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False leads in the Franklin search

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ABSTRACT. The strenuous and costly measures undertaken by the British Admiralty and others to find the missing expedition of Sir John Franklin during the period 1847–59 were hindered by malicious deceptions, misleading rumours, corrupted translations, unfortunate misunderstandings, and premature conclusions. The false leads included fake messages from Franklin, invented reports of his safety or death in various places, clairvoyant statements that placed him in several widely separated locations, discoveries of objects supposedly associated with his expedition, and distorted reports from Indians and Eskimos. The Admiralty had to investigate all leads, and this took time away from the planning and execution of more important measures.

Contents

Introduction

In late 1847 the British Admiralty considered what action it could take to find and, if necessary, to assist or rescue Sir John Franklin and the men of HMS *Erebus* and *Terror*. The challenge of designing and implementing an effective searching strategy was an extraordinarily difficult one because the region into which Franklin had been sent in 1845 was remote and largely unknown to Europeans, its climate was severe, and its cover of sea ice was both extensive and variable, limiting ship navigation to a period of three or four months a year in the most favourable places, and preventing it entirely in some other areas. To depart from Britain and arrive at Lancaster Sound — the only feasible entrance to the Northwest Passage — could take from two to four months or more, depending on the state of the pack ice in Baffin Bay. To reach Alaska, the western end of the Passage, where Franklin was expected to arrive, required a voyage of more than half a year by way of Cape Horn. To put an overland party in the region of Great Slave Lake to descend the Mackenzie, Coppermine, or Back rivers to the mainland coast, it was necessary to begin preparations at least a year ahead. As news of the progress of search expeditions took almost as long to get back to Britain (mail from the Pacific could take a short-cut across the isthmus of Panama), the Admiralty in London had to work in an information vacuum, contemplating additional measures during this dead time without knowing what the expeditions in the field had already accomplished, whether further efforts would in fact be necessary, and, if so, what measures would be most appropriate.

As if these were not sufficient obstacles to effective planning of search operations, there was another serious problem, one that has received little attention in the literature, namely assessing the reliability of incoming information. In addition to official dispatches from government expeditions, the Admiralty received first-hand reports from privately sponsored ones, and unsolicited information from a wide variety of other sources, including government officials abroad, Hudson's Bay Company posts, whaling ships, and individuals.

The overall planning for the Franklin search, including the consideration of new information and the implementation of appropriate measures, was the responsibility of the Board of Admiralty, which consisted of six Lords Commissioners and two Secretaries. During almost all of the search period, four of the Commissioners were naval officers ('naval lords'), and two were civilian members of Parliament ('civil lords'). The First Lord, who acted as chairman and final arbiter in all matters, was a member of Cabinet. The Board's correspondence and related paperwork was handled by the First Secretary (a political appointment subject to changes in government) and the Second Secretary (a non-political appointment), both of whom also participated freely in discussions. Captain W.A.B. Hamilton, who served as Second Secretary from 1845 to 1855 (Sainty 1975), was probably the most influential person on the Board in respect to Arctic matters. In this paper, the term 'Admiralty' may be taken to mean its decision-making committee, the Admiralty Board.

At the Admiralty the task of separating fact from fiction was especially difficult when the sources of information were far from London, when the reported events had occurred a long time before, when the information was second- or third-hand, and when the informants were native inhabitants of the northern regions or unknown individuals elsewhere. Like planners of a military campaign, the Admiralty had to bear in mind that authentic intelligence could be corrupted in transmission from one person to another, that communication with native people of a different language was likely to be imperfect, and that false information could be

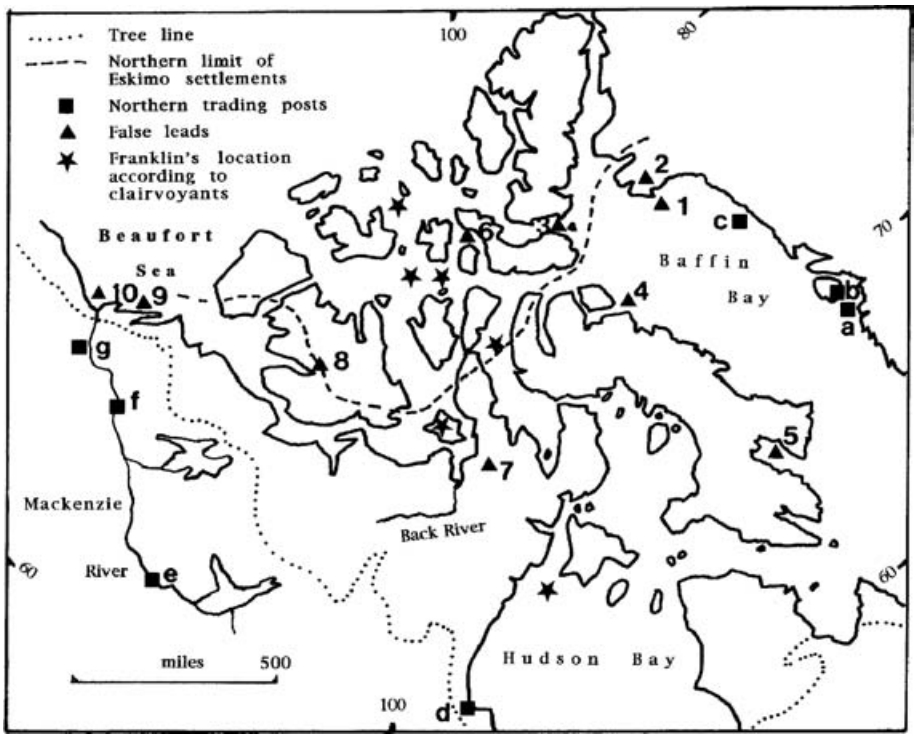

Fig. 1. Northern regions of Canada and Greenland, showing the tree line separating Arctic (Eskimo) and sub-Arctic (Indian) regions, and the approximate northern limit of Eskimo settlements in mid-nineteenth century. Northern trading posts are: (a) Whale Fish Islands (Kronprinsen Ejland); (b) Godhavn (Qeqertarsuaq); (c) Upernavik; (d) Fort Churchill; (e) Fort Simpson; (f) Fort Good Hope; (g) Fort McPherson. The locations of some false leads are: (1) Beck's story; (2) alleged site of massacre; (3) Jones Sound cairn; (4) Inuit report to *Chieftain*; (5) Cumberland Sound rumours; (6) Penny's wood; (7) Franklin's position (broadsheet); (8) Franklin's position (Gloucester balloon); (9) Warren Point story; (10) Franklin's cannons heard. Also shown are Franklin's locations according to clairvoyants (stars).

intentionally disseminated or 'planted' by mischievous persons. All of these things occurred in the Franklin search (1847–59).

Some of the false leads discussed in this paper, notably the native reports, originated in the North American Arctic (Figs 1, 2). Others, particularly the deliberate hoaxes, occurred in Europe and the United States.

Hoaxes

Drift bottle messages

One of the customary ways of reporting on the progress of a maritime expedition was by drift bottle. Dated messages giving a ship's position and significant news were periodically cast adrift in sealed bottles or metal cylinders (sometimes enclosed within casks and marked with a pole), in the hope that someone would find them and send them to the Admiralty in London. This was based on the recognition that surface waters of the world's oceans were not stationary but tended to move according to discernible patterns. The Gulf Stream had been identified and roughly charted in the eighteenth century, and, although the distribution of currents in more northerly waters was known with much less exactitude, several messages cast adrift by explorers in Baffin Bay had been picked up in Europe, suggesting that they had been carried southward along the coast of Labrador to the Gulf Stream, and then across the Atlantic.

When Franklin set out in 1845, his instructions from the Admiralty read, in part: 'we desire that you do frequently, after you have passed the latitude of 65° north, and once every day when you shall be in an ascertained current, throw overboard a bottle or copper cylinder closely sealed.' They were to indicate ship's position and date on pre-printed message forms that instructed the finder (in six languages) to send the forms to the Admiralty (Great Britain 1848: 6). Each ship was issued 200 cylinders (*The Illustrated London News* 24 May 1845: 328).

