ROBERT HOOD

Commentary

The Journal and Paintings of Robert Hood

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The expedition to the Arctic led by Sir John Franklin in 1819-22 was a major event in Britain's resumed search for the Northwest Passage. The members of Franklin's party were the first white men to travel along the mainland shores of arctic North America; in spite of extreme hardships, they discovered and mapped 675 miles of that coastline. The story of the productive but tragic journey, in which eleven out of twenty people perished on the return trek, is well known from the official account of Franklin (1823).

One of the sources used by Franklin was the journal of a midshipman, Robert Hood, the only officer to die during that expedition. Hood's original handwritten narrative has been made available to the author of this commentary, together with the paintings executed by Hood under the incredibly difficult conditions of the journey. Hood offers a well-written, very human and less formal version of the events which occurred up to the time the expedition reached the Coppermine, and also provides an important account of the life of the Cree Indians near Cumberland House. Hood's journal and paintings have just been published. (Houston 1974)

Both the journal and the paintings had been in the possession of Hood's sister Catherine and, in turn, her descendants, the Roe and Birch families. When Catherine's granddaughter died and the family home of Monaincha near Roscrea in County Tipperary, Ireland, was being closed, Hood's narrative and many of his paintings were in the attic of the coachhouse. Alfred Birch, the closest relative, might well have thrown out the nondescript-looking boxes, had not his wife taken time to sort through the contents and had she not appreciated the importance of the journal and paintings they contained. They have since been passed on to Alfred's family — principally to Mr. R. G. Birch, who resides near Vancouver and who kindly allowed them to be prepared for publication.

Hood's journal reveals him as a most intelligent, perceptive young man in his early twenties. His wide range of knowledge and interests are difficult to reconcile with the fact that he completed his formal schooling and joined the navy when only fourteen years of age. His accomplishments become somewhat more understandable, however, when it is realized that midshipmen — officers-in-training — received a considerable part of their education on board ship, with stress on subjects such as navigation, Euclid and Latin. Often they had access to recent books of science in the captain's cabin.

Certainly Hood's knowledge, interests and aptitudes were directed towards science, so that he came to be Franklin's chief assistant in climatological, magnetic and geodetic matters and Dr. John Richardson's chief assistant in regard to

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natural history collections. The assistance he rendered to Franklin is amply recorded in Franklin's journal and is evident from Hood's own account. Hood was a careful surveyor and draughtsman. Franklin described how he assisted in surveying the Hayes River: "The survey of the river was made by taking the bearings of every point with a pocket compass, estimating the distances, and making a connected eye-sketch of the whole. This part of the survey was allotted to Messrs. Back and Hood conjointly; Mr. Hood also protracted the route each evening on a ruled map, after the courses and distances had been corrected by observations for latitude and longitude, taken by myself as often as the weather would allow. The extraordinary talent of this young officer in this line of service proved of the greatest advantage to the Expedition, and he continued to perform that duty, until his lamented death, with a degree of zeal and accuracy that characterized all his pursuits." (Franklin 1823 p. 28)

The determination and talent displayed are as incredible as the wide variety of the pursuits. In the above instance, one needs to imagine Hood in the process of making accurate maps, squinting by the light of a candle, sitting on the bare ground tormented by hordes of mosquitoes and blackflies at the end of an exhausting day.

Franklin in his official journal credits Hood with ten observations of magnetic variation, latitude and longitude between York Factory and Cumberland House in 1819, thirteen observations between Cumberland and Fort Enterprize in 1820, and fifteen along the Arctic coast in 1821, in all many more than were credited to Back. The various readings are tabulated together in the journal. (Franklin 1823 pp. 636-8)

Hood made an estimation of latitude at Fort Enterprize on 28 December 1820 bare-handed, when the thermometer registered 46 degrees below zero. The last of his observations, many of which were correct to the nearest minute, was made just below the Wilberforce Falls on 29 August 1821. The amazing accuracy of Franklin's maps therefore reflects much credit on this young midshipman. Furthermore, as Madill (1949) has indicated, Hood was the first to carry out a careful magnetic survey in what is now Western Canada, measuring the dip as well as the magnetic declination.

