

# The Race for the Pole: Peary, Cook, and Winnie-the-Pooh

---

---

• Richard C. Davis •

*Résumé:* Lorsqu'il a attribué à Winnie l'Ourson la découverte du Pôle Nord, l'auteur A.A. Milne faisait une blague qui reposait en fait sur une profonde connaissance du contexte politique. Ce dernier collaborait au magazine satirique anglais **Punch** en 1909, l'année où deux explorateurs rivaux, les Américains Robert Edwin Peary et Frederick Cook, prétendaient chacun avoir été le premier à atteindre le Pôle Nord. À l'instar de toutes les caricatures de **Punch** sur la conquête du Pôle, l'attribution bouffonne à Winnie s'inscrit dans la même veine satirique pro-britannique.

*Summary:* When A.A. Milne honoured Winnie-the-Pooh with the discovery of the North Pole, he did so with a vast amount of topical awareness. Milne served as a contributing editor to the English satirical magazine **Punch** in 1909 when rival Americans Robert Edwin Peary and Frederick Cook each claimed to have been the first to reach the North Pole. Like the many ironic references to the polar contest that subsequently appeared in **Punch**, Milne's recognition of Winnie-the-Pooh as the Pole's discoverer evolved out of this same satirical position.

## Introduction

While serving on the editorial board of a northern journal some 20 years ago, I found myself caught between two conflicting factions. One side enthusiastically argued that Robert Edwin Peary had been the first white man to reach the North Pole; the other urged with equal vehemence that Frederick Cook had beat Peary to that geographic landmark. The polar event, whoever might have achieved it, occurred in the first decade of the twentieth century. By the time I became embroiled in this exchange of letters to the editor, some 70 years had passed since the event in question, which made the unrelenting stubbornness of Peary and Cook advocates somewhat wearying. After permitting numerous published assertions and rebuttals between



Illustration by E.H. Shepherd from *Winnie-the-Pooh*

supporters, I chose to end the debate — at least in the pages of this particular journal — with a neutral statement about the controversy. I felt a personal responsibility for resurrecting the ancient dispute through some of the work I had commissioned; consequently, I set out to compose a fair-minded editorial comment that accommodated the interests of both sides.

Nevertheless, the escalating requests for editorial space made by Peary and Cook advocates had been annoying. In part, my annoyance resulted from my awareness that the achievement of the North Pole was an event of no real historical significance, even at the time it was accomplished. By the mid-1980s, it hardly seemed relevant to northern issues, as diverse as they might be. At the same time I served as an editor on this northern journal, I was teaching a course in children's literature and had recently been reading A.A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh*. Against my better judgement, I could not resist a touch of mischief as I concluded my "fair-minded editorial comment" on the Peary/Cook question. That grown men should raise their blood pressure over such an inconsequential matter struck me as silly, and so I closed with the remark that A.A. Milne had reached the pinnacle of his creative genius when he attributed the discovery of the North Pole to Winnie-the-Pooh.

In the book's longest chapter, Chapter VIII, "In Which Christopher Robin Leads an Expedition to the North Pole,"<sup>1</sup> Milne brings together every member of the cast, including "all Rabbit's friends-and-relatives" (115), and sends them off "to discover the North Pole" (112). Not everyone, especially Pooh, is certain what it is they seek — "a Pole or something. Or was it a Mole?" (114) — but they are convinced the expedition will "discover something" (115). Even Christopher Robin, who first suggests the adventure, is a bit uncertain exactly what the North Pole *is*, only able to assure Pooh that "[i]t's just a thing you discover" (113). When they come to "a Dangerous

place," Roo falls into the stream and is rescued by Pooh, who holds a long pole across the water. At that point, Christopher Robin announces that "Pooh's found the North Pole" (128), the very pole he's holding in his paws.

At the time I commented on this particular mark of Milne's genius, I made the remark flippantly. I was not thinking this polar contest of largely American interest and the popular English children's book were in any way connected. My intent was only to be mischievous. As far as I was concerned, Milne was just as likely to have granted Pooh the discovery of the Straits of Magellan or to have located the Holy Grail or anything else that had gone missing for a long time. Such quests would have similarly appealed to the child's sense of adventure, which is all I thought Milne was doing. The North Pole, of course, enabled him to play with two different concepts of "pole": the axis of a rotating sphere and the variety found in front of barber shops. Milne not only revelled in such verbal playfulness so characteristic of *Winnie-the-Pooh* but he likely sensed that many adult readers were as uncertain as Pooh and Christopher Robin that some tactile, vertical landform did not mark the Earth's axis. Otherwise sensible adults, after all, expect something tangible to indicate their crossing of the equator or the Arctic Circle. In short, Milne chose the North Pole over the Straits of Magellan or the Holy Grail because of the verbal fun he could have with it. That was the only connection between the polar controversy and *Winnie-the-Pooh*, or so I thought at the time.

