



THE MAN WHO ATE HIS BOOTS

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On September 9th 2014, Stephen Harper, the Prime Minister of Canada, announced at a hastily-convened press conference that one of Sir John Franklin's ships, missing since 1845, had been found in the Arctic. Ryan Harris, the man who made this discovery, had been rushed back to Ottawa on a redeye flight-for-one to be present for the occasion, as a large video monitor in the room showed the sonar image of the ship, to applause from the assembled ministers and ladies and gentlemen of the press. If anyone present had squinted just a bit, though, they might easily have imagined themselves tossed back in time to Victorian London, where in the early days of the search for Franklin, similar scenes were unveiled upon screens of a similar size – only these were screens of linen or paper, and the representation of Franklin's ships composed of daubs of paint rather than liquid-crystal-screened pixels. In the 1850's, there were dozens of showmen in Britain and America who were purveying these "moving panoramas" of the Franklin expedition, in which painted scenes of the lost explorers scrolled by upon an illuminated roll of cloth or paper, while a lecturer in a frock coat pointed out scenes of interest with a long stick.

The search for Franklin had lasted that long – from the age of moving panoramas and Daguerreotypes to that of side-scan 3D sonar imaging and high-resolution digital

cameras, from the time when current events were sketched by artists and transmitted to the world via woodcuts and engravings to one in which instantaneous digital video links delivered the world into people's living rooms at the speed of light. And, although it might be assumed that it was our superior technological prowess that made the discovery of Franklin's ship possible, this marvel was actually the result of more than a century and a half of repeated searches of a bleak landscape, examining fragmentary clues and collecting the oral testimony of generations of caribou-skin-clad Inuit hunters, who had preserved their memories of the final fate of the Franklin expedition long after it had been largely forgotten by the "civilized" world, and the sun had at last set upon the empire that launched it.

But perhaps you may ask: who was Franklin, that at such a distance of time, the government of Canada would consider it worthwhile to spend six years and millions of dollars to locate his ships? After all, "is Franklin the only man who is lost?" There is certainly no shortage of lost explorers, lost cities, and lost civilizations in searching for which, were similar resources to be expended, we might learn more about our shared human history. Franklin's personal character and career, though exemplary, were not so different from those of other men of his background and talents, and his quest – the search for a navigable "Northwest Passage" through the Arctic – is one which, though achieved at last by Roald Amundsen in 1904, was of little use then and may not be reliably navigable for years to come, even in our present age of global warming. So what was it that has made Franklin and his men the subject of song and story, of novels, plays, operas, and musicals, as well as the object of hundreds of searchers traveling with equal alacrity by dogsled and armchair, whose determination has not flagged but rather intensified as a new century – the second since his demise – has dawned?

To answer that question, we must ourselves search in two places: first in the nineteenth century, when ships of Britain and other nations were exploring the as-yet-uncharted regions of the terrestrial globe, and second in the twenty-first, when geopolitical and economic pressures are converging on the Arctic to an extraordinary, unprecedented degree. For, just as technology has evolved and grown, so has the human population and its needs, to such an extent that the polar regions in general, and the Northwest Passage in particular, have come to represent the future even more than the past. Franklin's voyage, although its route has not changed, has changed very greatly in its significance; like a long-abandoned mine whose rare earths and metals are suddenly vastly more precious, the route he never lived to fully chart now rings and resonates with the glint of gold. And yet, if we are to fully understand the present meaning of his passage, we must begin with the earlier one, as well as the ripples of rearward-looking nostalgia and romanticism with which, even more than ice, he and his ships have become quite heavily encrusted.

The story begins when Britain, flush from its victories over Napoleon, found itself a great naval nation with a superabundance of ships and men. As with other global powers, it had always conducted a course of exploration, though more often in the pursuit of commerce than pure exploratory curiosity. Indeed, its original connection with what's now the Canadian Arctic came via the Hudson's Bay Company, officially known as the Company of Adventurers of England Trading into Hudson's Bay; what was being *ventured*, in the sense of this name, was money, not men. It was not necessarily an insult

for Napoleon to call England a ‘nation of shopkeepers’ – for although, certainly, great English navigators such as Drake or Cook did much to explore and chart unknown regions, it was no diminishment of their voyages to note that commerce, and colonization, quickly followed. The long peace after the defeat of France meant demobilization for sailors, decommissioning of ships, and retirement of officers on half-pay, but it also freed up some portion of these excess resources to pursue exploration in parts of the world in which the commercial potential was less, or even none. The pendulum of risk, for these voyages, moved back from money to men, and the absence of any practical value actually ennobled their undertaking.

