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## Constructing History: John Everett Millais and The North-West Passage

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Constructing History: John Everett Millais and *The North-West Passage*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Art History from  
The College of William and Mary

by

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**Introduction:**

A cursory look at John Everett Millais's 1874 painting, *The North-West Passage*, might suggest a typical Victorian genre painting (Figure 1). More thorough analysis of the painting, though, reveals the complex narrative and tacit historical perspective behind this domestic scene. The monumental scale of the work, standing over five feet tall and seven feet wide, suggests the breadth of this implicit narrative. *The North-West Passage* depicts two figures, an old man and a girl, in a room filled with artifacts related to polar exploration. The painting is neither a portrait nor a historical scene. Taking this into account, I suggest that Millais's painting should be read as a construction that builds on and reifies a social history of Arctic Exploration. That the painting presents themes such as empire, wilderness, gender, memory, and material culture would have been understood—even self-evident—in the late Victorian period. Consequently, *The North-West Passage* is an ideal subject with which to explore several key ways that history was constructed in the second half of the nineteenth century. My study considers the role constructed history played in Millais's artistic practice, both before and after his time with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. This thesis explores the construction of a British narrative of Arctic exploration. It also considers the ways in which *The North-West Passage* demonstrates the period's normative construction of gender. Finally, this study seeks to explain how Millais's construction of *The North-West Passage* encouraged Victorian viewers of all types to identify with the empire.

The nineteenth-century was a period of great economic, industrial, and societal change in Britain. While the early part of the century established the themes and cultural climate that continued into the later part of the century, this study is primarily focused on what is termed “the Victorian era.” Queen Victoria ruled from 1837-1900 so the term “Victorian” fits best for the period of time my research focuses on. Millais was born just eight years before Victoria was

crowned, and died in 1896, four years before the death of the queen. His career fits well into the time period defined by “Victorian,” so while some scholars have problematized this demarcation of time, it is useful for the purpose of this study. During Victoria’s reign Britain committed to a self-regulating economic market model, abandoning regulating legislation in favor of free trade.<sup>1</sup> The growing population was more urbanized than ever and class divisions grew. It was a time of widespread social change, predicated by the growth of industry, class division, and imperialism.

The Victorian era has been studied extensively, beginning within the period itself with the production of social theory by Victorian authors. Further studies have focused on the growth of industry and empire, as well as the widespread political reforms of the period. The literature that informs my study comes from a wide range of sources and methodical approaches, but I have relied heavily on studies of intellectual and social culture in nineteenth-century Britain. Andrew King and John Plunkett’s guide to Victorian print media has been especially helpful, as has Julie Codell’s work on social history.<sup>2</sup> My research has also depended on the comprehensive art historical scholarship devoted to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. M.H. Spielmann’s work, *Millais and His Works*, written in 1898, is the earliest monograph on the artist that I could find. While this was helpful for basic information, more contemporary research on Millais has been the most illuminating. Jason Rosenfeld’s clarity of analysis in *John Everett Millais* is notable. Furthermore, Rosenfeld is part of a group of scholars arguing for a holistic approach to Millais’s career, a methodology that has been central to my own work. Of the many arctic sources, Robert

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Howe, “Britain and the World Economy” in *A Companion to Nineteenth-century Britain*, ed. Chris Williams, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2004), 22.

<sup>2</sup>Julie Codell, "Introduction: Domesticity, Culture, and the Victorian Press," *Victorian Periodicals Review* 51, no. 2 (2018): 215-229. Julie F. Codell, “Expression over Beauty: Facial Expression, Body Language, and Circumstantiality in the Paintings of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.” *Victorian Studies* 29, no. 2 (1986): 255-290. Andrew King and John Plunkett, *Victorian Print Media: A Reader*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

David's *The Arctic in the British Imagination* is one of the most comprehensive studies of this period of exploration while Frederic Regard's *Arctic Exploration in the Nineteenth Century: Discovering the Northwest Passage* provides a detailed analysis of Millais's *The North-West Passage*. In other works of Arctic scholarship for this period, the painting is used as an illustration and is rarely given actual attention. The lack of insightful consideration of *The North-West Passage* has been a motivating factor in my thesis; I believe that the painting demonstrates important features of the period in which it was painted as well as of Millais's career.

Millais's treatment of history in *The North-West Passage* is symptomatic of a larger cultural movement focused on reframing narratives in order to make them more appealing for public consumption. He both contributed to and was a product of the distinct cultural moment within which he was working. As Britain reevaluated its position in the scheme of world power, in the aftermath of rapid industrialization and urbanization, anxieties about the trajectory of society became increasingly prevalent. The visual culture of the Victorian Era reveals the intricate manner in which national identity was imagined through constructed versions of the past. An imagined past was used as a counterpoint to the dissatisfaction many Victorians felt with their own time.

Constructing and using various histories was a primary way by which "Englishmen and women came to terms with their experience of change that was sometimes unsettling in its rapidity."<sup>3</sup> National identity was built on existing traditions and beliefs that were transformed from their original state to fit the needs of the Victorian populous.<sup>4</sup> It is this thread in the historical research on the Victorian period that has most shaped my understanding of Millais's work. The key to understanding the culture of constructed histories of the Victorian Era is to

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Readman, "The Place of the Past in English Culture C. 1890-1914," *Past & Present* 186, no. 1(2005), 191.

<sup>4</sup> Chris Williams, *A Companion to Nineteenth-century Britain*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2004), 537.

appreciate that it functioned as a coping mechanism employed in the face of rapid societal change. Many scholars agree that discomfort with the present was the main impetus for the Victorians' tendency for nostalgia and historical myth making. Eric Hobsbawm points out that the invention of tradition occurs with more frequency in times of rapid change in society, specifically when older social patterns are destroyed or weakened.<sup>5</sup> Billie Melman has done extensive work on this idea and her findings have been crucial to my understanding of nineteenth-century Britain.<sup>6</sup> As the British Empire expanded and industrialization increased class divisions, many people turned to the past for solace. "Different historical periods and moments were more or less successfully 'invented', constructed, and resurrected, then used inadvertently or to address agendas of historians, politicians, and ordinary people."<sup>7</sup> The nineteenth-century was filled with opposing forces, exponential advances in technology and empire building and multitudinous attempts to use the past as a moral center. Millais's approach to his work emerged from these contradictory impulses.

Millais's ability to construct an appealing version of history was evident in his paintings long before he created *The North-West Passage*. I will argue that it is this tendency that connects his stylistically diverse oeuvre. Millais helped found the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, a group of young artists who questioned the academic standards of British painting. The group's work is closely related to the period's tendency to create constructed histories; while Millais and the other members of the Brotherhood contributed to the construction of histories, their perspectives out to be seen as part of a larger cultural impulse. Though a work from later in Millais's career,

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<sup>5</sup> Eric Hobsbawm and T. O. Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, Canto Classics, vol. 15, (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2012), 4.

<sup>6</sup> Billie Melman, *The Culture of History: English Uses of the Past, 1800-1953*, (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Melman, *The Culture of History*, 15.

*The North-West Passage* is connected to this historicizing tendency in many ways. It straddles an ambiguous position between constructed history and constructed narrative genre. Both tendencies must be considered since *The North-West Passage* has long been used to illustrate the history of Arctic exploration in the period. Millais's painting has come to epitomize what was believed to be important about Arctic exploration. Arguably, his particular approach to the subject illustrates the normative function of the painting; this work reinforced, and perhaps even helped shape, the public's belief in the empire, in strict gender roles, and in understanding their place in imperial endeavors. Millais constructed a purported record of the age of exploration, his iconic image of the era enshrined Victorian values and visual culture. The following thesis explores the dialogue between *The North-West Passage* and various constructed narratives; it considers what social forces influenced the work, and how Millais contributed to British perceptions of self and empire.

## **Chapter 1- Millais's Narrative Structures**

John Everett Millais's painting, *The North-West Passage*, portrays two figures at the center of the composition. That they occupy a sea-side room is made evident by the view of a ship in the ocean outside the window behind the man. The contrast between the two figures is key to the painting's affect. The aged man is dressed in dark clothes of a heavy material; the young woman wears white and light pink, her skirt trails in foamy whirls towards the right-hand side of the painting. The ages and dress of the two figures further reinforce their strongly opposing characters. Initially, it is hard to reconcile this painting with his earlier now more famous paintings done while he was a member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Yet there is more of a connection than is at first evident.



Known primarily for his work with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Millais's *The North-West Passage* is a departure from that group's distinctive style. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB) was a group of artists who sought to return to what they considered a more antique artistic style. Millais, along with Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Holman Hunt, was a founding member of the group. They were later joined by James Collinson, Frederic George Stephens; others took over as the original members parted ways.<sup>8</sup> The group was notable for their rejection of the style of art that they were taught in the Royal Academy, one that modelled itself on the work of High Renaissance painters such as Raphael. Millais, Rossetti, and Hunt sought to return to a previous ideal of painting, a model from before Raphael, hence the group's name. The first Pre-Raphaelite paintings appeared in May 1849.<sup>9</sup> The Pre-Raphaelites' work is characterized by crisp realism, bright colors, and memetic recreation of natural detail. Their work was influenced by fifteenth-century artistic models. They were interested in engravings of the work of Italian artist Benozzo Gozzoli, as well as the work of the northerners, Jan Van Eyck and Hans Memling (Figure 2).<sup>10</sup>

The Pre-Raphaelites' work is often described by art historians as the first avant-garde artistic movement in British art history. "They believed that by examining an earlier stage of art-making, they could correct the intervening excess and move art forward once again."<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, while the Pre-Raphaelites certainly explored distinct stylistic methods, their subject matter was part of the larger cultural movement that looked at and valorized the past. They may have pointed to early fifteenth-century artists as their stylistic models, but their work was also

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<sup>8</sup> Dinah Roe, "The Pre-Raphaelites," British Library Online, 15 May 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Aurélie Petiot, *The Pre-Raphaelites*, trans. Jane Marie Todd, (Abbeville Press Publishers, 2019), 22.

<sup>10</sup> Michaela Giebelhausen, "The Religious and Intellectual Background", in *The Cambridge Companion to the Pre-Raphaelites*, ed. by Elizabeth Prettejohn, (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 63. Dinah Roe, "The Pre.

<sup>11</sup> Catherine Roach, *Pictures-within-Pictures in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, (Routledge, 2016), 99.

influenced by literature and philosophy contemporary to them. These artists visualized the medievalist sentiment that appeared in other areas of culture in the Victorian period, such as the poetry of Alfred Lord Tennyson and the essays of John Ruskin. As Catherine Roach has astutely pointed out, the Pre-Raphaelites were not as radical as has been claimed. For, “even in their most radical moment...the Pre-Raphaelites did not entirely reject contemporary art-historical theory. Rather, they reconfigured the existing understanding of the artist’s relationship to the past.”<sup>12</sup> Again, this concern for the past was ultimately a concern for the security of the empire. While the Pre-Raphaelites’ work was more erudite than some of their contemporaries in expressing this concern, nonetheless they shared it.<sup>13</sup> Given their emphasis on fairly popular literary models and shared tendency for historicism, the Pre-Raphaelites’ work was not as radical as it has often been portrayed. It must be seen as part of the wider culture of their time.

