

Seeing Icebergs and Inuit as Elemental Nature: An American Transcendentalist on and off the Coast of Labrador, 1864

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In 1865 a series of Atlantic Monthly articles written by the Transcendentalist minister David Atwood Wasson described the voyage to Labrador organized by American landscape painter William Bradford. Bradford was inspired by the success of fellow Hudson River school artist Frederic Edwin Church's monumental painting, The Icebergs (1861), and Wasson's role was to generate publicity for what would be Bradford's own "great picture," Sealers Crushed by Icebergs. Wasson produced many colourful descriptions of the icebergs encountered on the voyage, but he also depicted the Labrador shorescape as the planet earth at the dawn of time and the Inuit of Hopedale as unevolved, pre-adamic man. This article suggests that Wasson's racism and rejection of the benign, mystical Nature of first-generation Transcendentalists Thoreau and Emerson reflects the rise of evolutionary theory and the cultural impact of the American Civil War.

En 1865, l'Atlantic Monthly décrivait, dans une série d'articles parus sous la plume du ministre transcendentaliste David Atwood Wasson, le voyage au Labrador organisé par William Bradford, un peintre de paysages américain. Ce dernier était inspiré par le succès de The Icebergs (1861), peinture monumentale d'un confrère de l'école de l'Hudson, l'artiste Frederic Edwin Church, et Wasson avait pour rôle de susciter de la publicité autour de ce qui allait être la propre « grande œuvre picturale » de Bradford, Sealers Crushed by Icebergs. Wasson a produit de nombreuses descriptions pittoresques des icebergs rencontrés en cours de route, mais il a aussi dépeint le paysage côtier du Labrador comme s'il s'agissait de la Terre au début des temps et l'Inuit de Hopedale comme s'il était une race non évolué, antérieur à Adam. Le présent article laisse entendre que le racisme de Wasson et son rejet de la Nature mystique et bénigne des transcendentalistes de la première génération, Thoreau et Emerson, reflètent la montée de la théorie de l'évolution et l'impact culturel de la Guerre civile américaine.

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FAMOUSLY described by Jacques Cartier as the land that God gave to Cain, the rugged and isolated north Atlantic coast has never been a major attraction for scenery-loving travellers or tourists. It played an important role in the New England fishery, however, and during the later nineteenth century Labrador and Newfoundland became what literary historian Patrick O’Flaherty refers to as “an imaginative outpost of the eastern United States,” recreated by American authors as “an image of their own vanishing frontier.”¹ Lacking the usual nationalist rallying points, such as a royal family, a national church, and memorialized sites of important events, Americans had turned to the landscape as the source of their national character. Furthermore, it was the sublime—characterized by qualities of wildness, grandeur, and overwhelming power—that most distinguished their country from the more domesticated Europe.² Even though Labrador did not lie within the United States, then, it is not surprising that American adventurers were drawn to its rugged inhospitable landscape.

What attracted two well-known artists during the Civil War era, however, were the icebergs carried southward by the Labrador Current during the spring and summer, for the massive blocks of floating ice held a natural appeal to Americans who were accustomed to viewing the mountains, waterfalls, and canyons of their own country as icons of its greatness.³ With their fantastical shapes, icebergs were mobile and ephemeral counterparts, in many respects, to the unusual rock formations that served as natural substitutes for architectural ruins in nationalistic publications such as *Picturesque America*.⁴ They also combined Emmanuel Kant’s geometrical sublime with his dynamic sublime, yet their most important feature for the landscape painters of that era was neither their awe-inspiring size nor their shifting shapes, but the opportunity they provided to capture light in nature, an opportunity that presented not only an aesthetic challenge but a spiritual one as well.⁵

Americans were not the first or only observers to be enthralled by the shapes and colours of icebergs. As early as 1819 the Scottish explorer John Ross described the first iceberg his ship encountered in search of the Northwest Passage as being shaped like “a white lion and horse rampant, which the quick fancy of the sailors, in their harmless fondness for omens, naturally enough shaped into the lion and unicorn of the King’s arms, and they were delighted accordingly with the good luck it seemed to augur.” Ross also wrote, “It is hardly possible to imagine any

1 Patrick O’Flaherty, *The Rock Observed: Studies in the Literature of Newfoundland* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), pp. 83-85. On the New England fishery off the coast of Labrador, see Bill Rompkey, *The Story of Labrador* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2003), pp. 27-28.

2 David E. Nye, *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1994), pp. 1, 24.

3 *Ibid.*, pp. 24-25, 32, 43.

4 *Picturesque America* was published as two volumes in 1872 and 1874. See Sue Rainey, *Creating Picturesque America: Monument to the Natural and Cultural Landscape* (Nashville and London: Vanderbilt University Press, 1994), pp. 93-94, 113-115, 229, 232-238, 247. For the link between wilderness and nineteenth-century American nationalism more generally, see Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967; 2001), chap. 4.

5 Russell A. Potter, *Arctic Spectacles: The Frozen North in Visual Culture, 1818-1875* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007), p. 180; Barry Lopez, *Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1987), pp. 219-220. On Kant’s two basic manifestations of the sublime, see Nye, *American Technological Sublime*, pp. 7-8.

thing more exquisite than the variety of tints which these icebergs display: by night as well as day they glitter with a vividness of colour beyond the power of art to represent.”⁶ It was, however, American explorer Elisha Kent Kane’s well-publicized search for the lost Franklin expedition that drew the widely travelled landscape artist Frederic Edwin Church to the northern Labrador coast in the summer of 1859.⁷ As explained by Thomas Cole, founder of the Hudson River school and Church’s instructor, the “scenes of solitude” to be found in sublime landscapes inspired contemplation of “eternal things” because they were the undefiled handiwork of the divine creator.⁸ In keeping with the scale of Labrador’s coastal landscape, Church focussed on producing a single “great picture,” the ten-by-six-foot *The Icebergs*, which has helped to solidify his reputation as the finest American landscape painter of the nineteenth century.⁹ While explorers such as Kane published their own journals as well as embarking on promotional speaking tours to raise funds, Church invited Louis Legrand Noble—Episcopalian minister and author of Cole’s biography¹⁰—to provide the publicity for his painting. It was not coincidental, then, that the unveiling of *The Icebergs* in 1861 was quickly followed by the publication of Noble’s *After Icebergs With a Painter: Summer Voyage to Labrador and Around Newfoundland* (see Figure 1).¹¹

Less well known today, is the series of articles titled “Icebergs and Esquimaux” written by the Transcendentalist clergyman, David Atwood Wasson.¹² This series

