



O'LOUGHLIN, Ed. *Minds of Winter*.
London: Riverrun, 2017.¹

**Of maps, minds, and mankind;
or, trying to piece together the
loose gears in *Minds of Winter***

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Abstract: Ed O'Loughlin explores the mysteries of Sir John Franklin's ill-fated Arctic expedition in search of the Northwest Passage, blending history and fiction in a confusing but also compelling novel.

Key-words: Arctic Exploration; Ed O'Loughlin; Canadian Novel; Fiction.

Resumo: Ed O'Loughlin explora os mistérios da expedição malfadada de Sir John Franklin em busca da Passagem do Noroeste, misturando história e ficção em um romance confuso, mas também arrebatador.

Palavras-chave: Ed O'Loughlin; Exploração do Ártico; Ficção; Romance Canadense.

Ed O'Loughlin is not a well-known name in Brazil. His first novel, *Not Untrue and Not Unkind*, was longlisted for the *Man Booker Prize* (2009) and his third, *Minds of Winter*, was shortlisted for the *Canadian Scotiabank Giller Prize* (2017). His second novel, *Toploader* (2011), also gained critical acclaim. Despite this international recognition, none of his novels seems to have merited Brazilian translations. This literary oversight makes him no less relevant an author to be read in Brazil. Like other Canadian authors with low reception in Brazil, such as Emma Donoghue (cf. CARNEIRO, 2019), he holds dual citizenship, Canadian and Irish. He was born in Toronto and by the age of six moved to Ireland, where he went to Trinity College Dublin and Dublin City University. He worked as journalist and correspondent for the *Irish Times*, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, and *The Age of Melbourne*.

Sir John Franklin's ill-fated Arctic expedition in search of the Northwest Passage is one of the most enduring mysteries of polar exploration and of the Canadian unconscious. It has left such an indelible mark that the a capella song *Northwest Passage*, a homage to Franklin's expedition by Canadian musician Stan Rogers, is considered an "unofficial Canadian anthem", as referred to by Canada's former prime minister Stephen Harper. Moreover, Atwood (2009, p. 6) claimed that "[...] in every culture many stories are told, only some are told and retold [...]. In Canadian literature, one such story is the Franklin expedition." Coupled with the national relevance of this historic event, the discovery of both shipwrecks, *HMS Erebus* and *HMS Terror*, at the bottom of the Canadian Arctic in 2014 and 2016 respectively, revived the interest of researchers and writers of fiction. Proof of that is this new fictional retelling by O'Loughlin.

The novel begins with a press clipping from *The Guardian* (2009) reporting the reappearance in England of Franklin's marine chronometer that was thought to have been lost in the shipwrecks, then it moves forward to a present time

zone with Nelson and Fay chancing upon a lemming in Canada's North West Territories, only to plummet backwards to 1841 in Van Diemen's Land, four years before the ships *Erebus* and *Terror* leave port to search for the Northwest Passage. These initial movements in space and time are indicative of the dynamics amongst different storyworlds throughout the entire novel.

Nelson and Fay's is the main narrative thread that somewhat connects all the others. After a chance encounter in Inuvik, they find out that they are both looking for answers concerning a missing relative, Nelson for his brother and Fay for her grandfather. Indeed, the combination of an overwhelming sense of loss and confusion, and the need to come to terms with it seems to be at the core of this novel. It is through Nelson's brother's clues left before his disappearance that they both try to discover what happened to their loved ones. As they delve deeper into the papers left by Nelson's brother, the novel soon becomes an ensemble of stories concerning the lives of various explorers from different places and times.

One of the most striking of these stories is that of the Inuit known as

Eskimo Joe. In his account he expresses the harshness of the Arctic and the human frailty when confronted with nature saying that “[...] when men vanish in the ice they seldom come back again, and what does it matter how they were lost? You freeze or you starve or you drown, or you are killed by a bear or a walrus or perhaps by your own kind” (O’LOUGHLIN, 2017, p. 163-164). The combination of human hubris and the urge to have one’s name on the map is explored in Bellot’s story. Therein, a question is posed “But why would Kennedy insist on seeing something that was not there?” (O’LOUGHLIN, 2017, p. 110), which echoes the novel’s epigraph, the poem *The Snow Man* by Wallace Stevens, and suggests the tricks the mind can play and the things we choose to believe in.

The stories of different explorers follow, Oates, Meares, Amundsen, Morgan, adding new gears to the alluring and receding mystery pursued by Nelson and Fay. Although most of the book takes place in bygone days, interesting insights connect them to our present time, such as when Amundsen explores the Arctic from his aeroplane window, “Another first for Amundsen, thought Fay, turning away from the computer screen: that’s how we

all do our exploring now” (O’LOUGHLIN, 2017, p. 326). Here Fay hints at the idea that owing to technological developments, people nowadays explore things using computers rather than having direct access to the natural world.

“A globe was round and you couldn’t fall off it. But a map was a map, a metaphor, full of judgments and choices and victories and regrets; a map was built on hacks and heuristics and mistakes and lies, cracks though [sic] which you might, just maybe, someday slip away” (O’LOUGHLIN, 2017, p. 444). This quote seems to provide directions as to the mysteries that surround the novel. It makes us aware of the traps that representations might conceal. Thus, this novel requires the reader’s attention to details, which may easily escape their notice.

This is by far no easy read; it is as intricate as it is confusing. One can easily lose the threads and miss out on the connections along the narrative. The sheer number of characters, who at times quickly disappear, makes it hard to care for them and to keep track of them all, which adds to this confusing feeling. Also, the sense of confusion which courses through the novel is an effect that seems to stem from

the many narrative threads that never seem to cohere and from the bewildering states experienced by many a character. I think it beautifully serves the point O’Loughlin is trying to make. Readers should not be discouraged, then; it is well worth reading and re-reading.

Overall, this novel is an ambitious achievement. A huge amount of research had to be undertaken for the historical and geographical details that give it its sheen of reality. It spans through the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries in locations as diverse as Australia, Canada, Ireland, Siberia, England, Japan, and Antarctica. Just as the seas stretch into land in myriads of inlets, firths, fjords, sounds, so readers are taken to explore and navigate the frozen and at times thawing straits of memory and recollected events. Through nine parts titled with geographical locations and their precise coordinates, except for the ninth part – which begs interpretation –, each to the accompaniment of a map that helps readers visualise the maritime journeys, in his blending of history and fiction O’Loughlin charts a world not so one can find oneself in, but a world so one can get lost in, to experience the unsettling feelings of losing someone or of losing yourself.

References

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Notes

- ¹ *Minds of Winter* was first published in 2016. The presently reviewed paperback edition was published in 2017.
- ² Doutorado em Linguística e Linguística Aplicada pelo Programa de Pós-Graduação em Estudos Linguísticos (PPGEL), no âmbito do Instituto de Letras e Linguística (ILEEL) da Universidade Federal de Uberlândia, MG, Brasil. E-mail: raphael.olic@gmail.com