Book Reviews

WHITE HORIZON: THE ARCTIC IN THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH IMAGINATION. Jen Hill. 2008. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press. viii + 238 p, hard cover. ISBN 978-0-7914-7229-3. $US60.00.
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Studies of the imaginative resonance of the Arctic, and of the British fascination with the polar regions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, have proliferated in the past decade or so. Works such as Francis Spufford's *I may be some time: ice and the English imagination* (1997), Eric Wilson's *The spiritual history of ice: romanticism, science and the imagination* (2003), and Sarah Moss' *Scott's last biscuit: the literature of polar exploration* (2005) have done much to trace the diverse ways in which representations of Arctic and Antarctic space circulated in British culture, and to map the potent myths that came to be associated with both the North Pole and South Pole. To find a fresh path through this well-trodden territory is accordingly no easy matter. Jen Hill's new treatment of the topic is not entirely successful in this regard; perhaps inevitably, *White horizon* often has to cover the same material as its predecessors, and to reprise familiar arguments. At the same time, however, Hill is also able to demonstrate some intriguing new connections and contexts, as she brings together in illuminating ways a diverse cast of famous and not-so-famous figures, canonical and non-canonical texts. The result is a study that is certainly a useful addition to the extant scholarship in the field, even if it is hardly ground-breaking in its approach or its findings.

Like most scholars before her, Hill's starting point is the nineteenth-century mythologisation of the Arctic as the ultimate proving-ground of a heroic, imperial masculinity. From the late 1810s onwards, when the Admiralty initiated a more systematic search firstly for the northwest passage, and subsequently for the North Pole, the Arctic's vast expanses of snow and ice came to seem the supreme arena in which the qualities that supposedly distinguished the British national character could be both formed and demonstrated. The great Arctic explorers, most notably in this era William Parry, John Franklin, John Ross, and James Clark Ross, accordingly became talismanic figures. Their feats of physical endurance, mental resolve, and organisational efficiency were construed as metonymic indicators of the vigour and tenacity of the nation as a whole, and as signifiers of Britain's ability, and indeed moral right, to maintain a vast global empire. Yet this immense cultural investment in the 'meaning,' so to speak, of Arctic exploration was also a fraught and problematic undertaking, as Hill quite rightly stresses throughout her study. Survival in the Arctic in the nineteenth century was probably more dependent on luck than contemporary commentators liked to admit; when that luck ran out, as it did most spectacularly in the ill-fated Franklin expedition of 1845, the ensuing disasters could prompt agonised enquiries into the moral and physical state of the nation.

Hill's exploration of the Arctic's 'mythic' role in the nineteenth-century British imagination begins with a discussion of two of the seminal texts that helped to shape the myth, Robert Southey's *Life of Nelson* (1813) and John Franklin's *Narrative of a journey to the shores of the polar seas* (1823). Playing up Nelson's Arctic experience, and placing great weight on the iconic story of the young Nelson and a friend hunting down a polar bear in the course of Constantine Phipps' 1773 voyage, Southey presents a highly idealised view of the British encounter with the Arctic environment. Here, it seems, is a landscape in which British character will be severely tested, but from which it will nevertheless emerge triumphant, and indeed strengthened (as Nelson learns vital lessons of discipline and group loyalty from his escapade). Franklin's *Narrative*, meanwhile, presents a far more unsettling picture of what might actually happen to Britons in the Arctic wastes. If Southey postulates a British selfhood that will remain stable through all vicissitudes, the harrowing ordeal of Franklin and his men, Hill suggests, would seem rather to suggest that Arctic conditions could radically destabilise that identity. The expedition was a disaster, with some men dying of starvation and exhaustion, and all being reduced through hunger to skeletal figures. It also came close to a complete moral as well as physical collapse: amidst allegations of murder and cannibalism, it was judged necessary to execute one member of the party. Yet Franklin and some at least of his companions survived, and so even this farrago was ultimately recuperable into the prevailing ideology of Arctic exploration (and as Hill notes, in this regard it helped greatly that the principal trouble-maker on the expedition was a French *voyageur*, rather than an Englishman).

It is Franklin's 1823 narrative, with its many troubling aspects, rather than Southey's more straightforward rendering of the Arctic, that sets the tone for Hill's study as a whole. Throughout, she is not so much concerned with the mythic conception of the Arctic *per se*, as with episodes and texts that reveal the fragility of that myth, its tensions, contradictions, and exclusions. It is in connection with the