- 6 John Ross, *A Voyage of Discovery, Made Under the Orders of the Admiralty* (London: John Murray, 1819), vol. 1, p. 30 (Internet Archives); “Ross, Sir John,” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online*. See also the descriptions by the Scottish amateur scientist and folklorist John Francis Campbell, who likened an iceberg he encountered in Hamilton Inlet in 1864 to “a giant bust of the Duke of Wellington, 50 feet high.” J. F. Campbell, *A Short American Tramp in the Fall of 1864* (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1865), p. 90 (Internet Archives); “John Francis Campbell, F.G.S., etc. (Iain Ieach), of Islay,” *The Geological Magazine*, 1885, pp. 191-192, journals.cambridge.org/article_S0016756800151891 (accessed November 9, 2014).
- 7 Kane is said to have been the most famous man in the United States by the time he died as a young man in 1857. See Potter, *Arctic Spectacles*, p. 4, chap. 5; Gerald L. Carr, *In Search of the Promised Land: Paintings by Frederic Edwin Church* (New York: Berry-Hill Galleries, n.d.), pp. 36, 80.
- 8 Quoted in John Gatta, *Making Nature Sacred: Literature, Religion, and Environment in America from the Puritans to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 4.
- 9 Gerald L. Carr, *Frederic Edwin Church: Romantic Landscapes and Seascapes* (New York: Adelson Galleries, 2007), p. 11; Theodore Stebbens, Jr., *Close Observation: Selected Oil Sketches by Frederic E. Church* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1978), p. 3. *The Icebergs* was purchased after its 1863 London showing by railway entrepreneur Sir Edward Watkin and subsequently vanished from public sight until it was donated to the Dallas Museum of Art in 1979 (Carr, *In Search of the Promised Land*, pp. 80-83; Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, p. 221). On the initial critical response, see David Carew Huntington, “Frederic Edwin Church, 1826-1900: Painter of the Adamic New World Myth” (PhD dissertation, Yale University, 1960), pp. 129-135.
- 10 “Virtual American Biographies,” <http://famousamericans.net/louislegrandnoble/> (accessed June 30, 2014).
- 11 Louis L. Noble, *After Icebergs With a Painter: A Summer Voyage to Labrador and Around Newfoundland* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1861).
- 12 Wasson had been installed as minister of the Congregationalist Church and Society in Groveland, Massachusetts, in 1851, but then broke away to form an independent religious society in the same town. He assumed charge of another independent congregation in Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1856, moving to the old Thoreau house in Concord several years later, then on to Medford in 1860, and to Worcester in 1861. Wasson was invited to serve the Boston congregation of the very popular and influential Theodore Parker after the latter died in 1865. See Charles H. Foster, ed., *Beyond Concord: Selected Writings of David Atwood Wasson* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965), pp. 9-16; W. Creighton Peden, *An Intellectual Biography of David Atwood Wasson (1828-1887): An American Transcendentalist Thinker* (Lewiston, ME: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008), pp. 23-32, 49; Philip F. Gura, *American Transcendentalism:*



Figure 1: *The Icebergs* by Frederic Edwin Church (1861). Oil on canvas, 64.5 x 112.5 inches.
Source: Dallas Museum of Art, gift of Norma and Lamar Hunt, acc. 1979.28

appeared in the prestigious *Atlantic Monthly* in 1864 and 1865, and therefore reached an influential national and international audience.¹³ Not only do these articles illustrate the impact of Darwinism and the Civil War on the second generation of Transcendentalists and on the perception of Aboriginal peoples, they also reveal how Americans' nationalistic fascination with the sublime landscape could become an aesthetically colonializing force.

Like Noble, Wasson had been invited to become what Simon Schama refers to as a painter in prose¹⁴ by joining an iceberg-painting expedition to the coast of Labrador. In this case the artist in charge was William Bradford, a less successful member than Church of the Hudson River school. Bradford was quite likely motivated by the celebrity of Church's painting even though the Civil War had, by this time, broken the nation's Arctic fever.¹⁵ As its title suggests, Bradford's *Sealers Crushed by Icebergs* (see Figure 2) would depict a hostile northern environment and owe as much to German painter Caspar David Friedrich's bleak *The Sea of Ice* (*Das Eismeer*), also called *The Wreck of Hope* (1824), as it did to Church's

A History (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), pp. 280-283.

13 On the *Atlantic Monthly*, see Gura, *American Transcendentalism*, pp. 267-268.

14 Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (Toronto: Random House, 1995), p. 7.

15 Michael F. Robinson, *The Coldest Crucible: Arctic Exploration and American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 63; John J. Wilmerding, "The Many Views of Frederic Edwin Church" in *Treasures from Olana: Landscapes by Frederic Edwin Church* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), p. 16. Noble's *After Icebergs* was on board Bradford's ship in 1864. Bradford visited the coast of Labrador every year but one between 1861 and 1867. He extended his range to Greenland in 1869, subsequently publishing *The Arctic Regions, Illustrated With Photographs Taken on an Art Expedition to Greenland* (republished in 2013 by David R. Godine, Boston, in association with the New Bedford Whaling Museum). See Richard C. Kugler, *William Bradford: Sailing Ships and Arctic Seas* (New Bedford and Seattle: New Bedford Whaling Museum in association with University of Washington Press, 2003), pp. 14, 16, 21-28; Constance Martin, "Bradford, William," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online*; and Potter, *Arctic Spectacles*, chap. 10.

luminescent *The Icebergs*, with its broken cruciform mast in the foreground as the only reminder of life's fragility in the North.¹⁶ Like Church and Noble, Bradford and Wasson would both focus on the colours imbedded in the icebergs, but the pessimistic view of Nature that emerged from Bradford's "great picture" and Wasson's articles would reflect, as well, the experience and knowledge they gained about the dangers posed by shifting ice floes, not to mention the growing awareness during this Civil War era of the Darwinian struggle for existence in a hostile environment. That pessimistic perspective would also inform Wasson's depictions of the Inuit, whom he described as representing an evolutionary dead end and as therefore lacking the innate capacity for spiritual enlightenment that Transcendentalists believed was a basic characteristic of humanity.



Figure 2: *Sealers Crushed by Icebergs* by William Bradford (1866). Oil on canvas, 72.5 x 120.5 inches. Source: Courtesy of New Bedford Whaling Museum, acc. 1972.33

Referred to by the famous Harvard psychologist and philosopher William James as "one of the great instructors of mankind," David Atwood Wasson wrote chiefly about socio-political and religio-philosophic matters, and "Icebergs and Esquimaux" is his only published travel narrative.¹⁷ As a Transcendentalist,

¹⁶ Bradford worked on his *Sealers Crushed by Icebergs* from 1864 to 1866. It established his career by selling for \$12,000 several months after it was first exhibited to the fee-paying public in Boston and New York, and after 300 chromolithographs were sold at \$50 each. It failed, however, to achieve the fame of Church's Great Picture. See Linda Shanahan, "William Bradford's Sealers Crushed by Icebergs and the Green Bay Spring," *Newfoundland Quarterly*, vol. 107, no. 2 (Fall 2014), pp. 25-27. The chromolithograph of Church's *The Icebergs* is reproduced in Carr, *In Search of the Promised Land*, p. 159. Bradford's *Sealers Crushed by Icebergs* is reproduced in Kugler, *William Bradford*, p. 121.

¹⁷ Quoted in Gura, *American Transcendentalism*, p. 283. In addition, Wasson was a literary critic and a minor poet. See the introduction to Foster, ed., *Beyond Concord*. Mott refers to Wasson as "one of the ablest essayists" of the 1860s, but Austin claims that he was "a minor writer" for the *Atlantic Monthly*, "except in quantity." See Frank Luther Mott, *A History of American Magazines*, vol. 3: 1865-1885 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1938), p. 302; James C. Austin, *Fields of the Atlantic Monthly: Letters to*

Wasson was one of an influential group of intellectuals who had moved beyond Unitarianism's rejection of New England's original Calvinism to embrace a new religious expression derived from Germany's philosophical idealism.¹⁸ The two pioneer figures, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, taught that because God was "immanent and active" within the human soul, mankind had the potential to transcend the material condition and attain a reality higher than the physical. Furthermore, a close connection with Nature offered a heightened opportunity to tap into one's inner divinity.¹⁹

The fact remains, however, that neither Emerson nor Thoreau had the remote wilderness in mind,²⁰ and there is little in Wasson's travel narrative that evokes a more mystical connection to Nature than one would find in the increasingly domesticated sublime convention of his era, including the romantic descriptions by Church's religiously conservative travelling companion, Louis Noble.²¹ Wasson, in fact, held a more traditional view of Nature than did the first generation of Transcendentalists. He ridiculed the assumption that Nature was benevolent, arguing instead that it was either cruel or indifferent because it dictated that any species unable to survive would be inexorably swept from the earth. As for the idea that "natural man" was inherently good, Wasson argued instead that man was only potentially divine, though, as we shall see, he would not go even that far in describing the Inuit he met on the coast of Labrador.²²

To Wasson the far North was Nature at its most elemental, wilderness in the true sense of the term, and the Labrador coast represented "that period in Nature when her powers were all Titanic, untamed,—playing their wild game, with hills for toss-coppers and seas for soap-bubbles."²³ This was a sharp contrast, he added, to the "The Wild" Thoreau claimed to have discovered at Walden Pond. In his journal entry of August 30, 1856, Thoreau had written: "It is in vain to dream of a wildness distant from ourselves. There is none such. It is the bog in our brains and bowels, the primitive vigor of Nature in us, that inspires that dream. I shall never find in the wilds of Labrador any greater wildness than in some recess of

an Editor, 1861-1870 (San Marino, CA: The Huntington Library, 1953), pp. 251, 258. For a bibliography of Wasson's publications, see Foster, *Beyond Concord*, pp. 314-329.