Though Millais’s loose brush work and softer, more painterly style in *The North-West Passage* is very different from his earlier work with the Pre-Raphaelites, he still relied on some of the same thematic material. In art historical accounts, Millais’s oeuvre is often strictly divided between his work with the Pre-Raphaelites and his work ‘after’ he disassociated himself from the brotherhood. This stark division misses the similar themes that tie these two periods together. Rather than divide Millais’s oeuvre, I would argue for continuity; because of the similarities in the way Millais constructs historical narratives, these periods should be seen as inextricable from one another. This study aligns itself with scholarship that attempts “to provide a corrective, holistic approach” to Millais’s career in contrast to the notion that Millais’s post Pre-Raphaelite career was “a fall.”<sup>14</sup> More careful consideration of Millais’s career reveals that while he moved

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<sup>12</sup> Roach, *Pictures-within-Pictures*, 98.

<sup>13</sup> Pageants and medievalist festivals were a popular way for Victorians to inhabit the past

<sup>14</sup> Roach, *Pictures-within-Pictures*, 125.

away from the elitist specificity of the Pre-Raphaelites, he kept the drama and story building that was fundamental to their practice. Recognition that Millais, from his early education onward, had always been involved with the Royal Academy suggests that rather than viewing his later work and election as an Academician as “the triumph of ambition over youthful ideals” it should be understood as “a continuation” of his early involvement with the Royal Academy.<sup>15</sup> Millais used the type of narrative established by the Pre-Raphaelites and applied it to more widely popular subjects that were more accessible to the public. To explore what I mean by this, let us first turn to one of Millais’s paintings from his time with the Pre-Raphaelites.

Millais’s *Mariana* reveals just this early impulse for constructed historical narrative (Figure 3). This 1851 painting depicts the heroine of Shakespeare’s play *Measure for Measure*. Mariana was also the heroine in an 1850 poem by Alfred Lord Tennyson, a Romantic poet and the national poet laureate. In the painting, Mariana stands alone at a window, longing for her fiancé. Her desire is conveyed by her expression and her solitude in a highly decorated yet claustrophobic feeling room. Dead leaves rest on a table, indicating the changing season and the passage of time. While Millais painted this work in 1851, Mariana is located in the distant past. Her dark blue velvet dress, complete with an ornate bejeweled belt, is medieval in style. The decoration of the room is also medieval; the windows are stained glass and the arches are pointed, two easily recognizable characteristics of the Gothic style. The small altar in the room is also suggestive of an earlier time. The intensity of the colors in the painting recalls the vivid primary colors of medieval illuminated manuscripts, like the *Bedford Hours* (Figure 4).<sup>16</sup> This work epitomizes the sort of nostalgia Millais and his fellow Pre-Raphaelite brothers sought to

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<sup>15</sup> Roach, *Pictures-within-Pictures*, 124.

<sup>16</sup> Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 44. The *Bedford Hours* was sold several times in London in the early nineteenth-century and was acquired by the British Library in 1852, so the Pre-Raphaelites would most likely have been aware of this specific text.

achieve in their constructed (and very Victorian) version of the middle ages. This attitude, as scholars increasingly recognize, was a critical response to their society. This retrospective nostalgia and medieval revivalism marked a period which was characterized by rapid industrial growth and modernization. In short, the Pre-Raphaelites' painting expressed the widespread Victorian cultural interest in the Middle Ages. Morality and beauty were tied together in the Medieval conception of aesthetics and the Pre-Raphaelites found this thought-provoking.

The Pre-Raphaelite connection between an aesthetic and moral response to art was an essential part of their style because they sought to recapture the morality that they located in medieval art.<sup>17</sup> Millais and the Pre-Raphaelites followed the writing of John Ruskin who called for a return to the Gothic as an antidote to the disenchantment that he felt towards Victorian society which he saw as materialistic and amoral.<sup>18</sup> John Ruskin's worldview was shaped by the religiosity of his family and society—Ruskin was raised by his religious mother in the midst of the Anglican Evangelical Revival—this Christian moralising perspective is tacit throughout his work.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, Ruskin's art criticism is inseparable from his social criticism, and his writing often blends these two subjects, asserting that “every nation's vice, or virtue, was written in its art.”<sup>20</sup> This ability to locate societal values in art is abundantly apparent in *The Stones of Venice*. In that book's chapter, “The Nature of Gothic,” Ruskin defines the characteristics or “moral elements” of Gothic as follows: savageness, changefulness, naturalism, grotesqueness, rigidity, and redundance.<sup>21</sup> He writes that the “perfectness” of the manufactured world are signs that

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<sup>17</sup> Liana Cheney, *Pre-Raphaelitism and Medievalism in the Arts*, (Lewiston, N.Y; Lampeter: Mellen, 1992), 20.

<sup>18</sup> This belief is espoused throughout John Ruskin, “The Nature of Gothic”, from *The Stones of Venice*, in *Unto this Last and Other Writings*, ed. C. Wilmer (Penguin, 1985)

<sup>19</sup> Dinah Birch, "Ruskin, John." *Grove Art Online*, 2003.

<sup>20</sup> John Ruskin, ‘Traffic,’ from *The Crown of Wild Olive*, in *Unto this Last and Other Writings*, ed. C. Wilmer, (Penguin, 1985), 237.

<sup>21</sup> John Ruskin, “The Nature of Gothic,” 9.

England has ‘enslaved’ its workers.<sup>22</sup> While this sentiment might sound like an articulation of Marxism, Ruskin, unlike William Morris and Co., failed to recognize the power of collective action, and focused much of his energy on critiquing industrialization, rather than capitalism.<sup>23</sup> Ruskin asserted that the benefit of the Gothic manner was that the labourer is connected to their work, resulting in both a happy labourer and a better product. The “moral elements” that Ruskin found in the physical forms of Gothic architecture make it clear that, for him, aesthetics were inseparable from politics. There is no doubt that Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites were closely tied in their beliefs about the nature of art, Ruskin was one of the first critics to champion the group’s work. Ruskin and Millais were especially close. Millais painted Ruskin’s portrait in 1853, while the two were on a trip to Scotland together (Figure 5). Ruskin’s entanglement with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, especially Millais, was personal as well as philosophical; Millais married Euphemia Chalmers Gray in 1855, after her marriage to John Ruskin was annulled.

The Victorian taste for the Gothic style went beyond Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites. The Houses of Parliament are another example of Victorian engagement with the past. Charles Barry and A.W.N Pugin designed the buildings in a perpendicular Gothic style, so the buildings appear as though they are from a totally different era than they were built in.<sup>24</sup> The chapel of Henry VII, which is located nearby, is an authentic Gothic example of the perpendicular style.<sup>25</sup> The connection to Henry VII is significant because as the first monarch of the Tudor house he was emblematic of the past glory that the Victorians identified with Merrie England. Tudor and

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<sup>22</sup> Ruskin, “The Nature of Gothic,” 85.

<sup>23</sup> Charles Harvey, ‘John Ruskin and the Ethical Foundations of Morris & Company, 1861–96’ in *Journal of Business Ethics*, Volume 14, Issue 3, (March 1995), 189.

<sup>24</sup> Harris, Beth, and Steven Zucker, "Charles Barry and A.W.N. Pugin, Palace of Westminster (Houses of Parliament)," in *Smarthistory*, December 11, 2015.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

Elizabethan England were popular points of inspiration for the pageants and folk revivals that became popular during the Victorian era.<sup>26</sup> Especially in the urban environment of London, the construction of Gothic revival buildings was an attempt to reclaim a distinctly English sense of nationhood rooted in the pastoral past. The Gothic revival style also associated specific values with the government buildings, the moral virtue that people like Pugin and Ruskin assigned to the Middle Ages.<sup>27</sup> So, while the prominence of medieval stories in literature suggest the popular appeal of the Medieval period, the Pre-Raphaelites' attitude to the period was also influenced by other contemporary cultural associations.

Millais and the Pre-Raphaelites' appropriation and reworking of a medieval style to their own ends echoes the moral perspective and theatrical approach of contemporary writers. While certain formal elements in *Mariana* recall medieval art, Millais and the Pre-Raphaelites were not necessarily trying to precisely imitate a medieval artistic style, but instead to imbue their work with the sort of medieval spirit that they located in writings about the Middle Ages. *The North-West Passage*, like *Mariana*, elicits an emotional response that has to do with a strongly Victorian sense of morality. Constructed theatrical moments were the Pre-Raphaelites' mainstays, and while in *The North-West Passage* Millais's theatrical narrative is subtler, the references he makes would have been easily read by his audience. Millais's strategies in *The North-West Passage* are similar to those used in his Pre-Raphaelite work. In the case of his work with the Pre-Raphaelites, Millais constructed a mythic national history, in 1874 he was constructing a mythic national present.

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<sup>26</sup> Readman, "The Place of the Past," 147-99.

<sup>27</sup> Henry Hallam's (1777–1859) *View of the State of Europe during the Middle Ages* (1818) was also an important text for Victorian medievalism. Chandler, James. "History," in *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age*, (Oxford University Press, 1999), accessed through Oxford Reference.

Millais's work with the Pre-Raphaelites reveals his ability to create a realistic historical scene with layers of detail that would have appealed to a Victorian vision of the past. Millais was especially skilled at essentializing historical models that would be easily understood by his contemporary audience. During his work with the Pre-Raphaelites Millais honed his skills as a myth maker; this skill was often reliant on the visual clues he painted into scenes. Later in his career, Millais applied these same skills and techniques to contemporary events, constructing modern myths about Britain's empire. This ability to condense a complex narrative into one scene is a trait that is consistent throughout his career.

The continuity of Millais's approach to historical narrative is especially evident in two paintings — *A Huguenot, on Saint Bartholomew's Day, Refusing to Shield Himself from Danger by Wearing the Roman Catholic Badge* and *The Black Brunswicker* (Figures 6 and 7). In these two paintings Millais turned to similar themes, as a member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and after his break with them. *A Huguenot* was painted in 1851-52, and is firmly within the period that Millais worked with the Pre-Raphaelites. The later painting, *The Black Brunswicker*, was painted in 1860, after Millais's break from the group in the mid 1850's. Stylistically their differences reflect these two distinct 'eras' of Millais's practice. Nonetheless, these paintings share a specific type of narrative. *A Huguenot* portrays a pair of young lovers. The young woman, dressed in period costume, attempts to tie a Catholic badge around the arm of her beau who staves off her efforts, all while the two share a passionate embrace. The scene is supposed to take place on the eve of the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre.<sup>28</sup> By refusing the Catholic badge, the young man will no doubt be harmed or killed in the anti-Protestant violence by the Catholic

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<sup>28</sup> Jason Rosenfeld, *John Everett Millais*, (Phaidon Press, 2012), 68.

majority. Millais included the order for Catholics to wear a white band given by the Duke of Guise in the painting's exhibition catalogue.<sup>29</sup>

*The Black Brunswicker* shows a similarly emotional scene. Again, Millais depicts a parting embrace between a couple, this time set during the Napoleonic Wars. Stylistically this painting is a departure from the Pre-Raphaelite natural detail of *A Huguenot*, but the scene is essential identical. Jason Rosenfeld has identified this painting as part of a quartet of images, including *A Huguenot*, that focus on “lovers in desperate times” through the portrayal of “intense gender dependency.”<sup>30</sup> Here, the man in *The Black Brunswicker* is identifiable as a soldier from the famed (and largely doomed) Prussian military unit in the Waterloo campaigns who leaves his affianced behind. A framed print of Jacques Louis David's *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* in the background is an additional indicator of the time and the theme. Catherine Roach identifies Millais's use of images-within-images as another connection between the two parts of Millais's career.<sup>31</sup> The print might even suggest that the woman in the painting comes from a family who support Napoleon; the divergent backgrounds of the two figures is yet another parallel to *A Huguenot*.<sup>32</sup> Heroism within a romantic context is the theme of both works, and one that Millais returned to again and again throughout his life. Both paintings show an emotional scene of departure and presumed sacrifice.