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latter, for example, that she addresses in chapters 2 and 3 the appeal of Arctic imagery to three female writers. Nineteenth-century Arctic exploration was very much a male-only affair, in which women could not directly participate. The response of some female writers was accordingly to fashion in writing a role for themselves, and for women generally, in this great national endeavour; a strategy that Hill illustrates through an analysis of Eleanor Porden's poems *The veils* (1816) and *The Arctic expeditions* (1818). Also published in 1818, however, was another female-authored text that took a very different line on the homosocial world of Arctic exploration: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, which like many critics before her Hill reads as a powerful critique of the masculinist tendencies of such exploratory enterprises. Positioned somewhere between Porden and Shelley, meanwhile, is Charlotte Bronte, whose use of Arctic imagery in *Jane Eyre* is discussed in chapter 3. Thereafter, Hill moves on to discuss in chapter 4 the response of Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins to the disappearance of Franklin's 1845 expedition. Focussing in turn on Dickens's rebuttal, in *Household Words*, of the allegations of cannibalism that surfaced in the aftermath of the disaster, then on Dickens and Collins' collaboration on the play *The frozen deep* (1857), and finally on Collins' rather bizarre novel *Poor Miss Finch* (1871), Hill here makes an interesting case for seeing the Franklin débâcle as a major stimulus to the emergence of the sensation novel. Her final chapter, meanwhile, explores the use made of Arctic settings in the adventure stories of R.M. Ballantyne; focussing on the novels *Ungava* (1858), *World of ice* (1860), and *Giant of the north* (1881), Hill once again emphasises the extent to which the Arctic could confound as much as consolidate imperialist myths of British heroism and racial superiority.

For the most part, Hill's arguments are persuasive, marshalling much useful historical and literary information and engaging with it in a theoretically sophisticated way. In places there are local points of interpretation one might take issue with, and equally there are moments when one feels Hill is straining to establish associations that perhaps are not really there: I am not entirely convinced, for example, that Jane Eyre's burnt porridge at Lowood would have put readers in mind of the dismal fare on which the first Franklin expedition survived. I also felt that *White horizon* would have benefited from a more extended discussion of the expeditions of Parry and Ross, and the role their narratives played in fostering the British fascination with the Arctic; as it stands, this study is very much centred on the ill-fated Franklin, and I think this emphasis leads to a slightly skewed picture of British Arctic exploration. These quibbles aside, however, *White horizon* is an enjoyable and informative study, which provides further evidence that the British in the nineteenth century were as fascinated by the Arctic's 'heart of whiteness' as by the African 'heart of darkness.' (Carl Thompson, Centre for Travel Writing Studies, Nottingham Trent University, Clifton Lane, Nottingham NG11 8NS.)

RACING WITH DEATH. Beau Riffenburgh. 2008. London and New York: Bloomsbury. xxii + 296 p, illustrated, hard cover. ISBN 978-0-7475-8093-5. £18.99.
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In writing about Sir Douglas Mawson's Australasian Antarctic Expedition (AAE) of 1911–1914, any popular historian faces a significant challenge: the fact that, unlike the *Endurance* and *Terra Nova* expeditions, the AAE currently enjoys practically no hold whatsoever over the popular imagination. Most of Beau Riffenburgh's intended audience will at least have heard of Sir Ernest Shackleton and Captain Scott, but Mawson's name is likely to elicit only blank looks. Riffenburgh acknowledges, and deplores, this fact in his preface, but takes the bit between his teeth nonetheless and presses on to deliver an engaging, comprehensively researched, and very well-written account of both the expedition and its leader.

As Riffenburgh is quick to point out, the AAE was not Mawson's first foray into the Antarctic and not, therefore, his only claim to fame. Between 1907 and 1909, he played a key role in Shackleton's British Antarctic Expedition (BAE), becoming, in all but name, the leader of the three-man party seeking the South Magnetic Pole. In order to introduce his hero, Riffenburgh begins with the magnetic polar trek, a subject that he covered comprehensively in his earlier work, *Nimrod*, but then swiftly moves on to the AAE. It is this expedition, Mawson's second, which gives *Racing with death* its primary focus, taking up 10 of its 16 chapters.

The AAE set off for the Antarctic on Saturday, 2 December 1911, on board the steam yacht *Aurora*, a ship that would later serve as expedition vessel to the Ross Sea contingent of Shackleton's *Endurance* expedition. Just over a month later, after a brief stop at Macquarie Island, Mawson and his team of specialists landed at Cape Denison, a windswept outcrop of rock jutting out into Commonwealth Bay. Locating a suitable landing place for the expedition had proved so problematic and so time-consuming that Mawson had been forced to rethink his scheme on board *Aurora*, deciding to reduce his planned three expedition bases to two. The discovery of Cape Denison was, therefore, seen as something of a godsend, but gratitude would soon turn firstly to disbelief and then to intense frustration. Even while disembarking stores and equipment, *Aurora* was struck by a series of gales that seriously hindered progress. Initially, these winds were assumed to be nothing but freakish occurrences that should not be allowed to interrupt the expedition's ambitious programme of exploration and investigation. Mawson, however, had unwittingly landed upon the windiest spot, at sea level, on the face of the planet. Buffeted by winds averaging 50 mph for a whole year and regularly experiencing gusts of well in excess of 200 mph, in such conditions it soon became clear that the expedition would be severely hampered in the completion of its work. The members of the expedition had to learn

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