18 Perry Miller, ed., *The American Transcendentalists: Their Prose and Poetry* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1957), p. ix.

19 On what he refers to as the "correspondence" between the natural and the spiritual in Thoreau's writing, see Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 128-129, 263-264.

20 Emerson claimed that one's sacred connection to Nature could take place anywhere, including a village green, and Thoreau's experience of the "savage and dreary" wilderness of northern Maine in the late 1840s led him to prefer a middle ground. See Gatta, *Making Nature Sacred*, pp. 92-93; Nash, *Wilderness*, pp. 85-86, 90-95; Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964, reprint 1972), p. 246.

21 According to Potter (*Arctic Spectacles*, p. 184), Noble was "one of the first to trace in ice the apocalyptic overtones of these icy masses of shattered creation." In Noble's own less dramatic words, however, icebergs were "crystalline vessels" that "like all the larger structures of nature... are freighted with God's power and glory, and must be reverently and thoughtfully studied, to 'see into the life of them'" (*After Icebergs*, p. 110).

22 Robert Spence, "D. A. Wasson, Forgotten Transcendentalist," *American Literature*, vol. 27, no. 1 (March 1955), pp. 33-34.

23 D. A. Wasson, "Ice and Esquimaux," *The Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 15, issue 91 (May 1865), p. 566.

Concord, i.e. than I import into it.”²⁴ Wasson was not convinced. “Talk of finding it in a ten-acre swamp!” he scoffed. “Why, man, you are just from a cornfield, the echoes of your sister’s piano are still in your ears, and you called at a post-office for a letter as you came! Verdure and mild heaven are above; *clunking* frogs and plants that keep company with man are beneath. But in the North Nature herself is wild.” Wasson added that the desert and the sea were untameable, but the North was still more so because “Commerce is but a surf on its shores.” Its wildness, therefore, “goes to the very heart of things, immeasurable, immitigable, infinite; deaf and blind to all but itself and its own, it prevails, it is, and it is all.”²⁵

In short, where Thoreau studied morning frosts and frozen ponds seeking analogues in ice crystals to “reticulated leaves, feathered wings, [and] the harmonies of the universe,”²⁶ Wasson would look at ice on a much larger scale, and not only ice but the inhabitants of the northern coastline as well. Wasson’s romantic descriptions of the icebergs were as much an exercise in aesthetic colonialism as were the paintings of Church and Bradford, but the writer’s racist descriptions of the indigenous northern inhabitants were a more concrete expression of the colonializing gaze. Furthermore, this gaze was shared at the time by students of anthropology who viewed Labrador as “a kind of Pompeii of the New World” with its indigenous inhabitants living—in the words of a later American explorer—“in a state far more primitive than in any other part of the continent of North America.”²⁷

To help fund his expedition, which he claimed cost him \$4,000, Bradford invited paying passengers to join him.²⁸ The charge was \$250, at least in one case,²⁹ so it is not surprising that the twelve who signed up were a rather genteel group, entirely male in composition, and nearly all from Massachusetts. No doubt they would have considered themselves to be travellers rather than ordinary tourists, for according to Wasson they included a lawyer, a judge, a retired navy surgeon, an Episcopal clergyman, a teacher of geology and natural history, an ornithologist, a retired army lieutenant who had been a Greenland voyager, a “Greek and Latin scholar who was rich as Croesus,” and a photographer who was in Bradford’s employ.³⁰ This unnamed photographer was William H. Pierce, who produced many images of arctic ice as well as what may be the earliest surviving photographs of Labrador (see Figure 3).³¹ Reflecting the fact that scientists were

24 Quoted in Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, p. vii.

25 Wasson, “Ice and Esquimaux,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 14, issue 86 (December 1864), p. 728.

26 See Eric G. Wilson, *The Spiritual History of Ice: Romanticism, Science, and the Imagination* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 5.

27 Henry G. Bryant, *A Journey to the Grand Falls of Labrador* (Philadelphia: Geographical Club, 1892), p. 42, quoted in O’Flaherty, *The Rock Observed*, p. 103.

28 Bradford also stated that he needed to acquire skeletons—whether of humans or animals is not clear – to offset his costs. Centre for Newfoundland Studies, Memorial University Libraries, FF1041 W55 2003, Rare, Journal of Algernon Willis, July 1[*sic* – the journal begins on June 2] to September 5, 1864: A Voyage to Labrador, as transcribed by his great-granddaughter, Penelope Pendleton Beye [hereafter, Journal of Algernon Willis], August 16, 1864; Potter, *Arctic Spectacles*, p. 191.

29 Journal of Algernon Willis, June 3, 1864.

30 Wasson, “Ice and Esquimaux” (December 1864), pp. 730-731; Kugler, *William Bradford*, p. 15.

31 Kugler, *William Bradford*, p. 15; William Bradford, *Photographs of Arctic Ice*, photograph album held by the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

then considered indispensable to Arctic exploratory expeditions, the only member of the group named by Wasson was the young geologist Alpheus Spring Packard, whose *The Labrador Coast* would describe the same cruise during what was reportedly the coldest summer in 40 years.³²



Figure 3: *Labrador Fishing Station*, albumen print by William H. Pierce (1864). In album *Photographs of Arctic Ice*.

Source: Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-10281.

The professional activities of Pierce and Packard aside, the main diversion of the passengers, once on land, was fishing, hunting, and gathering wild birds' eggs. The names of these other passengers are known only due to the relatively recent discovery of an unpublished journal written by a 30-year-old fellow passenger named Algernon Willis, who spent more time assisting Pierce with his photographs than he did fishing or hunting.³³ Willis is not on Wasson's list, probably because his

³² Robinson, *The Coldest Crucible*, pp. 4-6. Packard had first visited Labrador as a Bowdoin College student who joined the Williams College expedition organized by Professor P.A. Chadbourne in the summer of 1860. See Alpheus Spring Packard, *The Labrador Coast: A Journal of Two Summer Cruises to the Region* (New York: N. D. C. Hodges, 1891), chap. 4 and 5. According to Arthur Silver, *Farm-Cottage, Camp and Canoe in Maritime Canada* (London: George Routledge & Sons; Toronto: The Musson Book Co., 1908), "parties of eager students" from Yale and Harvard were still chartering fishing schooners during the early twentieth century to cruise along the Labrador coast "combining in agreeable proportions the pursuit of science, sport, and travel" (p. 186).