So it was that 1818 saw the launching of two naval expeditions, one to explore the long-neglected bay charted by William Baffin in 1616, and one to sail straight north to the pole. The first, though successful, was derided as a “pleasure cruise” – for, in disappointment of any expectations of peril and perseverance, the ships commanded by Sir John Ross experienced neither. The second, turned back after an encounter with masses of floating ice that nearly destroyed the two vessels, causing one – the HMS Trent – to toss back and forth so sharply that the ship’s bell rang out, failed in its goals but succeeded in its encounter with danger. The vessels eventually retreated to the Spitzbergen islands, where they underwent emergency repairs, and then limped back to Britain to nearly universal acclaim. And it was then that the young commander of the Trent, lieutenant John Franklin, first stepped into the public eye.

This was in the age before illustrated newspapers, and so the voyage was first commemorated not in print, but in paint. For, in addition to the scrolling imagery of “moving” panoramas, there was also another nineteenth-century documentary medium, the fixed or ‘great-circle’ panorama. Painted on enormous cylinders of canvas, then visited from within by the public, they displayed an uninterrupted 360-degree view of some other place on Earth; for the London panorama’s view of the Arctic explorers, this was to be a scene of the ships at anchor off Spitzbergen, in the company of polar fauna such as seagulls and walruses, with Franklin and his senior officer, John Buchan, in the foreground. Franklin agreed to the proprietor’s request to pose for his representation, realizing full well that it could be a first, albeit slight, step into fame. To his sister, he wrote declaring that he would avoid Leicester Square, where the painting was on view, lest some member of the public call him out with “There goes the fellow from the panorama!”

He needn’t have bothered. His service had been duly noted, and he was made the commander of the next Arctic expedition, one sent overland via trading posts in what are now the Northwest Territories, to seek and map the shores of the “Polar Sea.” For, in the course of polar exploration, the notion that open water of some kind might lie beyond an “ice barrier” had proven a persistent one, making its invitation irresistible for both science and commerce. It was on this expedition that Franklin inadvertently cemented his claim to fame, not with unsullied success, but by an encounter with a hostile landscape (and a hostile native) that affirmed the Arctic’s proper position of peril. He had, it was true managed to map some of the northern coast, but on his return trip he unwisely chose a seemingly more direct route back to his winter encampment, crossing over an unmapped area that turned out to contain difficult-to-ford rivers and a striking absence of game; it would ever after be known as the “Barren Lands.” Franklin lost several of his

guides, French-speaking voyageurs who had been hired to steer his canoes, and worse: another of his guides, a Mohawk named Michel Teroahauté, apparently resorted to cannibalism.

In the British view of the day, this was an act which it was believed that no proper Englishman, or devout Christian, would ever commit, and Michel's deed was blamed on his lack of proper religious instruction. And yet, as the mystery meat he brought was in fact consumed by two of Franklin's officers, the incident can't entirely be blamed on that. When Michel progressed from passive cannibalism – eating the remains of already-dead voyageurs – to apparent murder, killing midshipman Hood as he sat beside a fire – his fate was sealed. At the next opportunity, Franklin's surgeon-naturalist John Richardson shot Michel in the head. Richardson then rejoined Franklin at their winter quarters, where they subsisted on rotten deerskins, pounded bones, and the singed leather of their own shoes. They lived long enough to be rescued, and on Franklin's return he received the sobriquet that he would never lose, becoming the 'man who ate his boots.'

Franklin returned one more time to lead a land expedition in the Arctic; this one was an unqualified success, mapping hundreds of miles of coastline without losing a single soul. He wrote the expected book about his journeys, was knighted, and remarried (his first wife, the poet Eleanor Porden, having died while he was in the Arctic). His new wife, Jane – a world traveler in her own right – preferred politics to poetry, and quickly set about trying to find a new situation for her husband that would be proportionate to his achievements. The position of governor of a small Caribbean island was turned down, as insufficient to his merits, but before long a proper posting was on offer as Governor-General of Van Diemen's Land (the modern Australian island state of Tasmania). There was, as it happened, to be one slight difference with this position, which was that Van Diemen's land was at that time Britain's largest penal colony, to which all manner of petty criminals (including my own great-great-grandfather, William Brunt) were sent for their period of servitude.

