

Polar Horizons: Images of the Arctic in Accounts of Amundsen's Polar Aviation Expeditions

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Article abstract

Despite the conquest of the poles in the pre-war era, in the interwar years explorers continued to be drawn towards the poles—only now they travelled by air. Historians of exploration have argued that the introduction of this modern technology raised the explorer far above the perils of the polar ice, thereby eliminating the danger and hardship at the core of heroic exploration narratives. In this argument, the use of aircraft marked the end of the age of heroic exploration. Examining the press coverage of Roald Amundsen's polar flights, however, reveals a more complex picture. Although the use of aircraft introduced tensions into the exploration narrative, particularly with regard to the images of the Arctic landscape deployed in these stories, analyzing these images highlights the ways in which the polar landscape was constructed in order to both renegotiate and rearticulate heroic exploration narratives in the era of polar aviation.

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Abstract: Despite the conquest of the poles in the pre-war era, in the interwar years explorers continued to be drawn towards the poles—only now they travelled by air. Historians of exploration have argued that the introduction of this modern technology raised the explorer far above the perils of the polar ice, thereby eliminating the danger and hardship at the core of heroic exploration narratives. In this argument, the use of aircraft marked the end of the age of heroic exploration. Examining the press coverage of Roald Amundsen's polar flights, however, reveals a more complex picture. Although the use of aircraft introduced tensions into the exploration narrative, particularly with regard to the images of the Arctic landscape deployed in these stories, analyzing these images highlights the ways in which the polar landscape was constructed in order to both renegotiate and rearticulate heroic exploration narratives in the era of polar aviation.

Résumé : Même si la conquête des pôles remonte à la période d'avant-guerre, les explorateurs continuent d'être attirés vers ceux-ci durant l'entre-deux-guerres – à la différence qu'ils voyagent dès lors par avion. Les historiens de l'exploration ont souligné que l'introduction de cette technologie moderne a élevé l'explorateur bien au-dessus des périls de la glace polaire, éliminant du coup le danger et la rudesse de l'entreprise figurant au cœur des récits d'exploration héroïque. Suivant cet argument, l'utilisation des avions marque la fin de l'ère de l'exploration héroïque. L'étude de la couverture médiatique des vols polaires de Roald Amundsen révèle toutefois un tableau plus complexe. Bien que l'utilisation d'avions introduise des tensions dans les récits d'exploration, particulièrement en regard aux images de l'Arctique déployées dans ces histoires, l'analyse de ces images met tout de même en évidence la manière dont le milieu polaire a été construit dans le but conjoint de renégocier et de réarticuler les récits d'exploration héroïque à l'ère de l'aviation polaire.

“Roald Amundsen has made his last voyage.” It was thus that the *New York Times* announced the death of the famous Norwegian explorer, the first to navigate the Northwest Passage and leader of the first expedition to reach the South Pole. That Amundsen had disappeared, not during a sledge expedition, but during a flight to rescue a group of Italian aeronauts stranded on the Arctic ice north of Spitsbergen, was a profound testament to the changes that come to polar exploration in the years following World War I. Although both poles had been reached before the outbreak of hostilities, in the interwar years men were still drawn to the polar regions—only now they no longer used dogs or sleds; now they used aircraft.

Although these polar aviators were often hailed as heroes, their triumphs also seemed to mark the passing of the age of heroic exploration. By raising its passengers above the obstacles of the Arctic ice and thereby fundamentally redefining the relationship between the explorer and his environment, it seemed as if aircraft had eliminated the danger and hardship that formed the heart of heroic exploration. Indeed, several historians of exploration have made just this assumption and, on the face of it, it is an entirely natural conclusion to reach.¹ However, examining the press coverage of Amundsen’s aerial career in greater detail reveals a more complex picture.

Indeed, press coverage was an essential part of the practice of exploration. More than just a physical journey, exploration is also a process of producing and consuming narratives.² Central to this production and consumption was the press, particularly through the formation of exclusive coverage agreements. These arrangements were an important source of funding for the expeditions. They were also a means for the newspaper to attract and increase its readership.³ For example, the *New York Times* was able to secure exclusive coverage rights for Amundsen’s aerial expeditions. These and other agreements meant that the *New York Times* effectively became the English-language paper of record for polar exploration in the interwar period. Although other newspapers might report on the expeditions, they were often obliged to repeat *New York Times* stories. This focused source material allows an in-depth analysis of how Amundsen’s aerial expeditions were covered in the American press, providing insight into the construction of exploration narratives in the interwar period.

1. Max Jones, *The Last Great Quest: Captain Scott’s Antarctic Sacrifice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 13, 290-292.

2. Felix Driver, *Geography Militant: Cultures of Exploration and Empire* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2001), 8.

3. Beau Riffenburgh, *The Myth of the Explorer: The Press, Sensationalism, and Geographical Discovery* (London: Belhaven Press, 1993).

Tracing this coverage makes it clear that old myths of polar exploration were alive and well; they did not disappear, nor were they replaced by pure narratives of technological triumphs. At the same time, the interwar stories were not simple recitations of previous narratives. Indeed, the introduction of aircraft into the practice of exploration created significant tensions within the exploration narratives, particularly in the depiction of the polar landscape. Probing these tensions reveals the moves to both preserve and reconstruct the cultural landscape of the Arctic in response to the advent of polar aviation. Analyzing the images deployed highlights the multiple, shifting images of Arctic landscapes at work in polar exploration narratives and the role of technology in creating the cultural landscapes of the Arctic.

Landscapes of Exploration

As historians of exploration have pointed out, the Arctic exists as a cultural as well as a physical landscape. Traditionally, the polar Arctic has been depicted as a place outside, beyond the everyday; as a pure space outside the modern world. However, this image of place is not a natural given, however much exploration narratives might treat it as such. Rather, the Arctic, like other spaces, is a constructed one. Cultural historians, for example, have examined the significance of the image of emptiness and purity to the enactment of narratives of heroism, masculinity, and national identity.⁴ More recently, historians of science and environmental historians have begun to explore the deep connections between science and this image of the Arctic. In many ways, this pure, blank space would seem the perfect natural laboratory.⁵ However, this image of the Arctic as a scientific space is as constructed as any other and, as such, is constantly redefined and negotiated.⁶

4. Lisa Bloom, *Gender on Ice: American Ideologies of Polar Expeditions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); Jen Hill, *White Horizon: The Arctic in the Nineteenth-Century British Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008); Sarah Moss, *The Frozen Ship: The Histories and Tales of Polar Exploration* (New York: Blue Bridge, 2006); Riffenburgh, *The Myth of the Explorer*; Michael F. Robinson, *The Coldest Crucible: Arctic Exploration and American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Francis Spufford, *I May Be Some Time: Ice and the English Imagination* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996).

5. Michael Bravo and Sverker Sörlin, eds., *Narrating the Arctic: A Cultural History of Nordic Scientific Practices* (Canon: Science History Publications/USA, 2002), vii, 5.

