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FOUR

DEAD LETTER RECKONING

Seeing a cairn near the water's edge, I hurried towards it, and quickly demolished the heap in the expectation of finding some record, but, after an hour's hard work with pick and shovel, I was horrified to find that it was a grave.

— ALBERT HASTINGS MARKHAM, *The Great Frozen Sea: A Personal Narrative of the Voyage of the "Alert" during the Arctic Expedition of 1875–6* (1878)

Arguably the most important document to date in the history of Arctic exploration was found in a cairn at Victory Point on King William Island (Qikiqtaq) in the northern Canadian archipelago in 1859. The document was a preprinted blank form supplemented with handwritten updates, one of thousands dispersed throughout the circumpolar North by British and American ventures throughout the nineteenth century. Arctic expeditions were expected to leave notice of their whereabouts and operations, depositing them under rock caches, in bottles dropped into the sea, in copper or tin cylinders, or at other outposts at regular intervals, ideally in multiple copies. Such multilingual forms (in English, French, Spanish, Dutch, Danish, and German) left lined blank space at their tops for the handwritten updates; their bottom halves were imprinted with variations on the following: “Whoever finds this paper is requested to forward it to the Secretary of the Admiralty, London, *with a note of the time and place at which it was found*: or, if more convenient, to deliver it for that purpose to the British consul at the nearest Port.” The U.S. Navy employed an analogous form. This manner of blank form was “usually supplied to discovery ships for the purpose of being enclosed in bottles and thrown overboard

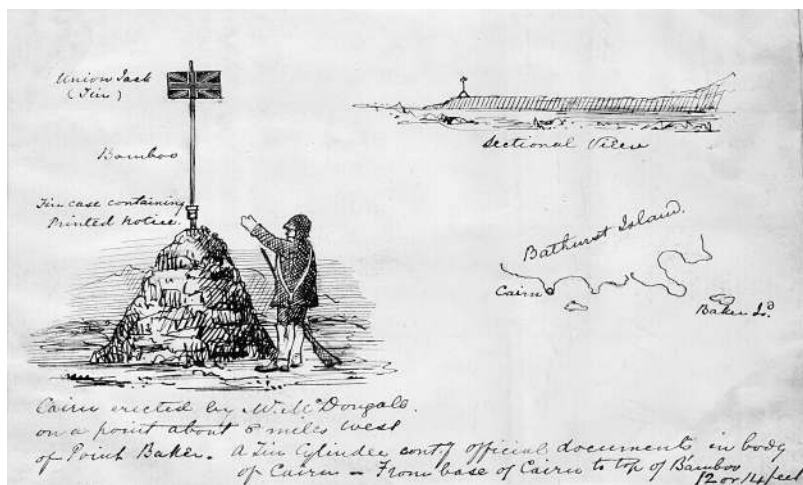


FIG 4.1 — Cairn erected by Mate George F. McDougall, HMS *Resolute*, near Point Baker. The cairn was topped by a bamboo pole hoisting a flag made of tin; under the rocks was a tin cylinder containing official documents. Its height was twelve to fourteen feet.

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at sea, in order to ascertain the set of the currents, blanks being left for the date and position.”¹ The sending and receiving of messages by humans constitutes a data set of currents and other nonhuman factors. Leaving such records, one officer wrote, “is done every day that the ships are under weigh.”²

The notice found at Victory Point on King William Island in 1859 was one of the standard multilingual forms. In 1847 it had been written upon briefly and then sealed in a tin cylinder by officers of the large Northwest Passage expedition led by Franklin, which had launched from England in 1845. In 1848, eleven months after the cylinder’s first interment, members of the Franklin expedition subsequently returned to the cairn, extracted the notice, and wrote upon it a second time, in script that wended its way around the border of the document, afterward recommitting it to a cairn. There it remained until its discovery twelve years later by the *Fox* expedition, commanded by Francis Leopold M’Clintock (or McClintock), a recovery mission seeking evidence of Franklin’s missing voyagers. The 1847 script tells us that Franklin remains in command—“All well”—two years into the voyage. Here is a transcription of the first note:

28 of May 1847 H.M.S.hips Erebus and Terror Wintered in the Ice in Lat. 70°5’ N Long. 98°.23’ W Having wintered in 1846-7 at Beechey Island

in Lat 74° 43' 28" N Long 91° 39' 15" W After having ascended Wellington Channel to Lat 77° and returned by the West side of Cornwallis Island. Sir John Franklin commanding the Expedition. All well Party consisting of 2 Officers and 6 Men left the ships on Monday 24th May 1847.—Gm. Gore, Lieut., Chas. F. DesVoeux, Mate

Just two weeks after this message had been committed to the cairn, however, Franklin was dead. We learn this from the second inscription, written eleven months after the original. The emphatic "All well" of the previous year takes on a special poignancy in light of the trials hinted at in the 1848 addition, which reads in full:

25th April 1848 HMShips *Terror* and *Erebus* were deserted on the 22nd April 5 leagues NNW of this having been beset since 12th Sept 1846. The officers and crews consisting of 105 souls under the command of Captain F. R. M. Crozier landed here—in Lat. 69° 37' 42" Long. 98° 41' This paper was found by Lt. Irving under the cairn supposed to have been built by Sir James Ross in 1831—4 miles to the Northward—where it had been deposited by the late Commander Gore in May 1847. Sir James Ross' pillar has not however been found and the paper has been transferred to this position which is that in which Sir J. Ross' pillar was erected—Sir John Franklin died on the 11th of June 1847 and the total loss by deaths in the Expedition has been to this date 9 officers and 15 men.—James Fitzjames Captain HMS *Erebus* F. R. M. Crozier Captain & Senior Offr And start on tomorrow 26th for Backs Fish River

Franklin and his two ships, *Erebus* and *Terror*, with their crew of 129 men, had been missing for fourteen years when McClintock's *Fox* expedition located the cairn note, stained by rust from the metal container and beginning to deteriorate. At least forty rescue and recovery missions had sought evidence of their whereabouts and mysterious end within those first fifteen years of searching—and they continued through the location of both ships on the Arctic seafloor, the *Erebus* in 2014 and the *Terror* in 2016.³

Traces had been found in the early years of the search in the form of Inuit testimony (not always fully credited by white, Western audiences) and in assorted *Erebus* and *Terror* artifacts in abandoned campsites and among Inuit parties. Notably, one Scottish searcher, John Rae, had purchased a number of Franklin materials from the Inuit in 1854; they told him a large party of "kabloonas" (Qabluunak)—white men, around thirty-five to forty of them—had resorted to cannibalism and starved to death in a previous

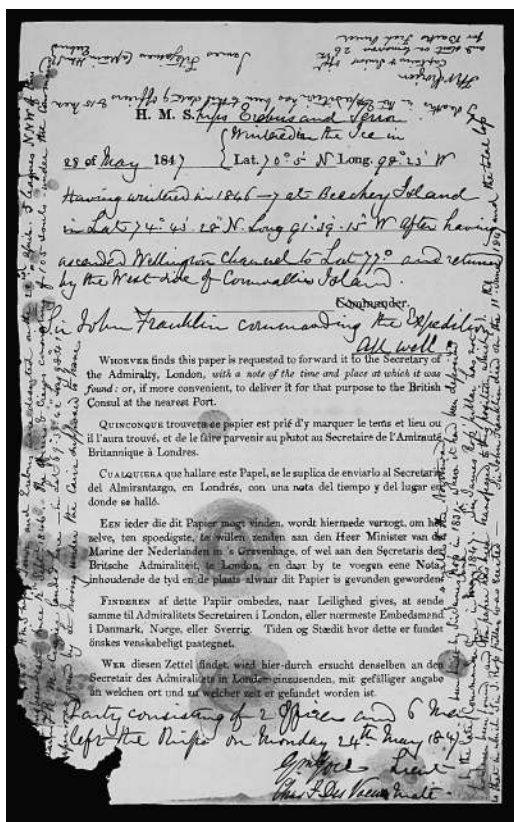


FIG 4.2 — Franklin expedi-
 tion note found in a cairn by
 Francis Leopold McClintock,
 1859. From McClintock, *The
 Voyage of the "Fox" in Arctic
 Seas*, after 282.

winter. (I discuss Rae further in chapter 5.) McClintock's *Fox* expedition itself located many more relics, including, in one small boat that had been hauled from the ship, twine, bristles, wax ends, sailmakers' palms, needle and thread cases, *The Vicar of Wakefield*, several bayonet scabbards cut down into knife sheaths, two rolls of sheet-lead, eleven large spoons, eleven forks, and four teaspoons, many of these last bearing Franklin's crest.⁴ Franklin "relics" had been central to the international interest in the expedition's fate for years; indeed Adriana Craciun argues that they were the "most eloquent texts" available to the public.⁵ Yet none of these fragments offered an obliging narrative in documentary, written form that explained the outcome of a party of the size of the full Franklin expedition. Not until McClintock's cairn discovery was there confirmation that satisfied Anglo-Americans and Europeans that the beset ships had been abandoned to the ice and that Sir John himself was dead, along with twenty-four other expedition members (by circumstances unknown, although causes likely

include exposure, starvation, and lead poisoning from poorly soldered tins). The Victory Point cairn note is the only written record that has been found to date that provides any information about the fate of the Franklin expedition.

