

Dreams of flight in the nineteenth-century Arctic imagination

Shane McCorristine 

School of History, Classics and Archaeology, Newcastle University, UK

Research Article

Cite this article: McCorristine S. Dreams of flight in the nineteenth-century Arctic imagination. *Polar Record* 62(e11): 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032247426100278>

Received: 5 August 2025

Revised: 9 January 2026

Accepted: 4 February 2026

Keywords:

Arctic exploration; ballooning; clairvoyance; John Franklin

Corresponding author:

Shane McCorristine;

Email: shane.mccorristine@newcastle.ac.uk

Abstract

This article is an attempt to understand how diverse and seemingly incommensurable aerial perspectives on Arctic exploration could co-exist during the search for the John Franklin expedition in the 1840s and 1850s. I begin by examining the cultural context of ballooning before turning to proposals to send balloons and other aerial missions to the Arctic. Why did balloons and ‘balloonacy’, as the popular periodical *Punch* described this craze, come to feature so prominently in responses to the Arctic mystery, and how did women feature in these responses? I then discuss the clairvoyantes who were put into mesmeric trances and then described visiting Franklin and his men in the Arctic. Beginning at the time of greatest anxiety regarding the fate of the expedition, clairvoyante visionaries and their operators formed part of an emotional field of speculation and experimentation centred on the Arctic. I conclude by arguing that actual balloon expeditions in search of Franklin echoed many of the mesmeric and imaginary projects emanating from popular culture. This connects women’s perspectives about the Arctic with aerial exploration schemes and suggests that we look at both together for a deeper understanding of polar culture in the 1840s and 1850s.

Introduction

In 1845, Sir John Franklin departed London in command of a naval expedition in search of a Northwest Passage through the Arctic. As the years passed and no word was heard from the explorers, the mystery inspired an outpouring of schemes, plans, and fantasies in Britain about how they might be located and rescued. Women’s voices featured prominently in these efforts despite Arctic exploration being, on the face of it, a hyper-masculine cultural space of endeavour, scientific heroism, and imperialism. More striking still was the fact that women’s dreams of flight to the Arctic began to feature in the cultural response to the mystery. For example, in 1850, Franklin’s wife, Lady Jane Franklin, received a letter detailing a ‘remarkable dream’ about her and some air balloons which the correspondent believed might aid in the rescue of her husband (Anon, 1850). Around this time, it was also reported that a woman in a mesmeric trance claimed to have ‘ascended in a balloon and proceeded to the North Pole in search of Sir John Franklin’ (Carpenter, 1853: 521). Furthermore, Jane Franklin and her niece Sophia Cracroft either attended or monitored the trance journeys of several female clairvoyantes who searched for the expedition between 1849 and 1851 (Gillies Ross, 2003; McCorristine, 2018). These kinds of aerial perspectives on an Arctic mystery are important because they emerged at the same time as male explorers and the British Admiralty were taking their own ‘aerial turn’ in their searches for the Franklin expedition – releasing messenger balloons and proposing manned air expeditions. This article is an attempt to understand how these diverse and seemingly incommensurable perspectives on Arctic exploration could co-exist in the same period.

I begin by examining the cultural context of ballooning before turning to proposals to send balloons and other aerial missions to the Arctic. Why did balloons and ‘balloonacy’, as the popular periodical *Punch* described this craze (Anon, 1857: 153), come to feature so prominently in responses to the Arctic mystery and how did women feature in these responses? I then discuss the clairvoyantes who were put into mesmeric trances and then described visiting Franklin and his men in the Arctic. Beginning at the time of greatest anxiety regarding the fate of the expedition, clairvoyante visionaries and their operators formed part of an emotional field of speculation and experimentation centred on the Arctic. I conclude by arguing that actual balloon expeditions in search of Franklin echoed many of the mesmeric and imaginary projects emanating from popular culture. This connects women’s perspectives about the Arctic with aerial exploration schemes and suggests that we look at both together for a deeper understanding of polar culture in the 1840s and 1850s.

Histories of Arctic exploration have traditionally focused on land and sea expeditions. This is unsurprising given how few and unsuccessful aerial endeavours in the Arctic were until the twentieth century. In the past two decades, however, geographers and historians have examined in more detail the cultural and emotional histories of Arctic ballooning during the heyday of

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polar exploration. Derek McCormack uses the disastrous 1897 North Pole balloon expedition of Salomon August Andrée to reflect on the 'sensing of atmospheres (as simultaneously meteorological and affective) in moving bodies' in the Arctic (2008: 414). Huw Lewis-Jones similarly focuses on a single case – the proposed balloon expedition of Commander John P. Cheyne in the 1870s – to argue that it reveals a lot about the culture of exploration at the time: 'As imaginations soared, some looked to ballooning as the ideal means of surmounting the difficulties which barred progress to the pole' (2008: 301).