³³ Willis recorded in his journal that he turned 31 on July 28. His first page identifies Benjamin P. Mann as the son of Horace Mann, the prominent politician and education reformer, and Copley Amory as nephew of the famous painter, John Singleton Copley.

profession of travelling shoe salesman was not considered sufficiently prestigious to mention in the *Atlantic Monthly* articles, but his daily journal entries provide a more intimate account than does Wasson of life aboard the cramped vessel during the seemingly endless days that it was boxed in by sea ice or stranded by lack of wind. Not mentioned in Wasson's articles, for example, are the scandalous behaviour of the Episcopal clergyman while on his frequent drunken sprees, the unappetizing meals served by the highly unhygienic "great greasy Scotchman" who had been employed as cook, or the increasingly vociferous demands of a number of passengers to return home before Bradford had the opportunity to fulfil the purpose of his expedition.³⁴

The first Labrador landfall of the chartered 136-foot schooner *Benjamin S. Wright* was on June 14 at Sleppe Harbour. Willis's only comment was "There are deep snow banks lying among the rocks within stones [*sic*] throw of our vessel,"³⁵ but Wasson described the scene as "bleak, bare, and hard," with "not a tree, not a shrub, not a grass-blade" to be seen.³⁶ He added that the sloping shoreline of "gray, unbroken rock" dipping under the sea "like a shore of sand" was more "completely 'master of the situation'" than even "the mightiest cliff," "[g]rand, enduring, and awful" as it might be. The scars on a cliff's face and the fragments at its feet provided evidence "of what it endures," but "this scarless grey rock, thrusting its hand in a matter-of-course way under the sea, and seeming to hold it as in a cup, suggested a quality so comfortably immitigable that one's eyes grew cold in looking at it."³⁷ Resorting repeatedly to the word "grey" to describe the sky, the sea, the surrounding islands, and the remaining snow, Wasson wrote that one felt "as if all the ruddy and verdurous juices had died in the veins of the world, ... that Existence was dead, and that we stood looking on its corpse, which even in death could never decay."³⁸

If this description challenged Thoreau's sense of the material world as sacred, Wasson's next instalment went still further by echoing Melville's critique of idyllic naturalism in his novel *Moby Dick* (1851).³⁹ Described in gory detail, as recounted to Wasson by the ship's captain, is the vicious and cruel attack on a huge right-whale by a large pod of "killer" cetaceans—presumably orcas—"hungry as famine, fierce as plague, dainty as a Roman epicure, yet omnivorous as time." The "epicure" reference refers to the attackers' focus on their victim's giant tongue, which Wasson was told weighed a ton and a half:

They fly with inconceivable fury at their victim, aiming chiefly at the lip, tearing great mouthfuls away, which they instantly reject while darting for another. The bleeding and bellowing monster goes down like a boulder from a cliff, shoots up

34 The quote is from Journal of Algernon Willis, June 23, 1864.

35 Journal of Algernon Willis, June 12, 1864.

36 Settlements had begun to be established along the southern Labrador coastline in the latter half of the eighteenth century. See Sean T. Cadigan, *Newfoundland and Labrador: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), pp. 66-67, 99, 135-136.

37 Wasson, "Ice and Esquimaux" (December 1864), p. 733.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 734.

39 See Gatta, *Making Nature Sacred*, pp. 73, 116-125.

like a shell from a mortar, beats the sea about him all into crimson spray with his tail; but plunge, leap, foam as he may, the finny pirates flesh their teeth in him still, still are fresh in pursuit, until at length, to end one torment by submitting to another, the helpless giant opens his mouth, and permits these sea-devils to devour the quivering morsel they covet.⁴⁰

A similar Darwinian perspective is reflected in Sir Edwin Landseer's popular painting, *Man Proposes, God Disposes*, first exhibited the same year as the Bradford expedition, for it alluded to the tragic fate of the Franklin expedition by focusing on two polar bears chewing on the ribs of dead men in an arctic shipwreck.⁴¹ Bradford's *Sealers Crushed by Icebergs* also depicts a hostile Nature, as already noted, but, like Church, he is said to have captured on canvas "a sensitive perception of the unique light, strange forms, and surprising colours of the Arctic regions."⁴² This oscillation between the dark and tragic sublime and the colourful picturesque can also be found in Wasson's writing, for, in contrast to his description of the bleak shoreline, he described the moon's reflection on the water as being of "intensest gold verging upon orange, edged with an exquisite, delicate tint of scarlet." He also alluded to the "brilliant" phosphorescence below the water's surface, as well as the colours of the "blushing" dawn.⁴³

As the ship came upon a massive ice field in the sunshine, Wasson wrote, the effect was "unlike anything known in more southern climates," for the day "warmed like summer and braced like winter." Rather than the flat cakes that he had expected, there were simulated "cliffs, basaltic columns, frozen down, arabesques, fretted traceries, sculptured urns, arches supporting broad tables or sloping roofs, lifted pinnacles, boulders, honey-combs, slanting strata of rock, gigantic birds, mastodons, maned lions, couching or rampant—a fantasy of forms, and, between all, the shining, shining sea." While these imaginative associations may have evoked the sublime insofar as they inspired a sense of awe,⁴⁴ the colours suggest the picturesque, for they include "glistening white flecked with stars," "aërial purple," and "emerald intensity of green."⁴⁵

Impressive as the 20 miles of shore ice was, Wasson claimed that it was dwarfed by the almost unbroken floe-ice which, during that unusually cold

40 Wasson further describes the killer cetacean as "a blue-fish on a big scale," "about fifteen feet in length," with a blunt nose and a large fin "some five feet long on the back, and eight or ten feet in length," "sloping away to a point, like the jib of ship" ("Ice and Esquimaux" [January 1865], p. 44). See also Packard, *The Labrador Coast*, p. 113.

41 Diana Donald, "The Arctic Fantasies of Edwin Landseer and Briton Riviere: Polar Bears, Wilderness and Notions of the Sublime" in Nigel Llewellyn and Christine Riding, eds., *The Art of the Sublime*, January 2013, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/diana-donald-the-arctic-fantasies-of-edwin-landseer-and-briton-riviere-polar-bears-r1136829> (retrieved July 2, 2014).

42 Martin, "Bradford, William."

43 Wasson, "Ice and Esquimaux," *The Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 15, issue 87 (January 1865), pp. 40-41.

44 I. S. MacLaren notes that "landscape enthusiasts" indulged in associationism because their sensitivity was demonstrated by the ability "to derive a plethora of sensations – emotional and intellectual – from the contemplation of a scene." See MacLaren's "The Aesthetic Map of the North, 1845-1859," *Arctic*, vol. 38, no. 2 (June 1985), p. 93.

45 Wasson, "Ice and Esquimaux" (January 1865), pp. 41-42. Willis, similarly, mentioned the "brilliant" colours and the many "shapes and forms resembling man's heads, animals, birds, vases, urns and everything" (*Journal of Algernon Willis*, June 20, 1864).

summer, was calculated to be more than a thousand miles in length and about a hundred miles in breadth.⁴⁶ This much-anticipated floe having finally been reached on the twenty-first day of the voyage, Wasson rhapsodized about the intensity of the blue, claiming, “This incomparable hue appears wherever deep shadow is interposed between the eye and any intense, shining white.” Beyond the “cerulean and sapphire glory” shining from the two caves excavated by the sea were “the deep blue waters of York Bay,” and further still “rose the purple gneiss hills” of the headland, “flecked with party [*sic*]-colored moss.” Rowing the next day to the mouth of one of the ice-caverns, Wasson and Bradford found that the blue grew “deeper, intenser, more luminous, more awful in beauty, the farther inward, till in the depths it became not only a shrine to worship at, but a presence to bow and be silent before!” There is no hint, here, of a cold indifferent Nature; instead, it is one of the rare moments when Wasson steers toward the transcendent, adding, “It is said that angels sing and move in joy before the Eternal; but there I learned that silence is their only voice, and stillness their ecstatic motion!”⁴⁷