McClintock was deeply affected by what he read in the cairn message; he reflected in his narrative, "In the short space of twelve months how mournful had become the history of Franklin's expedition; how changed from the cheerful 'All well' of Graham Gore!"⁶ For McClintock, the bureaucratic status of the note adds to rather than detracts from its elegiac qualities. "A sad tale was never told in fewer words," he wrote. "There is something deeply touching in their extreme simplicity, and they show in the strongest manner that both the leaders of this retreating party were actuated by the loftiest sense of duty."⁷ The duty to which McClintock refers is primarily constituted by the surviving officers' recognition that the expedition was provisioned only through the summer of 1848, and thus they were compelled into the risky act of abandoning the trapped ships. Far less dramatically, but also significantly, the responsibilities of the remaining officers included leaving official records. The forms "are perfect models of official brevity. No log-book could be more provokingly laconic," McClintock observed. "Yet, that *any record at all* should be deposited after the abandonment of the ships, does not seem to have been intended . . . and our gratitude ought to be all the greater when we remember that the ink had to be thawed, and that writing in a tent during an April day in the Arctic regions is by no means an easy task."⁸ McClintock fulfilled his own duty: even though he took the original Franklin message back to the Admiralty in England, he created a copy to leave in the cairn and added to it records of his own *Fox* expedition's maneuvers.

We know what message the cairn note conveyed to an Anglo-American public hungry for information in the fall of 1859, almost fifteen years into a series of far-reaching missions of mercy: it provided an elusive cenotaph for the ships and for Franklin himself, even as it left unanswered numerous questions about the expedition's broader fate.⁹ But what message was the form *itself* designed to convey, at the original scene of its production and inscriptions? McClintock's analysis of the cairn record oscillates between finding it exceptional (difficult to write, crafted in dire conditions) and mundane (a rote task of "official brevity"). Yet the document found by his party at Victory Point was not an emergency message, specially crafted for potential rescuers or for posterity. Rather it was just another update among hundreds that the expedition would have scattered over three years.

Such updates were often dispersed in multiple copies in order to amplify their chance of detection; indeed not far from the cairn in which this message was discovered, a copy was found, consisting only of the content of the first, 1847 message. Cairn messages, in this sense, bear the charge of the Franklin relics—the cutlery, pins, bits of metal—in their fetishistic promise to reveal the secrets of the vanished men. Yet while cairn messages, like the relics, are bits of mundane ephemera from a life in the Arctic, they are distinctive in one fundamental way: their form is both static (in that they are literally forms, to be filled in) and endlessly narratively adaptable (in the information added to them and in their vague and tenuous locatability). They have an intended circuit, which is to track daily movement; they also have a contingent circuit, determined by polar ecological conditions. The Franklin notice becomes a variation of what I call the Arctic dead letter: the blank form, the procedural information sheet, the status report, the routine paperwork that polar expeditions filed daily in bottles tossed in the sea, in caches built on flinty shores, or in metal casks covered with stones. In the case of the Franklin expedition, a routine notice left in a cairn becomes known as exceptional when it emerges as the only record, partial though it may be, of the fate of 129 men.

I propose that despite the importance it has assumed in the history of polar exploration, the Franklin message in the cairn was in fact routine. In the popular imagination a “message in a bottle” connotes solitude or abandonment, the voice of a singularity desperate to connect against long odds. In the case of Arctic recordkeeping, messages in bottles were generated en masse and as a matter of course; scarcity is a function of their reception, not of their generation. The only thing unusual about the Victory Point Arctic letter, that is to say, is that it actually was received. The cairn message found readers: first in McClintock, then among the broader Anglo-American nineteenth-century world, in polar historians, in me, in you.

I open this chapter by describing the famous cairn message as if its contents were exceptional, but as I’ve begun to suggest, the Franklin expedition note was just another dispatch among the blanks, forms, notices, and other official documents that circulate in the Arctic region in tenuous and provocative ways, as forms of polar ecomedia that embody oceanic conditions of drift, contingency, dispersal, and annihilation. Nautical ventures in general (naval, exploratory, or commercial voyages other than polar expeditions) produced an enormous volume of writing in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in multiple forms and genres. Recordkeeping, argu-

ably the most common category of sea writing, was as much a mainstay of nautical practice as the exercise of seamanship. In the form of logbooks, weather records, navigational accounts, wind and tide charts, longitude and latitude measurements, course and distance notations, and hydrography, officers and other seamen tracked the progress of their voyages. One aspect of this recordkeeping involved leaving letters, notices, and other forms of mail in whatever circumstances conditions might permit. For standard nautical routes, whether naval or merchant, this meant leaving letters in ports or exchanging them with passing ships. This system was irregular but surprisingly effective. The relative desolation of the polar regions arrested and altered the usual circulation of nautical mail, even as it opened up the possibilities for other forms of oceanic exchange. This chapter studies the unusual and baroque extent of messages sent from Arctic expedition ships, as well as the vagaries and contours of their posting and potential for delivery or receipt.

What I am calling Arctic dead letters comprise the notifications dispatched from ships into the polar regions, in the generally vain hope of future reception. Like letters in postal mail exchange found to be undeliverable and thus labeled “dead,” Arctic dead letters lie unclaimed. Like figurative dead letters, Arctic dead letters have passed out of use. Like dead media, they are discarded and possibly obsolete forms of communication. Yet unlike dead-end postal mail—which is eventually consigned to the fire—the circuit remains open for Arctic letters; they retain potential energy. In literary studies our association with dead letters is usually tied to Herman Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street” (1853): after Bartleby’s death by starvation in the Tombs, the lawyer-narrator hears a rumor that the scrivener had once worked in the Dead Letter Office. The detail, for many readers, has evoked the alienation of labor under capitalism, especially in light of Bartleby’s job, which was to produce duplicates of legal documents (in a manner not unlike the unrelenting duplication of Arctic records at sea). Through abstemiousness, Bartleby prefers to be unproductive: he moves from the Dead Letter Office, to a law office in which he fails to generate document copies, to an actual death that the lawyer-narrator histrionically equates with dead letters. In media studies, Bartleby’s dead letters—his rote, unoriginal, and ultimately unproductive copying—can be seen as a form of dead media, one of the processes of reproduction by an alienated human that would soon become reproduction by nonhuman machines.

A different logic for production and reproduction of letters obtains in the polar regions: whereas in “Bartleby” dead letters are a terminus, in the Arctic dead letters are inert components in a circuit that could conceivably blink into conductivity. The messages that have not disintegrated of the thousands cast onto ice or into the seas in the nineteenth century possibly remain in the Arctic in some form, whether in a state of decomposition or in persistent drift or awaiting some potential future reader, perhaps made more accessible in the twenty-first century by climate change. Nautical spaces are inherently resistant to inscription and other forms of demarcation. Recognizing this, polar-voyaging messengers multiply their modes and numbers of address, seeking oceanic registers of circulation both in terms of the wayward proliferation and mass publication scale of their dispatches. Arctic dead letters exemplify the unbounded dimensions of polar ecomedia in their potential for open, ceaseless circulation, and their risk of obliterating dispersal.

Other fundamentally oceanic characteristics of Arctic dead letters are their attenuated temporality and their randomness: any given cairn message or note in a bottle, if found at all, might be picked up decades after its inscription—a scrap of newsprint recovered, say, from Beechey Island by a Franklin search party, labeled by the Admiralty as “piece of brown paper found in washhouse,” or an insert from a tin of Superior Chocolate Powder provided to the expedition by Fortnum, Mason & Co.¹⁰ In visiting the expeditionary headquarters of Adolphus Greely’s Lady Franklin Bay Expedition decades later, Donald MacMillan found newspaper clippings of various poems whose pathos would be amplified in the Far North: “The Sweet By-and-By,” the refrain of which is “We shall meet on that beautiful shore”; Wordsworth’s “The World Is Too Much with Us”; and Longfellow’s “To Stay at Home Is Best.” The men returned home, but their scraps of newsprinted poetry remained at latitude 81°40′ N—at least until 1909, when MacMillan took them up anew.¹¹

Neither the interval nor the content of the materials circulating in the oceanic world can be strictly plotted geographically or hydrographically. They can be approximated, though (much like the debris from the 2011 Japanese tsunami that continues to wash ashore periodically on the Pacific coast of North America).¹² Metaphors of mapping likewise falter in representing oceanic diffusion. Unmoored from territorial and temporal fixity, Arctic dead letters and other forms of polar ecomedia bear the promise of ceaseless potential yet also stand as bits of the detritus that global-scale human resource extraction has unceasingly left in its wake.