The “strong narrative impulse” and personalized history that has been identified in Millais's Pre-Raphaelite's work is still present in *The North-West Passage*.<sup>33</sup> There is also continuity in the ways Millais structures his narrative between the paintings he did as a member

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Rosenfeld, *Millais*, 112.

<sup>31</sup> Roach, *Pictures-within-Pictures*, 125.

<sup>32</sup> Rosenfeld, *Millais*, 112.

<sup>33</sup> Roach, *Pictures-within-Pictures*, 97.



of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and the later *The North-West Passage*. This can be shown by carefully examining how Millais constructs the narrative within the 1874 painting. The following chapter will analyze the characterization of the figures in *The North-West Passage*, which will be followed by a detailed investigation of Millais's nuanced approach to his subject matter.

## **Chapter 2- The Figures: Characterization and Gendered Types**

*The North-West Passage* epitomizes Millais's skill as a narrator of appealing domestic histories. Analysis of this painting reveals the ways in which Millais constructed a mythic present using many of the same methods he employed in the works discussed in the previous chapter. In *The North-West Passage* Millais draws on a variety of devices to create a similarly constructed narrative of heroism, albeit one located in the contemporary period. Millais's skill for dramatic staging was recognized and lauded since the 1880's. In his 1898 book on the artist, M.H. Spielmann pointed out this trait. In her 2006 book, Christine Riding also notes Millais's talent for dramatic staging. As she confirms, Millais's exceptional work is distinguished by "its legibility to a broad public and the subtlety with which Millais communicated the drama and consequences of [a] moment."<sup>34</sup> While I have stressed the importance of visual clues and objects in Millais's other works, the construction of a mythic present in *The North-West Passage* depends upon the believability of the more complex central relationship between the two figures in the painting. This chapter will focus on the characterization of these figures and analyze the ways in which they establish specific well-known Victorian types who would resonate with a wide public.

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<sup>34</sup> Christine Riding, *John Everett Millais*, British Artist Series, (London: Tate Publishing, 2006), 46.

The human relationship between the old gentleman and the youthful girl in *The North-West Passage* is what makes the painting so immediately compelling. Their relationship is the focal point of the work and it is to them that the viewer's eye is immediately drawn. Moreover, the visual interest established with the contrast between the two is enhanced by the flow of their compositional interplay. The woman is seated at the man's knee, her head at his shoulder level; while his left arm rests on the table next to him, his right arm rests on his right thigh. The woman covers his hand with her own, her right arm reaching slightly away from her body to do so. This connection between the two is the emotional crux of the painting. It demonstrates the casual comfortable care between the two. Visually, this is the link between the two very different figures. The eye travels from the man's face down his right arm to her hand on his, along the length of her arm to her face and torso and down her right arm to her lap where she traces the page of a book with her finger. The tension between these contrasting forms who are connected by the fluid composition is what makes *the North-West Passage* dynamic. This, in turn, ensures that the figures are not overwhelmed by the plethora of objects that surround them.

The old gentleman in *The North-West Passage*, is presented as representative of a previous generation of nautical explorers. The choice of model, his age, and his clothing all display of his identification with a past age of the British navy. Like a good casting director, Millais made strategic choices when choosing models for *The North-West Passage*. His choice of model for the man was Edward John Trelawny. Born in 1792, Trelawny was part of a generation of military men who ensured Britain's geo-political dominance in the Victorian period. Trelawny was mainly known for his work as a writer. He served for a short time the Royal Navy, after which he continued to travel the world with companions such as Lord Byron and Percy

Shelley.<sup>35</sup> Trelawny was eighty-two years old when the painting was exhibited in the Royal Academy.

Within the narrative established by the painting, the man's age removes him from current attempts at Britain's nautical expansion. He appears to be seventy years old, his face is leathery and grizzled and steel-grey hair appears like a storm cloud around his head. The vocation of the man is reinforced by his clothing. He is dressed in a heavy woolen pea coat, which was popular in the navy beginning in the 1700s. His trousers are of a similar naval style. His birthdate was 1792 and his age, clothing, and activity all reflect this. Consequently, even if viewers in 1874 did not recognize the model, they could use this information to construct a likely backstory. Within the space of the painting the old gentleman is located in the central left of the picture plane. He is seated by an open window through which there is a view to the sea, complete with a distant ship. This placement within the painting reinforces his connection to nautical life. That he stares into the distance towards the viewer suggests a contemplative act, a function of recalling a memory though it also provides a link to the viewer.

The version of masculinity that is constructed by the man's clothing, vocation, and age is specific to the Victorian period. John Tosh argues that in the period masculinity as a social identity was constructed in three places: "home, work and all-male association."<sup>36</sup> During the second half of the nineteenth century normative models of masculinity were based in physicality. Masculinity was tightly tied to exploration, as "the polar regions became a means of selling stories and teaching lessons about national character and traits of manliness."<sup>37</sup> In *The North-*

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<sup>35</sup> Dinah Birch, "Trelawny, Edward John," in *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, (Oxford University Press, 2009). Accessed through Oxford Reference.

<sup>36</sup> John Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-class Home in Victorian England*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 2.

<sup>37</sup> Michael Robinson, "Manliness and Exploration: the Discovery of the North Pole", *Osiris* 30, no. 1 (2015), 91

*West Passage*, while he is still a distinguished figure, it is clear that the man has retired from naval action. He provides reminder of the empire's past greatness, an indicator that the heroic explorations of the present are built upon a strong legacy. The 1874 exhibition catalogue for *The North-West Passage* included a line of text: "It might be done and England should do it." Presumably, Millais evokes this sentiment by means of the memories evoked as well as by the man's outward gaze. In his painting, neither of the figures is actively involved in the quest for the North-West Passage at present, but each in their own way could kindle public fervor for new efforts in the Arctic. Perhaps the very absence of a young male figure within the painting suggests that that work is already underway. This is an idea that I will expand on further in the last section of my thesis.

Unlike the model for the old gentleman, the 'girl' in *The North-West Passage* is not a well-known character. Though her identity is unknown Millais did use the same model for *Stich, Stich, Stich*, a painting based on a poem by Thomas Hood (Figure 8).<sup>38</sup> The use of a known historical figure for the man and an anonymous model for the 'girl' is interesting. Millais, like other members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, worked closely with a few female models, so the use of a known female face has a precedent within his work. However, in *The North-West Passage* the contrast of a known figure (male) with an unknown figure (female), speaks to the hierarchy of the figures. Somewhat conversely, this contrast also makes the constructed nature of the painting more apparent. With the inclusion of the anonymous 'girl', *The North-West Passage* becomes a constructed scene instead of a portrait of Trelawney.

The 'girl' is characterized by her youth, bright clothing, and demureness. This interiority comes from the activity she is engaged in, reading, as well as her placid expression. She is

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<sup>38</sup> M.H. Spielmann and Royal Academy of Arts, *Millais and His Works, with Special Reference to the Exhibition at the Royal Academy 1898*, (W. Blackwood, 1898), 79.

demure and beautiful. With her face tilted downwards, long lashes, a full mouth, and a clear complexion are her most notable features. She is young, perhaps in her late teens. Her youth and beauty are a fresh note in the painting, and her attractiveness serves an aesthetic role. This is especially significant since “the Victorians staunchly believed in the power of beauty—particularly female pulchritude—to elevate morality.”<sup>39</sup> Consequently, she serves a normative as well as an aesthetic role.

The role of women in the late Victorian period has been extensively explored by scholars. However, the relationship between adult women and their fathers has not been as thoroughly explored as the marital relationship. Depictions of fathers with young children were common, but the aged (but still capable) father accompanied by an adult daughter is less often the topic of critical analysis. As I have suggested in a previous chapter there might be an absent third figure whose presence is felt in the painting—an adult man. The absence of a male peer to the girl hints at a key factor in imperial conquest, the maintenance of domestic life at home. Imperial action was dependent on a constructed understanding of domesticity. This is linked to the issue of identity in the period. English identity was defined through action located far away from England itself; Englishness “like the imperial frontier with which it is coincident...is an eternal shifting, eternal contested space of struggle.”<sup>40</sup> A domestic female half of relationships often served to anchor male identity in the Victorian period. Men’s ability to leave home and enact whatever form of imperial labor they took part in depended upon a stable home to return to, a sanctified space in which they were protected and nurtured. And in this period the home was synonymous with the wife. The young woman in *The North-West Passage* can be read as a Penelope figure,

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<sup>39</sup> Susan P. Casteras, *Images of Victorian Womanhood in English Art* (Fairfield Dickinson University Press, 1987), 14.

<sup>40</sup> Ian Baucom, *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire, and the Locations of Identity*, (Princeton University Press, 1999), 34.

waiting for her Odysseus to return from his exploration. (Is the elderly man then Laertes?) The contrast between the two protagonists reminds “the viewer that the masculine enterprise of exploratory seafaring was underpinned by the comfort provided by familial bonds at home.”<sup>41</sup> Victorian art and literature of the period illuminates the popularity of Penelope like figures in Victorian culture. Ruskin sums up the Victorian attitude in his list of three aspects of heroic warfare: “war served to differentiate between the genders, because while men fought in far-away places, women waited at home, encouraging these efforts with sympathy and understanding.”<sup>42</sup>

The complex gendered relationships of the Victorian period have understandably received considerable scholarly attention. Nonetheless, the role of women during the latter half of the nineteenth-century remains a hotly debated topic. By and large, though, depictions of women in visual culture indicate the roles women played in British society and generally reinforced normative models of femininity. Changing economic conditions, new scientific theories, and the rule of queen over England were all responsible for the growing awareness of gender within Britain. British painting from the mid to late nineteenth century reveals a complicated negotiation of gender and class roles in the rapidly changing Victorian world. Many works were created to assuage Victorian men’s anxieties about deviant women and to remind women what acceptable behavior looked like. Two types of images of women were prevalent in Victorian society, the ‘Angel of the House’ and the ‘fallen’ woman. The Angel in the House is representative of the model of acceptable femininity that found pictorial expression in Victorian Britain. This type gets its name from an 1854 poem written by Coventry Patmore. “The Angel in

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<sup>41</sup> David Blayney Brown, “Mapping and Marking”, in *Artist and Empire*, ed. by Alison Smith, (Tate Publishing, 2016), 32

<sup>42</sup> Beau Riffenburgh, *The Myth of the Explorer: The Press, Sensationalism, and Geographical Discovery*, (Oxford University Press, 1994), 5.

the House” described the ideal woman as modest, morally righteous, and pure.<sup>43</sup> This idea is closely related to the Victorian idea of separate spheres, and while modern scholars find that “a single version of the public sphere is insufficient to allow us to understand the complicated variety of ways in which women might identify with communities,” a distinct private sphere is decidedly present constructed version of society found in Victorian art.<sup>44</sup> In paintings of “pure” femininity, women are portrayed in their homes, usually involved in a leisure activity. The paintings are not portraits of specific women, but instead a pictorial type, the dutiful wife in her domestic sphere (Figures 9, 10). In these paintings the setting was as important as the figure. “The naturalistic depiction of a room complete with furnishings and inhabitants provided sufficient visual material to satisfy the taste of middle-class domestic patrons avid for the recognisable rather than the intellectual.”<sup>45</sup> Paintings of “Angels in the House” used the supposed moral superiority of women as a pretense for their subjugation. Obviously, such controlling images of pure femininity did not reflect the experience of real women. As A. Vickery observes, “wherever angelic uniformity was to be found, it was not in Victorian sitting rooms, despite the dreams of certain poets, wistful housewives, and ladies’ advice books.”<sup>46</sup> Nonetheless, very few images of women from the Victorian period reveal the nuanced reality of women’s lived experience. Examining prescriptive images of women reveals more about the men who painted them and how they viewed women, than it does about women themselves. The Angel in the House model of “pure” femininity indicates Mill’s insight when he wrote that “men want not only the obedience of women but also their sentiments.”<sup>47</sup> Close attention to the visual arts,

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<sup>43</sup> Coventry Patmore, ‘The Angel in the House’ (1854).