This interest in balloons has emerged in a time of renewed attentiveness to the emotional spatialities of the Arctic, as demonstrated by several Victorianists and cultural historians who have shown how ordinary people in Britain and North America forged vibrant imaginative connections with a remote and mostly inaccessible geographical region (see David, 2000; Spufford, 1996; McCorristine, 2018; Potter, 2007; Craciun, 2016; Davis-Fisch, 2012; Blum, 2019). Siobhan Carroll, for instance, argues that the Victorian Arctic was an intersectional space where science, discovery, and literature overlapped – 'a geo-imaginary region where the line between fact and fiction often appeared hopelessly blurred' (2015: 22). Scholarship on Arctic aviation almost exclusively focuses on men, but there is an established body of work that has complicated the theme of gender in the history of Arctic exploration over the past few decades. In different ways, scholars have dissected the limits of exclusionary practices and provided evidence for the lively presence of women, children, and other sectors of Victorian society traditionally occluded in official accounts and histories of polar exploration (see Robinson, 2015; Chapin, 2004; Bloom, 1993; Routledge, 2018; Hill, 2008).

In this article, I build on this scholarship by arguing that women's dreams of Arctic flight have cultural histories connected to official aerial expeditions and that they can be better understood together as co-constructions. The primary sources for this article were periodicals, archival collections relating to the Franklin family, and historic newspapers (accessed via the British Newspaper Archive database), all of which were searched for discussions of ballooning, Arctic exploration, clairvoyance, and women's roles in these spheres. The aerial perspective under discussion offers us a key to unlocking this expanded field of Arctic culture because in western culture people have traditionally used it for dreams and fantasies of escape or omniscience (Bachelard, 2001). The mystery of the Franklin disappearance, and the explosion in schemes and plans to solve it, occurred at a time when ballooning was popularly imagined as something which bridged reality and fantasy (Lynn, 2010). This meant that the aerial dimension of Arctic exploration quickly became relevant. Paying attention to the air during this period, I argue, also brings in a diverse range of sources and voices on the Franklin expedition and challenges ideas that polar expeditions were purely masculine activities or that polar culture was dominated solely by literate men.

At the centre of this article is the disappearance of Franklin's Northwest Passage expedition. In 1818, the British Admiralty rebooted the early modern quest to discover a maritime shortcut to Asia through what is now the Canadian Arctic. After several failed attempts, in 1845, Franklin was selected to lead 128 officers and crew into the Arctic ice aboard the restructured bomb vessels HMS *Erebus* and *Terror*. In their second winter, the men's ships became locked in the ice near King William Island (in modern-day Nunavut). After dozens of deaths (including that of Franklin), in April 1848 the survivors abandoned the ships and launched the

first of several doomed attempts to reach the Canadian mainland (Cyriax, 1939; Brandt, 2010). Over the next few years, small groups of the remaining men died at different locations in this region; some were remembered in detail by the Inuit, who spoke to searchers in the late 1850s (Woodman, 1991; Potter, 2016). The disappearance of the expedition sent shock waves through Britain, inspiring an outpouring of speculations on the mystery and causing the Admiralty to downsize its subsequent polar expeditions. Early search and rescue attempts by the Admiralty and other polar experts came to nothing, and this created an information vacuum that was swiftly filled by popular speculations (Gillies Ross, 2002a).

Starting in 1849, many people in Britain seized the opportunity to theorise about the Franklin expedition, and in 1854 revelations about cannibalism among the starving survivors led to further dark imaginings. The Arctic was of course dreamed about and represented in women's fiction long before this time: Mary Shelley's Arctic themes in *Frankenstein* (1818) are well known, and Franklin's first wife Eleanor Porden was also interested in the Romantic aspects of the Arctic, as demonstrated by her poem 'The Arctic Expeditions' (1818). However, after the Franklin expedition, the voices of ordinary women began to feature more often in Arctic discussions. Through media such as panorama shows, ghost stories, letters to newspapers, spiritualist séances, and dreams, people now felt they could access the Arctic and intervene in the Franklin mystery. *The Frozen Deep*, a play about female clairvoyance and Arctic exploration written in 1856 by Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens, is one of the many interesting performances to emerge from this confluence of the Franklin expedition, popular culture, and supernatural experience. As I have argued elsewhere, this confluence represented a democratisation of the culture of Arctic exploration and a challenge to the long-held authority of the Admiralty over the region (McCorristine, 2018).

Aerial perspectives over the Arctic

The fantasy of an aerial perspective over sea and land, described as the 'Apollonian gaze' by Denis Cosgrove, continues to structure thinking about mapping and air power in contemporary society (Cosgrove, 2001; Kaplan, 2006). During the period under investigation, the bird's eye view above the Arctic was an important visual logic in the narration of exploration by both commanders and fictional writers back home. This was a masculinist and imperialist narration whereby male writers, geographers, and navigators demonstrated their authority over Arctic space through the discernment of patterns and passages that were unseen by viewers down below. This was evident in the kind of maps produced throughout the early nineteenth century, which showed the blank spaces stretching between the Atlantic and the Pacific, flirtatiously waiting to be charted by explorers.

In practical terms, on the discovery ships sent out by the Admiralty, the ice-master kept a look-out for safe passages through the ice by observing in the crow's nest. As a single, vulnerable figure, the navigator's perspective was a hazardous and fragmentary one and the person occupying the crow's nest had to regularly endure significant weather-related suffering to gain a telescopic view of the ship's path: indeed, the Arctic whaler and Franklin searcher William Penny once spent 36 continuous hours in the topmast, with just one tea break (Tillotson, 1869: 84). In the context of ice fields, the desire to gain perspective from the air makes sense, but it also chimed in with the ideology of geographic seizure in the Arctic as constructed by things like the charts and

'God's eye view' maps issued to navigators. However, despite this imperial fantasy, it was not until the mysterious disappearance of the Franklin expedition that the Admiralty began to take seriously actual proposals to enter Arctic aerial space.

