

Visual Imagery in the Civil War

On December 23, 1864 – closely following two important Union victories – millions of Northerners witnessed a striking display of the **aurora borealis**. Many interpreted this as a sign of the North's inevitable victory. Frederic Church's painting by that name, though rich with associations of exploration, was probably partly inspired by that event. The colors of the northern lights in the sky certainly evoke the American flag,



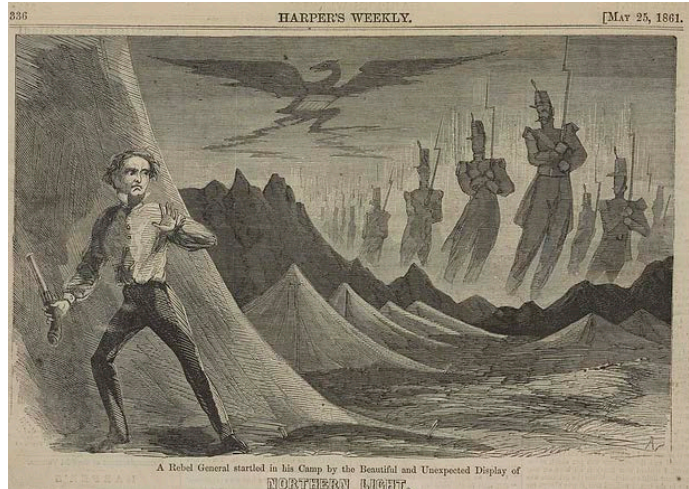
while the dogsled seems to be bringing hopeful news to the icebound ship. For the nineteenth-century landscape painter, the season, weather, time of day, degree of wildness or cultivation and of bareness or fertility were all symbolic. During the Civil War, painters turned to traditional symbolism of landscape imagery to comment on the war.

In this painting, *Aurora Borealis*, Church captures the sense of darkness before the dawn. It is a painting that can be read on several different levels. On its surface, it is about Arctic rescue. The painting depicts the S.S. *United States*, the ship of polar explorer Dr. **Isaac Israel Hayes**, wintering over in the ice in the Canadian Arctic. His sled dog team approaches the ship, as if though providing the hope of a rescue. As the ice grips the S.S. *United States*, and by proxy the nation, the auroras snake across the Arctic winter sky like a grim warning from God, a bleak foreshadowing of doom.

The war years had already proved to be a bounty for celestial portents. The preponderance of meteors, comets, and auroras made it seem as though the American skies, North and South, were witness to an apocalyptic battle overhead that rivaled the rolling war-dun on the ground. Chief among the phenomena invoking apocalypse and days of judgement was the aurora borealis, eerie, silent flickering of lurid light that rippled across the sky like a nocturnal, unhinged rainbow. They conjured images of nature out of control, appearing and disappearing with no warning. The aurora borealis were one of the often invoked metaphors either for imminent victory or imminent destruction – they were a malleable metaphor. Beginning in the 1850s, the appearance of the auroras spurred lengthy accounts in local newspapers that combined scientific data with astrological interpretations. At several times during the war years the aurora was uncharacteristically visible from Canada to Cuba, in 1859, 1860, and in 1864.

Americans, unfamiliar with the aurora phenomenon, viewed the skies at war with themselves – interpreting them as though God himself was weighing in on the issues surrounding the Civil War.

Church's painting can also be interpreted on a narrative level, a story about the dangers on polar exploration, the scientific fascination of a newly discovered weather phenomena, and the idea that exploration itself carries with it a fortitude that was characteristically American.



A Rebel General Startled in His Camp by the Beautiful and Unexpected Display of Northern Light, May 25, 1861, Harper's Weekly, [Library of Congress](#)

The underlying layer of interpretation is that the subject matter of the aurora indirectly deals with the Civil War. Landscape serves as the metaphorical war. At the time Church painted this, *Harper's Weekly* ran a political cartoon of a Confederate general cowering in the face of Northern light, where the auroras came around the mountain with bayonets as if they represented the oncoming Union Army. By this time in the war, there was a sense that it would never end. There was a sense that this might, in fact, be the end of the world, not simply the end of the country. Church captures the dark side of that mood and invests this painting with the kind of emotion that was prevalent in the press and in poetry at the same time. In his 1867 book on his polar explorations, titled *The Open Polar Sea*, Hayes mentions witnessing the aurora on January 6, 1861:

The broad dome above me is all ablaze. Ghastly fires, more fierce than those which lit the heavens from burning Troy, flash angrily athwart the sky. The stars pale before the marvelous glare, and seem to recede further and further from the earth – as when the chariot of the Sun, driven by Phaeton, and carried from its beaten track by the ungovernable steeds, rushed madly through the skies parching the world and withering the constellations . . . The colour of the light was chiefly red, but this was not constant, and every hue mingled in the fierce display. Blue and yellow streams were playing in the lurid fire; and, sometimes starting side by side from the wide expanse of the illumined arch, they melt into each other, and throw a ghostly glare of green into the face of the landscape.

Hayes' eyewitness account seems to correspond to the colors chosen by Church (red, green, and yellow) for the aurora in the painting. In hue and weirdly undulating motion, the northern lights in Church's painting give form to Hayes's poetic and yet scientific descriptions. It is interesting, too, that Hayes uses the metaphor of cities burning, as this is exactly what many people thought was happening during the spectacular appearance of the aurora exactly a year earlier, on September 1, 1859.

Photography

As the war drew on, allegorical interpretations of the war, like *Aurora Borealis*, began to lose favor. Realism was becoming more dominant in Civil War imagery because of a greater use of and reliance on a new artistic medium – **photography**. The reliance on photography for visual information had much to do with a growing demand for improved accuracy of representation in visual information. While still in black and white and sepia tones, photography captured the war in a way that painting just could not.

Some 1500 photographers produced thousands of images in urban studios as well as in makeshift studios on the battlefield. Photographers like **Matthew Brady** carried cumbersome equipment from camp to camp, battlefield to battlefield. Yet, they kept their distance from the fighting, so almost no images exist that depict the action of battle. The most often published photographs were of bodies littering the battlefield. These images were published in newspapers around the country, searing images of the horrors of war into the minds of Americans. Though these images were certainly the most provocative, the ravage of war is more often seen in photographs of a natural landscape decimated by the firestorm of battle. Scenes of camp life, military engineering marvels like bridges and fortifications, and portraits of military officers were popular and available to the public for purchase. As a medium, photography exploded during the Civil War, widely available and easily accessible to even the poorest soldier who could afford to carry a small photographic portrait of a sweetheart back home in his pocket.



The Sick Soldier, ca. 1863, Studio of Matthew B. Brady, Smithsonian American Art Museum

Glossary

aurora borealis: a natural electrical phenomenon characterized by the appearance of streamers of reddish or greenish light in the sky, usually near the northern or southern magnetic pole.

Isaac Israel Hayes: (1832-1881) American Arctic explorer, physician, and politician.

Matthew Brady: (1822-1896) American photographer and photojournalist, best known for his scenes of the Civil War.

photography: the science, art, application and practice of creating images by recording light or other electromagnetic radiation, either electronically by means of an image sensor, or chemically by means of a light-sensitive material such as photographic film.