<sup>44</sup> J. Rendall, ‘Women and the Public Sphere’, *Gender and History* 11, (1999), 482.

<sup>45</sup> Gail-Nina Anderson and Joanne Wright, *The Pursuit of Leisure: Victorian depictions of pastimes*, (Lund Humphries Publishers, 1997), 72.

<sup>46</sup> Amanda Vickery, ‘Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women’s History’, *Historical Journal* 36 (1993), 391.

<sup>47</sup> J.S. Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, (1869), 9.

specifically painting, provides an opportunity to analyze the matrix of forces surrounding gender and sexual politics in the Victorian era. Indeed, the pictorial arts of this period helped to construct the binary of ‘separate spheres’ that is still a part of historical analysis to this day. Certain women, especially wealthy women, were mythologized as moral guardians, too pure to exist in the outside world. Other women were portrayed as sinners, victims of deviant sexuality, sometimes their own. This construction of pure femininity relied on the creation of a punished, hyper-sexualized “other”. This strict binary of femininity necessarily fails to capture the nuanced ways in which real women lived their lives and constructed their own identities in Victorian Britain.

While Arctic explorers have been the subject of numerous books, paintings, and other cultural output during the period, less attention has been paid to their spouses. There is however, one woman associated with Arctic exploration who has not been ignored. In large part through her own promotional ability, Mrs. Franklin, wife of explorer John Franklin, became an important public figure in the search for her husband’s lost expedition. Examining how she was portrayed in popular media reveals some of the nuances of the Victorian’s understanding of the female relatives of Arctic explorers. Furthermore, as we will see, Mrs. Franklin presents an interesting contrast to the woman in Millais painting.

While there was a strong precedent of women’s exclusion from many facets of public life, Mrs. Franklin reveals that there were ways in which women acted independently in public life. And she was not alone in this. Middle and upper-class women were consumers, owned property and participated in charity and political work, which calls into question the “orthodoxy of women’s confinement to a world of child care and domesticity.”<sup>48</sup> John Franklin’s expedition

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<sup>48</sup> Kathryn Gleadle, *British Women in the Nineteenth Century*, (London: Red Globe Press, 2001), intro.



for the North-West Passage did not return when it was supposed to, and Jane Franklin took a leading role in the promotion of rescue missions starting in 1868.<sup>49</sup> Jane Franklin “became a tireless advocate of new exploration, using her moral authority as Franklin’s widow to push for rescue campaigns.”<sup>50</sup> The moral role of the wives of explorers in Victorian Britain was essential to both their own and their husbands’ participation in the creation of the normative model of the explorer’s family. Women provided the domestic moral underpinning that legitimized explorers’ choice to embark on exploratory expeditions. While the moral aspect of Jane Franklin’s involvement should be emphasized, it is important to note that the expeditions her public campaign motivated contributed to the geographic discovery of the Canadian Arctic.<sup>51</sup>

Within the context of *the North-West Passage*, the ‘girl’ is given a central position. She is seated, presumably on a stool, at the knee of the man. Engaged in looking at the book on her lap, her face tilted toward it, she traces the page with her finger. She is dressed in a white dress with a ruffled skirt that trails away from her to the right side of the picture plane. Her hair is adorned with blue ribbon, matching the blue beads around her neck. A pink shawl is wrapped around her torso. Her low-heeled shoes are decorated with a buckle. The width of her skirt seems to be in keeping with clothing of the 1860s. However, it is hard to date the period of her clothing exactly as she is young and dressed for a day at home, meaning her standard of dress is naturally more relaxed than with more formal wear. The white muslin material is indicative of a warmer time of year. It is likely a tea gown/house dress, as these gowns were looser in fit, and did not require the wearer to don a corset.<sup>52</sup> The tea gown was not as bohemian as some of the dresses of the

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<sup>49</sup> Robinson, “Manliness and Exploration”, 107.

<sup>50</sup> Robinson, “Manliness and Exploration”, 105.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Patricia Hunt-Hurst, “Tea Gowns, 1860-1899”, in *Clothing and Fashion: American Fashion from Head to Toe*, vol. 2, ed. by José Blanco and Patricia Hunt Hurst, (ABC-CLIO, 2016), 249

Artistic/Aesthetic dress movement, but they allowed women a range of motion while staying in touch with modernity.<sup>53</sup> The girl's clothing indicates her socio-economic position as middle class. This is significant in conjunction with the moral role she plays, since images that enforced normative gender roles were contingent on socio-economic class, as "pure" femininity was only available to those of a certain status. The economic status of women was directly linked to what "type" of Victorian femininity into which they fit.

The clear class and gender of both figures is exemplified by the contrast between their hands. In the nineteenth-century, "hands were a manifestation of class and gender written on the body."<sup>54</sup> Mrs. Robert Noble wrote *Every Woman's Toilet Book* that "one of woman's greatest charms is the beauty of her hands", the ideal hand was 'shapely, finely made, and white, with blue veins, taper fingers, and rosy nails, slightly arched.'<sup>55</sup> In the *North-West Passage*, the young woman's hands fit this description perfectly. The 'proper' care of her hands, their protection from the outside world and manual labor, is reinforced by the presence of her gloves on the table behind her. As Ariel Beaujot established in her book *Victorian Fashion Accessories*, gloves were a primary way for women to manage their bodies in the Victorian period, manipulating them to conform to a standardized model of middle-class femininity. Millais's painting shows a woman who conforms to gender and class standards of the period, she is an uncomplicated model of womanhood. She is an ideal version of young middle-class womanhood, a classification that is enhanced by the contrast of setting her in relation to the old gentleman. The femininity of the woman in the *North-West Passage* is enhanced by her relationship with the man, just as his masculinity is constructed in part through her presence.

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<sup>53</sup> Amy D. Scarborough, "Aesthetic Dress Movement, 1860-1899", in *Clothing and Fashion*, 32.

<sup>54</sup> Ariel Beaujot, *Victorian Fashion Accessories*, (Berg Publishers, 2012), 31.

<sup>55</sup> Mrs. Robert Noble, *Every Woman's Toilet Book*, 1908, quoted in Ariel Beaujot, *Victorian Fashion Accessories*, 31.

In *The North-West Passage* Millais reinforced normative Victorian gender roles, which in turn fortified the perception of a strong empire. Whatever was happening in the Arctic, the two characters in the painting could be depended upon to take care of the home front. And when the absent explorer hopefully returned he would have a comfortable and recognizable domestic life waiting. Careful analysis of the figures in the painting shows that *The North-West Passage* perpetuated normative Victorian attitudes towards gender, empire, and exploration.

### **Chapter 3- Cultural Context: Arctic Exploration**

The Arctic and its exploration was a major story in the popular press as well as in the scientific literature of the nineteenth-century. The long-standing association of exploration with travel and adventure made exploration an appealing topic for literary and visual culture. One with links to Imperial enterprise, as well as military and commercial expansion. Britain's Arctic endeavors provided Millais and his public with an exciting story, one which Millais's painting suggested even those at home were part of.

Before climate change opened it up in the 2000s, the North West Passage was nearly impassible and finding a safe passage through it represented exciting possibilities for trade and an opportunity for heroic exploration. Millais's painting, *The North-West Passage*, was painted during a period of heightened awareness of what was thought to be a viable naval route after hundreds of years of failed attempts to cross the ice filled waters of the Arctic. Faced with a surplus of naval resources following the Napoleonic Wars, and with no looming naval threats, Britain turned to exploration. After the end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815, the Navy began to be used as "a peacetime institution promoting British imperial economic, societal and cultural

security and enrichment.”<sup>56</sup> Britain’s interest in the North West Passage was not purely financial, the Arctic remained one of the few places that Britain had repeatedly failed to lay claim to through its various mechanisms of imperial conquest.

While its land and resources were not clearly viable sources of financial reward, the Arctic also presented a more transcendent draw, a chance for British men to prove themselves in some of the harshest environmental conditions on the planet. Furthermore, in an age that placed increasing value on a scientifically ordered world, the Arctic remained largely unknown to British science. During the nineteenth century, “science was emerging as the highest and most auspicious of altars upon which to sacrifice men and material.”<sup>57</sup> The Arctic was a nearly perfect platform for this sacrifice. The loss of the Franklin expedition provided brutal proof of this attitude. Of the three ships that left the Thames in 1845, only the few men who had left the expedition early returned.<sup>58</sup> All the others were lost to the ice and sea. Starvation, disease, and exposure were threats that even veteran explores could only pray to overcome. The failure of Franklin’s mission could have spelled the end of British Arctic efforts. Instead, it spurred years of further exploration, mostly in the guise of rescue missions. As Lisa Bloom writes, the Franklin rescue missions shaped British feeling about Arctic exploration,

“these men and ships are sent out to the Arctic not for material gain, but rather to save their fellow countrymen from death or to bring back their bodies. Such a display of chivalric values combined with noble sacrifice helped turn British polar explorers into romantic national figures.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Janet Owen, “Collecting artefacts, acquiring empire: exploring the relationship between Enlightenment and Darwinist collecting and late nineteenth-century British Imperialism”, *Journal of the History of Collections*, Vol. 18, Issue 1, (2006), 10.

<sup>57</sup> Frédéric Regard, *Arctic Exploration in the Nineteenth Century: Discovering the Northwest Passage*, (Routledge, 2015), 8.

<sup>58</sup> Ann Savours, "Northwest Passage," in *The Oxford Companion to World Exploration*, (Oxford University Press, 2007), Accessed through Oxford Reference.

<sup>59</sup> Lisa Bloom, *Gender on Ice: American Ideologies of Polar Expeditions*, (University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 118.

While rescue of Franklin's men was soon deemed futile, later missions still hoped to find out what happened to Franklin and his crew. These efforts were shaped by a controlling narrative; facts in conflict with that narrative were suppressed. John Rae's discovery of evidence of cannibalism among the Franklin party was not only ignored by the official record, but Rae's other accomplishments were never celebrated because he had contradicted the British Admiralty's reshaping of the Franklin narrative.<sup>60</sup> This control resulted in a stock understanding of Arctic exploration that bolstered normative Victorian values.<sup>61</sup> It was from this controlled history that Millais's painting emerged.

The normative narrative of exploration was disseminated by a variety of methods. Because of the inaccessibility of the Arctic, it was fundamentally important that the area be recorded, both for associates at home and for the Victorian public.<sup>62</sup> Advancements in media technology meant that the Victorian public was more visually aware of the empire's distant actions than at any previous time and this increased access was met with even more demand. Robert David tracks the effect of illustrated news-media on public perceptions of the Arctic in his book *The Arctic in British Imagination*. He reports that "more enduring stereotypes were created when pictorial images were constantly repeated, and when newspaper images complemented representations that appeared in other media."<sup>63</sup> The repeated use of the same image or type of image of the arctic in illustrated newspapers as a heading for new arctic articles led to pervasive stereotypes about the Arctic, "what was perceived to exist or to happen became

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<sup>60</sup> William Barr, "Rae, John," in *The Oxford Companion to World Exploration*, (Oxford University Press, 2007). Accessed through Oxford Reference.

