

lost stamina. There was no cause that I know of, except the fact of not being able to get really fresh meat and fresh vegetables."

The success of their voyage brought both honour and fame to M'Clintock and Hobson, as well as some solace to Lady Franklin. She now knew the exact date of Franklin's death and that he had died aboard-ship long before the final, gruesome events on King William Island, thus preserving his reputation. What is more, he had died close enough to his objective to have justified at least a moral claim to the prize: Discoverer of the Northwest Passage. M'Clintock had produced, it was popularly decided, "melancholy evidence of their success." Sherard Osborn, who had commanded a ship in an earlier search, captured the public mood when he wrote of Franklin:

Oh, mourn him not! unless you can point to a more honourable end or a nobler grave. Like another Moses, he fell when his work was accomplished, with the long object of his life in view.



The burial of Franklin. Depicted on the monument erected to him at Waterloo Place, London.

In Toronto, the *Globe* echoed:

Sir John, we now know, sleeps his last sleep by the shores of those icy seas whose barriers he in vain essayed to overcome. He died, as British seamen love to die, at the post of duty. Surrounded, let us hope, by his gallant officers, who, while he lived, would minister to his every want, and when dead would bear him to his cold and lonely tomb in some rocky bay, with saddened hearts and tear-bedewed eyes.

Finally, on 15 October 1859, the *Illustrated London News* attempted to recapture the emotions felt by Franklin's sailors near Victory Point in their final desperate struggle to survive:

Awfully impressing must it have been to Lieutenant Hobson, and subsequently Captain M'Clintock, when they thus stood upon the intrenched scene where their gallant countrymen had, eleven years previously, prepared themselves for that last terrible struggle for life and home. Who shall tell how they struggled, how they hoped against hope, how the fainting few who reached Cape Herschel threw themselves on their knees and thanked their God that, if it so pleased Him that England and home should never be reached! He had granted to them the glory of securing to their dear country the honour they had sought for her—the discovery of the Northwest Passage.

In their last final march, the crews of the *Erebus* and *Terror* had indeed discovered the Northwest Passage. But by the time they walked along the shores of Simpson Strait, the triumph must have been a hollow one, for all around them was despair.

Franklin and his crews entered the Arctic with their primary goal the completion of the passage. Although geographically there is no single passage, and on a map it is possible to plot a myriad of routes around and through the clusters of islands that make up the Arctic archipelago, in reality, until the advent of ice-breakers, ice

conditions narrowed the possibilities to only a few choices. By 1845, when Franklin sailed, much of the mainland coast of North America had been charted by overland explorers questing for a navigable passage, and when the ship-based explorations up to that point are added to the map of the Arctic, it becomes apparent that only a relatively short distance, in the King William Island region, remained uncharted.

In their first season in the Arctic, Franklin's ships sailed up Wellington Channel to 77°N latitude where they were turned back either by ice or the lateness of the season. The expedition then travelled south to Barrow Strait by a previously unexplored channel between Bathurst and Cornwallis islands. Wrote M'Clintock: "Seldom has such an amount of success been accorded to an Arctic navigator in a single season, and when the *Erebus* and *Terror* were secured at Beechey Island for the coming winter of 1845–46, the results of their first year's labour must have been most cheering."

When the sailing season of 1846 began with the break-up of ice in Barrow Strait and in Erebus Bay (their winter harbour off Beechey Island), the two ships sailed roughly south and west, ending beset in the ice off the northwest coast of King William Island in September 1846. What route the ships took to reach this point is still a matter of conjecture, though it is likely the *Erebus* and *Terror* travelled through Peel Sound and what is now Franklin Strait between Somerset and Prince of Wales islands. Franklin believed this route would eventually lead him to parts of the mainland coastline he had explored two decades earlier. His maps told him that, in the King William Island area, he had to complete the stretch along the west side of what was then called King William's Land (a distance M'Clintock estimated at 90 miles/145 km—but, in fact, was actually 62 miles/100 km) to be credited with completing the charting of a Northwest Passage.

