Publishing on Ice: Personal Experiences and Incarnations of Print Culture Aboard the HMS *Hecla*

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Abstract

This article examines a particular shipboard newspaper situated within the centuries-long hunt for the Northwest Passage. The newspaper existed in both an original handwritten form produced on a ship in the Arctic and as a printed edition in London. An examination of the newspaper in both versions suggests the ways in which the same text can be transformed by variations on its physical form, its readers, and its temporal situation. This study shows the ways that a focus on print culture and books as objects can be used to interpret primary historical sources, revealing the value of dealing with primary sources in a personal way.

Despite the aura of adventure surrounding naval explorations of the Northwest Passage, expeditions also experienced long periods of inaction when their ships were locked in ice. In 1819, Captain William Parry led the British HMS *Hecla* to discover the Passage. When the ship became locked in winter ice, he instituted *The North Georgia Gazette and Winter Chronicle,* a weekly newspaper. Parry's crew produced twenty-one handwritten issues in the winter of 1819-20, which included essays, poems, news, jokes, and advertisements. The *Gazette* also helped coordinate other amusements aboard the ship, such as the Royal Arctic Theatre. A second incarnation of the newspaper occurred when it was printed in 1821 in London as a result of massive public interest in exploration and travel narratives. The *Gazette* inhabited two wildly divergent roles: shipboard in the Arctic and published in London. Although the text remained consistent, the two incarnations of the book differed in their physical forms of either handwritten or elaborately printed text, their immediate impetuses for production, and in the long term concerns and anxieties that are played out in the text's two forms. A study of the *Gazette* has broader implications for book history, showing the importance of a book as an object, and revealing the entrenchment of a book in its surroundings.

The *Gazette* was created within the context of British naval exploration, travel narratives of the nineteenth century, and the specific maritime occupation of shipboard printing. Since the discovery of the New World, the search for the Northwest Passage was an obsession with mariners, explorers, navies, and governments. The quest was initially for a speedy passage to the riches of the East, and the Royal Navy sent a series of unsuccessful expeditions.[1] After a pause in British exploration of the Arctic during the Napoleonic Wars, the hunt for the Passage resumed in 1815. The threat of Russian imperial exploration drove the British government to pass legislation offering £20 000 for the first successful voyage through the passage.[2] Fergus Fleming even suggests that the Arctic became the next frontier of battle for Royal Navy after its victory at Trafalgar.[3] Elaine Hoag also argues that "scientific curiosity and national pride" replaced monetary motivations for finding the Passage after it came to be realized that there would never be an easy shipping lane to be found in the Arctic.[4]

1. Richard Vaughan, *The Arctic: A History* (Stroud: Sutton Pub., 2007), 55.
2. Vaughan, *Arctic*, 144.
3. Fergus Fleming, *Off the Map: Tales of Endurance and Exploration (New York: Atlantic Monthly Pre*ss, 2005): 209.
4. Elaine Hoag, "Caxtons of the North: Mid-Nineteenth-Century Arctic Shipboard Printing," *Book History* 4 (2001), 83.

Another important context is the genre of travel writing, which became incredibly popular in the nineteenth century. A public hunger for writings about travel awaited the *Gazette* when the *Hecla* returned home. According to Ray Bridges, during this period travel narratives "reached a position of influence greater than had ever previously been the case."[5] In Britain, this prominence occurred due to a variety of factors, including confidence after the defeat of Napoleon, the expansion of the British Empire into previously uncharted parts of the globe, and the increase in the number of travellers and tourists who could produce narratives of their journeys.[6] In addition to the larger contexts of the Northwest Passage and travel literature, the very specific background of shipboard printing must be considered in an analysis of the *Gazette*. Wartime printing on ships occurred during the Napoleonic and American Revolutionary Wars, and included practical publications, such as political pamphlets, sailing charts, and broadsides enlisting various unaligned groups into the fight.[7] The Royal Navy did not have a policy with regards to shipboard printing, and before the mid-nineteenth century British naval printing was "was a haphazard affair, producing a handful of quirky imprints."[8] Presses ended up on ships by chance, or with the goal of providing entertainment for the crew.[9] The *Gazette* aboard the *Hecla* reveals the importance of a shipboard press to the strategy of one naval captain, despite the lack of an official policy, and its popularity upon publication in Britain and continued life as a text today shows the newspaper's relevance beyond mere entertainment.

