

Michael F. Robinson

## Nostalgia and Exploration

### Explorers, Technology, and the Dilemma of the Modern

Two facets of exploration, the modern and the nostalgic, have framed the idea of exploration since the late 1700s. The combination of these facets led to certain paradoxes. Explorers often proclaimed their expeditions as evidence of the progress of civilization even as they reveled in adventures that they depicted as an escape from civilization. The uneasy relationship between nostalgic and futuristic visions of exploration began to fray in the middle decades of the twentieth century as explorers confronted environments so extreme that they had to bring their own environments with them. Yet the spirit of nostalgia is not dead. If exploration has been systematized by scientists on earth and mechanized by missions into space, it maintains its nineteenth-century ethos in the world of extreme adventure.

Robert Edwin Peary (1856-1920) was celebrated in turn-of-the-century America, not just for doing the dangerous work of Arctic discovery, but for the nostalgic figure he cut as an explorer. Yet his persona was often at odds with the reality of expeditionary life. Although his work depended upon the efforts of hundreds of people –from Inuit seamstresses and sledge drivers, to white crew men, officers, and patrons – he held up the polar regions as a place where he could “go it alone” pitting himself against the elements of nature. Furthermore, while Peary moved in the elite circles of New York and Washington, he preferred to be photographed in furs and snowshoes. Despite his training as a modern engineer, his design of novel inventions for life in the Arctic, and his use of *the Roosevelt* (one of the most sophisticated expedition ships ever created), Peary publicly dismissed the value of modern

technologies in the Arctic apart from the labors of “man and the Eskimo dog.” [fig 1].<sup>1</sup>

Why did Peary reinforce these deceptions? The technology and social networks required to launch his highly complex expeditions to the Arctic conflicted with his nostalgic image as a frontiersman from an earlier age, an image that was crucial to his popularity among American audiences. “The glory of manhood seems to have departed,” a woman admirer wrote Peary in 1907. “But you, and your ideals, justify it to my mind—and the response from the people, the men and growing boys, as their spirits still ring true to the appeal of noble adventure, is



fig 1. Robert Peary

so encouraging that we need not yet doubt the future of America.” In 1908, just before he left on his final expedition, the *New York Times* published a poem by Elsa Barker about Peary called “The Frozen Grail” that described the explorer as an Arctic knight in the tradition of King Arthur. “To conquer the world,” Barker wonders, “must man renounce the world?”<sup>2</sup>

Peary was not the only explorer to combine modern skills and technology with nostalgic themes. The Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen achieved professional expertise (a Ph.D. in zoology) and like Peary, designed a cutting-edge polar ship (*Fram* “Forward”) which was built to rise above the Arctic pack of ice as it became frozen in. Yet Nansen happily connected himself to traditional Scandinavian culture in his popular writings. “These bright dream-like nights,” he wrote of his time on the Polar Sea, “how many associations they have for us Northmen!” So too did Richard Byrd, the American pilot who became famous for flying over the North and South Poles. Byrd found fame for his use of aviation technology yet still emphasized Romantic and heroic themes – wearing traditional furs and publishing a book *Alone* about his solitary overwinter in Antarctica in 1934—in his writings. Explorers of other extreme environments, increasingly unable to reach their goals without the assistance of modern technology, tried to blend romantic and futuristic themes in their accounts. High-altitude mountaineers for example made use of high quality crampons, pitons, and bottled oxygen in order to scale higher peaks in Europe and Asia, even as they exalted in the

primitive nature of mountain life.<sup>3</sup>

These two facets of exploration, the modern and the nostalgic, were not new to the 1900s but emerged in the late 1700s as the idea of exploration itself began to change. In Great Britain, France, Spain, and the United States, elites began to re-envision expeditions as forward-looking endeavors that broke away from the violent colony-grabbing and resource-stealing voyages of earlier centuries. Reflecting the Enlightenment values of the

age – a profound optimism in the power of human reason to decode the mysteries of the world – these countries sent out discovery expeditions with naturalists aboard to catalog and collect their way through the far corners of the world. The voyages of James Cook, Jean-François de La Pérouse, Alessandro Malaspina, and Louis Antoine de Bougainville enchanted audiences across Europe and North America. Even explorers who set out to cover old ground, such as the Prussian polymath Alexander von Humboldt who spent five years roaming through the rainforests of South and Central America, became famous for their sophisticated, forward-looking approach. Humboldt,



fig 2. Alexander von Humboldt

for example, remarked that the revolutionary Simon Bolivar was “the true discoverer of South America.” If these expeditions seemed less imperial in their designs than earlier expeditions, they still benefited the state by means of “soft power” insofar as scientific expeditions became symbols of national sophistication and advancement. Gradually exploration was entering a new era of competition, one that placed more value on the prestige of discovery than the possession of discovered lands.<sup>4</sup>