Franklin gave Hood great credit for this ingenuity in scientific matters: "He also, by a skilful adaptation of a vernier to the graduated circle of a Kater's Compass, enabled himself to read off small deviations of the needle, and was the first who satisfactorily proved, by his observations at Cumberland-House, the important fact of the action of the Aurora upon the compass-needle. By his ingenious Electrometer invented at Fort Enterprise, he seems also to have proved the Aurora to be an electrical phenomenon, or at least that it induces a certain unusual state of electricity in the atmosphere." (Franklin 1823 p. 539)

However, it is in the area of natural history that Hood's contribution, through his paintings, is only now apparent. For this reason, this particular aspect of his work is worthy of special emphasis here. Indeed, one could argue that Hood's watercolours are as important as his journal. The two midshipmen, Robert Hood and George Back, no doubt chosen for the expedition because of their artistic ability, were the first artists to visit the present Canadian Northwest.

Scrutiny of Hood's original scenic paintings, still bright and colourful, does solve one problem that perplexed the present writer for years. The eight Hood paintings previously reproduced in Franklin's journal had portrayed the members of the expedition in unrealistically tidy uniforms. Was this fact merely an example of artistic licence, with Hood depicting fellow officers and men as they have been under more ideal circumstances? The answer is an emphatic "No." Comparison of the reproductions with the originals demonstrates that Hood's paintings were true to life. It was Edward Finden, the London engraver, who took it upon himself not only to change such items as the clothing worn, but also to rearrange the composition of several of Hood's paintings prior to their publication.

The previously unpublished paintings by Hood of birds and mammals are of some scientific importance. It must be appreciated that the natural history of the remote fur countries was, as a result of Richardson's observations as naturalist on the first two Franklin expeditions, more completely catalogued than that of any other area of the North American continent at that time, with the possible exception of the Carolinas. A remarkable series of volumes were published (Richardson and Swainson 1829-37; Hooker 1840) as a result of which Carlton House and Cumberland House on the Saskatchewan have become the "type localities" for many newly-discovered species and subspecies of fauna and flora. By painting some important specimens that were later lost, Hood has added further to this store of knowledge. At the time that he painted them, no less than five of the birds and one type of fish were unknown to the scientific world.

The black-billed magpie was the only one of the five newly-discovered birds painted by Hood which was to achieve "type specimen" status. This individual was one of two caught in traps at Cumberland House on 10 November 1819. Joseph Sabine, who compiled a zoological appendix to the journal of the 1819-22 expedition (Franklin 1823 pp. 647-703) describing the quadrupeds and birds, recognized differences from the magpie of Europe and named it *Corvus hudsonius,* the Hudson Bay magpie. It is now *Pica pica hudsonia* (Sabine) and the type locality is Cumberland House.

The black-backed three-toed woodpecker specimen may not have reached London, for it was not described by Sabine, and remained without scientific recognition. Thomas Drummond, Richardson's assistant naturalist, collected another specimen during the second Franklin expedition of 1825-27, in the Rocky Mountains; by default this became the type specimen, with the Athabasca headwaters as the type locality.

The yellow-headed blackbird specimen, as Richardson later complained, was "irrecoverably lost after . . . arrival in London". It had been collected at Cumberland House in the same month that Thomas Say, who was a member of the expedition led by Major Stephen Long to survey the Louisiana Purchase, collected a specimen near present-day Fullerton, Nebraska. The Nebraska specimen was described in 1825-26 by Charles Lucien Bonaparte, the nephew of the Emperor Napoleon, and Nebraska became the type locality.

Hood's painting of the evening grosbeak represents the first authentic record of this species anywhere. Hood's painting antedated the specimen shot on 7 April 1823 by an Indian boy with his bow and arrow at Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan,

purchased by William Cooper and published in 1825.