In the summer of 1849 one of Franklin's cylinders was found by native Greenlanders, delivered to the local governor, entrusted to a shipwrecked British whaling captain, carried by him to Scotland on a Danish ship, and eventually delivered to the Admiralty in London. Until the Admiralty revealed the contents of the message, the news generated a great deal of excitement throughout Britain, and raised the spirits of relatives and friends of the missing men, including Jane, Lady Franklin, who happened to be in the Orkney Islands when Captain Patterson of

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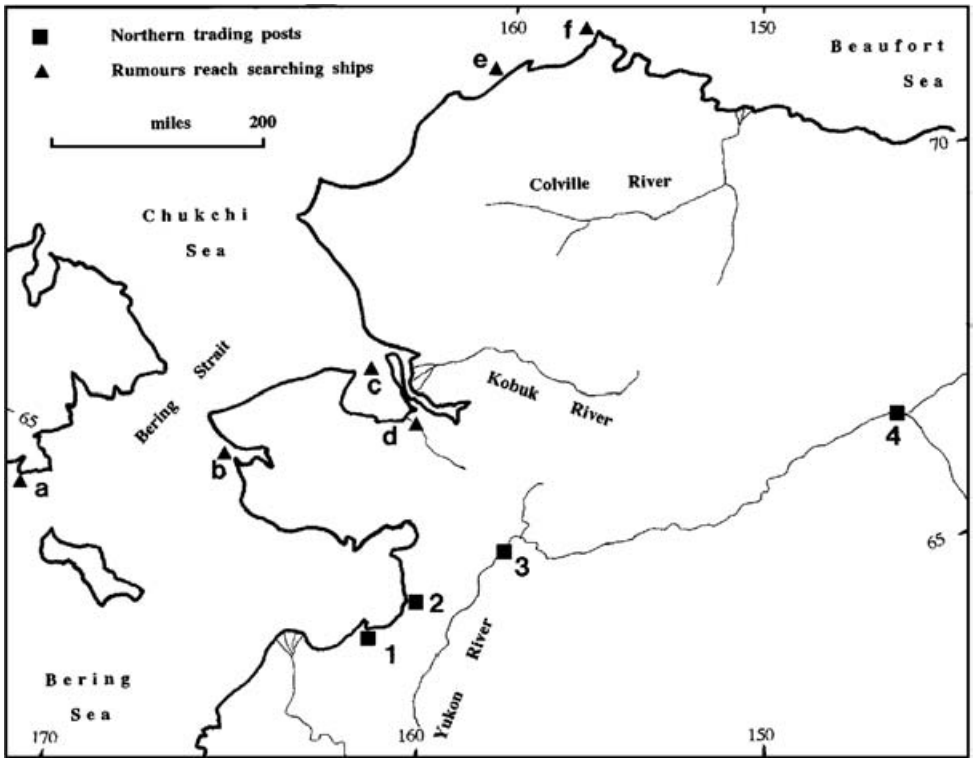

Fig. 2. Northwestern Alaska and eastern Siberia, showing places where rumours of white strangers reached the searching ships: (a) Plover Bay; (b) Port Clarence; (c) Kotzebue Sound; (d) Buckland River; (e) Wainwright Inlet; (f) Point Barrow. Also shown are northern trading posts: (1) Saint Michael (Michaelowski); (2) Unalakteet; (3) Nulato; (4) Fort Yukon (Hudson's Bay Company).

the wrecked whaler *Lady Jane* passed through with the cylinder. It proved to be authentic but, as one newspaper noted, its message was not 'of the slightest service towards unravelling the mystery which at present surrounds the position of Sir John and his brave companions' (*The Hull Advertiser* 5 October 1849: 5). It had been cast overboard off the west coast of Greenland four years earlier, and contained no information later than 30 June — before Franklin's ships had even reached Disko.

For obvious reasons, the drift bottle system of communication was too slow and uncertain to be effective. Although an authentic message from Franklin had been retrieved — against enormous odds — it had turned out to be far too old to be useful. But the extensive newspaper coverage of the event made people aware of this crude method of communication, and may have provided potential rumour-mongers and practical jokers with an idea.

In the following summer, when the search expedition under Horatio Austin reached the Whale Fish Islands, off Greenland's west coast, a story circulated among the five ships that the Scottish whaling master William Penny, whose two searching ships had passed through some weeks before, had found messages and survivors of the Franklin expedition. Lieutenant Sherard Osborn (commanding HMS *Pioneer*) sent a letter back to England on the transport *Emma Eugenia*, advising Lady Franklin to place no reliance in the report. She, in turn, wrote to warn Penny's wife Margaret: 'Lieut. Osborn warns me not to give any credit to a stupid report which he says is going about among the ships to the effect that "some casks had been picked up, that Captn Penny had got the papers contained in them & that some people had been picked up." Mr Osborn repeats "put no faith in it"' (Franklin 1850a).

A few years later *The Weekly Times* of London (9 January 1852) stated that the *Cork Constitution* had reported that a bottle had washed up on the west coast of Ireland containing a message signed by Franklin and dated 12 January 1850, at Cape Bathurst (in the Beaufort Sea). In the note, which was written in an 'indifferent' hand on a sheet of foolscap, Franklin reported that 10 men had died in the previous year and the survivors, very short of food, had just eaten a seal they had killed. The news that Franklin and most of his men were still alive and had almost completed the Northwest Passage was very exciting but some people were sceptical that a bottle could drift all the way from the western Arctic through the complex maze of islands lying north of the North American continent, and then across the Atlantic, even if it did take two years. Indeed, the message turned out to be a fake.

In the digest of Admiralty records there is a brief entry that may refer to the above incident. It reads, 'Jas. Mulholland says Michael Ryan has found a bottle at [Glandene?] giving intelligence' (Admiralty 1852b). The

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place name is not legible but it might be Glandore, a small village located at Ireland's southern tip, near Cape Clear.

Later in the same year the *Rotterdam Gazette* reported that a bottle had been found in the harbour at Harlingen containing a partly illegible message that began, 'Sir John Franklin has been found, with fifteen of his crew, in the Arctic regions' (*Dover Telegraph* 23 October 1852). The message had been written 'in haste' and signed 'J.G.' The absence of the complete name and rank of the author must have seemed curious, although two men on the *Erebus* actually had these initials — an engineer named John Gregory and a seaman named Josephus Geater (Cyriax 1939: 29). The note was forwarded to the Dutch consul in London, who presumably delivered it to the Admiralty, but it also proved to be a hoax.

Long after the search for the missing expedition had ended, the oceans continued to cast up their alleged messages from Franklin. A letter to the editor of *The Morning Herald* of London, dated 27 September 1869, summarized an article that the writers said had appeared in the *San Francisco Chronicle* two weeks before. A man named James Daly, walking along a beach in California, had found a watertight sealskin bag containing an Admiralty form printed in six languages, with a handwritten message around its margin signed by Commander James Fitzjames on 28 May 1847. The note said that the *Erebus* and *Terror* had ascended Wellington Channel, circumnavigated Cornwallis Island, wintered at Beechey Island, advanced southward, and spent the next winter in the ice. The writers of the letter to *The Morning Herald* condemned the San Francisco report as 'a bungling attempt at a cruel hoax,' but perhaps the hoax was entirely of their own invention, for they signed themselves 'Graham Gore' and 'Charles Des Voeux' (both of whom had perished with Franklin's expedition). At least this crude joke required no investigation by the Admiralty, for the note merely mimicked an authentic message retrieved from King William Island by Francis Leopold McClintock's expedition more than a decade earlier.

Drift-message hoaxes could also relate to other maritime explorers. During the search for Franklin, English newspapers reported the recovery of a barnacle-covered cedar keg in the Strait of Gibraltar, which contained a message written on parchment by Columbus in February 1493 during his homeward voyage, and thrown overboard during a violent storm near the Azores (*The Illustrated London News* 31 January 1852: 103). After 358 years afloat, the message — a summary of his explorations intended for Ferdinand and Isabella — was still perfectly legible, and naturally the document was reckoned to be of immense value. But it was a hoax, and by no means the last of its kind. The biographer of Columbus, Samuel Eliot Morison (1974: 86), revealed that 'sundry faked-up versions of the Admiral's Secret Log Boke' are still being offered to credulous collectors.

Fig. 3. The message card attached to the Gloucester balloon. (London: Public Record Office)

The Gloucester balloon

Balloons filled with a lifting gas offered another potential means of conveying messages from expedition ships in the Arctic to the outside world, and another possibility for hoaxes. In the autumn of 1851 a balloon was recovered at Gloucester with an attached message from Franklin's expedition at a location in Canada's western Arctic (Fig. 3). The Admiralty summoned experts to examine the balloon and its message card, questioned officers of recent expeditions about their balloon releases in the Arctic, checked the equipment lists of HMS *Erebus* and *Terror*, and sent two officers to Gloucester to interview witnesses. After a week of intense investigation, they announced on 11 October that the balloon had not come from Franklin's ships (Ross 2002a).

Strangely, the Admiralty's announcement did not convince everyone. A month later Lieutenant William H. Hooper submitted a 'Plan for an expedition to proceed in search of Sir John Franklin's party,' in which he declared as one of his objectives 'to entirely set at rest any lingering uncertainties which may exist respecting the possibility of the balloon (found at Gloucester) having come from the "Erebus"' (Great Britain 1852b: 100).

The London announcements

From time to time reports of the discovery of Franklin and his men — dead or alive — reached the Admiralty or the press. Some were rumours of undisclosed origin and others were deliberate falsehoods intended to deceive. On a Saturday evening in late December 1850 a report of Franklin's safety and imminent return spread swiftly through London's West End. 'At the clubs the rumour was rife, and publicity was given to it from the stage of the Haymarket Theatre, and also at the National Concerts at Her Majesty's Theatre. It is needless to say that the audiences at both houses expressed their satisfaction at the gratifying intelligence in the most enthusiastic manner' (*The Weekly Times* 29 December 1850). People everywhere were elated, the offices of the Admiralty were besieged by callers during the night, and thanksgiving prayers were said in at least one church on the following day. Unfortunately, the information proved to be entirely false. The newspaper labelled it a 'heartless hoax.'

Franklin near Back River

According to Roderic Owen (1978: 320), a London printer by the name of Rague distributed a broadsheet about the above incident 'straight away,' but as Owen gives a date of July 1851 — half a year after the Haymarket announcement — it must have been a separate incident. The broadsheet is said to have told of a boat crew from a whaling ship landing on 'one of those floating islands of ice so frequently to be met with in the most chilling regions of the northern seas,' and there seeing 'a stupendous booth or tent' with colours flying, and in it 'that long lamented gentleman and his gallant crew in perfect health.' This happy discovery is said to have occurred at 68°N, 94°W, a location east of Chantrey Inlet and the estuary of the Back River, and only about 70 miles southeast of the nearest point of King William Island, where the Franklin expedition foundered. The location cited, however, is some distance inland, and nowhere near any waterways visited by whalers.