<sup>61</sup> National identity was built on existing traditions and beliefs that were transformed from their original state to fit the needs of the Victorian populous. Chris Williams, *A Companion to Nineteenth-century Britain*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2004), 537.

<sup>62</sup> Jean-Louis Comolli, "Machines of the Visible," "the world becomes visible at the same time that it becomes appropriable" quoted in Russell Alan Potter, *Arctic Spectacle: The Frozen North in Visual Culture 1818-1875*, (University of Washington Press, 2007), 8.

<sup>63</sup> Robert David, *The Arctic in British Imagination*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 82.

as significant as what actually did exist or happen.”<sup>64</sup> Such stock images speak to Victorian attitudes of the Arctic and exploration, and are more useful in many cases than ‘accurate’ documentation of the area.

*The North-West Passage* was exhibited in the Royal Academy in 1874 in advance of the upcoming British Arctic Expedition of 1875. This expedition was one of the last sponsored by the admiralty; interest in the area was waning. The possibility of finding a traversable North-West Passage seemed to be increasingly unlikely and so the purpose of the expedition was not to transverse the passage, but to get as close to the North Pole as possible. Captain George Nares left Portsmouth England with the HMS Alert and HMS Discovery on May 29, 1875. An article about the expedition’s departure in the London *Times* wrote that the “crews were about to enter upon a battle with Nature in her sternest aspects, and that it was for the honour of the country that this should be so,”<sup>65</sup> a sentiment clearly in keeping with the themes of honor and self-making that defined nineteenth-century exploration. Showing the painting *The North-West Passage* directly before the 1875 Arctic expedition helped bolster these sentiments among the public. Millais’s painting “contributed to the culture of imperialism and reflected a new determination to reassert Britain’s traditional dominance in Arctic exploration.”<sup>66</sup>

*The North-West Passage* refers to the past history of Arctic expeditions, through the inclusion of the older man and the title of the painting, while also referring to the upcoming expedition. Millais’s decision to show this work in 1874 is a clear indicator that he was thinking of the upcoming expedition. This timing is also evident in the line of text he included in the

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<sup>64</sup> David, *The Arctic in British Imagination*, 86.

<sup>65</sup> *Times* 1875, May 31: 10, in Caswell, John Edwards. "The RGS and the British Arctic Expedition, 1875-76." *The Geographical Journal* 143, no. 2 (1977).

<sup>66</sup> David, *The Arctic in the British Imagination*, 165.

Royal Academy show catalogue, “It might be done and England should do it.” In this painting Millais seems to link past and present.

On my reading of the painting, the young girl is the companion of the old man but she also provides a contrast to him. While he looks to his past, she contemplates the page of a logbook. Millais, here, seems to suggest that she, too, is lost in thought. An admittedly speculative reading of the painting suggests the reason for her reverie, that there is a missing third figure, a male peer of the young woman, absent because he is actively involved in an Arctic expedition. *The North-West Passage* stands out from Millais’s typical tendency to portray heroic action through a pair of young lovers, as in *A Huguenot* and *The Black Brunswicker*. An already absent young hero would connect *The North-West Passage* more firmly with Millais’s other works.

The question of absent third figure aside, the context of Arctic exploration in the period connects *The North-West Passage* to Millais’s other paintings of heroic scenes. In each historically grounded scene of heroism, Millais’s narrative technique prioritizes human relationships over actual historical events. He presumes a knowledgeable viewer and he depends on his audience’s cultural literacy to read the paintings correctly. *The North-West Passage* is distinct among paintings related to Arctic exploration because Millais approaches the subject of Arctic exploration indirectly; the result is more emotionally accessible version of British exploration, especially when compared to the dramatic scenes of the Arctic like those of Edwin Landseer. Landseer’s 1864 painting *Man Proposes, God Disposes*, a much more sensational work of Arctic imagery (Figure 11). Landseer’s painting shows polar bears scavenging human remains in the wreckage of a British Arctic voyage. Understandably, the painting was controversial. Other works of the period showed dramatic Arctic landscapes, filled with sublime

but threatening shards of ice, such as in Caspar David Friedrich's *The Sea of Ice* and Frederic Edwin Church's *The Icebergs* (Figure 12, 13). Compared to these works, *the North-West Passage* is sedately domestic. It is meant to bolster the public's faith and not sensationalize Arctic exploration. The narrative of exploration is implicit, and this indirect approach allowed the public to relate to a non-threatening idea of exploration, as they would have already been aware of the dramatics and sacrifices of the Arctic endeavor.

#### **Chapter 4- Referential Objects and Victorian Media Culture**

As important as the figures in *The North-West Passage* are, their relationship and characterization only provide selective information about the history Millais was constructing in the painting. The narrative of the painting is reinforced by, and even requires, the objects that surround the characters. Millais fills the room with objects that are intended to be read with the same attention as given the figures. In *The North-West Passage*, no less than *A Huguenot* and *The Black Brunswicker*, Millais provides clues to a larger narrative that is at play, beyond the central figures. The objects in this painting relate to the Arctic, specifically the Northwest Passage. Moreover, *The North-West Passage* is directly related to the new media culture that emerged in nineteenth-century.

The room in *The North-West Passage* is full of objects related to the main themes of the painting. The old gentleman sits in a leather arm chair by a side table with roll-away side compartments. This may be a drum table, a popular style of table in the period. A mahogany library table covered by a heavy green cloth is positioned behind the two figures. An unfurled map on the central table frames the woman's face; close examination of the map reveals the words "passage," the "-erica" of America, and "smith sound." It is no surprise that the map is of



the North-West Passage, but these details ground the subject of the painting in a specific time and evoke the actual process of exploration. The map in the painting is a match for maps produced in the period that Millais painted the work; Smith Sound was not called Smith Sound on maps until William Baffin's discovery of the sound was confirmed by John Ross in 1818, the map is contemporary to the painting (Figure 14).<sup>67</sup>

Of course, there are also objects related to domestic life. The woman presumably brought the flowers in the vase as a single daffodil still remains in the wicker basket by her side. In genre paintings contemporary to *The North-West Passage*, home furnishings and interior details are just as important as the female figure, since these domestic details attest to her role as a homemaker.<sup>68</sup> In these works, women sitting inside engaged in some leisure activity are a common type. The paintings do not depict any specific narrative nor are they portraits. Although many genre scenes do show a "poetical" tendency (a term defined by Ruskin), their narratives are limited to the domestic space.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, the setting of these paintings is as important as the figure, "the naturalistic depiction of a room complete with furnishings and inhabitants provided sufficient visual material to satisfy the taste of middle-class domestic patrons avid for the recognisable rather than the intellectual."<sup>70</sup> Given the popularity of these types of scene, *The North-West Passage's* relative lack of domestic flourishes is notable. While there are some typically domestic objects like the vase and furniture, the rest of the room is filled with objects of

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<sup>67</sup> Ann Savours, "Ross, John," in *The Oxford Companion to World Exploration*, (Oxford University Press, 2007), Accessed through Oxford Reference.

<sup>68</sup> Susan Casteras, *Images of Victorian Womanhood in English Art*, 52.

<sup>69</sup> Julia Thomas explores the narrative dimensions of genre works in her book *Victorian Narrative Painting* (Tate Publishing, 200), there was a strong tradition of narrative painting during the Victorian period, but *The North-West Passage* is rather unique in that it is a constructed scene that evokes a specific historical narrative. Works like Jean Béraud's *After the Misdeed* (1885-90) use the title to suggest events outside of the painting, as mentioned in Erika Langmuir's *Narrative* (National Gallery London, 2003).

<sup>70</sup> Anderson and Wright, *The Pursuit of Leisure*, 72.

exploration, rather than domestic comforts. This suggests that the objects in the painting are meant to be read much more closely than those in a genre painting.

The objects in *The North-West Passage* advance the larger narrative constructed by Millais, and they also help create a harmonious composition. The central table is balanced by a blue and white pattern vase filled with flowers on one end and the woman's blue hat with floral embellishments on the other end. These hints of bright blue stand out among the earth tones of the room. The wall paper is a floral pattern, but is muted. The vase and hat pick up the other bright spots of blue in the painting. The dishware on the side table and the woman's blue beaded necklace are on the same parallel as the vase and hat, these spots of blue run across the middle of the plane. The bright blue of these objects picks up the more muted blues of other elements of the painting, the faded blue log book in the lower left and diagonally across the picture plane, the blue ice in the painting of the ship. The painting of the ship mirrors the scene outside the window, reminding viewer that these maritime artifacts are related to real events outside the space of the room. Along with the costume of the man, a heavy woolen pea-coat typically worn by sailors, they indicate his nautical past. There are other forms of nautical/naval memorabilia in the room, namely an engraving of Admiral Horatio Lord Nelson and a painting of a ship surrounded by ice. Artistic depictions of seascapes have always been popular, but the one in the painting is specifically a boat surrounded by ice, signaling an Arctic theme. Additionally, in the lower right corner of the painting various postcard or newspaper clippings related to naval activity are plastered to the wall. These are more tangentially related to maritime activity, mementos for public consumption rather than tools of the trade.

Millais's increasingly used narratives that would be understood by wider audiences as he distanced himself from the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. The images and objects that Millais

includes in *The North-West Passage* are not erudite or esoteric, but easily understood within the material culture and cultural events familiar to the wider Victorian public. Indeed, the painting specifically indicates several trends in Victorian visual and material culture; “the naturalistic depiction of a room complete with furnishings and inhabitants provided sufficient visual material to satisfy the taste of middle-class domestic patrons avid for the recognisable rather than the intellectual.”<sup>71</sup> The objects that decorate the room in *The North-West Passage* clue the viewer into the theme of the painting. They also indicate a trend of the period; “a house where images of the Frozen North could be hung upon the wall was clearly the house of a citizen of an important class, an important nation, and an important era.”<sup>72</sup>

As noted in Chapter 1, Millais was fond of using images-within-images to indicate the larger narrative in his scenes. The depictions of prints and paintings within his work communicates “information in [his] narrative pictures, while also involving [the] Victorian audience in a kind of problem solving in comprehending pictures.”<sup>73</sup> *The North-West Passage* demonstrates this tendency as it is filled with other pictures. Domestic settings like the one in *The North-West Passage* were ideal spaces to populate with images and objects that the viewers could read and decode. Nonetheless, the room is not overly symbolic; it is a domestic space embedded with the trappings of empire, a circumstance which would have been common for many domestic spaces in the period. As Julie Codell writes in the introduction to *Domesticity, Culture, and the Victorian Press*:

Domestic life around mid-century took on political, historical, imperial, aesthetic, and ethical values in its processes and its products, coming to symbolize

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Russell Alan Potter, *Arctic Spectacles: The Frozen North in Visual Culture 1818-1875*, (University of Washington Press, 2007), 11.

<sup>73</sup> Rosenfeld, *Millais*, 114.

progress itself through an ideological alignment with the civilizing mission of the empire, the rising middle class and its emerging ethos and ideologies, and the imagined community of the nation.<sup>74</sup>

The interior depicted in *The North-West Passage* is filled with objects that explicitly and implicitly reference the values and power structures that Codell identifies with domestic life in the period. The glorious past of the British navy is signaled through the engraving of Nelson that hangs on the wall, and the flags reinforce this imperial presence within the room. A room which actively celebrates Britain. Millais's success as a dramatic narrator in his work from throughout his career was predicated on his ability to populate his scenes with referential objects and images.