It was the *veiled* status of the Franklin mystery, hidden but seemingly within grasp, that invited so many people to dream about the Arctic in the 1840s and 1850s. As Russell Potter puts it: 'When explorers, themselves charged with venturing into the unknown and unearthing its secrets, become lost, we feel their disappearance more keenly, and if, despite all our efforts, we find no trace of them, our confidence in our human knowledge and capabilities is profoundly shaken' (Potter, 2016: xiii). This explains the gothic force that the Franklin expedition exerted: it seemed to leave material traces and clues everywhere. Searchers pored over copies of Admiralty orders and maps, as well as the caseloads of artefacts and relics found by John Rae, Leopold McClintock, and others in the 1850s, and yet this evidence did not solve the disappearance.

The response of some commentators was to imagine the Arctic as an uncanny place, a kind of maze where Franklin disappeared while "nobly toil[ing] in deciphering the puzzling Arctic labyrinth" (cited in Isbister, 1860: 95). In 1852, Charles Ede, assistant surgeon aboard HMS *Assistance*, raised this theme of the icy labyrinth in a prose contribution to a shipboard publication. Interestingly, his piece, entitled 'Franklin's Vision', linked the idea of an Arctic labyrinth with a female presence materialising in the air above:

The huge blank front of ice that reared around, a limit insurmountable, seemed rent in twain; and through the gaping walls of congealed water came a pleasant sunny light, soft with the tints of morn . . . Tears, hot tears of love, from well-tried friends form a clear passage through the treacherous elements, as flowing in unison they mingle in the ecstasy of joy. Nearer and nearer still the air-borne sounds and home-like fragrance come; while in the dim and lowering distance the dreaded region fades. Lo! gentle spring has decked the barren spot with flowers that we in childhood laughing plucked. Here, in gray garments clad, the light, the hope of life's bright dawn approaches; her step, firm with humanity, scarce leaves its print behind, so lightly buoyed with long deferred hope: she, bending, stretches toward my exhausted form her soothing hands, when that sweet touch my happiness dispels (Anon, 1852: 18).

The notion of an Arctic labyrinth became a trope during the Franklin mystery, binding together anxieties of loss with fantasies of flight and revelation. The dream of resolving the complexities of Arctic space called for a parallel presence from above, whether through the technology of the map or through fantasies of flight. However, in Ede's prose, Franklin imagines himself being rescued, not simply by the *Assistance*, but by the emotional and aerial power of his wife, Jane Franklin, a woman whose 'hot tears of love' travel to the Arctic without the mediation of male action. The idea of female agency in the Arctic, through tears, hopes, and prayers, was widespread during the Franklin era, but the role of women's aerial perspectives in this mystery – and ballooning in particular – has not been recognized before.

Ballooning emerged as one solution to the Arctic labyrinth, and an early proponent of this mode of transport was the whaler and scientist William Scoresby, an Arctic authority who recognised that the disappearance of the Franklin expedition had impacted on the emotional lives of the British public. For Scoresby, the job of exploring had now passed to the nation as, 'if we were ready to appropriate to ourselves . . . the glory . . . of an adventure successfully pursued, we are bound to adopt its reverses, and to help, to the uttermost, the adventurers in their difficulties' (Scoresby, 1850: 9). With the duty of search and rescue now shared among the general

public, Scoresby proposed new forms of 'transglacial journeys' to locate the expedition: land depots, sledges with kites, and messenger balloons were among his suggestions (1850: 86). Scoresby was also one of the first Arctic veterans to propose that explorers should themselves take to the air to find Franklin. In 1850, he suggested that a balloon could be launched from a ship with three men, provisions, a sledge, and a tent, for a month-long voyage. As a 'mode of attaining an elevated site for observation' and for the 'remote inspection of the nature of the ice and lands in the direction contemplated for travelling parties', ballooning, it was argued, had much to offer (88). Although Scoresby warned that the view from the balloon would likely mean that the *Terror* and *Erebus* would appear so small as to be invisible to the naked eye, the notion of aeronautic adventures in the Arctic quickly took off.

At this time, ballooning as a mode of travel could be variously seen as utopian; a pseudo-scientific sham; an exercise of sovereign power; or a radically democratic pursuit. This heterogeneity meant that the balloon floated erratically between the worldly and the otherworldly. Michael Lynn (2010) has shown how flight caught the public imagination in the nineteenth century, appealing to scientists, dare-devils, writers, monarchs, and the crowds that paid to attend ballooning spectacles and experiments. The balloon was attractive by virtue of its novelty, danger, and potential, but it also raised questions: How did it work? Where could it travel? What did this mean for politics, mass transportation, warfare, surveillance, photography, and art? Balloons confused the boundaries between materiality and immateriality because they were physical things that were buffeted by air and atmosphere, while at the same time they were imagined as airy, intangible things that could be affected by the dreams, hopes, and good wishes of people on the ground. In the next section, I examine some of the cultural histories of Arctic aerial expeditions to make the argument that they were co-constructed with dreamlike senses of Arctic flight, a genre in which women's voices or perspectives featured.