Franklin in Scotland

In 1852 *The Dundee Advertiser* (29 October 1852: 4) reprinted an article from the *Preston Chronicle* about a rumour that Franklin and 14 men had arrived at a Scottish port. A story of this nature could easily be proved or disproved, however, and the newspapers correctly concluded that it was 'only another of the heartless hoaxes in which senseless people now and then indulge.'

Bodies seen by a whaling crew

In 1851 a letter allegedly from one Thomas Reid to the editor of *The Dundee Advertiser* (26 July 1851) described how the whaler *Flora* (Captain J. Robb), while frozen into the ice of Lancaster Sound during the winter of 1850–51, had encountered Inuit who spoke of white men's graves and then guided a dozen of the crew to the site. It was a long and arduous trek. They left the harbour on 27 March 1851 and arrived on 5 April at a spot where a black silk kerchief had been tied to a walking stick. There they uncovered the bodies of four men, 'frozen like icicles' and perfectly preserved. They wore clothes typical of 'British seamen in cold latitudes.' Tattooed on the arm of one of the men was the name H. Carr. Having replaced the bodies, the men returned to their winter harbour, confident that these men had left Franklin's expedition and perished. Reid's information consisted mainly of a long quotation from a letter written by an eye-witness, the *Flora*'s mate G. Douglass, to his brother John in Aberdeen, after the ship arrived at Stromness about 19 June.

Reid's letter has the air of authenticity. It is signed. It gives the name of the ship and captain. It quotes from the letter written by the mate, Douglass, who lists the names of the 12 men who travelled to the graves, describes their 10-day voyage, and gives details of clothing and tattoos on the bodies exhumed. But the annual summaries of British whaling do not contain a ship named *Flora* or a captain named Robb, and no whaling ships are known to have intentionally wintered in the Arctic until three years later. Nor do whaling logbooks or the records of the six searching expeditions in the eastern Arctic in 1850 and 1851 mention encountering Robb or the *Flora*. None of the men on HMS *Erebus* and *Terror* was named Carr (Cyriax 1939: 28–31), and although there was an able seaman called Cann, his initials were G.J., rather than H.

After the story was reported in several newspapers, questions about its authenticity were raised in the House of Commons, where Mr Chisholm Anstey 'gave notice that he would ask next day whether the report in the papers respecting Sir John Franklin and his companions was a fabrication or not?, and, if it was, whether the law against retailing false news would be put in force by the Government, for the purpose of repressing the practice of circulating such reports?' John Parker, First Secretary of the Admiralty and a member of the House, responded, 'The Admiralty had no further knowledge respecting the report than every gentleman who had seen the newspapers; but immediately upon the report coming to their knowledge letters were written from the Admiralty to the places mentioned in order to test its truth.' Cries of 'Hear! Hear' applauded the swift action taken (*The Times* (London) 29 July 1851: 6). The result of the inquiry sent to customs authorities in Hull, is summarized in this surviving terse entry in the digest of Admiralty records: 'Customs reports that upon enquiry, the whole has proved to be a fiction, — no such vessel as the "Flora" of Hull being in existence' (Admiralty 1851).

Thomas Reid — presumably a pseudonym — is suspiciously similar to the name used a year earlier in another letter. Writing to *The Aberdeen Herald*, someone signing himself William Reid had claimed to be a mesmerist whose clairvoyant subject had 'seen' and 'visited' Franklin's ships twice at Somerset Island (south of Barrow Strait) (Ross 2003). In addition to the identical surnames, both letters were sent to newspapers in Scottish whaling ports, both stories involved Arctic whaling ships and men, and both accounts were wrong. The similarities indicate a common *modus operandi*, suggesting that the two reports were hoaxes perpetrated by the same individual.

Bodies found by Kane's expedition

A spectacular piece of news circulated in 1854. *The Lake Superior Mining News* reported that the Arctic search expedition under Dr Elisha Kent Kane had found the bodies of Sir John Franklin and his men! The news was telegraphed from Albany to New York, published there in early December, and carried in English newspapers a few weeks later. According to *Lloyds Weekly Newspaper* of London (24 December 1854), the original article had read, in part, as follows: 'We learn by private letters that the bodies of Sir John Franklin and his men have been found by Dr. Kane's party, completely frozen, and in a perfect state of preservation . . . From the authority whence we have gained the information, we have the right to believe it as perfectly true.'

Some scepticism had been expressed in New York, however, and, after the story appeared in *The Times* of

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London, Charles Weld, assistant secretary of the Royal Society, promptly wrote to the editor, 'As the report contained in your paper . . . respecting the discovery by Dr. Kam's [*sic*] arctic party of the frozen bodies of Sir John Franklin and his men may be regarded by some persons as entitled to credit, I beg to be permitted to remind you that Dr. Kam's [*sic*] expedition, having for its object the exploration of the seas and lands north of Baffin's Bay, it is manifestly absurd that letters should have been transmitted from the expedition to Lake Superior, whence it appears that the intelligence has been received' (*The Times* 19 October 1854: 10). Weld went on to say that he had talked with the explorer's father, Judge John Kintzing Kane, in Philadelphia a few months earlier, and there had been no mention of such an indirect and illogical line of communication. 'Thus,' he correctly concluded, 'although the Lake Superior Mining News declared its belief in the report which it publishes, it is clearly unworthy of confidence.' Weld's letter appears to have arrested any multiplication of false hopes in Britain.

Paranormal leads

The search for Franklin's expedition occurred at a time when belief in paranormal phenomena was strong and growing. At least eight clairvoyants claimed to perceive Franklin alive in the Arctic, and at least three mediums later claimed to have communicated with the spirit of the dead Franklin (Ross 2003).

The Admiralty not only kept abreast of clairvoyant statements but actively assisted one of them — Emma, 'the Bolton clairvoyant' — by providing samples of handwriting by Franklin, his officers, and commanders of search expeditions, to facilitate her contact with them, and by supplying Arctic charts so that her mesmerist, Dr Joseph Haddock, could ask relevant questions and interpret her responses. The inflow of information was most intense from October 1849 through January 1850, a period during which many other important considerations demanded the attention of the Admiralty.

Short of actually finding Franklin, however, there was no way of authenticating paranormal information. And there was a suspicion that what passed for clairvoyance could be produced under a trance by the power of a mesmerist's suggestion, or even by collusion between a fraudulent mesmerist and his subject. The undercurrent of scepticism about the very existence of such extraordinary powers of perception, reinforced by the lack of agreement among clairvoyants about Franklin's location (Fig. 1) prevented the Admiralty from using their statements as a basis of action.

Lady Franklin was more inclined to believe in paranormal evidence. She is known to have consulted clairvoyants (Woodward 1951; Lloyd-Jones 2001) and, according to Skewes (1889, 1890), she modified the plans for her two expeditions on the *Prince Albert* on the basis of a revelation by the spirit of a dead child, 'Weesy' Coppin, in Londonderry.

Vague suggestive evidence

Reports of objects sighted in the Arctic and thought to be connected with Franklin were troublesome because their locations were never adequately described, and the information — often second- or third-hand — was usually too vague to follow up. Unlike objects that could be examined in the field or brought home for study, such reports were difficult to assess, although quite capable of exciting false hopes for a time.

The cairn in Jones Sound

Returning from Davis Strait in the fall of 1848, Captain Thomas Lee senior of the Hull whaler *Prince of Wales* said that he had seen a cairn during his voyage. The story eventually reached the ears of Lady Franklin, who visited Hull in February 1849, accompanied by William Scoresby junior, the whaling master, scholar, author, and clergyman, to hear the account first-hand. Sophia Cracroft, Jane's companion and Sir John's niece, later described the meeting:

> She saw & questioned the Captn the veteran Lee of Hull — but he . . . is very ignorant of navigation or charts, & in fact knows nothing but the best way of getting thro' ice, & of catching whales — so he had a very bungling story — being sure of only one thing, viz — that they had been in some place north of Lancaster Sound, & that (the weather being very foggy) they had run some 100 or 150 milles up it, to the westward, fm the entrance in Baffin's Bay.
>
> As to the cairn, he did not seem to have, or wish to have, anything to say abt it. Some of the men thought they had seen one was all he admitted. He probably & with reason, thought that to admit its existence wd. be to incur blame for not examining it. (Cracroft 1851a)

Lady Franklin and Scoresby naturally wondered if the inlet in question could be Jones Sound, but Lee would not say that it was. He permitted them to examine the logbook of his voyage but (according to Sophia) it was 'most confused & told nothing of the kind' (Cracroft 1851a). Altogether, the meeting was intensely disappointing. Despite the frustrating vagueness of Lee's information, however, Lady Franklin took steps to have the story investigated, for a few months later she told Scoresby that she intended to purchase the Hull whaler *Abram* for a private expedition (Franklin 1849a). This plan was thwarted when Thomas Ward, the manager, decided to send the *Abram* on a whaling voyage to Davis Strait under charter to Captain Gravill, whose ship had been lost at the Greenland fishery. However, Lady Franklin was able to reach an agreement with the owner, Mr Barkworth, whereby if she would purchase a share in the ship, pay the sum of 500 pounds, and cover extra insurance, Gravill would carry out a search (Franklin 1849b). But Gravill failed to carry out his end of the bargain, and a year and a half later Jane was still trying to get her money back (Franklin 1850b).