Richardson was unable to collect another specimen on the second Franklin expedition, but a grosbeak skin specially collected for him in 1829 by J. P. Pruden at Carlton House reached London just in time to be painted by William Swainson and included in the second part of the *Fauna Boreali-Americana* which appeared in 1831-32. (Richardson and Swainson 1829-37)

Hood painted two species under the name of "snowbird", the snow bunting and the hoary redpoll. However, it was 1843 before C. Holboell, the Danish naturalist, recognized the much whiter specimens of redpoll from Greenland as a separate species.

Finally, the round whitefish was a new species when painted by Hood at Fort Enterprize, north of Great Slave Lake, in the spring of 1821. Presumably it was this specimen that was described at length by Richardson in an appendix dealing with fish collected during the first expedition of Franklin (1823 pp. 705-28). Another specimen was taken at Great Bear Lake during the second Franklin expedition and illustrated by Waterhouse Hawkins in the third part of the *Fauna Boreali-Americana* which appeared in 1836 (Richardson and Swainson 1829-37).

After the lapse of 154 years, the following paintings of birds and mammals from Cumberland House (53° 58′ N., 102° 16′ W.) have been published along with Hood's journal. (Houston 1974).

BIRDS

Red-necked grebe, *Podiceps grisegena*
Mallard, *Anas platyrhynchos*
Pintail, *Anas acuta*
Blue-winged teal, *Anas discors*
Shoveler, *Spatula clypeata*
Wood duck, *Aix sponsa*
Canvasback, *Aythya valisineria*
Lesser scaup, *Aythya affinis*
Bufflehead, *Bucephala albeola*
Ruddy duck, *Oxyura jamaicensis*
Red-breasted merganser, *Mergus serrator*
Willow ptarmigan, *Lagopus lagopus*
Sharp-tailed grouse, *Pedioecetes phasianellus*
*Black-backed three-toed woodpecker, *Picoides arcticus*
*Black-billed magpie, *Pica pica hudsonia*
Black-capped chickadee, *Parus atricapillus*
American robin, *Turdus migratorius*
*Yellow-headed blackbird, *Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*
*Evening grosbeak, *Hesperiphona vespertina*
Pine grosbeak, *Pinicola enucleator*
*Hoary redpoll, *Acanthis hornemanni*
White-winged crossbill, *Loxia leucoptera*
Snow bunting, *Plectrophenax nivalis*

*Denotes species not previously described.

MAMMALS

Fisher, *Martes pennanti*
Ermine, *Mustela erminea richardsonii* (see cover picture)
Wolverene, *Gulo luscus*
Otter, *Lutra canadensis*
Lynx, *Lynx canadensis*
Snowshoe hare, *Lepus americanus*
Moose, *Alces alces*
Bison, *Bison bison*

The following bird, mammal and fish paintings from Fort Enterprise (64° 27′ N., 113° 07′ W.) in 1820-21, have also been published.

BIRDS

†Arctic loon, *Gavia arctica*
Canada goose, *Branta canadensis*
Snow goose, *Chen caerulescens*
Oldsquaw, *Clangula hyemalis*
Common scoter, *Oidemia nigra*
Eskimo curlew, *Numenius borealis*

†As published with Hood's journal (Houston 1974 p. 186) incorrectly listed as a common loon *(Gavia immer)*.

MAMMAL

Wolf, *Canis lupus*

FISH

Round whitefish, *Prosopium cylindraceum quadrilaterale*
Lake trout, *Salvelinus namaycush*
Lake Whitefish, *Coregonus clupeaformis*

In these, his first serious attempts at bird and animal portraiture, Hood displayed remarkable artistic promise. In the days prior to Audubon and Gould, most bird artists copied "the distortions of the 'bird-stuffer' . . . quite unable to vivify the preserved specimens contained in Museums" (Newton 1896). Richardson remarked that Hood's "genius, had his life been spared, would have raised him to a conspicuous station in his profession, and rendered him an ornament to any science to which he might have chosen to direct his attention." (Franklin 1823 p. 733).

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