Blank Forms on the Map

Arctic dead letters are a body of records that were produced under the usual conditions of polar recordkeeping, but their primary mode was distribution away from the ship rather than retention aboard it (except in duplicate form—another circuit of Arctic exchange, about which I will say more). Even messages deposited in caches, on more solid surfaces that could be flagged or marked in some way, ran the risk of infrequent encounter. Elisha Kent Kane, for example, the best known of the American Arctic explorers at midcentury, engaged in the standard practices of “build[ing] cairns and leav[ing] notices at every eligible point” during his unsuccessful Grinnell expedition in search of Franklin (1853–55). But appropriate materials were not always at hand, and Kane recalls a time when, “as I had neither paper, pencil, nor pennant, I burnt a K. with powder on the rock, and scratching O.K. with a pointed bullet on my cap-lining, hoisted it as the representative of a flag.” One such improvised cairn, “rudely marked,” he writes in his narrative, was found by a party sent in aid of Kane’s expedition, but “strange to say, [it] was the only direct memorial of my whereabouts communicated from some hundreds of beacons.”¹³ Other depots were disrupted by polar bears or other Arctic megafauna. McClintock repeatedly encountered supply caches that had been destroyed; in one instance, a previous expedition had left a “small depôt of provisions and three boats” on Cape Hotham across from Beechey Island. “The boats were sound,” McClintock found, “but several of their oars, which had been secured upright, were found broken down by bears—those inquisitive animals having a decided antipathy to anything stuck up—stuck-up things in general being, in this country, unnatural.”¹⁴ (In blaming this destruction on polar megafauna, McClintock elides the possibility that Westerners on previous search expeditions had ransacked cairns, including Inuit communication cairns, or Inuksuit, looking for messages or supplies.) Oceanic environments work to erode the outcroppings, the “stuck-up,” whether through atmospheric attrition or more direct intervention from large organisms. Other Arctic environmental conditions conspired to interfere with cairn messaging. A lieutenant on the Nares expedition, Charles Arbuthnot, labored for some time to locate a message buried near a supply depot. “I regret to say,” he reports to his superiors, “that just after I had made one copy of this, and had written a notice of our visit on the back of it, a strong gust of wind took the original record from under a stone where I had placed it, and that although I followed it a long way down the hill, it eventually got amongst the cliffs,

and I was unable to recover it.”¹⁵ Arbuthnot then had to install the copy in the cairn after making a second copy of the document to bring aboard ship. At every turn Arctic conditions demand a multiplication of messages.

The chances that letters in bottles would wash ashore or ride the global oceanic currents to some other reception were vanishingly slim. James Clark Ross (nephew of the Arctic explorer John Ross) worries about this when describing the process of distributing his own versions of the very same standard blank form that was used by the Franklin expedition:

In the evening a cask was put overboard in lat. 77° S. and long. 187° 24' E., containing a brief account of our proceedings, and with a request that whoever might find it would forward the paper to the Secretary of the Admiralty. It was my practice to throw a bottle over almost every day containing a paper with our latitude and longitude marked on it, for the purpose of gaining information respecting the joint effects of the prevailing winds and currents in these parts; but amongst ice, and in so turbulent an ocean, I fear but few of them will ever be found to subserve the intended purpose.¹⁶

The messages, accounts, notices, bulletins, updates, and discarded papers scattered across the ice and waters of the Arctic (or the Southern Ocean, as in Ross's case) are the shipboard press output not created from an imaginative impetus, such as the newspapers, broadsides, and songs I discuss in earlier chapters; such creative publications remained on ship and circulated among expedition members. Instead the blank forms and other informational documents produced or filled out in the circumpolar North were addressed to a conjectural future audience in the Arctic itself. The forms note the location of expeditions, the numbers and health of their party, the contents of the supply caches they leave along their routes, the progress of their sledging ventures, and their planned future trajectories. For example, a form sent from the HMS *Lady Franklin* (a Franklin search vessel) via an Inuk or “Esquimaux” carrier that did ultimately reach the Admiralty had been filled in with the following information (other than the date [May 7, 1850] and the latitude and longitude notation): “Beset off Unknown Island since May 4th. H.M.S. Sophia in company. Crews of both ships well. Ice very light. Great appearance of Water to North. Despatches landed at Lively. William Penny, Commander.”¹⁷ Cast into oceanic spaces (ice, the pack, open water), these dead letters rarely, however, connected with a reader other than through copies retained aboard ship—and therefore are encountered only far from the scene of their Arctic emplacement, whether

by Admiralty secretaries at the conclusion of a voyage or in bound historical records in archives by researchers. Some of the materials that were composed and then deposited within the polar regions, directed to an audience that seldom materialized, remain potentially discoverable—deliverable, in a sense—today, in melting polar regions.¹⁸

In addition to illuminating the little-known role that Arctic dead letters play in the history of polar literature, this chapter recasts a once commonly held view of the Far North as a “blank.” The concept of polar blankness can be seen in the nineteenth-century Arctic sublime of romantic writers, as well as in the imperialist rhetoric of northern European and American expeditions, all of which inaccurately—whether deliberately or not—recast the continuously populated Arctic as barren. My aim is not to heap up evidence of the error of this figuration; there have been many correctives to this view. Instead I consider the notion of Arctic blanks in media and material text terms: What is the role of the printer’s blank when employed in polar circulation?¹⁹ A “blank,” according to the *OED*, is “a document, ‘paper,’ or ‘form’ with spaces left blank to be filled up at the pleasure of the person to whom it is given (e.g., a blank charter), or as the event may determine; a blank form.” Neither a printed book nor part of manuscript culture, the blank registers in the history of printing as an element of “job printing,” the kind of occasional work for hire done by printers. Job printing could include hand bills, tickets, letterhead, lottery tickets, currency, coupons, and other documents and ephemera. In areas where ready paper was comparatively scarce, job-printed matter could provide manuscript material too, adaptable to the use of the writer. Such was the case for one sailor, who deserted an Arctic whaling ship in 1860 and wrote an account of his experience in a bank passbook printed in the maritime town of Gloucester, Massachusetts. Jobbing accounted for the majority of most printers’ work in the nineteenth century but has received comparatively little attention in material text studies. As Lisa Gitelman observes, job printing is often neglected in histories of print culture and the book in favor of “accounts of authors, editors, booksellers, publishers, and readers; cohorts notably missing from the world of blanks. Blanks are printed and used,” Gitelman writes pointedly, rather than “authored or read.”²⁰ Scholarly interest in the history of books and the study of cultures of print, in other words, has been primarily focused on readers, writers, and publishers; blanks, by contrast, seem to exist outside of the agency of an author function or the humanism of a reader response. The wide employment of blanks within polar spaces with relatively diffuse human reading populations—as Inuit, Yupik, Iñupiaq, and other circumpolar

indigenous populations were not usually targeted as print publics, with a few exceptions—underscores, in some ways, the abstraction of blanks from the intimacy of direct human exchange. If the polar regions themselves were historically figured as blank or barren compared to the verdant temperate zones, then it is possible to think of printed blanks as bearing an analogous relationship to texts with more identifiable authors and readers.

And yet, as James Green and Peter Stallybrass have pointed out, job printing had blank spaces for completion by manuscript hand, as blanks invited direct interaction. Rather than superseding manuscript culture, that is, the various forms of job printing provided an “incitement to writing by hand.” Green and Stallybrass observe, “One may or may not read a blank form; but if the form is to fulfill its function, it must be filled in.”²¹ For Green and Stallybrass, the function of a form like the Franklin cairn message would be notification—ideally, in these terms, to notify the document’s readers of the expedition’s condition and whereabouts. But the experiential function of forms in the Arctic is not to notify but to leave notes. The designated reader may never appear or may come one year later, or one hundred. The expectation of notification relies on a relative synchronicity between sender and recipient that does not inhere in the frozen oceanic regions. It is happenstance that when McClintock found the Victory Point cairn message eleven years after its second emplacement, the Franklin expedition remained alive enough in the Anglo-American consciousness (if not in its own embodied state) for the discovery or “delivery” of the original message to resonate still, despite the temporal lag between the moment of its release and its receipt.

Virtually all theoretical readers of Arctic documents such as figure 4.3, however, encounter the blanks not in situ but far from the time and space of their inscription and read them necessarily in the form of copies—duplicates created at the scene of their original completion. The copies exist precisely because Arctic blanks are expected to become dead letters. Oceanic spaces are fundamentally characterized by dispersal, extension, and diffusion. In the frozen oceanic spaces of the Arctic, in which monuments and markers can stand for a time, an excess of writing and recordkeeping functions as a mechanism for multiplying possibilities for connection or inscription upon an ice-, land-, and seascape adversarial to permanent markers. Blanks in the Arctic thus function as a response both to the misconceived “blankness” of the regions themselves and to the standard expectations of claims-making by voyages undertaken under the banners of discovery, science, imperialism, or colonialism.²² Unlike fluid oceanic surfaces, however, the icy polar

Copy of Notice left in Cairn at Floeberg Beach

Arctic Expedition.