Many years later, I realized what Milne had been thinking when he bestowed on Pooh the honour of discovering the North Pole. Milne had suffered precisely the same reaction to the claims of Peary and Cook in 1909 as I had to their supporters in the 1980s. Those other avenues of appreciation remain open. The "expedition to the North Pole" (110-29) continues to appeal to the child's desire to explore the world. The pole that Pooh holds out to save Roo is just as effective a pun as is Milne's play with the child's parlour game "pin the tail on the donkey" (44-55), with the broken sign "Trespassers W" (34), or with the expression "under the name of" (4-5). But while I had once thought there was no special link between the polar event and the book, I am now equally certain that Milne's assignment of the discovery of the North Pole to Pooh was a satirical — even cynical — response to the conflicting claims of Robert Edwin Peary and Frederick Cook.

### *Punch* and the Polar Controversy

A.A. Milne is best remembered today as the author of *Winnie-the-Pooh*, but during much of his lifetime, his name was more familiar as a playwright and as a contributor to and editor of *Punch* magazine. He was an accomplished dramatist. In her biography of Milne, Ann Thwaite describes him as "certainly one of England's most successful, prolific and best-known playwrights for a brief period," although he was never quite "England's premier play-

wright," as Milne jokingly signed himself in closing a letter to his brother Ken (194). But the area of Milne's professional achievement most relevant to Pooh's discovery of the North Pole was his work in journalism. Even while editing the Cambridge undergraduate magazine *Granta*, Milne aspired to write for *Punch*, the satirical weekly that came out of London. In its early years, *Punch* was "anarchic, anti-establishment, socially disruptive" (Thwaite 124). *Punch* historian R.G.G. Price speaks of "*Punch's* opposition to the monarchy, its championship of the oppressed" in the first fifteen or sixteen years after the magazine was started in 1841 (46). But by the twentieth century, it had grown politically conservative. It maintained a humorous tone, nevertheless, which it generated through a gentle form of social satire. In 1905, *Punch* finally accepted a contribution from Milne, and soon after, on 13 February 1906, the editor offered Milne the post of assistant editor. Just over two years later, Milne was invited to join the *Punch* Table, where higher-level editorial decisions were made every Wednesday evening, especially about the cartoons to appear (Thwaite 126-29). He continued to serve as a contributing editor until his resignation, after the war, in 1919.

During the early years of his tenure as assistant editor, the controversy over who had first reached the North Pole exploded in newspapers around the world. Robert Peary had twice attempted to reach the North Pole (1902 and 1906) and was engaged in yet another northward thrust when Frederick Cook made the shocking announcement that he had attained the Pole. On 2 September 1909, papers around the world featured Cook's sensational claim to have reached the Pole on 21 April 1908, although he had not been able to communicate his accomplishment until his return to civilization more than a year later. According to historian B.A. Riffenburgh, Cook's claim "received unprecedented coverage (for a story of exploration) throughout Europe and the United States" (172). On 7 September 1909, only five days after Cook's astonishing announcement hit the presses, North American and European newspapers proclaimed Peary's assertion that he had reached the Pole on 6 April 1909. In spite of the impressive media coverage generated by Cook's dramatic claim, Peary's announcement received still greater press (Riffenburgh 178). Riffenburgh describes the coverage in U.S. papers as "enormous" (178) and, in the English press, "staggering compared to normal articles" (179). During the next year or more of media attention, popular opinion largely turned against Cook and his claim, although it is not certain that either Cook or Peary ever reached the North Pole. What is certain is that the newspaper-reading public, fanned by sensational battles between the *New York Times*, which supported Peary's claim, and the *New York Herald*, which backed Cook, was assaulted with coverage of the polar controversy (Riffenburgh 165-90).