It was here that both Sir John and Lady Franklin acquired fresh aspects of their reputations – his as a man too kind-hearted to punish prisoners, and too naïve to see the machinations being made against his governorship by other parties; and hers as an ambitious woman, prodding her now-pudgy husband to greater and greater achievements while she herself remained happily ensconced in the shadows. As it turned out, the shadows in Tasmania were rather shorter and fainter than they'd been back home, and after a bureaucratic insurrection by Franklin's former colonial secretary, they were sent packing. Thus, at just the moment when, with a young Victoria secure upon the throne, a renewed effort toward the long-elusive goal of finding a Northwest Passage was once more on the national agenda, a perfect convergence of the twain: Franklin was the only man for it. As Roderick Murchison, then President of the Royal Geographical Society, declared, "the name Franklin, alone is, indeed, a national guarantee."

A word needs to be said about exactly why the Passage was as important as it was. On one level, it was essentially a quest – a mission upon which 'knights-errant of the sea' (as Joseph Conrad later called them) could be dispatched, having the requisite difficulty and uncertainty to make the mission a long one. Mark Twain, indeed, in his *Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, explained the Holy Grail itself as but the "Northwest passage of that day." That it was difficult had long been established, and in

fact it was a matter of Parliamentary record that Sir John Ross, when asked whether the Passage, if achieved, had any potential value, had declared it “utterly useless.” A perverse – but very durable – formula of the day had it that the nobility of an undertaking was in inverse proportion to its usefulness, multiplied by the factor of its difficulty: there could be no better mission for a now-imperial power to dispatch men and ships.

The idea may seem absurd to us today, but we can look to our own more recent history, with the “space race” between the United States and the Soviet Union, for another example. The actual utility of putting a man upon the moon was known to be nil, and John F. Kennedy, when he proposed this mission, already anticipated that it would be extraordinarily costly (and, as it turned out, he badly underestimated its cost). The justification for the U.S. space program came in the form of science; after all, in addition to learning something about our “nearest neighbor in space,” one was meant to think of all the technical achievements, from Teflon to Tang, that the space program would require, and which would thence be made available to grateful civilians. But what the Moon mission had, above all, was an enormous element of risk, as the deaths of the Apollo 1 astronauts in 1967 proved. Another case in point might be Apollo 13, which – the moon now achieved – received little fanfare, and not even a live television feed from space, until it was suddenly put in peril by the explosion of one of its oxygen tanks, making it headline news again.

As with the US and Soviet astronauts, the men who sailed with Franklin were largely service veterans, and their vessels – rather like the US Space Shuttles – were reusable vehicles supplied with all the on-board necessities for the anticipated length of the mission, which was three years. Once the ships entered the Passage, they had no direct means to communicate with home; telegraph and wireless were decades in the future. Sir John Ross had tried homing pigeons, with some success, but none were sent with Franklin; instead, he had printed forms, with a space to fill out the expedition’s status, asking the finder to please return them to the nearest British consulate. At sea, these were meant to be dropped off inside an empty barrel, for flotation; on land, the usual method was to place them in a tin cylinder inside carefully-constructed stone cairn. These cairns were sometimes called the ‘post offices of the North,’ but unlike the penny post back home, the pickup and delivery times were quite hard to foresee – the only way for them to reach the outside world was for some other ship or party of explorers to stumble upon them. All this meant that, for the first two years, at least, no communication was expected; even in the third year, it was quite possible to imagine that any of a number of things might have delayed or prevented a message from being found.

It’s this silence – one that, in Franklin’s case, was to remain unbroken for fourteen years, well past the date at which survival was imaginable – that was the first harbinger of the haunted nature of his disappearance. Even in a world where news of “current” events could take weeks to reach the papers, three years was a very long time, long enough for the slow burn of apprehension to take hold, for the first rumors and conjectures to gestate, and bureaucratic indifference to turn to national alarm. Lady Franklin had hoped that a mission could be sent in 1848, but it was not until 1849 – four years after the expedition’s departure – that two ships, the “Enterprise” and “Investigator” under James Clark Ross, were sent. These, alas, found not a trace of Franklin, which deepened the mystery considerably; their search, too, was documented in

the Panorama in Leicester Square, striking a note not of accomplishment but absence. Hopes were still high, and humor still possible – such that in the pages of *Punch*, J.M. Thackeray had the chaperone of three hypothetical young children declare the Panorama’s view of the frozen ships more ‘chilling’ than Madame Tussaud’s Chamber of Horrors.