25 July 1876

H.M.S. "Alert," at Floeberg Beach

(Lat. 82° 27' North. Long. 61° 22' West.)

H.M.S. Alert wintered off this coast, inside the grounded ice 1875-76. Her discovery, her coast, passed the same winter in a well sheltered harbour in Latitude 81.44 N Longitude 65.3 W. The Alaga Crews after a very severe journey over the ice succeeded in attaining Latitude 82.25 N. No land has been sighted to the northward. Another division explored the coast line to the northward and westward to Latitude 82.25 N Longitude 64.36 W. Cape Columbia the northernmost Cape being in Latitude 82.7 N Longitude 70.20 W. Sledge parties from the Discovery have explored the Greenland shore for some distance to the northward and eastward but the result of the examination is not yet known to me. Scoury attacked nearly all the men employed in sledge travelling. Two deaths have occurred. Nils. C. Petersen from the effects of a severe foot bite (which necessitated a part of each foot being amputated) followed by exhaustion and carbuncle fever, and George Carter Gunnar Beck who

FIG 4.3 — Copy of notice left in cairn at Floeberg Beach by HMS *Alert*, 25 July 1876. May/13/2. © NATIONAL MARITIME MUSEUM, GREENWICH, LONDON.

regions can accept some monuments or markers. But shifting ice, extreme weather, and frozen ground make the forms of inscription customary to voyages of discovery or imperial ventures unreliable. The oceanic forms of knowledge practiced by polar expedition members compel a proliferation of texts, even as the laconic nature of the messages constitutes a proleptic recognition of their likely nonreceipt.

Within the history of material texts, then, we might stress the importance of the *use* made of both Arctic dead letters and other printed blanks as a form of media rather than their “literary” production and consumption. Scholars of book history and print culture have often talked of readerly circulation, of literary economies, but eighteenth- and nineteenth-century job printing is directly the organ and product of economic exchange, generating bills, tax forms, invoices, passbooks, receipts, and other tools of commercial exchange. Arctic circulations also concern economies, but

ones whose productivity and return cannot be tracked on linear axes of time and space. If polar exploration is driven by an interest in potential resources, then Arctic messages leave open the circuits of potentiality so wide as to render them inactive, foreclosing their prospect of completion through ellipsis. The tenuousness of blank documents in the Arctic brings into relief the epistemological work done by polar expeditions in their attempts to impose models of terrestrial recordkeeping and temporality on oceanic spaces. At the same time, the hyperproliferation of expeditionary documents acknowledges the insufficiencies of that terrestrial and temporal model.

It is not the case that Arctic dead letters never find a recipient, however. In researching this book, I have had access to nineteenth-century polar blanks that exist only, for the most part, as copies made at the scene of their original Arctic creation—copies that were produced as a function of standard shipboard recordkeeping, as well as out of a recognition that the originals would probably never be recovered. I have been able to locate these blanks because they have been preserved in institutional archives by virtue of their association with expeditions deemed historically important, even though the blanks themselves have not been so deemed. I have myself become a recipient of these Arctic letters, in other words. As *ecomedia* defined by their multitudinous proliferation without regard for spatiality and temporality, some Arctic dead letters do find readers, at some place, in some time. These messages may be printed and collected as ephemera, but they bear the hope of more permanent collection.

A Full Account of the Proceedings

Arctic blanks emerge from a tradition of obsessive accounting of polar expeditionary recordkeeping practices. Twenty-seven years before Franklin's final mission, John Ross embarked upon an Admiralty-sponsored Arctic mission in 1818 to explore Baffin Bay and seek the possibility of a Northwest Passage. In doing so he inaugurated a new, targeted period of British exploration of the northern regions in the nineteenth century. Baffin Bay, off the western coast of Greenland, had been renamed after the early seventeenth-century English captain who had explored the waterway two hundred years earlier, but the ensuing centuries had not been a dynamic period in polar exploration. After the Napoleonic Wars, though, Britain had

an excess of naval personnel on active duty, and Second Vice Secretary of the Admiralty John Barrow, who served in that role from 1807 to 1845, found occupation for many of the ships and sailors in nautical and African “discovery” missions. Barrow was a great proponent of Arctic exploration in particular, sponsoring ventures by Ross, Franklin, William Edward Parry, James Clark Ross, and George Back.

Ross’s expedition also inaugurated a custom in British polar exploration that placed tight control with the Admiralty of all written materials generated aboard ship. Throughout the long nineteenth century, the Admiralty required that “all persons” on polar expeditions submit any journals, memoranda, logs, and notes, “both of a public and private nature,” composed throughout the course of the venture. The full original orders to Ross and his men would be repeated in substance throughout the century:

GENERAL MEMORANDUM

“Pursuant to orders from my Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty,
&c. &c. &c.

“You are hereby required and directed to deliver to me, the moment the ship anchors on England, all the charts, logs, journals, and memoranda, both of a public and private nature, which you may have kept during the time you have been on board the ship under my command, which are to be sealed up, and kept at the disposal of their Lordships; and you are to sign an acknowledgment, according to the form annexed, for the satisfaction of their Lordships.

“Given on board the *Isabella*, this 9th day of November, 1818.

“JOHN ROSS, Captain.

“*To* WM. ROBERTSON, First Lieutenant.

EDW. SABINE, Captain R.A.

JOHN EDWARDS, Surgeon.

A. M. SKENE, Admiralty Midshipman.

J. C. ROSS, Admiralty Midshipman.

J. C. BEVERLY, Assistant-Surgeon,

And all persons on board the *Isabella*, who may have kept
any of the abovementioned documents.

Form.

“We, the undersigned, do hereby certify, that we have delivered (sealed up) all the logs, journals, and memoranda, we have kept on board the *Isabella*, between the 1st of May and date hereof, for the purpose of being delivered to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty.”²³

In addition to enumerating the officers and men of note aboard ship, the directive covers any other forms of writing done by any of the personnel (“all persons”) on the voyage—both officers and men, both public and private writing. The orders to Ross stress the importance of turning shipboard papers over to the Admiralty “the moment the ship anchors on England.” A similar sense of urgency is seen in other British naval instructions, such as those given to Parry before his 1819–20 Northwest Passage expedition: “On your arrival in England, you are immediately to repair to this office, in order to lay before us a full account of your proceedings in the whole course of your voyage; taking care, before you leave the ship, to demand from the officers, petty officers, and all other persons on board, the logs and journals they may have kept; together with any drawings or charts they may have made.”²⁴ The tone remained the same later in the century, as can be seen in the orders to George Nares upon the launch of his 1875–76 Arctic expedition: “On your arrival in England, you are forthwith to repair to the Admiralty, to lay before their Lordships a full account of your proceedings; having previously received from the officers and all other persons in the expedition the journals or memoranda they may have kept.”²⁵

The Admiralty’s demand for all written and illustrated accounts of polar proceedings is, in many ways, perfectly consistent with the broader nautical culture of daily (and often hourly) recordkeeping practices. The extremity of the geophysical spaces into which such expeditions ventured, and the infrequency with which subpolar Westerners had visited them, renders the Admiralty’s interest in acquiring and processing the results all the more expected. Why, however, would the official orders stress again and again the appropriation of the “private” writings of all persons on board? The answer, in part, lies in the objective to publish the official voyage narratives of polar and other exploring expeditions upon their conclusion, as Craciun argues.²⁶ The volumes often appeared from the London house of John Murray, known for publishing volumes of travel and exploration; Barrow designated Murray as the Admiralty’s official publisher for a time. The Admiralty would have recourse to all public and private shipboard writings

in assembling the history, usually under the captain's credited authorship; afterward, as the Nares expedition orders clarified, "such of these journals and documents as may be of an unofficial character will be returned to the writers when no longer required for the public requirements of the expedition."²⁷ The Admiralty's official narrative was paramount; were the men allowed to keep their private journals, they might rush their accounts into print before the captain had the opportunity to prepare the sanctioned volumes.²⁸ British voyages of discovery and exploration were somewhat exceptional in their close control of all the manuscript materials generated aboard ship, whether of an official nature or those designated as private; other naval operations did not observe such protocols. When we consider the geophysical spaces of the Arctic regions in their oceanic mutability and abstraction from territorial protocols, however, another reason for Admiralty documentary control emerges. In a hostile environment, the act of tightly regulating and collecting all written materials generated aboard ship serves to provide monuments in the form of writing—by excess of official forms and indiscriminate dispersal of bits of paper—which it cannot erect with any permanence upon the landscape, as nineteenth-century colonial missions did more generally. And since the Arctic dead letters strewn throughout the North were documented so thoroughly, their noncirculation as ecomedia in the polar regions nevertheless quickens into revivification in later readerly circuits.

