

The Fate of Sir John Franklin

— A Classic of Exploration

Geography

THE VOYAGE OF THE 'FOX' IN THE ARCTIC SEAS. A Narrative of the Discovery of the Fate of Sir John Franklin and his Companions. By Captain M'Clintock. London: 1859.

ONE thing is certain, the wild sort of tent-life we lead in Arctic exploration quite unfits one for such tame work as writing up a journal; my present attempt will illustrate the fact,—yet with such ample materials what a deeply interesting volume might be written! Since I last opened this familiar old diary—the repository alike of dry facts and the most trivial notes—winter has passed away, summer is far advanced, and the glorious sun is again returning southward. We too have endeavoured to move on with the times and seasons.

As for myself—I have visited Montreal Island, completed the exploration and circuit of King William's Island, passing on foot through the only feasible North-West Passage; but all this is as nothing to the interest attached to the *Franklin records* picked up by Hobson, and now safe in my possession! We now know the fate of the "Erebus" and "Terror." The sole object of our voyage has at length been completed, and we anxiously await the time when escape from these bleak regions will become practicable. . . .

About 12 miles from Cape Herschel I found a small cairn built by Hobson's party, and containing a note for me. He had reached this, his extreme point, six days previously, without having seen anything of the wreck, or of natives, but he had found a record—the record so ardently sought for of the Franklin Expedition—at Point Victory, on the N. W. coast of King William's Land.

That record is indeed a sad and touching relic of our lost friends, and to simplify its contents, I will point out separately the double story it so briefly tells. In the first place, the record paper was one of the printed forms usually supplied to discovery ships for the purpose of being enclosed in bottles and thrown overboard at sea, in order to ascertain the set of the currents, blanks being left for the date and position; any

From the time that Sir John Franklin, experienced Arctic explorer, went into the unknown waters north of North America with the ships "Erebus" and "Terror" in 1845 to search for the "North-west Passage" around the western continent, and did not return, the mystery of his disappearance caused expedition after expedition to be sent out by the British Admiralty to search for clues to his fate. It is to these expeditions that much of our knowledge of the Arctic is due. Many traces of the vanished explorers were found, but definite information of their fate was still lacking. Lady Franklin then dedicated her own fortune and all the money she could raise by subscription to another attempt to learn the cause of the expedition's failure, and Capt. M'Clintock, in the years 1857-59, was fortunate enough to find documentary evidence in a cairn which the Eskimos had not discovered.

person finding one of these records is requested to forward it to the Secretary of the Admiralty, with a note of time and place; and this request is printed upon it in six different languages. Upon it was written, apparently by Lieutenant Gore, as follows:

28 of May, 1847. H. M. ships "Erebus" and "Terror" wintered in the ice in lat. 70° 05' N., long. 98° 23' W.

Having wintered in 1846-7 at Beechey Island, in lat. 74° 43' 28" N., long. 90° 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.

There is an error in the above document, namely, that the "Erebus" and "Terror" wintered at Beechey Island in 1846-7,—the correct dates should have been 1845-6; a glance at the date at the top and bottom of the record proves this, but in all other respects the tale is told in as few words as possible of their wonderful success up to that date, May, 1847.

We find that, after the last intelligence of Sir John Franklin was received by us (bearing date of July,

1845) from the whalers in Melville Bay, his Expedition passed on to Lancaster Sound, and entered Wellington Channel, of which the southern entrance had been discovered by Sir Edward Parry in 1819. The "Erebus" and "Terror" sailed up that strait for one hundred and fifty miles, and reached in the autumn of 1845 the same latitude as was attained eight years subsequently by H. M. S. "Assistance" and "Pioneer." Whether Franklin intended to pursue this northern course, and was only stopped by ice in that latitude of 77° north, or purposely relinquished a route which seemed to lead away from the known seas off the coast of America, must be a matter of opinion; but this the document assures us of, that Sir John Franklin's Expedition, having accomplished this examination, returned southward from latitude 77° north, which is at the head of Wellington Channel, and re-entered Barrow's Strait by a new channel between Bathurst and Cornwallis Islands.

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 1845-6, the results of their first year's labour must have been most cheering. These results were the exploration of Wellington and Queen's Channel, and the addition to our charts of the extensive lands on either hand. In 1846 they proceeded to the south-west, and eventually reached within twelve miles of the north extreme of King William's Land, when their progress was arrested by the approaching winter of 1846-7. That winter appears to have passed without any serious loss of life; and when in the spring Lieutenant Gore leaves with a party for some especial purpose, and very probably to connect the unknown coastline of King William's Land between Point Victory and Cape Herschel, those on board the "Erebus" and "Terror" were "all well," and the gallant Franklin still commanded.