Yet by the early nineteenth century, exploration also began to reflect new Romantic attitudes, many of which clashed with the Enlightenment ideals that had inspired earlier voyages. The philosophers’ love of reason had not saved Europe from the bloodletting of the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars. Nor had it protected the continent from the smog and pollution of industrial cities. Romantic writers and poets pushed back against the truisms of the earlier age, praising character over technology,

nature over industry, and feeling over reason. They wanted their heroes to act more like Byron and less like Newton. As if to express this new nostalgic spirit of the explorer – a figure that was beginning to be distinguished as different from “traveler” – Caspar David Friedrich gave it form in his



fig 3. Wanderer Above a Sea of Fog

painting *Der Wanderer über dem Nebelmeer* (“Wanderer Above a Sea of Fog”) which shows the wanderer looking out over an ominous landscape of mountains, most of which remain hidden beneath a thick misty veil. Explorers embraced elements of this new *Zeitgeist* even when they clashed with older tropes. For this reason, one can find many explorers who proclaim their expeditions as evidence of the *progress of civilization* even as they revel in their adventures as an *escape from civilization*. Peary’s rival in the North Pole race, Frederick Cook, told a New York Herald reporter in 1909 that he “returned to the primitive life—in fact, became a savage, sacrificing all comforts to the

race for the pole.”<sup>5</sup>

By the late nineteenth century, the nostalgic appeal of exploration had become especially strong. Perhaps this was a reaction to the massive transformation of North America and Western Europe into industrial societies. While civilization had never seemed so powerful, the urban worker – confronted by city squalor, stagnant wages, industrial pollution, and dreary workplaces – had never seemed so tiny and insignificant. Not surprisingly, stories of exploration – to Africa, the Polar Regions, and the Oceans – became spectacularly popular with middle class readers and lecture-goers, perhaps because they offered vicarious thrills of a world that couldn’t be glimpsed from the office window or the factory floor. The exploration buffs of the industrial world did not seem to want their explorers to be scientists or technicians, but rather adventurers who had not been compromised by the artifice, vanity, and bureaucracy of the modern world.<sup>6</sup>

Even as the tension between nostalgic and futuristic themes grew more glaring, their co-existence within exploration discourse continued. Forward-looking pride at reaching the world’s last remaining *terra incognita* was woven seamlessly if incongruously with the backward-looking language of nostalgia. “The true spirit of the explorer is a primordial restlessness”, wrote

the mountain climber Robert Dunn. “It is spurred by instinct of pre-natal beginnings and a cloudy hereafter. . . . Men with the masks of civilization torn off, and struggling through magic regions ruled over by the Spirit of the North or the South.”<sup>7</sup>

The uneasy relationship between nostalgic and futuristic visions of exploration began to fray in the middle decades of the twentieth century. Increasingly exploration took place under the umbrella of scientific organizations pursuing research within disciplines such as oceanography, archeology, and anthropology. Scientific exploration of this type did not lend itself as well to Romantic “go it alone” exploration insofar as field scientists valued group work, systematic methods, and repeated observation over the quick dashes and flag-plantings of earlier eras. Explorers that did continue in the quick dash, flag-planting tradition – such as the Space Race astronauts of the Cold War years who sought to achieve new firsts rather than conduct science– now confronted environments so extreme that they had to bring their own environments with them. As a result, technology became the *sine qua non* of space exploration. Machines, not humans, became the key actors as well as the symbolic agents of the Space Age. Saturn rockets, lunar modules, and space capsules became the images of this new era, machines without which fragile human astronauts would die instantly in the vacuum of space.

Space program leaders of course resisted this characterization. American science officers attempted to represent astronauts as explorers of old using nostalgic images and language. American officials spoke of pioneers and frontiersmen, representing astronauts as Lewis-and-Clark-like figures for the twentieth century. Even the commemorative mission patches reflected this. The astronauts of *Gemini V* wore a “wagon train” patch which offered an homage to the cowboy culture of the nineteenth century while those of *Apollo II* wore a patch showing a Clipper Ship under sail. Soviet



fig. 4 Mission Patch of Gemini 5

space scientists also resisted the dominance of machine technology over the human explorer. Leonid Sedov, chairman of the Soviet space program, rejected the view of a cosmonaut “as a strapped-down, half-conscious bundle crammed in a narrow capsule and whirling through an orbit, but as an active, discerning scientist who explores the

moon and the planets.”<sup>8</sup>

Yet reality belied the rhetoric. NASA program officers promoted Neil Armstrong less because of courage and character than his exceptional aptitude for using the *Apollo Block I* computer. Reporters may have emphasized astronauts as heroic individuals, but behind the scenes, NASA scientists looked at them quite differently. Mission success was only possible, wrote Colonel Bernard Flaherty, insofar as “Man is an integral part of the total machine.” In the late twentieth century, the explorer was no longer characterized by the *Wanderer Above a Sea of Fog* but the floating form of astronaut Edward White, tethered by an umbilical cord to *Gemini 4*, a fetus bound to the womb of the machine. Astronauts retained status as heroes, but their “Right Stuff” was expressed as cool detachment and control. They operated less like pilots than as machine-tenders. This message was not lost on public audiences. The marvel of spaceflight might express the technological power of civilization but not the personal agency of the explorer. “Planet earth is blue” observes David Bowie’s Major Tom, “and there’s nothing I can do.”<sup>9</sup>



