IN LATE WINTER 1857 AMERICANS MOURNED a fallen hero. The polar explorer, Dr. Elisha Kent Kane, so recently returned from his latest voyage of exploration in the arctic regions, had died in Havana, Cuba. Kane had gained the love and admiration of his fellow Americans through scientific exploration rather than by military valor or political leadership, and as his body journeyed home to his native city of Philadelphia in late February and early March, Americans in diverse regions of the United States showed their grief with unparalleled feeling and elaborate public ceremony. They extolled Kane as the greatest hero of their age, as they paraded his body through the streets of America's cities. They claimed that Kane's memory would be honored for all time. One newspaper observed, "We think, that, among the few names of the present century which shall descend to a remote posterity, Elisha Kent Kane's is one of the surest of obtaining that distinction. It will survive the records of Admiralties and Geographical Societies in the legends of Icelandic poetry, and will be embalmed, like that
of the heroes of the days of chivalry, in the traditional literature of nations yet unborn.\(^1\)

Few people today have ever heard of Elisha Kane, yet for a brief time in February and March 1857 his memory was held up by many Americans as a shining example of ideal virtue. An analysis of the nature of Kane's reputation, precisely because it was so short-lived, provides a unique opportunity to study the ideals, hopes, and culture of a world soon to disappear in the turmoil of Civil War.\(^2\) Why did antebellum Americans choose this geographic explorer as their hero of the hour?

Kane's memory was celebrated by a broad spectrum of Americans in massive public demonstrations in the streets of a variety of American cities. As one "Young Lady of Baltimore" observed, "His life was a public benefit; his death a public sorrow."\(^3\) But Kane himself was a member of the nation's literary and scientific elite. He was a scientist and an author, yet the observance of his funeral moved far beyond typical scientific and literary forms to become part of more popular forms of public expression.\(^4\) Because of this, Kane’s funeral can add to our understanding of the way popular

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\(^1\) *Baltimore American*, Mar. 10, 1857. Most of the newspaper citations concerning Kane’s funeral come from a collection of clippings compiled by Margaret Elder Dow. Dow spent many years researching the life of Elisha Kane and wrote several unpublished manuscripts on Kane’s life. This useful collection of her research materials is in the Baker Library Special Collections at Dartmouth College, Dow/Stef MSS 68.


\(^3\) *Baltimore Weekly Patriot*, May 9, 1857.

images of science have often been used by the public for non-scientific ends.\textsuperscript{5} Antebellum American culture was heavily influenced by scientific themes that took the form of curiosity about the unknown and a belief in unlimited progress through human agency. Drawing on these themes, a popularizer of science like Kane could inspire enthusiasm in an American audience that moved beyond strictly scientific activity. Kane traveled to the Arctic, where he mapped newly discovered territory and made a variety of scientific observations, but antebellum Americans understood this activity in heroic and moral terms, not in terms of the knowledge he produced. They understood Kane as a hero of science and humanity who sacrificed himself for the good of mankind.

As historians of science Roger Cooter and Stephen Pumfrey have pointed out, "Successfully popularized' natural knowledge may take on very different meanings within popular culture from those intended by its popularizers."\textsuperscript{6} The meaning attributed to science by popular culture is not necessarily scientific meaning. This was especially true of arctic science in the nineteenth century. Historian Chauncey Loomis has observed, "The researches in meteorology, magnetism, and hydrography carried out by Arctic expeditions were of little interest to laymen or to politicians, but during the early part of the nineteenth century a romantic image of science had captured the minds of the public—a popularized, idealized vision of science created by non-scientific imaginations and related only remotely to the painstaking processes of actual scientific investigation. To its many enthusiasts it was 'the forefront of civilization;' its beneficent possibilities seemed endless."\textsuperscript{7} Because of such attitudes, Kane's role as a scientist became divorced from the science he practiced, allowing him to be seen as an example of virtuous manhood and a focus of national cohesion at a time


\textsuperscript{6} Cooter and Pumfrey, "Separate Spheres," 249.

when many other aspects of American life seemed to lack virtue. \(^8\)

Kane's funeral made a grand spectacle of American nationalism during a time of unprecedented national crisis. According to Kenneth Stampp, 1857 was the year when the sectional crisis between North and South "reached the political point of no return." \(^9\) Within this context Kane in particular and science in general were held up as symbols of the best the nation had to offer and as a sign that America could continue as a unified nation. Using Benedict Anderson's definition of a nation as an "imagined community" this examination of the funeral ceremonies for Elisha Kane will try to explain why a dead arctic explorer could symbolize for a broad spectrum of Americans from New Orleans to Philadelphia the image of a unified America. \(^10\) Kane's reputation as an explorer embodied the kind of heroic virtue idealized in the founders, yet the political milieu of the 1850s did not make room for heroic national political leaders. By turning away from the more contentious realms of American life toward a realm that linked geographic discovery with cultural ideals of virtue, manhood, and martyrdom, Americans found a hero worthy of nationwide public admiration. \(^11\)

\(^8\) Very little work in the history of antebellum American science is concerned with public perceptions or use of science that may not have conformed with professional scientists' intentions. Furthermore, as William Goetzmann points out in "Paradigm Lost" in Nathan Reingold, ed., The Sciences in the American Context: New Perspectives (Washington, D.C., 1979), the science of geographical exploration is often omitted from serious consideration by historians of science. Some of the most important works on nineteenth-century American science are Charles E. Rosenberg, No Other Gods: On Science and American Social Thought (Baltimore, 1961); George H. Daniels, ed., Nineteenth-Century American Science: A Reappraisal (Evanston, Ill., 1972); Robert V. Bruce, The Launching of Modern American Science, 1846-1876 (New York, 1987); Nathan Reingold, Science, American Style (New Brunswick, N.J., 1991). Two of the best works to consider the importance of geographic science to the nineteenth century are William Stanton, The Great United States Exploring Expedition of 1838-1842 (Berkeley, 1975); Hugh Richard Slotten, Patronage, Practice, and the Culture of American Science: Alexander Dallas Bache and the U.S. Coast Survey (Cambridge, Mass., 1994).

\(^9\) Kenneth M. Stampp, America in 1857: A Nation on the Brink (New York, 1990), viii.

