Sounds in the Sky: Listening for the *Aurora Borealis* at Fort Chipewyan

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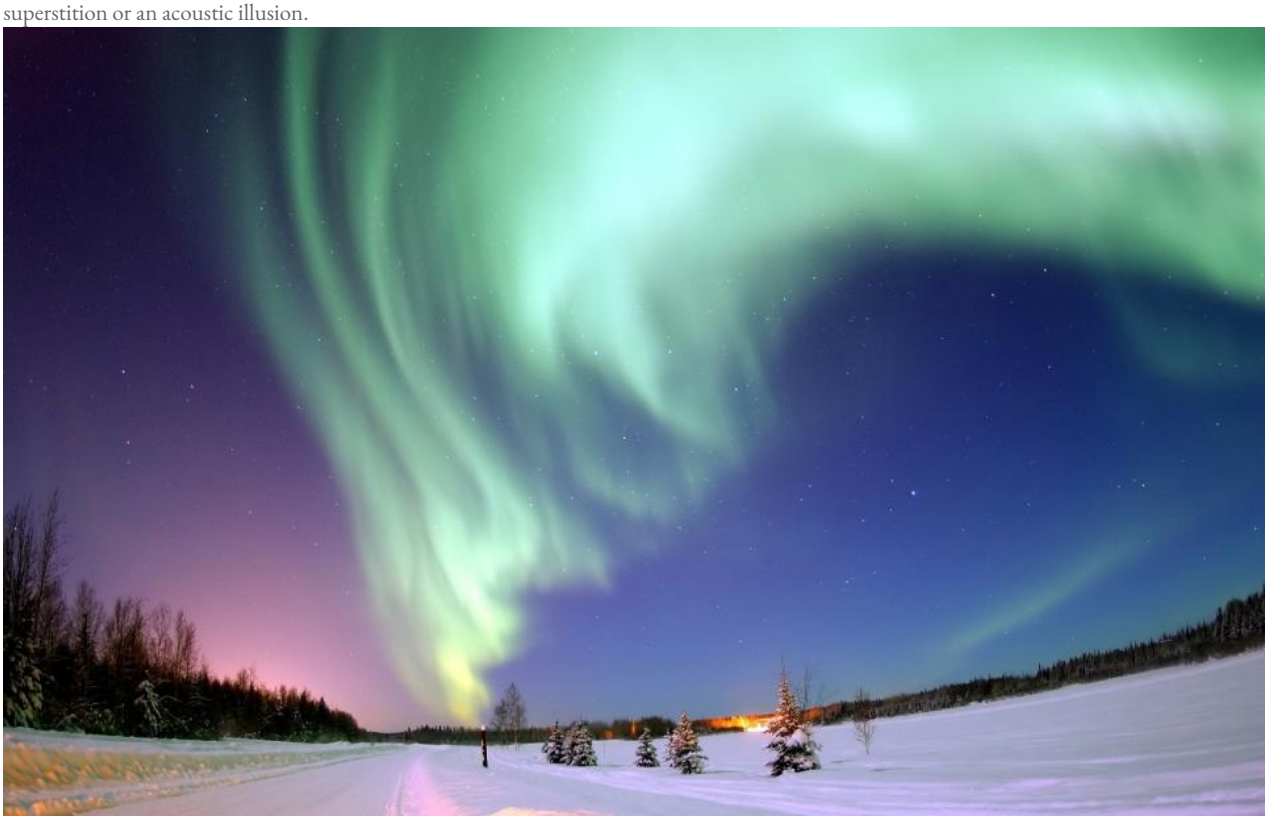
Summary

In 1819, British commander John Franklin set out to his first Arctic land expedition in order to survey the northern coast of Canada and to find the fabled North-West Passage. However, part of the expedition's scientific agenda was to investigate the phenomenon of *aurora borealis* or Northern Lights in the Arctic region. Hearing aurorae was something which eluded most Arctic explorers, and was therefore explained as superstition or an acoustic illusion.



Aurora borealis above the Great Bear Lake

2006 Joshua Strang
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Part of the scientific agenda of the British Arctic land expedition of 1819-22 was to investigate whether the appearance of the *aurora borealis* was accompanied by any sound. European folklore and indigenous testimony alike reported auroral sounds, typically hissing or rustling noises. Yet this was a highly contentious issue in Arctic science after the Enlightenment, when western publics began to be made aware of the ways in which meteorological phenomena could not easily be made orderly by scientific and intellectual authorities. Reflecting

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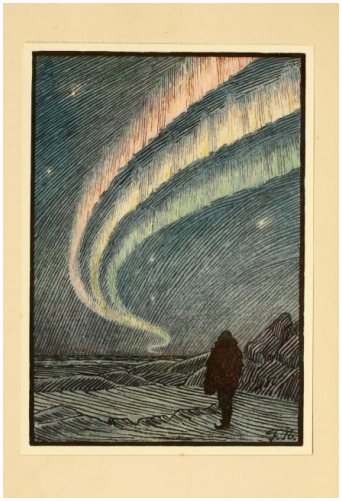
the new dependency of the enlightened observer on accuracy and discernment, British explorers in the field remained ambivalent about whether auroral audibility was possible or whether it was a native superstition. In effect, while questioning the credibility of non-scientific voices, scientists remained enchanted by the possibility of hearing aurorae.



Drawing of an aurora in Fridtjof Nansen's *In Northern Mists* (1911)

Fridtjof Nansen. *In Northern Mists: Arctic Exploration in Early Times*. Vol. II. New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1911.

