is no match for these Britons, determined to transform any turbulent space into the familiar image of London. One of innumerable places across the globe named for Victoria and her regent, this Arctic outpost of the British capital is unique because it claims not a terrestrial space but an oceanic one.

Creating a monstrous great hall, far larger than any Inuit ice house, the builders outdo the original Crystal Palace: "The windows . . . have been specially refrozen on a neighbouring lake for this purpose. . . . In this particular we beat the Crystal Palace, as we can have them of any size 'to order,' and without additional expense!" (61–62). Using freshwater

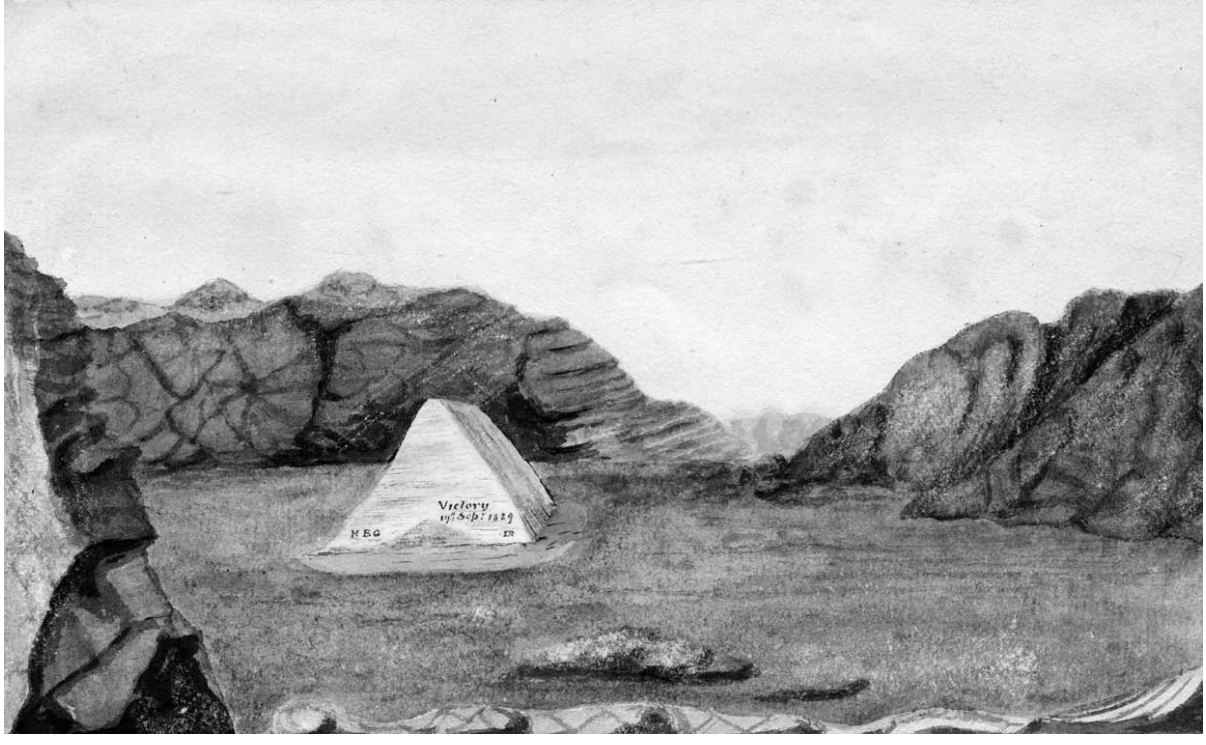


FIG. 2
John Ross, untitled watercolor painting, c. 1829–33. Courtesy of the Royal Geographical Society.