6. Stephen Bocking, "Science and Spaces in the Northern Environment," *Environmental History* 12, 4 (2007): 867-94; Adam Sowards, "Claiming Spaces for Science and Nature: The Canadian Arctic Expedition, 1913-18," unpublished ms, "Out of the Cold: Scientific Ways of Knowing in Histories of the Circumpolar Arctic," Boreas workshop, Iqaluit, September 2009.

A key technique in the production of Arctic space is the use of narrative. As Sverker Sörlin notes, for most the North is a far away place that they encounter only through narratives including myths, tales, reports, and scientific descriptions. Because of its remoteness, it is telling the land that makes it possessable and scientific narratives are a key element of this process.⁷ These narratives also provide a means of transportation, taking the listener or reader vicariously to the place or reproducing the place between the covers of a book or on the pages of a newspaper. At the same time, recounting a voyage replicates the experience of moving through that space. In these tales the Arctic is narrated into being.

While Bravo and Sörlin examine the role of science as a producer of both physical and imagined landscapes, the narratives surrounding Amundsen's expedition illustrate that technology engages in a similar dialogue with place, playing a key role in the production of cultural landscapes. Not only does the technology reshape the physical landscape, reconfiguring the geography and redefining relationships between places, narratives about technology produce cultural landscapes, reinforcing existing images or providing new understandings of place. This process takes place through fiction, painting, press coverage, and scientific narratives, with different narratives deploying different images of the Arctic, and sometimes presenting multiple images simultaneously. In the multifaceted depictions of the Arctic used in polar aviation narratives, one can see the tensions present in cultural imaginings of the polar landscape. The multiplicity of these sometimes contradictory images reveals the discursive practices used to construct the theoretically natural images of the northern landscape, highlighting the multiple layers that make up this cultural geography. Examining these tensions illuminates how place and technology evolve in dialogue and the connections between how we move through a space and how we see that space.

The Explorer as Hero

Although traditional heroic narratives, such as accounts of Scott's ill-fated expedition to the South Pole or Shackleton's hard-fought journey to South Georgia, tend to focus on the explorer's character, the explorer's movement through the landscape is an important component of these narratives as the encounter between the individual and the environment reveals this heroic character. As Francis Spufford argues in his analysis of English cultural images of the poles and polar exploration, exploration was primarily a moral activity for Victorians and Edwardians. In these

7. Sverker Sörlin, "The North and the Arctic in Swedish Scientific Nationalism," in *Narrating the Arctic*, 73-122; 74.

narratives, the corporeal hardships exacted by the polar landscape were only the beginning of a more significant spiritual journey into the depths of the self. By confronting the challenges of the polar environment the explorer tested his moral character and the struggle against the Arctic or Antarctic became a struggle to find and master the best parts of the self. The hero was the man who could preserve his moral character in the face of privation and hardship, demonstrating courage, dignity, and self-control even in the face of death. Indeed, the willingness to sacrifice oneself for a scientific goal or for one's comrades could transfigure a dead explorer into a martyr, giving death a queer quality of triumph. It was this narrative that allowed the Victorians to transform material failures into moral victories, exemplified most profoundly by the pre-eminent Victorian polar hero, John Franklin, both of whose major expeditions were reclaimed from failure by this narrative of moral character.⁸

For the Edwardians, exploration continued to function as a test of self, however Spufford argues that they were less concerned with delicate mental endurance and more interested in the testing of limits. In this narrative, there was a dangerous sense that there might be no limit to what the physical body could achieve if the will were strong enough.⁹ Nevertheless, they too were more concerned with the way "the game" was played, than with the results. As illustrated most strongly in the Scott myth, the noble death was sometimes more heroic than survival. Or, to reverse Ernest Shackelton's quip, it was better to be a dead lion than a live donkey.

As Beau Riffenburgh has pointed out, the press played a key role in constructing these narratives and, with the development of sensationalist narratives, the press particularly wanted stories of thrilling adventure in which risk, courage in the face of danger, perseverance, and the triumph over obstacles were key features.¹⁰ Alongside these general patterns, there were also cultural variations in the heroic narratives deployed. For instance, as Lisa Bloom notes, there were key differences in late-nineteenth century British and American exploration narratives. According to Bloom, these differences stemmed from the important place of the wilderness in American masculine identity. She argues that in the late nineteenth century the Arctic functioned as a substitute frontier wilderness where a man could test his masculinity against the wilds and where the keys to success were self-knowledge and self-control.¹¹ Despite these variations, the explorer's

8. Spufford, 256-272.

9. *Ibidem*.

10. Riffenburgh, 4-6; 22-28.

11. Bloom, 116-7.

struggle against the elements is central to these images—it was this dangerous encounter between the individual and the powerful, threatening forces of nature that provided the opportunity for heroism.

That said, there is a curious duality to these images: at the same time as the Arctic presented a threatening landscape in which death lurks behind every pressure ridge, it is also depicted as a place of salvation. In the writing of medieval Celtic monks, for instance, the Arctic functions as a place of transcendence, reflection, and peace; a place that takes one outside oneself.¹² Similarly, for the Victorians and Edwardians, the Arctic represented a fresh, untainted, blank space, unstained by the modern world, through which the explorer could escape the exhausted, grubby world of the everyday. It was a place of transformation—a space where the very act of survival became a heroic quest that tested the explorer's soul and his character as well as his body. In this sacred space, even the explorer's death could be transfigured into a kind of martyrdom almost entirely in virtue of where it happened. Nevertheless, even these narratives of redemption and martyrdom depended on the presence of a threat from the hazardous environment. The explorer trapped in over-wintering ships or struggling on foot across the frozen wastes must physically confront this dangerous landscape with its attendant suffering and hardships. In this case the Arctic's dangers and hazards functioned as profound obstacles, sealing off its interior space and allowing only the most worthy to brave its conditions in an effort to penetrate its mysteries.¹³ With this image of the Arctic underpinning heroic narratives of exploration, it becomes clear why historians have argued that aviation brought the age of classic polar exploration to an end. By lifting the explorer above the frozen ice and thereby divorcing him from the polar landscape, the introduction of aircraft seemed to remove the hardship of exploration, fundamentally undermining the struggle that made exploration heroic.

This apparent contradiction raises the question, how did polar aviation achieve a legitimacy that allowed the use of the heroic imagery one sees in coverage of Amundsen's and others' flights? As Felix Driver points out, the creation of heroic exploration narratives involves the mobilization of material and cultural resources in both their production and consumption.¹⁴ In particular, exploration necessitates cultural work to

12. Moss, 3-4.

13. J. Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949); Driver, *Geography Militant*; Jones, *The Last Great Quest*; J. MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of British Public Opinion, 1880-1960* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984); Moss, *The Frozen Ship*; Riffenburgh, *The Myth of the Explorer*; Robinson, *The Coldest Crucible*; Spufford, *I May Be Some Time*.