The contents of the newspaper exhibit a fascinating selection of articles emphasizing humour, elevated references and styles, and down-to earth glimpses of life while trapped during an Arctic winter. Advertisements in the *Gazette* tend towards the facetious, playing with the obvious lack of commercial enterprise on an ice-locked navy vessel. For example, one gentleman creates an advertisement for the purchase of "ONE of the FELINE SPECIES [*sic*]" in order to repair his violin strings, while another writer announces a fictional dissenting shipboard paper, "*The Non-Contributor's Post*, or *Opposition Journal*."[10] Notes on the theatrical productions at the Royal Arctic Theatre are tantalising suggestions of the spectacle of naval officers producing such entertainments as *Bon Ton*, *or High Life above the Stairs*, a production that unfortunately occurred on an evening where the temperature plummeted to "a degree of cold ill-suited to the dresses of the fair sex especially," which suggests the perils of plays performed by an all-male cast.[11] An example of bawdier humour is a letter from "Abigail Handicraft," a young widow applying for the job of dressing the "ladies at the theatre," who is concerned that they "keep their breeches on" and that she have "two or three of the stoutest able-seamen or marines, to lace their stays."[12] The following week's edition contains a reply to "Mrs. Handicraft," which regretfully informs her that the sailors "can't perform their ladies' parts properly with their can't-mention-ums on."[13] Further glimpses of Arctic reality include observations of the habits of wildlife as filtered through the crime reports and society pages of a newspaper. A wolf "state prisoner," being held on the ship escaped off onto the ice, and the exploits of the "Earl and Lady of Musk-Ox" and other animal aristocrats are depicted in "Fashionable Intelligences."[14] A

5. Ray Bridges, "Exploration and Travel Outside Europe (1720-1914)," in Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs, eds, *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, 13-26, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002, quoted in Tim Youngs, *Travel Writing in the Nineteenth Century: Filling the Blank Spaces* (London: Anthem Press, 2006), 4.
6. Youngs, *Filling the Blank Spaces*, 4-6.
7. Hoag, *Caxtons of the North*, 81-82.
8. Ibid., 82.
9. Ibid.
10. Sir Edward Sabine, *The North Georgia Gazette, and Winter Chronicle* (1820), 35, 69.
11. Ibid., 63.
12. Ibid., 44
13. Ibid., 52.
14. Ibid., 33, 88.

selection of anecdotes of "Arctic Miseries" makes light of the daily challenges the sailors faced, including falling through the ice when leaving the ship.[15] More melancholy reports include poems and essays reflecting on a Christmas morning far from home and show some of the darker emotions beneath the almost manic cheerfulness seen elsewhere in the newspaper.[16] The wide range of material in the *Gazette* offers glimpses of Arctic shipboard life, and helps to establish the diversity of content that appealed to over two hundred years of readers.

The handwritten version of the *Gazette* reveals key elements in the Arctic stage of the text as a physical object, including its relationship to efficiency and its survival. The handwritten nature of the newspaper may at first seem due to the fact that a naval vessel would not be equipped for publication, but, as described above, printing presses existed on ships since at least the eighteenth century and were used to produce propaganda, counterfeit currency, and announcements.[17] Printing presses could conceivably have been brought aboard Parry's ship, suggesting that on the *Hecla,* handwriting may have had an unconventional advantage. In a relatively unique moment in book production, the inefficiency of handwriting multiple copies of a document may have been more desirable than the faster process of using a printing press, as occupying time was of great importance while overwintering in the Arctic. Additionally, although handwriting was an everyday act in Britain, it took considerable foresight to have enough pens, ink, and paper to produce twenty-one issues of a newspaper at sea, revealing that unlike "previous explorers, Parry was prepared for the ordeal of overwintering."[18] Finally, the tenuousness of a text's physical survival is revealed by the dependence of the very existence of the London publication of the *Gazette* on Parry's successful return to England.[19] The second publication allowed by this return produced copies that reveal some of the elements of the London printing, sharply contrasting with those of the newspaper's Arctic run.

In 1821 the *Gazette* was printed both as an appendix to William Parry's *Journal* of the voyage and as a separate volume. Surviving copies of each of these printings reveal the diversity of the purchasers of this text, its coexistence with another work published within the same book, and how the transformation of the text into printed form affects its encoded meanings. The divergence can be seen in the physical forms of the two London editions, and each version shows the popularity of this travel narrative in different classes. The *Journal* edition is indifferently bound and designed for the mass market. In contrast, the *Gazette*-only book is a slimmer volume, elegantly bound, and has pages signed by a "Lord Abercromby." The pairing of the *Gazette* with the *Journal* also produces a different effect than the newspaper alone. Glyndwr Willians notes that these journals often recorded "what the crews had endured."[20] Parry's journal records add a counterpoint to the cheery *Gazette* by revealing some of the darker aspects of Arctic travel. In contrast, the smaller edition contains an elaborate masthead composed of a coat of arms, as well as generous margins and orderly spacing, which increases this edition's divergence from the original form of the newspaper and suggests a concern with glorification of naval missions in the Arctic. The elevated physical object of the *Gazette*-only edition contrasts with the surroundings that produced the newspaper aboard the ship.

