



Exhibition

They died as they walked



Inuit made model of European ship © Canadian Museum of History

Death in the Ice: the Shocking Story of Franklin's Final Expedition
National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London, UK, until Jan 7, 2018
www.rmg.co.uk/franklin

Edwin Landseer's *Man Proposes, God Disposes*, first shown in 1864, now hangs in the Picture Gallery at Royal Holloway, University of London. Against a sublime and stormy Arctic landscape two monstrous polar bears root through the wreckage of an expedition, one of them devouring a human ribcage. Student folklore claims the picture has driven viewers mad, and when exams are held in the Picture Gallery it is covered with a Union Jack.

Landseer's subject—the disappearance of the 1845 Arctic expedition led by Sir John Franklin—haunted the imagination of mid-Victorian Britain. How could two well equipped Royal Navy ships and their 129 crew, led by a veteran of Arctic exploration, simply vanish? If "Eskimos" could thrive in the ice and tundra, why did technologically advanced Europeans succumb? Were there limits to the power of the British Empire and the reach of British science? Was the Northwest Passage, a possible Arctic sea route connecting the Atlantic and the Pacific, no more than a cartographers' fable? Using objects from British, Canadian, and Inuit collections, *Death in the Ice: the Shocking Story of Franklin's Final Expedition*

tells three intertwined stories: the origins of the Franklin expedition and the expectations it faced; the efforts of Franklin's contemporaries to find him and his crew; and subsequent investigations into their fate.

"Death in the Ice offers an intriguing overview of insights from four decades of forensic work on human remains associated with the Franklin expedition."

Death in the Ice is a story, for the most part, of silences and absences, expressed beautifully in a striking expressionist design. The first room is stark, dark, and blocky: vast black boards, thinly scattered with text, represent the handful of objects recovered from the desolate shores of King William Island and the Adelaide Peninsula, and giant screens show the harshness of life in these regions today. Cases and panels highlight the often-violent history of European encounters with Inuit, and the importance of Inuit testimony and tradition—a source usually overlooked or mistrusted by early rescue missions,

but now recognised as an insightful account of the Franklin expedition and its disintegration.

In the next room sash windows and warm purple walls evoke the candlelit comfort of an Admiralty boardroom, and the narrative shifts from the desolate end of the expedition to its origins in early Victorian imperialism. By the early 1840s two points were abundantly clear to British statesmen and admirals. Only 900 miles of the Northwest Passage remained unmapped, and one more expedition might claim this quest of centuries for Britain. But even if the Passage were completed, it was hardly a practical prospect for navigation: all previous voyages had become ice-bound, and the brief and unreliable summer thaw would not allow a complete transit in a single year. The roots of the Franklin expedition lay in a potent combination of strategy and politics, symbolism and science.

Completing the Passage would assert British supremacy over American and Russian traders in the Arctic. It would fill in a blank space on British maps, illustrated literally on a globe from the period, and extend British dominion in a harsh and unforgiving territory. It would improve British knowledge of variations in the Earth's magnetic field, and hence strengthen British naval power. But cultural artifacts from the period also express the emotional appeal of the icy wilderness. Dinner sets and magic lantern slides showed British sailors traversing magnificent (and usually fictional) Arctic landscapes, and the immensely popular literary genre of Arctic exploration narratives gave Victorian boys a sense of what Victorian men were expected to endure. If the Franklin expedition succeeded, it would be a triumph of naval and scientific capability, but also a mark of British character and determination.



© National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London

HMS Erebus in the Ice, 1846

Franklin's reputation soared and dipped after his disappearance, and *Death in the Ice* offers a more nuanced portrait of its central character. Behind the stuffy, stupid High Victorian of early histories was a veteran of Trafalgar, who commanded a ship on the 1818 Northwest Passage voyage and returned to lead an overland expedition the following year. His privations on this 5500-mile journey gave him a heroic reputation as "the man who ate his boots", but this turned sour when he was later dismissed as lieutenant-governor of Tasmania. By 1845 Franklin was ailing, overweight, and almost 60 years old, returning to the Arctic in the hope that one last successful mission might restore his honour.