The northern extent of this unknown gap was a low point of land on the northwest coast of King William Island, visited by

James Clark Ross from the east in the late spring of 1830. Ross had named the location Victory Point. The southern extent was to be found at Cape John Herschel on the south coast of King William Island. In 1839, Peter Warren Dease and Thomas Simpson explored along the mainland coast; moving eastward along the coast to Boothia Peninsula, they eventually turned back to the south coast of King William Island, exploring the island until they reached Cape John Herschel, where they built a large cairn. From this point they crossed back to the mainland and retraced their route to the west, a route which itself had been extended over time to Bering Strait, the western entrance to the passage.

Curiously, perhaps tragically, both Ross in 1830 and Dease and Simpson in 1839 suggested that the area they had explored was an extension of the mainland—a bulge of land connected directly to the southwestern part of Boothia Peninsula. It is very likely that Franklin, armed with the maps, descriptions and opinions of these earlier explorers as well as his own theories on the geography of the region, believed he had no choice in sailing direction when he eventually encountered Cape Felix, the northern tip of King William Island. Thinking that a route to the east of this point would lead to a dead end, he turned his ships to the southwest, directly into the continuously replenished pack-ice that grinds down the length of McClintock Channel from the northwest. The power and persistence of this ploughing train of ice cannot be overestimated; the northwest coast of King William Island bears the scars as proof. This ice mass does not always clear during the short summers and a lethal trap awaited the two ships, a trap made all the more cruel with the realization that the route along the eastern coast of the island regularly clears during the summer. It was only during their final doomed march that the surviving men from the *Erebus* and *Terror* completed the gap—and the Northwest Passage. In the words of searcher Sir John Richardson, “they forged the last link of the Northwest Passage with their lives.”

M'Clintock's discoveries on King William Island thus provided an outline of the expedition's last days. And with this new information, the final clamour for answers to the Franklin mystery died down, even though it was apparent that many questions remained. As the *Illustrated London News* was to explain on 1 January 1881: "[M'Clintock's] search was necessarily a hasty and partial one, as the snow lay thick on the ground, and the parties had to return to their vessel before the disruption of the ice in summer."

In the end, the impetus for continuing to probe the Franklin disaster came not so much from the British but from two colourful Americans, who were without any Arctic experience when they each began their separate searches.



Charles Francis Hall.

Charles Francis Hall, a Cincinnati, Ohio, businessman who became interested in the Arctic following the disappearance of Franklin's expedition, decided in 1859 to conduct a search of his own. Hall argued before potential backers that Franklin survivors might still be alive among the Inuit; besides, the shores of King William Island needed to be searched during the summer for more clues as to the expedition's last days. After a failed first attempt to reach King William Island, Hall returned again in July 1864, finally reaching its southern coast in May 1869. Here, Hall noted Inuit accounts of cannibalism among Franklin's starving crews. He also recorded his anger at learning from the Inuit that, while several native families had provided an officer thought to be Crozier and a group of his men with some seal meat, the Inuit had then left, ignoring pleas for further aid. Forgetting to add that the Inuit themselves only managed to survive at subsistence level, Hall wrote:

These 4 families could have saved Crozier's life & that of his company had they been so disposed . . . But no, though noble Crozier pleaded with them, they would not stop even a day to try & catch seals—but early in the morning abandoned what they knew to be a large starving company of white men.

Hall itemized Franklin relics found in the possession of the Inuit, including a mahogany writing desk that "had been recently in use as a blubber-tray." He transcribed Inuit testimony of having dug up, and left unburied, a body on King William Island: "This white man was very large and tall, and by state of gums and teeth was terribly sick." The Inuit also recounted having seen a ship in the area of O'Reilly Island, off the Adelaide Peninsula, which Hall took to be evidence that either the *Erebus* or *Terror* had "consummated the Great Northwest Passage." According to their account, the Inuit had at first approached the ship with caution, but when it seemed no one was aboard, a group visited it. In a locked cabin, they told of the discovery of "a dead man, whose body was very large and heavy,

his teeth long. It took five men to lift this giant *kob-lu-na*. He was left where they found him." According to Hall's intelligence, the Inuit then began "ransacking" the ship for materials. Among the many items on board, they described seeing meat in cans.