14. Driver, 8.

establish itself as a legitimate activity. Given that so much of the landscape of exploration involves the image of a pure, untouched wilderness outside the everyday world, it would seem that a great deal of work would be involved in making the introduction of an explicitly modern technology into the centre of this space seem appropriate. After all, would the presence of this cutting edge technology not seem either fundamentally out of place in this wild space, or completely destroy the special status of the polar landscape and the heroic narrative that depended on this landscape?

Technology and Exploration

While existing analyses of the Arctic as a space of exploration would suggest that the use of aircraft should be antithetical to the culture of exploration, the idea of using aircraft in the Arctic had deep roots. Matthew Robinson's work, for instance, outlines a long-standing interest in the use of lighter-than-air technology in the Arctic, tracing it back to the 1850s, including Salomon Andrée's ill-fated balloon-borne attempt on the North Pole in 1896.¹⁵ In particular, Robinson provides an interesting analysis of Walter Wellman's unsuccessful dirigible expeditions of 1906, 1907, and 1909, arguing that these expeditions were presented within a narrative that framed polar attempts as problems requiring mechanical solution. In other words, in these accounts the Arctic was an environment that needed to be tamed by machines. In Robinson's analysis, this view developed in response to a series of tragic American polar expeditions in the later nineteenth century: Hall's *Polaris* and Kane's *Advance* had been crushed by ice, as had Greely's *Proteus* and De Long's *Jeanette*, and before them, Franklin's *Erebus* and *Terror*. In one way, these disasters could be seen as a failure of the expeditions' transport technology to conquer the polar environment. In part, Robinson argues, these failures provide the background to a growing popular American interest in Arctic exploration as an endeavour requiring mechanical solution. This interest was reinforced by a growing sense of machinery as a symbol of American progress.

Nor was the use of aircraft the first use of "modern" technology on polar expeditions. Indeed, technology had been an important component of previous expeditions. Franklin's ships, for instance, were described as carrying the latest in central heating and steam-driven propellers. That said, these technologies were slightly different in that they were still more obviously vulnerable to the environment as the ships could still be frozen in and left vulnerable to being crushed by the ice. Nevertheless, they, like

15. Robinson, 110-111, 114.

the airplane, required cultural work in order to integrate them into exploration narratives. Robert Peary, for instance, was hard-pressed to incorporate his new, modern ice-breaker, the *Roosevelt*, into the image of primitive masculinity that he had cultivated. To do so he downplayed the ship's technological sophistication, instead depicting it as a tough, masculine participant in the expedition.¹⁶ Similarly, work would be required to integrate aircraft into narratives of heroic polar exploration. In particular, incorporating aircraft involved the re-articulation and re-deployment of images of the Arctic landscape.

Early attempts

Even before the war, Amundsen himself had advocated the use of aircraft for Arctic exploration. According to his later account of his 1925 Arctic flight, Amundsen claimed to have been initially struck by the idea of polar flight upon learning that Blériot had flown across the English Channel. Amundsen argued that Blériot's flight alerted him to the power of aircraft to penetrate the unexplored tracts of the Arctic that had withstood previous attempts and could not be reached using current transport methods.¹⁷ In this narrative, aircraft possessed a power that could transform the Arctic environment. As Amundsen envisioned it,

cold and darkness should be dispersed, becoming warmth and light instead; for the complete and troublesome journey should be changed now to a speedy flight... No rationing, no hunger or thirst—only a short flight.¹⁸

Aircraft could transcend the troublesome toil of the hazardous journey over the ice, allowing the explorer to leap great distances in comfort and with little effort.

Amundsen's emphasis on his early interest in polar aviation was partly a reaction to accusations that he had stolen the idea to use aircraft in polar exploration—an American physicist, Edward Fairfax Naulty, claimed that Amundsen had appropriated his plans for a trans-polar flight.¹⁹ In response, in his autobiography Amundsen argued that while his interest in aerial exploration came to fruition in the 1920s, he had had plans for an Arctic flight that had been put on hold only by the outbreak of World War I.²⁰

Amundsen could also point to his attempt to include an airplane as part of his *Maud* expedition studying Arctic drift as evidence of his interest.²¹ Coverage of this attempt provides an example of the cultural work that

16. Robinson, 126-132.

17. Roald Amundsen, *My Polar Flight* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1925), 14.

18. *Ibid.*, 4.

19. "Charges Amundsen Appropriated Plan," *New York Times*, 30 June 1922.

20. Roald Amundsen, *My Life as an Explorer* (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1927), 103.

21. "Amundsen Will Try Air Flight to Pole," *New York Times*, 12 October 1921.

went into legitimizing polar aviation. Although initial reports claimed Amundsen would use the planes as part of an aerial attempt on the North Pole, the planes were ultimately intended to extend the expedition's reach by performing aerial reconnaissance work.²² These aircraft would allow the expedition to penetrate the unknown vastness of the Arctic ice by finding routes for surface parties.²³ In Amundsen's plans, the aircraft would also be used for meteorological and topographical investigations.²⁴ Although Amundsen had taken the planes north in 1922, his attempts to use the aircraft was put off until the following year, though even then he was not successful as the plane was damaged during its test flights.²⁵ Looking back on this episode, Amundsen framed it not as an adventure but as a scientific activity.²⁶ In this light the aircraft became instruments of scientific exploration, contributing to meteorological and oceanographic knowledge by operating as the ship's eyes, extending the explorer's vision by subduing the Arctic environment.²⁷

In coverage leading up to the test flight, attention focused primarily on the technology's potential to improve Arctic exploration, concentrating particularly on the aircraft's increased speed and its ability to conquer difficult environments. These technological capabilities, it was claimed, would break the region's isolation, allow the explorer to penetrate the Arctic's vast interior in a way he could not on foot, bringing more and more of the Arctic under his gaze and within his grasp, making it more knowable and therefore more controllable.²⁸ Where vessels were blocked by ice and men were limited by the amount of supplies they could carry and their ability to face the difficult conditions, aircraft would allow the exploration of large swathes of territory with speed and ease, allowing its passengers to unlock the secrets of that blank, unknown space.

To be fair, not everyone saw Amundsen's flight as an important feat of exploration, some pointing out that while the flights might demonstrate the aircraft's capability, they would not provide any new knowledge about the region: they would demonstrate the practicality of Arctic flight and test the aircraft's hardihood, but they would do little else.²⁹ Moreover, because of the centrality of the technology, some argued that Amundsen was now dependent on the aircraft's performance and his pilot for the expedition's

22. "Amundsen Plans 5-Year Polar Trip," *New York Times*, 10 January 1922.

23. "Amundsen's Radio Link with World," *New York Times*, 29 March 1922.

24. "Amundsen Ship to Sail Today for North Pole," *New York Times*, 3 June 1922.

25. "Amundsen Returning to United States," *New York Times*, 21 June 1923.

26. Amundsen, *My Life as an Explorer*, 104.

27. "Amundsen Ship to Sail Today..."; "Amundsen Starts Again for Arctic," *New York Times*, 4 June 1923.

28. "Amundsen's Radio Link..."; "Amundsen Starts Again..."