Lee's story continued to circulate. In the fall of 1849 it appeared in *The Weekly Times* (14 October 1849),

Fig. 4. Men of McClintock's expedition dismantling a cairn to look for a message. Another cairn in Jones Sound was supposed to contain a message from Franklin. The illustration is misleading, however: although at least one of McClintock's sled parties did carry a pick-axe, it was for breaking up ground around cairns. No one would have been stupid enough to strike a pile of frozen rocks with one. (*The Illustrated London News* 15 October 1859: 366)

with a significant alteration. He now admitted that in his 1848 voyage he had seen some 'land marks' (presumably cairns) on the coast and he expressed the conviction that they had been built by Franklin! Readers may have wondered why he thought that Franklin had made them, and why he had not stopped to examine them. But, whether justified or not, the enticing Franklin connection had been made.

A more complete version of the story surfaced another year and a half later, and it was taken as a confirmation of Lee's earlier report. In late May 1851, just as Lady Franklin's second *Prince Albert* expedition was preparing to leave Stromness under William Kennedy, one of the crew members, an Orkneyman named William Millar, who had served under Lee on the *Prince of Wales* three years before, came forward with more details about the incident. He stated that during thick weather they had entered what they thought was Lancaster Sound, and had sailed 100 to 150 miles west. When the fog lifted, he and a few others landed on the south shore, where they saw shoe prints, a cooking hearth, and a stone cairn four or five feet high. As they were taking the cairn apart to look for a message, they were suddenly recalled to the ship, whose position had become dangerous, and they sailed away towards the south. When they arrived at the mouth of Lancaster Sound Captain Lee realized that the inlet they had penetrated before must have been Jones Sound (parallel to Lancaster Sound but a hundred miles farther north) (*The Weekly Times* 15 June 1851). On Lady Franklin's urging, Millar wrote down his story and signed it (*John O'Groat Journal* (Wick) 20 June 1851).

Lady Franklin had instructed Kennedy to investigate Prince Regent Inlet, a long way from Jones Sound, but Millar's story caused her to make a last-minute modification to Kennedy's orders. Sophia Cracroft, writing from Stromness to her mother and sister a few weeks later, said, 'The "Prince Albert" is of course ordered to attempt to get up Jones Sd. in the first instance. But there is much reason to fear she will arrive too early at the entrance — for Jones Sound is rarely open before Septbr. — it was barred with Ice bergs when Penny passed last year in August' (Cracroft 1851a). As she predicted, Kennedy did not manage to get into Jones Sound, but for a different reason. He found the northern route through Baffin Bay barred by ice and was forced to back-track southward along the Greenland coast before crossing to Baffin Island at a lower latitude, and as this time-consuming detour made a side-trip to Jones Sound impracticable, he continued directly into Lancaster Sound.

Millar's information was published in newspapers in mid-June, a few weeks after the departure of the *Prince Albert*, and it was precisely the sort of news people had been hoping to hear. Surely Franklin would have stopped from time to time to leave reports of his progress under stone cairns, as this was a standard method of communication (Fig. 4), but no cairns had been spotted by whalers in Lancaster Sound, and those found in 1850 on and near Beechey Island, the site of Franklin's first winter quarters, had not contained any messages. But here was another cairn to investigate! There were notions that Jones Sound might connect with the top of Wellington Channel, and that their junction might be on the margin of the polar basin, which many thought to be ice-free, so the idea of

Franklin having left a message in Jones Sound seemed entirely plausible. Perhaps he had found Lancaster Sound blocked by ice, and had then sailed north through Jones Sound instead.

According to *The Morning Chronicle* of London (11 June 1851), Millar had also stated that beyond the point where they landed in Jones Sound they had seen 'an open sea with islands.' Any mention of open water in the zone normally characterized by permanent ice was certain to excite the imagination, and the newspaper did not hesitate to give its confident opinion: 'It is impossible to entertain any doubt that this cairn indicated the fact that some of Sir John Franklin's party have visited the spot in question.' *The Aberdeen Journal* (18 June 1851) went even further: 'The very existence of a cairn in this part is proof that beneath it lies intelligence of Sir John Franklin's expedition....' Echoing a request made by Lady Franklin, the latter newspaper urged the government to dispatch a steamer in July to enter Jones Sound late in the summer (by which time it should be free from ice), find the cairn, and retrieve the vital message from Franklin.

During the Franklin search hope often outpaced reason. Lee had not seen the cairn, yet he was sure it had been erected by Franklin's men. Millar had not completed the job of taking the cairn apart, but he concurred with Lee's opinion. Newspaper editors or reporters in Britain had never been within two thousand miles of Jones Sound, but they too were confident that Franklin had been there, and one considered the mere existence of the cairn proof that a message from Franklin lay within.

A man signing himself 'an inhabitant of Stromness' wrote to the Edinburgh *Caledonian Mercury* (21 June 1851) and said that another man, George Moore, who had been present at the cairn, confirmed Millar's account. It now seemed pretty certain that a cairn of some sort had been seen and partly dismantled, but where exactly was it? On this point the waters were about to be muddied even more.

After the publication of Millar's account the Admiralty received a letter from Captain Lee's son Francis, dated 14 June 1851. 'I am desired by him, being his son, to inform their Lordships that it was not Jones Sound that he was in last year' (Great Britain 1852b: 128–129). According to Francis Lee, his father had been unable to ascertain the precise position of the inlet because thick weather had prevented him from obtaining sun sights for 14 consecutive days, and because he had been unable to calculate the distance run each day, not having streamed the ship's patent log. Francis Lee's surprising information contradicted that of Millar, who had specifically mentioned Jones Sound. Faced with conflicting data, all of it too vague to follow up, the Admiralty decided against sending a steamer to investigate. Unless the location of a man-made object was described with some precision, by citing exact latitude and longitude or an accepted place-name, there was little chance that anyone could return to the place to investigate. As existing charts were inaccurate, and navigation crude, this was not likely to happen. The lapse of three years since Lee had sighted the cairn was another disadvantage.

Sophia Cracroft wrote, disconsolately: 'The steamer is at an end. The Admiralty have recd. a letter from the son of Captn Lee of the "Prince of Wales" wh gives a different position from Jones Sd to the sound they ran into, and we are bound to admit that accepting this testimony, the Admiralty are not acting unreasonably. But we do not accept this evidence.' She and her aunt continued to rely on the statement of William Millar because he seemed more reliable than either of the Lees. According to Sophia, Lee senior was 'in his dotage' and his son was 'a very clever fellow of drunken dissipated habits' (Cracroft 1851b).

But the cairn in Jones Sound was not forgotten. Despite the vague and conflicting reports, the Admiralty chart 'Discoveries in the Arctic Sea up to MDCCCLII' (published on 8 April 1852) showed the 'Position of the Prince of Wales, August 13th 1848 according to Captn Lee; having come up Jones Sound & visited a cairn, cooking place & foot-prints.' The notation appeared on the south coast of Jones Sound near longitude 89°W. A few months later Edward Inglefield went looking for it in Lady Franklin's *Isabel*, but he had to turn back at 84°W, almost 90 miles short of the place (Inglefield 1852). Edward Belcher, who had gone up Wellington Channel, had also been instructed to consider the feasibility of reaching Jones Sound (*Nautical Magazine* 1852: 660), and in the same summer Robert McCormick undertook a boat expedition up Wellington Channel with the intention of discovering a water channel or a narrow isthmus between it and Jones Sound, 'in the direction of the position laid down in the Admiralty chart, as the spot where a cairn, cooking place, and footprints, are said to have been visited by a whaler, and have been thought by some, most deeply interested in the fate of our lost countrymen, to have been traces of their wanderings' (Great Britain 1854 (XIV): 187). His unsuccessful quest was in fact unnecessary, for it merely duplicated exploration carried out in the previous year by travelling parties from Penny's search expedition.

Deceptive images

Polar regions, with their frequent temperature inversions, are particularly susceptible to optical illusions of various kinds caused by atmospheric refraction of light rays, and mirages have caused some embarrassing mistakes, such as John Ross' identification of the non-existent 'Croker Mountains' (Rees 1988). Two and a half decades before the Franklin search, the whaling captain William Scoresby junior (1823: 96) sketched and described some remarkable examples of refraction about 74°N in the Greenland Sea: 'Hummocks of ice assumed the forms of castles, obelisks, and spires; and the land presented extraordinary features,' he wrote. On another occasion he saw nearby ships stretched vertically, elevated from their true positions, segmented, and turned upside down (Fig. 5).

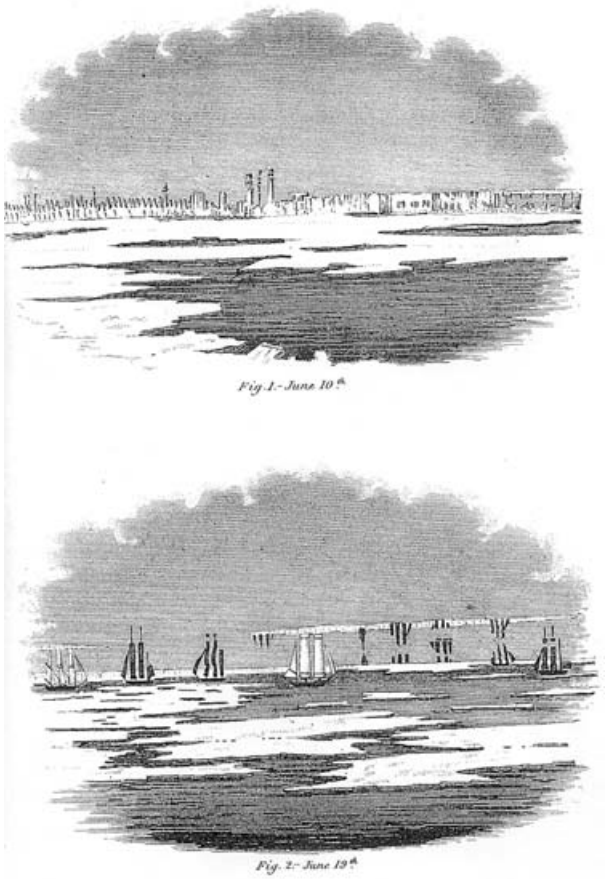

Fig. 5. Arctic mirages as sketched by William Scoresby (1823: opp. 96). Similar illusions deceived Franklin searchers.