While reading such political references would likely have come easy to Victorian viewers of Millais's painting, we must carefully reconstruct their meanings with attention to the context in which Millais's painting was created. Necessarily, though, *The North-West Passage's* visual references can only be understood in conjunction to the larger visual and material culture of the period. Millais's painting is provides a way by which the Victorian public could access the exploration phenomenon of the period. Furthermore, interest in the Arctic "transcended the convention boundaries between 'fine art' and popular painting."<sup>75</sup> Multiple types of new media appeared in the Victorian period which made it easier than ever for people in Britain to feel connected to the farthest edges of Britain's empire.

The numerous studies that have analyzed the role of media in advancing the interest of the nineteenth-century British public in exploration have approached the subject in various ways.

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<sup>74</sup> Codell, *Introduction: Domesticity, Culture, and the Victorian Press*, 220

<sup>75</sup> Potter, *Arctic Spectacles*, 4.

In *The Myth of the Explorer*, Beau Riffenburgh draws on newspapers for the bulk of his primary source information, both because his book focuses on the relationship between news media and the cult of explorers and because he believes newspapers indicate “what the ‘common man’ actually know about explorers and newly discovered lands more clearly than... expedition accounts, society publications, or private journals or letters.”<sup>76</sup> Newspapers, though, are only one of the ways in which the “common man”, to use Riffenburgh’s words, would have been exposed to Arctic exploration. Examining a variety of media sources gives a more holistic understanding of the role of the media in the construction of a consumable narrative of Arctic exploration.

The Arctic was an especially challenging subject to convey to a general audience because of the alien nature of the landscape. The Arctic had to be displaced and transformed into something that was easily consumable. One way that this difficulty was surmounted was by using a broad range of media to make the Arctic visible to the public. By surveying some of these approaches, we can understand the larger visual culture with which Millais was in dialogue with when he painted *The North-West Passage*. The advent of the illustrated weekly newspaper in particular had a huge impact on how the public received information (Figure 15). The *Illustrated London News*, first published in 1842, set a new standard for illustrated newspapers. The *Illustrated London News* emphasized the quality of the images it used, this was a way of differentiating the paper from less journalistically minded publications such as the *Penny Sunday Times*.<sup>77</sup> The *Illustrated London News*’s first address to the public in its first edition reveals much about the publication’s ethos. Its editors asserted that illustrative art has “mapped out the geography of mind with clearer boundaries and more distinct and familiar intelligence than it

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<sup>76</sup> Riffenburgh, *The Myth of the Explorer*, 3.

<sup>77</sup> King and Plunkett, *Victorian Print Media*, 379.

ever bore alone.”<sup>78</sup> “The public will have henceforth under their glance, and within their grasp, the very form and presence of events as they transpire, in all their substantial reality, and with evidence visible as well as circumstantial.”<sup>79</sup> “In the world of diplomacy...the customs—the dress—nay, the institutions and localities of other lands, shall be brought home to you with spirit, with fidelity, and, we hope, with discretion and taste.”<sup>80</sup> The last two qualities, discretion and taste, suggest that decorum was very much in the minds of the authors, whatever the scene it would be presented in a way that was acceptable or reflected Victorian values. The illustrations were constructed for the tastes and values of the audience, or what the publishers believed the tastes and values of the audience should be. Furthermore, their address promised scenes that showed historical detail and to “minister to the natural anxieties at home.” This was all part of a larger claim made by *Illustrated London News*, “to seek in all things to uphold the great cause of public morality.”<sup>81</sup> Illustrated articles would have clarified the public’s understanding of Britain’s Arctic effort in a way that articles by themselves did not. Visual depictions of the Arctic were fundamental to constructing a history of Arctic exploration in this period.

The press promoted exploration and the heroic figures associated with it for a variety of reasons. Primarily, they had a vested economic investment in promoting the business of exploration. The cult of the explorer was promoted by geographical societies and news media, “as a consequence the role of the explorer became paramount, and the Arctic was increasingly represented in relation to his world.”<sup>82</sup> Millais’s inclusion of the Nelson engraving in *The North-West Passage* hints at the power heroic figures had in the British public’s imagination (Figure

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 379.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 380.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 382.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> David, *The Arctic in British Imagination*, 86.

16). Nelson's popularity was reflected in prolific use of his image; "his likeness was reproduced in every conceivable format, from enamel boxes to a wax effigy at Westminster Abbey."<sup>83</sup> This personalization of history is also manifest in the individual accounts of the Arctic which were one of the main sources of information that emerged from Britain's expeditions, even given the scientific motivation of many of the voyages. Instead of learning facts and data about faraway places, the public was interested in personal accounts of heroism. Elisha Kent Kane, the head of one of the Franklin rescue missions, sold 150,000 copies of his book *Arctic Exploration* when it came out in 1857.<sup>84</sup> Readers' responses to Kane's narrative reveal the nature of the public's response to Arctic narrative. One woman in 1857 wrote after reading Kane's book, "I am with the party in all their weary journeys...and when I turn to gaze on the dark magnificent landscape, I can almost realize the solemn, the dreadful stillness of the Arctic night."<sup>85</sup> Clearly the public was deeply invested in the drama of Arctic exploration. Heroic figures gave the public a personal means to relate to the Arctic. They could identify with or at least admire the heroic figures who appeared across various media formats. Like characters in books, explorers allowed readers to live experiences outside their own. The public's investment in heroic figures was profitable for explorers and the press alike. Yet there were limits to textual accounts of the Arctic, as the alien nature of arctic landscapes meant that authors were hard pressed to express what these landscapes were like. Consequently, the public's knowledge of the Arctic was shaped by visual media.

Along with the plethora of printed representations of Arctic exploration that appeared in print media, more immersive depictions of the Arctic allowed the public to feel as though they

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<sup>83</sup> Roach, *Pictures within Pictures*, 127, note 122, May "Nelson Commemorated".

<sup>84</sup> Robinson, "Manliness and Exploration: the Discovery of the North Pole", 92.

<sup>85</sup> Robinson, "Manliness and Exploration: the Discovery of the North Pole", 107.

were directly experiencing the Arctic. Panoramas and exhibitions allowed the public to experience the vast expanses of ice from the safety of Britain. The popularity of expositions, panoramas, and tableaux boomed during Millais's lifetime. "The 1800s witnessed the spread and availability of the spectacles belonging to the family of panoramas."<sup>86</sup> History and discovery became objects of spectacle and this created huge popular interest in the exploits of the empire. The images that were repeated most frequently in media representations of the Arctic were "ships in winter quarters, atmospheric phenomena," and images that emphasized "the frailty of human sledge parties among the chaos of Arctic ice."<sup>87</sup> These images became icons of the Arctic and polar exploration.<sup>88</sup>

While decidedly different from the types of Arctic icons discussed above, Millais's painting also became an icon of Arctic exploration. *The North-West Passage* has been used to illustrate articles on the North-West Passage to this day. A decade after Millais first showed the painting it appeared in the Christmas edition of the *London Illustrated News* (Figure 17). A satirical version of the scene in *The North-West Passage* was used as a *Punch* cartoon (Figure 18). This popular response to the painting conveys the power of media culture, both in the media versions of the Arctic that fill the space and in the very creation of the painting. Millais took from and contributed to the visual and material culture of his time. Moreover, Millais's portrayal of the Arctic stands out from many of the stock images of the Arctic in ways that no doubt helped to engrain the painting in the public consciousness. Arctic exploration was a mass spectacle though really only a few people actually witnessed the Arctic. Consequently, it was a spectacle filtered through many interpreters before the public consumed it; in many ways the

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<sup>86</sup> Melman, *The Culture of History: English Uses of the Past*, 15.

<sup>87</sup> David, *The Arctic in the British Imagination*, 87.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*



spectacle was an invention. Millais circumvented the issues of invention that might have arisen in more direct representations of the Arctic by painting a domestic scene filled with information about exploration. His indirect portrayal of the Arctic through the lens of domesticity was a smart and strategic choice.

### **Chapter 5- Viewer Response: Inclusion and Projection**

In *The North-West Passage* Millais sets up two figures in a domestic setting filled with clues that allow the viewer to characterize the figures. Each figure, as discussed in chapter two, is a type depicted in ways that clearly fit within Victorian social expectations. Initially they are not the sorts of individuals obviously associated with the heroic theme or desolate spaces evoked by the painting's title—*The North-West Passage*. This chapter will explore how Millais's juxtaposition of the domestic scene and the heroic grandeur of the painting's title, along with the catalogue text, "It might be done and England should do it", provide the key to this painting.

Many of Millais's paintings show information being passed on indirectly, and this is what Millais is doing in *The North-West Passage*. This trait is already apparent in Millais's first public commission, a series of murals painted for the Judges' Chamber at Leeds.<sup>89</sup> In *Old Age* (1847), an elderly man teaches young boys by reading to them (Figure 19). This lunette's connection to *The North-West Passage* is even clearer when considering an x-ray of *The North-West Passage*, which reveals that Millais included a globe in nearly the same position as in *Old Age* (Figure 20). There is evidence as well that originally there were two children in the right-hand side of *The North-West Passage*. This links the painting compositionally to another of Millais's works as well. *The Boyhood of Raleigh* depicts a child version of Walter Raleigh listening to the stories of an older sailor, prompting his own interest in exploration (Figure 21).

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<sup>89</sup> Spielmann, *Millais and His Works*, 154.

The theme of learning connects these three paintings by Millais, all construct history as a tale told. In *The Boyhood of Raleigh*, a young Walter Raleigh learns about exploration from the stories of a sailor. In *The North-West Passage* the young woman learns about the Arctic from the logbook and the elderly man. Furthermore, by looking at *The North-West Passage* Millais's audience learns about Arctic exploration through the various devices employed by Millais in the painting. The young woman is a proxy for Millais's audience, who are learning about the empire through the painting. *The Boyhood of Raleigh* does the same thing, as it shows the education of Raleigh but also as Joseph Kestner argues, "serves to imprint on the young men of England a construction of masculinity which constitutes a summons to Empire."<sup>90</sup> Millais signifies the importance of the moment by creating scenes of instruction with which his viewers would relate; likewise, in *The North-West Passage* Millais's audience's interest in the Arctic is represented through the proxy figure of the young woman. *The North-West Passage* conveys the importance of Britain's Arctic history by showing the young woman learning about that history.

I would suggest that by juxtaposing a domestic and heroic setting Millais encourages the diverse viewers of the *The North-West Passage* to inhabit or imagine inhabiting the Arctic in a variety of ways. The first is through the elderly man, the second through the woman, and the third through the absent figure of an adult man. The omission of this third figure could suggest that the Arctic exploration is a question of personal interest for this household. The two figures and the potential absent one create three ways for a viewer to enter the work. Essentially, almost all of the members of the public who saw this painting would have had someone with whom they could directly identify. By the time *The North-West Passage* was painted, "a larger proportion of the British public has a practical and intellectual stake in (and thus potential influence on)

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<sup>90</sup> Joseph Kestner, "Pre-Raphaelites and Imperialism: Millais's Seizing the Inca of Peru, The Boyhood of Raleigh and The North-West Passage." *The Journal of Pre-Raphaelite Studies* 4 (Spring 1995), 57.

contemporary art” than at the beginning of the nineteenth-century.<sup>91</sup> This painting would have already been accessible because of the prominence of the visual culture of exploration at the time that it was exhibited, but the emotional response of viewers hinged on their identification with the figures in the painting.

