Exploring for the Empire
Franklin, Rae, Dickens, and the Natives in Canadian and Australian Historiography and Literature

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Introduction

Empires are bound to create heroes; it is in their nature to produce overreachers, who help fashion, sustain, and extend empires. It is almost as if empires\textsuperscript{1} were the \textit{raison d’être} for heroes, and the other way around. But how much of a hero is a hero? How did s/he come to be one and how did s/he remain one? One important aspect is certainly the mythmaking about such men (or women) in the discourse of such an empire – and their violent or spectacular death. Sir John Franklin, a Royal Navy Officer lost on his fourth Arctic expedition in 1845, is a commendable example of this conjuncture, whereas the case of the physician and explorer John Rae – who survived the extended search for the lost Franklin expedition – points to the bitter ironies concerning the Empire’s heroes. The achievements and death of Franklin helped make him one of the most cherished heroes of the British Empire.\textsuperscript{2} This article outlines Franklin’s and Rae’s Arctic expeditions and takes a critical look at their journals before discussing Ken McGoogan’s \textit{Fatal Passage}. The article demonstrates the nineteenth-century

\textsuperscript{1} In this article, the capitalized ‘Empire’ is used when referring to the political and geographical body of the British Empire or to its ideologies and imaginaries. The lowercase form ‘empire’ is employed in reference to the general idea of an empire with its material economics, politics, ideologies, and imaginaries.

determination to aggrandize the British Empire, as well as the many aspects of supremacist imperial attitudes that showed in connection with Arctic expeditions and that also thwarted the success of such endeavours. Finally, the article discusses how Rudy Wiebe’s *A Discovery of Strangers* and Richard Flanagan’s *Wanting* reframe Franklin’s expeditions and his time as Governor of Tasmania, contextualizing and writing back to Charles Dickens’s exoneration of Franklin and to the British Empire discourse.

Here, I do not employ the concept of empire in Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt’s sense as a new form of global capitalist imperialism, although empires, including the British one, have always moved in that direction.³ I use a concept established in postcolonial studies, where we think of empires as nations that engage in large-scale exploration, colonization, warfare, and expansion, that control large parts of the world, and gain wealth through imperial trade and exploitation of these colonies. Empire ideology intensely permeated British society of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, as many critics agree today.⁴ Some even assert that the very ideas of Englishness and Britishness were generated by and depended on imperialism.⁵ Concepts and practices of racism, patriotism, militarism, masculinism, adventurism, and the study of geography informed British “imperial culture.”⁶ The British Empire was perceived as a ‘white’ English-speaking, cultural, and political community, sharing a common language, literature, religion, laws, ideals, institutions, and sports – or, “the triple bond of blood, religion and language.”⁷

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⁵ See the nineteenth-century historian J.R. Seeley’s canonical text *The Expansion of England*, which incorporates the colonies as the very fabric of the British nation and sees the rise of the British Empire as an identifying and unifying characteristic; Thompson, *Imperial Britain: The Empire in British Politics c. 1880–1932*, 18.
⁶ Stephen Howe, “Empire and Ideology,” in *The British Empire: Themes and Perspectives*, ed. Sarah Stockwell (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2008): 161–62. Howe argues as well that empire ideology, and the visions, sources of enthusiasm, and participation of the British population, were not as unified as is often accepted and that it might have played a smaller role than is usually thought. See also John Darwin, “Britain’s Empires,” in *The British Empire: Themes and Perspectives*, ed. Sarah Stockwell (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2008): 3.
⁷ Thompson, *Imperial Britain*, 18–23, 33.