

## THE ARCTIC PLAYGROUND OF EUROPE: SIR MARTIN CONWAY'S SVALBARD

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If tourism is a defining feature of modernity, as Dean MacCannell has famously claimed (MacCannell 1976), then the High Arctic archipelago of Svalbard became incorporated into the modern world during the latter half of the nineteenth century when it emerged as a tourist destination. Since their discovery in 1596, these islands in the Arctic Ocean between the latitudes of 74° and 81° North had primarily been associated with resource exploitation and scientific expeditions. Moreover, Svalbard functioned as a “base camp” for attempts to reach the North Pole (Arlov 2003, 201). But starting with the Anglo-Irish Lord Dufferin’s luxurious yachting voyage in 1856, later the subject of a bestselling travelogue, Svalbard also began to be construed as a holiday destination for adventurous gentlemen (Hansson 2009; Reilly 2009). At first such tourists were wealthy independent travellers like Benjamin Leigh Smith (Capelotti 2013) and Sir James Lamont, who in the preface to *Yachting in the Arctic Seas* (1876) claims that he had written the book to encourage “many men of leisure and means” to explore the same area (Lamont 1876, v). Soon, however, regular cruise ships started bringing less exclusive groups of tourists to the archipelago, and from the summer of 1897 the voyage could be combined with a stay at a newly erected inn for travellers in Advent Bay (Elstad 2004, 480).

Few of the early Svalbard tourists ventured far from the coast. One of the first to do so was the British art historian and mountaineer, Sir William Martin Conway (1856–1936).<sup>1</sup> Later better known for his history of the archipelago, *No Man’s Land* (1906), he organised two expeditions to chart the little known interior of the main island, Spitsbergen, during the 1890s. Both resulted in books demonstrating the accessibility and pleasures, as well as the particular demands, of the landscape. Though narrated as exploration accounts and following many of the demands of that genre – such as an emphasis on natural science and collecting, on being the first and on mapping previously unmapped terrain – they may also be read as guidebooks in which Conway and his travel companions laid out a path that other undaunted tourists might follow (fig. 1). Already well known as an Alpine mountaineer and the recent author of two spectacular mountaineering narratives, *Climbing and Exploration in the Karakoram-Himalayas* (1894) and *The Alps from End to End* (1895), Conway seems to have turned to Svalbard as an even more challenging unexplored “substitute for the Alps” (Stephen 1956, 203). In his Svalbard travelogues, *The First Crossing of Spitsbergen* (1897) and *With Ski and Sledge over Arctic Glaciers* (1898) (hereafter abbreviated *FC* and *SS*), he highlights the touristic and mountaineering potential of the archipelago by showing that its mountain

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<sup>1</sup> Conway sometimes published as William Martin and sometimes as Martin, which he usually preferred. See the bibliography.



Fig. 1: “The Summit of Fox Peak.” Illustration in *The First Crossing of Spitsbergen*.

scenery in some way surpasses even the Alps and therefore “seems to be intended by Nature for the arctic ‘Playground of Europe’” (SS 73).

Conway’s two Svalbard narratives broke new ground by incorporating the archipelago in the late nineteenth-century European “planetary consciousness” (Pratt 1992, 15). As an experienced international mountaineer Conway transposed to the High Arctic his Alpine Club credentials of “manliness and a rugged gentility” (Hansen 2013, 183), but as a Cambridge-educated art historian he also had an aesthetic interest in mountains. He was well aware that their appeal was the product of a change in cultivated taste attributable to the Romantics and their Wordsworth-inspired Victorian successor, John Ruskin. “Mountains thrill us,” he wrote, “because Wordsworth and Ruskin opened our eyes” (Conway 1920, 3). I will argue that Conway’s representation of the Svalbard landscape in his travelogues may be explained in terms of a combination of a Ruskinian geology-informed mountain aesthetic and a gentlemanly perspective on climbing and camp life. He clearly intended to establish Svalbard as a tourist destination appropriate for a category of discerning and vigorous British travellers unafraid to venture far off “the beaten track” of Continental Europe (cf. Buzard 1993) and interested in ascending unfamiliar mountains and glaciers. Notably, scientific exploration validates the elite form of Arctic tourism that he wants to promote: “Here, then, is a chance for competent men to enjoy holidays of an active, health-giving, and novel sort, and at the same time to perform good and fruitful service to science” (FC 349).