29. "Topics of the Times," *New York Times*, 16 April 1923.

success, thus reducing his own heroic status.³⁰ In this account the machine becomes the actor while the explorer becomes a passive passenger.

That said, the bulk of the press coverage focused on the expedition's heroic contributions. As part of the effort to portray this as a heroic undertaking, Amundsen's expedition was placed in the context of other great voyages of discovery. In one instance it was compared, somewhat hyperbolically, to Columbus's voyage and was described as a great leap into the unknown.³¹ The voyage's heroic status rested not only on the flight's penetration of a blank space on the map, but also on the uncertain performance of aircraft in the Arctic, in particular the dangers the Arctic environment presented for the technology. Indeed, the depiction of the Arctic as a dangerous environment was key to constructing the voyages as a heroic endeavour wherein the technology overcame the barriers presented by the polar landscape. For example, observers pointed to the rough Arctic ice, which would be terribly inhospitable to aircraft, the extreme and changeable weather, and the disorienting Arctic environment.³² As Captain Wisting, the commander of Amundsen's *Maud* expedition described it, "the compasses were untrustworthy, and [...] the surface of the ice, even from low heights, appeared to be so level that any orientation was very difficult. Under these conditions it would be unjustifiable to proceed far from the Maud, because it might be impossible to find the way back."³³ Moreover, just as knowledge of the region was limited, knowledge of the environmental conditions and the behaviour of the technology under these conditions was restricted. In particular, little was known about the region's weather and even less about the air currents, especially the impact of the collision between cold air from over the ice encountering warmer air over open water. In fact, Captain MacMillan, an American aviator who would later lead an aerial expedition to northern Greenland, feared that "captain and pilot are going to almost certain death."³⁴ In these narratives, the unknown environment joined the unknown geography as a blank space to be explored and the dangers it contained provided the obstacles to be overcome on the heroic journey.

30. Burt M. McConnell, "What Can Amundsen Accomplish?" *New York Times*, 23 July 1922; "Amundsen's Polar Flight," *New York Times*, 14 June 1923.

31. McConnell, "What Can Amundsen..."

32. McConnell, "What Can Amundsen..."; "Amundsen's Flight," *New York Times*, 6 August 1922; "Amundsen's Polar Flight," *New York Times*, 14 June 1923; "Amundsen's Polar Flight," *New York Times*, 15 October 1923; "News from the Arctic: Progress of the Maud," *The Times* [London], 4 December 1923; Fitzhugh Green, "Navy Ready to Invade the Arctic by Air," *New York Times*, 30 December 1923.

33. "News from the Arctic," *The Times* [London], 4 December 1923.

34. *Ibidem*.

This image of the environment as an obstacle to be overcome was also an important element in the narrative of technological triumph as the landscape was painted as a testing ground for the technology.³⁵ Such a triumph would be significant only if there were significant challenges to overcome. In this vision, the Arctic was a space to be conquered and exploring the region was framed as a battle between the explorer and the environment. In one article, titled "Navy Ready to Invade the Arctic by Air," one member of the US Navy argued that, "the traditional scurvy-eaten, frost-scarred hero of the icy desert is a thing of the past. [...] modern methods of combating the perils of the frozen North have at last come into their own."³⁶ Whereas the Arctic had previously been seen as a stage for testing a man's heroic character, it had now become a ground on which the technology's strength was tested against the environment. In some ways, the Arctic-as-testing-ground can be seen as an extension of the Arctic's image as a scientific space; rather than a laboratory for testing and developing scientific knowledge, the environment became a laboratory for testing the technology.

Of course, there was a tension inherent in these images. On the one hand, the polar landscape was a dangerous environment full of obstacles. On the other hand, it was subdued by the new powers of the aircraft and conquered by modern methods of exploration. Indeed, this double-sided image is a common thread in narratives of the North where the landscape is constructed simultaneously as both wild and tamed in order to support narratives of heroism and exploration.

Amundsen was not the only one eager to explore the use of aircraft in the Arctic. In 1920 the United States Army Air Force organized a transcontinental flight from New York State to Alaska. This flight had explicitly strategic motivations to reinforce links between the continental United States and the far-flung state of Alaska by charting a potential airway, and to demonstrate the commercial utility of aircraft.³⁷ Following this flight there was also some discussion of a United States Navy plan to use a dirigible to attempt to reach the North Pole.³⁸ In 1921 Imperial Oil used two Junker-Larsens to fly to its oil strike at Norman Wells, Northwest Territories. That year also saw the publication of proposals for the use of aircraft in polar travel.³⁹ At the same time Canadian aviation was pushing steadily northward. As the Canadian developments indicated,

35. "Amundsen Will Start Flight to the North Pole June 20," *New York Times*, 10 June 1923; McConnell, "What Can Amundsen..."

36. Green, "Navy Ready to Invade the Arctic..."

37. "Four Airplanes Off on Alaskan Flight," *New York Times*, 16 July 1920.

38. "To Use Shenandoah in Dash for Pole," *New York Times*, 7 December 1923.

39. McConnell, "New Methods in Arctic Exploration," *New York Times*, 3 July 1921; "To Attempt Flight Across North Pole," *New York Times*, 2 August 1921.

aircraft were expanding further into the North throughout the 1920s. In the background, Vilhjalmur Steffansson was promoting his vision of the Arctic as a new highway.⁴⁰ In this context aircraft seemed poised to transform the Arctic from an obstacle to a new transport route. It was an image that would reappear in later coverage of the successful polar flights, providing a counterpoint to the image of the polar landscape as a hazardous backdrop for heroic deeds.

Amundsen's Polar Attempt, 1925

The narrative of the explorer's heroic struggle also formed a key theme in the coverage of Amundsen's 1925 aerial attempt on the North Pole, and in this case the narrative of technological triumph was replaced by a story of individual heroism. Although characterized as a modern epic in light of the use of aircraft, depictions of this expedition repeated many of the features of previous exploration narratives. In some ways, the expedition's adventures made it easy to apply images from the heroic narrative and the technology largely faded into the background as the stories focused on the struggle between the explorer and the environment.

In the aftermath of the problems with his 1923 flights, financial troubles forced Amundsen to delay his flight plans until he could raise the necessary funds. His rescue came from a young, wealthy American engineer, Lincoln Ellsworth, who provided financial backing in return for the chance to participate in the expedition. In the late spring of 1925, Amundsen, Ellsworth, and their pilots and flight engineer took off from Spitsbergen in two Dornier Wal flying boats, hoping to make a flight to the North Pole. Only eight hours later, early on the morning of 22 May and with half their fuel supply consumed, the aircraft descended. Because of the nature of the ice, while searching for open water in which to land their craft, the only suitable openings they could find for the two planes to land were located three miles apart. To make matters worse, on landing, Ellsworth's plane had torn the nails on the bottom of its hull loose and was leaking badly. After partially hauling the plane out on the ice, Ellsworth's crew discovered that only one of the plane's engines was working and that they would be unable to repair it. In the hopes that Amundsen's aircraft could transport all of them to safety, the crew sought to join their fellows.