The 'looming' of distant objects, especially ones below the horizon, sometimes fooled the men who looked for Franklin. Robert Goodsir, surgeon on board the whaler *Advice* during Penny's attempt to find signs of Franklin in Lancaster Sound in August 1849, was scouring the coast of Bylot Island by telescope when he suddenly sighted a flagstaff, and 'could almost make out the waving of a flag.' Another man saw it through the glass, and claimed to see a signal. But when Goodsir looked again the flagstaff gradually dissolved into weird and unreal shapes, and finally dissipated completely, revealing itself as 'a hummocky piece of ice.' It was only an illusion (Goodsir 1850; 102). A year later, as HMS *Investigator* was working her way along the low-lying north coast of Alaska, lookouts spotted conical mounds on the shore about three miles away. They appeared to be very tall cairns, but when officers landed to examine them for messages they found only small earth mounds about three feet high, 'which the refracting power of the atmosphere had increased to about forty feet' (Armstrong 1857: 103).

Even without the distortion of mirages, men on board searching ships were often deceived by objects that sprang into view through their telescopes and inflamed their imaginations. The officers of HMS *Investigator* once saw an upright post 'erected as if for a signal,' but it turned out to be a piece of driftwood pushed into a vertical position by ice pressure (McClure 1856: 72). Doubtless, many Arctic searchers had their hopes momentarily elevated by the sight of some distant wood, boulder, landform, or ice formation, which on inspection turned out to be quite unrelated to Franklin.

Glass balls in Russia

After the recovery of authentic drift bottle messages from the expeditions of Franklin and James Ross in 1849, and the fake Franklin messages reported in 1852, any floating container could revive fading hopes for news of the missing expedition. In 1853 English newspapers reported the discovery of seaborne objects in a rather unlikely location. According to *The Athenaeum* (London) (15 October 1853: 1227), natives in northern Russia had found several glass balls floating 'at the mouth of the River Ohio, which falls into the Arctic basin at the seventieth parallel of longitude.' In fact, no 'River Ohio' existed in Russia and lines of longitude are not parallel; but one could surmise that the careless report meant either the 70th parallel of north *latitude* or the 70th *meridian* of east longitude, and that the river was probably the Ob'. The article stated that attempts would be made to obtain samples of the bottles, which might contain messages from Franklin. If his ships had penetrated northward into an ice-free polar sea, as many people believed they had, drift bottles dropped overboard might have been carried by currents along the Siberian coast to the mouth of the Ob'.

The Morning Advertiser of London (4 October 1853), taking its information from *The Morning Chronicle*, which in turn had based its information on letters received from Berlin and St Petersburg, elaborated on the details of this enticing story. It described the bottles as 'hermetically sealed and airtight but not containing any memoranda to indicate their origin.' The Russian government had already delivered several of them to the British legation, and one of them was at that very moment on its way to London in the safe hands of a 'Queen's messenger.' But the newspaper prefaced these slim details with a cautionary introduction: 'We give insertion to the following for what it is worth, which our readers will probably agree with us in thinking is not a great deal,' and their scepticism proved to be well founded. After the bottle reached the Admiralty, *The Athenaeum* (15 October 1853: 1247) reported: 'It was, of course, hoped that it might prove to have belonged to Franklin's ships; but having personally examined it, — we are sorry to say, that it is evidently of foreign manufacture, and not at all likely to have been furnished to Franklin's Expedition. It is about the length of a soda water bottle — but more spherical; and it is formed of very dark glass, nearly a quarter of an inch thick.' The balls were later found to be identical to fishermen's net floats made in Hammerfest, Norway (Brown 1858: 318N).

Reindeer messengers

At various times the Admiralty received somewhat far-fetched reports of alleged clues to Franklin's existence. In

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1852 W. Herschel de Griesbach wrote from Ottersberg, near Bremen, to tell of some curious and profoundly significant information received in a letter from Tromsø, Norway. Hunters on Spitsbergen had noticed that many of the reindeer they had killed had notched ears, and they supposed that tame reindeer from herds marked in this manner had managed to travel over the sea ice from Novaya Zemlya. De Griesbach thought this unlikely because the distance was so great, but he offered a radically different explanation. As some Arctic search expeditions had trapped wild foxes and released them wearing collars with messages, he suggested that Franklin's men had done the same thing with wild reindeer. 'Within the dreary, and in all probability, ice-bound and pent-up fastnesses of Spitzbergen,' he wrote, there might be 'men in possession of knives, and endowed with sufficient intelligence and means to catch or entrap the wildest animal of the region involuntarily inhabited by them, alive, and then trusting to Providence for the result, turning them loose in hope' (Great Britain 1852f: 87–88). It is hardly surprising that the Admiralty decided not to dispatch a search expedition to Spitsbergen on the basis of such a wild conjecture. If Franklin and his men had reached Spitsbergen and had possessed 'sufficient intelligence' to devise this desperate method of communicating, would they not have been intelligent enough to attach messages giving their position?

Pigeon messengers

When Sir John Ross departed on the *Felix* in the spring of 1850 he took along two pairs of homing pigeons donated by a Miss Dunlop of Annanhill, near Ayr. On 7 October, with the ship encased in thickening ice at Assistance Bay, Cornwallis Island, he released the first two birds for their homeward voyage. But after they 'circled over the boundless expanse of unbroken ice and snow' they flew right back to the ship, opting for security and comfort rather than adventure and hardship. Several attempts had the same result, even when guns were fired to drive them away. The birds were than placed in a small paper box suspended from two large (six by eight feet) balloons filled with a lifting gas, and sent aloft. Only after travelling away from the ship for 24 hours would they be freed when a slow match mechanism opened a trap door. 'The plan seemed to answer well; the balloons and box rose beautifully, and were seen careering along southward, till lost first to the eye and then to the telescope' (*The Aberdeen Herald* 25 October 1851: 172).

According to Peter Sutherland (1852: II, 403), Ross hoped they would alight upon one of the whaling ships in Davis Strait, which would give them a safe passage home, but he may have thought them capable of flying all the way to Scotland if necessary. Indeed, within a fortnight British newspapers reported the arrival of the birds near their home roost in Ayr. The accounts differed in several details; it is uncertain whether one or two birds arrived, whether they were captured or simply sighted, or how they were identified as the ones taken to the Arctic by Ross. One newspaper reported that a bird had its legs shot away (*The Dundee Advertiser* 25 October 1850: 1). Although no messages were recovered from the birds, headlines such as 'Latest news from Sir John Ross — extraordinary flight of carrier pigeons' and 'Sir John Ross's letter-carriers' (*The Dundee Advertiser* 25 October 1850 : 1, 29 October 1850: 2) gave the impression that a line of communication had been opened from the search expeditions.

If Ross had been able to send carrier pigeons to Britain then it seemed possible that Franklin might too. Many turned their eyes skyward in expectation of Arctic news, and they were not disappointed. On 2 November a carrier pigeon was observed at Dundee, and great excitement ensued. When the bird alighted in the rigging of a ship people attempted to catch it; when it fled to the railway station they followed in pursuit. As *The Dundee Advertiser* (5 November 1850: 2) explained, 'there was no other conjecture but that it must have come from the Arctic regions with intelligence of Sir John Franklin, and the eagerness to get possession of the winged stranger was very great indeed.' Later it was learned that the pigeon had been released at St Andrews.

The reports of Ross' pigeons travelling 2000 miles from Arctic North America provoked a response from an expert, whose letter to *The Manchester Guardian* was reprinted in *The Dundee Advertiser* (12 November 1850: 3). He pointed out several improbable aspects (not the least of which was the distance) and concluded that the entire story was 'a clumsy invention of some wag desirous of practising upon the credulity of the public.'

Penny's piece of wood

Searching expeditions maintained a sharp lookout for objects that seemed alien to the Arctic region, especially ones that bore signs of human manufacture or alteration. During a remarkable sled and boat voyage north of Cornwallis Island in 1851, a small party under William Penny landed on Baillie Hamilton Island and found a piece of wood that showed signs of having been worked by human hands. It was approximately a foot and a half long, less than an inch and a half wide, and about an inch thick, smooth on one side and rough on the other, with splintered ends. It was evidently part of a plank, probably English elm, treated with tar or pitch. As it lay far beyond the northern limit of Inuit occupancy, they quite reasonably thought it might have come from the *Erebus* or *Terror*. In England the fragment of wood was carefully analyzed by Sir John Richardson of Haslar Hospital, and others. They compared its fibres, cellular structure, and fungal and lichenoid growths, with those of a wood chip from Franklin's Beechey Island site and some wooden timbers at Haslar beach that had been exposed to the elements for years. They confirmed that it was English elm, often used by shipwrights, but they concluded (with one minority opinion) that it could not have come from Franklin's ships because to reach that advanced state of decay and erosion in the Arctic would have required much

longer than five years of weathering (Sutherland 1852: II, cxxii–cxxix). Another piece of wood was found on the north coast of Cornwallis Island. It was identified as white spruce of North American origin, unrelated to Franklin's expedition.