Balloons and the search for Franklin

Rather than representing a fantasy of a disembodied and objective aerial perspective, ballooning reflected the messy diversity of the people involved in the practice in the 1840s and 50s. From below, spectators in the urban crowd viewed the balloon in one way, while rural farmers expressed surprise at occasionally seeing these floating objects crash into their crops and pastures. From the beginning, women participated in the spaces of ballooning as aeronauts and onlookers, subverting any dominance by men (Lynn, 2010: 60). At the dream spaces of the panorama shows, meanwhile, men, women, and children attended representations of ballooning where they entered a kind of virtual space: being in a balloon and feeling like you were in a balloon were equally dreamlike experiences for Victorian participants. A contributor to Charles Dickens's periodical *All the Year Round*, for instance, wrote about what it felt like to attend a moving diorama show of a balloon voyage in London. The author recalled that the audience was taken on a virtual aerial journey by viewing vertically rolling representations of a cross-channel aeronautic voyage: 'the garden, wondering spectators, trees, all went *down* rapidly, the balloon remaining stationary. The effect was most ingeniously produced'. To allow the audience to participate in the 'bird's-eye condition' of the ballooning perspective, an actual balloon was present in the diorama room. During the interval this was replaced by a tiny balloon 'which was put away high in the air, in its proper place' –

thereby allowing the stationary viewer to embody the view far above land (Anon., 1866–7: 306).

In the context of Arctic exploration, ballooning has mostly been associated with the Swedish expedition led by Salomon August Andrée in 1897. In July of that year, Andrée and his two companions left Danskøya, northwest of Spitsbergen, in the hydrogen balloon *Svea* on a voyage towards the North Pole. Andrée's expedition vanished without a trace until 1930 when passing sealers discovered the remains of their bodies and final camp on the island of Kvitøya in the Svalbard archipelago. It is notable that the loss of Andrée generated a feverish amount of speculation and rumour, leading to reports that a Siberian tribe had found the wreck of the balloon along with three bodies (*New York Journal*, 11 February 1899); that carrier pigeons had arrived home from the North Pole with news of success; and that 'uncanny cries proceeding apparently from space' were heard in its wake (*Montreal Witness*, 23 April 1898). Andrée's balloon expedition became a gathering point for dreams and fantasies as rumours circulated, untethered, around the disappeared object. Indeed, barely two weeks after Andrée's departure, reports reached Britain of a 'Parisian prophetess' who had followed the balloon expedition 'in spirit' to the North Pole. There she discovered that it was not made up of 'ice and perpetual snow, but of luxuriant grass and umbrageous trees' (*The Aberdeen Journal*, 22 July 1897). Andrée, like Franklin before him, was made into a hero after 1897, inspiring the dreams and speculations of an anxious public.

However, Andrée was not the first to propose using balloons to navigate the Arctic regions that naval and land-based expeditions found so difficult to traverse, nor was his expedition original in taking to the polar air. It was in fact the disappearance of the Franklin expedition, and the consequent discourse of Arctic mysteries and geographical labyrinths that kickstarted diverse aerial fantasies (Lewis-Jones, 2008). In contrast to the notion of a Northwest Passage quest solely conducted by authorised Admiralty personnel, the Franklin disappearance allowed women and ordinary people to share their ideas of Arctic space. The shift of perspective to the air by Franklin searchers could therefore be mirrored in the thoughts and dreams of those outside naval circles. Arctic space was now bridged with British space, and, like the diorama's vertically rolling landscape, a distant environment was brought closer through the aerial perspective.

By 1850, some search expeditions began experimenting with rockets and kites, admittedly with very limited degrees of success. On Beechey Island in October 1850, John Ross put two carrier-pigeons ('with feathers in a half-moulded state') in a basket attached to a balloon that was 'freighted with intelligence'. The idea was that a slow-match burned off the basket at a certain point and then 'the carrier-pigeons would be launched into the air to commence their flight'. This plan caused some hilarity among expeditioners at the time, but amazingly one of the pigeons was reported to have reached its home in Ayr, Scotland, about 120 hours later: an epic flight of some 3000 miles (Osborn, 1852: 136–7). Another experiment was the messenger balloon – an apparatus made of oiled silk and filled with hydrogen. As with the pigeon scheme, the balloon's basket contained a slow match that would cause a gradual scattering of hundreds of coloured pieces of paper and silk on the ice, giving lost explorers details of rescue ships in the vicinity. In practice, the furthest distance these papers were found from a ship was only 50 miles (Osborn, 1852: 135).

