

The Franklin Mystery

Life and Death in the Arctic

by Lyle Dyck



Newspaper and electronic media stories on the recent discovery of the hull of HMS *Erebus* showed the continuing fascination of many Canadians regarding the missing expedition of Sir John Franklin, and the fate of its members and ships. Small wonder – it is the quintessential Great Unsolved Mystery in Canadian History.

For more than 160 years, governments and citizens of Britain, the United States and Canada have wrestled with the conundrum – What happened to the Franklin expedition? Since its first disappearance and the sending of 31 search parties between 1847 and 1880, numerous debates have cropped up, as represented in a proliferation of books, articles and other commentaries offering further evidence and interpretations. Still, many questions remain as to what actually happened to Franklin and his compatriots.

“The Franklin Mystery: Life and Death in the Arctic” is the latest installment in the highly successful Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History Project (<http://canadianmysteries.ca/en/index.php>), the remarkably successful web based series devoted to posing historical mysteries and providing primary documents, curriculum and other materials to students and teachers concerning major events in Canadian history. It presents a rare opportunity to examine, and re-evaluate the diverse strains of Franklin historiography. Of particular interest are two very distinctive approaches bearing upon the principal and secondary questions arising from the Franklin story, including the contrasting roles of participants and witnesses of two very different cultures and knowledge systems – Inuit and European. Through the assemblage of extensive evidence generated by numerous Inuit and European witnesses, students will be challenged not only to try to solve the mystery of Franklin’s fate but also to evaluate our notions of historiographical methods,

authority, and truth. The website will be formally launched in Ottawa on 4 June 2015 following its complete translation into both official languages. With further resources it is also intended that parts of the website will also be translated into Inuktitut.

“The Franklin Mystery” meets the project’s three main criteria for a great history education website. First, the original story of the Franklin expedition to the Canadian Arctic is filled with the kind of adventure and danger that is intrinsically and immediately interesting to young people – the first criterion in selecting each of the subjects for the website. While the original disappearance is intriguing, more recent elements, particularly Parks Canada’s search for the lost ships, add other layers of immediate interest by providing details on the work of historical detectives. We are adding the voices and the experiences of Arctic historians and some of scientists working on the Parks Canada project as part of the website.

Second, the Franklin Expedition is an episode of considerable significance in Canadian history. It embodies two major, intersecting stories – the European search for the Northwest Passage, primarily post-1818, and Inuit life and adaptation in the Arctic over many hundreds of years. Further, extensive British exploration during the search confirmed the United Kingdom’s claim to sovereignty in European eyes over most of the Arctic Islands and the Search set the stage for the subsequent transfer of title of the Arctic archipelago to Canada in 1880, thereby enabling its incorporation as one of this country’s major regions. Of considerable significance in itself, the Franklin Mystery provides insight into several themes of critical importance to the history of Canada as a whole, including:

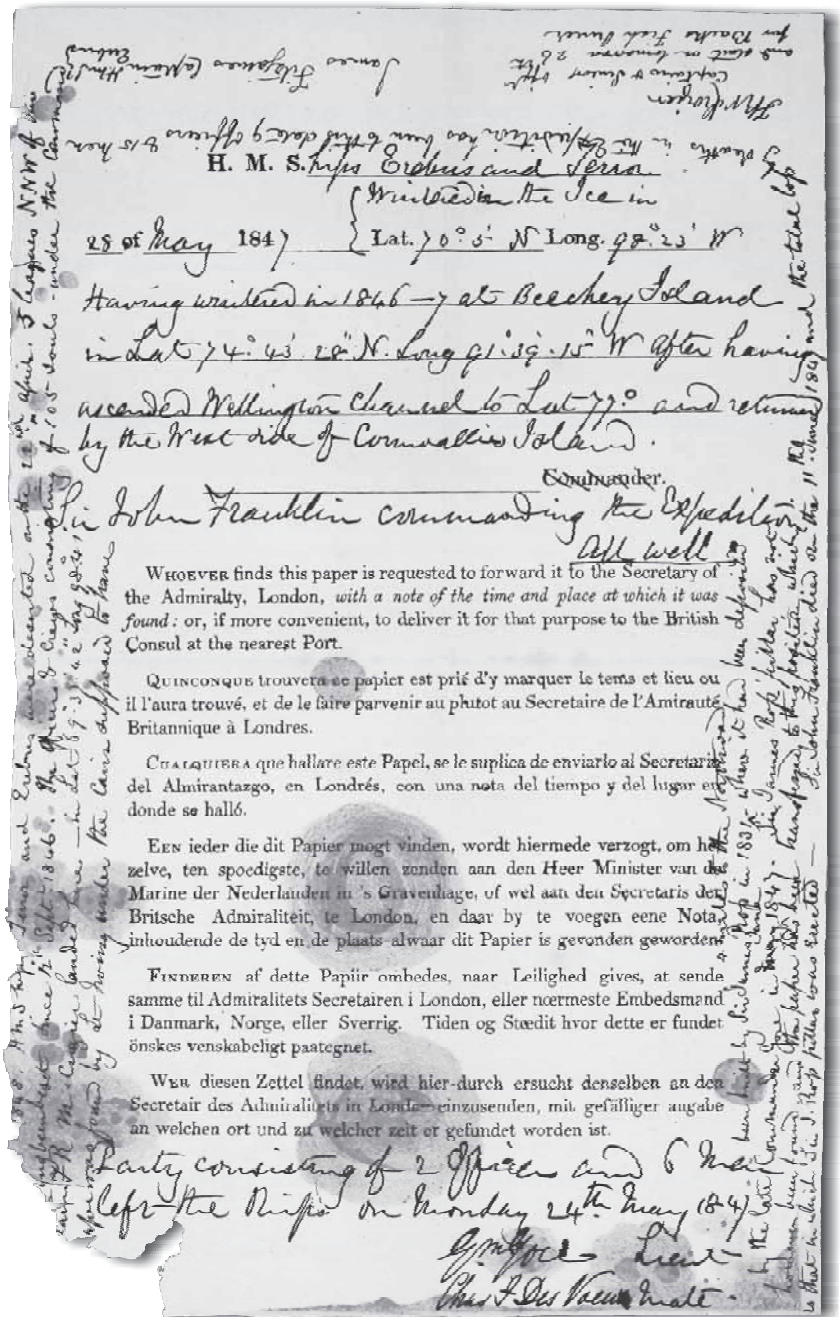
- History of First Peoples in the Canadian North
- History of first contact between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples

(left) The discovery of remains of the Franklin Expedition, by Lieutenant William Hobson on King William's Land. Harper's Weekly, 1859. (right) A note, c. 1847, also found by Hobson's party, describing the fate of Franklin Expedition. / (à gauche) La découverte des vestiges de l'expédition Franklin à King William's Land par le lieutenant William Hobson. Harper's Weekly, 1859. (à droite) Une note détaillant le sort de l'expédition Franklin, vers 1847, autre découverte du groupe de Hobson.

- Environmental History, by illuminating the importance of climate and geography
- History of Arctic and Northern exploration
- British colonial attitudes toward the North
- Arctic exploration and scientific investigation
- The place of the North in Canadian history

Third, there is a rich evidential base relating to mystery of the Franklin Expedition. Research in repositories in the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States has resulted in the collection of a wide array of archival documents relating to Franklin's expedition and those that later set out to find it. The primary resources include correspondence between Sir John and Lady Franklin and senior members of the British Admiralty, ship's log books, and expedition records; oral histories of Inuit interviewed in the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries; accounts of material evidence, autopsies, period newspapers, and many other textual sources. Visual evidence includes European and Inuit maps, historical photographs, drawings, and paintings. The research materials also comprise numerous secondary sources, including books, articles, variety of scientific reports, aerial and other modern-day photographs. The Mystery also incorporates a wealth of materials relating to Parks Canada current search for the missing ships HMS *Erebus* and *Terror*. By providing a rich assemblage of research materials, and contextualizing them, this project will make this enduring historical mystery accessible to students and the public alike while fostering the serious study of Canadian history through direct encounters with the tangible evidence of our past.

Update: The discovery of the hull of HMS *Erebus* by Parks Canada underwater archaeologists and other partners in September 2014 is an exciting new find offering the potential to further engage Canadians in history and through the Franklin Mystery. The discovery came late in the arctic navigation season and much remains to be investigated, especially the areas below the main deck possibly containing objects and other evidence that could shed further light on the expedition's history and disappearance. Pending future studies, the discovery of the *Erebus* already further validates the importance of Inuit knowledge in solving the Franklin Mystery. Several Inuit observers interviewed by the American explorer Charles Francis



Hall in the 1860s had reported having witnessed an abandoned ship that sank in the vicinity of O'Reilly Island off the southwest shores of the Adelaide Peninsula. These reports figured prominently in the modern-day search for Franklin's ships, accompanied by ice and climatology studies, observations of currents and tides, and other data from various disciplines, leading to the ship's discovery. In consequence of the discovery the team is already developing strategies to update the website and enable new historical documents to be posted and interpreted as they are generated by continuing investigations by Parks Canada, other partners, and the Franklin Mystery project.

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