



1846. The Officers and Crews, consisting of 105 souls, under the command of Captain F.R.M. Crozier landed here—in Lat. 69° 37' 42" Long. 98° 41'. This paper was found by Lt. Irving under the cairn supposed to have been built by Sir James Ross in 1831, 4 miles to the Northward, where it had been deposited by the late Commander Gore in June 1847. Sir James Ross' pillar has not however been found, and the paper has been transferred to this position which is that in which Sir J Ross' pillar was erected—Sir John Franklin died on 11th of June 1847 and the total loss by deaths in the Expedition has been to this date 9 Officers and 15 Men.

James Fitzjames, Captain HMS Erebus. F.R.M. Crozier Captain and Senior Offr. and start on tomorrow 26th for Backs Fish River.

"So sad a tale was never told in fewer words," M'Clintock commented after examining the note. Indeed, everything had changed in the 11 months between the two messages. Beset by pack-ice since September 1846, Franklin's two ships ought to have been freed during the brief summer of 1847, allowing them to continue their push to the western exit of the passage at Bering Strait. Instead, they remained frozen fast and had been forced to spend a second winter off King William Island. For the Franklin expedition, this was the death warrant. There had already been an astonishing mortality rate, especially among officers. Deserting their ships on April 22, 1848, the 105 surviving officers and men set up camp on the northwest coast of King William Island, preparing for a trek south to the mouth of the Back River, then an arduous ascent to a distant Hudson's Bay Company post, Fort Resolution, which lay some 1,250 miles (2,210 km) away. M'Clintock described the scene where the note had been discovered:

Around the cairn a vast quantity of clothing and stores of all sorts lay strewn about, as if at this spot every article was thrown away which could possibly be dispensed with—such as pick-axes, shovels, boats, cooking stoves, ironwork, rope, blocks, canvas, instruments, oars and medicine-chest.

Why some of these items had been carried even as far as Victory Point is another of the questions that cannot be answered, but M'Clintock was sure of one thing: "Our doomed and scurvy-stricken countrymen calmly prepared themselves to struggle manfully for life." The magnitude of the endeavour facing the crews must have been overwhelming, and the knowledge of its futility spiritually crushing.

It also ran contrary to the best guesses of other leading Arctic explorers. George Back, who had explored the river named for him in 1834, was certain Franklin's men would not have attempted an escape over the mainland: "I can say from experience that no toilworn and exhausted party could have the least chance of existence by going there." John Rae thought that "Sir John Franklin would have followed the route taken by Sir John Ross in escaping from Regent Inlet."

To this day, the route of the expedition retreat confounds some historians, who, like Rae, believe a much more logical and attainable goal would have been to march north and east to Somerset Island and Fury Beach—the route by which John Ross had made good an escape from an ice-bound ship in 1833. Fury Beach was not much further for the crews of the Erebus and the Terror than it had been for John Ross's crew of the abandoned Victory. It was also the most obvious place for a relief expedition to be sent, and James Clark Ross did indeed reach the area with two ships, five months after the Erebus and Terror were deserted.

Instead, after quitting their camp on April 26, the crews moved south along the coastline of King William Island, man-hauling heavily laden lifeboats that had been removed from the ships and mounted on large sledges. Plagued by their rapidly deteriorating health, the crews were then overcome by the physical demands of the task. M'Clintock found what

appeared to have been a field hospital established by Franklin's retreating crews only 130 km into their trek. He suspected scurvy. Speculation also focused on the tinned food supply. Inuit later told of some of their people eating the contents

of the tins "and it had made them very ill: indeed some had actually died." As for Franklin's men, many died along the west and south coasts of King William Island.

Later, Hobson found a vivid indication of the tragedy when he located a lifeboat from the Franklin expedition containing skeletons and relics. Men from Franklin's crews had at last been found, but the help had come a decade too late. ♣

IT WAS A MELANCHOLY TRUTH THE OLD WOMAN SPOKE WHEN SHE SAID, 'THEY FELL DOWN AND DIED AS THEY WALKED'



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the only written record of the Franklin expedition—chronicling some of the events after the desertion of the ships and consisting of two brief notes scrawled on a single piece of naval record paper—was found in a cairn near Victory Point. The first, signed by lieutenant Graham Gore, outlined the progress of the expedition to May 1847:

28 of May 1847. HM Ships Erebus and Terror... Wintered in the Ice in Lat. 70° 05' N. Long. 98° 23' W. Having wintered in 1846-7 at Beechey Island in Lat. 74° 43' 28" Long. 90° 39' 15" W after having ascended Wellington Channel to Lat. 77°—and returned by the west side of Cornwallis Island. Sir John Franklin commanding the Expedition. All well. Party consisting of 2 officers and 6 Men left the Ships on Monday 24th. May 1847. Gm. Gore, Lieut. Chas. F. Des Voeux, mate.

The document is notable for an inexplicable error in a date—the expedition had wintered at Beechey Island in 1845-46, not 1846-47—and its unequivocal proclamation: "All well." Originally deposited in a metal canister under a stone cairn, the note was retrieved 11 months later and additional text then scribbled around its margins. It was this note that in its simplicity told of the disastrous conclusion to 129 lives:

(25th April) 1848—HM's Ships Terror and Erebus were deserted on the 22nd April, 5 leagues NNW of this, having been beset since 12th Sept.