The Admiralty and analogous regulations, in other words, ensured the survival of Arctic dead letters in the form of copies preserved by accounts-minded crew members, and thus guaranteed their presence in the archive of polar expeditionary history, however miscellaneous these practices. It also provided a fantasy of management in an environment antagonistic to human circulation and control. This was especially the case for messages in bottles, which were generated with daily frequency, although their recovery was exceptionally rare. On his Northwest Passage expedition Parry notes, "A bottle was thrown overboard, containing a printed paper, stating the date and the situation of the ships, with a request, in six European languages, that any person finding it would forward it to the Secretary of the Admiralty, with a notice of the time and place where it was found. One bottle at least was thrown out daily during the voyage, except when the ships were 'beset' in the ice."²⁹ For John Ross's expedition, "a bottle, or copper cylinder, containing an account of our proceedings, was thrown over-board every day, as soon as the ship's position had been determined."³⁰ Most, if not all, narratives of polar exploration include similar accounts

of daily bottle casting, which I need not multiply here. As a form of Arctic ecomedia, messages in bottles are neither distress calls nor romantic searches for attachment. The machinery of administration—the mundane apparatus of institutional recordkeeping—is filed away in the nonhuman depths of the frozen seas. Messages in bottles embody the contradictions and the promises in trying to account for—and also account *in*—oceanic forms of circulation, both in document and genre.

While many blanks were preprinted before their expeditions launched and were provided in bulk to their officers, many other forms were composed and printed in the polar regions on shipboard presses. These Arctic-generated documents emerged as a particular contingency of the search for the missing Northwest Passage expedition led by Franklin. Most Arctic ships after 1850 brought with them a printing press to aid in the search for the *Erebus* and *Terror*. While the presses were eventually commandeered by the crews in service of shipboard newspapers (as chapters 1 and 2 describe), their original function was to print multiple copies of messages on colored silk or oiled paper that would be transmitted by hydrogen balloon or ship location notices that could be placed in cairns or thrown overboard.³¹ To Sherard Osborn, an officer on the HMS *Resolute* search for Franklin, balloon messages were a “novel attempt for distant signaling, or rather, intercommunication”; the notes contained the location of the searching parties for the benefit of any survivors. “Should these tidings by good fortune have reached their destination,” it was hoped that in addition to providing location information, the messages “will have raised up at once fresh hopes and fresh endurance.”³² The *Resolute* expedition also experimented with dispatching messages via carrier pigeon and in collars secured to the necks of Arctic foxes that had been trapped; other stratagems proposed to the Admiralty for signaling the Franklin party included the use of ice hammers, ice blasting, rockets, railway carriages, bladders, stimulating medicines, boots with spikes, kites, gutta percha boats, inflated india rubber balls, aeronauts, velocipedes, and smoke balls.³³ Osborn describes the balloon gambit, a “simple” plan:

A balloon of oiled silk, capable of raising about a pound weight when inflated, was filled with hydrogen evolved from a strong cask, fitted with a valve, in which, when required for the purpose, a certain quantity of zinc filings and sulphuric acid had been introduced. To the base of the balloon, when inflated, a piece of slow match five feet long was attached, its lower end being lighted. Along this match, at certain intervals, pieces of coloured paper and silk were secured with thread, and on them the information

as to our position and intended lines of search were printed. The balloon, when liberated, sailed rapidly along, rising withal, and as the match burnt the papers were gradually detached, and falling, spread themselves on the snow, where their glaring colours would soon attract notice, should they happily fall near the poor fellows in the “Erebus” and “Terror.”³⁴

Osborn observes that the greatest distance the balloon messages were documented to have traveled was about fifty miles. (Fewer than ten of the launched notes that were recovered on the ice have made it to present-day archives; the extant messages are copies preserved on the ship.) Nevertheless, he writes, neither the messages’ narrow orbit nor “our non-discovery of any papers during our travelling in 1851 can be adduced as a proof against their possible utility and success; and the balloons may still be considered a most useful auxiliary.”³⁵ Robert Randolph Carter, a sailor on a different expedition searching for Franklin, was himself very pleased to find that their own balloon messages had traveled five miles, a tenth of the distance achieved on the *Resolute*. Among the “thousand bits of paper marked with (Date, Ship, position, future intentions, and naming depots of provisions)” that were launched by balloon in bunches of ten, Carter reports that just three of the messages “were found by a party from the Advance about five miles from Beechey Island which were probably some of the first bundle showing that it had worked well thus far.”³⁶ We see here the oceanic optimism maintained by expedition members even in the face of the circum-polar annihilation of their messaging attempts.

In some instances, printed messages were given to local Inuit or Yupik parties for distribution. This strategy was conceived of by Rochfort Maguire, a member of the HMS *Plover* expedition stationed in Point Barrow, Alaska, where active trading routes among Russians and the Yupik and Inupiat were already established. Maguire wrote in his diary, “I began to turn my attention to the means we might have of extending information along the coast to Eastw [*sic*] through the Natives. . . . We had a Number of Notices printed today, that I intend asking them here to distribute along the Coast.” The scheme does not seem to have worked, however, as Maguire’s plan launches in late October: “Unfortunately all their migrations take place in the summer, when they can be of very little use for our purpose.”³⁷ The notices printed for native distribution presumed that Yupik, Inupiat, or Inuit couriers were not able to read English. In a message “Printed on board H. M. S. Plover, on the 1st of July, 1854,” for example, Maguire details the baroque locations of buried caches of food, but remarks of one such cache that

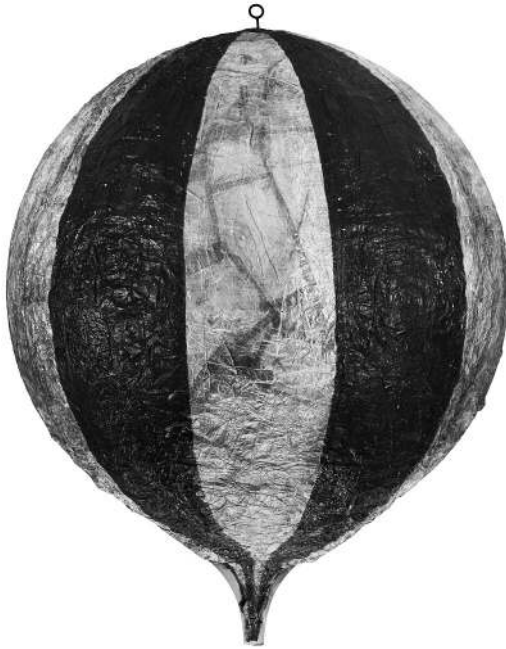


FIG 4.4 — A balloon used by the Franklin search expeditions for distributing messages. AAA4347. © NATIONAL MARITIME MUSEUM, GREENWICH, LONDON.

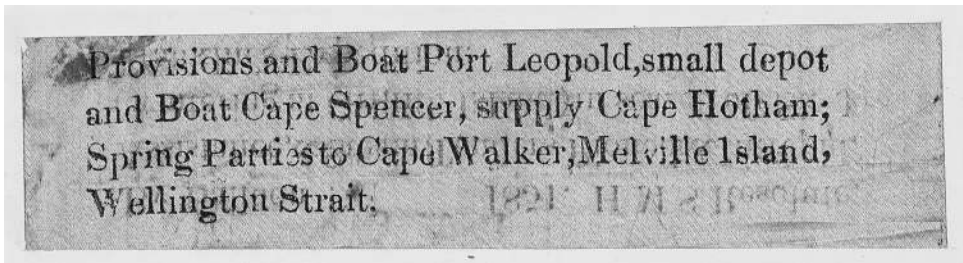


FIG 4.5 — Balloon message on green silk, HMS *Resolute, Assistance*, 1851. The printed text on the other side of the note reads as follows: “By Balloon 1851. H M S Resolute, Assistance, Steam Tenders Pioneer & Intrepid, (wintering at Griffith Island) in search of Sir J Franklin’s Expedition.” British Library C45.i.11. © THE BRITISH LIBRARY BOARD.