The main goal of the 500-mile Labrador cruise, however, was to view icebergs, which the ship first approached on June 30. Needless to say, Wasson spared no adjective in describing the “noble berg,” including colours such as “infinitely delicate luminous green” and a blue “looking like lapis-lazuli.” His focus was principally on texture and shape, however, referring to a surface like “the finest statuary marble,” as well as like porcelain that would be “the despair of China.” The “sculpturesque and architectural design” with “an intensely polished surface” was “surmounted by an elaborate level cornice, and above this the marble lace again.”⁴⁸ In short, this was not Thoreau’s mystical Nature, but Nature civilized as a classical Greek or Roman ruin.⁴⁹ Furthermore, the constant references to colour once again conform more closely to the picturesque than to the sublime. Paradoxically, the description of the same iceberg by the more prosaic Algernon Willis strikes a stronger religious chord: “I never gazed upon anything in nature with such wonder and admiration. I was awe struck. Its immense towering bulk glistening in a purity I never conceived of in this bright light, certainly inspired my religious nature more than I can tell.”⁵⁰

Boxed into a small harbour by floe-ice during the following two weeks (see Figure 4), the passengers aboard the *Benjamin Wright* met a crew of fishermen who told stories about the summer of 1862 when more than 30 sealing vessels had to be abandoned in the pack ice of Green Bay. Further inspiring Bradford’s “great picture,” with its image of flames and thick black smoke rising skyward from an icebound vessel, many of these ships had been set ablaze to prevent them from

46 Wasson, “Ice and Esquimaux” (January 1865), p. 42.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 45.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 46.

49 The same classical reference is evoked by the broken twin pillars of the theosophist Lawren Harris’s *Icebergs, Davis Strait* (1930). According to the poet and critic Eli Mandel, these pillars “form a gigantic gateway to an undreamed of place,” and “an arch that could, completed, once and for all unify all shattered things, restore peace to a shattered world.” See Eli Mandel, “The Inward, Northward Journey of Lawren Harris,” *artscanada* (October/November 1978), pp. 22, 24.

50 Journal of Algernon Willis, July 1, 1864.

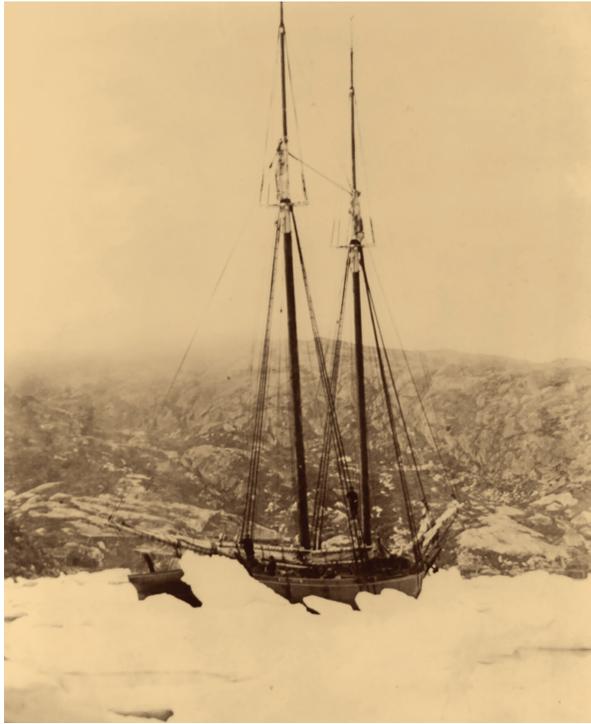


Figure 4: *The Schooner Trapped Two Weeks in Ice, Square Island Harbor*; albumen print by William H. Pierce (1864). In album *Photographs of Arctic Ice*.

Source: Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-4441.

drifting into the navigation lanes or being salvaged by others (thereby cancelling the insurance claims) once the ice had relaxed its grip.⁵¹ In the meantime, the restless and bored American tourists were entertained by the July 4 celebration, with its 48-gun salute, oration by one of the passengers, sermon by Wasson, and banquet with champagne, blackberry wine, and whiskey punch. In addition, the firing of rockets and roman candles, as well as the burning of Bengal lights on the ice cakes, moved Willis to observe that “the effect was wonderful reminding one of fairy scenes.”⁵² Wasson, on the other hand, focussed on the ice floes, writing, “Yard-wide spaces of emerald, amethyst, sapphire, yellow-green beryl, and rose-tinted crystal, grew as familiar to the eye as paving-blocks to the dwellers in cities.”⁵³

51 Packard briefly recounted the story in his journal, and it also appeared in the broadside accompanying Bradford’s painting during its exhibition in 1866. Both accounts mistakenly date the event to 1863 rather than 1862. Nor do they mention the burning of ships, but there were detailed descriptions in the Newfoundland press at that time. Packard states that 20 to 30 ships were lost, but the press set the number at approximately 38, with 24 set on fire. See Shanahan, “William Bradford’s Sealers,” pp. 22-23, 25.

52 Journal of Algernon Willis, July 4, 1864.

53 Wasson, “Ice and Esquimaux” (January 1865), p. 47.

When the second iceberg of the voyage came into view, Wasson's gaze shifted back to what he referred to as the "Northern architectural," describing it as "two immense Gothic churches, ... each with a tower in front."⁵⁴ Despite warnings about the dangers of disintegrating or over-turning icebergs, Wasson was determined to have a closer look from his small skiff. Urged by the Episcopal clergyman, who had joined him at the last minute, and braving a heavy swell, Wasson even pushed into a small opening in the ice, "gazing upward and upward at the towering awfulness and magnificence of edifice, myself frozen in admiration."⁵⁵ This description is one of only two in Wasson's travel journal that might be said to sacralise the Labrador landscape, or rather ice-scape, but the experience of being frozen in admiration apparently did not lead to any deeper transcendental sensation.⁵⁶ In fact, Louis Noble's lengthy *After Icebergs* had effectively exhausted the descriptive vocabulary of the sublime with images such as domed mosque, Parthenon of the sea, gothic cathedral, huge man of war, marble mausoleum, and moving Alps of ice.⁵⁷ Religious conformist though he was, Noble's response to the icebergs was actually a more spiritual one than that of Wasson, though spiritual in the conventional Christian sense of viewing the natural world not as inherently sacred but as evidence of design by a beneficent creator.⁵⁸

If ice represented elemental Nature, as far as Wasson was concerned, so too did the indigenous inhabitants of the Labrador coast. Indeed, he argued that they were "original and pre-Adamite man," adding that he meant it "not as a piece of rhetorical smartness, but in gravest characterization."⁵⁹ The idea that human beings had inhabited the earth prior to Adam was not a new one, for it had originated with tenth-century Islam and begun to appear in Christianity in the fourteenth century.⁶⁰ The "heresy" was strengthened by the "discovery" of new cultures in America, compelling Pope Julius II to decree in 1512 that American Indians were descended from Adam.⁶¹ Attempts were made in subsequent centuries to reconcile pre-adamism with Christianity, but by the 1840s American ethnologists were rejecting the monogenetic theory that racial difference was the result of adaptation to different environments.⁶² Wasson claimed that to him it was an open question as

54 *Ibid.*, p. 48. In a contemporary vein, Barry Lopez describes the icebergs he encountered as "monolithic; their walls, towering and abrupt, suggested Potala Palace at Lhasa in Tibet, a mountainous architecture of ascetic contemplation." He also argues that travellers compared icebergs to cathedrals because they both represent a passion for light (*Arctic Dreams*, pp. 184, 222).