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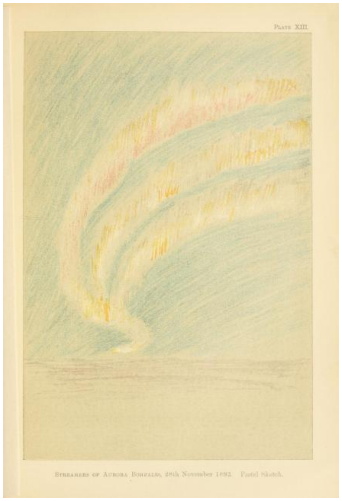

Drawing of an aurora in Fridtjof Nansen's *Farthest North* (1897)

"Streamers of Aurora Borealis (November 28, 1893)." Fridtjof Nansen. *Farthest North: Being the Record of a Voyage of Exploration of the Ship 'Fram' 1893–96 and of a Fifteen Months' Sleigh Journey by Dr. Nansen and Lieut. Johansen* . Vol. II. New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1897: 400.

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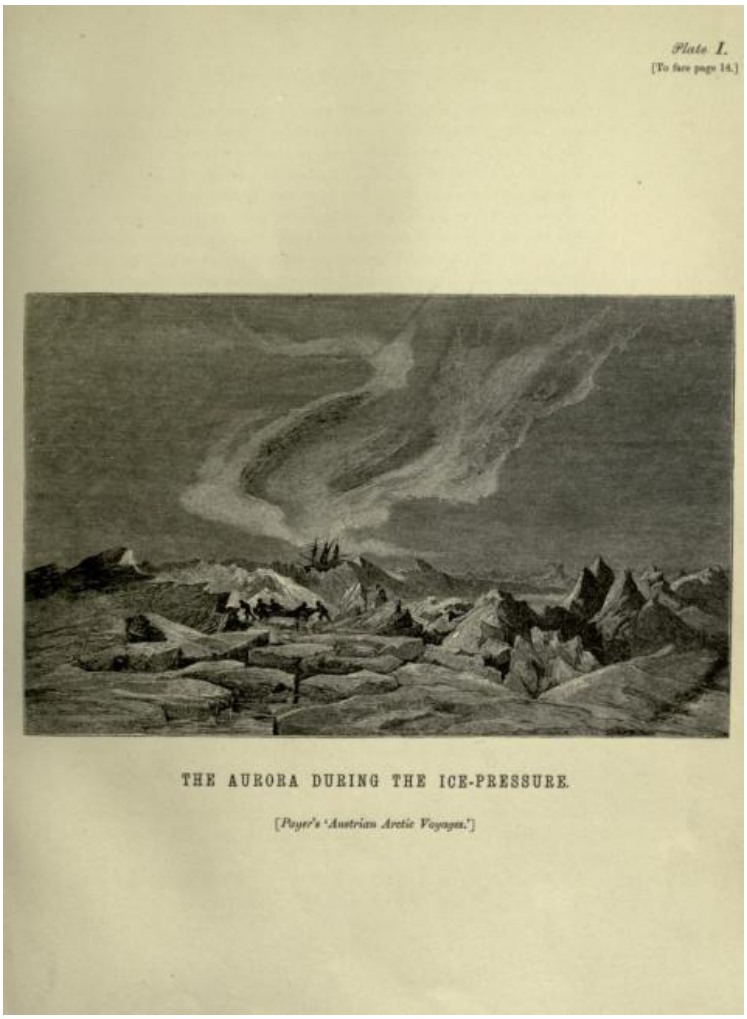

Aurora during the ice pressure (1879)

Illustration by Julius Payer.

J. Rand Capron. *Auroræ: Their Character and Spectra*. London: E. & F.N. Spon, 1879: 14.

The commander of this particular expedition, John Franklin, wrote of how they "imagined, more than once, that we heard a rustling noise like that of autumnal leaves stirred by the wind; but after two hours of attentive listening, we were not entirely convinced of the fact." At Fort Chipewyan in 1821 a fur trader told the explorers of an incident in which the motions of the aurora were so low "that the Canadians [voyageurs] fell on their faces, and began praying and crying, fearing they should be killed; he himself threw away his gun and knife that they might not attract the flashes, for they were within two feet of the earth, flitting along with incredible swiftness, and moving parallel to its surface. They continued for upwards of five minutes, as near as he could judge, and made a rustling noise, like the waving of a flag in a strong breeze."

Hearing aurorae was something that eluded most nineteenth-century Arctic explorers and scientists, and was therefore explained as superstition or an acoustic illusion. Even today it remains a contentious subject in geophysics. Yet the fact that indigenous inhabitants, European settlers, and fur traders continued to report hearing aurorae disrupted attempts at the scientific disenchantment of the Arctic. Discussing the particular

anomaly of auroral sounds in Arctic narratives therefore revealed submerged discourses on what it meant to be "native" to an environment and how this indigeneity could enhance sense perception or reveal "authentic" spirits of place.

Further readings:

- Capron, J. Rand. *Auroræ: Their Character and Spectra.* London: E. & F.N. Spon, 1879.
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- Holzworth, Robert H. "Folklore and the Aurora." In *History of Geophysics,* vol. 1, edited by C. S. Gillmor, 41–3. Washington: American Geophysical Union, 1984.
- McCorristine, Shane. "The Supernatural Arctic: An Exploration." *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 9, no. 1 (2010): 47–70.

Related links:

- McCorristine, Shane. "Seeking Environmental Knowledge from an Inuit Shaman." *Arcadia*, 2012. https://doi.org/10.5282/rcc/3679

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Shane McCorristine is an interdisciplinary historian with interests in cultural, social, literary, and environmental history, currently focusing on embodiment and disembodiment in Victorian Arctic exploration.

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