But then the horror came home, and by slow degrees. 1851 saw multiple searches by Britain and the US; the result was the discovery of Franklin’s first winter harbor on Beechey Island, whose chief feature was a row of three forlorn graves, marked with the names of seamen John Torrington and John Hartnell, and Royal Marine William Braine. An enormous cairn was found, but – incredibly – it contained no message at all, even though the searchers dismantled it and dug in every direction nearby. The only other feature of the place – the stack of empty food-tins that so struck Thoreau – seemed to testify at once of continued progress (after all, the men were well-fed, and energetic enough to construct this playful pile) and uncanny absence (here was the meal, but where were the men?). The answer to that question proved a further horror; in 1854, Hudson’s Bay surveyor Dr. John Rae returned with all manner of relics – chronometers, pencil-cases, silverware, and Sir John’s own medal of knighthood – and also with accounts, given to him by the Inuit, that in their final desperation Franklin’s men had turned to the “last resource” of cannibalism.

Lady Jane, as may well be imagined, did not take this lightly. She enlisted no less a light than Charles Dickens to take on Rae’s report, and Dickens obliged with a long tirade against the lying, savage “Esquimaux” in his own magazine, *Household Words*. She also tried – unsuccessfully – to prevent Rae from being given the £10,000 reward for ‘ascertaining the fate’ of her husband. She then turned her attention to persuading the government to launch another search, in part to attend to the unburied bodies of her husband and his men, in part to more fully determine what had become of them, and (she hoped) disprove Rae’s account. Unfortunately for her, British forces were by then engaged in the Crimean peninsula, and the Admiralty, on a war footing, had no resources to devote to such a cause, however noble. Having already expended much of her own resources, she turned to her Arctic friends – officers who had served on previous searches – and in 1857 was able to send Francis Leopold McClintock aboard the yacht the “Fox,” back to seek the source of those sad artifacts returned by Rae. The “Fox,” in turn, was caught in the ice pack in the Davis Straits and carried far from her destination, delaying her arrival in the search area until 1859.

And it was then that scattered bones, abandoned supplies, and the final, fatal, record, deposited in a cairn on the remote shores of King William Island, were recovered. The note offered its own miniature version of hubris before a fall, and desperation after: it had first been filled out in 1847, with a list of the expeditions achievements and the doubly-underlined phrase All Well. Yet around the margins of this same note, in a cramped hand, Franklin’s second and third in command – Francis Crozier and James Fitzjames – had added a grim codicil. In it, they numbered the dead (seventeen more since the three at Beechey, including nine officers) and noted, without further comment, that “Sir John Franklin died on the 11th of June 1847.” The “Erebus” and “Terror” had been abandoned in April of 1848 – a year before any search had even been sent – and the men were departing thence for Back’s Fish River, though why that route had been elected

was not said. Had they, as it was then assumed, tried to ascend this river to the Hudson's Bay Company post on the Great Slave Lake, it would have been an arduous journey of more than six hundred miles.

The note became instantly the most famous 'last words' document of its kind; it was reproduced in facsimile in the *Illustrated London News* and *Harper's Weekly*, and a fold-out version included with every copy of McClintock's book. From one point of view, at least, the Franklin "mystery" had at last been solved, as this note – along with the skeletons, some buried and some not, that McClintock and his men found along the coast of King William Island – told a simple, sad tale, one of abandonment, a long march overland, and eventual death. McClintock spoke, through his interpreter, with several groups of Inuit in the area; they told of men dragging whaleboats mounted on heavy sledges, men who looked weak and sickly. McClintock found one of these boats abandoned on the western shores of the island; in it were two skeletons along with an astonishing array of materials – silver forks and spoons, tea, chocolate, lead sheeting, carpet slippers, dozens of books (including Bibles, prayer books, and a copy of *The Vicar of Wakefield*) and much other such bric-a-brac, which McClintock regarded as "a mere accumulation of dead weight" that would have made hauling the oak-and-iron sledge even more exhausting.

It's this discovery that, for many at the time, seemed to mark the end of searching. As the *Times* of London put it,

So far it is satisfactory to know that the 'final search' has proved that SIR JOHN FRANKLIN is dead. Alas! There can be no longer those sad wailings from an imaginary Tintagel to persuade the credulous that ARTHUR still lives.

And yet, for others, the story seemed incomplete. Where were the ships? Where was the body of Sir John Franklin? Where were most of his men? – McClintock encountered only a handful of skeletons out of the hundred and nine said to have abandoned the ships. And, most of all, where were the other papers one would expect – ship's logs, officers' journals, magnetic observations, or any account of what transpired after the ships were left behind? The only other document recovered, perversely, was a pocket-book of letters, nearly all of them written backwards, which seemed to rant and rave of tropical climes and festive occasions – an odd thing to find in the coat-pocket of a skeleton found face-down in a frozen wilderness.