55 Wasson, "Ice and Esquimaux" (January 1865), pp. 48-49; *Journal of Algernon Willis*, July 15, 1864.

56 On sacralisation of the landscape, see Gatta, *Making Nature Sacred*, pp. 6, 10.

57 Noble, *After Icebergs*, pp. 28, 57, 85, 86, 113, 171.

58 See, for example, Noble, *After Icebergs*, pp. 110, 113, 127, and 177. See also William Closson James, *Locations of the Sacred: Essays on Religion, Literature, and Canadian Culture* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1998), pp. 61-62.

59 Wasson, "Ice and Esquimaux," vol. 15, issue 90 (April 1865), p. 438.

60 Michael Barkun, *Religion and the Racist Right: The Origins of the Christian Identity Movement* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), p. 152.

61 David N. Livingstone, *Adam's Ancestors: Race, Religion, and the Politics of Human Origins* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), pp. 16-24.

62 *Ibid.*, pp. 173-175; Reginald Horsman, "Scientific Racism and the American Indian in the Mid-Nineteenth Century," *American Quarterly*, vol. 27, no. 2 (May 1975), pp. 152-168; Robert E. Bieder, *Science Encounters the Indian, 1820-1880: The Early Years of American Ethnology* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986), pp. 99-100. According to Michael Banton, it was only at the end of the

to whether the Inuit had become “children of the icy North” by slow modification or—as the famous biologist and geologist Louis Agassiz claimed—they had originated “just as they are.”⁶³ He was certain, nonetheless, that they had stopped evolving “at the point where human history begins.” In short, “They belong not to spiritual or human, but to outward and physical Nature.”⁶⁴

Rather ironically—given Wasson’s militant abolitionism⁶⁵—the polygenesis theory was used to defend slavery. In fact, one of the leading members of the American School of Ethnology, Samuel George Morton, had promoted polygenesis by postulating a racial hierarchy based on cranial measurements with Caucasians at the top, Native Americans in the middle, and Africans at the bottom.⁶⁶ As for the Inuit, whom Morton saw as a separate race from the other North American Natives, his *Crania Americana* (1839) pronounced that they were “crafty, sensual, ungrateful, obstinate and unfeeling, and much of their affection for their children can be traced to purely selfish motives.... Their mental facilities from infancy to old age, present a continued childhood.... In gluttony, selfishness and ingratitude, they are perhaps unequalled by any other nation of people.”⁶⁷ In addition, explorer Dr. John Rae’s 1853 report that the Inuit had informed him of the doomed Franklin expedition’s cannibalism had led to a strong backlash against the people who had been “England’s favourite natives.” Charles Dickens had led the attack against what he referred to as “the gross handful of uncivilised people,” arguing that their story was a malevolent projection onto the explorers of habits natural to themselves.⁶⁸

Having no sense of nationalist identification with the controversy over Franklin’s fate, Wasson was free to profess a degree of admiration for the “Esquimaux,”

eighteenth century that some writers began to use “race” as denoting “a class of creatures with common characteristics, making it synonymous with either species or subspecies in modern classifications.” See Banton, “Historical and Contemporary Modes of Racialization” in Karim Murji and John Solomos, eds., *Racialization: Studies in Theory and Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 53.

- 63 After Agassiz emigrated to the United States in 1846, he provided race theory with the aura of scientific authority. See Horsman, “Scientific Racism,” p. 159; Bieder, *Science Encounters*, pp. 91-92, 216. Franz Boas, who in 1883 and 1884 became the first scholar to engage in prolonged fieldwork with the Inuit, would reject the theory of cultural evolution, becoming associated instead with the school of thought known as historical particularism. John L. Steckley, *White Lies About the Inuit* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2008), pp. 32-34.
- 64 Wasson, “Ice and Esquimaux” (April 1865), p. 448.
- 65 Wasson associated closely with the supporters of John Brown. See Foster, *Beyond Concord*, pp. 14-15; Gura, *American Transcendentalism*, pp. 258-263. Wasson’s letter to William Lloyd Garrison in 1860 is summarized in Peden, *An Intellectual Biography*, pp. 54-55.
- 66 Livingston, *Adam’s Ancestors*, pp. 173-175, 179-180; Barkun, *Religion*, pp. 152-153; Horsman, “Scientific Racism,” pp. 155-158; Bieder, *Science Encounters*, pp. 89-91. Horsman (p. 160) states that although “it has been contended in the case of the Negro that the arguments of the American School of ethnologists were rejected in both North and South, concerning Indians they achieved considerable acceptability.” As pre-adamism disappeared from scientific discourse, it became associated with attempts to reconcile theology with science, and, increasingly, with anti-Semitism and other forms of racial bigotry. See Livingston, *Adam’s Ancestors*, chap. 7 and 8; Barkun, *Religion*, pp. 154-172 and chap. 9.
- 67 Quoted in Livingston, *Adam’s Ancestors*, pp. 177-178. On the place of the Inuit in the classification of human skulls, see also Francis Spufford, *I May Be Some Time: Ice and the English Imagination* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), pp. 225-226. The 1842 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* claimed that the domestic economy of the Greenland Inuit was “uniformly filthy, and disgusting in the extreme.” Quoted in Spufford, *I May Be Some Time*, p. 200.
- 68 Spufford, *I May Be Some Time*, pp. 123-126, 196-198.

whom he described as primeval man. Cut off from civilization as well as from “the chief bounties of Nature,” Wasson wrote, “He has done all for himself: he has developed his own arts, adjusted himself by his own wit to the Nature which surrounds him. Heir to no Rome, Greece, Persia, India, he stands there in the sole strength of his native resources, rich only in the traditionary accomplishments of his own race.”⁶⁹ There is a strong echo, here, of the Noble Savage myth embraced by Thoreau, who was fascinated by Native Americans.⁷⁰ Furthermore, Transcendentalists professed that all persons share in a common nature, that grace is the birthright of all.⁷¹ Wasson, however, dehumanized the Inuit. “Inseparable from the extreme North, the sea-shore and the seal,” the “Esquimaux,” according to Wasson’s rather shocking description, was himself “a seal come to feet and hands, and preying upon his more primitive kindred. The cetacean of the land, he is localized, like animals,—not universal, like civilized man. He is no inhabitant of the globe as a whole, but is contained within special poles.”⁷²

The chief distinction between pre-adamite and adamite man, Wasson argued, was that the former simply responded to “outward Nature, to physical necessities,” but the latter had begun—presumably with Adam or his near descendants—“to create necessities and supplies out of his own spirit,—to build architectures on foundations and out of materials that exist only in virtue of his own spiritual activity,—to live by bread which grows, not out of the soil, but out of the soul.” Echoing the Victorian fascination with what was assumed to be the early beginnings of the human species (and the Inuit were the people most studied to this end),⁷³ Wasson claimed that a journey to the North was not only a journey across space, but also “over ages, epochs, unknown periods of time, ... into the obscure existence that antedates history.” Once one had arrived there, “Palestine and Greece, Moses and Homer” were “but a wild dream! Expel the impossible fancy from your mind! Go, spear a seal, and be a reasonable being!”⁷⁴ To Wasson, then, the Inuit effectively represented a dead end as far as evolution was concerned.

The Inuit Wasson encountered were living at the German-speaking Moravian mission at Hopedale, where Bradford’s Labrador expedition ended.⁷⁵ Wasson

69 Wasson, “Ice and Esquimaux” (April 1865), p. 437.

70 Robert F. Sayre states that Thoreau studied “‘the Indian’ as the ideal solitary figure that was the white Americans’ symbol of the wilderness and history.” See Sayre, *Thoreau and the American Indian* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. x.