### **The Gentleman’s Arctic**

In the introduction to *The First Crossing of Spitsbergen* Conway pays homage to his predecessor Lord Dufferin’s *Letters from High Latitudes* (1857) as an important source of inspiration. Specifically, he credits Dufferin with making the archipelago emerge for him “from the fogs and darkness of Arctic mystery, as a land of

mountains and glaciers, of splintered peaks and icy bays, a place worth seeing and even worth going to see” (FC 1). What he does not explicitly state is that Dufferin’s textual persona was clearly also a role model. As Heidi Hansson has argued, *Letters from High Latitudes* represents a touristic counter-discourse to common depictions of the High Arctic as a “last frontier”, where heroic survival demands coping with severe cold, distance from civilisation, danger of starvation, exposure to extreme natural conditions and so on (Hansson 2009, 61). Instead, Dufferin’s northern tour is narrated “as a gentlemanly pursuit” in which “the notion of the North as a testing ground for heroes” is continually deflated. The account repeatedly “draws attention to the writer’s refinement and good breeding”, Hansson writes, which together with a detached and humorous acceptance of difficult obstacles, a non-specialist but casually well-informed outlook and lightly carried learning mark him out as a true gentleman (Hansson 2009, 64).

Nevertheless, the rationale of Dufferin’s narrative, according to Hansson, is “the romance of the Arctic, which builds on the image of man pitted against the forces of harsh and dangerous nature” (Hansson 2009, 68). This aspect is primarily conveyed in the illustrations, many of which depict very rough seas, steep mountains and icebergs. The images represent a dramatic context for the experiences recounted in the narrative. Although Hansson concludes that *Letters from High Latitudes*, at one level, “functions as a manual for gentlemanly behaviour”, she also notes that, “there is no sense that Dufferin’s masculinity should be compromised by this downplaying of traditional male virtues. [...] He is already performing masculinity by travelling North by sea and there is consequently no need for him to narrate his manliness” (Hansson 2009, 70).

Much of what Hansson writes about Dufferin could have pertained to Conway whose Svalbard travelogues are characterised by a similar duality. Like Dufferin he casts himself as a gentleman tourist – upper-class, detached, well-bred and well-informed without being pedantic, and like Dufferin, too, he makes light of obstacles and avoids casting himself in a conventional heroic role. However, as a mountaineer, skier and sledge-hauler with an objective of charting the Svalbard topography, he displays a toughness and tenacity that the pampered Dufferin in his well-appointed yacht does not need. In performative terms Conway’s textual persona therefore represents a more rugged version of the manliness exemplified by Dufferin. The two travellers differ even more in their attitude toward the landscape. Dufferin saw little to praise in Svalbard. Describing his first encounter with the archipelago on 6 August 1856, he foregrounds the “appearance of deadness [...] strikingly exhibited” (Dufferin [1857] 1879, 186) – an impression confirmed when he goes ashore and sees “skulls of walrus, ribs and shoulder-blades of bears”, as well as an open coffin with “the bleaching bones of a human skeleton” (Dufferin [1857] 1879, 190). Such discoveries are so distasteful that he does not want to weary the recipient of his letters with a detailed account of his visit, assuming that it “would probably only make you wonder why on earth we should have wished to come so far to see so little” (Dufferin [1857] 1879, 195). Conway’s response, as his introduction indicates, is equivocal. By converting Samuel Johnson’s famous riposte to James Boswell – “Worth seeing? yes; but not worth going to see” (Boswell [1791] 1992, 912) – into a declaration that Svalbard is indeed “a place worth seeing and even worth going to

see”, he distances himself from his admired predecessor by establishing his own sightseeing agenda.

As a mountaineer Martin Conway was a self-declared “excentrist”. That is, unlike “centrists” who stay in one place in order to climb all nearby peaks, he advocated covering as much ground as possible for the purpose of grasping the many different aspects of mountain regions (Conway 1891, 401–2). His main interest, he told fellow-members of the Alpine Club in 1917, had always been “not in climbing but in the scenery and the natural phenomena” (Conway 1817, 147). Tiring of the Alps after twenty years that involved not only climbing, but also the publication of a series of Alpine climbers’ guides, he moved on to the Himalayas and, some years later, to Svalbard: “There [...] the wonder and the mystery returned in full measure, in spite of Alpine knowledge and experience. Nothing in them was quite the same as in Europe. Moreover it was impossible in a single season to solve their topographical problems” (Conway 1817, 156).

In his climbing memoir, *Mountain Memories* (1920), as well as in his first Svalbard travel book, Conway explains that his interest in extending his climbing activities into the North was sparked accidentally when as editor of the *Alpine Journal* he received an article about the ascent and naming of Mount Lusitania in Sassen Bay. Describing an area unfamiliar to most British climbers, it raised many questions that encouraged him first to delve into the history of Svalbard exploration and then to explore the archipelago himself. More curiously, but in keeping with an Anglocentric perspective, he also claims to have been inspired by the sight one early winter morning of the frozen Serpentine in Hyde Park glittering as the sun shone through the mist: “The tender evanescent beauty of the scene took sudden possession of me. Thus, perhaps, on a grander scale might arctic visions fashion themselves” (Conway 1920, 192). The combined emphasis on topographical studies, climbing and aesthetics inform both his Svalbard travelogues.

