

Terror Camp

CLEAR

BY 1854 NINE YEARS had elapsed since Franklin set sail on his voyage of discovery. He had provisions for three years, though it was thought the supplies could have been rationed to last some months longer, perhaps until 1849. What became obvious to the Admiralty was that, regardless of what more could be done to solve the mystery, nothing could be done to save Franklin and his men. On 20 January 1854, a notice in the *London Gazette* stated that unless news to the contrary arrived by 31 March, the officers and crews of the *Erebus* and *Terror* would be considered to have died in Her Majesty's service, and their wages would be paid to relatives up to that date. The expedition's muster books show the sailors buried on Beechey Island, however, were "discharged dead" according to the dates on their headboards: William Braine on 3 April 1846, John Hartnell on 4 January 1846, John Torrington on 1 January 1846.

Despite the official acknowledgement that no more relief expeditions would be sent, interest in the Franklin search—and in the Arctic in general—remained high in Britain. Three Inuit (or

“Esquimaux” as the Victorians called them) were taken to England by a merchant and given an audience with Queen Victoria at Windsor Castle, then “exhibited” in London. “The painful excitement which has so long pervaded the minds of all classes with respect to the fate of Sir John Franklin’s Arctic Expedition lends additional interest to the examination of these natives of the dreary North,” the *Illustrated London News* commented. Interest among North Americans did not always match that of the British public’s, however. In one instance, the *Toronto Globe* complained that only a handful of people attended a lecture on the Arctic and the possible fate of Sir John Franklin, while the same hall had been “filled to overflowing” with those curious to view the famous midget Tom Thumb.

Finally, on Monday, 23 October 1854, under the headline “Startling News: Sir John Franklin starved to death,” the *Toronto Globe* reported “melancholy intelligence” that had arrived in Montreal two days earlier. After his failed earlier investigations, the Hudson’s Bay Company’s John Rae had made the first major discovery of the Franklin searches while surveying the Boothia Peninsula. The *Globe* excitedly outlined the news:

From the Esquimaux [Rae] had obtained certain information of the fate of Sir John Franklin’s party who had been starved to death after the loss of their ships which were crushed in the ice, and while making their way south to the great Fish [Back] river, near the outlet of which a party of whites died, leaving accounts of their sufferings in the mutilated corpses of some who had evidently furnished food for their unfortunate companions.

Two days later, the *Globe* argued that Rae had succeeded “in revealing to the world the mysterious fate of the gallant Franklin and his unfortunate companions, and in proving the folly of man’s attempting to storm ‘winter’s citadel’ or light up ‘the depths of Polar night.’” By 28 October 1854, word had reached Britain that the veil that obscured the fate of Sir John Franklin had been lifted. In a letter to the Secretary of the Admiralty, Rae outlined his discoveries:

... during my journey over the ice and snow this spring, with the view of completing the survey of the west shore of Boothia, I met with Esquimaux in Pelly Bay, from one of whom I learned that a party of 'whitemen' (Kablounans) had perished from want of food some distance to the westward ... Subsequently, further particulars were received, and a number of articles purchased, which place the fate of a portion, if not all, of the then survivors of Sir John Franklin's long-lost party beyond a doubt—a fate terrible as the imagination can conceive.

Rae went on to report descriptions of a party of white men dragging sledges down the coast of King William Island, of the discovery a year later of bodies on the North American mainland and evidence of cannibalism. Contrary to the *Toronto Globe* headline, there was no proof that Franklin himself had starved to death, but disaster had clearly befallen his crews. Evocatively, the Inuit also told Rae that "they had found eight or ten books where the dead bodies were; that those books had 'markings' upon them, but they would not tell whether they were in print or manuscript." When Rae asked what they had done with the books, possibly expedition logs, he was told that they had given them to their children, "who had torn them up as playthings." In support of the Inuit accounts, Rae carried with him items he had been able to purchase from the natives, including monogrammed silver forks and spoons, one of them bearing Crozier's initials, and Sir John Franklin's Hanoverian Order of Merit.