71 Peden, *An Intellectual Biography*, pp. 71-73, 327; Gura, *American Transcendentalism*, p. 18.

72 Wasson, “Ice and Esquimaux” (April 1865), p. 438. On the use of animal metaphors to describe the Tlingits of Alaska, see Robert Campbell, *In Darkest Alaska: Travel and Empire Along the Inside Passage* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), pp. 147-148. See also the dehumanizing descriptions of the Montagnais by American travel writer Charles H. Farnham, as discussed in J. I. Little, “Travels in a Cold and Rugged Land: C. H. Farnham’s Quebec Essays in *Harper’s Magazine*, 1883-89,” *Journal of Canadian Studies*, vol. 47, no. 2 (Spring 2013), pp. 232-234.

73 Spufford, *I May Be Some Time*, pp. 210-235.

74 Wasson, “Ice and Esquimaux” (April 1865), p. 438.

75 The original aim had been to sail as far as the opening of Hudson’s Strait, but “ice and storm” delayed progress by a month. Wasson, “Ice and Esquimaux,” vol. 15, issue 90 (April 1865), p. 439. The Moravians had established their first Labrador mission at Nain in 1771. Hopedale followed in 1782. See Cadigan, *Newfoundland and Labrador*, pp. 67-69, 100; Hopedale Mission National Historic Site of Canada, Canada’s Historic Places website, www.historicplaces.ca/en/rep-reg/place-lieu.aspx?id=11597 (accessed

conceded that these Inuit were outwardly beginning to borrow from civilization, but, being “unable radically to change,” they were growing “inwardly poorer and weaker” due to those influences. Because civilization was forcing upon the Inuit “a rivalry to which he is unequal,” Wasson concluded, “it wrests the seal from his grasp, thins it out of his waters; and he and his correlative die away together.”⁷⁶ There was no need for Wasson to have read *Origin of Species*, which had been published in 1859, in order to express this view, for it had become commonplace in the United States by the 1840s.⁷⁷ Describing the scene in rather nightmarish terms, Wasson wrote that the Inuit’s “squat and squalid huts ... with their grovelling toward the earth ..., seemed rather dens than houses.” The surrounding ground was “all trodden into mud,” and nearby “a dead dog lies rotting; children lounge listlessly, and babies toddle through the slutch about it. Here and there a full-grown Esquimaux, in greasy and uncouth garb, loiters, doing nothing, *looking* nothing.”⁷⁸ (In Pierce’s staged photographs, on the other hand, the women and children are well dressed and the physical surroundings are quite tidy—see, for example, Figures 5 and 6). Some of the girls, Wasson admitted, “are really pretty,” but “always in a lumpish, domestic-animal style.” Their hands and feet were “singularly small,” and their fingers “nicely-tapered,” but “[t]ake hold of the hand, and you are struck with its *cetacean* feel. It is not flabby, but has a peculiar blubber-like, elastic compressibility, and seems not quite of human warmth.”⁷⁹

Only in relation to the kayak did Wasson describe the Inuit as evolved in any way, for this ingenious vessel was “a seal-skin Oxford or Cambridge, wherein he takes his degree as master of the primeval arts. Here he acquires not only physical



Figure 5: *Esquimaux at the Moravian Mission, Hopedale, Labrador.* Albumen print by William H. Pierce (1864). In album *Photographs of Labrador.*

Source: Courtesy and © of Komatik Press

June 19, 2014).

76 Wasson, “Ice and Esquimaux” (April 1865), p. 439.

77 Horsman, “Scientific Racism,” pp. 153-154.

78 Wasson, “Ice and Esquimaux” (April 1865), p. 441-442.

79 *Ibid.*, p. 443.



Figure 6: *Skin Tent, Kayak and Sod-Roof Houses at Hopedale.* Albumen print by William H. Pierce (1864). In album *Photographs of Labrador.*

Source: Courtesy and © of Komatik Press

strength and quickness, but self-possession also, mental agility, the instant use of his wits,—here becomes, in fine, a *cultivated* man.”⁸⁰ Wasson also claimed admiringly that there was probably “no race of men on earth whose ordinary avocations present so constantly the alternative of rarest skill on the one hand, or instant destruction on the other.” That skill simply reflected the Inuit’s close link to Nature, however, for kayak and rower appeared as “one creature,” its “motion graceful as a flying bird.”⁸¹

Far from criticizing the Inuit sense of morality, Wasson was impressed by their honesty. While Noble claimed that the Anglican Inuit of Fox Harbour “compare well with Christians anywhere,”⁸² however, Wasson concluded that the religion of the Hopedale convert was essentially “a matter of personal relation between him and the missionaries. He goes to church as a dog follows his master,—expecting a bone and hoping for a pat in return.” Wasson also wrote that pre-adamite man could not be truly religious because “religion implies ideas, in the blood at least, if not in the brain, as imagination, if not as thought; and ideas are to him wanting, are impossible.” Furthermore, because of their docility, there was no chance that the Inuit would evolve:

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 445. Dr. John Rae was the first British explorer to advocate the adoption of Inuit technology, and – in 1865 – to describe their inventions as products of “scientific skill,” but in that respect he was considerably ahead of his time (Spufford, *I May Be Some Time*, p. 195).

⁸¹ Wasson, “Ice and Esquimaux” (April 1865), pp. 445-446. Spufford suggests that the northern counterpart of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* might be titled *Borealism*, “and it would have much to say about animal imagery” (*I May Be Some Time*, p. 229).

⁸² Noble, *After Icebergs*, p. 194. Bradford, similarly, praised the results of the Christian missionaries among the Inuit of Greenland in *The Arctic Regions*, pp. 149-150.

Had they been happy, had they been unhappy, I had hoped for them. They were neither; they were contented. A half-animal, African exuberance, token of a spirit obscure indeed, but rich and effervescent, would open for them a future. One sign of dim inward struggle and pain, as if the spirit resented his imprisonment, would do the same. Both were wanting. They ruminates; life is the cud they chew.

In short, as pre-adamite man, the Inuit belonged “not to spiritual or human, but to outward and physical Nature,” and, because civilization affected them only by “mechanical modification” and not “by vital refreshment and renewal,” they had no future.⁸³ For evidence, Wasson pointed to the large number of local Inuit deaths—24 out of approximately 200 inhabitants in March alone. The cause, he suggested, was in part “[t]he long winter of suffocation in their wooden dens, which lack the ventilation of the igloo that their untaught wit had devised.” More fundamentally, however, “the hands of the great horologe of time have hunted around the dial, till they have found the hour of doom for this primeval race.”⁸⁴

David Wasson’s journalistic mission was aimed at attracting the attention of middle-class American readers who wished to turn their minds from their country’s war and bloodshed to a cultured appreciation of the natural world.⁸⁵ He admitted that—unlike explorers such as Kane, Parry, and Franklin, who looked on “the very face” of the “Arctic Czar”—he and his fellow passengers wished only “to see the skirts of his robe, blown southward by summer-seeking winds.”⁸⁶ Nor, despite Wasson’s being a self-confessed Transcendentalist, was his Labrador a sacred space, to use Mircea Eliade’s term, but rather one in which people struggled against Nature for basic survival.⁸⁷ The same essential message was reflected in the single iceberg painting of his patron, William Bradford, despite its inspiration by the transcendental painting of Edwin Church.

Although he was fascinated by the Inuit’s survival capabilities, Wasson argued that such a society was ultimately doomed. As a firm believer in the Manifest Destiny of the United States, he had claimed in one of his earliest essays that, in wresting the land from the Aborigines who were merely “robbers in the domain of nature,” Americans had become “God’s curators for a mighty continent.” Indeed, they represented “a new man,—not merely a migrated European” but a Teutonic blend that had produced the “Anglo-American.”⁸⁸ In making this statement, Wasson was clearly inspired by Emerson’s adamic myth, which envisioned the

83 Wasson, “Ice and Esquimaux” (April 1865), p. 447.

84 *Ibid.*, p. 448.