\(^10\) Benedict Anderson, Imagined Community: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (New York, 1983). I also follow David Waldstreicher: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (New York, 1983). I also follow David Waldstreicher's notion that nationalism should not be understood as a form of unthinking consensus; In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes, 14. The desire for symbolic cultural unity does not imply political consensus; in fact, calls for cultural unity often come as a response to political and social fragmentation.

\(^11\) As Len Travers has pointed out, "In response to stress by disruptive forces, people turn more readily and fervently to rituals that assert group identity and group cohesion; Celebrating the Fourth, 12-13."
Elisha Kent Kane died on February 16, 1857, at Mrs. Almy’s Hotel in Havana, Cuba. His death did not come as a surprise. Kane, though only thirty-seven years old, had been frail and sickly since youth. The hardships associated with his recent polar explorations had further damaged his health, and he had traveled to Cuba in hope that the warm climate would help him recover his strength. When he died the public reaction began almost immediately and continued until his body reached his home in Philadelphia almost a month later. A detailed description of the ceremonies held in his honor in cities across the country demonstrates the nature of his reputation.

The day after his death between two and three hundred American citizens in Havana, “men of respectability from almost every State in the Union,” met “for the purpose of agreeing upon some public demonstration of respect to the memory of the intrepid Arctic navigator.” The results of this meeting can be seen in subsequent events. At 7:30 in the morning, February 20, a large group of Americans and some citizens of other countries met Kane’s corpse as it was brought out of the hotel. A procession of from six to eight hundred people then accompanied the body to the Plaza de Armas where they were joined by representatives of the Havana government, members of “various learned bodies,” and a military band. This expanded procession then proceeded to the waterfront where Kane’s remains were put on a barge solemnly decorated for the occasion. Boats from almost every ship in the harbor joined in a floating procession up the harbor. “Every American vessel, and indeed nearly all of those of every other country, had their colors hoisted half mast high.”

Accompanied by Kane’s mother and two brothers who had tended him on his deathbed, the body was brought to the steamer, Cahawba, for transport back to the United States. After appropriate speeches by both Cuban and American representatives, the Cahawba departed. It docked in New Orleans three days later. With the arrival of Kane’s remains in the United States, word of his death spread throughout the country by telegraph. Meanwhile, the New Orleans city authorities began to organize. The honor they showed the departed explorer demonstrated unparalleled admiration for a man most of them had never met. The body was carried to the city hall

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13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
where it lay in state overnight under a guard of honor. The next day the remains were taken by a military escort, "and followed by a concourse of citizens, military officers, the city authorities, the Masonic fraternity, and the Keystone Association, were borne through some of our principal streets to the levee, and there placed on board the steamboat Woodruff, for Louisville, en route to Philadelphia." As this procession passed through the streets of New Orleans, crowds gathered to pay their last respects. Between five and seven thousand observers came to see the procession, an indication of the popular interest aroused by the departed explorer. Along the route and at the port, homes and businesses displayed flags at half mast, and on Lafayette Square a detachment of artillery fired their guns at fifteen-minute intervals as a token of respect. As the body of the dead explorer progressed towards home, the New Orleans Evening Delta observed, "Strange that even the corpse of the Arctic wanderer is traveling still. Poor Kane was a true martyr to science, and there is a genuine sanctity in his coffin, worth the prestige of a thousand conquerors." This same theme would emerge many more times in the course of Kane's journey home; Kane was a hero, but his heroics were based on science, not war.

The Woodruff made its way up the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers, passing Cairo, Illinois, on the morning of March 3. In some areas spectators lined the banks of the river to watch the funeral procession pass. In Louisville the mayor and local order of Free Masons prepared for Kane's arrival. After the Woodruff docked, the body was carried amidst great fanfare to Mozart Hall where it lay in state overnight. The next day it was taken across the river to New Albany, Indiana, where a committee from Cincinnati took charge of the body, bringing it by steamboat to that city. All this was accompanied by solemn speeches by members of special committees from Louisville, New Albany, and Cincinnati. The committees were composed of the first citizens of these cities, who felt that the honor of their communities depended on the respect they showed the remains of the departed explorer. Throughout the funeral journey the ceremonies were organized by America's elite male citizens, yet the newspapers consistently pointed out that the spectators who came to mourn Kane included the working class as well as

16 Ibid.
18 Elder, Biography, 309.
the wealthy, and women as well as men.

A procession carried Kane's body through the streets of Cincinnati where some of the city's most respected citizens gave solemn speeches in memory of the deceased. The procession then delivered the remains to the depot of the Little Miami Railroad Company, and placed the body on a railroad express car for its journey to Columbus. The citizens of Columbus planned to honor Kane's memory "as a proud and dauntless warrior of science." The body arrived on Saturday evening and was brought to the Capitol Senate chamber to lie in state over the Sabbath. On Sunday morning the chamber was opened to the public, but the crowd was so large that barely half of those wishing entrance could be accommodated. Following the sermon the mourners prayed and sang a hymn dedicated to the memory of this "hero of science and discovery." From two to five in the afternoon the chamber remained opened to visitors and "throughout the afternoon, the living tide, flowing and ebbing, was constant; and with saddened hearts and bowed heads all passed around the bier, in the melancholy tribute that genius and worth, unsullied by blemish, nor tainted by reproach, can alone command."

As the corpse neared home, the displays of mourning intensified. On Monday morning the remains were taken to the station and placed on a train heading east. At various points along the train's path through Ohio, "the people assembled in great numbers, and stood uncovered while the train was passing, whilst at some points the station-houses and dwellings by the side of the road were draped in mourning, indicative of the deep and widespread feeling of admiration that prevailed for the character and services of the deceased, and the heartfelt sorrow for his early demise."