These questions might have simply faded away, had not one person kept asking them. Lady Jane Franklin, though dubbed "our English Penelope" by the *Daily Telegraph*, wanted nothing of weaving, or of widow's weeds. Though grateful to McClintock, she was deeply dissatisfied that he'd found no definitive evidence against Rae's stories (indeed, privately, he acknowledged that he too had heard tales of cannibalism). One single paper, however poignant, was not enough for Lady Jane, and she continued to dispatch searches, and to welcome those by others, in pursuit of more. The last of these, commanded by Sir Allen Young in 1874, was explicitly charged to search for papers of any kind, but the ice that year prevented him from reaching the vicinity of King William. On his return, he discovered that Lady Franklin had died while

he was away; to the Franklin cenotaph at Westminster Abbey were now added these few lines:

THIS MONUMENT WAS ERECTED BY JANE, HIS WIDOW, WHO, AFTER LONG WAITING, AND SENDING MANY IN SEARCH OF HIM, HERSELF DEPARTED, TO SEEK AND FIND HIM IN THE REALMS OF LIGHT, JULY 18, 1875, AGED 83 YEARS.

Yet even Lady Franklin's death did not put an end to searching. There was something about the manner of Franklin's disappearance that continued then, and continues now, to haunt the edges of our imagination; like the unfinished scale that Mozart's parents used to play on the pianoforte to get their son out of bed – young Wolfgang could not help but leap up and play the missing note – there is something not merely unresolved but profoundly disturbing about the tantalizing and incomplete nature of the scattered trail of relics that left behind by Franklin and his men. The hope that someone could, by more careful procedures, more persistent searching, or some fresh interpretation of the known evidence, provide a solution of some kind to this profound mystery offered one sort of lure – here was a quest even more elusive than the Grail of the passage itself! And at the same time, like a novel lacking its final chapter, the Franklin story offered up a fertile and nearly infinite palette of possibilities for writers whose imaginations bent northward. This urge has always been particularly strong for Canadians – for Canada is a young nation, one whose most heavily populated areas lie to the south of a vast and trackless North. It's a land held together by stories, whose mythic tales are bound up with strange and terrible deeds done in a great white vastness. As Margaret Atwood wryly put it, that jagged red shape on its flag isn't a maple leaf, "it's where someone got axed in the snow."

Atwood noted early on the significance of the Franklin story in Canadian culture; her 1991 Oxford lecture "Concerning Franklin and his Gallant Crew" traces its roots from the balladeering northern yarns of Robert W. Service through the poems of E.J. Pratt and Gwendolyn McEwen, the latter of whose verse drama "Terror and Erebus" was first broadcast on the CBC in 1965. And yet the main reason most Canadians would have heard of Franklin by the time of Atwood's lecture wasn't through poetry, but television: the 1988 broadcast of "Buried in Ice," a documentary about the exhumation of three of Franklin's men from their icy graves at Beechey Island. Here, it was not a new discovery – the location of these graves had been known since 1850 – but a new approach: could science solve the mystery of the demise of the expedition? The program offered the possibility that high levels of lead detected in the bodies could give one explanation, but that wasn't why this program caught the imagination of Canadian – and American – viewers. It was the uncanny effect of looking into the face of men – John Torrington, in particular, whose blue eyes seemed almost to look back at you – that brought this haunted story out of the deep freeze and deep into the unconscious minds of its viewers.

We'd seen the cans – we'd even seen the bones – but now, here were the *men*, the men who had been sleeping in our midst for all these years, beautiful in their stillness, dressed in their shore-going clothes, resting on their beds of wood-shavings, their wrists and toes tied together by their shipmates with strips of linen. It was as if time had skipped a beat, and our hearts skipped with it. Torrington, who'd actually been exhumed the year before Harrington and Braine, haunted us not only on our televisions, but from the pages

of *National Geographic* and even *People Magazine*. The American songwriter James Taylor was so struck by this image that he wrote a song, “The Frozen Man,” from Torrington’s point of view:

*My brothers and the others are lost at sea,
I alone am returned to tell thee.
Hidden in ice for a century
to walk the world again,
Lord have mercy on the frozen man.*

In Taylor’s version, the frozen man, thawed, returns to life, only to discover to his distress that his wife and child had both died of “extreme old age” years ago.

