

Ingeborg Høvik

**Heroism and Imperialism in the Arctic:
Edwin Landseer's *Man Proposes – God
Disposes***

Edwin Landseer contributed the painting *Man Proposes – God Disposes* (Royal Holloway College, Egham), showing two polar bears amongst the remnants of a failed Arctic expedition, to the Royal Academy's annual exhibition of 1864. As contemporary nineteenth-century reviews of this exhibition show, the British public commonly associated Landseer's painting with the lost Arctic expedition of sir John Franklin, who had set out to find the Northwest Passage in 1845. Despite Landseer's gloomy representation of a present-day human disaster and, in effect, of British exploration in the Arctic, the painting became a public success upon its first showing. I will argue that a major reason why the painting became a success, was because Landseer's version of the Franklin expedition's fate offered a closure to the whole Franklin tragedy that corresponded to British nineteenth-century views on heroism and British-ness.



At the Royal Academy exhibition of 1864, Landseer's main painting, *Man Proposes – God Disposes* was sure to attract the audience's attention. On a great horizontal canvas measuring

almost a metre by two metres and a half, Landseer had painted two fearsome polar bears in a frozen landscape. The cramped composition provided only a limited view, which forced the spectators to look at the scene as they would have had they been there. The viewer was thus essentially confronted with the hostile 'reality' of the Arctic – human relics among ferocious polar bears.

In addition, the exhibition's committee had hung *Man Proposes – God Disposes* in a favourable spot. According to *The Art Journal*, the 'picture-hangers' had put Landseer's painting in one of the three posts of honour in the East, or chief, Room, of the Academy's premises on Trafalgar Square.¹ Here, *Man Proposes – God Disposes* was exhibited with J. Phillip's and John Frederick Lewis's paintings of Spain and Egypt respectively.² Displayed in proximity to Phillip's and Lewis's ordered domestic scenes from the warm and sunny 'south', the wild uncontrollable 'north' of Landseer's painting must have offered a startling contrast for the exhibition-goer.

As Landseer had probably expected, his painting received wide publicity in the press, and was arguably the most popular painting of the show.³ In addition to the visual contrasts and the painting's prominent placement, the public readily interpreted *Man Proposes – God Disposes* as showing the lost expedition of their national hero Sir John Franklin. As Landseer's biographer Cosmo Monkhouse wrote in 1877, an important reason why *Man Proposes – God Disposes* received so much attention was that the painting seized 'a subject in everybody's thoughts'.⁴

¹Anon., *The Saturday Review* (21 May 1864): 625, Anon., "The Royal Academy. London, 1 June 1864," *The Art Journal* (1 June 1864): 157, W. M Rosetti, "Art-Exhibitions in London," *Fine Arts Quarterly Review* (October 1864): 33.

² J. Phillip, *A Spanish Wake* 1864 (details about the painting's whereabouts is unknown). John Frederick Lewis, *The Hósh of the House of the Coptic Patriarc* 1864 (Private collection).

³ Anon., *Annual Register; a Review of Public Events at Home and Abroad, for the Year 1864* (London: Rivingtons, 1865) 333.

⁴ Cosmo W. Monkhouse, *Pictures by Sir Edwin Landseer, R. A.* (London: Virtue and Company, 1877) xi.

However, Landseer's painting harshly suggested Franklin's fate. The painting's dim, concealed light, the dull colours of the ice and the bleached colours of the wood and fabric imparted a dark and depressing mood. Upon this bleak background, Landseer painted the motif of two polar bears ravaging remnants of Franklin's expedition. In their natural habitat – a desolate icescape – the violence of the bears appears doubly terrifying. Although Landseer did not paint any actual bodies, the right bear chews bare bones and the left bear is tearing at a piece of red fabric that, by its colour, can be read as a metaphor for human flesh. Landseer's terrible scene was accompanied by a deterministic and moralistic title. 'Man proposes, God disposes' is based upon a Biblical proverb that says no matter what humans may attempt in their lifetime, it is God who ultimately decides their destiny.¹ The title of Landseer's painting may suggest, that the tragic fate of Franklin's expedition was unavoidable and predestined: despite modernisation, inventions and new technology, man could not overcome God's plan or defy the divine forces of a hostile nature. Landseer's painting suggests a very dark, distressing and pessimistic outlook on Franklin's fate, British imperialism in the North and, perhaps, the human condition in general.