Conway’s first and most ambitious expedition to Svalbard took place in the summer of 1896, the second a year later. Both were thoroughly documented in diaries and notebooks (now at the Cambridge University Library) and public lectures, as well as in his two travelogues. The expressed purpose of the first expedition, which had been partially sponsored by a £300 grant from the Royal Geographical Society, was to make “a sketch survey of an area of about 600 square miles in the heart of the interesting middle belt of the country” (FC 11). In a paper presented to the RGS in January 1897, Conway argues that “this peculiar island of temperate climate in the midst of Arctic ice-sheets” is of general geological interest, because it represents “one of the very best examples in the world of the processes of mountain and valley manufacture” (Conway 1897a, 355). Hence, according to the tenets of geological uniformitarianism – the view that all geological changes, in the words of Charles Lyell, may be explained by “the evidence of those minute, but incessant mutations, which every part of the earth’s surface is undergoing” (Lyell 1833, 3) – studying even a limited area of the island of Spitsbergen might have global significance.

The coast-to-coast itinerary narrated in *The First Crossing of Spitsbergen* seems to have been modelled on the Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen’s skiing expedition across the Greenland ice-shelf eight years previously, although Conway and his

companions did not use skis until the following summer. Conway's title, which echoes Nansen's *The First Crossing of Greenland* (1890), is phrased in the language of geographical discovery. Likewise, in the tradition of polar explorers such as Nansen, one member of his party, the geologist Edmund Garwood, in an inserted report represents the Arctic as a mystery to be unlocked:

In the bay at my feet gigantic icebergs of a wondrous blue shimmered in the frosty light as they glided seawards on the ebbing tide. Beyond lay the ice-pack, and at the back of beyond lay that mysterious region whose secret so many had tried in vain to solve, and which, in spite of many an heroic effort, it still clasps tightly in its icy grasp. I thought of Nansen, that gallant Norseman, who, sailing northwards now three years ago, had drifted into the silence of that frozen waste; and, as I gazed, there crept over me a deep mysterious awe, a shadow from the threshold of the great unknown. (*FC* 47–8)

Believing that the interior of Spitsbergen like that of Greenland would be ice-covered, Conway and his companions had originally planned “to strike across the island along two or three lines”, but the group soon realised that they were dealing with a very different terrain whose “intricate nature” made rapid movement impossible and reduced them to making short geological and botanical excursions from a series of camps (*FC* 8). After a month, a combination of low fog, icy wind and rain put an end to surveying. The last third of Conway's travelogue consequently deals primarily with a boat trip along the coast, following a route described many times before by earlier travellers. In the text the change of plans is anticipated via detailed accounts of the difficulties the expedition encountered. These were partly of their own making, a fact Conway does not try to conceal but ascribes to “the drawbacks under which pioneers labour” (*FC* 8). Hence, they had to learn the hard way that the Nansen sledges they had brought were “mere costly ineptitudes” in the rocky and boggy Spitsbergen valleys (*FC* 77), as were the ponies that pulled the sledges when encountering the crevasses, snow and ice on higher ground.

In spite of his declared ambitions, Conway's emphasis in both the RGS paper, which was printed in the *Geographical Journal* (Conway 1897a), and the book-length narrative published a few months later, is on the specific, anecdotal and touristic. Closely based on his diary and notebook, *The First Crossing of Spitsbergen* has the form of a day-by-day account of the journey. In addition to Conway himself, his party consisted of three experienced British naturalists, who all contributed reports to the book, and his cousin, who joined as expedition artist. In addition, two Norwegian assistants, one “reputed to be well versed in Spitsbergenography”, the other “of less precisely defined qualifications”, were hired in Tromsø in northern Norway (*FC* 35). For much of the expedition they divided into separate parties that together covered as much ground as possible and climbed many mountains “surveying, geologising or collecting” (*FC* 193). Nonetheless, Conway's narrative attempts to provide a sense of coherence through a focus on his own role as leader, topographer and surveyor, often under difficult conditions.



Fig. 2: “The Survivors and Their Hut.” Illustration in *The First Crossing of Spitsbergen*.

Even if Conway was more an adventurous tourist than an explorer, and his lightness of tone suggests the former, he underscores the extreme severity of the Arctic climate and natural conditions in and around Svalbard. These are encountered early in *The First Crossing of Spitsbergen* when on their approach to Advent Bay drift ice threatens to trap and destroy their ship. Soon after, they take on board from a small boat two men with “a horrible tale to tell of privation, sickness, and death” (FC 55). They are the survivors of a party of four Norwegian reindeer hunters who had been and forced to winter on Svalbard, first in their boat, which was later crushed by the ice, then in a makeshift hut. As a reminder to his readers of the potential perils of travel to the High Arctic, Conway recapitulates their story in the form of a long first-person narrative based (as his 1896 notebook proves) on detailed notes taken at the time. He also describes the wreck of their sloop, their hut and the two barrels covered with a sail that contain the body of their dead skipper, the frozen ground having made it impossible to bury him (fig. 2). On the last evening of their overland journey Conway revisits the site to look at “the winterer’s grave and the ruins of his hut” and is struck by the “settled melancholy [that] pervaded the silent scene” (FC 316). The plight of the survivors confirm Dufferin’s claim that Svalbard winters are “unendurable” (Dufferin [1857] 1879, 196).