“it is impossible to say the natives will allow it to remain undisturbed,” even as the notice “is printed for distribution among the natives who travel eastward to Barter Point, in the hope that it may fall into the hands of any party of the missing Expedition who may be travelling this way.” We learn from the form’s conclusion that the supply caches are potentially at risk because the local population is starving: “The natives have been friendly with us but

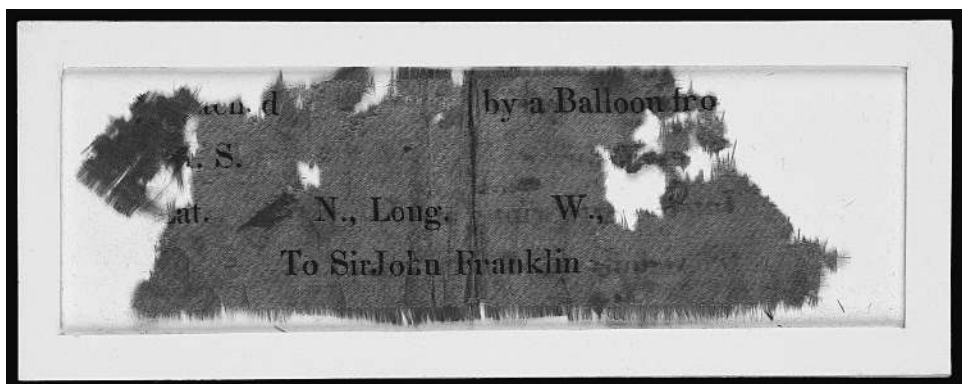


FIG 4.6 — Balloon message, printed in black ink on red silk. AAA3970.2. © NATIONAL MARITIME MUSEUM, GREENWICH, LONDON.

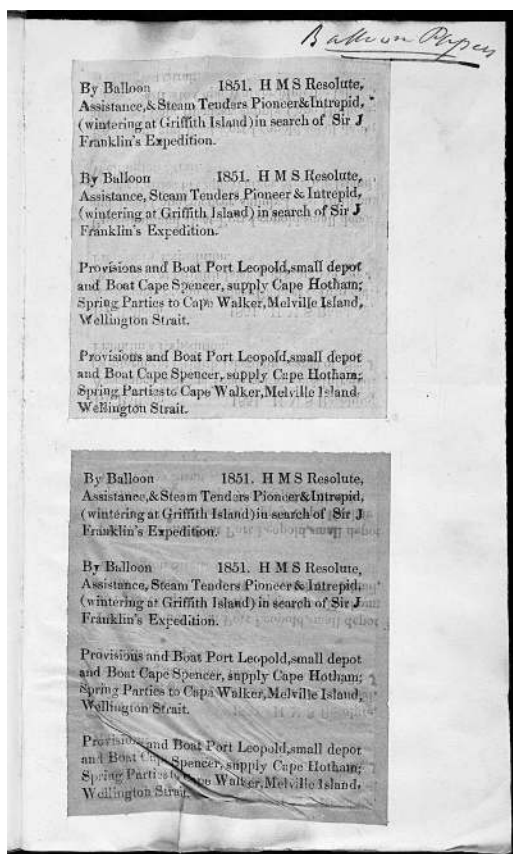


FIG 4.7 — Balloon message on pink and green paper, 1851. The message was printed with the same set of type as figure 4.5 but on different material: oiled pink paper instead of green silk. The printed text on the note reads as follows: “By Balloon 1851. H.M.S. Resolute, Assistance, Steam Tenders Pioneer & Intrepid, (wintering at Griffith Island) in search of Sir J. Franklin’s Expedition. Provisions and Boat Port Leopold, small depot and Boat Cape Spencer, supply Cape Hotham, Spring Parties to Cape Walker, Melville Island, Wellington Strait.” ADM 7/190. NATIONAL ARCHIVES, LONDON.

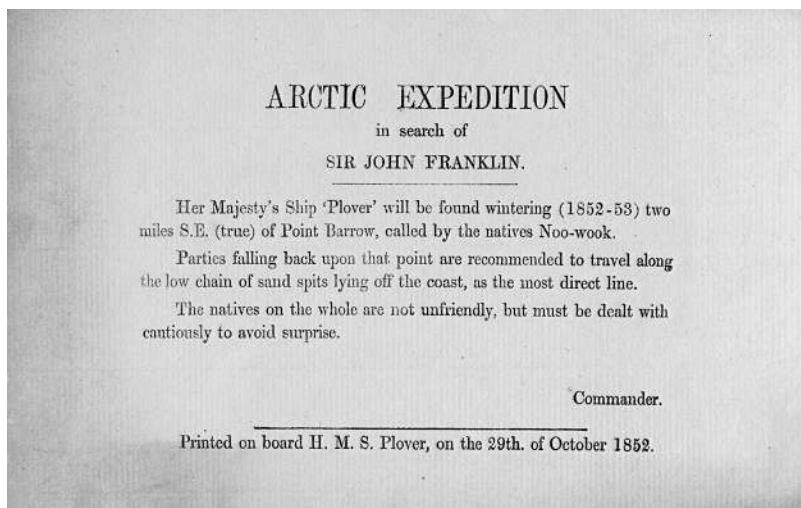


FIG 4.8 — HMS *Plover* cairn message, 29 Oct. 1852. Box 4, John Simpson Papers, 1825–1875. DAVID M. RUBENSTEIN RARE BOOK AND MANUSCRIPT LIBRARY, DUKE UNIVERSITY.

ought not to be trusted by strangers, and cannot be relied on for provisions as they frequently suffer from famine themselves.”³⁸ Maguire takes advantage of the “friendliness” and mobility of Arctic indigenous communities while safeguarding his resources, both materially and politically. The paradoxical accessibility and restrictedness of such circuits is painfully underscored by the Inuit recognition that British and American cairns were not communicative media within themselves, but caches of food through which to rummage.

The Oceanic Postbox

I have been describing how messages, notices, and other forms of information circulated in the polar regions in the nineteenth century. These varieties of Arctic ecomedia are not the only body of oceanic letters: these also comprise the letters whose places of emission and destination were aboard ships, to and from captains, sailors, and long-voyaging passengers. Their circuits of delivery and receipt share with the formal post a process of heterogeneous handling, but one stripped of all regularizing processes, patterns, and forms.³⁹ In this section I address the *intraoceanic* (rather than *transoceanic*) circuits of nautical letter exchange and mail delivery in the

long nineteenth century in order to place into spatial and temporal context the relative “dead”-ness of Arctic blanks. Ships’ letters were thrown to the commerce of the sea; indifferently handled, passed along, left behind, or intercepted, correspondence nevertheless often reached its address. The provisional postal exchanges that took place at sea, in ports, in cairns, or at watering spots were surprisingly effective ways of delivering mail. Or so it would seem; in their voyage journals and narratives, sailors describe their postal successes but rarely mention the letters that are lost, adrift, dead.

After writing a letter—in the age of sail as much as today—an individual encloses it in an envelope, places postage upon it, submits it to the handling of the postal service, and trusts that even though multiply handled on various vehicles of transport, the letter will arrive intact, sealed, and ready for the private reception of its intended audience. This process is exceptionally intimate in its presumption of the one-to-one correspondence and shared tactile experience of its sender and its recipient. At the same time, the post is a broadly public form of exchange, predicated upon the hand-to-hand transmission of the agents of delivery, the national postal systems that underwrite it, and the economies of the world of letters on the registers of both the local (the stationers and news agents who provide the materials and tools) as well as the global (Syrian gall ink, for example, and gum from the Sudan, to speak of the materials alone). Even electronic mail replicates historical forms of mail exchange in the digital fragmentation of its modes of transmission, as well as the ambitions it has to privacy despite the medium’s demonstrably public exchanges. The letter functions as an itinerant signifier, as Jacques Lacan and Jacques Derrida have memorably argued; while they may diverge on whether “a letter always reaches its destination” (in Lacan’s reading) or “always not arrive[s] at its destination” (in Derrida’s response), both see the general economy of epistolary exchange as a system of personal and impersonal object relations.⁴⁰ In this sense the Victory Point cairn note left by the doomed Franklin expedition can serve simultaneously as just another pedestrian expeditionary update and also as the most important document in Arctic exploration history: its ultimate delivery into the hands of a reader (McClintock; the Anglo-American public; you and me) is conditioned by Franklin’s death. Indeed for Derrida in *The Post Card*, death—which demarcates the space between correspondents—may be the inevitable destiny of letters.⁴¹ Failure is the condition of Arctic communication rather than its telos.