For the lost explorers' families and friends, such as Franklin's wife, it is natural to assume that Landseer's grim representation of these explorers' death was not well received. *Man Proposes – God Disposes* was additionally touching on a controversial theme: the final end of Franklin's party. The lost expedition of John Franklin had been of great concern to the British public since the first search expeditions set out in 1847. Despite the many efforts that were made to find it, clues to the expedition's whereabouts and, later on, its bodies and remnants, were not found until 1854 when John Rae came in contact with a group of Inuit people who possessed items of the lost men. In 1859, fourteen years after Franklin's ships had left England and five years prior to the first exhibition of Landseer's painting, M'Clintock's expedition

¹ The English Standard Version, Prov. 16: 9

returned having found the area where the men had perished and some of the bodies.

One reason why Franklin's disappearance disturbed the public so greatly was the long time it had taken before the expedition was found. Some blamed the Admiralty for this delay, arguing that due to their misjudgement Franklin's men had died in vain. Additionally, the circumstances around the crews' death became a contentious issue. In October 1854, *The Times* published Rae's official report on his discoveries. In his report, Rae testified that Franklin's crew had died from starvation and that, 'From the mutilated state of many of the corpses and the contents of the kettles, it is evident that our wretched countrymen had been driven to the last resource – cannibalism – as a means of prolonging existence'.¹

According to contemporary Britons, resorting to cannibalism was 'worse than death'. An article that featured in *The Spectator* after the publication of Rae's report in *The Times* suggests how difficult it was for contemporary society to accept Rae's allegations. The author of the article in *The Spectator* argues that it was impossible for heroic Englishmen – such as Franklin – to become cannibals. In his defence of Franklin, the author refers to the hardships of Franklin's 1821 expedition, where parts of the crew had died from starvation:

The officer and men had come down to the point of actual starvation, beyond even the stage where they were feeding upon rotten offal which excoriated their mouths; and they were without a thought of recourse to a sustenance which is worse than death. But there was one amongst them – Michel, a Canadian – who frequently absented himself in the rear; who took possession of a hatchet under circumstances which suggested that he intended to cut up something frozen; and who remained strong [...] This Michel once brought some piece of meat which he asserted to be wolf's flesh, but which, there was afterwards reason to suspect, was part of a fellow

¹ John Rae, "The Arctic Expedition," *The Times* 23 October 1854, 7.

Canadian [...] Richardson undertook the responsibility of shooting him.¹

According to the author of this article, Franklin and the rest of the survivors were finally rescued, returning home with 'virtues unblemished' and 'names immortalized', proving that: 'even such experiences are not sufficient to measure the resolution or enterprise of Englishmen'.² This quote suggests that, though it may be possible for a Canadian, resorting to cannibalism was something English explorers would never do, however famished they may be.

Although Rae's observations were probably correct and one reason why he hurried to publish his findings was to put the public's mind at rest, this is not what happened. Instead, as the quote in *The Spectator* illustrates, the public was shocked and questioned the veracity of Rae's statement. A strong scepticism and disbelief concerning Rae's discoveries of 'the fate of Franklin' were repeated in other journal and newspaper articles of 1854. Some articles expressed a belief that the party could still be alive while others argued that treacherous 'Esquimaux' had killed Franklin and his men.³

In 1857 these questions were still present and the desire to solve the mystery of Franklin's whereabouts appears to have been a reason why the search for Franklin continued. One example of this is the search party lead by captain M'Clintock, an expedition initiated by Lady Franklin in 1857. In his journal, M'Clintock explains that his motives for participating in the search expedition resulted from 'an earnest desire to extend succour to any chance survivors of the missing expedition who might still exist, or at least, to ascertain their fate, and rescue from oblivion their heroic

¹ Anon., "Franklin and Collinson," *The Spectator* (28 October 1854): 1128.

² Ibid.

