

**Shane McCorristine**, *The Spectral Arctic: A History of Dreams and Ghosts in Polar Exploration*, London: UCL Press, 2018. ISBN: 9781787352476 (cloth); ISBN: 9781787352469 (paper); ISBN: 9781787352452 (ebook)<sup>1</sup>

Ghost stories, psychic travels, shamans, and Arctic tragedy – Shane McCorristine’s new book has the ingredients of a (scholarly) thriller. Yet, the book should not be mistaken for a light read as such. In *The Spectral Arctic: A History of Dreams and Ghosts in Polar Exploration*, McCorristine offers a nuanced account of the “spectral” in Victorian exploration and geographical imaginaries. He does so from the vantage point of Sir John Franklin’s fatal quest for the Northwest Passage in 1845 and the mystery surrounding its disappearance, interweaving individual stories, archive materials, and contemporary context. On the one hand, this is a story focused on imperial exploration and its societal context as seen from Britain; on the other, it would be impossible to tell without reference to imperialist and colonial relationships, racialisations, and violence as seen from the North. As such, this is a book that is relevant not just for those with an interest in the Arctic. On the contrary, it is a book that touches on the development of geography in 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain, colonialism and imperialism, gender relations, racism, globalisation, and cross-cultural communication – or indeed its failures. What McCorristine accomplishes is both radical scholarship and revisionist storytelling: qualities that highlight the monograph’s relevance to readers of *Antipode*.

The book is positioned among recent work on relational geography and “the spectral” (see e.g. Holloway and Kneale 2008). What McCorristine examines is “how spectral experiences such as dreaming, clairvoyante travel, reverie, spiritualism and ghost-seeing informed ideas of the Arctic and the searches for a Northwest Passage through the Arctic” (p.3-4). Although this is not a theory-heavy book, it is clear that it speaks directly to conversations in geography. For example, McCorristine is interested in embodied experiences and more-than-Euclidean spatialities; in discussing dream-induced travels across vast geographies and remotely sensed people and places it is situated in and speaks to the

---

<sup>1</sup> An open access pdf is available from: <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/ucl-press/browse-books/the-spectral-arctic> (last accessed 24 July 2018).

discipline. Additionally, the book comes out in a time of resurging interest in both the Franklin expedition and Arctic geopolitics more generally. The two ships, HMS Erebus and HMS Terror, which so mysteriously vanished with their crew, were finally re-located in 2014 and 2016 respectively. These were events that fed into Canadian polar nationalism and sovereignty narratives, and which no doubt reignited public interest. McCorristine exemplifies this by noting, for example, the recent TV-adaptation of Dan Simmons' (2007) horror novel inspired by the lost expedition: "*The Terror* reacts to the huge blanks in the historical narrative..., combining speculation with supernatural sensationalism" (p.215). No doubt, *this* book will speak to those with an interest beyond sensationalism, while fundamentally acknowledging that the many cultural, literary, and generally non-academic engagements with the Arctic are intrinsic to the ways in which we understand the region today.

At the heart of the book lies a concern with overlooked perspectives in the historical geographies of exploration, aiming "to do something new for the cultural history of the Arctic" (p.4) and to "inspire a shift in scale, with non-explorers made part of the history of exploration, and inspire a shift in sequentiality, as historical time is recognised as being 'out of joint'" (p.233). It offers two key arguments with which it seeks to complicate understandings of the Arctic in Victorian Britain (p.5). Firstly, it argues that the polar explorers themselves were far from divorced and disengaged from the "spectral" views of their time. In contrast to the notion of "rational men embarking to conquer untamed wilderness", their own accounts were often characterised by experiences of the supernatural, ghostly, and sublime. And secondly, for Victorian audiences, too, the Arctic already exceeded cartographic conceptions of space: "Because of the spectral power of the Arctic as an idea, it could be sensed remotely, dreamed about, imagined and consumed by people who were at a great distance from the Arctic geographically and politically" (p.5). The significance of these insights is a revision of historical geographies, but one that also relates directly to current conceptions of the Arctic. Historical polar narratives, and indeed their mythical language, still play their part in geopolitical, cultural, and societal relations.

The book is organised in six chapters, plus an introduction that contextualises the study and an afterword that links it to the recent news of the found ships. Each chapter includes rich material from historical, literary, and cultural sources, and plenty of images,

maps, and illustrations. Due to this richness and the interrelatedness of its multiple facets, the balance and editorial delimitation of each chapter could at times have been clearer. For example, Chapter 3 charts histories of mesmerism and clairvoyance, including noting the roles of women and the working class, over the span of nearly 60 pages. This is a minor point in a well-presented book, but points to its wide range of topics and recurring concerns as seen from several angles.