Although the elm plank appeared to have no connection with Franklin, it did influence the course of the search, in an indirect way. Its occurrence on the margin of a vast body of ice-free water discovered in Queen Victoria Channel (now Queen's Channel) led Penny to believe that Franklin had pushed northwards through Wellington Channel into the hypothetical Open Polar Sea. The persistence with which he presented his view, and the enthusiasm with which Open Polar Sea advocates embraced it, contributed to the decision of the Arctic Committee in November 1851 to recommend a renewed search by way of Wellington Channel and Penny's open sea. The result was Belcher's huge expedition of 1852–54.

By the autumn of 1851, when eagerness to search northward through Penny's open sea was in vogue, some evidence of far greater significance had been discovered — but largely ignored — more than 500 miles to the south. On the southeast corner of Victoria Island, about 80 miles west of King William Island, John Rae had picked up two wooden objects that were unmistakably from a British naval ship — an oak stanchion and what appeared to be a boat's flagstaff made of pine. The latter contained tacks marked with the Queen's broad arrow. Although they had probably come from the *Erebus* or *Terror*, the connection could not be proved (Richards 1985: 81). Two years later, the strait south of Victoria Island provided another important clue to the Franklin mystery. Richard Collinson worked HMS *Enterprise* eastward from Bering Strait along the continental mainland. After penetrating Dease Strait and reaching the Finlayson Islands, roughly 80 miles short of the place where Rae had found these wooden objects, he discovered a piece of wood more than four feet long, apparently part of the frame of a door or hatch. It contained a copper hasp for a latch, some screws and nails, and was partly painted. Again, a broad arrow revealed its naval origin, but there was no certain connection with Franklin's ships (Collinson 1889: 278).

It is one of the curious aspects of the Franklin search that although the naval provenance of the objects found by Rae and Collinson was revealed by the official broad arrow, the discovery of the relics did not attract much attention in Britain, whereas Penny's unmarked piece of wood, in conjunction with the seductive suggestion of access to an ice-free polar sea, led to the largest expedition in the entire Franklin search proceeding in the wrong direction.

Other inconclusive leads

Men on the search expeditions sometimes experienced moments of excitement when they encountered an object of European origin in the Arctic. In the waters off Cape York, in late August 1852, the crew of the *Isabel* picked up 'a wedge of a ship's mast, a cask, a cork, and some staves,' and two days later 'part of a ship's deck with a heavy piece of iron bolted firmly to it.' As one of the expedition's objectives was to investigate an earlier report that Franklin and his men had been murdered in this area and their ships destroyed, these relics 'appeared to be well worthy of our notice with reference to the missing squadron' (Inglefield 1853: 42, 50). Much later, however, they learned that the wreckage was probably from whalers crushed by ice in Melville Bay.

In 1852, during Sir Edward Belcher's expedition, floating whale blubber on which seabirds were feasting was observed near the mouth of Welllington Channel from HMS *Resolute*. Someone suggested that it might have come from the *Prince Albert*, but a newspaper pointed out later that the *Prince Albert* had been in Prince Regent Inlet at the time, so 'The blubber must, therefore, have been cut either by Esquimaux, or by Franklin's party' (*The Aberdeen Journal* 10 November 1852). Such a conclusion was entirely unwarranted; the blubber could have come from a whaling ship or from a whale dead from natural causes.

Characteristic of the above examples is a tendency to attribute undue importance to very sketchy evidence, but this straw-grasping is understandable. The problem of locating Franklin's expedition had at first appeared to be straightforward, but as the years rolled by and expedition after expedition returned unsuccessful, a sense of frustration pervaded the Admiralty and society at large. For men who were directly involved in the search, the eagerness and optimism they felt at the outset of their expeditions may have faded into a sort of desperation when the enormity of the task became clear. When the vast Arctic spaces provided anything that could possibly be connected with Franklin — a stone cairn, a piece of wood, some floating blubber — they were all too anxious to believe. Yet, curiously, they ignored clear evidence of a wrecked naval ship.

Native reports

Many reports about sightings of white men and ships or boats originated with Arctic and sub-Arctic native groups. Information provided by Inuit in the eastern Arctic was usually brought home by whalers or expedition ships at the end of the same summer in which it was received. Reports from the central Arctic coast and from Alaska, however, took much longer to reach Britain, making it necessary for those closest to the source — naval commanders and leaders of overland parties — to analyse the evidence and take action if necessary, before the trail grew cold.

The *Chieftain* report

In the fall of 1849 British whalers returning from Davis Strait and Baffin Bay brought thrilling news that lifted everyone's spirits for a short time. Captain Parker of the *Truelove* of Hull delivered to the Admiralty a rough sketch drawn by Inuit at Pond Inlet that showed four

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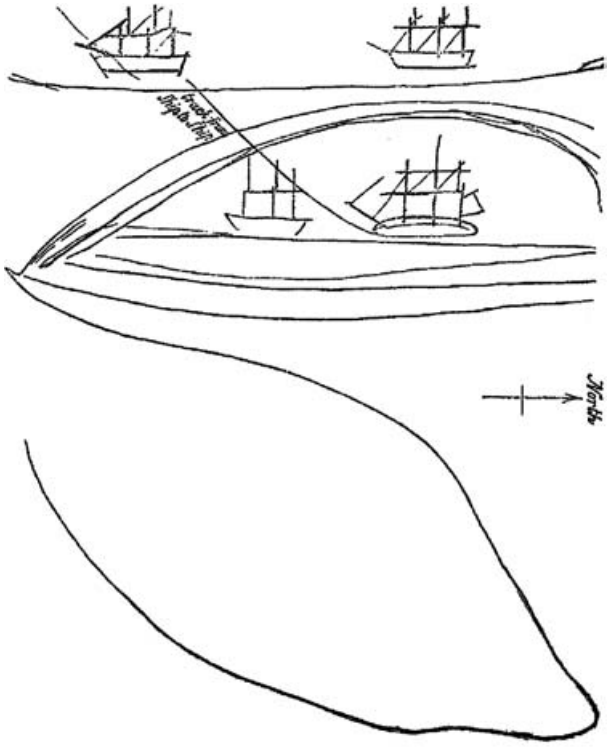

Fig. 6. The sketch drawn by Inuit on board the whaling ship *Chieftain* at Pond Inlet, supposed to represent the ships of Franklin and James Ross. The compass rose and written notation were added later. (*The Illustrated London News* 13 October 1849: 250)

square-rigged ships frozen into the ice (Fig. 6). He had been entrusted with the sketch by Captain Kerr of the Kirkcaldy whaler *Chieftain*, which had been boarded by Inuit off Cape Graham Moore, the northern gatepost of Pond Inlet, on 11 July. The Inuit had told Kerr that they had seen and visited two pairs of beset ships several months before and that the crews were alive and well. Judging from their account the beset ships were in Prince Regent Inlet, or Barrow Strait, or perhaps one pair in each locality. They were some distance apart, the Inuit said, but they had been in contact with each other. This news, coming more than four years after Franklin's expedition had departed with such high hopes, certainly appeared to have substance. Clearly, two of the ships must be the *Erebus* and *Terror*, and the other two Sir James Clark Ross' *Enterprise* and *Investigator*, which had been sent out in 1848 to find Franklin.

The temptation was great to immediately accept everything as fact, and initial reactions in the media were euphoric. Newspaper editorials and letters to editors rejoiced that the missing explorers had been found and offered ideas on how best to extricate the ships from the ice. As one perceptive commentator observed, 'Seizing eagerly on the asserted fulfillment of a long-deferred hope, the press at once announced the actual safety of Sir John Franklin and his party; and as news generally travels with the properties of an avalanche, swelling in importance with every step, many hours had not elapsed before the return of the Erebus and Terror in the course of the present month was spoken of as an almost certain event' (*The Athenaeum* 13 October 1849: 1038).

Through the month of October and into November the Admiralty gave a high priority to the report from Pond Inlet. They interviewed captains Parker and Kerr; they received and analysed information from ship-owners, customs-collectors, and other officials in whaling ports; they discussed the opinions voiced by men with first-hand experience in the Arctic, including George Back, Frederick William Beechey, William Edward Parry, and William Scoresby junior; and they corresponded with Lady Franklin, who had initiated her own researches in Scotland.

Disturbing questions arose to curb some of the premature optimism. If the ships of Franklin and Ross were really stuck in Prince Regent Inlet, why had they not communicated with the whalers who could be found every July and August off Pond Inlet, only a few hundred miles to the east? If Inuit had really visited the ships, why had they returned to Pond Inlet without any messages from Franklin or Ross, or any relics to substantiate their tale? Had the Inuit spoken to Kerr in their own language? Could he have misunderstood them? Had he made the mistake of asking leading questions? The credibility of the Inuit story received a serious blow when Penny's whaler *Advice* returned from Davis Strait and letters written by her surgeon Robert Goodsir (a brother of Doctor Harry D.S. Goodsir on the missing *Erebus*) were published in *The Athenaeum* (13 October 1849). The *Advice* had been off Pond Inlet in July and had sailed into Lancaster Sound with Captain Parker's *Truelove*, so Goodsir and Penny were familiar with the Inuit report, but neither believed it (Goodsir 1850: 75).