Crossing the three miles to Amundsen's plane proved a hazardous journey. The route was difficult and treacherous and during the journey Lieutenant Omdahl, Ellsworth's mechanic, fell through the ice and had to

40. "A Dream of the Arctic," *New York Times*, 6 August 1922; "Foresees Air Mail Routes Over Pole," *New York Times*, 5 December 1923; "Steffansson Offers Aid in Polar Flight," *New York Times*, 9 December 1923.

be rescued. When the party finally reached Amundsen's plane they discovered that his aircraft had become frozen into the ice. With both planes disabled, the crews were trapped, stranded on the ice as they struggled to free Amundsen's plane and laboriously chop an ice-free lane for the craft. It was a dangerous time; their supplies were limited and the group's survival depended on their ability to repair the technology. It was an intriguing irony of aerial expeditions: aircraft increased an explorer's capabilities, but it also made him more dependent. If the technology failed, he was trapped. Eventually the crew freed the plane and cleared a lead. The takeoff on 2 June was a leap of faith in an overloaded plane.⁴¹

When the men returned home, from the dead as it seemed, they were hailed as heroes. Given the aircraft's difficulties, rather than celebrating the technology, newspaper coverage of the expedition emphasized the magnitude of the hazards faced, the risks encountered, and the suffering endured.⁴² Amundsen, for instance, is described as bearing the physical marks of his hardships.⁴³ These corporeal traces of the expedition served to emphasize the encounter between the explorer's body and the land. The accounts also emphasized the party's courageous spirit in the face of these dangers and Amundsen's ability to maintain his cheerfulness under difficult conditions.⁴⁴ Finally, the newspapers celebrated the crew's resourcefulness and indomitable spirit.⁴⁵ It was this demonstration of character, the *New York Times* argued, that turned this episode into a gallant failure. In so doing, the newspaper echoed the narratives that appeared around both Franklin and, later, Scott. Unlike Franklin and Scott, however, Amundsen and Ellsworth lived. Nevertheless, their suffering and their reaction to it allowed them to demonstrate their heroic characters.

This coverage also reiterated previous narratives of dedication, endurance, and stoicism as central features of heroism. For instance, Amundsen is described as a Viking of the air: brave, indomitable, cheerful in the face of danger, and able to make light of his suffering. This depiction specifically links Amundsen to images of heroic exploration and paints him as the modern embodiment of the Norwegian Viking character and

41. Lincoln Ellsworth, "An Epic of the Polar Air Lines," *New York Times*, 11 Oct. 1925.

42. "Amundsen's Fight for Life," *The Times* [London], 23 June 1925; Howard Mingos, "Amundsen Confident He Would Come Back," *New York Times*, 31 May 1925.

43. "Amundsen on His Flight: A Hard Adventure," *The Times* [London], 20 June 1925; "Amundsen's Welcome Home," *The Times* [London], 6 July 1925.

44. "Amundsen on His Flight: Next Year's Airship Expedition," *The Times* [London], 29 September 1925; Edwin L. James, "Amundsen's Peril Now Fully Seen," *New York Times*, 23 June 1925; "Welcoming Amundsen," *New York Times*, 6 July 1925; R.L. Duffus, "Amundsen, at 53, Plans New Quest," *New York Times*, 18 October 1925.

45. "Wants Committee Here to Help," *New York Times*, 7 June 1925; "Amundsen Back Safe in Spitzbergen," *New York Times*, 19 June 1925; "Amundsen's Feat Studied in London," *New York Times*, 20 June 1925.

spirit.⁴⁶ At the same time, Amundsen is presented as calm, methodical, modest, hopeful, and cheerful. Bravado is not enough, the argument goes. The hero must wed courage to gentlemanly virtue to succeed. Possessing these characteristics, Amundsen is able to both save his men and to recast a technical failure as an episode of heroic triumph.

There is another thread to this image that may represent a departure from previous representations of the heroic, suffering explorer. Central to the Scott narrative is the idea of resolution in the face of inevitable death, but the American coverage of Amundsen focuses instead on the idea of the indomitable will; the drive to fight against fate, to make things happen. Amundsen, when confronting the ice-bound aircraft, does not lay down and die. He fights back. It is this refusal to surrender that allows him to overcome the obstacles, both physical and otherwise, that threaten to prevent him from achieving his goals. In this narrative, although his machine has failed, Amundsen the explorer is undaunted. He draws on his courage, daring, energy, resourcefulness and ingenuity to overcome a hostile environment, to make himself “King of the Air.”⁴⁷ Through this transformation he becomes a symbol of the self-realized man, the person who takes control of his fate, who bends it to his will.

Although the emphasis in coverage of this expedition is squarely on the explorer’s character, the landscape of exploration continues to play an important role in this story of heroic triumph and to demonstrate multiple layers. On the one hand, the Arctic provided the magical, otherworldly backdrop for the action. Ellsworth, for instance, described it as a landscape that exerted a strange fascination over the imagination:

There is an inexplicable something about great open spaces, forsaken of men and given over to loneliness, that have a peculiar attraction all their own. There is a simplicity in the breadth, space and distance that is inviting and ennobling. Things that lie flat are at peace and the mind grows peaceful with them.

[...] That call of the silence and desolation of those far-flung ice fields, that strangely beautiful world of glittering white, lying beyond the rim of the Polar Sea, will ever soothe and ravish me.⁴⁸

This beauty, however, carries a hint of malice as underneath the landscape’s magnificence lurks a darker face. Indeed, in an earlier account, Ellsworth had highlighted this more sinister image of the Arctic:

It was a ghostly scene. [...] The silence of the ages hung over the sea. Cataclysmic forces must have been at work before ever those huge blocks of ice could be torn loose and thrown up from the ocean’s bosom, but not a whisper of a sound was now disturbing the silence. It seemed as if the world had died.⁴⁹

46. “The Saga of a Modern Viking,” *New York Times*, 16 October 1927.

47. “Amundsen Hailed By His Countrymen,” *New York Times*, 11 October 1925.

48. “As Ellsworth Saw the Pole’s Allurement,” *New York Times*, 9 July 1926.

49. Ellsworth, “An Epic of the Polar...”

This place was depicted as a ghostly dead world, an ice desert shaped by cataclysmic forces, a vast whiteness that could as easily destroy the explorer and his aircraft as it had destroyed previous expeditions.⁵⁰ This image of the Arctic as a weird, alluring, fascinating, and unsettling landscape was not unique to either coverage of the Amundsen expedition or to exploration narratives. As Jen Hill points out, in nineteenth century British narratives, the Arctic functions as the field on which explorers can enact and therefore solidify understandings of British masculinity. At the same time, however, the Arctic is also the environment that threatens to consume the explorer's body.⁵¹ In the context of aerial exploration narratives, this menacing picture of the Arctic provides the dangers and obstacle that allow the enactment of the heroic character displayed by Amundsen and his expedition in the press coverage. The success of Amundsen's next flight, however, would make the application of the heroic narrative more complicated.