After crossing the Ohio River again, near Wheeling, Virginia, amidst the tolling bells of boats on the river, the body was placed upon a specially prepared car of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad to be taken to Baltimore. Citizens of Wheeling, who had planned to have Kane's body over the Sabbath, were disappointed by not being able to express their

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19 Ibid., 315–20.
20 Ohio Statesman (Columbus), Mar. 6, 1857.
21 Ibid.
22 Elder, Biography, 340.
23 Baltimore American, Mar. 11, 1857; Elder, Biography, 340.
sorrow more fully.\textsuperscript{24}

Baltimore had special reason to mourn the death of the doctor, for Kane was a member of the Maryland Institute and many of the participants in the ceremonies had known him personally. Following the massive funeral procession and observances in Baltimore, one newspaper observed, "On no occasion have our citizens united more generally, or with a greater earnestness of purpose, in manifesting their appreciation of distinguished worth and eminent services."	extsuperscript{25} Another noted, "The testimonial was one of a universal character, it having been participated in by every class of our community."\textsuperscript{26} As the body was carried from the train station to the Maryland Institute to lie in state, "the streets were walled with people, whilst windows, balconies and roof tops were occupied by spectators."\textsuperscript{27} The funeral procession, which included carefully arranged representatives from military, scientific, academic, fraternal, and religious organizations, formed a long line that progressed through the crowded streets. When the procession reached the Maryland Institute, ceremonies were performed and a dirge played before a crowd so large it had to be restrained by police.\textsuperscript{28} The body lay in state overnight before being placed on a train for Philadelphia.

In Philadelphia the morning of March 12 dawned clear and cold. The normally busy city was quiet and had an aura of mourning. "The indications of sorrow were seen on all sides . . . . The flags of the shipping were at half-mast, . . . the public offices were closed, the bells were tolled, minute guns were discharged, and although the day was bright and clear, an anxious and solemn aspect characterized the city, and indicated the feelings of the community at large."\textsuperscript{29} Homes and businesses draped signs of mourning from their windows. A building on Chestnut Street displayed a flag from its upper story which read "Philadelphia mourns an illustrious son, and the world a martyr to science and humanity."\textsuperscript{30} Another building displayed a banner stating "Science Weeps, Humanity Weeps, the World Weeps."\textsuperscript{31}

Hundreds of Philadelphians congregated outside Independence Hall, the

\textsuperscript{24} Elder, \textit{Biography}, 341.

\textsuperscript{25} \textit{Baltimore American}, Mar. 11, 1857.

\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Baltimore Sun}, Mar. 11, 1857.

\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Baltimore American}, Mar. 11, 1857.

\textsuperscript{28} \textit{Baltimore Sun}, Mar. 11, 1857.

\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Pennsylvania Inquirer and National Gazette}, Mar. 13, 1857.

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
birthplace of the nation, where Kane's body lay in state. Here the symbolism of the mourned explorer could mingle with the symbolism of nationhood. "At an early hour the streets were filled with people, and the city presented the aspect of an unusual occasion. Before nine o'clock the vicinity of Independence Hall presented a dense mass of citizens, and there was continual accumulation until, about 10 o'clock, the crowd was almost impenetrable." At 11 o'clock preparations began for forming the line of procession. The city's newspapers listed the participants in the procession in great detail and appropriate order. They included Kane's shipmates from his Arctic expedition, political associations, clergy, members of scientific societies, fraternal organizations, military units, and professional associations. The pallbearers were some of Philadelphia and the nation's elite; they included the governor, prominent jurists, and an Episcopal bishop.

At 12 o'clock the body was brought out of Independence Hall as the State House bell tolled, and the procession proceeded toward the Second Presbyterian Church. It moved slowly, taking nearly an hour to pass a single point. At the church only those with invitations could fit inside to hear the eulogy delivered by the Reverend Charles Shields. Still, it was reported that 950 people were crowded into the lower floor and galleries. Most people had to wait until the evening or next day to read the text in its entirety on the front pages of the city newspapers. After this ceremony, the body of Elisha Kent Kane finally ended its journey when it was laid to rest in Laurel Hill Cemetery.

Elisha Kane was clearly a great hero to those who engaged in such heartfelt observance of his untimely death. But to fully understand the way mourners felt we have to step back and look at the career of the man whose death caused such a reaction. Kane's personality was well suited to becoming a popular hero to antebellum Americans. As a young man he had both ambition for public recognition and a restless curiosity to see the world. The son of a well-respected federal judge from Philadelphia, Kane had the opportunity to pursue almost any career he chose, but he also suffered from chronic ill health after a bout with rheumatic fever in his late teens. He

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33 Public Ledger (Philadelphia), Mar. 13, 1857.
studied medicine, perhaps as a way to understand his own illness, and was interested in a variety of natural sciences, but he was not content to pass his life in a sedentary medical practice in Philadelphia. He seemed convinced that his fate was to die young, so he became driven by a romantic desire to travel the world.

After joining the United States Navy in his early twenties, Kane eventually secured an appointment as assistant surgeon on Caleb Cushing's diplomatic mission to China in 1843. While a member of the Cushing embassy, Kane pursued a number of his scientific interests. Like many naval surgeons in the nineteenth century, he spent his leisure time making scientific observations of the foreign lands he visited. He was well versed in the current literature in the fields of geology and natural history and perhaps hoped, like many amateur travelers, to make some small contribution to these fields. His friend Fletcher Webster, who was secretary to the Cushing embassy, recalled that when he met Kane, he “was at once struck by the activity and energy of the doctor, who was never for a moment idle.” Webster observed: “He was very fond of the exact sciences, and was an indefatigable student,—evidently annoyed when not engaged in something, and always restless unless busy,—for hours in the state-room buried in mathematics, and then next seen at the mast-head or over the vessel's side.”

After crossing the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, with stops in Madeira, Rio de Janeiro, Bombay, and Ceylon, the mission reached China, but negotiations dragged on and Kane had little to do. He decided to resign his post with the embassy and travel the world. For almost two years he wandered, visiting much of Asia, Egypt, and Europe before arriving home in August 1846. His exploits while abroad included having himself lowered into the crater of the Taal volcano in the Philippines to get a sulfuric water sample from a boiling pool, as well as recklessly climbing up the colossi of Memnon in Egypt to read an inscription.