Because Rae's information about the cause of the expedition's destruction came second-hand, it was judged inconclusive by many, though the relics were evidence enough that "Sir John Franklin and his party are no more." The British government, enmeshed in the Crimean War, asked the Hudson's Bay Company to follow up on the new information. Its chief factor, James Anderson, was able to add only slightly to Rae's report when he discovered several articles from the Franklin expedition on Montreal

Island and the adjacent coastline, including a piece of wood with the word "Terror" branded on it, part of a backgammon board and preserved meat tins—but no human remains or records. Anderson's search, which lasted only nine days, would be the last official attempt to learn the fate of Franklin. Rae, though attacked by critics for not following up on the Inuit reports and instead hurrying back to London, was given £8,000 in reward money; the men in his party split another £2,000.

The British public and government interest quickly turned to the Crimean War. The very week that news of Rae's discoveries reached Britain, a confusion of orders resulted in a brigade of British cavalry charging some entrenched batteries of Russian artillery. A report in the *Times* captivated Franklin's nephew, the poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson, who immortalized the encounter where so many British horsemen died in his "The Charge of the Light Brigade." Events had finally overtaken the disappearance of Sir John Franklin and his officers and crews, leaving many to believe that the mystery of the expedition's destruction would never be solved. In addition, there were others who questioned the value of research expeditions such as Franklin's, which demanded such a heavy toll. *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* summed up this view better than any other journal in an article published in November 1855:

No; there are no more sunny continents—no more islands of the blessed—hidden under the far horizon, tempting the dreamer over the undiscovered sea; nothing but those weird and tragic shores, whose cliffs of everlasting ice and mainlands of frozen snow, which have never produced anything to us but a late and sad discovery of depths of human heroism, patience, and bravery, such as imagination could scarcely dream of.

Yet there were still those who had not given up on Arctic expeditions, who still believed that the answers to Franklin's fate lay somewhere on King William Island or on the mainland close to

the mouth of the Back River. Foremost among them was Lady Franklin, who made one last impassioned plea to British Prime Minister Lord Palmerston: "... the final and exhaustive search is all I seek on behalf of the first and only martyrs to Arctic discovery in modern times, and it is all I ever intend to ask." She failed to convince the British government to send one final search, and launched another expedition of her own. No longer seeking the rescue of Franklin, she now sought his vindication.



Jane, Lady Franklin, neé Griffin, aged twenty-four.

Lady Franklin, born Jane Griffin, personified the romantic heroine with her refusal to give up hope that searchers would one day discover the fate of her husband and his crews. Her determination, coupled with a willingness to spend a large part of her fortune

to outfit four such expeditions, haunted the Victorian public as much as it inspired the searchers of her day. "To know a loss is a single and definite pain," the *Athenaeum* observed, "to dread it is a complicated anguish which to the pain of the fear adds the pain of the hope . . . The misery is, that if the truth be not known, Lady Franklin will nurse for years her frail hope, almost too sickly to live and yet unable to die."

What makes the devotion of Lady Franklin especially moving is the recognition that she was an independent and free-thinking woman who had not married until her thirties, and who saw more of the world than possibly any other woman of her day. During her long vigil, Lady Franklin not only implored the British for help, but the president of the United States and the emperor of Russia as well. She became an expert in Arctic geography. One famous folk song, "Lord Franklin," captured the passion of her search:

In Baffin's Bay where the whale-fish blow,
The fate of Franklin no man may know.
The fate of Franklin no tongue can tell,
Lord Franklin along with his sailors do dwell.

And now my burden it gives me pain,
For my long lost Franklin I'd cross the main.
Ten thousand pounds I would freely give,
To say on earth that my Franklin lives.