³ Anon., *The Times* 1 November 1854, 9, Anon., "The Fate of Franklin," *The Times* 7 November 1854, 8, Anon., "The Fate of Franklin," *The Athenaeum* (28 October 1854): 1305, Anon., "The Fate of Franklin," *The Atlas* (28 October 1854): 793, E.J.H., *The Times* 3 November 1854, 7.

deeds'.¹ Although M'Clintock, perhaps out of courtesy, did not mention the word cannibalism, it seems probable that his and Lady Franklin's desire to establish the truth about the men's fate was related to a fear that Rae's report would disrupt the public image of Franklin as a national hero. Moreover, M'Clintock's quote shows that the anxiety following Rae's report in 1854 was still present at the end of the decade.

Representing the final fate of Franklin's crew, Landseer's painting addressed an issue that was still controversial and sensitive at the time of the Royal Academy exhibition in 1864. It seems reasonable to believe that visitors to the exhibition would dismiss *Man Proposes – God Disposes* as offensive and tasteless. One review of the Royal Academy's exhibition did comment upon the inappropriateness of Landseer's motif. While it recognised Landseer's talent as an animal painter, *The Athenaeum* noted that, 'As to his choice of subject, we protest against it. – Sir E. Landseer's most pleasant and healthiest picture here is *Piper and Pair of Nutcrackers*'.²

Most art critics, however, as well as the general viewing public perceived Landseer's painting very positively. According to W. M. Rossetti, *Man Proposes – God Disposes*, 'raised a general chorus of sympathy and acclamation' and it was arguably one of the most popular paintings of the show.³ Except for the art critic in *The Athenaeum*, the remaining ten reviews of the 1864 exhibition that I have read reflect an opinion similar to the public's general response. *Fraser's Magazine* described *Man Proposes – God Disposes* as an 'epic' and as Landseer's 'crowning achievement' while *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* wrote that the painting

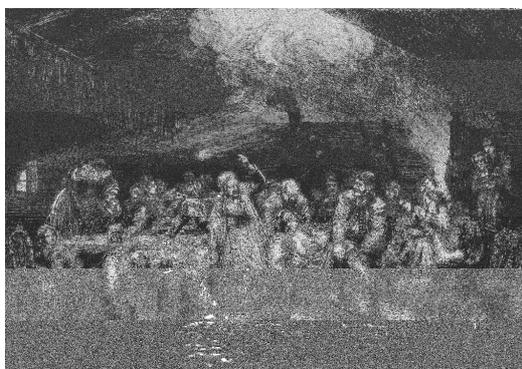
¹ Francis Leopold M'Clintock, *Fate of John Franklin. The Voyage of the 'Fox' in the Arctic Seas in Search of Franklin and His Companion*, Fifth ed. (London: John Murray, 1881 (1859)) 8. Emphasis added

² Anon., "Fine Arts. The Royal Academy," *The Athenaeum* (7 May 1864): 650.

³ Anon., *Annual Register; a Review of Public Events at Home and Abroad, for the Year 1864* 333, W. M Rosetti, *Fraser's Magazine* (July 1864): 67, Rosetti, "Art-Exhibitions in London," 27.

witnessed the artist's comeback.¹ In relation to the painting's motif, *The Saturday Review* argued that *Man Proposes – God Disposes* was an honourable commemoration of Franklin and his crew. The 'relics' from the dead explorers were arguably things 'which have been, and may be again'.² In other words, Landseer's work immortalised the dead men. *The Spectator* similarly argued that animal painting had never been 'turned to so noble account as this'.³ Instead of seeing the painting as offensive and insensitive, these reviews show that the public interpreted *Man Proposes – God Disposes* as a respectful representation of Franklin's final fate. What set of aesthetics did Landseer follow to earn the acclaim of these art critics?

Following certain reviews of the Royal Academy's 1864 exhibition, it appears that art critics often disapproved of paintings that, in their opinion, were too emotional or violent or showing immoral scenes. An example of this is seen in *The Reader's* assessment of Landseer's subject in comparison with Aldolph Tidemand's *An Old Norwegian Duel* (Private collection).