In these world travels, Kane's curiosity mirrored the strong popular curiosity antebellum Americans had about distant lands. Narratives of travel,
such as Richard Henry Dana’s *Two Years Before the Mast*, were some of the biggest selling books of this time, and popular works of fiction by authors like Melville and Poe were often structured around the theme of travel to exotic lands. While most Americans could not travel themselves, as Kane did, they loved to experience the exotic through books, periodicals, popular lectures, and panoramas, all of which often portrayed foreign lands.\(^{38}\)

Even at this early stage in his life, Kane apparently hoped to make a name for himself as a traveler. He wrote several accounts of these early travels for his family to read, and his brother Tom critiqued them for him, with a view to their ultimately being published.\(^{39}\) But apparently Kane never found sufficient time to revise these pieces for publication. Instead, during the late 1840s, he served on a naval supply ship for a time and briefly served in the Mexican War, carrying a dispatch from President James K. Polk to General Winfield Scott. Although his time in Mexico was short, he did manage to get himself wounded while traveling to Mexico City with a small group of Mexican partisan allies. When they came upon the enemy, Kane demonstrated his romantic notions of honor by leading a successful attack, having his horse shot out from under him and then gallantly protecting his prisoners from his allies who wanted to execute them on the spot. He received a sabre wound from his own party for his efforts.\(^{40}\)

Up to this point in his career, Kane’s travels were fairly random. He had an unfocused interest in a variety of sciences, but he seems mainly to have been trying to satisfy his restless nature with adventure. This kind of activity by itself would never have gained for him a reputation as a hero of science and humanity or earned him nationwide honors. An essential ingredient to his later fame came after the war, when he worked briefly for the United States Coast Survey, one of the most important scientific organizations of the antebellum era. Here Kane learned how to contain his varied interests and his love of travel and adventure within an accepted methodological, moral, and popular approach to science. The Coast Survey was founded in the early part of the nineteenth century to map harbors and coastlines, but as historian Hugh Richard Slotten has shown, from 1843 to 1867, under the


\(^{39}\) Thomas Leiper Kane to Elisha Kent Kane, Feb. 12, 1847, EKK Papers.

direction of Alexander Dallas Bache, "the Coast Survey became the largest institution supporting science in antebellum America." Furthermore, Bache and the Coast Survey became a strong force in America behind what historian of science Susan Cannon, and others, have called "Humboldtean Science." Cannon has shown that around the middle of the nineteenth century one widely supported approach to science was characterized by a belief in global interconnections between all physical phenomena. This view was best represented by the German scientist and explorer Alexander von Humboldt. Humboldt's approach, developed during his well-known explorations in South America between 1799 and 1804, was to travel the world to measure and observe a variety of physical phenomena on a global scale. The data collected by this means could then be tabulated with the data of hundreds of others doing the same thing with the ultimate goal of discovering global patterns and interconnections.

When Kane was assigned to the Coast Survey, he became a part of the process of data gathering for Humboldtean science, and he would remain a part of this process even after leaving the survey. The diversity of his own interests combined with his restless nature and love of travel made him the ideal Humboldtean. But Humboldtean science was more than just a methodology. Hugh Slotten has shown that Humboldtean science also had a strong ethical component as it was practiced at the Coast Survey. Under the leadership of Alexander Dallas Bache, the activity of the survey was seen as having moral as well as scientific value. According to Slotten, Bache "viewed scientific progress in republican terms that subordinated individual interests to the common good. As a large-scale cooperative activity, the geographical research pursued by the Coast Survey supported this ideal by involving a large number of practitioners in the search for truth—by building a community of like-minded, truth-seeking inquirers." Kane had close ties to Bache even before joining the Coast Survey in 1849. Kane's father, Judge John Kane, who was heavily involved in both Democratic politics and

41 Slotten, Patronage, 1.
43 Cannon, Science in Culture, 73-110.
antebellum American science through the American Philosophical Society, was Bache's friend and had been instrumental in gaining his appointment as superintendent of the Coast Survey. Bache was apparently returning the favor when he took Elisha into his organization. Later he was asked to serve as one of Elisha Kane’s pallbearers but had to drop out at the last minute because of ill health.\textsuperscript{44}

Bache’s view of science as a virtuous activity dedicated to the advancement of the common good was of great value to Kane when combined with Humboldtian methodology. His early travels had been mere wanderings with no greater purpose than the satisfaction of his own curiosity. Now Kane had a model for travel and exploration that combined scientific significance with a higher moral purpose, even if that purpose was vaguely defined as the advancement of knowledge and the “common good.” He could now pursue travel as a calling rather than a pastime, which greatly increased his potential appeal as a public figure.

Humboldt’s influence moved far beyond institutions like the Coast Survey and into American cultural life. Alexander von Humboldt, as an individual, served as a model of the inspirational hero of science and humanity. The German explorer was greatly admired by nineteenth-century Americans. He was elevated to the status of a popular romantic hero because he seemed to have special abilities enabling him to contribute to the progress of human knowledge and the ultimate unveiling of life’s mysteries. He brought science to a wide audience through books that described his extensive travels and gave scientific descriptions of human life and physical phenomena in various parts of the world.\textsuperscript{45} While he is largely forgotten today, in the nineteenth century Americans admired Humboldt to a degree that can easily be called hero worship. Edgar Allen Poe dedicated his prose-poem “Eureka” to him, and stories about him often appeared in the popular press. The \textit{New York Daily Times} called him one of “the most world-renowned men of the last half century.” The \textit{New York Herald} called him a hero of science. But perhaps Bayard Taylor was the most emphatic when he bluntly asserted that, “Alexander von Humboldt is the world’s

\textsuperscript{44} Slotten, \textit{Patronage}, 154–73, passim.

Humboldt’s approach to explaining the physical phenomena of the earth appealed to the public’s sense of wonder. He described things that were sublime and awe inspiring such as the volcano of Chimborazo, and he set these things within a scientific framework. Just as a mythic hero is made greater by the caliber of the trials he overcomes, the scientific hero is elevated by the sublime wonder of the natural world he describes and explains. Humboldt, and scientists such as Kane who emulated his approach, were popular heroes because they portrayed the search for knowledge about the physical world as part of the moral advancement of humanity. The American people were willing to make romantic heroes out of those who seemed to contribute to that advancement by explaining nature’s wonders.