The Flight of the *Norge*

In many ways the 1926 flight of the *Norge* fit much more neatly into the narrative of technological triumph. Although Amundsen's experience in 1925 left him unconvinced of the utility of aircraft in the rigorous polar environment, he remained interested in the possibility of aerial exploration and shifted his focus to the use of airships. These dirigibles, floating above the ice that had caused such hardship for the two flying boats, he felt, were better suited to long-distance travel in the Arctic. With this in mind, Amundsen and Ellsworth joined with Italian airship designer Umberto Nobile to organize a transpolar flight and, in May 1926, the explorers and the airship crew left King's Harbour, Spitsbergen, bound for Point Barrow, Alaska. The coverage of the flight deployed multiple images of the environment, depending on the type of narrative the writer wanted to construct. As with the 1923 flights, in the lead up to the expedition coverage was dominated by narratives of technological progress, and as part of efforts to build excitement about the flight, the airship was presented as a technology that could subdue the treacherous environment.

In these stories the landscape is constructed as both dangerous and as tamed. For example, Amundsen himself emphasized the dangers of travelling on the surface, pointing to "those vast ridges that hurl themselves up under tremendous pressuring in the constantly moving,

50. "Amundsen Depicts Epic Polar Flight," *New York Times*, 16 October 1925; "Arctic's Toll of Ships Grows with the Years," *New York Times*, 4 October 1925.

51. Hill, 39, 47-49, 98, 107.

shifting ice [...] There is not one moment's peace or safety on it."⁵² The airship, however, would lift the explorer far above these dangers—through technology he was able to conquer the environment, removing its ability to harm him. Aviation would also extend the explorer's ability to cover distance, which, in combination with its capacity to neutralize the region's hazards, would allow him to pierce the Arctic's mysteries and lift the veil of secrecy over the polar vastness.⁵³ This ability to penetrate to the very heart of the hostile polar wilderness enabled the explorer to open new areas to human investigation. The technology's ability to subdue the Arctic in turn meant the region's secrets were now open to anyone, not just the heroic few. With the advent of polar aviation, the air-minded coverage claimed, the Arctic was poised to become an aerial highway with aircraft plying new circumpolar transport and trade routes. In this story the final conquest of the Arctic belonged to the aircraft, not to human beings.⁵⁴ If previous expeditions tested human beings' character and strength, these pieces argued, the new mode would test aircraft technology against a hostile, difficult environment.⁵⁵ This created an interesting tension in the narrative as, to maintain a heroic narrative or to have the region function as a significant testing ground for the technology required that the environment offer some sort of challenge.

Indeed, the coverage was not purely a paean to technology—there were dissenting voices. Some commentators, including Amundsen himself, pointed to the technological failings highlighted, especially, by Amundsen and Ellsworth's 1925 adventure and Nobile's misfortune in 1928.⁵⁶ Indeed, some felt that aviation made exploration even more risky than on foot. By using aircraft, they argued, explorers were almost entirely dependent on their machines, but the machines were extremely vulnerable to the elements.⁵⁷ Others lamented the passing of an era. For instance, Matthew Henson, Peary's companion, felt that the ease of aerial exploration meant the interwar achievements were neither worth as much nor as satisfying.⁵⁸ Now they were mechanical, not human triumphs.⁵⁹ It

52. Roald Amundsen, "The Coming Polar Flight," *New York Times*, 14 March 1926.

53. "MacMillan Ready to Go On Double Quest," *New York Times*, 14 June 1925; "As Ellsworth Saw Pole's Allurement," *New York Times*, 9 July 1926; "Land and Seas Await Explorers," *New York Times*, 15 August 1926.

54. Waldemar Kaempffert, "Braving the Perils of the Arctic Regions," *New York Times*, 3 June 1928.

55. R.L. Duffus, "In Three Graphic Chapters the Story of the Italia Disaster..." *New York Times*, 22 July 1928; Fitzhugh Green, "Why the Polar Regions Still Lure Explorers," *New York Times*, 26 August 1928.

56. "Oslo to Welcome Amundsen July 4," *New York Times*, 28 June 1925.

57. Henry E. Armstrong, "High-Hearted Adventure of Amundsen's Polar Flight," *New York Times*, 10 January 1926.

58. "Peary's Aid Praises Both Polar Airmen," *New York Times*, 14 May 1926.

was a view shared by the British Royal Geographical Society, which concluded, “We may join in the admiration of skill and enterprise, without committing ourselves to allowing that a raid on the North Pole by aeroplane is a useful contribution to geography, or a thing to be repeated.”⁶⁰

However, reviewing coverage of the expedition indicates that reporters sought to integrate the *Norge*'s success into existing heroic narratives. To do so was not an easy task and to accomplish it writers focused on the landscape of exploration, highlighting the dangers still presented by the environment and, even more interestingly, constructed the airship itself as a space of exploration. For instance, in an effort to underline this heroism the stories by Frederik Ramm, the *New York Times* journalist that accompanied the expedition, focused extensively on the one episode during the flight when the expedition faced serious danger when, over Alaska, ice that had accumulated during poor weather was thrown off the propellers and threatened to puncture the ship's thin membrane.⁶¹

In this episode the dangers faced came from the conditions of the Arctic environment, which was presented as particularly threatening for airships. Drifting in the sky, the dirigible was marked as especially susceptible to the vagaries of Arctic weather and stories emphasized the fragility of its thin gas-filled skin. Some argued that this made airships a more dangerous method of transport than dog sleds. If the worst happened, they pointed out, and the ship were forced down, the expedition would be left stranded, beyond the reach of relief parties, ill-equipped and ill-prepared for a treacherous march back through the icy wastes.⁶² It was a risk with which Amundsen and the public would have been familiar from his perilous landing in 1925. In their ability to face and overcome these risks, both the men and the machine were able to demonstrate their heroic natures.

Amundsen's own account likewise emphasized the dangers of the airship's flight in order to make a point about the heroism of the expedition's members. In the aftermath of the *Norge*'s transpolar flight, Nobile and Amundsen and their champions had engaged in a dispute about who deserved the lion's share of credit for the expedition and its success. While Amundsen had held his tongue in the press, in his autobiography he had savaged the Italian. In his account of the flight, Amundsen described Nobile as a man of “extreme nervousness, erratic

59. “Real Arctic Honors,” *New York Times*, 14 June 1926.

60. “Amundsen's Polar Flight,” *The Geographical Journal* 66, 1 (1925): 48-53, 50.

61. Fredrik Ramm, “Ice Hurlled by Propeller Punctured Ship,” *New York Times*, 16 May 1926; Fredrik Ramm, “Heavy Winds Buffeted and Bumped Norge,” *New York Times*, 17 May 1926; Fredrik Ramm, “Polar Experiences of the Norge Told by Meteorologist,” *New York Times*, 19 May 1926; Roald Amundsen, “How the Norge Was Saved by a Miracle When She Landed at Teller,” *New York Times*, 7 June 1926.