85 On the growing popularity of the fictive travel movement in the later nineteenth century United States, see Kristin L. Hoganson, *Consumers’ Imperium: The Global Production of American Domesticity, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), chap. 4.

86 Wasson, “Ice and Esquimaux” (December 1864), pp. 729-730.

87 On Eliade’s classic formulation of sacred space, see Gatta, *Making Nature Sacred*, pp. 129-130.

88 Quoted in Spence, “D. A. Wasson,” pp. 35-36. See also Peden, “An Intellectual Biography,” p. 84. These new Americans were able to grasp simple universal truths more effectively than were members of other cultures because they did not imprison themselves within symbols, creeds, and customs that limited free speech and free thought (Peden, *An Intellectual Biography*, p. 42). In Horsman’s words, “Manifest Destiny was not simply a question of land hunger or of ports on the Pacific; it involved a belief in the destiny of a superior Anglo-Saxon race” (“Scientific Racism,” p. 164).

virgin continent as the setting for the second beginning of history.⁸⁹ From this perspective, it was logical to conclude that what predated the Pilgrim settlers in North America was pre-history and that, figuratively at least, the Aborigines were pre-adamite peoples.⁹⁰

A recent study claims that Wasson “cultivated a mystical sense of unity everywhere revealed in the universe that links him to the young Emerson,”⁹¹ but he clearly had a restrictive view concerning what it meant to be religious. In fact, Wasson argued, the closer one was tied to Nature the less one was capable of introspective contemplation and, therefore, of spirituality.⁹² Nor was Wasson’s assessment of the Inuit particularly unique or controversial.⁹³ Elisha Kent Kane, for example, had expressed much the same attitude towards those who had saved the lives of himself and his crew, for he claimed that they were so close to humanity’s natural state that they could not be judged by the standards of adult behaviour.⁹⁴ Even though Kane’s fellow American explorer, Charles Hall, argued that the Inuit were reliable informants, he failed to challenge the prevailing view that they “represented a last bastion of savagery as yet untouched by the forces of civilization.”⁹⁵ Americans were not alone in this view, for it was echoed by Scottish geologist John Francis Campbell who encountered Labrador Inuit the same year that Wasson did. In Campbell’s pseudo-scientific view, “Lapps and Esquimaux who feed on fish, are some-what fish-like; and the last grow up within natural fat great coats like seals of the glacial period in which they live.”⁹⁶

Wasson’s fellow passenger, the scientist A. S. Packard, was an exception in this respect, for he did not claim that the Inuit were incapable of adapting to the modern world. The education of those at Hopedale may not have been “so thorough-going as not to leave external traces at least of their savage antecedents,” Packard wrote, but he also posed the rhetorical question, “may this not be said of all of us?” After all, “only a few generations ago our ancestors were in a state of semi-barbarism, and the Anglo-Saxon race can date back to the Neolithic Celts and bronze-using Aryan barbarians.” The Inuit of the Labrador coast had,

89 See R. W. B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955). In his biography of Frederic Church, David Huntington claims that the artist’s landscapes reflect this myth, with its assumption that in America “man” would recover his primal innocence and be reconciled with Nature and God (“Frederic Edwin Church,” pp. iii, 274-275). For Huntington’s analysis of Church’s *The Icebergs*, see pp. 323-325.

90 As Anne McClintock notes, this was a standard colonialist trope, for “colonized people ... do not inhabit history proper but exist in a permanently anterior time within the geographic space of the modern empire as anachronistic humans, atavistic, irrational, bereft of human agency.” See McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), p. 30. Even Thoreau, who romanticized Native Americans, also believed that – as hunters incapable of becoming farmers – they were doomed to extinction (Sayre, *Thoreau*, pp. 21-27).

91 Gura, *American Transcendentalism*, p. 280.

92 Thoreau himself described his Walden Pond neighbour, a French-Canadian wood chopper, as “animal-man” rather than “spiritual man” (Wilson, *The Spiritual History*, pp. 64-65).

93 Peden refers to him as a “public intellectual” rather than an original thinker (*An Intellectual Biography*, p. 327).

94 Robinson, *The Coldest Crucible*, pp. 46-47.

95 *Ibid.*, pp. 68-75. On Mark Twain’s derogatory story, “The Esquimaux Maiden’s Romance,” published in 1870, see Helen L. Harris, “Mark Twain’s Response to the Native American,” *American Literature*, vol. 46, no. 4 (1975), pp. 500-501.

96 Campbell, *A Short American Tramp*, p. 104.

in fact, made rapid progress, according to Packard, for they were “a well-bred, kindly, intelligent, scrupulously honest folk, whereas their ancestors before the establishment of the Moravian missionaries on this coast were treacherous, crafty, and murderous.”⁹⁷ Furthermore, to a disinterested lay observer such as Algernon Willis, the Inuit were simply fellow humans, albeit culturally backward ones. Willis’s first impressions of the families at Hopedale were that they were “all very fat many quite good looking. All smell strong of fish and oil. All the houses very dirty. The Women are dressed many of them like men with seal skin pants with a waddling gait, some of them with long hair, carry their babies on their backs are lively, jolly and friendly.”⁹⁸ Willis further observed, “The Esquimaux are honest in every respect, yet they are shrewd and know how to trade.” Bradford forbade the trading of rum, but Willis and the other passengers exchanged hard tack, tobacco, and old items of clothing for seal skins, fur-lined boots, bear skulls, leather bags, duck eggs, and carved objects such as miniature kayaks. They also acquired several dogs that frequently fought amongst themselves on the return journey.⁹⁹

Willis’s unpublished journal shines a revealing light back on Wasson, who endured constant pain because of an old injury. For example, Willis recorded that one night, because Wasson alone was unable to sleep through the row, he became “determined we all should suffer with him and he would not allow any of us to sleep as he screamed and jumped out of his berth and rang the dinner bell as loud as he could.” The more cool-headed Willis could only conclude: “He seems to be nearly worn out and prostrated so that he shows a very irritable and unchristian disposition for a man in his position. I think this voyage will show to a disadvantage when he gives its story in the *Atlantic Monthly*.”¹⁰⁰ As it turned out, Wasson’s articles did not mention the quarrelsome dogs, and he was more generous to his mostly unnamed fellow travellers than some of them might have expected or deserved. His was clearly a colonializing gaze, however, insofar as it domesticated the icebergs, focussing on their shapes and colours while ignoring the danger they represented to sailors, and relegated the Inuit to an inferior branch of humanity. Iceberg tourism was slow to develop along the fog-bound Atlantic coastline, but even though Wasson’s pre-Adamite fantasy may not have gained much purchase in a literal sense, a century later the Inuit were still being referred to as a Stone Age people.¹⁰¹

97 Packard, *The Labrador Coast*, pp. 199-200. Rather ironically, Packard also recounted how he had stolen two Inuit skeletons that he had happened across on one of his rambles at Hopedale (pp. 207-208).

98 Journal of Algernon Willis, July 30, 1864.

99 *Ibid.*, August 1, 3, and 14, 1864. Bradford also acquired a porcupine that would die of starvation (August 16, 1864).

100 Journal of Algernon Willis, August 12, 1864.

101 See Joan Sangster, “Constructing the ‘Eskimo’ Wife: White Women’s Travel Writing, Colonialism, and the Canadian North, 1940-1960” in Joan Sangster, ed., *Through Feminist Eyes: Essays of Canadian Women’s History* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2011), pp. 336-337.