

‘The cravings of nature’: Landseer’s *Man Proposes, God Disposes* and the Franklin Expedition

Sophie Gilmartin

In April of 1864, Lady Eastlake was busy issuing invitations to the great and the good of British society, requesting their attendance at the annual soiree which opened the Royal Academy’s summer exhibition. The opening traditionally took place on the first Monday of May, and was commonly seen to usher in the London ‘season’, that time when society left their country houses to come to London for balls, parties, politics, courtship and culture. But in 1864 one invitation in particular posed a dilemma: Lady Eastlake, as wife of Charles Eastlake, President of the Royal Academy, had been advised to invite Lady Jane Franklin. Lady Jane was apparently ‘the great gun of the season’,¹ a formidable social presence who had rallied public sympathy around her efforts to send search parties to find her husband Sir John Franklin and his men in the Arctic, where they had been lost since 1845. Lady Eastlake’s dilemma lay in the fact that the 1864 exhibition included a large and prominent painting by Edwin Landseer, *Man Proposes, God Disposes*, which depicted two polar bears mauling the remains of the Franklin expedition, and one polar bear in particular eating what could be Lady Franklin’s husband – or at least one of his party. It wouldn’t do to have the poor woman – an iconic Victorian widow – having hysterics in the middle of the soiree, confronted with the horrific depiction of her husband’s demise. But Lady Eastlake need not have worried; Lady Franklin was made of sterner stuff. The invitation was sent, and Franklin’s widow declared that she did not, after all, have to enter the room where Landseer’s ‘offensive’² painting was hung, but that would not stop her attending, viewing the other paintings, and indeed, being ‘on view’ herself.

Offensive or not, Landseer had chosen an immensely popular topic. Arctic voyaging, and in particular the search for the Northwest Passage, had fired the imagination of nineteenth-century armchair travellers, and both would-be and actual explorers for many years. Indeed Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* of 1818 opens with the fictional Captain Walton sailing for the Arctic and writing to his sister in England: ‘you cannot contest the inestimable benefit which I shall confer on all mankind to the last generation, by discovering a passage near the pole to those countries, to reach which at present so many months are requisite’.³ Interestingly, while most of the characters in Shelley’s novel are European, Walton is English – and this is an appropriate choice, as the discovery of the Northwest Passage was understood by the British to belong to them – to be their natural right – as the mysteries of so many uncharted territories had yielded to the British explorer in the past, and especially in the nineteenth century.

Sir John Franklin was already a famed Arctic explorer by the time he sailed, in the spring of 1845, to find the Northwest Passage. In the same year that Mary Shelley had written of Captain Walton’s Arctic voyage, Franklin had embarked upon an expedition to find a passage to the Pacific. This expedition had been forced to turn back, but the next year he was given command of another expedition which, in spite of the terrible privations and suffering of his men, and the deaths of several, was

¹ Ken McGoogan, *Lady Franklin’s Revenge* (London: Bantam Press, 2006) 395

² McGoogan, 396.

³ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, the 1818 edition (New York: W.W Norton and Co., 1996) p.8.

regarded as a success in that it mapped hundreds of miles of unknown coastline. The narrative of this expedition became a travel classic, and Franklin became a boy's hero – 'the man who ate his boots'⁴ - when suffering starvation in the Arctic.

Franklin's expedition left Greenhithe on May 19th 1845 to tremendous rejoicing, fanfare and the cheers of jubilant, optimistic crowds. So jubilant in fact, that one newspaper declared that it was almost as if Franklin were *returning*, having already discovered the Northwest Passage. The Admiralty had got able and experienced officers and men for the job, and had equipped the expedition's two ships, *Erebus* and *Terror* with state-of-the-art, steam-powered icebreakers, and massively strengthened hulls to withstand the pack ice. The rhetoric of the newspapers and the Admiralty inspired a belief that nothing could stand in the way of British science, expertise and ambition. Like the episode of the *Titanic*, the expedition was an act of vainglory and hubris which is encapsulated in Landseer's painting, and of course in its title, *Man Proposes, God Disposes*; for the Franklin expedition, its 129 officers and men, simply disappeared into the ice. Last seen by a whaler as they entered Lancaster Sound in late July 1845, all their subsequent movements were enveloped in mystery until nine years later.