Kane soon found a venue for becoming just this sort of scientific hero when he volunteered for an expedition that was being organized to travel to the Arctic. The United States Grinnell Expedition was a joint private/United States Navy voyage in search of Sir John Franklin, the British explorer who was lost in the Arctic. In 1845 the Royal Navy had sent Franklin to complete the elusive Northwest Passage which they had been mapping for many years. Although most of the route had been mapped by that time, no ship had yet passed from the Atlantic to the Pacific across the top of the American continent. All of Britain fully expected Franklin, a seasoned Arctic explorer, to succeed where for centuries others had failed. Unfortunately, Franklin disappeared and was not heard from again. Several successive British expeditions failed to find him and his crew, and in 1850, after an appeal from Lady Jane Franklin to the humanitarian good will of all nations, the Americans decided to get involved in the search. New York merchant Henry Grinnell provided the ships, the Navy provided the officers and men, and the American public provided a growing enthusiasm for polar exploration.


Hearing of the planned expedition in late February 1850, Kane volunteered to go as its surgeon. The idea of searching for the lost British explorer appealed to his adventurous and romantic side, while the opportunity to make scientific observations in such a seldom traveled region appealed to his interests in Humboltean science. Writing to his brother Tom of his desire to go on the expedition, Kane claimed not to be motivated by "craving after excitement," but rather by a sense of duty and honor combined with ambition. "Seldom, dear fellow, in the routine of our naval profession, does self sacrifice and privation connect itself with reward and self approval, and God knows both are involved in a volunteer expedition such as this."48

The first Grinnell expedition was not successful in finding Franklin, yet it did begin to interest the American public in arctic exploration. News about expeditions in search of Franklin became more prevalent in the American press, which finally gave Kane the opportunity to have some of his writing published. While he was a member of the expedition he wrote two long accounts that appeared in the New York Tribune. These accounts stressed the exotic and sublime Arctic landscape for curious readers and played up the gallantry of the American explorers, who were advancing knowledge at the risk of their own safety. The Tribune also contributed to Kane's exposure by reprinting an article from the Philadelphia Pennsylvanian which recounted his earlier world travels, calling them "a series of adventures such as few men living have undergone, and such as still fewer would voluntarily embark in out of pure love of danger, and a spirit of seeing the wonders and the peculiarities of other parts of the globe."49 Others understood his skills as more than just adventure seeking. Before the expedition arrived home, Kane was nominated for membership in the American Philosophical Society, America's premier scientific society.50

On the expedition's return, after having been gone for over sixteen months, Kane further stimulated public interest in the Arctic and in his own reputation by writing a book about the winter the expedition had spent trapped in the Arctic pack ice. Kane's first book was a verbal panorama of the Arctic landscape which appealed to the American public's fondness for

48 Elisha Kent Kane to Thomas Leiper Kane, Mar. 8, 1850, EKK Papers; Elder, Biography, 142-145; Corner, Doctor Kane, 71-84; Mirsky, Elisha Kent Kane, 40-56.
49 New York Tribune, June 8, 1850.
50 American Philosophical Society, Archives no. IV.2, Nominations for Membership, Kane, Elisha K., May 16, 1851.
tales of far away and exotic places.\textsuperscript{51} Since there was little action worth describing, Kane dwelt in minute detail on every aspect of the strange realm visited by the expedition. The \textit{United States Grinnell Expedition in Search of Sir John Franklin: A Personal Narrative} is a multifaceted book. On its surface it is a narrative of adventure, but more importantly it is a work of popular Humboldtean science. The majority of the text is made up of detailed description of a variety of physical phenomena. Geology, oceanography, botany, zoology, astronomy, glaciology, geomagnetism, meteorology, and hydrography all come under Kane's informed consideration together with brief interludes to hunt polar bears or look for relics of the Franklin voyage. Lengthy appendixes contain meteorological tables giving daily entries from the log book on latitude, longitude, direction of ocean currents, and wind, air, and water temperature, barometric pressure, and weather. These tables were prepared with the assistance of Charles Schott of the Coastal Survey.\textsuperscript{52}

Mixed with this science is a strong dose of the strange and exotic. The overarching theme of the book is a tension and interplay between wonder and science. Kane capitalized on public perceptions of the Arctic as a world of wonders. He described strange things like polar bears, perpetual light and dark, icebergs, and the northern lights, which seem to defy the laws of nature, or seem to belong to another world. At times he seemed to describe a fantasy world or something from a fairy tale. Yet in the end he always explained these things rationally, or if he could not fully explain them, he subjected them to rational inquiry, thus containing the wonder and the mystery within the bounds of human understanding.\textsuperscript{53} In explaining this exotic region of the world, Kane seemed to be advancing knowledge and thus moving humanity itself towards some greater future.

Further capitalizing on the publicity, he began to lecture on arctic science and present the theory—then popular among some scientists—that Franklin was trapped in an “Open Polar Sea” at the North Pole. He claimed that if an expedition could penetrate the ring of pack ice which he and others believed surrounded the pole at around seventy to eighty degrees of latitude

\textsuperscript{51} Elisha Kent Kane, \textit{The United States Grinnell Expedition in Search of Sir John Franklin. A Personal Narrative} (Philadelphia, 1854); for antebellum America’s love for the exotic, see Bode, \textit{Anatomy}, 221–35.

\textsuperscript{52} Kane, \textit{United States Grinnell Expedition}.

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.
it would reach a relatively mild ocean free of ice.\textsuperscript{54} He advocated a second expedition, with himself in command, to reach this sea. This expedition would combine scientific research with the humanitarian search for Franklin, although by this time most realists were convinced that Franklin and his crew were dead.

At this point in his life Kane demonstrated a remarkable ability for self-promotion. His own goal was to travel the world and become known as a great explorer like Humboldt, so he skillfully exploited popular interest in the Arctic and the fate of Franklin to promote his own ambition. He framed his idea for a voyage around a scientific mystery—the idea of an “Open Polar Sea”—and a humanitarian mission—the search for Franklin—so that he could achieve his goal. If his travels could be portrayed as a noble quest, with both humanitarian and scientific goals, public interest and enthusiasm would be greatly increased, thereby allowing him to raise the necessary funds for the expedition. It was to be a privately sponsored venture with a crew partially made up of officers and men on special assignment from the United States Navy.

