

ARCTIC'S PRESERVATIVE POWER OVER-MATCHED by Ken McGoogan **The Globe and Mail, 28 September 2009**

The late Pierre Berton liked to describe how in 1853, when Arctic explorer Leopold McClintock was searching for the lost expedition of Sir John Franklin and travelling across spongy, summer-time tundra, he chanced upon cart tracks so fresh that he thought they had been made the previous day. As he studied them, slowly he realized the truth: those tracks had been made by Sir Edward Parry, another Arctic explorer – not yesterday, but thirty-three years before.

The preservative power of the Arctic has loomed large in the Canadian imagination since 1987, when Owen Beattie and John Geiger published *Frozen in Time*. That book contained photos of the well-preserved bodies of the first three sailors to have died during that last Franklin expedition. Dead since 1846, the three looked as if they might have died last week.

Yet a recent visit to their gravesites on Beechey Island suggests that the preservative power of the Arctic may have met its match – and that match is us. It also reminded me that while Canadians have grown fond of talking about Arctic sovereignty and developing the North, we are failing to take concrete, relatively inexpensive actions that could make a difference both today and tomorrow.

Where to begin? This was my third visit to Beechey Island with Adventure Canada, a conservation-minded travel company based in Mississauga. And the history-rich island, the most famous site in the Arctic, is so confusingly degraded that only on this occasion did I finally sort out what happened where, exactly, in the 1840s and '50s.

Arriving in two ships late in 1846, the Franklin expedition spent one winter on Beechey before sailing south to its terrible fate. Four years later, in August 1850, American explorer Elisha Kent Kane was among the first men to discover this site. The artistic, articulate Kane sketched the three gravestones, copied their inscriptions, and scoured the area, turning up countless artefacts.

A quarter mile from the graves, he found a neat pile of more than 600 preserved-meat cans. Emptied of food, these cans had been filled with limestone pebbles, “perhaps to serve as convenient ballast on boating expeditions.” Today, of all that Kane described, only the three headstones (and the bodies before and beneath them) remain – and those headstones are not the originals, which are preserved in Yellowknife, but facsimiles, two of which have been accidentally switched.

The site is further confused by a fourth headstone, which marks the grave of a sailor named Thomas Morgan who died here in 1854; and also by what looks like an unmarked grave, but is in fact the original location of a memorial to Joseph-Rene Bellot, a searcher who died nearby in 1853.

Franklin's original campsite is today nothing but a shallow pit, unmarked. The 600 pebble-filled tin cans are long gone. About eighty-five of them have been moved a couple of kilometres west to the ruins of Northumberland House, a storehouse erected in 1852-53 in case Franklin should return.

There, half-buried in the sand, those 85 cans form a rusty cross, itself badly damaged. Nearby stand a number of memorials – some of them significant, like Lady Franklin's monument to Bellot, others irrelevant. Standing amidst this archaeological

chaos, where well-meaning but unaware visitors have bent cans and broken beams, I found myself thinking that they must have arrived unprepared and unguided. A priceless historical record is being destroyed – part of our cultural heritage. And I wondered: Should visitors be banned?

I thought then of a young Inuk woman, a guide I had met a few days before at Kugluktuk, an Inuit settlement at the mouth of the Coppermine River. In 1771, Samuel Hearne had reached that location after an arduous, months-long journey from Churchill on Hudson Bay. To this guide, I had described what Hearne had seen -- seals, tide water markings, an array of islands – and she had been able to lead me to where Hearne must have stood: a bluff overlooking the mouth of the Coppermine River.

That location, the first point charted on the northern coast of North America, and also along the Northwest Passage, remains devoid of signage. After I had spoken of the site to those who accompanied us, and as we walked back into town, the young woman told me, “We need more of these ships stopping here.” She was alluding to the fact that ships bring much-needed spending to any northern community they visit.

Now, on Beechey Island, as I stood amidst the archaeological confusion, I rejected the idea of banning visitors. And surveillance, given the isolation of many sites, is obviously impossible. What we need, I realized anew, is interpretative and cautionary signage at every significant historical site in the north. We should start with Beechey Island, which is both busy and jeopardized, and move on to sites like the mouth of the Coppermine River and Victory Point on King William Island, near where Franklin’s ships got trapped in the ice.

At each site, well-designed interpretive signage should explain and map what exists and caution visitors to ensure that it remains intact. These same interpretative materials should be distributed to travel companies that regularly venture into the Arctic. And those companies should be encouraged or even compelled to follow the example of Adventure Canada, which brings archaeologists, historians and conservationists on every voyage.

As the Northwest Passage becomes increasingly viable, the Arctic will attract more visitors. Relevant sites need protection. And the territory of Nunavut, with a population of 30,000, can hardly be expected to shoulder responsibility. The federal government should act immediately to protect and develop Canada’s exploration history as a natural resource.