Franklin's expedition had provisions to last three years in the Arctic, so there was little public anxiety for them in 1847, but from 1848, when no news of the explorers came, the search began in earnest. Expedition after expedition was sent out by the Admiralty, and when she felt that they were not doing enough, by Lady Franklin. The Arctic had never been so frequented, and while still nothing could be discovered of Franklin, the benefits to Arctic exploration were enormous: thousands of miles of unknown territory were mapped, and a second Northwest Passage discovered in 1850.⁵ Most expeditions returned to publish a journal of their voyage, and these accounts became hugely popular travel narratives. They were often serialized in the best-known family periodicals of the day, vying for the reader's attention with works by novelists such as Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, Wilkie Collins and Anthony Trollope. So numerous were the search expeditions and the published accounts of them, that one could be forgiven for having the impression that they were positively bumping into one another in the Arctic Sea. In one account, for example, searchers discover a cairn (a small hill of stones often used to house a food supply or message to other ships) only to find that it covered, not a message from Franklin's party as they had hoped, but a message placed there a few days earlier by another search party.⁶ Another account, published in the *Cornhill Magazine* in 1860, is entitled 'The Search for John Franklin', but would certainly leave the reader to wonder whether this goal has been kept sufficiently in sight, as the writer closes his account in a rather jaunty tone, unsuited to Franklin's tragic fate: 'Our happy cruise was at an end', he writes, as if closing a holiday diary. However, the Admiralty's enormous reward of £10,000 for authentic news of the expedition, Lady Franklin's appeals to the public which aroused much sympathy, and the very real mystery of what had happened to the largest and best-equipped Arctic expedition, all contributed to the public fascination with Franklin, and meant that he was not forgotten.

⁴ Scott Cookman, *Ice Blink: The Tragic Fate of Sir John Franklin's Lost Polar Expedition* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 2000) 23.

⁵ *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Eleventh Edition, entry on 'Sir John Franklin', Volume XI (New York, 1910) 30-33.

⁶ 'The Search for John Franklin', *Fraser's Magazine*, vol. 43 (February 1851) 200-201.

News of the Franklin expedition finally came in 1854 from Dr John Rae, an Orcadian working for the Hudson Bay Company. On a sledging expedition for the Company he had interviewed Inuit who had learned from other tribes that about forty white men had been seen in 1850, dragging a boat south along the western shore of King William Island, and that later in the season the bodies of those men were found, dead of cold and starvation. John Rae was eventually granted the Admiralty's £10,000 reward, but it was Captain McClintock of the *Fox*, a small ship outfitted and despatched by Lady Franklin and public subscription, who found a written record of the expedition, the date of John Franklin's death, personal items belonging to the men, and the skeletal remains of some.⁷ McClintock's findings largely supported those of Rae, but even after this evidence was discovered, there was and still is much mystery surrounding the fate of the Franklin expedition, and 'search' parties continued to ply the Arctic Sea to find more clues, possibly some answers. At the same time that Edwin Landseer's painting was on show at the Royal Academy, an American explorer, Captain Hall, was embarking on a voyage to trace further remnants of Franklin's party.

In choosing his subject for *Man Proposes, God Disposes*, Landseer had put his finger on the pulse of a Victorian British imagination which was aroused by expansion and exploration, and fed on stories of daring adventurers. But Landseer's painting was executed not only literally in the darker tones that he employed in his later period, but his handling of the subject throws some dark hues upon an English optimism and triumphalism, which was particularly apparent at mid-century. These dark tones are partly effected by the topical details which he includes in the painting: a telescope from the expedition had been discovered by John Rae, but this symbol of investigation and clear vision lies discarded and useless in the left-hand corner of the painting. The red British ensign flag, once standing for nation and identity, is being ripped to shreds in the teeth of polar bears, and its vivid red in close proximity to the skeletal rib-cage of one of the expedition's men reminds the viewer of the blood spilled on this exploration, and also of Tennyson's line, 'Nature, red in tooth and claw'. Ironically, the savagery of the polar bears may have been oddly comforting to Victorian viewers, because the 'Nature, red in tooth and claw' is firmly placed in the animal realm, and not among men: the most controversial and deeply worrying aspect of the Franklin expedition for most Victorians was the report that the men had finally resorted to cannibalism.

John Rae returned to England from the Arctic in 1854 and duly submitted the report of his findings concerning the Franklin expedition to the Admiralty. Reporting what the Inuit had told him, he wrote: 'From the mutilated state of many of the bodies, and the contents of the kettles, it is evident that our wretched countrymen had been driven to the last dread alternative as a means for sustaining life.'⁸ Rae had never meant the report for the public eye, but the Admiralty released it to the newspapers and the result was electrifying. Lady Franklin immediately asked to see Dickens, and she rallied his powerful rhetoric to her side to refute Rae's claims. Cannibalism had no place in what had now become her life's work, to mythologize her husband as 'the great Arctic navigator... who sacrificed [his life] in completing the discovery of the

⁷ McGoogan, 374-377.

⁸ Quoted in an article by Charles Dickens, 'Sir John Franklin and His Crews', in *Household Words*, Vol XI, 16, 1855.

North West Passage' (the words are from the monument that she campaigned to have erected, and which has stood in Waterloo Place in London since 1866, two years after Landseer's painting was first exhibited). To be known as men who ate their shoes was heroically resourceful; to be known as men who were eaten by polar bears, tragic and rather interesting; to be known as men who ate each other, unthinkable.