”Foto©: O. Væring Eftf. AS

¹ Anon., "The London Art Season," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (July 1864): 95, Rosetti: 67.

² Anon., "The Royal Academy of 1864. (Fourth Notice)," *The Saturday Review* 17 (4 June 1864): 689.

³ V, "Fine Arts. The Royal Academy," *The Spectator* 37 (14 May 1864): 564.

The cause for the assessment was the critic's urge to explain why Tidemand's painting – showing the deadly outcome of a fight in a crowded farmhouse – was arguably more popular with the public than *Man Proposes – God Disposes*. According to *The Reader's* art critic, Tidemand's painting could not compare to Landseer's motif, as it represented 'a drinking bout interrupted by a quarrel, leading to the bloody encounter between two peasants, who, in accordance with the savage custom of a barbarous time and race, hack each other to death with axes in the presence of men, women and children'.¹ Along the same lines, *The Art Journal* argued that Tidemand had missed one of 'the ethics of Art', which was that the motif should be 'permissible to ears polite' and 'within permitted social limits'.² In contrast to Tidemand's 'revolting and hideous' motif, the art critic in *The Reader* wrote about *Man Proposes – God Disposes* that:

Landseer's choice of subject [...] is a noble one; the subject itself, highly poetical, full of pathos – suggestive of the battle waged by human effort with the unrelenting powers of nature [...] of the true 'excelsior' spirit of which those bones bear witness, which might well be spared to the bears; above all, perhaps, attractive from the sense of mystery pervading the whole scene before us, and which raises the picture to the dignity of a poem.³

As this quote shows, mid-nineteenth-century art critics viewed *Man Proposes – God Disposes* as representing a 'noble' or 'moral' subject. Unlike Tidemand's sinful motif – showing drunkenness and violence – there was nothing decadent about the human bones, artefacts and polar bears in Landseer's painting. Although *Man Proposes – God Disposes* showed traces of pain and sufferings, Landseer's painting was only 'suggestive' of the lost battle.

In contrast to *An Old Norwegian Duel*, Landseer's painting was credited for representing a potentially emotional subject with

¹ Anon., *The Reader* (4 June 1864): 724.

² Anon., "The Royal Academy. London, 1 June 1864," 163-65.

³ Anon., *The Reader* (4 June 1864): 724

a 'sublimity of sentiment'. Although *The Saturday Review*'s art critic noted that Landseer showed 'one aspect of the terror of death', the artist had, in his mind, ultimately 'saved his work, in part by the total freedom from sentimentalism; but most, perhaps, by the skill with which the idea of actual human suffering has been removed from the blanched bones and relics, obviously exposed to many Arctic winters'.¹ As the art critic in *The Saturday Review* pointed out, Landseer had managed to hold back, or represent Franklin's fate with as little emotion and violence as the motif allowed. Instead of actual bodies, for example, there were bones; in the place of actual human flesh, there was a red coloured piece of fabric. The 'blanched' bones and artefacts were further interpreted as indicating a time lapse, and Landseer's distancing from the tragedy took away any potential feelings of sadness or pity in the image. This elevated it from being a vulgar, populist or sensationalist account of Franklin's ill-fated expedition, to becoming a moral and sublime painting. Though the painting suggested the bravery and hardships of the dead explorers, these traits are understated. In contrast to the weapons, blood and anger of Tidemand's painting, the noble motif and the exclusion of violence made Landseer's painting permissible to 'ears polite'.

At the same time, Landseer was, in fact, offering an accepted ending to 'the fate of Franklin'. The discourse on and about the lost expedition is characterised by a language that is repeated in the reviews of Landseer's painting later on, suggesting a similar view on Franklin's end. *The Saturday Review*, for example, described Landseer's painting as, 'a memory of the brave men whose lives we sacrificed'.² Similarly, articles concerned with the search expeditions in 1854 described Franklin as 'the man who braved perils for the world's good in obedience to his country's commands'.³ Furthermore, *The Reader*'s review of *Man Proposes – God Disposes*, quoted above, echoes M'Clintock's description of

¹ Anon., "The Royal Academy of 1864. (Fourth Notice)," 689.