By May 1853 the second Grinnell expedition was underway with Kane in command. He sailed off in the brig \textit{Advance} with a crew of eighteen men including himself, for the distant icy regions.\textsuperscript{55} As planned, the \textit{Advance} sailed north to Smith Sound, north of Baffin’s Bay, where the expedition tried to force its way through the ice to the imagined open sea beyond. When the ship could not get through, Kane decided to spend the winter, allowing the \textit{Advance} to become frozen in the ice at almost eighty degrees north latitude. His plan was to spend time making scientific observations and laying out caches of supplies to the north so that in the spring a sledge journey could be made to the open sea, where, with any luck, they would find Franklin. Conditions, however, proved too severe. Each time a party was sent out to bury a cache, the men came back near death with frozen extremities. Two men died after one such journey.

In these harsh conditions the spirits of the once enthusiastic crew of volunteers quickly declined, and conflict became no stranger aboard the


\textsuperscript{55} \textit{New York Daily Times}, June 1, 1853.
Advance. Kane barely maintained his authority over the officers and men. After the first winter was over, everyone was ready to return home. Unfortunately, when summer did come, the bay where the Advance was anchored never thawed, and the expedition was forced to spend a second winter frozen into the ice. They would never have survived had they not met a group of native Greenlanders who lived nearby. These “Esquimaux” traded fresh meat for whatever useful items, especially metal, that the Americans were willing to trade. When spring came once again, Kane and the crew deserted the brig, most of which they had already burned as fuel, and in an open boat made an incredible journey of close to one thousand miles through ice-choked waters to the settled part of southern Greenland. There they met with a rescue party sent out to find them. When they arrived home they learned that signs of the lost Franklin expedition had been found by Dr. John Rae, a Scottish-born explorer working for the Hudson’s Bay Company, over a thousand miles from where Kane’s crew had been looking, but this did not significantly dull their reception back home. Americans chose not to see that the expedition had been largely pointless. Rather, they chose to celebrate the noble effort.

Little more than a year after the expedition’s return, Kane’s second book, *Arctic Explorations*, was published. It sold close to 150,000 copies. The book told the story of long dark winters amidst a strange and forbidding arctic landscape; of the suffering of the men from scurvy and frozen toes and fingers and of how they were kept alive that second winter by the treaty with the band of native Greenlanders at Etah; of the dedicated process of gathering scientific data on tides, temperature, and other natural phenomena on a daily basis in these conditions; of claims that two men from the expedition had seen the Open Polar Sea in the distance while on a sledging journey, confirming Kane’s theory. These observations and discoveries seemed to give the expedition a purpose. More interesting for readers, however, *Arctic Explorations* was the account of how the expedition’s small, young commander used his medical knowledge and perseverance to bring all but three of his men home alive. Here was the story of a young leader who despite amazing hardships used his knowledge and wits to overcome a hostile nature, of a man who had been raised with every advantage of class...

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and position yet who gave it all up for the sake of advancing human knowledge. Instead of the story of a failed mission that had left three men dead for no tangible results, readers got a story about a noble quest for knowledge. The attempt to find Franklin and to reach the Open Polar Sea had failed, but antebellum Americans still found value in the sacrifices made for what seemed to be the advancement of mankind.\footnote{57 Reviews of \textit{Arctic Explorations} in \textit{Eclectic Magazine} 40 (April 1857) and 41 (July 1857), \textit{Knickerbocker Magazine} (November,December 1856), \textit{Littell's Living Age} 52 (1857); advertisement for \textit{Arctic Explorations}, EKK Papers—printed materials, box 1.}

Kane became the nation's newest hero. He was heralded as a great scientist for his geographic discoveries. He was held up as an example for America's youth. At only thirty-seven years of age this intelligent and courageous young man seemed to be headed toward a great future. Kane seemed to embody everything that America wished itself to be—but within months of the publication of his thrilling narrative, he was dead.

The life and death of Elisha Kent Kane allow a rare view of the way science and exploration can become a context for hero making. Francis Spufford, in a recent book on arctic travel in the British context, has observed that polar exploration in the nineteenth century took on a strong imaginative quality. It transcended the goal of simple scientific or adventurous exploration to become a context for myth making and moral reflection.\footnote{Spufford, \textit{Ice and the English Imagination}, passim.} Part of this myth making was the creation of a particular kind of hero. Kane was held up before the public as a scientific hero. Reading his eulogies one imagines that America was burying a great moral leader rather than a popular explorer, but for antebellum Americans, Kane's geographical exploration was a form of human progress that translated easily into a moral crusade. Kane's travels to exotic Arctic regions could be understood in mythic terms, like the journey of Christian in Bunyan's \textit{Pilgrim's Progress}, and Kane himself could be understood as a heroic figure who performed wonders on behalf of mankind.

Students of mythology might recognize in Kane some of the characteristics of the archetypal hero figure described by Joseph Campbell.\footnote{Joseph Campbell, \textit{The Hero with a Thousand Faces} (Princeton, N.J., 1949), passim.} Kane disappeared from the face of the known world into a strange realm of ice. Gone for two years, he was almost given up for dead when he emerged to tell tales of a wondrous place totally unfamiliar and otherworldly to the
average American. His eulogist observed this very quality of Kane's: "With the prayers and hopes of his country following after him he disappears from the abodes of men, on a pilgrimage of patience and love, into the solitudes of the North . . . . At length, like one come back from another world, he returns to thrill us with the marvels of his escape, and transport us, by his graphic pen, into scenes we scarcely realize as belonging to the earth we inhabit."\(^60\) This aspect of Kane's image certainly contributed to his fame. He was the archetypal hero, like Gilgamesh or Odysseus, yet his ability to fit into the mold of a universal archetype does not fully explain why he was a hero at this particular time in American history. It does not explain why his fame was intense yet only fleeting. Ultimately Kane's brief fame had more to do with historical context than universal archetypes.