Clearly Dickens was of this opinion, and such was his popularity and rhetorical power, that he could significantly influence the attitudes and beliefs of the British population. He did so, at Lady Franklin's request, through the instrument of his very popular periodical, *Household Words*, in an article on 'The Lost Arctic Voyagers' which was a response to Rae's report to the Admiralty. He criticized Rae, dismissing his report as 'a very unsatisfactory document on which to found such strong conclusions as it takes for granted.'⁹ Dickens's dismissal of the Inuit reports of cannibalism among Franklin's men is a triumph of some of the worst aspects of Victorian stereotyping of the 'savage'. He writes that the Eskimos are not to be trusted because the 'word of a savage is not to be taken for it; firstly because he is a liar; secondly because he is a boaster; thirdly because he talks figuratively; fourthly because he is given to a superstitious notion that when he tells you he has an enemy in his stomach you will logically credit him for having his enemy's valour in his heart.'¹⁰

Dickens did at least give Rae the opportunity to respond and to defend himself in *Household Words*, which he did do, modestly and effectively adhering to all that he had reported to the Admiralty. But Dickens had seriously damaged the credence which the British public accorded to Rae's account of the expedition's fate. Years later, Rae would defend himself once again in the newspapers, when a journalist confidently dismissed his 1854 report of cannibalism among Franklin's men:

'Your leader says that discipline would have prevented men having recourse to cannibalism. I do not believe that any discipline would eradicate the cravings of nature, and it is all very well for those who, probably, have never spent twenty-four hours continuously without food in their lives to enlarge most indignantly on the subject.'¹¹

Entertaining and popular accounts of the 1850s and 1860s often included civilized scenes which could not be further removed from the prospect of cannibalism: one account tells how the explorers 'dined at their usual hour, and at tea-time regaled themselves with the cup that cheers but not inebriates,'¹² and another, how some whaling 'captains gave us a true Scotch welcome, and ransacked their ships to find some little comforts for us. We again tasted the roast beef of old England.'¹³ The Victorian armchair explorer relished tales of cold, privation and hunger – hopefully punctuated by the comfort of a cup of tea – but the horrors of real starvation, as Rae acknowledges, are simply unimaginable to a reader who has probably never experienced a day's hunger. For this armchair traveller, cannibalism is unthinkable in

⁹ *ibid.*, 12.

¹⁰ Charles Dickens, 'The Lost Arctic Voyagers', *Household Words*, Vol X, 385-93 (2 December 1854). Quoted in R.L. Richards, *Dr John Rae* (Whitby: Caedmon of Whitby, 1994) 115.

¹¹ R.L. Richards, *Dr John Rae*, (Whitby: Caedmon of Whitby, 1994) 117.

¹² 'Forlorn Hope', in *Fraser's Magazine*, June 1854, 641.

¹³ 'The Search for John Franklin, from the Private Journal of an Officer of the "Fox"', in *Cornhill Magazine*, January-June, 1860, 108.

every sense: it cannot be understood or imagined, and it *must* not be, as it raises too many disturbing ideas about human nature generally, and more specifically about the disintegration of English discipline and heroism. In some ways, Landseer's painting of the fate of the Franklin expedition comes the closest in tone and feeling to Rae's account, of all Victorian representations of the subject. Just as Rae's report was considered too horrific to be believed, so some art critics of the day, while admiring the imagination and execution of Landseer's work, also found it too 'harrowing'¹⁴, and productive of a 'horror...beyond the aims of art'¹⁵. Like the grim facts of Rae's report, the dark tones, savagery and futility depicted in *Man Proposes, God Disposes* knocked the self-confidence of an England at the height of Empire, brimming with the happy belief that English science, industry and character could conquer the world.

The wealthy philanthropist Thomas Holloway bought *Man Proposes, God Disposes* in 1881 for the women's college that he was building. The Picture Gallery at Royal Holloway College, where the painting still hangs, has been used as an examination hall since the end of the Second World War. Perhaps it says something of the bleak vision and the seeping of confidence which the painting is felt to inspire, that the College finally felt it necessary to cover the painting with a large Union Jack flag during the examination period, to 'counteract an increasing superstitious awe'¹⁶ of the painting, and rumours among students that those who sat next to it would fail their exams, or even die! Completely unfounded as this superstition may be, it is fascinating that the custom of covering it with the Union Jack still continues today; the banner of national pride and confidence holds at bay the harrowing implications of Landseer's work. Lady Jane Franklin, attending the Royal Academy opening in 1864, would surely have approved such a proceeding.

Dr Sophie Gilmartin
Reader in Nineteenth-Century Literature
Royal Holloway
University of London

¹⁴ *Illustrated London News*, 7 May, 1864 Quoted in Jeannie Chapel, *Victorian Taste: The complete catalogue of paintings at the Royal Holloway College* (Egham: Royal Holloway College, 1982) 103.

¹⁵ F.G. Stephens, 'English Artists of the Present Day, Sir Edwin Landseer', *Portfolio*, 1871. Quoted in Chapel, 103.

¹⁶ Caroline Bingham, *The History of Royal Holloway College 1886-1986* (London: Constable, 1987) 211.