Judging by the contemporary press coverage, the roll-out of the first major search and rescue expeditions for Franklin in 1849 coincided with a period of 'ballooning mania' in Britain (Anon.,

1849b: 69). The mystery of the Franklin expedition became intertwined with this aerial imagination as a host of aeronauts vied for attention from the general public and the Admiralty. In 1849, the Admiralty was attacked in the press for its management of the Franklin searches while rumours, reports, and stories began flooding in regarding the sightings and visions that people were having, all beyond the confines of naval authority (*Inverness Courier*, 22 April 1852; *Dundee, Perth and Cupar Advertiser*, 4 January 1850). Ballooning was now part of a context in which ephemeral, intangible, or previously unauthorised Arctic agencies were being given critical mainstream attention. Women's voices become part of this emerging discourse, and Jane Franklin was the key bridgehead between 'official' Arctic expeditions, mesmeric and clairvoyante trances, and plans for balloon expeditions in search of her husband.

In October 1849, the balloonist Lieutenant G.B. Gale wrote to Jane Franklin volunteering to voyage in search of her husband's expedition alongside any official naval attempt. Gale's proposal was to ascend from an expedition ship in his balloon where, if he gained a height of two miles, a 'panorama of at least 1200 miles would be placed within observation'. Gale's idea received a mixed reception in the press with *The Era* balancing its ribbing of this "Columbus of the skies" with an admission that it could be of great benefit (*The Era* (London), 28 October 1849). A rather more scathing riposte came from *Punch* which, predictably, could not resist lampooning the aeronaut's unfortunately appropriate surname:

Imagination forms icicles on the tips of our nose as we figure to ourselves the daring GALE 'blow high, blow low', with the thermometer 15 degrees below zero, his gas contracted, his balloon congested into a flying iceberg, or like the head of an airy giant with his night-cap on, while the poor frozen out aeronaut surveys his brandy-bottle solidified into a mass of ice à la Cognac, and his cold fowls too cold for his knife to penetrate them. The mere picture throws us into a chilly pickle; and we trust GALE, for his own sake, will not be able to raise the wind for so absurd a purpose (Anon, 1849c: 213).

Jane Franklin replied to Gale the next month welcoming any plans he sent her that could be 'approved by men of science capable of estimating them' (*The Morning Post* (London), 10 November 1849). Although she sidestepped Gale's offer of service, his suggestion that a balloon could command 'every nook, inlet, and undulation, whether on land or amongst icebergs' was certainly an attractive one and something that chimed with the ideal 'God's eye view' latent in imperial exploration of the far north (*Worcestershire Chronicle* (Worcester), 12 December 1849).

Soon after Gale's letter, John Hampton, a Dublin-based aeronaut formerly of the Royal Navy, stated that he had written to *The Times* before the Franklin expedition even departed proposing the applicability of balloons to Arctic exploration (*The Freeman's Journal* (Dublin), 17 November 1849). Hampton's plan was also to inflate a large balloon on an expedition ship that would be manned with two aeronauts supplied with telescopes. When tethered to the ship, the balloon might achieve a height of one mile where the observer could 'gain a vast circle of view by ascending above the irregularities and obstructions' of the earth. When untethered, the balloon might ascend two miles into the air, although Hampton doubted Gale's suggestion of a 1200-mile panoramic view.

Gale and Hampton's claims demonstrated the way that ballooning straddled the boundaries between public science and entertainment. Despite the ridicule he had faced in *Punch*, Gale gave public lectures throughout England to try and raise interest in his scheme. Although he did not demonstrate the Arctic balloon, he did illustrate his lectures with 'small balloons ['balloonets'] and

an aerial machine moving about the room'. At one lecture, Gale mentioned that his previous Arctic experience included living among the 'natives' and, rather improbably, walking '450 miles in those dreary lands, carrying his daughter in his arms' (*Worcestershire Chronicle* (Worcester), 12 December 1849). Meanwhile, Hampton took his ballooning show on the road in Britain and Ireland (1 shilling entry fee), associating his ascents with the search for Franklin. Indeed, it was claimed that the 'Lords of the Admiralty, and also Lady Franklin, [were] pleased to express their high approbation of this plan of surveying the Arctic Regions, and their deep interest in its successful development' (*Northampton Mercury*, 31 July 1852). Both Gale and Hampton offered their services to Jane Franklin in a very self-conscious performance of knight-errantry, a motif which Michael Robinson (2015: 101) has identified as part of the nuanced gender roles in Arctic discourses at this time. Other examples of chivalrous male explorers offering their services to female figures – whether Jane Franklin, Britannia, or the Arctic Ice Queen can be found throughout Victorian print culture (McCorristine, 2018: 170–80).

In the end, the Admiralty employed a civil engineer named George Shepherd to conduct a series of aerial experiments with five-foot high messenger balloons throughout 1850. Shepherd's balloons, released from Woolwich Dockyard and the roof of Whitehall (the location of the Admiralty Board) with apparent success, were designed to test how far messages could travel in preparation for their use on the massive Arctic expedition commanded by Horatio Thomas Austin (1850–1). The public were enlisted as part of this enterprise and Shepherd placed letters in the national and local press describing the messages and how people might forward them to the Admiralty with details of when and where they were found (*Kentish Gazette* (Canterbury), 5 February 1850). This scheme had limited success, although information was received from a 'commercial traveller from Birmingham' who incongruously found a paper slip near Hamburg in Germany (*The Morning Post* (London), 10 April 1850).

