

Dear Editor,

I am writing in response to Ian MacLaren's review of my book *Tracing the Connected Narrative: Arctic Exploration in British Print Culture, 1818–1860* in the March 2010 issue of *Arctic*. A review, whether positive or negative, should accurately describe the thesis and contents of a book. Unfortunately, in this case Dr. MacLaren has significantly distorted my main arguments, ignored crucial sections of the book, and misrepresented my attitude towards earlier scholars. He describes *Tracing the Connected Narrative* as a confusing, poorly researched volume whose faults should be attributed mainly to the fact that I myself "could not decide what in fact the book's thesis is." To set the record straight, I would like to outline the thesis, describe my use of primary and secondary sources, and respond to the specific criticisms put forward by Dr. MacLaren.

Almost all previous accounts of Arctic exploration literature and its cultural impact in 19th-century Britain (including those by MacLaren) have focused on the writing and contents of the narratives produced by John Franklin, Edward Parry, and other explorers. However, these narratives were published in extremely expensive, lavishly illustrated quarto editions. Most novels at the time soon became available in cheap editions, but this was not the case with exploration literature. Many reviewers complained that only the very rich could afford the narratives. Therefore, for scholars today to read these books and speculate on how the British public likely responded to them is a futile exercise. Instead, the only way to fully recreate the 19th-century image of the Arctic is to also examine the far more affordable periodical and newspaper literature, which, as I discovered, is both extraordinarily rich and surprisingly complex.

The central thesis of my book is that Britons read these popular accounts of northern exploration in much the same way as they read serial fiction (hence the "connected narrative" of the title). However, British periodicals were extremely diverse in terms of their political and class orientation. Many magazines and newspapers presented the story in ways that would not have been sanctioned by John Barrow, the powerful second secretary of the Admiralty. Barrow's articles in the Tory *Quarterly Review* began the Arctic narrative, but once it had been released into the public sphere of journalism, he could no longer control it. In the 1850s, liberal and radical journalists took up the story of the Franklin search as a way of criticizing the government. Franklin himself became what might be called the "people's explorer." The popular press also elevated whaler William Penny and former fur trader William Kennedy to the status of Arctic heroes, along with two non-Britons, Joseph-René Bellot and Elisha Kent Kane.

None of these facts fit with the claims made by MacLaren and several other authors (including both academics and such popular writers as Pierre Berton and Fergus Fleming). They see Barrow as an all-powerful manipulator of public opinion who ensured that only British naval officers would win approval. Given the choice between following the

primary source evidence or the secondary literature, I chose the original sources. MacLaren describes this decision as an unwarranted and poorly informed “dismissal” of other scholarly work, and he accuses me of failing to engage with the work of my predecessors. Indeed, he suggests that I may be culpably ignorant of their work. I think it is clear from my notes and bibliography that I have frequently drawn on the many invaluable books and articles by such excellent Arctic scholars as Clive Holland, William Barr, and W. Gillies Ross. I have also made extensive use of recent work on British cultural and social history and the history of print culture. As for the literature written by MacLaren, Richard Davis, Hugh Wallace, and others, it is true that I have confined my discussion of it to a brief section in the introduction. However, MacLaren must be well aware that I have engaged very closely with this literature in a number of articles. Three of these are cited in my notes and bibliography, and one more has appeared since the book was published. (Interested readers can find these articles in the April 2007, January 2008, and January 2009 issues of *Polar Record*, and in Norman Hillmer and Adam Chapnick, eds., *Canadas of the Mind*, published by McGill-Queen’s University Press in 2007). Having addressed the historiographical issues at length in the articles, I did not want my book to be a prolonged argument with these writers. Instead, I assumed that the great majority of readers would be far more interested in learning about the new primary source evidence I uncovered in my research.

In his attempts to demonstrate my supposed ignorance of many key facts about northern exploration literature, MacLaren singles out my arguments about the importance of modesty and religious faith to the popular image of the Arctic hero. He claims that I believe the trope of the modest author originated with Parry and Franklin. In his view, the use of this rhetorical device by Alexander Mackenzie in 1801 shows the limitations of my research. In fact, my discussion of the modest author begins with James Cook in the 1770s. Though there were even earlier examples of the modest preface in which an explorer apologized for his lack of literary skill, Cook’s carried a special significance because, as a man from a lower-class background with little formal education, he had good reasons for genuine reluctance to appear before the public as an author. Yet his book was enthusiastically received by reviewers precisely because of its plain and undramatic style. It therefore set the paradigm for later writers, including both Mackenzie and Franklin (see p. 16–19).

As for the religious aspect of Arctic books, MacLaren observes that piety was also a feature of some earlier literature. For the origin of this tradition, he points to the 1630s, when Thomas James exhorted his crew to put their trust in God and to remember that in the Arctic they were still “as close to heaven as we would be in England.” However, it does not require a profound knowledge of 16th- and 17th-century narratives to recognize this exhortation as a deliberate echo of Sir Humphrey Gilbert’s famous words, “We are as near to heaven by sea as by land.” MacLaren states

that James drew his inspiration from Thomas More’s *Utopia*; actually, it was Gilbert who died with a copy of *Utopia* in his hands. Therefore, had I been searching for the very first example of the pious English explorer, I would have gone back to Gilbert in 1583, or even earlier, to the account of Stephen Burrough’s voyage to Novaya Zemlya in 1556.