As the premier satirical magazine of the English-speaking world, *Punch* took on the responsibility of ridiculing all that its staff viewed as



From the New York Herald, September 1909

ludicrous about polar affairs in the news. Cook's claim to have reached the North Pole, as we have seen, hit the newspapers on 2 September 1909, Peary's on 7 September 1909 (Riffenburgh 172). The 8 September 1909 issue of *Punch* contained four separate items directly related to the polar contest. One of those items is a poem, filling half a page, entitled "The New Cordon Bleu: To Dr. Cook, of the North Pole." The initials "O.S." (possibly Owen Seaman, *Punch*'s editor) appear after it, so Milne was clearly not its author, but as assistant editor and member of the Table, he would definitely have been involved in the editorial decision to run it. Two of the shorter items about Cook's claim almost certainly bear Milne's stamp. Both items quote unfortunate lines from London daily newspapers, followed by editorial quips from unidentified *Punch* staffers that boldly expose the verbal blunders for all the world to see. One priceless example is worth repeating here:

'The very Farthest North'

'Dr. Cook's telegram to M. Leconte states definitely that he reached the North Pole on the date mentioned above, and that he discovered land to the northward.' — *Daily Telegraph*

We should like to hear what Etukishook [one of Cook's Inuit companions] thinks of the country north of the North Pole.

(8 Sept. 1909: 177)



Frederick Cook

While the notion of printing howlers from other newspapers and magazines was not new to *Punch*, Milne himself is generally credited with the idea of commenting on them (Thwaite 128), so one may almost certainly say that he was responsible for this quip, perhaps both as editor and contributor.

Given another week to prepare copy, *Punch* staff came up with eleven separate pieces relating to the polar controversy by the 15 September 1909 issue. These include another half-page poem by O.S. entitled “The Battle of the Pole”; two cartoons on the topic, one of them full-page; four quotations from other papers followed by editorial quips, as described above; two prose items referring to the North Pole, each about one-third of a page in length; and two more poems. Of these latter two poems, one is just under a half-page in length and is anonymous. The other, “An Unconvincing Narrative,” the longest non-pictorial item related to the Pole in the issue, runs to about three-quarters of a page and is followed by those now-famous initials “A.A.M.” — Alan Alexander Milne. There will be more to say about this shortly.

Being a topical weekly, *Punch* focused on the polar controversy while it blazed across the front pages of the world’s newspapers. That interest lessened in subsequent issues, as it did in the dailies, but its presence was evident throughout the remainder of the year. The 22 September 1909 issue carried two items relevant to the Pole; the next week contained two more (one of them a cartoon); the following week, three; the week of 13 October, three more; and so on, gradually diminishing to only three separate items making reference to the polar controversy in the first two months of 1910. Most of these later references were either brief items in the “Charivaria” section or editorial quips laughing at blunders quoted from other publications. Some

items were substantial, however, such as “The Song of the Dirt,” a song of woe supposedly sung by the man who had to scrub all the dirt off Frederick Cook upon his return to civilization (13 Oct. 1909: 260) and a mock “Advertisement: To Explorers and Others of the North, South, or any other Pole” (20 Oct. 1909: 277). References to the South Pole, prompted by both Robert Falcon Scott’s and Ernest Shackleton’s efforts to reach it, also began to appear with frequency, although the figures given here apply only to those items specific to Peary, Cook, the North Pole, Eskimo, or polar bears, which have nothing to do with the Antarctic.

### Britain, America, and the Arctic

Before exploring how Milne’s work at *Punch* and the polar controversy found their way into *Winnie-the-Pooh*, which was not published until 1926, some historical background will be helpful. Frequently, Canadian readers are aware that Winnie-the-Pooh took part of his name from a black bear from Winnipeg, but the cold-weather association generally stops there. Subscribers to *Canadian Children’s Literature* will be more familiar with *Winnie-the-Pooh* than with the race for the Pole, so it is important to focus on two aspects of the polar contest in order to grasp its significance to Britain. First, the race for the Pole was not an isolated event but was an inevitable outgrowth of centuries of arctic exploration. Second, whereas Britain had dominated arctic exploration for centuries, it was an American (actually two!) who claimed to have been the first to reach the North Pole. Let’s look first at the relationship between the race for the Pole and arctic exploration in general.

To some minds, attaining the North Pole was the ceremonial pinnacle of Europe’s age-old search for the Northwest Passage. The quest for the Passage had initially been driven by commercial interests seeking a more expedient route to the Orient, hence avoiding the lengthy journey around the Cape. Many geographical features in the Canadian Arctic today take their names from British mariners in search of that goal — Hudson, James, Frobisher, Davis, and Baffin, to name a few. By the end of the eighteenth century, few navigators still thought that a route over or through the continent, if one even existed, would be economically viable. Nevertheless, during the nineteenth century, the British government continued to commit hundreds of men and ships to the goal of navigating the Northwest Passage. Under the urging of John Barrow, Second Secretary to the British Admiralty in 1818, Britain began a major renewal of its commitment to gaining the Passage and, later, to rescuing those who had gone missing in search of it, men such as John Ross, Robert McClure, and John Franklin.