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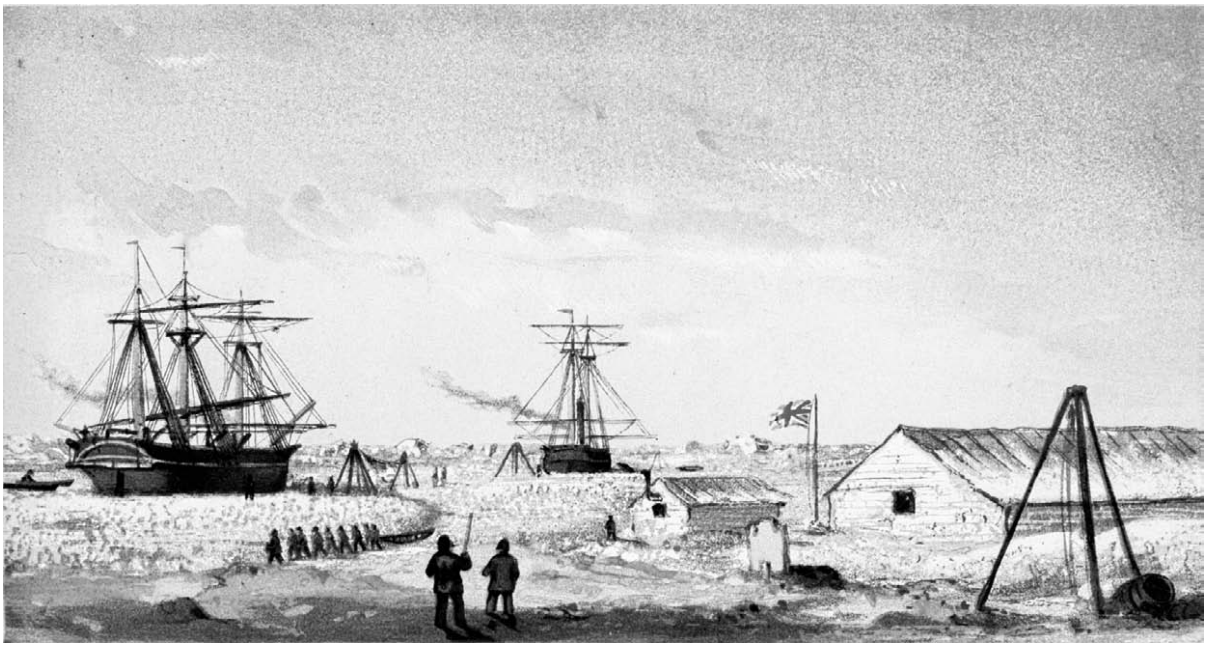


Fig. 3
George McDougal, *Crystal Palace, Winter Quarters, 1853–1854*, 1855 (Belcher 66). The Arctic Crystal Palace is the large building on the right. Courtesy of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Library.

ice (which remains transparent) for windows was an Inuit technique, but for the British author-architect Belcher, every aspect of the Arctic Crystal Palace echoes what a British newspaper said of the original, that it embodied "our wonderful industrial discipline—our consummately arranged organization of toil, and our habit of division of labour" (*Morning Chronicle*, 1 May 1851). Nearby, the crew of the *Resolute* built out of "inexhaustible quarries of Arctic alabaster" (Kennedy 169) "Northumberland House" (named for a palace in Charing Cross, the residence of the First Lord of the Admiralty) and an astronomical observatory, "Cornwall Lodge," both christened in an inauguration ceremony.[4] Their Royal Arctic Theatre was even attended by snow avatars of the Prince of Wales and Princess Royal.

Victoria Town's Anglocentric toponymy is unremarkable in the history of exploration and colonialism, as is its attempted urbanization and Europeanization of the landscape, but the Franklin searches of the mid–nineteenth century are probably unique in their ephemeral territorial settlement of the Arctic Ocean. Dozens of expeditions were sent into the Canadian Arctic archipelago beginning in 1848, their searches for Franklin survivors, wreckage, relics, and journals resulting in an explosion of geographic knowledge of the Northwest Passage region. They carried with them printing presses, circulating onboard newspapers and other periodicals and notices for masquerades, balls, casinos, lectures; they distributed messages in and beyond the Arctic using pigeon post, messenger foxes, air balloons, stone cairns, a postbox, and Inuit "postmen." The Frozen Ocean served as the farthest colonial outpost of the metropolis, and the comforts of the London "season" compensated for the hardships of the Arctic season. The urbanism of the architecture, spectacles, and print culture would have been at home in British colonial cities elsewhere in the empire (AlSayyad), but when these ephemeral transplants were frozen fast to the ocean, the fragility of their makers' attempted technological and cultural dominion was exposed.