When Shepherd provided a 'waggon load of balloons' to Austin's departing expedition in May 1850, it was commended as part of the 'excellent arrangements [that] inspire great hope that the expedition will be successful' (*Royal Cornwall Gazette* (Truro), 17 May 1850). The public had been asked to participate in the Franklin searches, testing out the communicative potential of messenger balloons and one can see in these aerial voyages a realisation that Britain was now a part of Arctic space, linked to the Franklin mystery through the very real emotional ties that bind distant persons together. A letter sent home by an officer on Austin's ship *Assistance* demonstrates that Shepherd's balloons were imagined in this kind of way:

The balloons were tried the other day, and answered admirably. One young one is up aloft yet, I expect, as he went away in the clouds in good style, with notices that we were in the neighbourhood. Fancy the sensation of the survivors, if any, on seeing such a proof of friends being in the North, looking after them, and telling where provisions, &c., are stored (*The Ipswich Journal*, 9 November 1850).

Hampton made the point that had the Franklin expedition been supplied with balloons, they might have been able to communicate with their rescuers, not the other way around (*Lancaster Gazette*, 12 January 1850). Yet as emotional forces travelled back and forth from the Arctic, balloons actually did allow people to 'think with' the Franklin expedition, in terms of their ability to 'balloon back' with news. For example, around this time, it was reported that a woman in a mesmeric trance claimed to have 'ascended in a

balloon, and proceeded to the North Pole in search of Sir John Franklin', whom she found alive and well (Carpenter, 1853: 521). When news of the mesmeric Arctic travels from Britain reached the *Scientific American* it decried how it was 'pitiable to see people endeavouring, by humbugging, to make gain out of the misfortunes of others. If there is any virtue in flying machines, here would be a case for an effort' (Anon, 1849a: 82). Another example of this can be found in the February 1850 letter sent to Jane Franklin:

I saw in my dream two Air Bloon's a great distance off rising just like the moon. I said in my dream to myself [this is] Sir J. Frankland. I looket the second time as the Bloon's [rises?] on their journey looking beautiful an as I looket all in a moment one Banishet like a Pillar of Smoke. The second Bloon still going on its journey it gets to a place where I saw the inhabitants living People I saw in the my dream a Lady beautiful Dressed looking at them I said in my dream their is Lady Frankland but with this dream I saw nothing but snow as it fell amongst the inhabitants of these two Bloon's [sic throughout].

The correspondent, who signed off 'a Humble and true dreamer', explained that the balloons represented the ships and that the first one was destroyed. The second one 'stands well' and 'Providence will bring them back again' (Anon, 1850). Although the letter is a rare surviving example of the type of correspondence that Jane Franklin and Cracroft were receiving at the time, this allegorical vision encapsulates the overlaps between ideas of Arctic exploration, dreams of flight, and female emotional power. Just a few weeks before Jane Franklin received this dream account, Gale visited officers aboard the Arctic vessels at Deptford, offering 'to startle the Esquimaux with a sight of his monstrous "air ship"' (*Brighton Gazette*, 17 January 1850). Dreams of flight and proposals for Arctic flight were therefore part of the same cultural context, both addressing the aching sense of loss with the Franklin expedition and women's voices were very much a part of this culture.

As scholars elsewhere have demonstrated, Jane Franklin is a good example of a woman holding a nuanced position of power amid the homosocial world of Arctic expeditions: she used an extraordinary emotional intelligence to leverage the services and proposals of Arctic experts, but, along with her companion Sophia Cracroft, she had a powerful voice on her own behalf, writing influential public letters to politicians, Admiralty officials, and heads of states (Russell, 2013; Jacobs, 2015). Indeed, it was down to her organisational efforts that some form of closure was brought to the mystery when McClintock's 1857–9 expedition recovered a key document and artefacts from King William Island. Therefore, it is interesting to see her on the one hand fielding dream accounts about balloons and clairvoyante reports of spirit flights, while on the other hand taking a deep interest in actual aerial modes of contacting the missing explorers.

Another strange case of ballooning involved a distant cry for help from the Arctic that seemingly materialised in British domestic space. On 5 October 1851, Mrs. Russell of Wooton, Gloucester, observed a small balloon descending into her garden during Sunday dinner. Her servant, Edward Edmunds, was sent to fetch it and as it began to rise again he jumped up and caught it. In the basket of the balloon was a card that read, 'Erebus, 112° W. Long: 71° N. Lat. September 3rd 1851. Blocked in'. Russell sent the balloon and its message to the Admiralty and the Board quickly began an extensive set of investigations. Austin, who had just returned from the Arctic, was consulted about balloon launches on his expedition but his officers decided that the Gloucester balloon was too fresh to have come from a rogue prankster on their

expedition. A handwriting expert was consulted to ascertain whether the note was written in the hand of James Fitzjames, Commander of the *Erebus* and Captain A.B. Becher of the Hydrographical Office was requested to send in data about local wind conditions. The mystery was deepened when analysis showed the balloon to be very similar to those made by Shepherd. William Frederick Beechey, now a naval administrator, was sent to Gloucester to investigate with a local detective (Gillies Ross, 2002b). The case began to receive a large amount of publicity in the local and national press, but after sifting through the available evidence the Admiralty Board belatedly issued a press release that denied the *Erebus* was ever supplied with balloons and, tellingly, stated that the balloon found at Gloucester was 'not of a particular shape, but is of a description commonly supplied to the public' (*Dundee Courier*, 15 October 1851).