Thus, while the notion of the Northwest Passage was once motivated by pragmatic interests, its pursuit ultimately became a matter of altruism, rather like mountains that had to be climbed because they were there. The



Robert Peary

search for the Passage became a focus for national pride, celebrating Britannia's ability to extend her imperial command even into the vastness of the Arctic. Finally, after centuries of questing after it, the Northwest Passage was navigated in 1905 by Roald Amundsen. "Amundsen," one will notice, is not a British name. With the ancient goal realized, the momentum in the short term was inevitably redirected at achieving another arctic grail, the North Pole. It, too, was of no practical value. As early as 1909, Harvard astronomer Percival Lowell had said that "scientifically the discovery of the North Pole is of just the same significance as a new record in the 100 yard dash" (*Boston Daily Globe*, 3 Sept. 1909; qtd. in Riffenburgh 175). But its value was greatly enhanced by the traditions it inherited from Britain's search for the Northwest Passage, as well as by the inhospitable remoteness in which it lay. Like the Passage that preceded it, this was surely a region in which heroes could be made.

This brings us to the second aspect of Peary's and Cook's claims — that two Americans were being celebrated, especially by their countrymen, for an Arctic achievement made possible by centuries of sacrifice and effort from Britain. In the first half of the nineteenth century alone, Britain had committed thousands of pounds to searching out the Passage; America had paid little attention. Later in the century, of course, Britain's interest in the Arctic declined. The Dominion of Canada was formed in 1867, the Hudson's Bay Company sold its Rupert's Land holdings to the new dominion in 1870, and Britain ceded her arctic claims to Canada in 1880, all indications that



Britain was voluntarily giving up her sovereignty in the North. Nevertheless, it must have stung some corner of British pride when a Norwegian finally sailed his small vessel around Prince William Island and through a passage that had proved so elusive to British mariners, an endeavour that had become a matter of national pride through generations of effort.

As if this were not sufficient sting to national pride, the matter did not die there. Not only did a Norwegian find the Passage, but Peary and Cook — both undeniably American — almost immediately afterwards claimed to have seized the geographical landmark that symbolized arctic exploration in the popular imagination, the North Pole. Americans now immodestly boasted their accomplishment of this goal, never acknowledging or perhaps even recognizing that its only value lay in the traditions it had inherited from Britain. As well, Britain had a sort of historical right to the Arctic, even though she had voluntarily given it up to her former colony, Canada. Britain's endeavours had set down the basic lay of the land, they had evolved methods of travel in polar regions, and they had developed an understanding of compass behaviour in the magnetic fields surrounding the Pole.

The United States, on the other hand, had spent little of its first century of nationhood gazing northward. Isaac Hayes unsuccessfully sought the Pole in the early 1860s, and C.F. Hall and Frederick Schwatka both searched for clues about the missing John Franklin in the next decades. But with the exception of commercial whaling interests, these were the only significant American explorations in the Arctic until the first International Polar Year of 1882, a year in which many nations — including such temperate ones as Germany and Hungary — contributed to the scientific knowledge of the Arctic. It is a telling fact that when Secretary of State William Henry Seward purchased Alaska from Russia in 1867, most Americans were so uninterested in the North that they referred to the new territory as "Seward's Folly" and "Seward's Ice-Box."

Geographically as well as historically, Britain had every reason to be affronted by the brash boasts of the new kid on the block. Until Seward's purchase some two-thirds of the way through the nineteenth century, no part of the United States lay anywhere near as close to the North Pole as did Scotland. Yet competing American papers celebrated the achievements of either Peary or Cook as though the attainment of the Pole was the ultimate fulfilment of the national ethos of Manifest Destiny. In short, to now boast about achieving the Pole, a goal made both possible and valuable through prior British efforts, must have been the acme of poor taste in British minds. One can only imagine how much more crass and gauche this must have seemed when Cook's claim — and later Peary's — became suspect, the work of glory-seeking charlatans.<sup>2</sup>



Cartoon from *Punch*, September 1909

And if anyone in Britain had a responsibility to direct barbs at such tasteless behaviour, it was the editors of the satirical *Punch*. Although not of Milne's creation, the cartoon "An Undisputed Claim" shows something of the British attitude toward America's false pride in its polar obsession. Bernard Partridge drew the cartoon, but as assistant editor and member of the weekly *Punch* Table, Milne himself would have been closely involved with the cartoon's selection. It shows an American eagle perched smugly and solidly atop an icy Pole, surrounded by endless ice. The sub-caption "My Pole, anyway!" not only alludes to the dispute between Peary and Cook, but takes the satire further, ridiculing the entire national obsession with winning a goal about which others care little.

