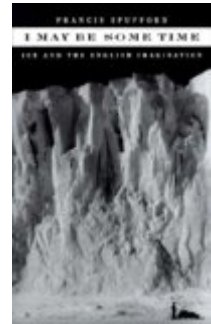


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Francis Spufford. *I May Be Some Time: Ice and the English Imagination*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997. 372 pp. \$26.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-312-17442-2.

Reviewed by Angela Schwarz (FB 1 Geschichte, Gerhard-Mercator-Universitaet - GH Duisburg)  
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## The Ultimate Challenge

There are not many parts of the globe that have fascinated western and particular English imagination to such an extent as the polar regions have. Although at least the Arctic had been a human habitat for thousands of years when the Europeans arrived, explorers, whalers, and travelers from the warmer regions came to envisage the polar world as an environment utterly and relentlessly hostile to human existence, with the whiteness or rather colourlessness of ice and snow epitomizing nullity and desolation. That very moment of seeing and envisaging was the starting point for the stylization of the poles as a place of mystery and ultimate challenge for man, bringing about a lasting fascination with this challenge and the expeditions of those who were to accept it.

Francis Spufford aptly begins with the question why, considering the hostility of this great unknown, men should have taken it upon themselves to face this ordeal—to get to the gist of the matter one might add that the unknown could be the Antarctic just as well as some South American or African jungle teeming with dangers for say an early nineteenth-century explorer. And if some individuals chose to risk their lives on expeditions only vaguely mapped out beforehand, why should others, sitting snugly in their armchairs by the fireside with the amenities of life at arm's length, eagerly devour reports and expositions of their struggles? To get at people's motives one must go, as Spufford convincingly argues, beyond material gain or the mere acquisition of knowledge about geographical expansion. Rather, one must look at the imagination, into the collective memory of the En-

glish nation and the images and myths of the polar regions, of national virtues and of an enterprising national character.

Consequently, the book unfolds not a polar history of the Parrys, Franklins, Shackletons and Scotts as it has already been written many times over, but a largely uncharted history of “assumptions, responses to landscape, cultural fascinations, aesthetic attraction to the cold regions” (p. 6) as they have influenced ideas of the polar regions from the late eighteenth up to the early twentieth century. Thus, it is a book on representations of a landscape and of its exploration in English culture, in itself a landscape of the mind full of original observations connecting Edmund Burke as aesthetic theorist with literati like Charlotte Bronte, Samuel T. Coleridge, John Keats, Charles Dickens, Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville and the Dane Hans Christian Andersen among others with nineteenth-century anthropologists like Edward Tylor.

In order to explain the attraction of Victorian women to narratives of polar exploration, Spufford not only looks into the position of the explorers' wives staying at home, passive and loyal, as the ideal would have it, that found its most perfect expression in the image constructed of Sir John Franklin's wife. He sees a parallel in the virtues demanded from men venturing forth into the polar world and the virtues attached to an ideal Victorian femininity, i.e. endurance, perseverance and resignation. This interpretation may provoke dissent, but it nonetheless deserves to be examined in a more detailed analysis

of female perception of the travelers in British popular culture—here only one aspect among many others.

There will be little or no controversy about the very convincing central argument of the book about motives that goes a long way at explaining not only the British fascination with the “ice seas” as Martin Frobisher wrote in 1576 but also the amateurism characteristic of the British expeditions in contrast to those of other nationalities. Taking up the challenge of polar nature was a continuation of “a bucaneeering English past” (p. 184) into the comparatively unadventurous industrial present of the Victorian era and was another enactment of English pluck, of English virtues, giving reassurance amidst growing anxiety. In taking up the ultimate challenge, then, success or survival did not matter. The British at

home did not accept the explorers’ death as the final triumph of nature over man, they rather believed that some part of them had withstood corruption. Therefore, mistakes or gross incompetence of men like Franklin or Scott, who died because of them, could not prevent British polar exploration from being idealized and its participants from being revered as national heroes. Reading this “archaeology of the hazy love affair between the ice and the English” (p. 7), one begins to understand the attraction and its lure even today.

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