Various strategies have been used to circulate mail on an oceanic scale. A visitor today to Floreana Island (formerly Charles Island) in the Galápagos

archipelago in the Pacific Ocean can stop at the island's informal post office, at which letters and post cards are left—without postage, by design—to be selectively picked up by visitors who promise to hand-deliver them. It has been in existence for hundreds of years, likely since the 1793 visit to the islands by a British Naval officer, James Colnett, who thought that the islands would be a useful refueling and rest station for whaling fleets working the Pacific. Either Colnett or a slightly later visitor erected an empty whale oil barrel to serve as a postbox, and the spot—which became known as Post-Office Bay—became the center of Pacific Ocean epistolary exchange. U.S. Naval captain David Porter, a major figure in the Pacific during the War of 1812, was one of many visitors to take advantage of the local letter box, by then known as “Hathaway’s Post-office.” Vessels stopping by the islands for tortoises, wood, or water would leave letters addressed not to individuals, or even specific ships, but to the Pacific community at large. Porter writes of his first stop on Charles (Floreana) Island in 1813:

Understanding that vessels which stopped there for refreshments, such as turtle and land tortoise, and for wood, were in the practice of depositing letters in a box placed for the purpose near the landing-place, (which is a small beach sheltered by rocks, about the middle of the bay,) I dispatched Lieutenant Downes to ascertain if any vessels had been lately there, and to bring off such letters as might be of use to us, if he should find any. He returned in about three hours, with several papers, taken from a box which he found nailed to a post, over which was a black sign, on which was painted *Hathaway’s Post-office*. There were none of them of a late date, but they were satisfactory.⁴²

The opportunity for mail exchange was on a par with resource gathering as an impetus to stop on Charles Island, in Porter’s description. The contents of the letters, as described by Porter and other sailors, relate the ships’ movements, engagements, freight, success, crew health, and future trajectories. Porter quotes from one such letter from a whale ship captain, in part because he is amused by it as a “rare specimen of orthography”: “Ship Sukey John Macey 7 1/2 Months out 150 Barrels 75 days from Lima No oil Since Leaving that Port. . . . I leave this port this Day With 250 Turpen 8 Load Wood.”⁴³ On their first stop on Charles Island, Porter’s men take with them several of the letters they find in the box; on a return trip, Porter writes in *A Voyage in the South Seas*, they find that another ship has taken away all of the barrel’s remaining papers. But when Porter needs to communicate directly—and privately—with his lieutenant on another ship, he buries his



FIG 4.9 — HMS *Lancaster* crew members at post office barrel, Charles Island, 28 Nov. 1917. Las Encantadas, Human and Cartographic History of the Galápagos Islands.

PRIVATE COLLECTION OF JOHN WORAM. USED WITH PERMISSION.

note in a bottle in the sand, as per prearrangement. Should the lieutenant not rendezvous with him on the island, Porter commands, he should “search at the foot of the stake to which the letter-box is attached, where I should bury a bottle containing instructions for him.”⁴⁴ The presumption is that these postbox letters are public, inasmuch as the small community of whaleships and naval vessels constitutes a public. The Pacific mail-exchange community centered in the Galápagos is a public to a more definitive degree than the circle of Arctic messengers, for whom the inclusion of strangers may be a vain hope.⁴⁵

Porter’s experience rhymes with that of other mariners. A number of nineteenth-century seamen describe the Galápagos post office in their narratives; among them is William Nevens, who in his *Forty Years at Sea* writes that the post office “consists of a box made water tight, with a close cover, into which every captain that enters the harbor, puts in an open letter telling his ‘where from, where bound, what luck,’ and all about. When we came into the harbor there were many letters in the ‘post office’ and we knew by reading them where all ‘the whalers’ were bound.”⁴⁶ Nevens’s account is one of many that belie a claim made by the *Beagle*’s captain Robert Fitzroy, that the small settlement that had emerged on Charles Island

by the 1830s meant that letters intended for homeward-bound whaleships were now left with the residents rather than in the barrel in Post-Office Bay.⁴⁷ Reuben Delano's whaling narrative also affirms the "open" status of this letter point, mentioning the customary epistolary updates: "By a letter which we found in the box, we learned that an English vessel had been there but a few days previous, and had lost two men, one of whom fell dead with a terrapin on his back, from the excessive heat of the sun."⁴⁸ The sailors treat the barrel in Post-Office Bay as a convenience and a curiosity, a rare tether in the Pacific to which to affix an epistolary signal. Absent the infrastructure of a port community and the environmental starkness of the polar regions, the largely unsettled Galápagos Islands can support an open post for exchange while still remaining proximate to oceanic forms of relation and circulation. While sailors refer to these missives as "letters," they are, in fact, news, designed to convey information to passing ships.

Melville visited the Galápagos during the time he spent as a sailor; he later wrote about the "enchanted" equatorial isles in "The Encantadas," a series of sketches serialized in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* in 1854 (and later included in *The Piazza Tales*). Although a working seaman for some years, Melville brings a terrestrial skepticism or pessimism to oceanic forms of mail exchange. In his telling, the Galápagos Islands' post office is catalogued among other signs of "vanishing humanity" detailed in the final sketch of "The Encantadas." It is a "dreary" spot where letters are staked in bottles and rot in the absence of a recipient. "Curious to say," Melville writes,

that spot which of all others in settled communities is most animated, at the Enchanted Isles presents the most dreary of aspects. And though it may seem very strange to talk of post offices in this barren region, yet post offices are occasionally to be found there. They consist of a stake and a bottle. The letters being not only sealed, but corked. They are generally deposited by captains of Nantucketers for the benefit of passing fishermen, and contain statements as to what luck they had in whaling or tortoise hunting. Frequently, however, long months and months, whole years, glide by and no applicant appears. The stake rots and falls.⁴⁹

Melville highlights the sociability that characterizes land-based post offices, which stands in contrast, in his telling, to the lack of animation to be found on the desert islands. Oceanic letters in Melville's tale are dead, rotting; this is a very different sense of the animation of the spot than can be seen in the writings of his contemporary fellow sailor-authors, for whom the Galápagos mail might not be "of a late date" but is more than "satisfactory."

The oceanic system of mail practiced on the Galápagos serves an arresting function in the story of the historical hermit Patrick Watkins, alias “Oberlus,” whose tale Melville adapts from naval captain David Porter’s account. (This is only one of many elements of Porter’s narrative that Melville borrows in “The Encantadas.”) Watkins was an Irish renegade from an English ship, and from his encampment on Charles Island (Melville places him on Hood Island, now Española) he sought to kidnap passing sailors and enslave them. Both Porter and Melville describe how crew members of a ship that had been victimized by Watkins had, in Porter’s words, “put a letter in a keg, giving intelligence of the affair, and moored it in the bay” in order to warn other vessels that Watkins was targeting shore parties.⁵⁰ In Melville’s slight alteration of the line, “they put a letter in a keg, giving the Pacific Ocean intelligence of the affair, and moored the keg in the bay.”⁵¹ In fictively moving Watkins off Charles Island, and thus away from Post-Office Bay, Melville removes him from the actual sphere of Pacific epistolary exchange (which he casts as stagnant, in any case). Melville’s addition of the whole of the Pacific Ocean to the intended audience for this letter of warning introduces a jape about the open access, as it were, of sea letters, available to those who would put the news to use and share it in turn. For as it happens, Watkins—having deserted his own ship—establishes on the island a Crusoe-esque parody of terrestrial containment, declaring himself sovereign over the island and enslaving men from passing ships, the first of whom is a black sailor. Rather than extending the potential geographical and political mobility offered to him by his oceanic location, Watkins doubles back to land-based models of constraint.

An incident in *Moby-Dick* involving oceanic mail exchange likewise underscores Melville’s Derridean emphasis on the morbidity of letters at sea rather than their circulatory potential. In “The Jeroboam’s Story,” the *Pequod* encounters a plague-beset whaleship whose crew is in thrall to a lunatic sailor who fashions himself a prophet—the archangel Gabriel, in fact. This is the *Jeroboam*’s story: Gabriel had commanded his shipmates not to hunt the white whale, but when the chief mate, Macey, risked doing so, Moby Dick swept him from the boat with a flick of its tail, killing him. In the *Jeroboam*’s aborted gam with the *Pequod*, Gabriel warns Ahab, in turn, to beware the white whale. At this moment, incongruously, Ahab recalls that in his letter bag he has some correspondence for an officer of the *Jeroboam*. “Every whale-ship takes out a goodly number of letters for various ships, whose delivery to the persons to whom they may be addressed, depends upon the mere chance of encountering them in the four oceans,” Ishmael narrates.

“Thus, most letters never reach their mark; and many are only received after attaining an age of two or three years or more.” The letter that is retrieved from Ahab’s letter bag is “sorely tumbled, damp, and covered with a dull, spotted, green mould, in consequence of being kept in a dark locker of the cabin.” Its mossiness is a sign of its relative immobility; Ahab’s letter bag has not been in circulation but has instead accrued the moisture of oceanic spaces without their fluidity of exchange. Even in the open sea this is a dead letter: “Of such a letter,” Melville writes, “Death himself might well have been the post-boy.”⁵² And such is the case, as it happens. The single letter that Ahab holds for the *Jeroboam* is addressed to the mate Macey, dead by the flukes of the white whale. When Ahab tries to deliver it to the ship despite its absent recipient, the letter attached to a long pole to escape contagion from plague, the cracked archangel Gabriel shriekingly manages to cast the letter back aboard the *Pequod*, telling Ahab that he himself is bound where Macey has gone. The letter for Macey lands back with Ahab: a dead letter for a death-marked monomaniac. Ahab’s attempt to circulate the letter, that is, ends with it returned to hand or, literally, to foot, as it falls at his ivory leg—the limb removed from Ahab’s own body’s circulation. For Melville, letters at sea are always not arriving.