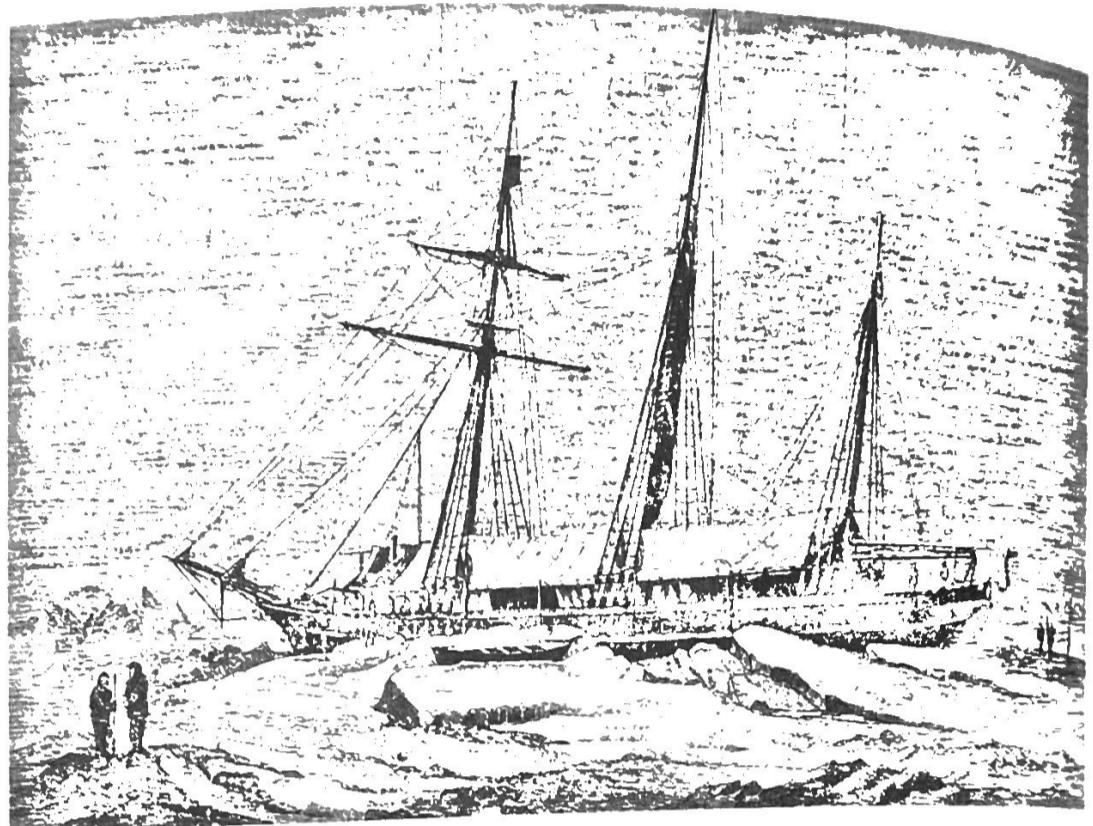
With the help of a public appeal for funds and a donation of supplies by the Admiralty, Lady Franklin purchased a steam yacht, the *Fox*, and placed command with the Arctic veteran Captain Francis Leopold M'Clintock, a Royal Navy officer who had been involved in three earlier Franklin search expeditions, beginning with that of James Clark Ross's attempt in 1848–49. M'Clintock chose Lieutenant William Robert Hobson, son of the first governor of New Zealand, as his second-in-command. The *Fox* sailed from Aberdeen, Scotland, on 1 July 1857.

Almost immediately, problems hampered the search and the *Fox* was forced to spend its first winter trapped in ice in Baffin Bay, before being freed in the spring. By August 1858 the *Fox* had reached Beechey Island, where, at the site of Franklin's first winter quarters, M'Clintock erected a monument on behalf of Lady Franklin. The monument, dated 1855, read in part:

To the memory of Franklin, Crozier, Fitzjames and all their gallant brother officers and faithful companions who have suffered and perished in the cause of science and the service of their country this tablet is erected near the spot where they passed their first Arctic winter, and whence they issued forth, to conquer difficulties or to die. It commemorates the grief of their admiring countrymen and friends, and the anguish, subdued by faith, of her who has lost, in the heroic leader of the expedition, the most devoted and affectionate of husbands.

By the end of September the searchers had travelled to the eastern entrance to Bellot Strait, where they established a second winter base. From there, M'Clintock and Hobson were able to leave their ship in small parties and travel overland to King William Island, early in April 1859. The two groups then split up, with M'Clintock ordering Hobson to scour the west coast of the island for clues while he travelled down the island's east coast to the estuary of the Back River, before returning via the island's west coast.

On 20 April, M'Clintock encountered two Inuit families. He traded for Franklin relics in their possession and, upon questioning them, discovered that two ships had been seen but that one sank in deep water. The other was forced onto shore by the ice. On board they found the body of a very large man with "long teeth." They said that the "white people went away to the 'large river,' taking a boat or boats with them, and that in the following winter their bones were found there." Later, M'Clintock met up with a group of thirty to forty Inuit who inhabited a snow village on King William



The Fox, trapped in Baffin Bay in 1857-58.

Island. He purchased silver plate bearing the crests or initials of Franklin, Crozier and two other officers. One woman said "many of the white men dropped by the way as they went to the Great River; that some were buried and some were not."

