

John Franklin (1786–1847)

One of the ironies accompanying fame is that the solid merits of celebrated men are often obscured by events of no real significance. Perhaps no reputation has suffered this irony more than John Franklin's. The man who charted nearly 3000 km of the coastline of North America is best remembered as the leader of an expedition that cost the British Admiralty two ships and the lives of 129 men and that made no direct contribution to the geographical unfolding of the Canadian Arctic.

John Franklin was born on 15 April 1786, one of 12 children in a family of waning fortune. In the 14th and 15th centuries, the word "franklin" marked a landowner of free but not of noble birth; however, by the time of John's birth in Spilsby, Lincolnshire, the family had long been involved in trade to meet economic realities. Franklin's biographers disagree about what Willingham Franklin thought of his son going to sea at age 13 aboard a merchant vessel, but the young Franklin at least was eager. Family connections soon got him into the Royal Navy, first aboard the *Polyphemus*, later aboard the *Investigator*. Engaged in a coastal survey of Australian waters, the *Investigator* provided an excellent opportunity to learn about navigation and geographical work. Franklin was an apt student and subsequently became signals midshipman aboard the *Bellerophon*; he was aboard that ship in 1805 when it squared off against *L'Aigle*, one of Napoleon's fleet, in the Battle of Trafalgar. Casualties were heavy, and although Franklin was not wounded, his hearing was permanently damaged by the guns' roar.

After Trafalgar, Franklin gained steady promotion and by 1815 was a first lieutenant. But that same year marked Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo, and in the ensuing peace, advancement in the Royal Navy all but ceased. Franklin endured an enforced idleness for three years before he was put in command of the brig *Trent*, which was to accompany the *Dorothea* under David Buchan up the east coast of Greenland and, it was hoped, over the Pole to the Orient. The voyage came to naught, the ships being turned back by heavy ice near Spitzbergen.

In the same year, 1818, John Ross had been sent on an ancillary expedition to look for an opening leading out of Baffin Bay; when Ross returned to England to report that Baffin Bay offered no westward egress, John Barrow, Secretary to the Admiralty, refused to believe him.

Hence, in 1819 the Admiralty dispatched Edward Parry to search Baffin Bay again, while Franklin went across the mainland to explore the northern coast east of the Coppermine River's mouth. He built his base camp — Fort Enterprise — northeast of present-day Yellowknife, and in June 1821 his small party crossed overland to the Coppermine, descended it, and surveyed eastward along the coast. The advanced season and a mutinous crew forced him back at Point Turnagain on Kent Peninsula. To avoid the treacherous return along the coast in the much-weakened bark canoes, Franklin decided

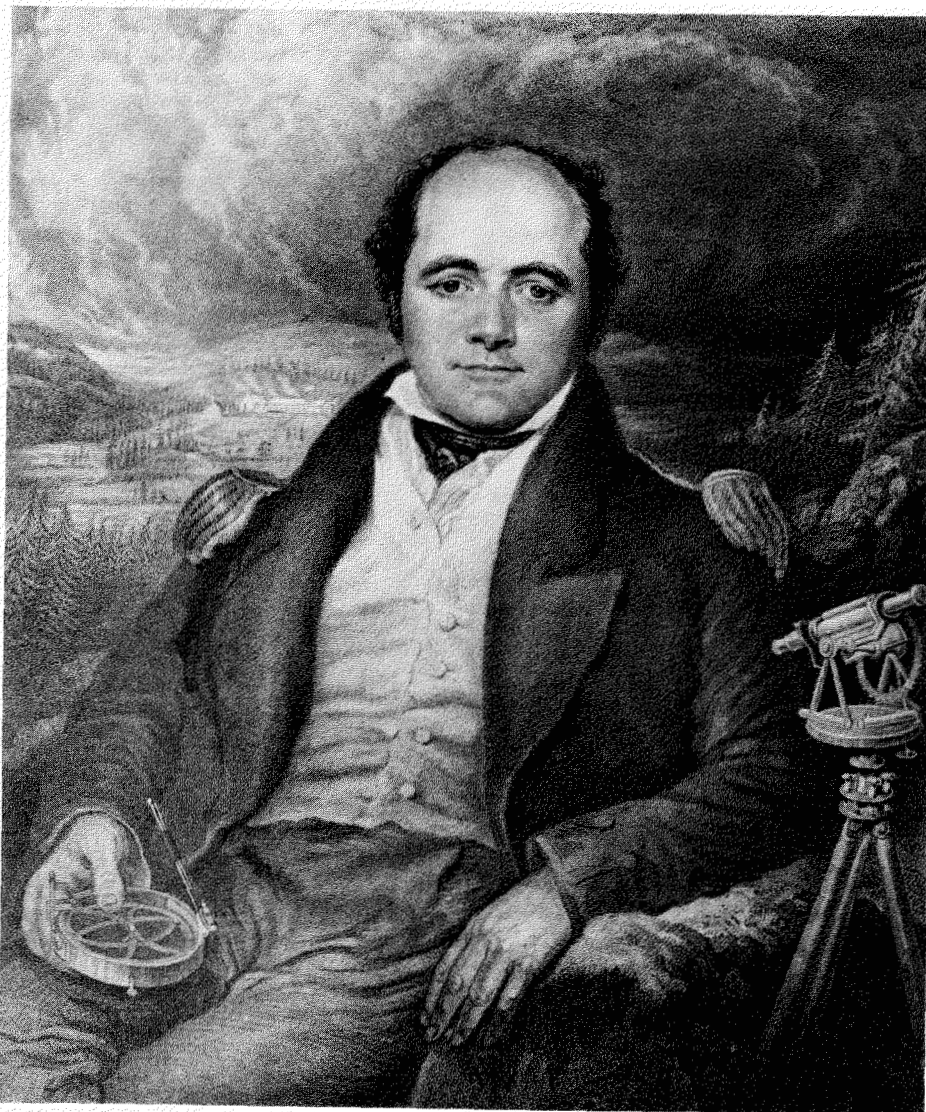
upon a 500 km overland crossing by compass-bearing to Fort Enterprise, a journey that took them across the Barrens and that witnessed the deaths by starvation and exposure of nearly half the party of 20, at least one murder, an execution without trial, and suspected cannibalism. Franklin and two of his three officers survived; the voyageurs paid the heaviest toll, only 2 out of 11 returning.