But, alas! round the margin of the paper upon which Lieutenant Gore in 1847 wrote those words of hope and promise, another hand had subsequently written the following words:

April 25, 1848.—H. M. ships "Terror" and "Erebus" were deserted on the 22nd April, 5 leagues N. N. W. of this, having been beset since 12th September, 1846. The officers and crews, consisting of 105 souls, under the command of Captain F. R. M. Crozier, landed here in lat. 69° 37' 42" N., long. 98° 41' W. Sir John Franklin died on the 11th June, 1847; and the total loss by deaths in the expedition has been to this date 9 officers and 15 men.

(Signed) James Fitzjames,
Captain H. M. S. Erebus.

(Signed) F. R. M. Crozier,
Captain and Senior Officer.

and start (on) to-morrow, 26th,
for Back's Fish River.

This marginal information was evidently written by Captain Fitzjames, excepting only the note stating when and where they were going, which was added by Captain Crozier.

There is some additional marginal information relative to the transfer of the document to its present position (viz., the site of Sir James Ross's pillar) from a spot four miles to the northward, near Point Victory, where it had been originally deposited by the *late* Commander Gore. This little word *late* shows us that he too, within the twelvemonth, had passed away.

In the short space of twelve months how mournful had become the history of Franklin's expedition; how changed from the cheerful "All well" of Graham Gore! The spring of 1847 found them within 90 miles of the known sea off the coast of America; and to men who had already in two seasons sailed over 500 miles of previously unexplored waters, how confident must they then have felt that that forthcoming navigable season

of 1847 would see their ships pass over so short an intervening space! It was ruled otherwise. Within a month after Lieutenant Gore placed the record on Point Victory, the much-loved leader of the expedition, Sir John Franklin, was dead; and the following spring found Captain Crozier, upon whom the command had devolved, at King William's Land, endeavouring to save his starving men, 105 souls in all, from a terrible death by retreating to the Hudson Bay territories up the Back of Great Fish River.

A sad tale was never told in fewer words. There is something deeply touching in their extreme simplicity, and they show in the strongest manner that both the leaders of this retreating party were actuated by the loftiest sense of duty, and met with calmness and decision the fearful alternative of a last bold struggle for life, rather than perish without effort on board their ships; for we well know that the "Erebus" and "Terror" were only provisioned up to July, 1848. . . .

BRIEF as these records are, we must needs be contented with them; they are perfect models of official brevity. No log-book could be more provokingly laconic. Yet, that *any record at all* should be deposited after the abandonment of the ships, does not seem to have been intended; and we should feel the more thankful to Captains Crozier and Fitzjames, to whom we are indebted for the invaluable supplement; and our gratitude ought to be all the greater when we remember that the ink had to be thawed, and that writing in a tent during an April day in the Arctic regions is by no means an easy task.

Besides placing a copy of the record taken away by Hobson from the cairn, we both put records of our own in it; and I also buried one under a large stone ten feet true north from it, stating the explorations and discoveries we had made.

With respect to a *navigable* North-West Passage, and to the probability of our having been able last season to make any considerable advance to the southward, had the barrier of ice across the western outlet of Bellot Strait permitted us to reach the open water beyond, I think, judging from what I have since seen of the ice in the Franklin Strait, that the chances were greatly in favour of our reaching Cape Herschel, on the S. side of King William's Land, by passing (as I intended to do) eastward of that island.

The wide channel between Prince of Wales' Land and Victoria Land admits a vast and continuous stream of very heavy ocean-formed ice from the N. W., which presses upon the western face of King William's Island, and chokes up Victoria Strait in the manner I have just described. I do not think the North-West Passage could ever be sailed through by passing westward—that is, to windward—of King William's Island.

If the season was so favourable for navigation as to open the northern part of this western sea (as, for instance, in 1846, when Sir J. Franklin sailed down it) I think but comparatively little difficulty would be experienced in the more southern portion of it until Victoria Strait was reached. Had Sir John Franklin known that a channel existed eastward of King William's Land (so named by Sir John Ross), I do not think he would have risked the besetment of his ships in such very heavy ice to the westward of it; but had he attempted the northwest passage by the *eastern* route, he would probably have carried his ships safely through to Behring's Straits. But Franklin was furnished with charts which indicated no passage to the eastward of King William's Land, and made that land (since discovered by Rae to be an island) a peninsula attached to the continent of North America; and he consequently had but one course open to him, and that the one he adopted.

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M'Clintock's party on the Arctic ice with one of their unruly dog teams and another sledge pulled by men. The engraving is from a drawing made on the expedition by Captain May.