Yet, hope lingered on. Even if some details of the account were suspicious, there might be some substance in it. When the two ships of James Clark Ross unexpectedly hove into view off Scarborough in early November, there was great excitement. It was easy to reason that if Ross had managed to extricate his ships from the ice then Franklin, whose ships had been nearby, had probably succeeded too; the long overdue *Erebus* and *Terror* might appear at any moment! But after Ross hurried to London to make his report to the Admiralty, he revealed that he had not seen Franklin nor any Inuit during his winter in the ice. The Inuit report — or Captain Kerr's understanding of it — was wrong.

On hearing Ross' news, Lady Franklin confided to John Barrow at the Admiralty: 'I have felt palsied by his return & all its fearful consequences' (Franklin 1849c). Parry remarked, 'How entirely the Esquimaux report has thus vanished! Alas! for poor Lady F!' (Parry 1849). Interest in the matter subsided after Ross' return, but without any convincing explanation having come forth. The story 'was placed on the trash-heap of useless Inuit remembrances' (Woodman 1991: 213).

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Adam Beck's massacre story

In the summer of 1850 the search expeditions of Horatio Austin, William Penny, John Ross, and Charles Codrington Forsyth, comprising a veritable fleet of eight ships, worked their way up the Greenland coast and across Melville Bay. They arrived off Cape York more or less together and met some members of the isolated Eskimo group whom Ross had termed 'Arctic Highlanders' three decades before. Then 'the explorers came upon a startling announcement, — which, for a moment, seemed to give a melancholy solution to the object of these expeditions.' According to Adam Beck, the interpreter on Sir John Ross' *Felix*, the Cape York people reported that Franklin and his men had been killed by 'a fierce and numerous tribe of natives' and their two ships burned, near Wolstenholme Sound, some 60 miles to the northwest. But the other interpreter in the fleet (Carl Petersen on Penny's *Lady Franklin*) disagreed with Beck, insisting that the natives had said nothing about destroyed ships or murdered Europeans' (*The Athenaeum* 5 October 1850: 1044). One of the Cape York natives, Kallihirua, or 'Erasmus York,' who joined HMS *Assistance*, and was taken to England after the expedition wintered, also denied that his companions had reported a massacre. (This is a vastly oversimplified summary. In fact the movement of ships and officers back and forth, the succession of meetings and conferences, the repeated interviews with the natives, the various statements by Beck, and the several translations into English, were highly complex. They have been thoroughly reconstructed and analysed by Cyriax (1962).)

Most of the officers believed Petersen and were highly sceptical of Beck's massacre story, but no one could be certain, and this presented the search expeditions with an untimely dilemma. They were all bound for Lancaster Sound and it was already mid-August, so they needed to press on rapidly to the objective, but here was a report that could not be ignored. It had to be carefully investigated. The various consultations near Cape York consumed precious time. Sherard Osborn, commanding HMS *Pioneer*, wrote with undisguised fury, 'Adam Beck — may he be branded for a liar! — succeeded, this day, in misleading a large number of Her Majesty's officers . . . and in detaining, for two days, the squadrons in search of Franklin' (Osborn 1852: 72). As the Europeans were not qualified to ascertain the authenticity of Beck's alleged translation, there was no choice but to examine Wolstenholme Sound. Austin therefore sent two of his ships north, towing Ross' *Felix*, and they found persuasive evidence there that the basis of the Cape York report had been the wintering of HMS *North Star* in 1849–50 and the loss of four of her crew to scurvy.

After the expeditions proceeded into Lancaster Sound, they discovered Franklin's first wintering site on Beechey Island. This appeared to confirm that Franklin had not been lost near Cape York, but had advanced westward into the Arctic archipelago as instructed. But this was not the end of Beck's massacre story. During the winter Sir John Ross, who had himself visited Wolstenholme Sound and found no evidence to support the massacre story, was persuaded by Beck that it was true — or so Ross said. He came up with the ingenious explanation that after wintering at Beechey Island in 1845–46 Franklin had decided to head for home, and on his way across Baffin Bay his ships had then been trapped in the ice and his men killed by Eskimos. In July 1851, after wintering and nearly running out of food, Ross announced his intention to return to Wolstenholme Sound from Barrow Strait. 'This, indeed, may detain me another winter, and with sixteen men I am not very able to cope with a numerous tribe of hostile savages,' he wrote heroically, 'but I must and will try' (*The Aberdeen Herald* 18 October 1851: 168). This was pure face-saving theatre by the 64-year old veteran, whose expedition on the under-equipped *Felix* had achieved nothing. In fact, he sailed back to Britain, and then attempted to excuse his failure to return to Wolstenholme Sound by the absence of adequate provisions at Godhavn.

Yet Ross was determined to fan the dying embers of the Beck story into a blaze. On his way home he took Adam Beck before a magistrate in Godhavn to make a formal deposition about the meeting at Cape York. This document, written in the Greenlandic Eskimo language, Ross later sent to his sponsors, the Hudson's Bay Company, to be translated into English (*Nautical Magazine* 1851: 571–573). He also applied for command of a government expedition to search northwest Greenland, but the Admiralty turned him down. After the return of all the eastern expeditions in the fall of 1851, the general feeling was that Franklin, after wintering at Beechey Island, had gone north through Wellington Channel into the Open Polar Sea. Yet, owing to Ross' efforts, the massacre story still smouldered, and when the Arctic Committee met in October 1851 it questioned Ross, Erasmus Ommanney, Charles Gerrans Phillips, and Erasmus York (who had been brought to England on HMS *Intrepid*) about Beck's report. Among the witnesses, however, only Ross believed that it was true.

Even then, a few individuals considered that further investigation was desirable. Lady Franklin may have been among them, for when Inglefield commanded her search expedition on the *Isabel*, he went out of his way to verify or refute the already discredited massacre story. On 14 September 1852 he wrote to Barrow at the Admiralty: 'I may tell you that I have communicated with natives near Dudley Digges, that I have steamed all round Wolstenholme Sound, and thoroughly examined Omenak, disinterring the dead and pulling down cairns without finding the slightest traces of Franklin' (Inglefield 1852: 654). He had needlessly duplicated the researches of Austin's expedition two years previously.

Several years later Rae and McClintock discovered that Franklin's ships had in fact been lost and that their crews had perished, but nowhere near northwest Greenland. The disaster had occurred in the vicinity of King William Island, a thousand miles to the west.

Was Adam Beck a liar, as Osborn stated, or had he misunderstood the unfamiliar dialect of the Cape York natives and simply reported the story incorrectly? One writer suggested that there was probably some foundation to most native reports, and 'The truth lay at the bottom of them; but flowing through channels infected by fears of displeasure or hope of gain, or by bad interpretation, they were wild and improbable, and obtained no attention. Thus no one believed...that of Adam Beck; but that Beck's statement was founded on truth, and picked up by him and transferred to a locality which suited his views, is now possible . . . ' (A.B.B. 1856: 129).

Beck's metal sign

In August 1850, after the search expeditions had discovered Franklin's wintering site on Beechey Island, Beck boarded the *Felix* with a wooden post he had collected on the island. He said that a piece of tin had been attached to its top bearing the inscription 'September 1846' but on his way back to the ship, while he was descending a steep and slippery slope, the sign had fallen out and vanished in the snow. Searches by the crew of the *Felix* failed to find it. Ross later supported Beck, saying that from the ship, with the aid of a telescope, he had seen Beck carrying the post with its metal sign attached (Great Britain 1852a: 56). In the following year Ross interrupted his homeward voyage and sent Phillips to scour Beechey Island again for the metal plate, without success (Great Britain 1852a: 70).

In some versions of the story the metal is called brass or copper, and the inscription is sometimes said to have specified 3 September. But as Beck understood only a few words of English and had to communicate with Ross in Danish (Cyriax 1962: 37), it is surprising that he claimed to remember exactly the inscription on the sign. This very point was raised in November 1851 by the Arctic Committee, which was assessing the expeditions of Austin and Penny. The Committee asked Ross if Beck could 'read English well.' 'Yes,' Ross assured them, 'he can read it perfectly well, and write it' (Great Britain 1852a: 56). A more relevant question would have been 'could Beck read English *in August 1850* when he found the signpost?' Ross could hardly have claimed that Beck read it 'perfectly well' at that time, because he stated elsewhere that it was only during the winter of 1850–51 that Beck '*began* to understand English' [author's italics] and that shortly before leaving winter quarters for home — a full year after Beck reported the sign's inscription — Ross was still conversing with him in Danish rather than English (Ross 1855: 65).

The alleged inscription really had no apparent significance but some must have wondered if other more useful information had been included on the sign. The Arctic Committee pursued the matter in the fall of 1851, and several months later, when the Admiralty instructed Belcher to look for Franklin's records on Beechey Island, they added, 'The piece of tin or copper, said by Adam Beck to have been dropped from a staff, should also be looked for' (Belcher 1855: I, 4). William John Samuel Pullen, commanding Belcher's base ship *North Star* at Beechey Island, undertook a search for the metal sign, without success.

Rumours in Cumberland Sound

In 1853–54, while wintering on board ship in Cumberland Sound, William Penny heard Inuit stories about white men who had starved some time before 1852 while making their way towards the Great Fish (Back) River, far to the west. Apparently, he did not make this information public until two years later (Penny 1856a).