Antebellum Americans had particular ideas about what it meant to be a hero, and these ideals were easily applied to the image of the scientist. Fundamental to the beliefs about heroism was the idea that it took more than simple physical courage. A hero was one who underwent suffering, not for personal gain, but on behalf of humanity. One such humanitarian motive could be the pursuit of knowledge. A writer in the *Knickerbocker Magazine* ended an essay on heroism with the claim that older ideals of heroism as simply a matter of strength and courage in war were being replaced by a new form of heroism based on science, art, and religion. "Heroism in the nineteenth century has assumed a type of things grander and more beautiful to come. It is rolling back the waves of ignorance to their source. It finds ample room for exercise of its prowess in the pursuits of science and song, in the elevation of human propensities, and in the propagation of the words of truest import the WORLD'S GREATEST HERO uttered eighteen centuries ago."\(^61\)

If we consider this understanding of heroism in the light of other historical forces at play at the time of Kane's death it takes on greater significance. In the decades leading up to the 1850s the United States was undergoing rapid change. The nation had rapidly expanded westward, acquiring new land and incorporating new states. Immigrants with different

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religious beliefs were arriving in increasing numbers, seeming to threaten American values. A “market revolution” had taken place changing the very fabric of social and economic relations in the country. In the South a new attitude toward slavery was taking hold which viewed slavery as an institution worthy of expansion instead of the previously assumed gradual decline.

In the 1850s all of these forces merged in the form of intense sectional conflict. In the year before Kane’s funeral, open warfare took place in Kansas between northern and southern settlers; abolitionist Charles Sumner was beaten half to death on the floor of the Senate by South Carolina’s Preston Brooks; and the Republican Party entered presidential politics dedicated to stopping the expansion of slavery. On March 9, 1857, at the very same time that Kane’s body was on its way home, the United States Supreme Court issued its decision in the case of Dred Scott, denying the federal government the right to prohibit slavery in the territories. Many people thought it was only a matter of time before the nation broke apart—which it did only four years later.

It is against this backdrop of controversy and social discord that we can best understand the enthusiasm, sentimentality, and hero making that went into Kane’s funeral. There was very little sign of selfless dedication to humanity among national leaders in February and March 1857. Instead Americans saw faction, division, and the supremacy of self-interest. An American arctic explorer was separated from these conflicts at home and as such could become a symbolic figure of unity. In his image Americans found virtues that they could not find in the nation’s leaders.

Descriptions of Kane focused on his role as a hero to science and humanity, which interestingly intertwined the themes of science and virtue. Eulogists and admirers consistently pointed out that his glory did not stem from military, political, or economic achievement, but rather from the selfless service of humanity through science. A Pittsburgh committee resolved that in honoring Kane, “we summon the noblest and most unselfish feelings of the human heart. Unattended by the ‘pomp and circumstances of military glory’—unsustained and uninfluenced by the sordid motive of pecuniary gain—not desiring that blood or treasure should be poured out to minister to his ambition, we have seen this noble, gentle-minded man go forth on his long and laborious mission, for the sake of humanity and of
science, and for their sake only." Another admirer pointed out that Kane was one "who never held any lucrative office, who never was in a position to dispose power or patronage, but who devoted his talents and sacrificed his life at once in the cause of science and humanity." Praise came not only from scientists, but also from others who chose to see geographic exploration as a heroic, unselfish, and humanitarian endeavor that exemplified the progress of the age and the process of rolling back life's mysteries.

Geographic discovery was not just a topic of interest to experts and hobbyists; rather it appealed to a popular antebellum belief in progress. Americans believed that they lived in an age when the world's greatest mysteries, including geographic ones, would finally be revealed. As one writer in *Harper's* enthusiastically predicted, "In another century, perhaps, the phrases, 'Unexplored region,' 'Only partially known,' and other similar blazons of geographical ignorance, will cease to disfigure the map. Perhaps, in still another, we shall have ordnance and coast surveys of the earth's entire surface . . . . What may we not expect from the accelerating movement of the age?" This same author identified Kane's alleged discovery of the Open Polar Sea as one of the three greatest geographic discoveries of the age.

Because antebellum Americans had a great curiosity about the unknown, and a belief that uncovering the unknown led to human progress and human happiness, a figure like Kane took on greater importance than might otherwise have been the case. The search for scientific knowledge in such a remote zone was presented as a noble quest. The process of exploration combined intellectual achievement with physical achievement, and was understood by a wide-ranging audience. The intellectual justification of science served to legitimate a certain degree of foolhardy adventure seeking, so that science could be read as adventure and adventure could be read as science. As one observer pointed out, "His earliest travel and exploits have a color of scientific enthusiasm to sanction their physical hardihood." But moving beyond the scientific and adventurous aspects of Kane's achievements, antebellum Americans found a lesson in virtue. What a broad spectrum of Americans loved about Elisha Kent Kane was not his science alone, but rather, as one observer noted, "the whole cluster of manly graces

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Humboldtean science provided a context that enabled mid-nineteenth-century versions of virtue and manhood to express themselves. The *New York Daily Tribune* declared, "Whatever the scientific results of his perilous voyages, they are of still higher significance in the example they have presented of noble, persistent, and disinterested and undismayed manhood." As a polar explorer Kane exemplified virtues such as bravery, progress, perseverance, selflessness, intelligence, and duty. Kane was seen as one who placed the good of his men and the good of humanity above his own self-interest. Even those who did not understand Kane's scientific significance could understand and honor his virtue in a seemingly humanitarian cause.

In trying to explain the honors being paid to Kane, one Philadelphia newspaper looked not to Kane's practical discoveries, but to his symbolic value for the nation, putting forward the idea that Kane was being honored more for his motives than for his achievement. The newspaper article argued that he was to be honored for "what he has attempted and endured in the high and ennobling service of science and philanthropy," and concluded by saying that the ceremonies in honor of Kane were really about "that abstract ideal of manly virtue and magnanimity, which his life embodied." His life was to serve as a moral inspiration and example to the young. It was this aspect of Kane that brought his reputation out of the confines of the strictly scientific community and made him a hero accessible to a wider public, so that mourning him became a national public ritual.