According to the card, the location of the *Erebus* was far inland on Victoria Island – an unlikely spot for a ship – and the balloon was full of gas when captured. This was suspicious, given that it had apparently travelled across the Atlantic Ocean. Although Mrs. Russell seemed to be the victim of a cruel hoax, the explorer William Hulme Hooper certainly gave it some credence, sending the Admiralty his plan to travel with Inuit to the Coppermine River and explore Victoria Island based on the clue (1852: 99–100). This balloon, seen floating from Southgate Street before it landed in Mrs. Russell's garden, was potentially the first contact that the Franklin expedition had made with the British public.

Balloons drew the Arctic and Britain into new spatial relationships because they became a metaphor for polar geography at the time. Balloons unsettled the 'where' of the Arctic, activating techniques of what McCormack calls 'remote sensing', a geographical practice that is also spectral in that it 'is always remote yet always potentially sensed as a felt variation in a field of affective materials' (2010: 643). Balloons travelling through the Arctic, remotely sensing the labyrinth below, or balloons travelling from the Arctic causing sensations remotely, came to be represented through the same practices of dreaming and hoping. If the Arctic could be sensed remotely through the air, the balloon also unsettled the 'who' of the explorer. After the Franklin disappearance aeronauts imagined themselves as a new type of explorer – scientist-heroes who had mastered innovative but dangerous technologies and enacted the dreams of the populace by erasing geographical borders and ascending to where there were no limits to knowledge (Coxwell, 1881).

Although detailed projects involving polar ballooning were lampooned and attacked up to and beyond Andrée's expedition in 1897 (Ward, 1935), fantasies of aerial travel maintained their allure in the popular imagination. Surely, given the difficulties that explorers faced when using standard modes of transport, they might now put their faith in this modern technology? In June 1850, another remarkable hoax materialised when an advertisement appeared in several newspapers:

Rescue of Sir John Franklin: to the rich and chivalrous. A gentleman whose claims to common sense, respectability, and talents are corroborated by university distinctions, honorary medals, and works of art and literature, offers to construct, for £8000, and in three months, a flying machine, able to travel in the air at a rate of 100 miles per hour. The expense of an experimental trip would be £300, and one month's time (*Liverpool Mercury*, 4 June 1850).

Such dreams of flight did not decline with the passage of time and a shift in popular interest to a different polar quest. During the preparations for his final North Pole expedition (1908–9), Robert

Peary received a flood of "crank" letters from members of the public offering unsolicited advice and counsel and 'flying machines occupied a high place on the list' (Peary, 1910: 17). One inventor even gamely proposed that Peary play the part of a "human cannon ball": 'He was so intent on getting me shot to the Pole', Peary wrote, 'that he seemed to be utterly careless of what happened to me in the process of landing there or how I should get back' (1910: 18).

Clairvoyantes in the Arctic

The example of Jane Franklin demonstrates how women's voices were now being heard in Arctic discourses – she was discussed in the newspapers, addressed in private correspondence, and petitioned by schemers and dreamers, but she was also a strong moral voice in naval and Admiralty circles, lobbying on behalf of her missing husband. However, I now want to demonstrate that women outside the privileged circles that Jane Franklin moved in could also share their thoughts and dreams about polar exploration in this period. This can be seen in the case of the dozen or so clairvoyantes (mostly young women) who spoke out about what they saw happening in the Arctic (Gillies Ross, 2003; McCorristine, 2018: 79–138). There is evidence of clairvoyantes claiming to travel to the Arctic from Ireland, Britain, North America, India, and Australia during this period, but the most celebrated clairvoyante of them all was a young woman named Emma – the 'Seeress of Bolton' – who was the domestic servant of a physician and surgeon-apothecary named Dr Joseph W. Haddock (1800–61). Haddock frequently gave lectures on the subject and advertised his services to patients 'desirous that the faculty of Clairvoyance be used as an aid in discovering the cause and nature of their complaints' (Haddock, 1851: xii). He referred to clairvoyance as a kind of 'magnetic vision' or 'internal sight, or sight of the soul' in which light is projected from within 'as the spark flies from the excited electric machine, so the perception seems, as it were, to seek the corresponding sensation' (Haddock, 1851: 63, 66). The role of the mesmeriser was therefore analogous to a machine operator and Haddock referred to the lucid, mesmerised subject as 'a living stethoscope' that assists the judgement of the physician 'just as the astronomer uses his telescope' (53). In her séances with Haddock in late 1849 and early 1850 Emma stated that Franklin was alive and 'comparatively well' although his cheeks were sunken. The Franklin family provided Emma with a sample of John Franklin's hair and through this medium she was able to state that he was in 'good hope of getting to England in nine months and a half', although this was not given as a prophecy, but as 'the impression on his mind, with which she professed to have some mysterious means of communication' (Admiralty, 1849–50).