The facts of Torrington’s condition, alas, precluded the possibility of a return to life: as the autopsy report noted, most of his internal organs had disintegrated due to cell *autolysis* – a sort of self-cannibalism that takes place when enzymes in the cells digest their hosts; his brain had been reduced by this process to a “puddle of yellow, granular liquid.” His lungs, though much of their tissue was similarly degraded, showed signs of ‘pleural adhesions’ and abscesses that were likely the result of tuberculosis. But it was his hair and fingernails – those unglamorous witnesses – that may have told the most significant tale, one of heightened levels of lead, peaking a couple of weeks before his death. This matched with the theory, advanced by Dr. Owen Beattie, the anthropologist who supervised the exhumations, that lead poisoning may have damaged the mental faculties of Franklin and his men; Beattie hypothesized that the lead in Torrington’s body had come from that same notorious stack of tins – tins which, when examined, showed unusually large and sloppily-applied beads of lead solder down their interior surfaces.

Like the Victorians before us, we saw, and we believed. Television at the time was still a ‘hot’ medium, beamed into homes around the world, offering in its science programs an eye on every question from the origins of the species to the exploration of space. The limited number of broadcast channels ensured that, whatever their inclinations, audiences could choose from among only a few options, giving even public TV and the educational channels of the CBC and BBC an extraordinarily large share of the viewership, by the standards of twenty-first century cable and Internet providers. And yet, unlike the Victorians, we did not need to travel to lecture-halls or Lyceums, or wait for the wagon-train of Chautauqua lecturers to erect its tents on the edge of town. These images came to us, into our living-rooms and dens, arriving at our eyes almost before our rational faculties could defend against them. And so Torrington, Braine, and Hartnell became our shipmates.

The success of this broadcast was followed up by a book, *Frozen in Time*, written by Dr. Beattie along with John Geiger, who had accompanied him to the exhumations to document their progress. The book was an unqualified success, earning endorsements from figures such as Atwood and even a blurb from William S. Burroughs, whose famous line “when you cut into the past, the future leaks out” took on a new and uncomfortable meaning in this context. The book was even published in a version for children, with Torrington’s face on one corner of its cover – a book that I vividly recall so frightened my own children that they refused to come into a room if it was on the table. Across Canada and around the world, the mystery of the Franklin expedition received a new

transfusion of interest; a public that had, for a long time, forgotten it now remembered it with intense feeling. And with it, a strange and perhaps morbid curiosity: did the story these bodies told fully resolve the mystery?

Apparently not, for in 1991, with his book *Unravelling the Franklin Mystery: Inuit Testimony*, David C. Woodman broke open a whole new vein of inquiry. Woodman pointed out that the graves exhumed by Beattie were only the first three casualties out of 129. Where were the other bodies? What routes of escape had they tried, and why were so few human remains ever recovered? And, most significantly, where were Franklin's ships? Woodman believed that the Inuit accounts, many by eyewitnesses who had met with groups of Franklin's men before their deaths, held the answer. From Beechey Island, where the graves were found, attention shifted to King William Island, near the shores of which the final record indicated the ships had been abandoned. So it was here that the next phase of the search began, retracing the steps of nineteenth-century explorers who had passed this way before.

Between 1981 and 2008 – the year that the Parks Canada searches began – there were no fewer than two dozen organized Franklin searches, including visual searches, ground-penetrating radar, magnetometer surveys (it was hoped that the ships' ex-railway engines could be found this way), and sonar. A 1994 CBC documentary, "Searching for Franklin," documented two of these, one led by Woodman himself, interspersing footage of skulls and Franklin-era relics with interviews with an all-star parade of Canadian writers, including Margaret Atwood, Rudy Weibe, and the eminent historian Pierre Berton. It was this era, more than any other, when Franklin's connection with Canada was highlighted, and, via television, made palpable. And yet, nearly all of these searches relied on sponsorship deals and private funds, which limited the amount and kind of ground they could cover, and the resources at their command. The brief season of open water, and the vast area of any potential search, meant that any substantial search for the ships would involve a multi-year commitment.

It's here that a number of additional factors came into play, most notably the anxieties surrounding Arctic sovereignty. It may come as a surprise to many outside Canada that there might be any question as regards its claims to its northern territory, but in reality it's been a source of national anxiety for some time. In geopolitical terms, Canada is a young country, first established as a Dominion only in 1867, twenty-two years *after* Franklin sailed. Its northern territories were added later, beginning with the surrender of private claims to the subarctic region by the Hudson's Bay Company in 1870, followed by the cession of the High Arctic— here defined as the islands north of the Barrow Strait, extending to the pole – in 1895. The British had actually tried on several earlier occasions to transfer responsibility for this territory, but the Canadian government had repeatedly balked at the offer. They were, understandably, concerned about the cost of administering such a vast and empty tract of land, land which – at least at the time – seemed of uncertain value.