M'Clintock reached the mainland and continued southward to Montreal Island, where a few relics, including a piece of a preserved meat tin, two pieces of iron hoop and other scraps of metal, were found. The sledge party then turned back to King William Island, where they searched along its southern, then western coasts. Ghastly secrets awaited both M'Clintock and Hobson as they trudged over the snow-covered land.

Shortly after midnight on 24 May 1859, a human skeleton in the uniform of a steward from the lost expedition was found on a gravel ridge near the mouth of Peffer River on the island's southern shore. M'Clintock recorded the tragic scene in his journal:

This poor man seems to have selected the bare ridge top, as affording the least tiresome walking, and to have fallen upon his face in the position in which we found him. It was a melancholy truth

that the old woman spoke when she said, "they fell down and died as they walked along."

M'Clintock believed the man had fallen asleep in this position and that his "last moments were undisturbed by suffering."

Alongside the bleached skeleton lay a "a small clothes-brush near, and a horn pocket-comb, in which a few light-brown hairs still remained." There was also a notebook, which belonged to Harry Peglar, captain of the foretop on the *Terror*. The notebook contained the handwriting of two individuals, Peglar and an unknown second. In the hand of Peglar was a song lyric, dated 21 April 1847, which begins: "The C the C the open C it grew so fresh the Ever free." A mystery, however, surrounds the other papers, written in the hand of the unknown and referring to the disaster. Most of the words in the messages were spelled backwards and ended with capital letters, as if the end were the beginning. One sheet of paper had a crude drawing of an eye, with the words "lid Bay" underneath. When corrected, another message reads: "Oh Death whare is thy sting, the grave at Comfort Cove for who has any douat how . . . the dyer sad . . ." On the other side of that paper, words were written in a circle, and inside the circle was the passage, "the terror camp clear." This has been interpreted as a place name, a reference to a temporary encampment made by the Franklin expedition—possibly the encampment at Beechey Island. Another paper, written in the same hand, also spelled backwards, includes this passage: "Has we have got some very hard ground to heave . . . we shall want some grog to wet houer . . . issel . . . all my art Tom for I do think . . . time . . . I cloze should lay and . . . the 21st night a gread." The "21st night" could be 21 April 1848, the eve of the desertion of the *Erebus* and *Terror*—a possibility raised because of another discovery. The most important artefact of the Franklin searches had been located three weeks before the skeleton was found, as Hobson surveyed the northwest coast of the island. On 5 May, the only written record of the Franklin expedition—

chronicling some of the events after the desertion of the ships and consisting of two brief notes scrawled on a single piece of naval record paper—was found in a cairn near Victory Point. The first, signed by Lieutenant Graham Gore, outlined the progress of the expedition to May 1847:

28 of May 1847. HM Ships Erebus and Terror . . . Wintered in the Ice in Lat. $70^{\circ} 05'$ N. Long. $98^{\circ} 23'$ W. Having wintered in 1846-7 at Beechey Island in Lat. $74^{\circ} 43' 28''$ N Long. $90^{\circ} 39' 15''$ W after having ascended Wellington Channel to Lat. 77° —and returned by the west side of Cornwallis Island. Sir John Franklin commanding the Expedition. All well. Party consisting of 2 officers and 6 Men left the Ships on Monday 24th. May 1847. Gm. Gore, Lieut. Chas. F. Des Voeux, mate.



*Lieutenant Hobson and his men opening the cairn—
near Victory Point, King William Island—that contained the only
written record of the Franklin expedition's fate.*

The document is notable for an inexplicable error in a date—the expedition had wintered at Beechey Island in 1845-46, not 1846-47—and its unequivocal proclamation: “All well.” Orig-

nally deposited in a metal canister under a stone cairn, the note was retrieved eleven months later and additional text then scribbled around its margins. It was this note that in its simplicity told of the disastrous conclusion to 129 lives:

(25th April) 1848—HM's Ships Terror and Erebus were deserted on the 22nd April, 5 leagues NNW of this, having been beset since 12th Septr. 1846. The Officers and Crews, consisting of 105 souls, under the command of Captain F.R.M. Crozier landed here—in Lat. $69^{\circ} 37' 42''$ Long. $98^{\circ} 41'$. This paper was found by Lt. Irving under the cairn supposed to have been built by Sir James Ross in 1831, 4 miles to the Northward, where it had been deposited by the late Commander Gore in June 1847. Sir James Ross' pillar has not however been found, and the paper has been transferred to this position which is that in which Sir J Ross' pillar was erected—Sir John Franklin died on 11th of June 1847 and the total loss by deaths in the Expedition has been to this date 9 Officers and 15 Men.