Franklin sailed back to England, where he married Eleanor Anne Porden, but when he was ordered to return to North America in 1825, he left his ailing young wife on her death bed and sailed for New York. With a well-disciplined crew of 27, comprising mostly British seamen and marines and including Dr. John Richardson and George Back, survivors of the 1819–1822 expedition, Franklin set off for Great Bear Lake. There the party built Fort Franklin, a winter residence near the Great Bear River, which drains the lake into the Mackenzie River. After wintering at Fort Franklin, they descended the Mackenzie in the summer of 1826, using four sturdy boats rowed by seamen in place of the frail bark canoes manned by voyageurs of the previous expedition. At the delta, Dr. Richardson and E.N. Kendall turned east with two boats and about half the men, surveying the coast as far as the mouth of the Coppermine, where the eastward survey had begun on the first Arctic Land Expedition.

Franklin and George Back took the remaining men and boats and headed west. They hoped to meet Captain F.W. Beechey, who had sailed around Cape Horn and through the Bering Sea as an ancillary to Franklin's overland journey. But poor weather and ice conditions made travel along the coast slow, even in the wooden boats, and Franklin did not want to repeat the experience of five years previous. Thus, at Return Reef, far short of Icy Cape, the intended rendezvous with Beechey, Franklin turned the party back, and everyone reached Fort Franklin safely. Franklin would later learn that he had come within 250 km of a boat sent out from Beechey's ship.

Under John Franklin's command, then, two small parties of about two dozen men each put over 2800 km of previously unknown coastline on the map. The 1819–1822 expedition had charted the shore almost 900 km east of the Coppermine, and the 1825–1827 party had explored just short of 2000 km of coast to the Coppermine's west. The north shore of mainland North America stretches some 76° of longitude between the Alaska/Yukon border and the northern tip of Labrador; the coastline mapped under Franklin extends 40° of that longitude. Such is the accomplishment that earns John Franklin his greatness.

Notwithstanding this major achievement, Franklin is more often known by his final expedition of 1845. Shortly after the 1825–1827 expedition, Franklin remarried, this time to Jane Griffin, who became the well-known Lady Franklin, and the Franklins spent most of the next two decades in the Mediterranean and in Van Diemen's Land (modern Tasmania), where



Portrait courtesy of the Scott Polar Research Institute.

Franklin was governor. By the 1840s, a passage through the Arctic had been explored from both the east and the west; it remained for someone to make the short connection around King William Land and to navigate the Northwest Passage from east to west. The Admiralty's choice of Franklin, already 59 years old, to command the expedition suggests that they saw the voyage as a ribbon-cutting ceremony presenting little hazard. It was to be a ceremonial culmination of the centuries-old search for a passage to the Orient. The *Erebus* and *Terror* were last sighted by whalers in Baffin Bay in July 1845, two months after they sailed from London. Not a single crew man ever returned.

The many searches for the missing ships and men led to the mapping of much of Canada's Arctic, but the Franklin expedition itself added nothing to that discovery. The mysterious fate of the 1845 expedition, nevertheless, almost totally obscures the geographical triumphs Franklin made in the 1820s when he — to use L.H. Neatby's phrase — “put a roof on the map of Canada.”

FURTHER READINGS

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