Kane seemed to combine many disparate virtues in his creation of an identity as a scientific hero, especially in his expression of manhood. Historian Anthony Rotundo has observed that the nineteenth century saw a transition from an ideal of manhood based upon paternal responsibility and intellectual depth, to a manhood based more on a competitive model of aggression and physical prowess. Kane's role as a scientific explorer expressed a version of manhood that encompassed both ideals. What many

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66 *Sun* (Philadelphia), Mar. 13, 1857.
69 Ibid.
observers found most appealing about Kane was the impression he gave of overcoming physical hardship by the use of his intellect and will. To the proponents of a physically vigorous manhood, Kane appeared as one who displayed remarkable strength and endurance in the face of physical hardship. In his narrative we see him engaging in all sorts of physically robust and courageous activities, from hunting walrus and polar bears to hauling a sledge over massive icy hummocks. Yet, to the more intellectually inclined, it was Kane’s intellect and will that triumphed. One member of the Geographical Society observed “that the most remarkable phase of character presented by Dr. Kane was the triumph of his intellect over the infirmities of his body.” Kane was a very small man, not more than 130 pounds, yet he endured in the Arctic by using his wits, when stronger men fell sick. In this sense Kane was a scientific hero distinguished from the mere reckless adventurer by his overcoming of obstacles by the use of reason. He underwent physical hardship in order to prove the primacy of reason over force.

For those to whom manhood was best demonstrated by a sense of duty and paternal control, Kane appeared as an ideal leader. As a medical doctor, he became a nurturing provider for his crew when, in the depths of an arctic winter, they were stricken with scurvy. Observers noted that his nursing the men back to health “shows conclusively that with the sterner qualities of man he combined the gentle qualities of woman.” Kane showed himself to be a gentle man at a time when gentleness was increasingly being considered a feminine trait. He showed his nurturing qualities to be part of his manliness, since nursing his men was part of his duty as a paternal leader. In Kane, all these different ways of expressing manhood—physical courage, reasoned intellect, and paternal responsibility—were balanced together, so that different generations of men and men in different cultural regions of the country could look to him as a model of manly virtue.

Kane’s funeral began as an opportunity to honor one man, yet it soon developed into a nationwide celebration of those virtues he was said to represent. When a nation joins together in this way to celebrate its ideals, it is a good example of what Benedict Anderson has called imagining community. When thousands of Americans from New Orleans, Columbus,

72 *Daily Telegraph* (Harrisburg, Pa.), Feb. 27, 1857.
Baltimore, Philadelphia, and other cities, who knew neither one another nor Kane, could all find the same context in which to express themselves, they could imagine themselves all part of the same nation despite the discord of the time. The mayor of Cincinnati put it this way: “[Kane] was our countryman, and his life has made a bright page for our country’s history, and added to the consideration which the world abroad is daily disposed to concede to us as a nation.” Eight members of the Louisville bar expressed the same theme in a public letter of condolence to Elisha Kane’s father. “You must know that the reputation of your son belongs to the American public, and will be cherished as a part of the nation’s wealth. His heroic devotion to humanity and science has conferred imperishable glory upon his country.” Kane was also often compared with the national icon Columbus, who, in the nineteenth century, had come to be a symbol of the United States.

*Harper’s Weekly* printed a poem on its first page after Kane was buried, one stanza of which expressed the view of Kane, the scientific traveler, as a justification for a unified nationalism. The poem describes all the different regions of the country from “Maine’s deep woods” to “Hot Southern lips” to the “large-lunged West,” all proclaiming “Honor to Kane!” Interestingly, this poem appeared right next to, and in stark contrast with, a story on continuing controversy in Kansas.

Newspapers stressed the theme of Kane as a national American hero, not the hero of a particular class, region, or faction. Some stressed the journey of the corpse through both southern and northern states. The *Baltimore Sun* observed that the mourning for Kane in Baltimore “was of universal character, it having been participated in by every class of our community.” Others pointed to the symbolic value of Kane lying in state in Independence Hall where the nation had been born. Reverend Charles Shields observed, “Fittingly we have suffered his honored remains to repose a few pensive hours at the shrine where patriotism gathers its fairest memories and choicest honors.” Shields went on to use geographic lines of longitude

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75 *Louisville Courier*, Mar. 4, 1857.
77 *Boston Pilot*, July 18, 1857; *Louisville Courier*, Mar. 4, 1857.
79 *Baltimore Sun*, Mar. 11, 1857.
converging at the North Pole as a symbol for Kane's role as a unifier of disparate people. To Shields, Kane's journey to look for Franklin was "a beautiful tribute to the sentiment of national amity."  

Similarly the mayor of Cincinnati observed that the citizens of his city came together "to pay respect to the remains, not of a party leader, nor of him who lost his life in party strife or in the broils of faction, but of one whose fame is world-wide, gained by distinguished services rendered to the intelligence and the humanity of the age."  

Virtuous science, as represented symbolically by Kane's heroic image, transcended the corrupting influences of faction at a time when little else did.

A scientific hero like Kane could be used as a versatile image. The image of the virtuous explorer could be a moral example of humanitarianism and progress. It could be a model for ideal manhood. And finally it could be a model for imagining America as a unified community founded upon intellect and virtue. In this way science became part of national public ritual. It provided a convenient cultural context for Americans to communicate their ideals regardless of the quality of the scientific knowledge being produced.

Elisha Kane was a hero seemingly above the fray of ordinary concerns. By traveling to the North he removed himself from the growing controversies of American life. Frozen into the ice off the coast of northwest Greenland one need not worry about the expansion of slavery or growing class divisions. There is no threat of Catholic immigrants or controversies with do-good Protestant reformers. The issues faced by Kane and his crew were the simple issues of life and death which could be overcome only by reasoned intellect and manly virtue. A broad spectrum of Americans found a hero in a man who could deal with problems like clashing icebergs and frostbit toes. They could not find a hero at home who could deal with problems like slavery and economic transformation. By looking to Kane as a heroic figure and celebrating his scientific work in public ritual displays, Americans looked away from the real issues confronting their world. Of course, Elisha Kane as

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81 Ibid., 373.
82 Mayor Faran, quoted in Cincinnati Daily Enquirer, Feb. 27, 1857.
a man or as a symbol could not really unify a fragmenting nation, but for a brief time in the midst of impending crisis, America liked to imagine a world where simple scientific virtues could lead to the discovery of open water beyond the impenetrable pack ice of the 1850s.

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