MacLaren seems to believe that Franklin’s piety was merely an imitation of James’s, which in my opinion is not a tenable view. As I have shown in my book and in an article in this issue of *Arctic*, Franklin’s religious feelings arose from the Evangelical climate of his time and from his close brush with death on his first overland expedition. What I have argued in my book is that Barrow constructed an artificial discursive link between the fortitude and faith of the Elizabethans and that of the 19th-century explorers. There was no causal connection, merely a resemblance that was particularly striking when contrasted with the lack of religion in many 18th-century narratives. Barrow shrewdly exploited this resemblance in order to promote the belief that the quest for the Northwest Passage was a unified epic spanning the centuries (p. 69–70, 86–87, 128).

Because I have given a generally favourable account of Franklin’s character, MacLaren accuses me of ignoring the dark truth and of naively believing that the Franklin presented to the public by Barrow and the real Franklin were “one and the same.” As an example of what the real Franklin was like, he refers to George Back’s diary entry describing Franklin’s alleged threat to shoot deserters. Surely it is no surprise that a young commander in an increasingly desperate situation should have resorted to threats he had no intention of ever carrying out. Other accounts of Franklin’s character, both published and unpublished, are remarkable in their consistent depiction of a genuinely good and kindly man. No truly discreditable action by him has ever come to light. However, it simply is not true that I have made no distinction between Franklin the man and Franklin the author. Instead, my book contains a discussion of Franklin’s reluctance to put some aspects of his experiences into his narrative (see p. 100–103).

MacLaren further complains that I have “neglect[ed] any mention of nationalism.” This remark baffles me, since the relationship between Arctic exploration and 19th-century British ideas about the nation’s character and destiny is a central concern of my book (see especially Chapter 5). His review is equally misleading when it ignores or brushes off some of the most original parts of the book. For example, he says nothing about the favourable press coverage given to William Penny, William Kennedy, and even John Rae. Other writers have assumed that Rae was always a pariah, but I found that in the early 1850s he was very highly regarded by the press. With regard to my discussion of Rae’s fall from favour after his 1854 report of cannibalism on the last Franklin expedition, MacLaren claims that it “offers few new insights.” In fact I have pointed out that, contrary to the general belief today, Rae’s allegation of cannibalism was widely accepted at first. The horrifying fate of Franklin’s men seemed likely to be an effective weapon

for critics of the Admiralty. The story was questioned only after its potential to damage the government's reputation had become apparent. Unfortunately, by then Rae had undermined his own credibility by his lack of empathy for the lost explorers' grief-stricken families (p. 204–219). MacLaren states that the press criticism of the Admiralty in 1854 has already been covered in detail by Pierre Berton in *The Arctic Grail*. After reading his comments, I re-examined the relevant section of Berton's book (p. 268–269), but found nothing on this topic.

Finally, I would like to discuss MacLaren's complaints regarding my interpretation of a letter from Barrow to publisher John Murray about the illustrations for Franklin's first book. He describes this as a particularly "glaring" example of my failure to ground my work in earlier scholarship. Some background information not provided by MacLaren may be useful here. In his article "From Exploration to Publication: The Evolution of a 19th-Century Arctic Narrative" (*Arctic*, March 1994), he himself cites this letter as proof, not merely that Barrow took a strong interest in the production of Franklin's book, but that he encouraged lavish illustrations in the hope that they would distract readers from such discreditable episodes as the death of Robert Hood. According to MacLaren, Hood's death was likely a suicide but, thanks to Barrow's machinations, the "official version" claimed he had been murdered by voyageur Michel Teroahauté. In MacLaren's view, the published version was also intended to whitewash the unwarranted shooting of Teroahauté by Dr. John Richardson. In one of my own *Polar Record* articles ("The Hidden Crime of Dr. Richardson," April 2007), I have argued against these claims. The accounts written by Franklin and Richardson while they were still in Rupert's Land appeared almost unchanged in Franklin's narrative; therefore, the theory that Barrow distorted the record during the publication process does not hold up. Moreover, Barrow's letter contains nothing to justify the idea that he saw the illustrations as a way of beguiling and deceiving readers. Instead, it deals only with such practical matters as the engraver's fee and the effect of the illustrations on the cost of the book.

I can only assume that MacLaren resents my criticism of his article. However, even if he still stands by the opinions expressed in it, I fail to see how he can claim that I am not aware of them, or that I should have echoed them in my book. If historians were required to agree with their predecessors on every point, how would new books be written?

Then there is the comparatively minor matter of the letter's date. On checking my photocopy of it I found that, though it has been annotated "14 Dec 1822/John Barrow Esq," the actual date (in Barrow's execrable handwriting) does appear to be "14 Nov." MacLaren is of course quite right to point out this slip. I should also have listed Fleming's *Barrow's Boys* in my bibliography, simply to show that I have in fact read it. Its omission was a regrettable oversight. However, I would not consider it necessary to make any changes to the main text because of Fleming's book, which seems more intent on telling a good story than

on presenting an accurate picture of events. For example, Fleming attributes all press criticism of John Ross to a determined campaign conducted by Barrow, even though there is no primary source evidence to show that this was the case. At the same time, he ignores the many journals that supported Ross, thus drawing a false picture of a man assailed by criticism on all sides (see pages 57–61, 309).

In general, it seems to me that too many writers (both academic and popular) have accepted a stereotyped image of 19th-century Arctic literature, and that they have neglected many primary sources which tell a very different story. My book is an attempt to bring this new material into the academic debate on northern history. I hope that readers of *Arctic* who feel an interest in such matters will approach it with open minds.

REFERENCES

- Berton, P. 1988. *The Arctic grail*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart.
 Fleming, F. 1998. *Barrow's boys*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press.

Yours sincerely,
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