Hall deduced that the Inuit found the ship in the spring of 1849. According to the Inuit account, there was a gangway reaching from the deck to the ice, suggesting that the vessel was still occupied that winter. The ship sank a short time later and debris, masts, boxes and casks drifted to shore. It was after this that an intriguing discovery was made: "fresh tracks were seen of four men and a dog on the land where the ship was. *In-nook-poo-zhee-jook*, who had seen Ross and his party on the Victory and Rae in 1854, knew these tracks to be *kob-lu-nas'* . . ." If that is the case, then it is likely that survivors of the Franklin expedition were alive at the time that James Clark Ross made his sledge journey in May 1849.

Searching for remains on King William Island and on nearby islets, Hall in once instance identified a human thigh bone, but his work was constrained because snow remained on the ground. He also found a skeleton, later identified by a gold filling as Lieutenant Henry Le Vesconte of the *Erebus*. Hall conducted a solemn ceremony to honour the dead man, including flying the American flag at half-mast and building a monument of stones. The remains were then collected by Hall and taken to the United States before being returned to England, where they were entombed at a Franklin memorial in Greenwich Hospital.

Much more important American discoveries were to come. On 19 June 1878, Lieutenant Frederick Schwatka, a United States cavalry officer who had served in the Indian wars of the American West at the same time as the famed defeat of Lieutenant Colonel George Custer at Little Big Horn, and who was also a qualified lawyer and medical doctor, led a tiny expedition backed by the American Geographical Society into the Arctic. Schwatka was inspired by Hall's earlier efforts, and by American whalers who, having spoken with the Inuit, reported that documents of the lost expedition might be found.

Travelling by sledge on what was to become a 3,249-mile (5,232-km) return journey, Schwatka was able to reach King William Island and conduct a thorough search in 1878–79 along the route taken during the retreat of the *Erebus* and *Terror* crews. Besides confirming important aspects of M'Clintock's search, Schwatka added immeasurably to the record of relics and human remains scattered along the western and southern coasts of the island.

On 21 July 1879, Schwatka visited the boat place seen by M'Clintock some nineteen years earlier, but instead of an intact boat and contents, he found that the site had "evidently been thoroughly overhauled by the natives." Besides the remnants of the boat, Schwatka found combs, sponges, toothbrushes, bottles and powder cans. He also found the widely distributed bones of four skeletons, including three skulls.

On 24 June that same summer, at what Schwatka called the "very crest" of his long journey, near Victory Point on the island's northwest shores, an opened grave was discovered. A medal with the name of John Irving engraved on it was found at the site, though the grave had been "despoiled by the natives some years before." Schwatka described the scene in his journal:

In the grave was found the object-glass of a marine telescope, and a few officer's gilt-buttons stamped with an anchor and surrounded by a crown. Under the head was a colored silk handkerchief, still in a fair state of preservation, and many pieces of coarsely stitched canvas, showing that this had been used as a receptacle for the body when interred.

Because of the original care taken in the burial, Schwatka believed that the body had been buried from the ships, where a proper coffin could have been constructed. The gravesite stood in contrast to the final resting places of the other Franklin sailors found on King William Island, where the bones lay scattered on the ground. A human skull and other bones, thought to be Irving's, were found



*The grave of Lieutenant John Irving, and relics
from the HMS Terror, found by Lieutenant Schwatka.*

scattered over a wide area around the grave. "They were carefully gathered together, with a few pieces of cloth and other articles, to be brought home for interment where they may hereafter rest undisturbed," Schwatka wrote. (Of all the skeletal remains discovered by the American, only those identified as belonging to Irving were removed from the island, to be eventually buried with full naval honours at Dean Cemetery, Edinburgh.)

Schwatka's expedition made other discoveries: a large cairn covering a fragment of paper with a hand drawn on it, the index finger pointing; an Inuit cache with more relics, including several red cans marked "Goldner's Patent." Schwatka also found and interviewed a woman who said that some of the men she had met had "dry and hard and black" mouths, suggesting the presence of scurvy. He also recorded testimony similar to that collected by Hall, from an old man named Ikinnelikpatolok, who told of a large ship frozen in the ice to the west of Adelaide Peninsula, north of O'Reilly Island, and claimed he had seen one white man "dead in a bunk." Among other items, "they found some red cans of fresh

meat, with plenty of what looked like tallow mixed with it. A great many had been opened, and four were still unopened."