Once the legal transfer was complete, these northernmost lands became known as the District of Franklin, a name that served both as a memorial and a reminder of the line of succession from Britain to Canada. Then, as the chill of the 'Cold War' descended in the 1950's, this northern land gained sudden strategic importance, even as it became the locus of a quite different sort of anxiety about foreign incursions. This came in the

building of the Distant Early Warning or DEW line in the mid-50's – a defensive series of radar stations erected at the insistence of the United States to allow the early detection of Soviet ICBM's – which made it instantly clear to Canada that, if it did nothing to establish its national presence in the north, American military activity, and potentially commercial activity as well – might render its sovereignty merely symbolic. The increasing exploitation of the region's immense resources of fossil fuels, metals, and minerals made a succession of Canadian governments still more keenly aware of the region's potential value. And yet, the underlying problem persisted: a claim of sovereignty required some securing of borders, some population of the land or use of its resources, some sense of presence over an area more than twice the size of Alaska.

And so it was that Canada, throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, made a number of moves to try to secure and enhance their claim to the north. Airbases and airports were built, permanent settlements planned, and the nation's fleet of icebreakers and RCMP vessels expanded, taking the place of the Hudson's Bay ships that had formerly comprised the north's main supply line. In 1958, the establishment of Polar Continental Shelf lengthened the reach of northern research with air transport and supplies. The Canadian Rangers, self-supporting hunters who were equipped at government expense to patrol Canada's remotest borders, were increasingly deployed into the High Arctic, flying the flag over the furthest, uninhabited reaches of the frozen zone. For, while other countries could maintain their sovereignty claims by settling the land, Canada faced the unique difficulty that much of its northernmost lands were scarcely habitable.

But quite beyond these issues, there was another line that cut across the Canadian landmass in an even more problematic way than the DEW line – the Northwest Passage itself. In the modern era, of course, we know that there's more than one route through these waters – they're officially known as the 'Northwestern Passages' – but it's that same fact that poses perhaps the biggest problem for Canadian sovereignty. Since the passage is a natural one, and the only way to travel from one large body of international waters (the Atlantic) to another (the Pacific), it's officially designated an 'international strait' by the terms of current sea-law. Canada has long taken a different view, declaring the passages to be 'Canadian Internal Waters,' which would require any ships passing through them to obtain permission from the Canadian government. In practice, cargo ships are still quite rare, and those that have made the voyage have gone through the motions of asking permission, though insisting that this was voluntary on their part.

Enter Stephen Harper. His Conservative Party victory in 2006 marked a new era for the sort of muscular nationalism that had been a rarity in previous Liberal governments; as part of this push, the Harper government very loudly asserted its claims to the Northwestern Passages. At one point, a deep-water port at each end of the passages was proposed, along with a new fleet of more heavily-armed military grade icebreakers. Fiscal realities have since put both those plans on hold, although the government has done what it could – including staging annual military exercises in the Arctic – to strengthen its claims. And, at some point, it must have occurred to Harper that, with a far more modest expenditure, he could assert Canada's claim to Arctic waters by way of highlighting the Franklin expedition's voyage, and giving Canada a national role in recovering its ships.

Back in 1997, a quietly-negotiated ‘memorandum of agreement’ had been made with the UK. If the Canadian government were to pay for the ships’ recovery, they would want the British to surrender their claims to the wrecks, and this was what the memorandum accomplished. In it, the British government assigned ‘custody and control’ of the ships to Canada, effectively granting them exclusive salvage rights to both “Erebus” and “Terror,” if found. The only provisos to this grant were that the UK government reserved its claim to any gold recovered from the wrecks, and obtained a promise that any artifacts found to be “of outstanding significance to the Royal Navy” would be made available for loan and display in an appropriate British museum. Then, in 2006, Canada declared the site of both wrecks to be national historic sites, which further put into place protocols and protections similar to those granted to national parks. The irony of this designation was that neither ship had yet been found, making them the first two national monuments so designated by any country to have no known location.