James Fitzjames, Captain HMS Erebus.

F.R.M. Crozier Captain and Senior Offr.

and start on tomorrow 26th for Backs Fish River.

"So sad a tale was never told in fewer words," M'Clintock commented after examining the note. Indeed, everything had changed in the eleven months between the two messages. Beset by pack-ice since September 1846, Franklin's two ships ought to have been freed during the brief summer of 1847, allowing them to continue their push to the western exit of the passage at Bering Strait. Instead, they remained frozen fast and had been forced to spend a second winter off King William Island. For the Franklin expedition, this was the death warrant. There had already been an astonishing mortality rate, especially among officers. Deserting their ships on 22 April 1848, the 105 surviving officers and men set up camp on the northwest coast of King William Island, preparing for

28 of May 1847

Lat. $70^{\circ} 5' N$ Long. $92^{\circ} 23' W$

Having written in 1846 - at Beechey Island
in Lat. $74^{\circ} 43'.28'' N$. Long $91^{\circ} 39'.15'' W$ after having
ascended Wellington Channel to Lat. 77° and returning
by the West side of Cornwallis Island.

John Franklin commanding the Expedition
All well

WHOEVER finds this paper is requested to forward it to the Secretary of the Admiralty, London, with a note of the time and place at which it was found: or, if more convenient, to deliver it for that purpose to the British Consul at the nearest Port.

QUINCONQUE trouvera ce papier est prié d'y marquer le temps et lieu où il l'auro trouvé, et de le faire parvenir au plutot au Secrétaire de l'Amirauté Britannique à Londres.

CUALQUIERA que hallare este Papel, se le suplica de enviarlo al Secretario del Almirantazgo, en Londres, con una nota del tiempo y del lugar en donde se halló,

EEN ieder die dit Papier mogt vinden, wordt hiermede verzocht, om het zelve, ten spoedigste, te willen zenden aan den Heer Minister van de Marine der Nederlanden in 's Gravenhage, of wel aan den Secretaris den Britsche Admiraliteit, te London, en daar by te voegen eene Nota, inhoudende de tyd en de plaats alwaar dit Papier is gevonden geworden.

FINDEREN af dette Papiir ombedes, naar Leilighed gives, at sende samme til Admiralitets Secretairen i London, eller nærmeste Embedsmand i Danmark, Norge, eller Sverrig. Tiden og Stedet hvor dette er fundet ønskes venskabeligt påtegnet:

WER diesen Zettel findet, wird hier-durch ersucht denselben an den Secretair des Admiralitets in London einzusenden, mit gefälliger angabe an welchen ort und zu welcher zeit er gefundet worden ist.

Party consisting of 2 Officers and 6 men
left the ship on Sunday 24th May 1847
G. M. Gore Lieut.
Thos L. Des Voeux mate

The notes found in the cairn at Victory Point
on 5 May 1859, by Lieutenant Hobson and his men.

a trek south to the mouth of the Back River, then an arduous ascent to a distant Hudson's Bay Company post, Fort Resolution, which lay some 1,250 miles (2,210 km) away. M'Clintock described the scene where the note had been discovered:

Around the cairn a vast quantity of clothing and stores of all sorts lay strewed about, as if at this spot every article was thrown away which could possibly be dispensed with—such as pickaxes, shovels, boats, cooking stoves, ironwork, rope, blocks, canvas, instruments, oars and medicine-chest.

Why some of these items had been carried even as far as Victory Point is another of the questions that cannot be answered, but M'Clintock was sure of one thing: "our doomed and scurvy-stricken countrymen calmly prepared themselves to struggle manfully for life." The magnitude of the endeavour facing the crews must have been overwhelming, and the knowledge of its futility spiritually crushing. It also ran contrary to the best guesses of other leading Arctic explorers. George Back, who had explored the river named for him in 1834, was certain Franklin's men would not have attempted an escape over the mainland: "I can say from experience that no toilworn and exhausted party could have the least chance of existence by going there." John Rae thought that "Sir John Franklin would have followed the route taken by Sir John Ross in escaping from Regent Inlet."