62. “The Polar Expeditions,” *New York Times*, 11 April 1926.

natures, and lack of balanced judgement,” egotistical and selfish, and ineffectual during the flight. In particular, he pointed to Nobile’s reaction to the hardships as evidence of his weak character.⁶³

Other descriptions of the landscape focused less on an immediate danger than on a sense of the environment as generally threatening or malevolent. As in coverage of the 1925 flights, in order to establish its malice, the landscape’s scale is emphasized, with its vastness reinforced, not diminished, by the explorer’s new range of vision. For instance, in Ellsworth’s description of the sensation of flying over the Arctic ice:

We were like gnats in an immense void. We had burned our bridges, broken all contact with civilization. What lay behind counted for nothing now. Time and distance counted for nothing. Only what lay before us counted now [...]⁶⁴

As in previous narratives, this landscape was double-edged, with a haunting, strange beauty that provoked wonder and amazement for the explorer fascinated by the siren call of silence and desolation.⁶⁵ Under this beauty, however, lurked a terrible danger. In these depictions the Arctic remained a desolate landscape, a barren wilderness of vast sheets of ice, devoid of life, silent and dead.⁶⁶

In many ways these descriptions represented redeployments of images that featured in other exploration narratives. What is interesting, however, is the concurrent move to construct the space inside the ship as a landscape of exploration. Here the interior becomes, not a domestic space of refuge or comfort set in opposition to the dangerous wilderness outside, but a polar landscape in which the hero can undergo the trials necessary to demonstrate his heroism. The domestic space disappears from the aerial narratives as the technology’s interior becomes the site of exploration rather than the space of safety, emphasizing that what is important in these narratives is not the ability to create a domestic space and survive within the Arctic, but to move through the environment. In this mirror landscape, the explorers endure cold, hunger, and discomfort that mimics the experience of surface expeditions. Ramm’s stories, for instance, described how the crew suffered from cold, huddling over their instruments, unable to prepare any hot food, staying awake for the duration of the flight.⁶⁷ The coverage also emphasized the monotony of the flight, the lack of sleep, and the danger.⁶⁸ Similarly, Nobile’s own account stressed the removal of

63. Amundsen, *My Life as an Explorer*, 139-40, 163-4, 176-80.

64. Ellsworth, “An Epic of the Polar...”

65. “As Ellsworth Saw Pole’s Allurement,” *New York Times*, 9 July 1926.

66. “As Ellsworth Saw Pole’s...”; “The Polar Wonder,” *New York Times*, 13 May 1926.

67. Ramm, “Heavy Winds Buffeted and Bumped Norge,” *New York Times*, 17 May 1926.

68. Roald Amundsen and Lincoln Ellsworth, “Norge’s Perils From Fog and Ice After Passing the North Pole,” *New York Times*, 6 June 1926.

all luxuries from the airship's cabin in order to reduce the craft's weight.⁶⁹ If one wants to construct these flights as part of the tradition of heroic exploration but the aircraft seems to remove the explorer from the risks on the ground, then the technology must become the site of exploration. By reconstructing the cabin as a hazardous space of exploration, these narratives allowed Amundsen to remain a heroic explorer despite his displacement far above the ice. The tensions between the image of technology as conquering the environment and the idea of the technology as a space of exploration illustrate again the twin poles of taming and wilding that so often inform images of the North.

A Fitting Sepulchre

Where coverage of the *Norge* flight emphasized the hazards of the polar environment, in coverage of Amundsen's 1928 disappearance the image of the polar regions as an otherworldly space would take centre stage. After his success with the *Norge*, Amundsen announced his retirement from exploration. Although the dispute with Nobile about who was actually the driving force behind the expedition kept him briefly in the limelight, Amundsen largely faded from the public stage. He would step forward for one final time in 1928.

Following on from the controversy that followed the *Norge* expedition, Nobile had organized an Italian airship flight to the North Pole. Unfortunately, on the morning of 25 May 1928, the *Italia* had crashed on the ice pack northeast of Spitsbergen. Ten men were left stranded on the ice. Six had vanished, borne aloft in the airship's helium-filled bag, while the gondola was left mangled on the ice. The *Italia*'s disappearance sparked a large-scale aerial search and rescue mission that captured press attention. Despite their personal differences, Amundsen was amongst the first to volunteer to search. While attending a banquet in honour of George H. Wilkins and Ben Eilson, Amundsen had received news that Nobile and his crew were feared down and that his help was requested. According to the coverage, there was no hesitation in his response. "Tell them at once," he is reported to have said, "that I am ready to start instantly." This was seen as the ultimate act of honour. The *New York Times* described it thus: "There was another instant of silence, and then a shout of acclaim for the strong man, a man of strong antagonisms, who had so quickly forgotten his grievances before the appeal of common humanity. Amundsen's eye sparkled, and Svedrup nodded his white and venerable head in approval."⁷⁰

69. Umberto Nobile, "Navigating the *Norge* from Rome to the North Pole and Beyond," *National Geographic Magazine* 52, 2 (1927): 180.

70. "Italia is Reported Down on the Ice," *New York Times*, 27 May 1928.

While Nobile and his party would ultimately be found, Amundsen's aircraft, with its crew of Captain René Guilbaud and Lieutenant Lief Dietrichsen, lifted off from Tromsø, Norway, vanished over the horizon, and was never seen again. While commentators pointed to Amundsen's extensive polar experience to bolster the possibility of his survival, by early July hope was declining. Amundsen was finally given up as lost when a float from his plane was found washed ashore on the Fugløe Islands in early September.⁷¹ The canny Arctic veteran had finally met his end.

Amundsen's disappearance and death sparked a flood of valedictory articles in the press. In this coverage Amundsen was firmly placed within the genre of the heroic explorer and his obituaries rehearsed many of the standard heroic characteristics, describing him as courageous and determined, with an adventurous, intrepid spirit, drawn by the unknown and "hungry for tomorrow."⁷² This was paired with celebrations of Amundsen's patience and disciplined, careful thoroughness, and his ability to endure great trials.⁷³ In the eyes of his admirers these characteristics allowed him to achieve his almost superhuman feats of exploration. More than that, however, his supporters celebrated his good character: his loyalty and sense of duty, his honesty and nobility, and his freedom from pride and vanity.⁷⁴ The image of Amundsen as a Viking also resurfaced.⁷⁵ In one account, Amundsen was described as a modern Viking. In another, Ellsworth described him as "a picturesque Viking of an old school."⁷⁶ In each case, however, this description functioned as a short hand for a spirit of courageous adventure and a strong, steadfast, hearty, modest personality at ease with itself.⁷⁷ At the heart of this praise was Amundsen's willingness to

71. "Amundsen Pontoon Found off North Norway Coast; Hope for Crew Abandoned," *New York Times*, 2 September 1928.