During her trance voyages to the Arctic, Emma spoke of climbing for a better view of things: on being given a letter in Lieutenant G.H. Hodgson's handwriting she stated, 'I can't find him anywhere – I will go to the top of that hill of snow and look – (after a pause) – I hope he is not dead, there is no place to bury him here – no churchyard'. Emma described her travels as 'going away' and in being sent to the Arctic the intention was that she would connect with the thoughts of individual explorers. When requested to go in search of someone, Emma 'begins as it were to look about her' and maintains a grave expression until she 'lights up, & she apparently begins a conversation with those she has been sent to see. "Oh I've found you – Well, you have come a long way since I saw you last – & how are you feeling? & What have you got to eat? & when do you expect to get home?"' (Admiralty, 1849–50).

At one well-publicised séance, Emma was provided with a map of the Arctic regions, although it was ‘very inconveniently bound up in a volume of the Penny Cyclopaedia, and required by her to be rested on her head’. The book – a symbol of working-class aspirations to education – was placed on her head, and Emma pointed to a region on the map that corresponded with the north-west side of Hudson Bay. This ‘took the bystanders quite by surprise. They had not the least idea of looking for Sir John in this direction’. Emma’s journey to the Arctic involved her body as she was said to ‘arrive’ home exhausted (Gell, 1849). At this stage in her seership, Emma was apparently unable to take questions while ‘away’, although Haddock noted in a letter of December 1849 that ‘I can communicate with Emma when away, it saves her strength and enables me to put enquiries’. While communicating with Franklin, Emma could also communicate his state of mind to her audience, acting through a kind of emotional transference. For instance, in a séance of 13 January 1850, she reported that Franklin ‘[t]hinks much of Lady F. and some children, not babes . . . He wonders [why] no one has been to help him – thinks it very strange’ (Admiralty, 1849–50).

These very specific embodied performances of Arctic experience accord closely with the stereotypes about the Arctic available to audiences in nineteenth-century Britain. Almost by definition, the Arctic was a place that almost nobody could travel to. Because it was so remote from the lives of most people this distance was bridged through things such as exploration narratives, fiction, ballads, museum exhibitions, and material objects brought back by whalers. Due to this dependence on a media, critics were quick to point out the parallels between clairvoyante visions and popular representations of Arctic exploration. One sceptic satirised Emma’s ‘spiritual flights’, asking:

Why did not the operator request the fair Emma, while she was perambulating the North Pole, to tell us something we did *not* know? Why did she not reveal to us the secret of the North-west Passage? Why describe only pictures of snowy desolation and stunted Esquimaux – figures which are familiar to every child who had read any story-book about the Polar Regions? Nay, since Emma is so great a mesmeric prodigy, and since space and time appear to be annihilated during these spiritual flights, why, even now, will not the operator ‘will her’ to inform us of what is going on in the moon, and what sort of people the Antropophagi really are? If she were only induced even to give us the benefit of her clairvoyance nearer home she would be more useful even to the Government than the telegraph at the top of the Admiralty (Anon, 1851: 211).

Clairvoyantes, mesmerists, and spiritualists continued to visit Franklin in the Arctic after Emma, and indeed in the later 1850s the spirit of Franklin returned from the dead to visit mediums at séances in Britain and North America.

Conclusion

As the Franklin mystery dragged on into the 1850s, criticisms of the Admiralty’s rescue efforts intensified. This allowed other proposals to circulate, even those with supernatural connotations: indeed there is plenty of evidence that key Arctic authorities such as William Scoresby, W.A.B. Hamilton (John Barrow’s successor as Second Secretary of the Admiralty), and the geographer Alexander Maconochie, knew of and facilitated female clairvoyante investigations into the loss of Franklin (Gillies Ross, 2003; McCorristine, 2018). Looked at from this context, it is clear that proposals for balloon expeditions in search of Franklin echoed the many mesmeric and imaginary projects emanating from popular culture. What united both developments were people – from the Admiralty, to aeronauts, to clairvoyantes and their operators –

imagining that a solution to the Franklin mystery could be found ‘up in the air’.

This article has explored aspects of the aerial dimension in the nineteenth-century Arctic imagination, demonstrating how dreams of flight inspired a host of previously unauthorised voices. I have built upon the work of scholars who have painted rich portraits of women’s roles in Arctic exploration, whether as clairvoyantes and spiritualists (Margaret Fox), ghost-writers (Emma de Long; Elsa Barker) or explorers in their own right (Josephine Peary; Taqulittug) (Chapin, 2004; Robinson, 2015; Herbert, 2012; Routledge, 2018). This article therefore forms part of a broader historiographical shift in the past three decades, which has connected a democratisation of the culture of Arctic exploration with an upsurge associated with the Franklin mystery.

My contribution was to demonstrate how diverse and seemingly incommensurable aerial perspectives on Arctic exploration could co-exist in the same period. I have argued that balloons allowed people to dream about the Arctic in a multitude of ways because they had a multitude of meanings ranging from a practical mode of transport to a kind of fantasy or science-fiction. This sphere of debate – or ‘balloonacy’ – was open and inviting people at the same time as the Franklin disappearance untethered the cultural dominance of the Admiralty over Arctic narration. These two factors enabled the voices of women to emerge, alongside others traditionally excluded from the Arctic, thereby expanding our sense of what constituted Arctic exploration and experience in the mid-Victorian period.

Competing interests. The author declares none.

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