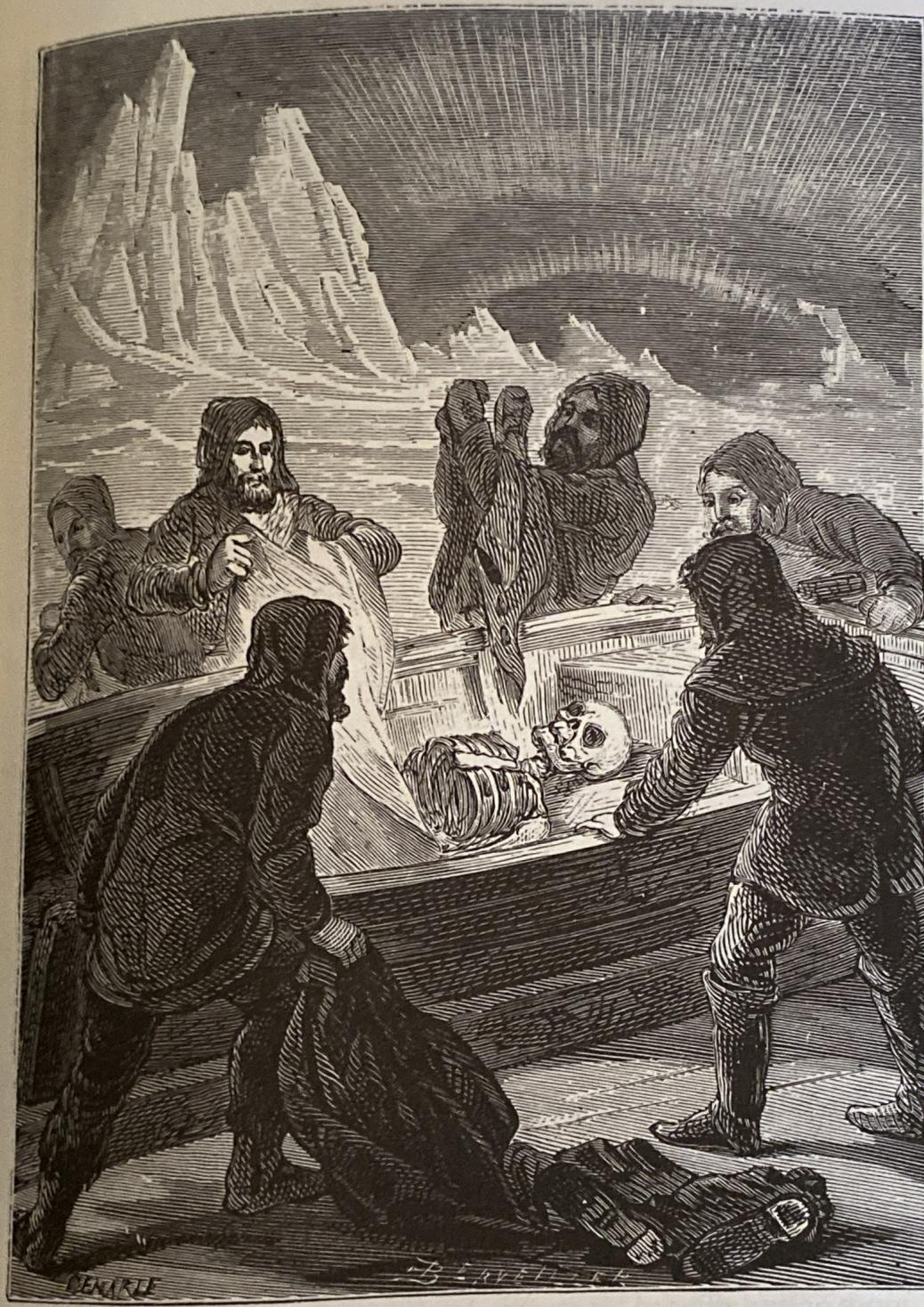
To this day, the route of the expedition retreat confounds some historians, who, like Rae, believe a much more logical and attainable goal would have been to march north and east to Somerset Island and Fury Beach—the route by which John Ross had made good an escape from an ice-bound ship in 1833. Fury Beach was not much further for the crews of the *Erebus* and the *Terror* than it had been for John Ross's crew of the abandoned *Victory*. It was also the most obvious place for a relief expedition to be sent, and James Clark Ross did indeed reach the area with two ships, five months after the *Erebus* and *Terror* were deserted.