Although Conway’s expedition takes place during the more hospitable and temperate summer season, the story of the winterers’ disaster resonates throughout his narrative, and in that sense its function is similar to Dufferin’s many highly dramatic illustrations. It creates a sense of impending doom that is reinforced by Conway’s use of an image of their sloop caught in ice as a frontispiece, and also by an incident preceding the meeting with the survivors, when Conway is by himself, confused, hungry and lost and beginning to think about the delusions of “marooned

mariners” and “the strain of Arctic solitude” (FC 51). Behind this self-image is clearly also the tragic Franklin expedition, kept in the public consciousness throughout the second half of the nineteenth century via narratives of new search expeditions, such as Charles Francis Hall’s *Life with the Esquimaux: A Narrative of Arctic Experiences in Search of Survivors of Sir John Franklin’s Expedition* and the anonymous *The Search for Franklin: A Narrative of the American Expedition under Lieutenant Schwatka, 1878 to 1880*, published in London in 1865 and 1882 respectively.

### A Ruskinian Arctic

Despite intimations of mortality, Conway describes the Svalbard summer as endurable and the terrain as relatively accessible, at least to experienced mountaineers like himself and his companions. His approach to the landscape, which combines scientific and aesthetic observations, is related to, and was probably directly inspired by, John Ruskin’s “science of aspects” (Ruskin 1903–12, 5:387). Ruskin develops this methodology in his popular five-volume treatise on landscape art, *Modern Painters* (1843–60), as a response to nature “combining the inductive observation of facts with the operation of the imagination” (Smith 1994, 153). Summarising his position in a postscript to a paper presented to the Mineralogical Society in Edinburgh in 1884, Ruskin emphasises that “precisely the same faculties of eye and mind are concerned in the analysis of natural and of pictorial forms” (Ruskin 1903–12, 26:386). Both nature and art demand the same attention to detail and the same imaginative grasp of the whole – a view endorsed throughout Conway’s Svalbard travelogues.

Originally written in defence of J.M.W. Turner as a landscape artist who contrary to contemporary critical opinion was truer to nature than the lauded old masters, *Modern Painters* developed over sixteen years into a wide-ranging exposition of what Elizabeth Helsinger has called Ruskin’s “art of the beholder”. This art, according to Helsinger, may be described as “a new science of perception” in which the “wandering natural scientist, like a visionary artist, does not merely observe but perceives: his own responses, shaping his observations, are an admitted part of his subject” (Helsinger 1982, 64). As Ruskin makes clear, in a chapter of the final volume titled “On Vulgarly”, the ideal “beholder” is a (British) gentleman, a category he views less as a representative of an educated social elite (though he links gentlemanliness to “high breeding”) than in terms of innate qualities, “that fineness of structure in the body, which renders it capable of the most delicate sensation; and of structure in the mind which renders it capable of the most delicate sympathies – one may say, simply, ‘fineness of nature’” (Ruskin 1903–12, 7:345).

Elsewhere, and by his own example, he shows that the best perceptions are also based on such gentlemanly prerogatives as academic training extended by many years of study and practice, and enhanced by an ability of comparison acquired through travel and observation. But in the final instance, Ruskin’s beholder’s art comes down to the individual qualities and “fineness of nature” of the viewer. “Believe me, gentlemen,” he exhorts his readers in the first chapter of *Deucalion*, “The Alps and Jura”, based on a lecture in Oxford in 1874, “your power of seeing mountains cannot be developed either by your vanity, your curiosity, or your love of

muscular exercise. It depends on the cultivation of the instrument of sight itself, and of the soul that uses it" (Ruskin 1903–12, 26:103). Or, as Conway puts it in his memoir: "It is not Nature that illuminates the mind, but the mind that illuminates Nature. The beauty that we behold must first rise in ourselves" (Conway 1920, 3).