Certainly, themes about American behaviour being gross, vulgar, and materialistic ran throughout *Punch* for many years. That is a basic cultural focus, and one that has not disappeared, if such films as *A Fish Called Wanda* hold any truth. But the brouhaha over the race to the Pole captured the essence of what the British found in poor taste about Americans, and during the first year of the polar controversy, *Punch* touched time and again on matters related to the American character. Many, like the American eagle cartoon, were specific to the polar controversy. Here is another example from the "Charivaria" section:

Dr. Cook has been presented with the freedom of New York City by the Board of Alderman. Tammany's point of view, we understand, is this:—

If Dr. Cook's story is true, then we respect him; if he is a fraud, then we still respect him. (27 Oct. 1909: 295)

Another *Punch* barb attacks American character through a poem about America's great sportsman/statesman, Teddy Roosevelt, whom Taft had recently replaced in the White House. The notion of the polar controversy is always close at hand, as the voice in the poem wonders where Roosevelt is now and what big game he is stalking, before it closes with the lines:

No lions tempt his rifle, but the bear,  
The white, the Arctic, to his icy home  
Lures Roosevelt on across the frozen foam.  
And many a dog and many an Eskimo  
Goes with him on his perilous journey slow;  
And soon a message will rejoice our soul:—  
'Peary and Cook be hanged! I, Roosevelt, have the Pole!'  
(15 Sept. 1909: 197)

Still another example from the "Charivaria" section:

'Pole reached. Roosevelt safe,' cabled Commander Peary. Big Game in Africa seems to have got wind of this new triumph of the American flag, and to be treating the ex-President with increased respect. (15 Sept. 1909: 181)

Peary, always on the lookout for sponsors, had named his special-built vessel *The Roosevelt*.

And one final example cannot be omitted:

Judge Woodward, of New York, holds the opinion that, while American people many years ago were probably over boastful, the pendulum has now swung the other way, and the average American is too modest in asserting the glories of his native land. But this was said before the Stars and Stripes had been run up at the North Pole. (8 Sept. 1909: 163)

None of these pricks to the American sensibility is signed, so it may be that little more can be said here than that Milne read and approved them in his capacity as assistant editor.

### A.A. Milne, *Punch*, and Winnie-the-Pooh

But Milne did put his initials after the poem entitled "An Unconvincing Narrative." This, the longest piece related to the polar controversy in the 15 September 1909 issue, was previously mentioned in this article, and the time has come to look at it more closely. The poem's rollicking rhythm, the inter-

nal rhyme, and the heavy use of vernacular, coupled with the poem's northern theme, immediately bring Canada's Robert Service to mind. Possibly Milne was thinking of Kipling when he composed the comic verse, but it nevertheless reverberates with the sounds of Service, whose *Songs of the Sourdough* and *The Spell of the Yukon* were published in 1907.

The verse purports to be the story of "a third claimant to the Pole." It is of considerable interest that Milne conceived the idea of another "discoverer" of the North Pole a week after Peary's announcement hit the world's newspapers. The third claimant was not yet Winnie-the-Pooh, but here we have the germ of the idea that Milne was to bring to fruition more than a decade later when he credited Pooh with its discovery. Significantly, Milne's "third claimant to the Pole" is British, not American, and the flag he flies on the Pole is the Union Jack, not the Stars and Stripes. This different configuration solidly supports the idea that the British were sensitive to the matter of national pride in the polar conquest. Britain's prior commitment in the Arctic, no doubt, put the sting in America's unabashed celebration of its achievement. As well, since the poem is Milne's own creation, we can know for certain that Milne himself shared something of that same stung pride.

No doubt, regardless of Britain's cultural sensitivity to the American success at the Pole, the editors of *Punch* found the self-aggrandisement of Cook's and Peary's conflicting claims quite comical. The ego of the "third claimant" is evident when he purchases "a first-return" and "five third singles" — that is, a first-class return ticket for himself and five third-class one-way tickets — for "Etukishock, Gaukrodger, J.C. Clegg, Sir Fortescue Flannery, and the Cardinal Merry Del Val" (15 Sept. 1909: 188). These third-class expedition members provide not only a refrain for the poem, but act as an affirming chorus of "yes men" to the third claimant — swearing to the authenticity of his claim, cheering on his accomplishments, and witnessing his letter to the king. Having hoisted the Union Jack, the men are filled with "a wunnerful pride" until the "innocent tears (the first in years) rolled out of the eyes of all" (188). Clearly, Milne saw little innocence and much pride in the antics of Cook and Peary and the American culture they represented.