The immediate impetuses for producing the *Gazette* can be read in the surviving text and include the unique situation of a planned overwintering, Parry's personal philosophy towards inactivity, and his

15. Ibid., 4.
16. Ibid., 53-58.
17. Hoag, *Caxtons of the North*, 81-82.
18. Fleming, *Off the Map,* 211.
19. Ibid., 213.
20. Glyndwr Williams, *Voyages of Delusion: The Quest for the Northwest Passage* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), xvi.

egalitarianism. Ann Savours argues that the *Hecla*'s journey was as much concerned with "understanding ... living and working in the Arctic as it was about exploration," and the newspaper is one indicator of the coping methods employed in this endeavour.[21] Another key influence is Parry's strategy for overwintering which emphasized his fear of "inactivity:" Parry had the crew "scrubbing the deck, exercising on the ice, or working in the *Hecla*'s brewery or bakery," and the inception of the *Gazette* is another direct result of this policy.[22] A final notable element in the *Hecla*'s production of a newspaper was Parry's relative egalitarianism. Savours suggests that fairness on the part of Parry, such as allowing all ranks equal portions of meat, allowed him to achieve order with very little corporal punishment, an equanimity that also appears in the *Gazette*.[23] The newspaper records theatrical events that were aimed at the entire crew, and Mike Pearson suggests that the spectacle of officers, even Parry, playing female roles boosted morale by allowing the sailors to see "officers make fools of themselves."[24] The newspaper also contains elements of gentle class subversion by referring to the wildlife sighted as aristocrats, thus evoking the meaninglessness of titles in the Arctic, where survival trumped all.[25] The immediate motivations of an icebound winter can be discerned from the text's Arctic form and are radically different from the motivations that resulted in the newspaper's London publication.

When the crew returned home in 1821, the entertaining nature of the *Gazette* motivated its printing for public consumption. In the published edition, editor Edward Sabine claims that the paper was only brought home for the "amusement [of] a few private friends at home."[26] He then asks the public to give the paper the same "indulgence" as their personal circle had, a request that denies the text's value beyond entertainment.[27] The transformation of the book from one edition to another reflects I.S. MacLaren's description of the process that produces travel literature, from first-hand notes to journals to edited copies to published narratives.[28] Although each step in the production of travel narratives changes the original observations, sometimes immensely, the finished work maintains a facade of scientific precision and immediacy.[29] Similarly, the published edition of the *Gazette* makes no mention of how the text was transformed and how meaning was both lost and created in its publication. The purchased copy was implied to be essentially the same as the original, and as entertainment was the purported goal of both, fidelity to the first text was not of great concern. However, overarching forces acting on the text at sea and among London readers also drove publication of the *Gazette*.

Long term influences aboard the *Hecla* can be seen in the production of the *Gazette*, including a concern with madness and mutiny and with the conditions of the Royal Navy in the early nineteenth century. Beneath Parry's concerns with inactivity and egalitarianism lie hints of one of the unspoken dangers of naval and especially Arctic missions: that of insanity and rebellion. MacLaren notes the

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21. Ann Savours, *The Search for the North West Passage* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 58.
22. Fleming, *Off the Map*, 211.
23. Savours, *The Search for the North West Passage*, 59.
24. Mike Pearson, "No Joke in Petticoats: British Polar Expeditions and Their Theatrical Presentations," *TDR: The Drama Review* 48, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 51.
25. Sabine, *North Georgia Gazette*, 88.
26. Ibid., v.
27. Ibid.
28. I.S. MacLaren, "History of the Canadian and Circumpolar Arctic," Lectures, University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB, Fall, 2007.
29. Sir William Edward Parry, *Journal of a Voyage for the Discovery of a Northwest Passage from the Atlantic to the Pacific; Performed in the Years 1819-20, in His Majesty's Ships Hecla and Griper, Under the Orders of William Edward Parry with an Appendix ... to which is Added, the North Georgia Gazette, and Winter Chronicle* (Philadelphia: A. Small, 1821), 127.