Both Conway's Svalbard travelogues show that he shared Ruskin's views on the importance of "fineness of nature", gentility and cultivated sight for correct perceptions of mountain landscapes. Yet neither contains any direct references to Ruskin. Instead, most of Conway's cited sources are well-known contemporary Arctic explorers such as Nansen, Robert Edwin Peary, Gerhard De Geer and Adolf Erik Nordenskiöld, into whose elevated company he implicitly wants to insert himself, either by relying on them or by confirming or correcting their observations. However, an entry dated 3 August in the notebook from his second summer expedition on the island of Spitsbergen indicates the extent to which he relied on a Ruskinian methodology. The expressed purpose of that trip was to explore some of the glaciers on the island, and after ascending the Pretender in King's Bay, he examines the foot of the precipice together with one of the geologists from the previous year, Edmund Garwood, who is trying to locate a fault. "Precipice becomes more imposing as better known & nearer its foot you come," he comments. "You must compare yourself with it to feel its size. A mere rock-wall at a distance is nothing. It becomes great by comparison with man. You must get under it to know it. Now it is veiled in mist. (Ruskin on precipices.)" What Conway has in mind in the final note to himself is probably Ruskin's dismissal of the "false sublime" of obscurity and distance in the fourth volume of *Modern Painters*, where he argues that nothing can be more impressive than "a faithful rendering" of a precipice: "For the majesty of this kind of cliff depends entirely on its size: a low range of such rock is as uninteresting as it is ugly; and it is only by making the spectator understand the enormous scale of their desolation [...] that any impression can be made upon his mind" (Ruskin 1903–12, 6:296–97). As the whole quote from his notebook shows, Conway follows Ruskin in attempting to ground his descriptions of mountain scenery and its effect both on accurate assessments of scale and on close observations of, in Ruskin's words, "the trifling details which really are its elements" (Ruskin 1903–12, 6:317).

Unlike Ruskin who had published his first article on geology and mineralogy at the age of fifteen and studied under the renowned geologist William Buckland at Oxford, Conway did not have any formal science background. This is noted by the *Times* reviewer of *The First Crossing of Spitsbergen*, who remarks that the language Conway uses to describe northern landscapes "reminds one that [he] is first of all an artist" ("Spitzbergen" 1897). Characterising himself as an amateur scientist at best, Conway generally leaves the analysis of geological formations and specimens to his scientific companions and their separate reports, though as a long-time Alpinist he shows himself well informed particularly about glaciers and glacial actions. Like Dufferin, he carried his learning lightly. But he shared with Ruskin a mountain aesthetic based not only on the tradition of landscape painting, but also on practical knowledge acquired through laborious scrambles among Alpine rocks and crags (Colley 2010: 154). This is what makes him argue, in *With Ski and Sledge over Arctic Glaciers*, that "only mountain climbers are in the position to thrill with perfect



resonance to the glory of a mountain prospect” (SS 118). In his role of expedition surveyor on both his Svalbard ventures he puts up the plane table he had started using in Himalaya whenever physical conditions and weather permit. Nevertheless, accounts of views that are meant to serve topographical purposes often merge into Ruskinian word paintings obviously aimed at suggesting a more subjective, poetic or pictorial vision of the Arctic landscape.

By his own account, Conway uses a visual style is to give readers unfamiliar with the Arctic a sense of how best to view “its splendour” (SS 9). Since most of the sights originate in topographical prospects, they are typically seen from a static viewpoint and usually arrange the landscape according to conventional pictorial norms. Sometimes, however, the scenery changes with the movement of the beholder, as when he describes a midnight march in mid-July with Garwood on the Nordenskiöld Glacier during his second summer in Svalbard:

High above the clear air that surrounded us was a dark-blue roof of soft cloud, resting on skyey walls of marvellous colours, with streaks of stratus across them, reflecting the golden sunlight. The sun itself was hidden in the north, but beneath it hung a reticulated web, woven of gold and Tyrian purple, through which shafts of tender light drooped down like eyelashes upon the snow. All around, the *névé* went sweeping away in gentle curves and domes, greyish-white in some places with purple shadows, bluish-grey in others, here and there strewn with carpets of sunlight. The rocks, too, wherever they appeared, were rich in colour, showing their own ruddy or orange tints enforced by the lustrous atmosphere. There was none of the sharp contrast of black and white that strikes a superficial observer in high mountain views. This panorama was a glorious mass of colours, harmonious without rift and rich without monotony. Just at midnight the cloud-roof opened in the north and a flood of sunshine fell around and upon us – a veritable transformation and thrilling glory which cannot be told. Entranced with beauty, we marched on and on over the wide snowfield, with a sense of boundless space, a feeling of freedom, a joy as in the ownership of the whole universe [...] (SS 46–7)

As Conway reminds his readers, it is the clarity of the air on this particular occasion that causes both the intensity of their visual impressions and their sense of liberation. At the conclusion of the passage the High Arctic is summed up as one of “the great clean places of the earth”. Here, its opposite does not represent, as is usually the case in comparisons between North and South, a positive fertility. Instead it is associated with dirt and decay: “Green country, after such regions, is land soiled by mildew” (SS 47).