Not surprisingly, Chapter VIII of *Winnie-the-Pooh* includes two songs of self-celebration. One is written by and celebrates Milne's subsequent "third claimant," Winnie the Pooh, who fashions a Good Song out of little more than the line "Sing Ho! For the life of a Bear!" (110-11). Pooh's other song is only vaguely more modest, ending "Sing Hey! For Owl and Rabbit and all!" (118). Significantly, the song's emphasis is on those who discover the Pole, not on the Pole itself, reminding us that even in the Cook/Peary controversy, the North Pole was of no significance beyond the opportunity it provided for American self-aggrandisement.

Or one might see in *Winnie-the-Pooh* a different manner of calling to

mind the shameless self-congratulation that “An Unconvincing Narrative” satirizes. When Christopher Robin announces that “Pooh’s found the North Pole,” Pooh “look[s] modestly down” (128). Given his healthy, child-like ego and his propensity for the joyful celebration of “the life of a Bear,” Pooh’s modesty here might well serve as a foil to the decided immodesty in “An Unconvincing Narrative” and in the polar non-event of 1909. Significantly, it is not until Pooh is alone and back in his own house that he feels “very proud of what he had done,” upon which he has “a little something to revive himself” (129). Milne, as it were, offers an alternative behaviour to that chosen by Peary and Cook.

Nor should one forget the context in which Pooh discovers the North Pole: he is attempting to save Roo from drowning, although Roo himself is merely intent on making certain all onlookers witness his aquatic prowess! This comic rescue of Roo, which inadvertently leads to Pooh’s discovery of the North Pole, stands in marked contrast to the self-centred glory-seeking of the third claimant in “An Unconvincing Narrative.”

“An Unconvincing Narrative” shares another link with Milne’s later celebration of Pooh as the Pole’s discoverer. The narrator of the verse explains why neither Peary nor Cook saw the Pole when they arrived at the appropriate latitude: the “third claimant” had taken it down and sent it to the king! While the image of a physical, vertical column at the Earth’s axis is certainly not unique to *Winnie-the-Pooh* (*Punch* abounds in such graphic references, the American eagle cartoon serving as one of many examples), it seems particularly significant that this pre-Pooh claimant to the geographic landmark shares the same tactile and linear apprehension of the Pole as does the Bear of Little Brain.

Numerous other suggestive parallels link the polar race, the satirical pieces in *Punch* in the autumn of 1909, and Chapter VIII of *Winnie-the-Pooh*. “The Song of the Dirt” (*Punch*, 13 Oct. 1909: 260), supposedly sung by the man who scrubbed down a filthy Dr. Cook “in latitude 82,” might be echoed in Roo’s washing his face for the first time, which prompts Eeyore’s remark: “I don’t hold with all this washing.... This modern Behind-the-ears nonsense” (123). Similarly, the severe frostbite suffered by Peary and others on the polar rush might resurface in Milne’s book when Eeyore hangs his tail in the water until he finds that his tail has “[I]ost all feeling. Numbed it” (127). Only Christopher Robin’s rubbing brings sensation back into the donkey’s chilled appendage.

Such parallels might readily convince, had Milne bestowed the honour on Pooh in, say, 1910 or 1912. But that is not the case. Rather, 17 years elapsed between the publication of “An Unconvincing Narrative” in *Punch* and the publication of *Winnie-the-Pooh* in October 1926 (Thwaite 316). Is 17 years too long to warrant such a connection? I think not. For one thing, the

manuscript of *Winnie-the-Pooh* was submitted in 1925 (Thwaite 291), which knocks at least a year off the span. More significantly, the chapters that constitute the book had previous lives as oral bedtime stories that Milne made up for his son, Christopher Robin. His son, however, was not born until 1920, so Milne obviously did not compose the stories before then. In fact, the toy bear that is thought to be the prototype of Pooh was purchased at Harrods as a gift for Christopher's first birthday in 1921 (Thwaite 222-23). Thus, the minimum span of years between the *Punch* response to the polar hullabaloo and an oral version of the Winnie-the-Pooh stories is twelve years — 1909 to 1921.