As emphasized throughout this study, Millais was an effective dramatist. The wide range of Arctic paraphernalia from the period hints at one of the problems with imperial action, that only a few witnessed it first-hand. In order to maintain public support, the Arctic had to be made accessible and polar exploration something to which ordinary people could relate. These goals were accomplished by means of the media culture discussed in the last chapter. Millais’s painting though, with its domestic setting and oblique relationship makes it even easier for the public to partake in their country’s imperial efforts. *The North-West Passage* serves a purpose not too distant from the Arctic panoramas, in that the viewer inhabits the narrative of exploration. In Millais’s painting, however, it is as if the experience of the panorama is implicit, seen only through the empathetic engagement of the viewer with the scene. The strange landscape of the Arctic is removed from *The North-West Passage*, allowing viewers to interact with it in a way that includes them in the narrative of empire but in a comfortable manner. The strange is made familiar and palatable and Millais has provided characters that the viewer can easily identify with.

Millais’s construction of viewer response in relation to *The North-West Passage* is especially apparent when the painting is contrasted with *The Boyhood of Raleigh*. In this 1870 painting, Millais imagines a scene from the life of famed Elizabethan explorer Sir Walter Raleigh.<sup>92</sup> The child-Raleigh is here shown listening to a sailor, the wonder of the story

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<sup>91</sup> Riding, *John Everett Millais*, 7.

<sup>92</sup> Tate, gallery label, November 2016.

conveyed by the sailor's expressive gesticulation. The scene is an idealization of history, the painting suggests the great things that Raleigh would go on to do. Both *The Boyhood of Raleigh* and *The North-West Passage* are indirectly about exploration. Millais explored this theme both times in the 1870's; the paintings are linked by their time of production and a common theme.

Yet, the heroic subject of *The Boyhood of Raleigh* contrasts with the domestic subjects of *The North-West Passage*. The types represented by the figures are clear, but not their identity. These anonymous figures in *The North-West Passage* are left open for a more expansive and, I would argue, more personal reading by the viewer. The two figures in *The North-West Passage* are stand-ins for the Victorian viewers who could project their own feelings and stories onto the scene. While the man and the woman are carefully characterized, this characterization is limited enough to allow for multiple identities to be associated with them. Just as the Arctic was a blank canvas for explorers to project their imperialistic fantasies, the openness of the figures in Millais's painting allowed his audience on viewing the painting to project themselves into the larger story of British Arctic exploration.<sup>93</sup>

Millais, instead of portraying the wonders of the Arctic and brave men in action, grounds the action at home. The domestic setting of the painting allows him to address exploration in an indirect manner that amplified the public's feeling of inclusion in Britain's arctic efforts. *The North-West Passage* reveals how the information available about the Arctic was transmitted to a popular audience and how that popular transmission formed and transformed the popular understandings of Britain's arctic efforts. Arctic exploration was a mass spectacle really only viewed by only the very few people who actually saw the Arctic. As understood by most of the

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<sup>93</sup> Benjamin Morgan, "After the Arctic Sublime," *New Literary History* 47.1 (2016), 3; idea emerges when quoting Mary Louise Pratt's argument about travel narratives; a similar idea is also put forth by Lisa Bloom in *Gender on Ice: American Ideologies of Polar Expeditions*, (1993), 3.

British public, the ‘Arctic’ was filtered through many interpreters before they consumed it; so in many ways the spectacle was an invention/construction/fiction. Millais’s nuanced approach must be seen within this context, *The North-West Passage* does not attempt to mirror a heroic reality, rather his painting stages a scene that informed the viewers how they should place themselves in relation to their nation’s imperial efforts. *The North-West Passage* is a constructed history, intended to reconstitute public perceptions of self and nation in advance of what could be another disastrous foray into unknown territory.

Millais’s indirect approach to the Arctic allowed viewers to identify with the sort of exploration which was determined by Britain’s imperial efforts. In this period, exploration was a means “not only to justify imperial or nationalist political doctrine, but to embody the supposed collective cultural superiority of the nation.”<sup>94</sup> It would have been in the interest of the Victorian viewer to identify with exploration and in Millais’s to provide a comfortable means by which to do so. His painting does this in that it provides an ideal way for the viewers to project themselves into “the imagined community of the nation.”<sup>95</sup> In 1874, Millais held considerable power in establishing the public’s loyalty to Britain’s imperial actions. He was by then an established figure in the British art world, and would soon become the president of the Royal Academy. As M.H. Spielmann wrote in 1898, *The North-West Passage* “is a picture of the Rule-Britannia kind, but of a very high order...its sentiment, the Union Jack, and the determined old mariner inspired by genuine patriotism...combine in a picture to inspire respect and even admiration for the subject.”<sup>96</sup> And when the success of Arctic exploration was in the balance his support would have been especially important. As Eric Hobsbawn has shown, “a changing society made the

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<sup>94</sup> Riffenburg, *The Myth of the Explorer*, 2.

<sup>95</sup> Codell, *Domesticity, Culture and the Victorian Press*, 220.

<sup>96</sup> Spielmann, *Millais and His Works*, 125.

traditional forms of ruling by states and social or political hierarchies more difficult or even impracticable. This required new methods of ruling or establishing bonds of loyalty.”<sup>97</sup> Millais’s indirect approach to exploration and promotion of the viewer’s self-identification was his way of building public support for the next Arctic expedition.

*The North-West Passage* is not the only painting in which Millais portrays heroic action indirectly. In both *A Huguenot* and *The Black Brunswicker*, Millais uses an interpersonal relationship to tell a story about historic heroism. To some extent, Millais’s viewers would have reacted to these histories by identifying with the emotions of the characters within the scenes. Millais relies on empathy and self-identification. *The North-West Passage* uses this same strategy to tell the story of British Arctic exploration. There is, however, another layer of complexity to *The North-West Passage*. The elderly man is a specific and empathetic figure who provokes memory of the history of Arctic exploration. On the other hand, the young woman is strangely blank. She is beautiful but generalized. This combination of blankness and beauty makes her the perfect proxy for the viewer. Beauty is important in the viewer’s identification with the young woman. Unattractive faces were “an affront because one could not, or did not want to, identify with ugliness or awkwardness.”<sup>98</sup> Millais’s indirect portrayal of the Arctic depends upon the viewer imagining the larger narrative of Arctic exploration through the two figures in *The North-West Passage*. “Imaging involves not only sensation and perception but also constructive skills and memory.”<sup>99</sup> *The North-West Passage* evokes memory and relies on the Victorian viewer’s exposure to other narratives of Arctic exploration. The domestic scene also

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<sup>97</sup> Hobsbawn, *The Invention of Tradition*, 263.

<sup>98</sup> Codell, “Expression Over Beauty”, 285.

<sup>99</sup> Bernard Smith, *Imagining the Pacific*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), ix.

allows the viewer to construct a version of the scene in which they are accessing exploration more personally, as does the young woman.

A viewer-response analysis of the work is illuminating, once the cultural context of the painting's production has been established. Stanley Fish's argument that interpretative communities produce the meaning of a work is especially pertinent here.<sup>100</sup> Victorian viewers of *The North-West Passage* would have brought their own knowledge to the painting to complete the narrative that Millais sets up obliquely. Prompted by the referential objects, viewers of the time would have completed the narrative using what they knew about Arctic exploration. As my chapter on Arctic media has shown, this information was widespread and readily available to the public. It is only when the knowledge commonplace to Millais's audience is taken into account that his painting become more than a domestic scene. Millais uses signs and symbols that he knew would have indicted the larger narrative of Arctic exploration to his audience. He focuses on a recognizable encounter between family members as a grounding device, and uses referential object to expand the narrative out of the domestic space. He relies on this background as well as his audience's knowledge of his other paintings of heroic subjects to imply the action (on behalf of the missing young man) taking place outside of the scene.

As noted in the first chapter of this study, Millais had practice constructing historical scenes from his early days with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Many of his early paintings critique the state of the arts in Britain stylistically, but substantiate national identity through their constructions of history. In his later work Millais is more closely aligned with the mainstream stylistically and this makes his constructions of national icons for his viewers to identify with even more powerful. English identity in the Victorian period was frequently defined through

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<sup>100</sup> Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, (Harvard University Press, 1982).

action located far away from England itself; Englishness “like the imperial frontier with which it is coincident...is an eternal shifting, eternal contested space of struggle.”<sup>101</sup> In *The North-West Passage*, awareness of faraway imperial action was resonates through this seemingly tranquil domestic scene.<sup>102</sup>

While Millais’s painting was very popular at the time of its exhibition and sold for a record price, later interpretations of the painting have varied widely. This is may be due to a gradual loss of knowledge and context over time. It could also be the original staged quality of the painting that made it an effective canvas for Victorian viewers to project their narrative on to especially required this tacit knowledge. Many modern sources say that the painting was intended to point to the precariousness of the Arctic adventure or that it was bemoaning the passing of the Arctic age. The latter may be closer to the truth, for while the Arctic age was not yet over, Millais’s painting certainly is about memory. “The past was used as a resource by means of which contemporaries sought to cope with and accommodate change.”<sup>103</sup> More importantly though, *The North-West Passage* shows Millais’s transition from using history to creating it. As Millais’s work with the Pre-Raphaelites shows, constructed versions of history became powerful icons of national identity in the Victorian period. *The North-West Passage* functions as a construction of national history as well, both by relying on the public’s exposure

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<sup>101</sup> Baucom, *Out of Place*, 38.

<sup>102</sup> An argument could be made that Millais’s recontextualization of exploration in *The North-West Passage* is due to the artist’s approach to painting nature. Memetic recreation of natural detail was a key part of the Pre-Raphaelite style and while Millais took a more painterly approach in his later works of human figures, he still painted the natural world with precise detail. His 1889-90 painting, *Dew Drenched Furze*, illustrates this continued attention to the recreation of natural phenomena. In the painting, Millais captured the environmental effects of light and dew on a wooded scene. Given this treatment of nature, perhaps it is not so surprising that Millais did not attempt a direct portrayal of Arctic scenery. Not being personally familiar with the Arctic landscape, Millais situated his scene at home, in an environment he was familiar with. Nonetheless, *Dew Drenched Furze* still is filtered through a human lens, the size and composition of the work reveals that it is a recreation of the artist’s view of the scene, not a direct portrayal of nature. Even in this painting Millais treats the subject through a human lens, in this case his own perspective.

<sup>103</sup> Readman, *Past and Present*, 191.



to history of Arctic exploration and by perpetuating a normative narrative of domestic peace and prosperity. Both these aspects of the work function to bolster the public's support of further Arctic endeavors and their perceptions of the British empire.

### **Conclusion- Constructed History**

My thesis considers John Everett Millais's painting, *The North-West Passage*, as a constructed history which must be considered from multiple angles to be fully understood. The painting has never fit easily into any category, as it is neither a strict history painting nor a genre painting. The narrative relies on both of these painting traditions as well as popular tropes, social attitudes, and current events to elicit what would have been a strong and visceral response in the original viewers. No doubt this is, in part, why *The North-West Passage* was so immensely popular. Every element in the painting plays a specific role in the story told and allows viewers to share in the construction of the painting's overall meaning, yet also to read it from a variety of perspectives. By analyzing every element—figures, setting, and objects—I have shown how Millais carefully plotted and realized his narrative. It is a nuanced story, a personal and domestic embodiment of the sublime that makes it empathetic, touching on various responses that are all the more heroic for being under and even unstated.

Throughout this study I have emphasized how necessary it is to view *The North-West Passage* within the wider context of Millais's career, as well as within prevailing beliefs about gender, exploration, and history. Seen as a constructed history, it is clear that *The North-West Passage* fits well within the subject matter Millais popularized earlier in his career. When seen in this context it is evident that *The North-West Passage*, like other of his works, such as *A Huguenot* and *The Black Brunswicker*, personalizes heroic historic events. Indeed, the knowledge of Millais's earlier works by his contemporary suggests that they would have been

able to trace this continuity as well. The shift from depictions of romantic couples to the old gentleman and the young woman could be more readily understood by viewers who would have the awareness of the absent lover from the earlier works. It could be argued that Millais's change in characters reveals his increased awareness of his audience, as this reworking of his earlier subjects opens up the narrative to the possibility of multiple vantage points. Constructed history in *The North-West Passage* is also a popular history that would reach a wider audience and play upon gender and national stereotypes.