Conway’s word paintings suggest that he is repeatedly amazed – and assumes that his readers will be too – by the many colours of the Spitsbergen landscape. Rocks are “gaudy with flaming colour” (SS 65), valleys are “deep blue cloud-enveloped” (FC 109), remote hills are “indigo, patched with orange, gold and pink” (SS 48), a prospect is memorable because of “the gravity of the colouring, the dark-green sea, the purple rocks, the blue glacier cliff, the near grey, the remote yellowish snow”



Fig. 3: “Glacier Front in Ekman Bay.” Illustration in *The First Crossing of Spitsbergen*.

(*FC* 285) – to cite only a few examples. Even the snowfields are colourful. “What struck us most was the colours,” he comments about the view from the middle of the three mountains known as the Crowns. “The desert of snow was bluish or purplish-grey; only the sea mist [...] was pure white” (*SS* 120–1). Particularly in his account of the second expedition, during which good weather prevailed, he consistently counters “the rather colourless stereotype of the Arctic” that, as Robert David has argued, persisted throughout the nineteenth century in spite of the many passages in travel narratives referring to the colourful northern landscapes, icescapes and sky (David 2000: 39). The emphasis on colours and diversity, displayed in *The First Crossing of Spitsbergen* in eight inserted colour reproductions of landscape paintings by Conway’s cousin (fig. 3), gives his descriptions of Spitsbergen a picturesque quality.<sup>2</sup> So do references to “fine effects to reward an observant eye” (*FC* 157) and “infinite varieties of effect” (*SS* 10). This aesthetic approach not only challenged the popular perception of a desolate Arctic, but also Dufferin’s emphasis on stillness and death.

### The Arctic Hearth

As the anecdote in his memoir about the frozen Serpentine suggests, Conway attempts to familiarise the Arctic for his readers by identifying parallels between England and Svalbard. This is most obviously the case in *The First Crossing of*

<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Ingeborg Høvik for pointing out to me that Conway’s emphasis on colours links his descriptions of Arctic landscapes to picturesque aesthetics.

*Spitsbergen*, where “unpropitious weather” often makes surveying impossible (FC 257). Hence, the light one day is “pale and feeble, like that of a cloudy English afternoon in December” (FC 72). Another is “a day amongst a thousand, worth winning by weeks of labour and wet. Cool airs played around; the sun was warm, and the pale blue sky brilliantly clear. It might have been an English May day” (FC 122). In general he finds that “[t]he air of Spitsbergen is not stimulating. It resembles that of a moist English spring, when the ground is clammy beneath a dripping sky” (FC 192). Assertions such as these finally lead him to an astonishing conclusion:

Spitsbergen weather in these summer months is very English – the same soft, damp air, the same fickleness and unreliability, the same occasional perfection. In future I shall always think of England as belonging in a climatic sense to the polar regions. The Arctic Circle ought to be drawn through the Straits of Dover. The contrast between London and Paris weather is the contrast between the Arctic and temperate regions. Our fogs and winds and changeful damps belong to the pole. Our green lawns are but more refined Spitsbergen bogs. One has to come to these islands of the north to understand not merely geological history, but the present atmospheric conditions of the British Isles. (FC 213–4)

Svalbard, as Conway notes, has been explored and exploited by people from many different nations during the three centuries since its discovery by the Dutch. But here his conflation of English and Arctic climates and vegetations – in stark contrast to the sense he conveys elsewhere of the alien qualities of the Svalbard landscape – helps to naturalise British presence on the archipelago.

According to his biographer, Joan Evans, Conway’s travels were motivated in part by a desire to escape from “domesticities” such as his wealthy American wife’s dinner parties (Evans 1966, 170). As Evans puts it, “his mind was not centred on his own drawing-room” (Evans 1966, 151). On the evidence of his Svalbard narratives, he clearly preferred a tent. “It was delightful to be again under canvas,” he exclaims in *The First Crossing of Spitsbergen*, “living in pure air with no dark roof to shut out the sky” (FC 61). In *With Ski and Sledge over Arctic Glaciers*, he likewise rejoices in “being once more free from the incumbent protection of walls and roofs” (SS 2) (fig. 4). Instead of rejecting the concept of domesticity, however, he converts his various camps with their cosy tents and familiar equipment into domestic sites, Arctic versions of the homely hearth. The camps represent a “sense of home” – “the niche in the world to which one belongs” according to a note on 8 July 1896 – that is moved from site to site with the moving of their baggage and equipment:

Eight heavy loads I portered, one by one, down the bogy hill-side. The first was something carried away from camp out into the wide world; but, as each load followed and fewer remained behind, as each tent was in turn emptied, and the canteen and store-tins disappeared, the sense of home was taken from the old place, and gradually transferred to the pile of baggage by the ford. Strange, how keen in the wilderness becomes a sentimental attachment to “one’s things”, the visible and transient connection that for a

time links one with a particular spot and distinguishes it from all others! Their presence anywhere invests the place with a kind of consecration, as of the Aryans' sacred hearth. Remove them elsewhere, and the spot they quit reverts at once to its former aloofness. The stones on the ground, for a day known so well, give up their individuality, and become mere common fragments of the broken hill-side, not different from millions more about them. The camp-knoll melts into the landscape, and is unrecognised a mile away. (*FC* 141).