figure 5. Edward White Gemini 4 Space Walk

The push towards greater machine autonomy has only increased since then. In the early 1960s, space scientists hoped that humans might be “optimized” for long-range space travel through the use of medical technology. Yet this vision of the astronaut cyborg – so popular in science fiction – was largely discarded as a practical idea by the 1970s. Meanwhile, the advance of robotic expeditions has marched forward with the spectacular success of Voyager, Hubble, and the Mars Rover missions. While NASA maintains an interest in human exploration of the solar system, the dangers and costs have proven to be prohibitive. Yet there is a human-machine hybridization that has taken place, not in the physical form of the cyborg, but in robot-human symbiosis that powers today’s deep space robotic missions. The Mars rover human teams on earth sleep and rise according to the Mars day-night cycle, translate rover images (which can see a broader spectrum of electromagnetic radiation than the human eye) for scientists and the general public, and script out actions for the rover arms using their own arm movements as models. After months of this kind of work, sociologist Janet Vertesi writes, human operators begin to “see like a rover.”<sup>10</sup>



However, the spirit of nostalgia is not dead. If exploration has been systematized by scientists on earth and mechanized by missions into space, it maintains its nineteenth-century ethos in the world of extreme adventure. In BASE jumping, wingsuit flying, free-soloing and slacklining, we see the ethos of an earlier era. In “pushing into fear, exhaustion, beauty, and the unknown,” writes elite climber Dean Potter, “I willingly expose myself to death-consequence situations in order to predictably enter heightened awareness.” Potter – who died in a wingsuit accident in 2015 – expresses an idea of the sublime that Shelly, Byron, or Friedrich described two-hundred years earlier. In this sense, the Romantic explorer lives on, not in search of geography but self-knowledge. These adventures climb, soar, and fall within the slender envelope of Earth’s atmosphere. Here they test themselves and enact a fantasy of escape from the machine world, seeking the frontiers of their own limits while robots fly above them exploring the vastness of space.<sup>11</sup>

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## Notes

1. Peary quoted by Mary French in “Memories of a Sculptor’s Wife,” 2, Box “Diary Transcripts, 1871-1900,” Robert E. Peary Papers, National Archives, College Park, Maryland; “Eskimo dog” quoted from Peary, *The North Pole* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1910), 5.
2. Constance G. Dubois to Robert Peary, 15 April 1907, Folder G, Box 30, Robert E. Peary Family Collection, quoted in Michael F. Robinson, “Manliness and Exploration: The Discovery of the North Pole,” 30 (2015) *Osiris: Scientific Masculinities*, 89-109; Elsa Barker, *The Frozen Grail and Other Poems* (New York: Duffield and Company, 1910), 5-6.
3. Fridtjof Nansen, *Farthest North*, (New York: Harpers and Bros., 1898), 1:431; Marianne Cronin, “Sourcing the Technologies of Polar Travel,” 107 (June 2015) *Viewpoint*, 4-5; Tait Keller, *Apostles of the Alps: Mountaineering and Nation Building in Germany and Austria, 1860-1939* (UNC Press, 2015), 163.
4. The term “soft power” was first used by Joseph S. Nye in discussing the dynamics of the Cold War, “Soft Power” *Foreign Policy*, 80 (Autumn, 1990), 153-171; Simon Bolivar quoted in Nicolaas A. Rupke, *Alexander von Humboldt: A Metabiography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 136.
5. “Dr. Cook Lived Like a Savage in Order to Gain the Pole,” *New York Herald*, September 18, 1909, 3-4.
6. Beau Riffenburgh, *The Myth of the Explorer: The Press, Sensationalism, and Geographical Discovery* (London: Oxford University Press, 1994).
7. Robert Dunn, *The Shameless Diary of an Explorer* (New York: Outing Publishing Co., 1907).
8. Sedov quoted in Ernst Stuhlinger, “Operator Requirements,” in *The Psychophysiological Aspects of Space Flight* ed. Bernard E. Flaherty (New York: Columbia University

Press, 1961), 18.

9. David Bowie's "Space Oddity" was released on 11 July 1969, ten days before the launch of Apollo 11.
10. Janet Vertesi, *Seeing Like a Rover: How Robots, Teams, and Images Craft Knowledge of Mars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).
11. Potter quoted in "Flash: In Memory of Dean Potter," *Climbing* (6 May 2016) <https://www.climbing.com/photos/flash-in-memory-of-dean-potter/>.