The News at the Ends of the Earth

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Early in 2006 I visited the Grolier Club, a cloister for bibliophiles in New York City, in order to see the exhibition **Books on Ice: British and American Literature of Polar Exploration**. Curated by David H. Stam and Deirdre C. Stam, librarian-scholars and polar book collectors, the show recast Arctic and Antarctic exploration history as book history; on many expeditions, the Stams proposed, “books seem to have been as essential as pemmican, primus stoves, fuel, and furs.”1 The exhibition featured significant editions of voyage literature from both Arctic and Antarctic ventures over the centuries, as well as a range of other polariana. This miscellany included illustrations of the Arctic regions depicting (and, in at least one case, drawn by) Inuit translators and guides, such as an image by Inuk interpreter John Sacheuse (or John Sackhouse, Hans Zakeus) of the “first communication with the natives” held by John Ross’s British Northwest Passage expedition in 1818. Also on hand was a wooden case that had held a portable library, one of many provided by the American Seamen’s Friend Society to naval and merchant ships. Robert Peary had carried the portable library on his North Pole expedition of 1905–6 and again in 1908–9. Virtually all polar ships had libraries, and the Grolier Club exhibition contained the catalogue of the books in the ship’s library on the *Discovery*, Robert Falcon Scott’s first Antarctic command. A sound recording made by Ernest Shackleton and released by *Edison Phonograph Monthly* under the title “My South Polar Expedition” was among the more notable ephemera. Perhaps the most pathetic item was the edition of Alfred Lord Tennyson’s *In Memoriam: Maud, and Other Poems* carried to Antarctica by a member of Scott’s final, fatal expedition, one volume of which was found near the frozen bodies of the polar party.2
I was riveted. At the time I was completing a book on the literary culture of early American sailors, and I brought to the Grolier Club both my scholarly interest in the history of maritime books and an omnidirectional avidity for narratives of polar exploration. In a display case halfway through the exhibition I saw an unfamiliar artifact that at once unified my interests and seemed to stand as their apotheosis: an 1852 facsimile of the *Illustrated Arctic News* (1850–51), a shipboard newspaper written and published in the North by the men of the *HMS Resolute*. As I would come to learn, the contents of the paper were largely comic and playful, featuring detailed medical reports on the worrisome decline of the sun as winter advanced; a story about an inflatable named Benjamin Balloon getting “high” on “Hydro-Gin”; notices of a companion newspaper (the *Aurora Borealis*) from the expedition’s sister ship; and reviews of shipboard theatricals. The newspaper combined manuscript hand with printed headers and other typography produced, remarkably, on one of the first Arctic expeditionary printing presses. Sailors adapted the press to their use in the Far North in multiple ways: a note in the paper, in one example, specifies that “the large type headings as well as the Arms and devices were cut on board by the Seamen.” The *Illustrated Arctic News* was created during the total darkness of polar winter by ice-bound sailors who were searching for the members of a vanished—and perpetually searched-for—British Northwest Passage expedition launched by Sir John Franklin in 1845 aboard the ships *Erebus* and *Terror*. To this day most of the bodies of the men have never been found, other than a handful of remains of individual sailors who died at various points earlier in the expedition. One of Franklin’s missing ships, the *Erebus*, was finally located on the Arctic seafloor near King William Island in the summer of 2014, 167 years after the first searches, by a state-sponsored submersible mission led by Parks Canada. The second ship, *Terror*, was located in Terror Bay in the fall of 2016 by a private expedition. In the nineteenth century, however, only scattered relics of the expedition (and scattered graves) were discovered, including a copy of Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Vicar of Wakefield* found on the ice.

In the Grolier Club, the sight of the *Illustrated Arctic News* activated not only my fervor but my archival instinct as well, and moved me to proclaim to my companion, “Here is my next book.” When I made this assertion I knew nothing about the *Illustrated Arctic News* beyond the information contained on the exhibit display tag. From my reading in polar history I was familiar with the decades-long search for the Franklin expedition. As a nineteenth-century Americanist, I could not help but notice references to
the hunt for the *Erebus* and *Terror* in the media of the period; Frankliniana was its own mania for a time in the Anglo-American midcentury, and its traces are visible in periodical, literary, and other historical accounts. The existence of literary cultural work by sailors was not news to me either, as mariners’ engagement with and production of narrative writing has been the ongoing focus of my scholarship. What was unfamiliar—and what impressed me as so strikingly, declaratively different about the *Illustrated Arctic News* at that moment in the Grolier Club—was the revelation of the presence of an actual printing press, a far-from-standard piece of nautical equipment, aboard that icebound Arctic ship.

The press was used, surprisingly, in service of media circulation largely within the confines of the expedition’s ships themselves. Of all the ways that a polar expedition might find to pass the tedium of a long, dark, immobilized winter, I wondered, why would crew members feel an imperative not just to write a newspaper but to print it as well? And not to print it upon their return home to London or another metropole but to print it somewhere around latitude 75° N, well north of the Arctic Circle in the Canadian archipelago, for an imagined community defined only by (and necessarily limited to) the members of the expedition, the actual community, themselves? I was arrested by their employment of the very form of the newspaper, an uncommon genre in sailor writing. Yet as I would discover, the *Illustrated Arctic News* represents only one of many coterie newspapers created by polar voyagers throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century in what became a standard practice of such ventures, however little known today. Looking at the *Illustrated Arctic News* for the first time, I was curious to learn if the climatic and geophysical extremity of the polar regions, as well as their nonhuman scale—which was tracked in the scientific recordkeeping done by polar ventures as a matter of course—would also register within the quotidian pages of an expedition’s gazette. The genesis for this book, in other words, was a question freighted with multiple implications, both then and now: *What is the news at the ends of the earth?*

That is how the book began, but books on ice, like ice itself, are not fixed in place. Nor do they maintain a consistent state of matter. When I began researching and writing *The News at the Ends of the Earth*, I was also closely reading contemporary news reports emerging from the Arctic and from Antarctica: news of climate change, of resource extraction and its attendant land and water claims. I followed the twenty-first-century media reports with one eye cast on the nineteenth-century research in which I was engaged. My questions about the news at the ends of the earth took
on more detail and more urgency: How does polar news circulate? What is its temporality in a region without familiar patterns of diurnal time? What knowledge do the Arctic and Antarctica impart to the human and nonhuman world in Anthropocenic time, in deep or geological time? Do the forms of media chosen by expedition members—newspapers and other ephemera—have something to tell us about what kind of communicative media and narrative structures can help us represent our current age of climate change?

I came to realize that twenty-first-century news of polar resource circulation and climate observation, facilitated by textual and other media representation, was not just a contemporary analogue of the story I was telling about the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: it was the same story.