Other connections between *Winnie-the-Pooh* and Milne's earlier work at *Punch* suggest that the creative mind can easily retain such associations for twelve years or more. This is especially true for an author such as Milne, who theatre-critic W.A. Darlington described as "always an autobiographical writer" (qtd. in Thwaite 105). For example, a "humming duet" that Milne composed for a theatre review in the 6 October 1909 issue of *Punch* bears a striking resemblance to a "little hum" that surfaces years later in *Winnie-the-Pooh*. Milne offered the following ditty as a humiliating example of the libretto Paul Rubens had written:

Oh, tiddily um!  
Lum tity toty tum!  
Lum tiddily um!  
Lum tity toty tum!  
Lum tiddily um!  
Lum tity toty tum!  
Lum ti to ta tee —  
Tiddily um! (241)

Surely no reader of *Winnie-the-Pooh* will miss the strong similarities between this 1909 creation for *Punch* and the "little hum" that Pooh ran through after doing his Stoutness Exercises:

Tra-la-la, tra-la-la,  
Tra-la-la, tra-la-la,  
Rum-tum-tiddle-um-tum.  
Tiddle-iddle, tiddle-iddle,  
Tiddle-iddle, tiddle-iddle,  
Rum-tum-tum-tiddle-um. (23)

There are other links between Milne's work as a *Punch* staffer and as a children's writer. Most of the poems in *When We Were Very Young*, for example, appeared initially in *Punch* in 1924 (Thwaite 192). In a 6 May 1908 issue of *Punch*, Milne favourably reviewed a Savoy Theatre production of W.S.

Gilbert's *The Mikado*. The review was brief, but Milne nevertheless found the space to remark on one of the comic operetta's minor characters, the self-important Pooh-Bah. None of the other characters, save the leads, the Mikado and Ko-Ko, are mentioned in the review (6 May 1908: 330). By comparison, *The Encyclopedia of the Musical Theatre* devotes two and a half close pages to *The Mikado, or The Town of Titipu*, yet the commentary only mentions the minor character of Pooh-Bah as it glosses over the *dramatis personae* (Gänzl 985-87). Was Milne, then, especially drawn to the character and his name? Is there possibly a connection between Milne's work as a theatre reviewer for *Punch* and the part of Winnie-the-Pooh's name that remains inexplicable (Thwaite 283-85), and should one not concede that the name derives from blowing flies off the nose (Milne 20)?

Of special relevance to these connections between *Winnie-the-Pooh* and Milne's work for *Punch* are several pages about Milne in Frank Swinnerton's *The Georgian Literary Scene*. Bibliographer Tori Haring-Smith cuts to the chase when she summarizes Swinnerton's thesis in this way: "Milne was most heavily influenced in his work by *Punch* and his wife, Dorothy DeSelincourt" (251). It is widely known that Dorothy DeSelincourt was instrumental in convincing Milne to write down the stories he made up for his son (Thwaite 290), but the pervasive influence of *Punch* on Milne's later work has been less recognized, perhaps largely because those who study Milne as a writer for children do so in isolation, ignoring his considerable work as playwright, theatre critic, satirist, and magazine editor. But Swinnerton makes no such error, and while he can do nothing to lessen the dozen or so years between the Peary/Cook contest and *Winnie-the-Pooh*, understanding his assessment of Milne's writing can, like a wrinkle cream, minimize the effect of those years.

Swinnerton's grasp of Milne's work is not only helpful in this way, but it also accounts for why the polar controversy should be one of the events to linger in Milne's consciousness for those dozen years. Few Europeans or North Americans capable of reading newspapers could have avoided awareness of the highly sensationalized polar events of 1908 and 1909, and Milne was no exception. But the newspapers are, by nature, always full of the latest news, so one must wonder why this topical matter – and not some other – resurfaced in *Winnie-the-Pooh* after more than a decade of gestation. The answer, in part, lies in the especially intense awareness of the polar obsession that Milne developed through his association with *Punch*. Just after the turn of the century, newspapers served as social barometers to an even greater extent than they have since the introduction of television. And as a topical humorist, Milne necessarily scanned all the dailies in search of fodder for his weekly columns and quips. In doing so, his familiarity with this polar business grew far more intense than that of the typical newspaper reader.