In a similar manner, Millais's use of a domestic setting not only provides a backstory for the old man and the young woman, but it also conveys the arctic theme. Millais uses objects of memory to evoke the nautical past of the Empire and the current reverie of the gentleman. The details of *The North-West Passage* also convey the position of the young woman who thoughtfully traces the page of a log book, which would be somewhat unusual reading for a young lady in the Victorian period, and is certainly suggestive given her absorbed expression. It is Millais's genius to be able to convey heroic arctic adventures through such domestic figures. He has set the scene so that it is only by unpacking every detail of the painting—along with knowledge of current events, social mores, and the history of arctic exploration—that anyone viewing this painting can appreciate the significance of his comment in the 1874 exhibition catalogue: "It might be done and England should do it."

**Figures:**

*Figure 1: John Everett Millais, The North-West Passage, 1874, oil on canvas, 69.5x87.5in, Tate Britain*



Figure 2: Conte Carlo Lasinio, *The Crossing of the Red Sea*, engraving after Benozzo Gozzoli fresco, 1812, 44.8 x 80.6 cm, Harvard Art Collection



Figure 3: J.E. Millais, *Mariana*, 1850-51, oil on panel, 24x19in, Tate Britain



Figure 4: Page from the *Bedford Hours*, 1410-1430, British Library



Figure 5: J.E. Millais, *Portrait of John Ruskin*, 1853-4, oil on canvas, 78.7 x 68 cm, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.



Figure 6: J.E. Millais, *A Huguenot, on Saint Bartholomew's Day, Refusing to Shield Himself from Danger by Wearing the Roman Catholic Badge*, 1851-2, 92.71 cm × 64.13 cm, oil on canvas, private collection



Figure 7: J.E. Millais, *The Black Brunswicker*, 1860, oil on canvas, 104 cm × 68.5 cm, Lady Lever Art Gallery

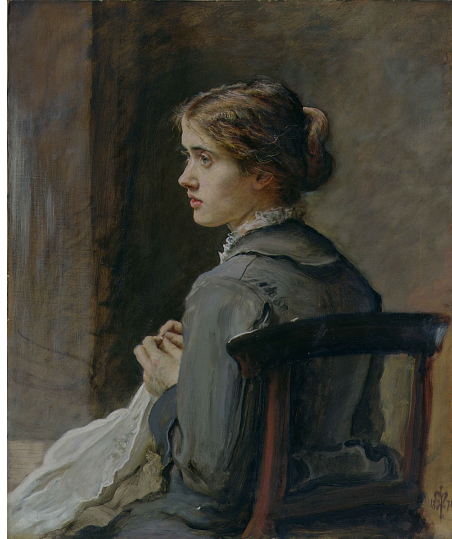


Figure 8: J.E. Millais, *Stitch, Stitch, Stitch*, 1876, oil on canvas, 76x63.8cm, private collection



Figure 9: George Elgar Hicks, *Woman's Mission: Companion of Manhood*, 1863, oil on canvas, 76.2x64.1cm, Tate Britain



Figure 10: Lionel Charles Henry, *A Quiet Half Hour*, 1876, oil on panel, 22.9 x 17.8 cm, National Trust, Hinton Ampner, Hampshire



Figure 11: Edwin Landseer, *Man Proposes, God Disposes*, 1864, oil on canvas, 91.4 cm × 243.7 cm, Royal Holloway, University of London



Figure 12: Caspar David Friedrich, *The Sea of Ice*, 1823-24, oil on canvas, 96.7 cm × 126.9 cm, Hamburg Kunsthalle



Figure 13: Frederic Edwin Church, *The Icebergs*, 1861, oil on canvas, 164 × 285 cm, Dallas Museum of Art



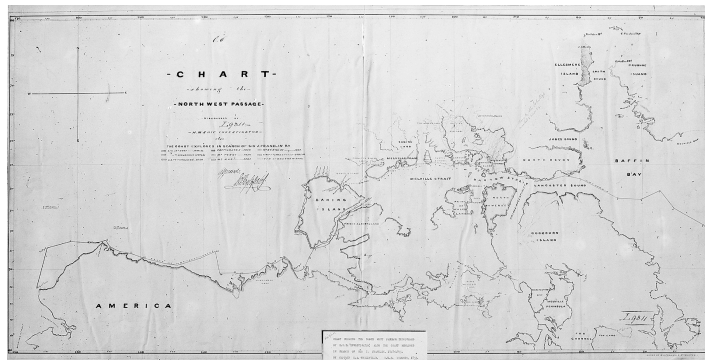


Figure 14: Chart Showing the North West Passage, Wellcome Collection, London

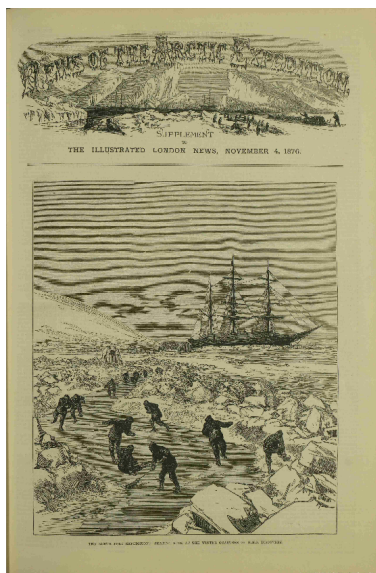


Figure 15: “News of the Arctic Expedition”, supplement to *Illustrated London News*, November 4, 1876, British Newspaper Archive



Figure 16: Charles Turner, *Horatio Nelson*, after John Hoppner, mezzotint, published 1806, 661 mm x 435 mm, National Portrait Gallery, London

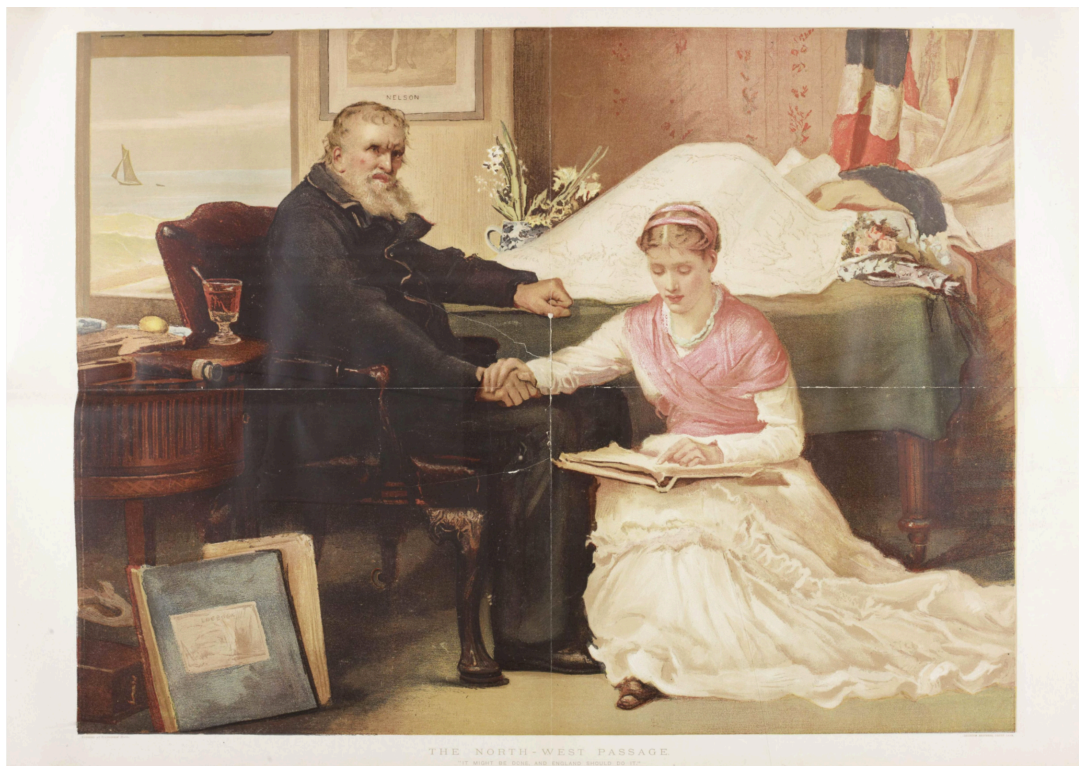


Figure 17: *The Celebrated Academy Picture* by Sir John Millais, Bart, R. A. "The North-West Passage." Christmas Number. Illustrated London News, 7 Dec. 1885

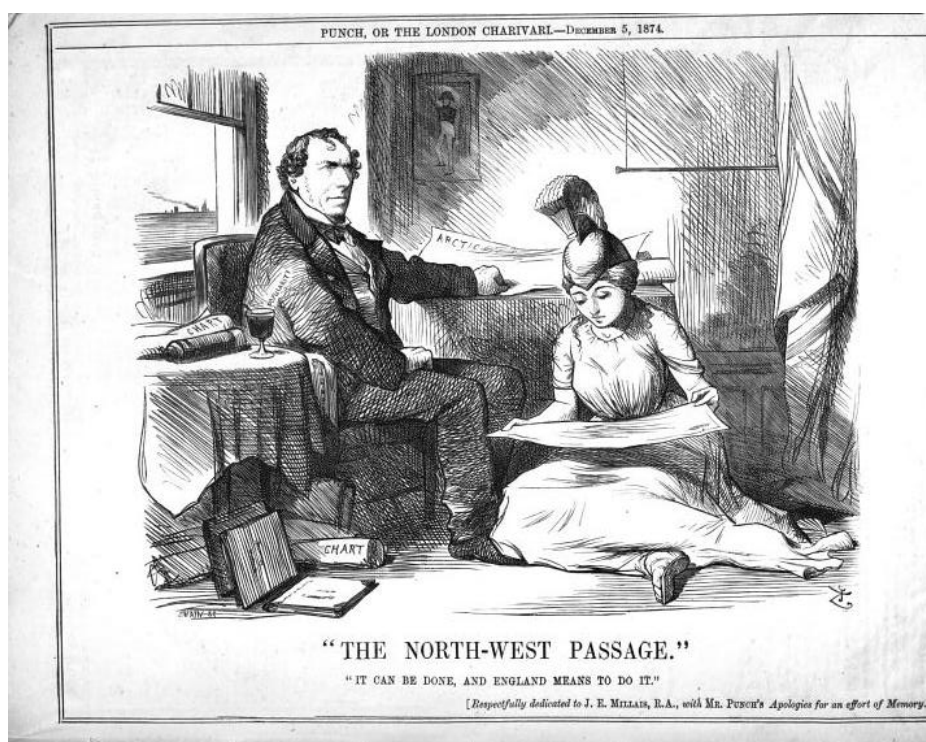


Figure 18: "The North-West Passage", *Punch, or the London Charivari*, Volume 66, December 5, 1874



Figure 19: J.E. Millais, *Old Age*, 1847, oil on canvas, 38.6x129.5cm, Leeds Art Gallery



Figure 20: X-ray of *The North-West Passage*, Tate Photography



Figure 21: J.E. Millais, *The Boyhood of Raleigh*, 1870, oil on canvas, 120.6x142.2cm, Tate Britain

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