Stephen Harper then took a very personal role in supporting and organizing searches for Franklin’s ships. Under (at first) Robert Grenier, and later Marc-André Bernier and Ryan Harris, a Parks Canada team was dispatched nearly every summer, given the support of the icebreaker CCGS Sir Wilfred Laurier, along with two skiffs, side-scan sonar rigs, and other basic supplies. Over the next few years, this commitment continued, despite cost-cutting measures by this same government, which resulted in layoffs and unfilled positions in a wide variety of cultural institutions ranging from Library and Archives Canada to Parks Canada itself. The Franklin team, however, was protected from such cuts, although in one year (2009) no search was mounted. Since then, each year’s search has received increased support; in 2010, a team was dispatched to Mercy Bay, where the Franklin search ship HMS “Investigator” had been abandoned. Not surprisingly, it was still there, but the visual impact of images of the ship was nevertheless considerable. The Harper government did everything possible to publicize this rediscovery, even flying its Environment Minister to the site for a live press conference. A book, along with a (rather hastily-produced) television documentary further touted the “Investigator” find.

By now, the search for Franklin had become – if it wasn’t already – a deep personal obsession of Stephen Harper’s. Outside his office in Ottawa, he installed a glass case filled with Franklin relics, and from 2010 onward he became still more personally and publicly involved with each search. One may well ask, as did many members of the Canadian public, whether this obsession had grown disproportionate to any actual national interest – after all, did *not* having found one of Franklin’s ships pose any ‘clear and present danger’ to Canada? Under some pressure to reduce the government’s direct financial involvement, and thus defuse the arguments of those who decried the Franklin search as a waste of public monies, Harper turned to a variety of allies: to John Geiger, now the CEO of the Canadian Geographic Society, to research foundations, and – most significantly – to private corporate partners. Thus the 2014 search, the largest of its kind to date, was supported by several such groups, among them Shell Canada and the adventure cruise line One Ocean, the latter of which provided a floating platform for journalists and others who craved a first-hand glimpse of any discovery.

But here we need to take a step back: where and how was the search for these ships being conducted? The 2014 expedition, like its forebears, relied primarily on side-

scan sonar towed by smaller ships and boats. As with the finding of any sunken vessel, a search area had to be defined; side-scan sonar demands a slow process of back-and-forth, dubbed ‘mowing the lawn’ by Titanic discoverer Robert Ballard, and without some limits it would have been a matter of decades rather than years to search every possible waterway. Here, it was David Woodman’s work that laid the foundation, by compiling, and placing faith in, Inuit oral histories as to the site where one of the ships, at least, had sunk, a place the Inuit called *Utjulik*. Woodman himself had begun the process, using both sonar and magnetometer searches; since the Inuit told that the ship had sunk in water shallow enough that its masts still showed, he could also eliminate areas where the water was too deep, or too shallow, for that to have happened. When Ryan Harris joined the Parks Canada search, he consulted regularly with Woodman, and the area searched was closely based on Woodman’s previous surveys; without his work, none of what was achieved in 2014 would have been possible.

But at the same time we need to remember that the ships hold only part of the Franklin story. It’s a compelling part – one can only wonder what artifacts, perhaps even personal papers or records that could tell us something of what happened after the 1848 abandonment, might be retrieved – but only part. The darker side of the Franklin expedition, including the stories of cannibalism, of small groups of survivors each setting out in its own direction, of hospital camps, of overturned boats, graves and caches of records on land – is still largely unknown. Here too, the way has been led in recent decades by amateur searchers, of which Woodman is just one; in these chapters, the story of many of the others who came before and after, will be told. And today, even the ‘armchair’ explorers have new technological tools – better publicly-accessible satellite imagery, the ability to search millions of books and manuscripts online, and the power of crowds to decipher difficult documents or collate ones separated by time and distance. There’s every possibility, indeed, that the next vital discovery relating to the fate of Franklin’s men will be made by a lone searcher equipped only with a laptop, in the comfort of his or her own study at home.

And what, then will the finding of Franklin’s ship, HMS “Erebus” mean? What if we find the “Terror” as well? And what if, against all odds, someone were to locate Franklin’s tomb, or unearth a hitherto-unknown cache of records documenting what happened after the ships were left behind? Even then, there’d doubtless be plenty of unanswered questions, but that’s not the real reason we’d still care. No, nor just the strange, vaguely guilty knowledge that these men, for whom so many searched for so long, in the end died desperately, unaware of the effort expended to reach and relieve them. Their bones, though they may be recruited to serve some nation’s purpose, or studied to disclose their sufferings, their struggles, or even their names, must someday be put back to rest. In the end, Thoreau was right: it’s ourselves, not Franklin, that we’re really searching for, and those latitudes know no pole.