Instead, after quitting their camp on 26 April, the crews moved south along the coastline of King William Island, man-hauling heavily laden lifeboats that had been removed from the ships and mounted on large sledges. Plagued by their rapidly deteriorating health, the crews were then overcome by the physical demands of the task. M'Clintock found what appeared to have been a field hospital established by Franklin's retreating crews only eighty miles into their trek. He suspected scurvy. Speculation also focussed on the tinned food supply. Inuit later told of some of their people eating the contents of the tins "and it had made them very ill: indeed some had actually died." As for Franklin's men, many died along the west and south coasts of King William Island.

Later, Hobson found a vivid indication of the tragedy when he located a lifeboat from the Franklin expedition containing skeletons and relics. Men from Franklin's crews had at last been found, but the help had come a decade too late. When M'Clintock later visited the "boat place," he described his tiny party as being "transfixed with awe" at the sight of the two human skeletons that lay inside the boat. One skeleton, found in the bow, had been partly destroyed by "large and powerful animals, probably wolves," M'Clintock guessed. But the other skeleton remained untouched, "enveloped with cloths and furs," feet tucked into warm boots to protect against the harsh Arctic cold. Nearby were two loaded double-barrelled guns, as if ready to fend off an attack that never came.

M'Clintock named the area, on the western extreme of King William Island, Cape Crozier. The boat, which had been carefully equipped for the ascent of the Back River, was 28 feet (8.5 metres) long; M'Clintock estimated the combined weight of the boat and the oak sledge it was mounted on at 1,400 pounds (635 kg).

Careful lists of the "amazing" quantity of goods also contained in the boat were compiled. Everything from boots and silk handkerchiefs to curtain rods, silverware, scented soap, sponges, slippers, toothbrushes and hair-combs were found. Six books, including a Bible in which most of the verses were underlined,



M'Clintock discovers a lifeboat—containing skeletons—from the Franklin expedition.

A Manual of Private Devotions and *The Vicar of Wakefield*, were also discovered and scoured for messages, but none were found. The only provisions in the boat were tea and chocolate. M'Clintock judged the astonishing variety of articles "a mere accumulation of dead weight, of little use, and very likely to break down the strength of the sledge-crews." Perhaps strangest of all was the

direction in which the boat was pointing, for instead of heading towards the river that was the target of the struggling survivors, the boat was pointed back towards the deserted ships. M'Clintock guessed that the party had broken off from the main body of men under the command of Crozier, and was making a failed attempt to return to the ships for food: "Whether it was the intention of this boat party to await the result of another season in the ships, or to follow the track of the main body to the Great Fish [Back] River, is now a matter of conjecture."

This picture, of dying seamen shambling along, dragging sledges loaded down with the detritus of Victorian England, is the enduring image of the Franklin expedition disaster. Reviewing the evidence in 1881, M'Clintock concluded that surviving members of Franklin's expedition:

... were far gone with scurvy when they landed; and the change from the confined lower decks, and inaction, to extreme exposure in an Arctic temperature, combined with intensely hard sledging labour, would almost immediately mature even incipient scurvy. The hospital tent within 80 miles [130 km] of the spot where their march commenced is, I think, conclusive proof of this. The *Investigator* [McClure's search expedition] is almost the only ship which has ever similarly spent three winters in the ice. Although she had only three deaths in all that time, yet a careful medical examination revealed the fact that only 4 out of a total of 64 on board were not more or less affected by scurvy. Such is the usual results of limitation to salted or preserved provisions, unrelieved by fresh animal or vegetable food. It is evident that disease, not starvation, carried off the earliest and by far the largest number of Franklin's companions, those martyrs to the cause of geographical discovery.

Even among his own sledging parties, M'Clintock observed, "scurvy advanced with rapid strides." Hobson, who had carried tinned pemmican for food, "suffered very severely in health," ulti-



ABOVE Franklin's men lie dying beside the boat with which they had planned to ascend the Back River, King William Island. Oil painting by W.T. Smith
BELOW Burial in mid-winter, from M'Clintock's voyage aboard the Fox.

mately having to be dragged back on the sledge. Wrote M'Clintock of Hobson's plight: "How strongly this bears upon the last sad march of [Franklin's] lost crews!" Years later, Hobson was asked: "Can you give . . . any opinion as to the cause why scurvy broke out with you?" His answer was, "I can scarcely say that scurvy did break out with us. I said that the men were debilitated, that they