As Tim Youngs has observed in a study of nineteenth-century African travel narratives, descriptions of commodities taken on journeys function as “an important means of negotiating and affirming identity at a time when it is under threat” (Youngs 1997, 118), and Conway’s descriptions of camps and equipment fulfil this function. But they are also a way of claiming space by converting an alien landscape into a domestic setting. When the equipment is removed, it reverts to its original, wild state.

While Dufferin can easily maintain his status as a gentleman when travelling in the comfort of his well-equipped yacht, under the care of his valet, Conway in the Arctic wilderness defines himself in terms of both nationality and class by making “servantless camp-life” into a rugged equivalent of the “sacred hearth” of domestic ideology (*FC* 213). At the same time, domestic rituals such as making tea and



Fig 4: “Waterfall camp and the Sassendal.”  
Illustration in *The First Crossing of Spitsbergen*.

cooking elaborate meals is given a masculine dimension when performed in the wilderness. After devouring “a mighty supper”, for example, Conway and one of his companions, smoking their pipes at the door of their tent, enjoy “an hour of peace and perfect charm – light, colour, air, scenery, all fair and pleasant to every sense, rare combination, nor in Spitsbergen only” (*FC* 147). Like the male clubs discussed in John Tosh’s study of nineteenth-century British masculinity, the “peace and perfect charm” of the tent represents a form of homosocial recreation without the constraints of women and femininity. Following Tosh, one may argue that Conway’s focus on the domestic nature of camp life, although it may be construed as a celebration of the Victorian home, in fact ought to be viewed as “an *alternative* to home life, where an ethos of fraternalism replaced the ties of family” (Tosh 1999, 128–9).

Conway’s version of rugged gentlemanliness in the Arctic is not without its inconsistencies, however. In spite of his Ruskinian emphasis on the intimate connections between the actual experience of climbing and an imaginative grasp of mountain scenery, both his notebooks from the Svalbard journeys and his published narratives posit a distinction between “mental activities” and “mere mechanical labour”. The former requires a privileged physical leisure that is obviously often hard to achieve on expeditions in demanding terrains. “We feel so idle & damn Bensen [one of the Norwegian assistants] for not pulling & making us do the work,” he notes on 19 July during his second Svalbard tour. “We are idle & like to sit on sledge & look at view. This is what one comes to Sp. for. Harmony in blue & silver. Perfect day.” In *With Ski and Sledge over Arctic Glaciers* he expresses the same sentiment more elegantly:

Now only had we leisure to look about and drink in the fine quality of the scenery; not that a man is blind to scenery when engaged in toilsome physical exertion, but he is incapable of analysing it or noticing its more delicate and evanescent qualities. For this reason I maintain that the observers in explorations should be freed as much as possible from the mere mechanical labour of making the way. Every foot-pound of energy put into sledge-hauling, for instance, precludes more important mental activities. (*SS* 17)

As educated and well-travelled men Conway and his party bring sophisticated aesthetic and analytical perspectives to bear on the Svalbard landscape, while the hands-on local knowledge the Norwegian assistants represent is seen as unreliable: “the fact being that the reindeer hunters know little about the interior beyond a few miles from the coast” (*FC* 77). Their role is therefore confined to sledge-hauling, hunting and other practical tasks. This impression is only slightly modified on the second expedition when one of the assistants, Edward Nielsen, proves “most serviceable” (*SS* v) and is duly rewarded by having a mountain (Mount Nielsen, south of King’s Bay) named after him.

Set in “a region in which man has no abiding-place – a land not made for man, but mainly inimical to him” and recounting the exhilaration of being “absolutely alone in a new world, hitherto seen only by occasional reindeer hunters”, Conway’s Svalbard

travelogues in many ways equate tourism and exploration (*FC* 121, 106). Turning to look back on the interior of the island from the beach at Advent Bay after the completion of his first overland journey, he permits himself to rejoice in the conviction that its “mysteries and problems [...] had been for the most part successfully solved” (*FC* 237). His sense of achievement, of course, is not only personal. As Gillian Beer has noted, though exploration and discovery during the nineteenth century was no longer “unconcerned predation”, it was nevertheless a patriotic enterprise: “Natural history and national future were closely interlocked” (Beer 1996, 59). By demonstrating the superiority of a British gentlemanly approach to the High Arctic, Conway’s travelogues participated in this effort.