The years from 1906, when Milne first came aboard as assistant editor, until 1915, when he volunteered in the war effort, were an especially heady time for the young Milne. This was the period when he established his career as a humorist and satirist. As Swinnerton said, those *Punch* years affected Milne's later writing, but perhaps more importantly, they influenced how he looked at the world. Not only did his editorial work make him more keenly aware of the polar events assaulting any newspaper reader, but it shaped how he responded to those events. He learned to look at them with laughter. He learned to respond to the arctic brouhaha and the people's fascination with it from the humorous position of a *Punch* staffer. He learned to meet the high seriousness of the polar race, especially as seen in the American press, with a brand of satire so gentle that little more than the humour was noticed. *Punch's* subtitle, *The London Charivari*, alludes not only to an earlier French magazine, but to the noisy and mocking but nevertheless good-natured celebration of newlyweds, something akin to modern roasts of celebrities. That same characteristic stance of *Punch* reappeared in *Winnie-the-Pooh*.

Of course, by the time Milne's satirical quip resurfaced in *Winnie-the-Pooh*, the barb had worn from the shaft. Milne's intention was surely not to evoke from the reader derisive laughter over a series of minor events long since passed. Nor was his intention to use satire as a didactic tool designed to instruct Christopher Robin in the foibles and pitfalls of modern society. Rather, Milne's purpose was turned exclusively inward. He was simultaneously satirist and audience, and all that remained for the innocent reader was laughter. Only Milne himself remained conscious of the silly events of 1908 and 1909, and he was able to chuckle quietly while he synthesized the events of his life as a *Punch* editor and contributor, newspaper reader, theatre critic, and father.

If, some 20 years ago, my own response to those pestering advocates of Peary and Cook was flippant, it was certainly made with less social history behind it than when Milne credited the Bear of Little Brain with the discovery of the North Pole. I think, however, Milne's intention was no less dismissive than mine of the polar hullabaloo.

### Epilogue

Peary's claims to have reached the Pole have been more widely accepted than Cook's, especially by the U.S. Congress and by geographical institutions. While Peary's reputation as an ambitious and self-promoting egotist did his case no favours, Cook's subsequent imprisonment for fraud in promoting Texas oil lands devastated his credibility. It is possible that neither man ever reached the exact Pole, whether through navigational error or deceit.



Christopher Robin's claim that Pooh found the Pole, however, has never been disputed. And one might as well accept it, because like that strange article in *Winnie-the-Pooh's* name, "it is all the explanation you are going to get" (Milne 3-4).

## Notes

- 1 All references to Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh* are to the easily accessible Canadian edition listed below, rather than to the rare first edition published in London in 1926 by E.P. Dutton.
- 2 Britain had not only voluntarily withdrawn from her interests in the Arctic, but she had redirected her attentions to the Antarctic as well, where she maintains considerable scientific and political interests today. She mounted two major scientific expeditions, the British National Antarctic "Discovery" Expedition (1901-04) and the British Antarctic "Nimrod" Expedition (1907-09), led respectively by Robert Falcon Scott and Ernest Shackleton. Ultimately, both men set out on their own separate races to the South Pole. So one might say that when good taste was assaulted by the American press, Britain simply turned the other cheek and cast her gaze southward.

The British ego had, nevertheless, another prick in store for her national pride. Scott reached the South Pole on 17 January 1912, all of his party perishing on the return journey, but when he arrived, he found evidence of a prior visitor. The Norwegian Roald Amundsen had beat him to the South Pole, gaining it on 14 December 1911, more than a month before Scott. Amundsen had won the Pole, just as he had been the first to navigate the Northwest Passage through the Arctic, which, if historical effort and determination were to count for anything, should have been an honour claimed by Britain!

## Works Cited

- Gänzl, Kurt. *The Encyclopedia of the Musical Theatre*. Vol. 2. Oxford: Blackwell, 1994.
- Haring-Smith, Tori. *A.A. Milne: A Critical Bibliography*. New York: Garland, 1982.
- Milne, A.A. *Winnie-the-Pooh*. 1926. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1994.
- Price, R.G.G. *A History of Punch*. London: William Collins Sons, 1957.
- Punch, or the London Charivari*. Vols. 134, 137.
- Riffenburgh, B.A. *The Myth of the Explorer: The Press, Sensationalism, and Geographical Discovery*. London: Belhaven, 1993.
- Swinnerton, Frank. *The Georgian Literary Scene*. London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1938.
- Thwaite, Ann. *A.A. Milne: His Life*. London: Faber and Faber, 1990.

---

*Richard C. Davis* is Professor of English at the University of Calgary, where he specializes in Canadian literature. He has published four books related to arctic Canada's cultural history, including two volumes of Sir John Franklin's expedition journals.