72. "Viking, Sleep," *New York Times*, 3 September 1928. See also "The Passing of Amundsen," *New York Times*, 3 September 1928; Emil Herbeck, "Lincoln Ellsworth Writes a Moving Tribute to the Memory of His Old Friend and Arctic Preceptor," Letter to the Editor, *New York Times*, 9 September 1928; Walter B. Hayward, "A Polar Viking Who Died as He Lived," *New York Times*, 9 December 1928; "Amundsen: December 14," *New York Times*, 14 December 1928; "The Passing of Amundsen," *New York Times*, 3 September 1928; "Amundsen Honored at Memorial Here," *New York Times*, 15 December 1928; "The Amundsen Anniversary," *New York Times*, 15 December 1928.

73. Hayward, "A Polar Viking...," *New York Times*, 9 December 1928; "Amundsen Honored at Memorial Here."

74. "Give Thanks in Mass for Rescue of Nobile," *New York Times*, 2 July 1928; "Holds Honest Man Is Treasure in Life," *New York Times*, 2 July 1928; Herbeck, "Lincoln Ellsworth Writes a Moving Tribute..."; Hayward, "A Polar Viking Who Died as He Lived"; "Amundsen: December 14," *New York Times*, 14 December 1928; "Amundsen Honored at Memorial Here."

75. "Amundsen Pontoon Found Off North Norway Coast," *New York Times*, 2 Sept. 1928.

76. "The Passing of Amundsen," *New York Times*, 3 September 1928 and Herbeck, "Lincoln Ellsworth Writes a Moving Tribute..."

77. Herbeck, "Lincoln Ellsworth Writes a Moving Tribute..."

sacrifice his own life, not just for a comrade, but for his enemy.⁷⁸ This willingness was treated as evidence of Amundsen's courage, loyalty, nobility, and sense of duty, forming the foundation of his heroism.⁷⁹ The most extreme praise came from the anonymous author of a commemorative poem who described his sacrifice as Christ-like.⁸⁰

In many of these narratives the Arctic continued to feature as a place of danger, and an inhospitable wilderness.⁸¹ For instance, when Nobile first disappeared, the *New York Times* rehearsed the history of polar exploration, focusing on John Franklin and Adolphus Greeley, Solomon Andrée and Ernest Shackleton's expeditions, all filled with hardship, suffering, and, in all but Shackleton's experience, death. Rather than the conquered landscape of the *Norge* stories, in these narratives, "the stabbing Arctic winds and murderously cold temperature have yet to be conquered. All man's weapons against the perils of the North still prove pitifully inadequate."⁸² In these stories, the Arctic is still a place that swallows brave men.⁸³ This depiction of the Arctic underpinned the stories construction of Amundsen as the heroic explorer. In order to present Amundsen as a hero, the narratives required the Arctic to be a space of danger and therefore a space of risk. Intriguingly, in these accounts technology has almost entirely faded from the narrative, despite Amundsen's having disappeared in an airplane.

At the same time, the Arctic is also depicted as a sacred space and as a liminal space; as a gateway to another world.⁸⁴ This concept of the Arctic as a sacred space is combined with an understanding of the Arctic as a transformative space, one that takes the explorer outside himself and places its indelible mark on his body and mind.⁸⁵ This was taken to its ultimate extension in the stories that portrayed Amundsen as one with the North. The idea of Amundsen as deeply connected to the poles is an important component of the eulogies. Amundsen is depicted as having come out of the North. In these accounts, it is the North that bred him and gave him his character—the North is Amundsen's natural home. Indeed it is the only appropriate sepulchre for his Viking body.⁸⁶ In these narratives,

78. "Holds Honest Man is Treasure in Life," *New York Times*, 2 July 1928; "The Ice-Breaking Rescue," *New York Times*, 13 July 1928; Duffus, "In Three Graphic Chapters..."; "Only Man to See Both Poles," *New York Times*, 2 September 1928.

79. "Two British Planes to Hunt Amundsen," *New York Times*, 3 July 1928; Duffus, "In Three Graphic Chapters..."

80. "Viking, Sleep," *New York Times*, 3 September 1928.

81. "The Passing of Amundsen," *New York Times*, 3 September 1928.

82. C.G. Poore, "Grim Courage Writes a Saga of Polar Seas," *New York Times*, 17 June 1928.

83. "Explorers Located on Ice," *New York Times*, 21 June 1928.

84. "The Passing of Amundsen."

85. "A Polar Viking Who Died as He Lived," *New York Times*, 9 December 1928; "Amundsen: December 14," *New York Times*, 14 December 1928.

86. "The Ice-Breaking Rescue..."; "The Passing of Amundsen."

through his disappearance Amundsen merges with the Arctic's ice and snow. Entombed in the ice, Amundsen becomes one with the Arctic. The fact that his body lies in the ice allows his spirit to blend with the Arctic, sharing its deepest secrets.⁸⁷ With this final transformation the Arctic is no longer a threat to Amundsen, instead, it is a place of safety. After his death, the Arctic will watch over Amundsen, will guard him and hold him tenderly.⁸⁸ In Amundsen's story, not only is the Arctic an arena for purification, it too is purified. Amundsen's death in the northern ice cleanses both him and the Arctic as he becomes part of the eternal ice he sought to conquer.⁸⁹ The Arctic itself is sanctified as the tomb of the hero.⁹⁰ Where, in previous narratives, it is Amundsen's struggle against the environment that demonstrates his heroism, at the end his merging with the Arctic is the ultimate indication of his Nordic character.

Conclusion

Tracing the coverage of Amundsen's aerial expeditions reveals the deployment of multiple images of the Arctic, from a hazardous landscape of heroic deeds, to a conquered environment subdued by technology, to a sacred otherworldly space. These shifting images highlight the multiple layers that form the cultural landscape of the Arctic, which appears now in one guise, now in another, sometimes within the same narrative. Indeed, these images are often in tension with one another as the polar landscape is depicted as both conquered and as a space of danger; as both tamed and wild.

In part, these tensions reflect the images used as tools to accomplish particular narrative ends as writers sought to tell stories of technological triumph, while still incorporating polar aviation into the tradition of heroic polar exploration. Because the introduction of aircraft removed the explorer from direct contact with the polar ice and snow, it introduced tensions into a heroic narrative that rested on the confrontation between explorer and environment. In order to resolve these tensions these authors had to both rearticulate existing images of the Arctic as a threatening landscape and to renegotiate the space of exploration, constructing the technology's interior as a heroic landscape. By both reaffirming and renegotiating the geography of exploration, these narratives were able to construct polar heroes in the age of polar aviation. The necessity of doing so highlights the relationship between how we construct the Arctic's cultural landscape and the way in which we move through that space; between technology and place.

87. "Amundsen: December 14," *New York Times*, 14 December 1928; "Italians Acclaim Nobile on Return," *New York Times*, 9 September 1928; "A Polar Viking Who Died as He Lived"; "Amundsen Honored at Memorial Here."

88. "Viking, Sleep," *New York Times*, 3 September 1928; "Amundsen: December 14."

89. "Italians Acclaim Nobile on Return," *New York Times*, 1 August 1928.

90. "Italia Hope Revived by Smoke in Arctic," *New York Times*, 3 September 1928.