Yet this is not the experience of other mariners, who hunger for absent letters but do not foreclose on the eventuality of their delivery. If we consider Melville’s postal pessimism within the context of the countervailing practices and views offered by other sailors, we arrive at a different oceanic order of correspondence. The long establishment of the Galápagos Islands as a nautical watering spot and meeting place—given their relative fixity within the seascape—made them anomalous as a site for seafaring postal exchange. More common would be for ships to exchange letters with other ships or pick up letters in port, in the hope that a given port would have received letters that presumed that that particular ship would indeed have arrived at that particular port. While this method may have been extraordinarily conditional and serendipitous, the majority of sailors spend little to no time lamenting letters that might have been lost or cast astray. Instead they focus on the gratification to be had from their delayed and peripatetic arrival. William Whitecar, aboard a whaler, records the pleasures of receiving news both via letters and in the form of periodicals: “By the ship *Alexander*, I received letters from home; and although nine months old, they were heartily welcome. . . . Such events are the oases in our desert. Newspapers were also sent to me; and I read them completely through, advertisements and all, with a degree of attention I had never before bestowed

on a printed sheet.”⁵³ Walter Colton, aboard a U.S. Navy ship, describes his shipmates’ reaction to an unexpected encounter with a homebound whale ship: “All pens were now put in motion to dispatch letters home. Go where you would, fore or aft, nothing was to be heard but the scratch of these pens. . . . How they can carry paper in their clothes-bags is more than I can explain. . . . Each seemed lost in thoughts of the surprise and pleasure which the letters he had thus unexpectedly been able to send back would awaken.”⁵⁴ Other sailors dealt more strategically with the attenuation and contingency of nautical mail. The captain of J. Ross Browne’s whale ship, devoted to his wife and children,

spent an hour every forenoon reading a package of letters written by his wife to entertain him during his long voyage; and every night he regularly wrote her an account of the proceedings of the day, signed and directed as if for the mail. This arrangement, dictated by affection, brought the devoted couple in mutual communion. While thus separated, the wife had all the letters of the preceding voyage to read, and the husband all those interesting little details of domestic life which had transpired during his previous absence, to make up for the deprivation of being separated from those he loved.⁵⁵

The chronometric slide in the calendar they keep does not sour the correspondence between the captain and his wife, for whom terrestrial time scales are not relevant. Even in the absence of ship-to-ship encounters at which to exchange letters, sailors keep generating material. Aboard the USS *Constitution*, the anonymous author of *Life in a Man-of-War* laments that only twice in twenty-six months had his ship received dispatches; nevertheless, he writes, “month after month, *our* letter bags for the United States were swelled to an enormous magnitude.”⁵⁶ The sailor’s tenuous link to the wider social body he has left behind seems to supersede, temporarily, the promise of oceanic fraternity.

On the Nares Arctic expedition, a relative of one of the officers had contrived to create a Christmas card for each sailor on board, which were then held in reserve until the holiday; in order to simulate postal exchange—“to make it appear as if they had been actually delivered through the post”—the benefactor had affixed “a second-hand postage-stamp” to each envelope, enacting a fantasy that overwrites the dead status of Arctic letters.⁵⁷ This fantasy encounters the atemporal status of polar ecomedia too. The nautical posting of letters maintains a pragmatic eventuality in addition to an affective or metaphysical one: because they are not restricted to the

private circuit, the mail's "openness" is defined both in terms of time and the multiplicity of participants involved in the transmission of letters. A different fantasy of receipt is at play in the account that Robert Peary gives of a postcard to his wife that he inscribes upon reaching the North Pole, or at least the postcard that he supposedly writes at the moment of his now-discredited claim to have reached the Pole. He is very busy at the North Pole, Peary explains: "I found time, however, to write to Mrs. Peary on a United States postal card which I had found on the ship during the winter." The message:

90 North Latitude, April 7th.

My dear Jo,

I have won out at last. Have been here a day. I start for home and you in an hour. Love to the "kidsies."

"BERT."⁵⁸

Josephine "Jo" Peary (a polar explorer and successful author in her own right) received the North Pole postcard in Sydney, at the other end of the world. The fact of its delivery, for insouciant "Bert," confirms his North Polar claims.

Other Arctic voyagers wrote and occasionally received correspondence, although the deposit points tended to be in the small port towns along Baffin Bay, which was trafficked by whalers and traders. The orders to Edward Belcher from the British Admiralty stipulated that he was "invariably, should any opportunity offer, to leave letters for us at such places as Cape Warrender, Ponds Bay, etc., provided no delay be incurred thereby."⁵⁹ Francis Leopold McClintock was so eager to collect any letters waiting for him in Godhavn, Greenland, upon the *Fox* expedition's return trip that they roused the inhabitants from bed at 3:00 a.m., "demanding our letters, but great indeed was our disappointment at finding only a very few letters and two or three papers, and these for the officers only!"⁶⁰ Weather and ice conditions naturally affected mail delivery, and a report from the Nares expedition displays some anxiety about how best to weigh the dispersal or storage of letters against the environmental challenges: "As in the present condition of the straits and at this early season it was impossible to know what our future proceedings would be, or even if we could again visit the cape, and, moreover, the despatches not being in duplicate, I considered it for the best to land now the only loose letters which seemed to comprise some

for nearly every member of the expedition, and to reserve the sealed bags until the landing party returned with further information.”⁶¹ The temporary post drop proved successful, and the Nares expedition was later able to use the spot to collect correspondence that had been delivered by a separate tender, even though a notice from the “Postmaster-General” aboard ship cautioned that there was “some uncertainty whether the letters will reach their destination.”⁶² When it was discovered that a search party “had found a mail,” the “feelings of all on board were not to be easily-described. . . . After the first exclamations of pleasure and surprise not a word was spoken until the mail-bags were sorted and the lucky ones received their budgets of news.”⁶³ Robert McClure of the Franklin search ship *HMS Investigator* acknowledges, “Communication by post from this region of the globe is rather unprecedented, but nevertheless I hope [a letter] will arrive at its destination safely.” His letter had help: McClure wrote to his sister from Mercy Bay in the far northwest of the Canadian Arctic archipelago, and his dispatches ultimately arrived at their destination with the aid of a “skin-clad chief of the tribe fishing at the cape.”⁶⁴

The tether between home and the Arctic was more often than not imaginatively constructed in text, however. A mock letter home that appeared as the first contribution of the first number of the *Illustrated Arctic News* finds a crew member writing to his father. He describes with breathless drama the ship’s imaginary escapes from destruction in the icepack, near-catastrophes that have made him a “wiser, & I trust, a better man.” Thus improved, the sailor recalls “the fact that a small Bill, about £36, is still owing to Looney in Regent Street” for cigars—might his father satisfy the debt?⁶⁵ In this comic fantasy of connection, we see Arctic hazards reconfigured as the impetus for moral and economic equity. The joke works only if we recognize that this sailor is, in reality, beyond all accounting.

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I close this chapter with a hauntingly evocative dream about Franklin and Arctic communication recorded in the journal of George De Long, an American naval officer and North Polar explorer. De Long commanded the *USS Jeannette* expedition (1879–81), which also ended in tragedy: the ship was crushed by ice, the crew was separated, and twenty of the thirty-three men perished, including De Long, although his body and his papers were later recovered by the survivors. Nearly forty-five years after the Franklin venture, De Long’s North Pole expedition had a wider range of technology at hand, and this factors into the dream experienced by a *Jeannette* member:

The doctor relates a curious dream he had last night. He seemed to be accompanying the survivors of Sir John Franklin's last expedition on their journey to the Great Fish River, when suddenly he changed his base to this ship's cabin, and began explaining to Sir John Franklin there present some of our articles of outfit, such as Edison's electric machine, the anemometer, and the telephone. Franklin, after listening to the explanations and viewing the articles, tersely remarked, "Your electric machine is not worth a damn, and your anemometer is just the same." The telephone he seemed to consider a good thing.⁶⁶

When Franklin and his party were heading to the Great Fish River in the late 1840s, both historically and in the dream, they were in their final grim hours. The dream-Franklin rejects the utility of both the anemometer (a machine for gauging wind speed) and the electric lights that a young Edison had offered to the expedition. (Before perfecting the incandescent lightbulb, Edison had toyed with arc lamps; he gave the *Jeannette* a series of arc lamps and the hand-cranked dynamo that De Long found "not worth a damn.")⁶⁷ But it is the telephone, a communication device reaching across time and space, that attracts dream-Franklin.⁶⁸ Prophetically experienced and recorded before De Long or the ship's doctor could imagine their own deaths on the ice, the dream sifts through possible technologies of ecomedia for illuminating and communicating in the darkness and isolation of the Arctic winter. The doctor's dream nevertheless keeps alive the possibility that a circuit of communication with the dead will yet remain open.