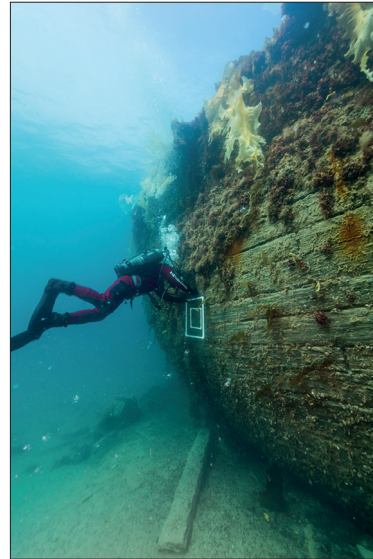
Any official doubts over his suitability were put aside, and Franklin was given command of the largest and best-equipped Arctic expedition of the century. Two sturdy and specially reinforced "bomb vessels"—HMS *Terror* and HMS *Erebus*—had been fitted with heating furnaces and flues, and with modified railway locomotives in their holds they could steam through ice fields. In 2014 and 2016 the wrecks of *Erebus* and then *Terror* were located in remarkable condition beneath the ice off King William Island, and the last room of the exhibition wonders what objects—or even written records—might survive in the clear, chilly water. Franklin and his crew were widely expected to complete the Passage, and in the absence of evidence to the contrary this achievement was attributed to them in the years after their disappearance. In words carved into the base of the Franklin Memorial in London, "they forged the last link with their lives".

That this view prevailed, at least initially, was down to Franklin's redoubtable second wife, Lady Jane Franklin. Jane emerges as the heroine of *Death in the Ice*: having expected her husband to return after 2 or 3 years at sea, covered in glory, she became an endlessly energetic campaigner for

his rescue. From 1848 the Royal Navy, the Hudson's Bay Company, and Jane's supporters mounted "the largest and most costly rescue mission in history". Over the next four decades 36 separate expeditions pursued Franklin—and a £20 000 Admiralty reward—in all kinds of ways. Some released balloons carrying instructions to Franklin printed on red silk; others trapped Arctic foxes and fitted them with collars bearing messages; a few became trapped in the ice and themselves required rescue.

After 8 years the Admiralty declared the Franklin expedition dead, and removed the crew from the Navy List. Jane refused to regard her husband as lost, and in 1857 she funded her own expedition under the Irish explorer Leopold McClintock. This expedition found evidence of the scale of the disaster: two documents, a handful of objects, three graves, and multitudinous bones scattered along some 200 miles of Arctic coastline. An earlier explorer, Dr John Rae, had gathered evidence and Inuit testimony that this death march had ended in cannibalism—a conclusion which horrified Charles Dickens, who wrote an essay arguing that the Inuit had murdered Franklin's men and then lied about it.

Why did this happen? What calamity overtook these sailors, many of them experienced Arctic travellers? *Death in the Ice* offers an intriguing overview of insights from four decades of forensic work on human remains associated with the Franklin expedition. In 1981 Owen Beattie, professor of anthropology at the University of Alberta, exhumed the bodies of three men who died in the winter of 1845–46 and were buried in the permafrost on Beechey Island. Photographs of these bodies, delicately preserved and gazing sightlessly out of their coffins, are some of the most striking in the exhibition. Soft tissue samples showed very high concentrations of lead, and Beattie concluded that inadequately canned food had poisoned the crew—a conclusion supported by analyses of



Underwater archaeologist collecting samples from HMS *Erebus*

disarticulated bones from other sites. More recent work has raised other possibilities—tuberculosis, botulism, scurvy—although the balance of probabilities suggests a gradual and multicausal decline into starvation and hypothermia. One Inuit woman who encountered the death march recalled that "they fell down and died as they walked".

Late-Victorian visitors to Greenwich were encouraged to treat objects from the Franklin expedition as relics of imperial martyrs, but contemporary visitors may be more impressed by the artifacts representing Inuit culture. Sleds, fur boots, and parkas bear witness to an entirely different but extremely effective approach to Arctic survival, one which a later generation of explorers would embrace. The looping polished edges of hand-sized wooden maps represent the sounds and inlets of the Arctic coastline in tactile form. Most evocative and most disquieting, though, is a model of a European ship, complete with masts and a proud captain in a bicorn hat—a vessel and a crew that might be dashed to pieces with the blow of a hand.

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