Before leaving the Arctic, Schwatka met an old Inuk woman and her son who told a grim story of finding relics of the Franklin expedition on the shores of the North American mainland many years before, including one of the lifeboats the retreating crewmen had been dragging. Schwatka recorded the son's account:

Outside the boat he saw a number of skulls. He forgot how many, but said there were more than four. He also saw bones from legs and arms that appeared to have been sawed off. Inside the boat was a box filled with bones; the box was about the same size as . . . one with the books in it.

The last thirty or forty of Franklin's men had apparently left the tragedy of King William Island behind them near the mouth of the Peffer River and crossed Simpson Strait, only to exhaust their last hopes in the barren reaches of an area Schwatka named Starvation Cove. (It has been argued that the two boxes may have contained the remains of Sir John Franklin and the expedition logs, but they have been lost forever.) A search of the area revealed little, only the partial remains of one sailor. The Inuit explained that the land had reclaimed the rest of the bodies—that the bones had sunk into the sand, mute testimony of the horror that visited the area so long ago.

Schwatka's party returned to the United States in September 1880. The *Illustrated London News* provided detailed coverage of the expedition's journey across King William Island, including an explanation for the absence of proper graves:

The coast had evidently been frequently visited by natives, who had disinterred those who had been buried for the sake of plunder, and left their remains to the ravages of the wild beasts . . . [Schwatka's party] buried the bones of all those unfortunates remaining above ground and erected monuments to their memory. Their research has established the fact that the records of Franklin's expedition are lost beyond recovery.

The president of the Royal Geographical Society concluded that the Franklin search expeditions had succeeded in surveying much of the Arctic archipelago and “expunged the blot of obscurity which would otherwise have hung over and disfigured the history of this enlightened age.” Despite the failure to locate the ships’ records, or either of the two vessels, the Franklin searches had also pierced the Arctic long enough to answer the fundamental mysteries of the expedition’s disappearance. Its route had been generally established, the reason for the desertion of the *Erebus* and *Terror* was made known and the Inuit accounts and sad discovery of relics on King William Island attested to the crews’ final chilling days of life.

With the great search at last over, Tennyson wrote the epitaph for the Westminster Abbey memorial to Franklin:

Not here: the white North hath thy bones, and thou
Heroic Sailor Soul
Art passing on thy happier voyage now
Toward no earthly pole

Britain transferred sovereignty of the Arctic islands to Canada in 1880. The Northwest Passage was finally sailed by Norway’s Roald Amundsen in 1903–06, aboard a wooden sloop named *Gjoa*. It was perhaps fitting that Amundsen should have been the first, for it was the narrative of Franklin’s 1819 overland journey that led him to dream of being a polar explorer. “Oddly enough it was the sufferings that Sir John and his men had to go through which attracted me most in his narrative. A strange urge made me wish that I too would go through the same thing,” wrote Amundsen, who conquered the passage and later the South Pole, only to die in a plane crash in Arctic waters in 1928. Royal Canadian Mounted Police Sergeant Henry Asbjorn Larsen later sailed the passage from west to east aboard the *St. Roch* in 1940–42, and from east to west in 1944.

Occasionally, bones thought to belong to a Franklin expedition member were discovered. In one case, a partial skeleton was sent

to Canada's National Museum in Ottawa, where it remains in storage. And in 1923, the explorer Knud Rasmussen, a native of Greenland, reported interring some remains on the east coast of the Adelaide Peninsula, which, from surviving scraps of clothing and footwear, were "unquestionably the last mortal remains of Franklin's men."

Rasmussen also wrote down Inuit oral history of the discovery of a deserted ship, found when the natives were hunting seals off the northwest coast of King William Island. One old man named Qaqortingneq described what was seen by those who went aboard: "At first they were afraid to go down into the lower part of the ship, but after a while they grew bolder, and ventured also into the houses underneath. Here they found many dead men, lying in the sleeping places there; all dead."

Major L.T. Burwash of Canada's Department of the Interior made several visits to King William Island, interviewing Inuit elders for further clues about the Franklin expedition. In April 1929 he secured a statement from two men named Enukshakak and Nowya who told of finding, forty years earlier, a large cache of wooden cases carrying "tin containers, some of which were painted red." According to the men's account, some of these provisions were tins of preserved meat, purportedly found on a low flat island to the east of King William Island. They expressed their belief that the cache was left by the crew of a ship that had been wrecked off nearby Matty Island. This testimony, coupled with the report, recorded by Schwatka, of a wreck a short distance from O'Reilly Island, prompted Burwash to present the theory that some of Franklin's crews had returned to the *Erebus* and *Terror* and that "the ships were eventually brought to their final resting places while more or less under the control of their crews."