Territorialization of the Arctic Ocean extended as far as selling property on it, as in this satirical advertisement from the 1850 *Aurora Borealis* shipboard newspaper:

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> To be sold or let, with immediate possession. Two new cottages, called Marble Villa and Cerulean Cottage, situated a short distance to the southward of "Assistance," in a very picturesque neighbourhood; they both face to the south, having extensive undulating grounds in front. . . .
>
> The situation is very convenient for families fond of theatricals. The Royal Arctic Theatre, and well known "Intrepid" Saloon are within a few minutes' walk. The Walhalla, or Gallery of Statues; the skating grounds; the tennis courts and skittle gardens are easily accessible from them. . . .
>
> N.B.—There are many good quarries of building materials close to the cottage, and any quantity of water can be obtained by sinking wells of a few feet. (*Arctic Miscellanies* 37)

The Frozen Ocean becomes an impossible triptych: the undulating grounds of the English countryside, the fashionable West End, and the stone quarries out of which are carved both the country cottage and the townhouse (even the Prince Regent himself). "Not the smallest speck of water visible," wrote one of the Marble Villa's satisfied neighbors, "to denote the element on which we rode" (77–78).

So complete was the fantasy of territorialization that it included burying the dead "in" the frozen ocean, illustrating that "the surest way to take possession of a place and to secure it as one's own is to bury one's dead in it" (Harrison 24). Images and accounts of burial services performed on the sea ice abound in nineteenth-century Arctic texts, overlaying the comforts of the country churchyard onto the sailor's dread of a turbulent burial in the restless depths. In 1822, as Franklin completed his first Arctic disaster, leaving numerous corpses in his wake, Felicia Hemans's poem "England's Dead" imagined the English "empire, not as a realm on which the sun never sets, but as a global graveyard" (Wolfson xvi), one spreading across the Frozen Ocean:

> On the frozen deep's repose
> 'Tis a dark and dreadful hour,
> When round the ship the ice-fields close,
> To chain her with their power.
>
> But let the ice drift on!
> Let the cold-blue desert spread!
> *Their* course with mast and flag is done,—
> *There* sleep England's dead. (266)

For Hemans the empire of the dead overtakes the empires of the sea and the land: "Wave may not foam, nor wild wind sweep, / Where rest not England's dead" (267).

In the war of attrition against the "old enemy, the external floe," Britain's serial defeats tell a familiar tale of imperial hubris, made possible by the projected "tenacious jollity" (Spufford 50) of Victoria Town or William Parry's earlier Winter Harbor, which helped sell a fantastic Arctic dominion to metropolitan readers, spectators, and financiers. Conversely, learning to drift with the "mountains in motion," as Fridtjof Nansen did in 1893 and as the Russian ice stations did beginning in 1937, illustrates the progressive moral of adaptation and scientific progress relative to this unique ocean space. But failure to adapt the Arctic Ocean to terrestrial, Eurocentric dimensions also illuminates how oceanic universals continue to shape our thinking. Writing, walking, working, and building on the ocean were ephemeral, sometimes comical possibilities—misguided and arrogant, but also wonderfully speculative, gesturing toward the fragility of all sojourns on the Frozen Ocean.

Notes

1. Other kinds of spaces (e.g., beaches and wetlands) also exceed the land-sea binary (Howarth; Bentley, Bridenthal, and Wigen). As with continents (and "the Arctic"), definitions of what constitutes an ocean vary across time and context; the Arctic Ocean is today identified as the smallest ocean, though it has historically been considered a mediterranean sea as well.

2. There is a discrepancy between the pyramid's illustration and its description, suggesting that the object may

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have been stone, not ice. The painting envisions it as ice, complete with meltwater, as confirmed by an inscription on the verso (not in Ross's hand) describing an "extraordinary lump of snow." Ross's manuscript mentions seeing a "pyramidical stone" on 14 Sept. and that on 19 Sept. he "went on shore and having painted on the pyramid the ship's name and date," he then sketched it (the manuscript includes a small sketch). Ross may have intended to memorialize a deceased friend, whose initials he gives, and also to compete with his rival Parry, who inscribed a pyramidical sandstone erratic in Winter Harbor in 1819. Whether painted on the spot or later, Ross's painting may attempt an aesthetic solution to the perplexing nature of sea ice, the subject of Ross's entry for that day (i.e., the equivalency of ice and granite).

3. The original Crystal Palace stood in Hyde Park for the Great Exhibition of 1851 and in August 1852 began its move to and reconstruction on a larger scale in south London, where it reopened in June 1854. Aside from the Arctic Crystal Palace, other replicas of the original included the New York Crystal Palace (1853) and the Munich Glaspalas (1854). Belcher's expedition was trapped in the Arctic from 1852 to 1854, making their Crystal Palace the only one in existence at that time, as far as its builders would have known.

4. Belcher's Crystal Palace was viewed in less glorious terms by others—e.g., the master of the *Resolute*, who described coming on its thawing ruins, "which had been used as a skittle alley" (McDougal 426).

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