

THE DISCOVERY OF THE CENTURY by Ken McGoogan Canadian Geographic, December 2014

The discovery of one of Sir John Franklin's lost ships reminds us that Canadian history does not exist in a vacuum. It demonstrates that the demise of the 1845 Franklin expedition was far more complex and protracted than we knew. And it vindicates not just the Inuit but also, and equally, the Arctic explorers who charted our northern archipelago while searching for the Royal Navy ships. For Canadians, most of whom live along the American border, the discovery means we have to rewrite a foundational myth that underscores our national identity as a northern people.

Obviously, the story of Franklin and the search he inspired belongs to British history. But that narrative belongs equally to Canadian history, albeit with a different emphasis, if only because so much of it happened in what would later become Canadian territory. Even those chapters that arose elsewhere, because they affected what occurred here, belong to our history. The Franklin saga has dual nationality.

The discovery of the ship demonstrates that the so-called "standard reconstruction" of what happened to the lost expedition has to be radically rewritten. British historians created the original story around the "Victory Point Record," the only written document ever recovered from the expedition. Consisting of a single sheet of paper, it indicated that in April 1848, 105 men abandoned the two ships, which had been trapped in the pack ice since September 1846. It added that Franklin had died in June 1847, and that, under Captain Francis Crozier, the men were making for the mouth of what is now called the Back River.

Starting from this single piece of paper, historians devised a basic narrative according to which all 105 men trekked south. A party of 30 or so probably turned back to fetch food, and a few may have reached the ships, but everyone succumbed in 1848 to cold, starvation, and scurvy. In 1854, explorer John Rae relayed Inuit testimony that some of the final survivors had been driven to cannibalism. Victorian England contrived to erase this from the public record. The "standard reconstruction" ignores cannibalism, and also insists that the last survivors completed the Northwest Passage: "they forged the last link with their lives."

The discovery of the Franklin ship off the west coast of Adelaide Peninsula explodes this version of events. The best indications of how, exactly, can be found in *Unravelling the Franklin Mystery: Inuit Testimony*, a 1991 book by Canadian David C. Woodman. Drawing on Inuit oral history, Woodman argues that virtually all of the men returned to the ships after hunting in 1848. One vessel got crushed by pack ice and, as several Inuit watched, helpless, sank with many men on board. The other ship was carried south by ice (to where it has just been discovered), and the last survivors abandoned it in 1851.

How does this new rendition vindicate the Arctic explorers? Simple: Woodman created his counter-reconstruction, which has just been corroborated in many particulars, by sifting through Inuit testimony as gathered and recorded by explorers. Without the papers, journals, and published books of key sojourners, Woodman's work would not exist. Crucial eye-witness accounts would never have survived in the detail that makes them so vivid, and so utterly convincing.

Woodman draws mainly on the work of five explorers:

- John Rae interviewed numerous Inuit, among them the highly articulate In-nook-poo-zhee-jook, in 1854. He reported what he had learned, including the cannibalism, and indicated where the disaster unfolded.
- Five years later, dispatched by Lady Franklin, Leopold McClintock found skeletons, relics, and the paper record on King William Island.
- In the late 1860s, with the help of Ebierbing and Tookoolito, outstanding Inuit translators, Charles Francis Hall gathered eyewitness accounts, including reports that a ship had sunk near an island off the west coast of Adelaide Peninsula. That would be the newly discovered vessel.
- In 1878-80, Frederick Schwatka located skeletons at Starvation Cove on that same peninsula and added detail to Hall's findings.
- While traversing the Northwest Passage by dogsled in 1921-24, Greenlander Knud Rasmussen added yet more detail because he spoke fluent Inuktitut.

These are still early days. Parks Canada researchers may discover relics, bodies, or even logbooks that will further transform our understanding. These revelations will generate controversy and conflicting interpretations. But this we know: as we thrash out a radical revision of one of Canada's foundational myths, integrating scientific revelations of the past half century, we will rely primarily on the testimony and work of both the Inuit and the Arctic explorers.