

William Robert Hobson (1831-1880)

In April 1854 Dr. John Rae heard from Inuit at Pelly Bay an account of the last fateful days of Franklin's expedition, missing somewhere to the west for a number of years. He also purchased relics from the Inuit that could only have belonged to members of Franklin's party. When his report of his discovery reached England, Lady Jane Franklin mounted a private expedition, in part financed by public subscription, to search for relics of the expedition on the site. Commander of the expedition was Captain Francis Leopold McClintock, who had already participated in three arctic search expeditions, had wintered in the Arctic four times, and had made some of the longest man-hauled arctic sledge journeys to date.



McClintock chose Lieutenant William Robert Hobson as his second-in-command. Second son of a naval officer of Irish birth, Hobson had been born at Nassau in the Bahamas in 1831. A few years later, when his father — William Hobson, Sr. — was serving as the first governor of New Zealand, the Hobsons were hosts of Lady Franklin, whose husband was then governor

of Tasmania. On that occasion Lady Jane took a great interest in their young son, William.

William joined the Navy in 1845 and was promoted to mate in 1852, in the interim serving aboard a number of ships on fairly routine duties. Early in 1853 he was appointed mate aboard *Rattlesnake*, which had been ordered to take supplies to *Plover*, waiting at Point Barrow, Alaska, in support of McClure's *Investigator* and Collinson's *Enterprise*. These latter ships had entered the Arctic via Bering Strait in 1850 to search for the Franklin expedition from the west.

Sailing from England in February 1853, *Rattlesnake* entered the Pacific via the Strait of Magellan and reached Port Clarence, Alaska, just east of Nome, in August 1853. After her rendezvous with *Plover*, *Rattlesnake* settled there for the winter.

In February, Hobson, with two seamen and nine dogs, set off on a sledge journey northward across the Seward Peninsula to Chamisso Island. This had been set as the rendezvous for Frederick Beechey in *Blossom* and John Franklin during the latter's second land expedition in 1825-1827, and hence it was thought that Franklin might have headed here again. Hobson's task was to check for signs of Franklin at Chamisso Island.

He returned to *Rattlesnake* on 27 March, having reached his goal and finding no sign of Franklin. He and his men had covered 896 km in 47 days despite difficulties that included the loss of his dogs by disease, the theft of provisions by the local Inuit, and an extremely ugly incident with a group of belligerent Inuit from which Hobson successfully extricated his party without bloodshed.

In mid-July *Rattlesnake* put to sea and cruised north as far as Cape Smyth; by 11 August she was back at Port Clarence to find *Plover* waiting for her. At this point Lieutenant Hobson transferred to *Plover*; after a short voyage northward, *Plover* met up with Collinson's *Enterprise*, and both ships started back south. *Plover* reached San Francisco on 28 October, where it was condemned, and Captain Maguire, Lieutenant Hobson, and the rest of her crew took over the prize ship *Sitka*, captured during the siege of Petropavlovsk, and sailed her back to England.

On the basis of this arctic experience, McClintock chose Hobson as his second-in-command for his search expedition aboard *Fox*. Sailing from Aberdeen on 2 July 1857, *Fox* made her way north to Melville Bay, where she was caught in the pack ice and drifted for eight months before she could break free. The *Fox* found more secure winter quarters the next year at Port Kennedy, near the east end of Bellot Strait, and Hobson led several depot-laying trips to the west side of Boothia Peninsula.

During a reconnaissance trip in February 1859, McClintock encountered Inuit near Cape Victoria who possessed various relics from the missing *Erebus* and *Terror*, and reported that one of them had been crushed west of King William Island. On the basis of this information McClintock planned his spring sledge trips. On 2 April McClintock and Hobson set off, each leading a party that included one man-hauled sledge and one dog sledge. Near Pasley Bay they met the group of Inuit again, who showed them more items from the missing ships and revealed that two ships had been seen off King William Island.

When the two sledging parties reached Cape Victoria, they separated. In what can only be described as a magnanimous gesture in view of the Inuit reports, McClintock gave Hobson the task of searching the west coast of King William Island, while he himself would push down past the east side of King William as far as Montreal Island before swinging back north via the west side of King William Island. Significantly, when the parties separated, Hobson was already complaining of stiffness and pains in his legs.