The book focuses primarily on the British context and society at the time, and in so doing it connects the Franklin story to both class and gender relations. While the historical geographies of female explorers – and not least, Sir Franklin’s influential wife, Lady Jane Franklin – have received scholarly attention, it remains limited compared to their male contemporaries or indeed husbands. McCorristine therefore adds to this, offering a new perspective on women’s roles in exploration. He does so not by chronicling their presence on or absence from the ships themselves, but by drawing attention to how an influential role may be played regardless of geographical distance. Perhaps most strikingly, the book explains how when Sir Franklin’s two ships were admittedly “lost”, the uncertainty opened up a space for otherwise unheard voices. The same emotionality (or “lack of rationality”) we know was often attributed to women at the time, here became a subversive strength, allowing them to psychically travel, sense, or connect to these lost travellers. In the quest for knowledge where no material proof was to be found, information from, for example, working-class women was heard, collected, and followed.

Moreover, McCorristine both expands on and challenges oft-held assumptions about historical masculinities. Lisa Bloom (1993) has previously shown how Northern exploration served as a testing ground for masculine ideals; McCorristine builds on such insights, adding more complexity to how the Arctic region was intermittently conceived of as threatening and alluring and/or as pure and virgin-like. But more than the stereotype of a disinterested “hero” who sets out to conquer said space, what McCorristine offers is a nuanced account of diverse people. The reader is presented with rich stories of “moods” and indeed emotion – love and longing, despair, boredom and melancholy – and men’s dreams and reveries.

The final chapter and afterword bring the discussion explicitly to the present, focusing on how these stories have been told and re-told in a time of heightened Arctic geopolitical

attention. It is here that the force of revisiting these histories is explicitly brought to the fore. In McCorristine's own words, the "past does not simply vanish – it hangs around in landscapes, bodies, dreams and stories. It is *ongoing*, like an unexploded mine" (p.233). With the recent findings of the ships some questions may have been answered, but many more have also arisen. The above-contested narrative of brave, masculine, imperial, and white explorers was employed by then Canadian Prime Minister Harper in the immediate aftermath – arguably a politically motivated act of forgetting. Directly at odds with what is argued for in *The Spectral Arctic*, the voices of Inuit, women, and, frankly, most non-explorers were thereby silently subsumed in that of the settler state. These are among the topics raised both in this book and elsewhere, underlining once again its relevance to diverse audiences.

Just as *The Spectral Arctic* adds to geographical conversations, so too does it highlight that there remains much more to be said and questions yet to be answered in years (and books) to come. For instance, although Inuit narratives of their encounters with these British men are interwoven to an extent, it is nevertheless unmistakably a book about Victorian Britain's view and experience of the Arctic. As the reader is reminded in the Introduction, accounts of encounter have far too often, for far too long, been seen primarily through the eyes of *qallunaat* (Inuktitut: "white people") (p.17). Something less discussed is how these early and brief visits were seen by those already there; how these temporary disruptions to everyday life in the Arctic were experienced; or how encounters played out prior to the violent establishment of asymmetrical relationships of future imperial engagements. For example, McCorristine mentions Europeans' consultation of Indigenous shamans (p.60), as well as the ghost stories told among Inuit of these thin, white men "dressed in rags" (p.17). The "strangeness" of the encounter was experienced on all sides, and the events would haunt those on *both* sides of the Atlantic for now more than 170 years.

In the end, the book's timeliness is demonstrated by the highly symbolic "gifting" of ships and artefacts from the United Kingdom jointly to the Canadian government and the Inuit Heritage Trust in April 2018 (*The Globe and Mail* 2018) – only days before *The Spectral Arctic* was published by UCL Press. As such, these are not just tales of historical superstitions and ghost-stories, but, on the contrary, tales that touch on contemporary relationships with the Arctic. What really stuck with me was not only the intriguingly haunting stories, but the many

complex and emotional interpersonal relationships to which it points. In the end, the mystery of eerily lost ships in the Arctic was felt and experienced by the many affected both in Britain and the North. It is a book I can only strongly recommend – a book that is both a fascinating and page-turning read, as well as a thorough scholarly engagement with historical, cultural, and political geographies. And, given its open access availability by UCL Press, I have no doubt it will reach a wide readership. Or, in my case, it will become a book I will return to again; this is a history that is still unfolding.

## References

- Bloom L (1993). *Gender on Ice: American Ideologies of Polar Expeditions*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press
- Holloway J and Kneale J (2008) Locating haunting: A ghost-hunter's guide. *Cultural Geographies* 15(3):297-312
- Simmons D (2007) *The Terror: A Novel*. London: Bantam
- The Globe and Mail* (2018) Britain officially gifts two long-lost ships from Franklin expedition to Canada, Inuit. 26 April  
<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-britain-officially-gifts-two-long-lost-ships-from-franklin-expedition/> (last accessed 24 July 2018)

Ingrid A. Medby  
Department of Social Sciences  
Oxford Brookes University  
[imedby@brookes.ac.uk](mailto:imedby@brookes.ac.uk)

June 2018