² Ibid.

³ Anon., *The Times* 2 November 1854, 8. A similar language features in all articles concerned with the Franklin expedition's fate in *The Times* from 23 October to 8 November 1854

the unfortunate sailors' fate. In the same tone, M'Clintock articulated the accepted version of Franklin's final destiny. In one of the last chapters of his journal, M'Clintock wrote:

There is something deeply touching in their extreme simplicity, and the show in the strongest manner that both the leaders of this retreating party were actuated by the loftiest sense of duty, and met with calmness and decision the fearful alternative of a last bold struggle for life, rather than perish without effort on board their ships; for we all know that the 'Erebus' and 'Terror' were only provisioned up to July, 1848.¹

According to the art critic in *The Reader*, Landseer had elevated Franklin's expedition to 'the dignity of a poem' that corresponded to the noble character of the unfortunate men who had battled the 'unrelenting powers of nature'. In a similar way, M'Clintock describes the stoic manner in which Franklin's party had spent their final days. Unlike the statements of Rae's report, M'Clintock's quote argues that Franklin and his men had died a heroic death; they had not only sacrificed themselves whilst in the service of their country and their noble quest for knowledge, they had also showed great strength and splendour in their final struggle for survival. Rather than giving up, they decided with 'calmness' to challenge their destiny as the brave men they were.

To the nineteenth-century public Landseer's painting offered a comparable closure. In his emotionally restrained painting the only man-eating carnivores are two polar bears. Furthermore, the implements in the painting's left-hand corner – a telescope and a notebook – do not suggest any violence. Instead of tools that perhaps would have been more useful to survival – such as a gun, knife, a tinder box or, indeed, an ice hatchet and a cooking pot – the telescope and notebook in Landseer's painting seem to relate to the 'calmness' and 'sense of duty' that M'Clintock applauds in his journal. A reason why *Man Proposes – God Disposes* was so well received may therefore be that – as with M'Clintock's 're-

¹ M'Clintock, *Fate of John Franklin. The Voyage of the 'Fox' in the Arctic Seas in Search of Franklin and His Companion* 247.

discovery' of Franklin's fate – Landseer proposed that Franklin and his men had stayed 'civilised' and 'English', until the bitter end.

Bibliography

- Anon. *The Times* 2 November 1854.
- . *The Reader* (4 June 1864): 724.
- . *The Saturday Review* (21 May 1864).
- . *The Times* 1 November 1854, 9.
- . *Annual Register; a Review of Public Events at Home and Abroad, for the Year 1864*. London: Rivingtons, 1865.
- . "Fine Arts. The Royal Academy." *The Athenaeum* (7 May 1864): 650-51.
- . "Franklin and Collinson." *The Spectator* (28 October 1854): 1127-28.
- . "The Fate of Franklin." *The Times* 7 November 1854, 8.
- . "The Fate of Franklin." *The Athenaeum* (28 October 1854): 1305.
- . "The Fate of Franklin." *The Atlas* (28 October 1854): 793.
- . "The London Art Season." *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (July 1864): 84-102.
- . "The Royal Academy of 1864. (Fourth Notice)." *The Saturday Review* 17 (4 June 1864): 687-89.
- . "The Royal Academy. London, 1 June 1864." *The Art Journal* (1 June 1864): 157-68.
- E.J.H. *The Times* 3 November 1854, 7.
- M'Clintock, Francis Leopold. *Fate of John Franklin. The Voyage of the 'Fox' in the Arctic Seas in Search of Franklin and His Companion*. Fifth ed. London: John Murray, 1881 (1859).
- Monkhouse, Cosmo W. *Pictures by Sir Edwin Landseer, R. A.* London: Virtue and Company, 1877.
- Rae, John. "The Arctic Expedition." *The Times* 23 October 1854, 7.
- Rosetti, W. M. *Fraser's Magazine* (July 1864): 57-74.
- . "Art-Exhibitions in London." *Fine Arts Quarterly Review* (October 1864): 26-55.
- V. "Fine Arts. The Royal Academy." *The Spectator* 37 (14 May 1864): 564.