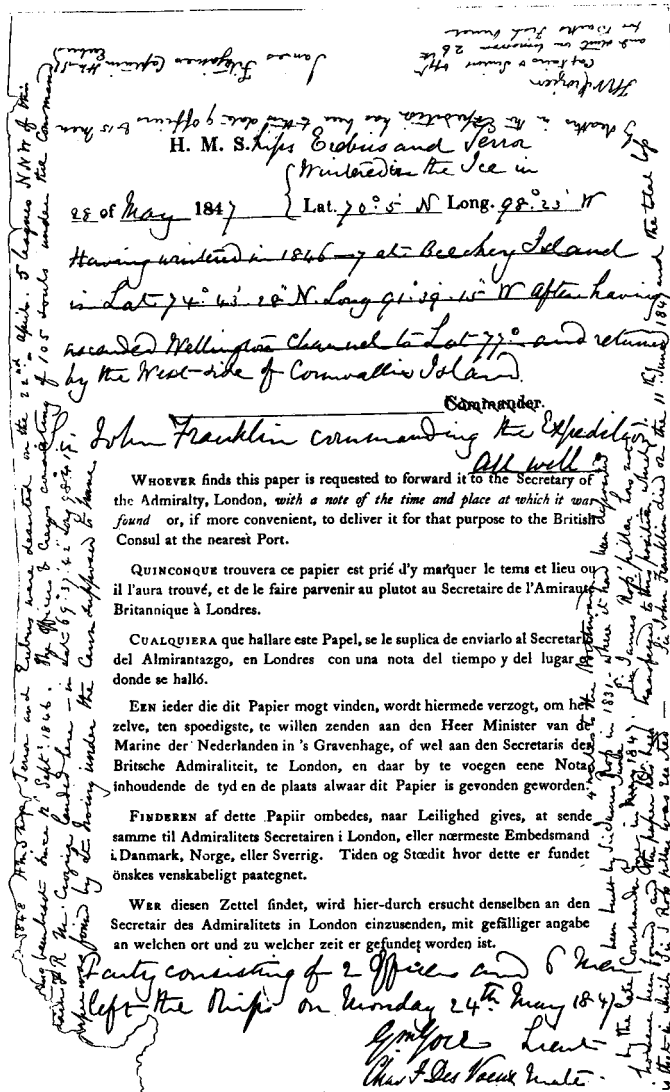
Heading west across Ross Strait, Hobson and his men reached the coast of King William Island. Near Cape Felix they found a cairn and the remains of a camp; by the clothing and equipment scattered around, Hobson deduced it had been a hunting or observatory camp occupied for quite some time by a party from *Erebus* and *Terror*. Three days later they found another cairn, originally built by James Ross, and inside it, in a cylinder, the only record that has ever been found describing, in frustratingly brief terms, the final outcome of the Franklin expedition, including the information that Franklin had died in 1847 and ending with the horrifying announcement that the survivors were about to start to walk south to the nearest fur trade post. Nearby lay an extraordinary heap of discarded clothing and equipment.

Hobson and his men continued south on 7 May. For nearly two weeks they struggled south along the barren west coast of King William Island despite almost constant blizzards. Having left most of his men at a snow-house camp in Terror Bay, Hobson reached Simpson's cairn at Cape Herschel on the 19th. Next, he crossed Simpson Strait to the mainland and continued some distance farther east, finally turning back on the 21st. On returning to the camp in Terror Bay, he left a cairn and message for McClintock, detailing his finds thus far. From McClintock's account, it is clear that the commanding officer thought Terror Bay had been the southern limit of Hobson's journey.

By this time Hobson's incipient scurvy had forced him to ride on the sledge; by the time he got back to the ship he could not stand without assistance. On the way back north, the party discovered more evidence of the Franklin disaster, including two skeletons in a life boat and another message, this one signed by Lt. Graham Gore well before the ships were abandoned, and hence with no further details of the final fate of the expedition. Hobson and his men returned to *Fox* on 14 June, after an absence of 74 days. McClintock returned soon after, having found nothing of significance not already discovered by Hobson.

Fox reached London on 23 September 1859, where Hobson was soon promoted to commander. Subsequent commands included the sloop *Pantaloön* on the Cape of Good Hope station and *Vigilant* on the East Indies station. Hobson was promoted to captain in 1866 and retired in 1872. He died at Pitminster, Somerset, on 11 October 1880.

Even allowing for McClintock's generosity in permitting Hobson to search the coast that promised clues to the fate of *Erebus* and *Terror*, Hobson has been largely eclipsed by his superior officer. Hobson was the first to find the important sites and relics on King William Island as well as the only two messages relating to the final phase of the expedition. For his achievements on King William Island, made in the face of vile weather and despite a progressively incapacitating attack of scurvy, Hobson deserves better than the passing recognition that has been accorded to him.



Document found by Lt. Hobson on 6 May 1859 telling of the Franklin expedition's fate.

FURTHER READINGS

- McCLINTOCK, F.L. 1859. The voyage of the "Fox" in the Arctic seas. A narrative of the discovery of the fate of Sir John Franklin and his companions. London: John Murray.
- JONES, A.G.E. 1979. Captain W.R. Hobson, R.N. (ret.). The Mariner's *Mirror* 65(2):168.

William Barr
Department of Geography
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada
S7N 0W0