Burwash also included with his account what was purported to be unpublished testimony from a member of Charles Francis Hall's expedition, by then deceased, which strangely never made it into Hall's official account. Attributed to an Inuk hunter, this additional

material revealed that Sir John Franklin may have been buried in a cement vault on King William Island: "one man died on the ships and was brought ashore and buried . . . in an opening in the rock, and his body covered over with something that 'after a while was all same stone.'" At the time the remains were interred, "many guns were fired."

In 1930, Burwash and pilot W.E. Gilbert would become the first men to fly to Crozier's Landing. However, there was little more than some rope and broadcloth left for them to see. Gilbert described the scene in an article published in the *Edmonton Journal* on 9 September 1930:

Bitter winds across the still snow-covered ground made work difficult and the ravages of the tremendous storms encountered here had largely obliterated the remains of the camps in the eighty years which had elapsed.

There was no sustained challenge to Franklin's reputation mounted in Victorian times. It was not until 1939 that Canadian Arctic explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson wrote his essay, "The Lost Franklin Expedition," and asked how these sea-toughened men, armed with shotguns and muskets, could have "contrived to die to the last man" of hunger so quickly in a land where the Inuit had survived for generations, hunting with Stone Age weapons.

Stefansson concluded that the chief failure of the Franklin expedition, and other nineteenth-century British explorers of the Arctic, was in the refusal to respond to the harsh environment by adopting the ways of the Inuit: "The main cause . . . was cultural." An explorer and ethnographer, and a man who had subsisted on a fresh meat-only diet in the Arctic for seven years, Stefansson repeatedly argued that the Arctic explorers would have thrived had they done the same. As he wrote: "The strongest antiscorbutic qualities reside in certain fresh foods and diminish or disappear with storage by any of the common methods of preservation—

canning, pickling, drying, etc." Yet as late as 1928, Stefansson's theories about the antiscorbutic value of fresh meat continued to be greeted with skepticism. As a result, he submitted to a bizarre experiment in which he ate nothing but raw meat for a year while living in New York City. To the astonishment of medical observers, he remained perfectly healthy.

There is no doubt that an abundance of fresh meat would have offered a means of salvation to Franklin expedition survivors. As Stefansson argued, Franklin and his officers need only have studied the narratives of two then recent expeditions to have had a command of the situation: "When you compare the John Ross expedition of 1829–33 with the George Back expedition of 1836–37, you have the complete answer to how a polar residence should be managed." Stefansson conceded, however, that while John Ross had wisely adopted the Inuit diet, he had not demonstrated that whites could be adequately self-supporting, as most of the food had been obtained from the Inuit through barter. In addition, there is evidence that Franklin expedition survivors did procure limited amounts of fresh meat from the Inuit, but pleas for further aid were then rebuffed.

In truth, the large number of survivors disgorged onto King William Island doomed any hopes of securing adequate quantities of fresh meat. Even among the Inuit, episodes of starvation have been documented in the region of King William Island and the adjacent mainland. Schwatka encountered Inuit who he reported were "in great distress for food" and who had already lost one of their number to starvation. He gave them caribou meat. Knud Rasmussen also wrote that, for the Inuit, life is "an almost uninterrupted struggle for bare existence, and periods of dearth and actual starvation are not infrequent." As late as 1920, Rasmussen documented that eighteen Inuit had died of starvation at Simpson Strait.

More to the point, Stefansson noted the curiously high number of deaths—before the *Erebus* and *Terror* were deserted, "while there were still large quantities of food on the ships." That "scurvy

took so heavy a toll" even then, required, he argued, a "special explanation." If scurvy was indeed the cause of those deaths, then that explanation was almost certainly an enduring faith in the antiscorbutic value of tinned foods. As the historian Richard J. Cyriax stated in his 1939 study of the Franklin expedition: "As tinned preserved meat has no antiscorbutic properties, Goldner's meat, if perfectly good, would not have prevented scurvy."

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