contemporary belief in geographic determinism that held that extreme climate conditions could produce extreme volatility in Europeans, and Pearson argues that the cramped and dark conditions of polar exploration led to "persecution mania and the brink of insanity."[30] A concern with madness emerges textually as the newspaper promotes all of the signifiers of European civilization. The attempt to keep the crew's mindset in the orderly society of home also requires the newspaper to explicitly ban printing of anything would cause "unease."[31] Finally, the construction of the Arctic as a place of battle for the navy can be seen in the newspaper's contributors' frequent creations of an imagined decisive victory in navigating the passage in their plays and stories. A tone of cooperation towards a great cause pervades the *Gazette,* producing an echo of narratives of war and conquest.[32] The *Hecla*'s newspaper is the product of diverse and long-reaching factors beyond the mere immediate reasons for its production. Although the long-term influences on the text's London publication are very different from the shipboard influences, they can similarly reveal broad themes of a stage of the book's production and context.

Anxieties in British society about the dangers of Arctic exploration and the rationale behind its continuation contributed to the publication of the *Gazette* in London. Williams argues that waves of support from the British public were sought by the navy, who "were always convinced that the next 'push' would pass through all obstacles to reach its objective."[33] Furthermore, the public demand for the *Hecla*'s newspapers indicates a hunger in readers for the same positive portrayal desired by the navy. Arctic voyages were extremely dangerous and the worries of those readers with loved ones at sea were somewhat diffused by the *Gazette*'s portrayal of the lighter side of shipboard life. Finally, as national pride became the dominant motivation for Arctic exploration, the newspaper's publication can be seen as the navy advertising the success of a ship safely returned home from the Far North.[34] The published newspaper's impressive masthead and orderly layout help to produce an image of a victory of civilization over the continued impenetrability of the Arctic. Long-term concerns situate this text amongst the powerful dynamics of nationalism, naval goals, and risks at sea in nineteenth-century Britain.

A coda to this study of text and context is the *Gazette*'s present-day existence in another completely different set of surroundings – the University of Alberta's Bruce Peel Special Collections – which reveals aspects of the long-term survival of a text and of our treatment of rare and valuable books. About sixty copies of the London publication of the *Gazette* exist worldwide in universities. Two versions of this work are available in Special Collections. The copy that is bundled with Parry's *Journal* has uneven pages, cardboard covers, no headband and an indifferently papered spine: all of the signs identified by Alex McGuckin as the markers of the cheapest bindings of books.[35] In addition to this slapdash binding, water damage has taken its toll on pages that now remain stiff as they are turned. This economical volume does not exhibit any sign of being rebound despite its decrepit appearance. In contrast, a slimmer volume containing only the newspaper has been deemed worthy of restoration. A pencil indicates that rebinding occurred in "March '88" and the page is signed in pencil, presumably by the binder, as "C.P." The new bottle green leather binding is luxurious in look and smell and is embossed with a simple grid pattern, with gold leaf on the spine.

30. Pearson, "No Joke in Petticoats," 47.
31. Sabine, *North Georgia Gazette*, vii.
32. Fleming, *Off the Map*, 209.
33. Williams, *Voyages of Delusion*, xviii.
34. Hoag, "Caxtons of the North," 83.
35. Alex McGuckin, "Bookbinding and Book Restoration," Lecture, University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB, Winter 2009.

Considering the unlikelihood of extreme wear in twenty years in Special Collections, it seems as though the edges of the binding have been distressed to evoke the years that the book inside has weathered, producing a more graceful (faux-) aging than the authentic wear on the *Journal* edition. The appearances of these books evoke past readers and libraries, but the almost two century long voyage to Special Collections that each has endured remains shadowy. On a recent trip to Special Collections, I added my own mysterious mark to the *Journal* edition of the *Gazette*: in a flash of cold sweat, I saw that a light mark had appeared on the book's cover, possibly caused by me. I discovered that with some light rubbing the line disappeared, but I had realized that the *Gazette* has travelled from being an object of levity in the deadly waters of the Arctic to becoming an object that evokes fear in the sanctity of a rare books library.

The *Gazette*'s production and survival show the complex interactions between its physical forms, immediate influences, and the overarching forces acting on it. Beyond the specific insights gleaned from the newspaper itself, its role as an unconventional source reveals the intersection of naval history, book history, literature, and travel narratives. An examination of this text and related scholarly works provide a window on the details of Arctic expeditions. This analysis also points to further questions in the areas of other shipboard publications, polar theatre, and perceptions of the Arctic in Britain.

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