For Conway himself the two books laid the foundation of his later reputation as an authority on Svalbard. That was consolidated with the publication of his impressively researched *magnum opus*, *No Man’s Land*, a chronicle of the early history of the archipelago. Still a standard work, its publication seems to have enhanced Conway’s sense of ownership of the islands. Together with the discovery of large coal and iron deposits that made the archipelago financially desirable, encouraging both investors and speculators, this feeling of possession may explain his fruitless campaign for British sovereignty during the negotiations leading up to the Svalbard Treaty of 1920. In *The First Crossing of Spitsbergen*, perhaps under the influence of contemporary Scandinavian views that generally favoured Norwegian sovereignty (Berg 2013, 164–8), he had argued that Norway ought to annex the archipelago to regulate the hitherto ruthless exploitation of its natural resources (*FC* 5). Some twenty years later, in 1919, he used the occasion of a lecture to the RGS to claim not only that British rule would be the sole guarantee of a “reign of law” and “wise regulations” (Conway 1919, 91), but also that Svalbard actually belonged to Britain and had in fact done so since the seventeenth century. However, in the aftermath of the First World War Conway’s proprietary stance no longer had any relevance, and the debate following his lecture (and reprinted in *The Geographical Journal* in conjunction with the lecture) indicates that he succeeded only in showing himself as a sentimental imperial fantasist out of touch with the political realities.<sup>3</sup>

## Conclusion

Conway concludes *No Man’s Land* with a reference to the Swedish zoologist Sven Lovén’s expedition in 1837, which he defines as the beginning of the history of the “modern scientific exploration” of Svalbard (Conway 1906, 300). Although he also inserts himself in that history by including both his expeditions in an appendix listing “the principal voyages to Spitsbergen recorded from 1847 to 1900”, his status as explorer has been downgraded in recent Scandinavian versions of the history of Svalbard, as Mary Katherine Jones has shown (Jones 2013, 4–5). Instead there is a

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<sup>3</sup> How far out of touch Conway was, is demonstrated in the following Foreign Office note on the status of Svalbard, dated 4 December 1919, that is, four days before his lecture: “During the past few years some political pressure has been put upon His Majesty’s Government in favour of British annexation of Spitzbergen [sic] but His Majesty’s Government have maintained the line that they have no political interests in Spitzbergen and only wish to ensure that the rights which British claimants may have established in the islands are properly protected” (qtd. in Kristiansen 1995, 186).

tendency to treat both Conway and his predecessor Lord Dufferin dismissively as gentlemen tourists with only superficial knowledge of the archipelago compared with contemporary Scandinavian explorers, scientists and hunter-trappers, who by implication represent a deeper insight and more genuine experience (cf. Arlov 2003). But why denigrate the pioneering British tourists and their travelogues? It is more interesting to look at what might be entailed in their particular perspectives or even what might be lost if their models of description are disregarded. By mobilising Ruskin's mountain aesthetic Conway launched a form of Arctic sightseeing that encouraged positive perceptions by locating natural beauty, picturesque colours and life where others had only described desolation and death. Likewise, through his use of the domesticating metaphor of the sacred hearth, he humanises the Svalbard landscape, anticipating twentieth and twenty-first-century more intimate and reverential approaches to the High Arctic.

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MS Add. 7676/Y28: 1896 diary and notebook from journey to Spitsbergen.

MS Add. 7676/Y30: 1897 diary and notebook from journey to Spitsbergen.

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### Summary

The development of tourism is a significant aspect of the processes of modernity in the High Arctic. This article discusses the British art historian and mountaineer Sir William Martin Conway's two travelogues, *The First Crossing of Spitsbergen* (1897) and *With Ski and Sledge over Arctic Glaciers* (1898), in terms of a pioneering tourist approach to the archipelago of Svalbard. Unlike earlier yachting tourists, Conway described a journey into the uncharted interior of the main island, Spitsbergen. His books are therefore narrated as exploration accounts and following many of the demands of that genre, such as an emphasis on mapping, natural science and being the first. However, they may also be read as guidebooks for other discerning and undaunted British gentleman travellers. Inspired by the art critic John Ruskin's "science of aspects", which combined accurate scientific observations and practical knowledge with an imaginative and aesthetic response to the landscape, Conway attempts to give his readers a positive sense of the qualities of the Arctic. At the same time, he promotes Svalbard as an Arctic "Playground of Europe", where adventurous Alpinists in addition to climbing unknown mountains and glaciers could find fraternal domesticity far away from home around the hearth of the campfire. In this way Conway locates natural beauty, life and recreational opportunities where travellers before him had only described desolation and death.

### Keywords

Svalbard, the Arctic, tourism and travel writing, landscape aesthetics, Sir William Martin Conway, John Ruskin, Lord Dufferin, rugged gentility, homosocial domesticity.