

Broken Line

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## TAKE ME BACK TO THE FROZEN NORTH – THE GREENLAND PHOTOGRAPHS OF OLAF OTTO BECKER

*Looking in the direction indicated my eyes were attracted by the gleaming of a pale, silvery spire which appeared to push itself upwards and outwards through the vapours that surrounded it. Then we knew that ice instead of land was the cause of our alarm, and all hands were immediately on deck to look at it. Regardless of what others thought or said, the scene possessed such an interest and charm for me that I desired to enjoy it alone. While gazing at its peak, and anxiously wishing for a more perfect view, the sun shone out clearly, dispelling the fog-wreaths which hung around the berg, and investing the whole mass with a grandeur and beauty that filled my mind with impressions not soon to be dispelled.*

William Bradford, *The Arctic Regions* (1873)

At the end of photography's first golden age – which for argument's sake lasted roughly the two decades between 1850 and 1870 – an American painter of seascapes and Arctic views was responsible for one of the most remarkable and sumptuous photography books of the nineteenth century. William Bradford made his book *The Arctic Regions* during the great age of discovery with the camera. The world was wide. It could all be photographed and recorded for posterity with this wondrous new machine – a strange device that combined the accuracy of science with the imagination of art.

Faraway lands – the Far East, the Middle East, Africa, and Asia – became a major proving ground for the new medium. New vistas and different civilizations could not help but stimulate the eye, and since the formal vocabulary of photography was being invented literally exposure by exposure, any photographer who got himself to an exotic location could hardly prevent

himself from making photographs that were novel, original, beautiful, and stimulating – as if seeing the world with the fresh eyes of a child, which in essence he was. And when he brought them back home to London, Paris, New York, or Berlin, and published them (usually in albums or portfolios), citizens of the great European and American cities could be taken there as never before. Taking one there was one of photography's first, and remains one of its primary, functions.

William Bradford became a specialist in painting Arctic scenes after spending six consecutive summers in Labrador, making sketches of icebergs and the northern landscape to be worked up into finished paintings back in his studio. But when he found a rich patron in the unlikely-sounding LeGrand Lockwood, he formulated a more ambitious plan to further his reputation as an Arctic specialist. In July 1859, he set sail in the steamship *The Panther*, a vessel specially fitted out at Lockwood's expense for travel in the icy northern seas. The *Panther* was bound for Greenland, and accompanying Bradford were two photographers from the Boston photographic firm of James Wallace Black – John Dunmore and George Critcherson, as well as the noted polar explorer Dr. Isaac Hayes.

When the *Panther* reached St. John's, Newfoundland, on October 3, almost exactly three months to the day she set sail, the party had sailed nearly five thousand miles up the coast of Greenland and back. A notable expedition in the annals of polar exploration had been successfully completed. Not only had Bradford obtained enough sketching material to last the rest of his career, Dunmore and Critcherson had made enough negatives, under extremely difficult conditions, to make a notable photography book.

*The Arctic Regions*, or, to give it its full title, *The Arctic Regions: Illustrated with Photographs Taken on an Art Expedition to Greenland*, was published in London in 1873 by the well-known publishing house Sampson Low, Marston, Low, and Searle. Bradford seemed adept at attracting sponsorship. Among the book's subscribers were several members of the British royal family, including Queen Victoria herself. It was one of the most sumptuous photo-