About the same time that Penny heard the stories, Dr John Rae of the Hudson's Bay Company recovered from the Inuit many articles that had belonged to Franklin and his men, and heard descriptions of their starvation and cannibalism in the same region. When his news was announced in England in late October 1854 the darkness of despair closed in for relatives and friends of the missing men. Voicing Lady Franklin's feelings as well as her own, Sophia Cracroft called it 'the overthrow of our hopes' (Cracroft 1854). Yet some were contemptuous of the Inuit reports. *The Aberdeen Herald* (4 November 1854: 3) quoted *The Athenaeum*'s statement, 'all those who know the Esquimaux know that they have no sense of truth. Like all savages they lie without scruple.' The most influential proponent of this irrational generalization was Charles Dickens (1854: 362) who wrote in the pages of his magazine *Household Words*, 'We believe every savage to be in his heart covetous, treacherous, and cruel.' Although his racist views were opposed by some men who had actually met and travelled with Inuit, Dickens may have convinced some people that the stories of cannibalism could not possibly be true, thus throwing suspicion on the accounts of starvation as well. He suggested that Inuit had murdered the whites.

On Penny's next wintering voyage to Cumberland Sound, in 1855–56, he heard more stories. According to *The Aberdeen Journal* (17 September 1856: 5):

> In the course of the winter he [Penny] saw many of the native Esquimaux, and was informed by some of them that they had heard from other tribes, of their having seen, a long distance in a north-westerly direction from Hogarth Sound [Cumberland Sound], and probably about the year 1850, a circular white tent, erected on the ice, and that, in the absence of all the inmates, they had stolen from it articles made of bright metal. On a second visit, several moons after, two white men were seen at the tent. The natives also brought the story of a party of white men, in the locality indicated, having been compelled by hunger to devour each other.

The Aberdeen Journal felt that Penny's news from Cumberland Sound was 'quite consistent with that brought by Dr John Rae.' Certainly the story was credible to the Inuit of the Cape Searle region; Penny later learned that eight sled loads of them had decided to accompany the visitors westward when they returned home, presumably in the hope of obtaining useful metal objects.

Lady Franklin was very interested in Penny's news. A few days after the article appeared in the Aberdeen newspaper, she pressed him for details. Had any of his Eskimos actually seen the tent? Had they described the belongings of the white men? Had they happened to mention her husband's 'large silver star of the Guelphic order?' (Franklin 1856a). Penny could give her no encouragement.

A significantly different version of the Inuit report to Penny appeared in the *Lincoln Mercury* and was reprinted in a book by Bedford Pim (1857: 16–17). It mentioned 'a large party of white men' living in a tent in a region where deer [caribou] were plentiful. Penny's principal informant, Toutou, had at first said that the whites had been murdered, but the 'small amount' of brandy administered to stimulate his memory may been excessive, for he retracted the allegations of murder on the following day. The *Lincoln Mercury* reached a conclusion opposite to that of *The Aberdeen Journal*. It accepted as fact the version in which men were said to be still alive, and (unjustifiably) declared that Rae's report of cannibalism was 'perfectly unwarranted, and without the slightest foundation.' People who had refused to believe Rae's dismal report now found their views upheld; there might still be survivors after all! Pim was eager to obtain command of a search expedition, but if Rae's findings and *The Aberdeen Journal*'s conclusion were accepted then no one would be inclined to sponsor an expedition. He therefore included the optimistic *Lincoln Mercury* article in his book, and called it 'conclusive evidence of the unwarrantable nature of Dr Rae's report' (Pim 1857: 16), which it clearly was not.

The stories told to Penny in Cumberland Sound almost certainly related to the deaths of many of the Franklin expedition on or near King William Island, about 900 miles to the west, an effective illustration of the extraordinary geographical extent of Inuit communication in the Arctic. News, like trade goods, travelled vast distances by a succession of inter-tribal exchanges. But the stories also reveal the near-impossibility of pinning down the precise time and place of past events when white explorers communicated (as best they could) with native people, often several years after the events — a difficulty that plagued the Franklin search and diminished the potential usefulness of Inuit information.

On his next wintering voyage to Cumberland Sound (1857–58), Penny met an Inuk who introduced himself as 'Captain Pakak' (a corruption of 'Captain Parker,' a Hull whaling master). Pakak told of several boatloads of shipwrecked white men who had arrived at Pond Inlet some years earlier and stayed for two weeks before departing in their boats, never to be seen again. Penny did not consider the man a reliable informant and it was not feasible to investigate the report. To reach Pond Inlet would have required a sea voyage of approximately a thousand miles in a direction contrary to his homeward route to Scotland (Ross 1997: 80, 88–90).

Wrecks and relics in Lancaster Sound

At the end of the 1856 whaling season, Captain Patterson of the Aberdeen ship *Pacific* showed Penny three copper bolts and a galvanized iron rod about three and a half feet long, which he had obtained at Pond Inlet from an Inuk who claimed to have taken them from a ship (evidently abandoned) that had been driven on shore and was still there. Penny wrote to Lady Franklin with the details, and promised to ask the whaling owners to send the items to her. The ship, he said, 'had come up Barrows Straits and turned down I have no doubt he meant Peel Sound' (Penny 1856b). Penny thought it likely that the wrecked ship was one of Franklin's and that Inuit guides could lead someone to the site. Patterson had also seen in the possession of Pond Inlet natives 'two new sledges made of hardwood of the colour of mahogany.' Furthermore, Captain Deuchars of Dundee had noticed (apparently at the same place) 'a patent-copper scoop of some description with one of the ships names upon it,' but its owner had left before he could barter for it.

Lady Franklin wrote back two days later (Franklin 1856b). She asked if Penny could contact Deuchars and find out what ship's name was on the scoop — a vital point — and she revealed that Captain Parker of the Hull whaler *Emma* had also heard Inuit stories, about not one but two ships that had gone ashore near the mouth of Lancaster Sound and provided Inuit foragers with materials. Deuchars had presumed them to be two of the four ships abandoned by Belcher two years before, but it was natural for Lady Franklin to wonder if they belonged to her husband's expedition. The same thought occurred to John Barrow at the Admiralty, who wrote Penny asking if he could get hold of the bolts and any other relics, so that their provenance could be determined (Barrow 1856). Whether the metal objects ever reached the Admiralty or Lady Franklin is uncertain.

(One of Belcher's abandoned ships, the *Resolut*e, was recovered in Davis Strait by an American whaler, but the fate of the others has never been determined. These Pond Inlet stories suggest that two of them may have gone ashore somewhere on the south coast of Lancaster Sound. Penny thought the inlet mentioned was Peel Sound, but it could have been Admiralty Inlet or, even more likely, Navy Board Inlet — the closest one to Pond. As the whalers would have moored to the floe edge off the mouth of Pond Inlet in July, the Inuit who reached the ships on a dog sled made of wreck wood had probably obtained the wood during the winter of 1855–56 or sometime earlier. Unfortunately, no precise details about the time or location of the wrecks have come to light.)

Cannons near the Mackenzie River

In November 1845 — only half a year after Franklin's departure from England — the sound of cannons announced his triumphal arrival near the mouth of the Mackenzie River. The guns were heard at a fur trade post on its tributary the Peel River, approximately a hundred miles south of the Arctic coast, and both whites and Indians

were sure that it was not thunder. The news was sent south 'by the express' (probably a rapid dog sled team) in February 1846 and when the trader at the next post relayed it onward on 1 April 1846 he surmised: 'It may, perhaps, be Captain Franklin. It will be a novelty to see a boat's crew of jacks come dancing up the Mackenzie this summer.' The information made its way slowly across the continent, probably in fur trade canoes, and then traversed the Atlantic by ship. It reached England a year after the event and was published in *The Times* and elsewhere (*Nautical Magazine* 1846).

A slightly different version was given two years later by M.M. McPherson, the Hudson's Bay Company's chief factor in the Mackenzie River district. Writing to Sir John Richardson from Fort Simpson on 1 March 1848, McPherson (1848: 613) said that the noise had been heard by Indians (not whites); it had been heard at the Arctic coast (not at the Peel River post); and it had resembled 'distant thunder' (not cannon fire). McPherson also mentioned a second report of noises like thunder, heard in the following summer (1846) and reported to the Peel River post in October. But his most exciting news (received from the Mr Peers, the trader there, in a letter of 17 December 1847) was that local Indians who had travelled to the coast during the summer had met Eskimos east of the Mackenzie Delta with knives and files given to them earlier by a party of white men in two large boats (possibly ships) (Richardson 1848).

In such reports there was always the possibility that the native people were referring to contacts with explorers other than Franklin, but as the times and places of the alleged meetings were usually vague, it was difficult to determine which explorers — if any — had been involved. In 1846 and 1847 the only explorer working on the continental coast was Rae, who travelled up through Hudson Bay, but his farthest west was Lord Mayor Bay, at the base of Boothia Peninsula, and he reached it by sledge rather than by boat, so it is unlikely that he was the source of the knives and files said to be in the possession of Inuit 1000 miles to the west.

Experienced Arctic explorers and sub-Arctic fur traders did not take the rumours from the Mackenzie very seriously. McPherson (1848: 613) told Richardson: 'I would not mention these reports to one unacquainted with the character of our northern Indians, and the very slight grounds on which they will sometimes spread a report,' and when Richardson (1848: 612) forwarded McPherson's letter to the Admiralty on 4 July 1848 he wrote, 'I place no confidence in them, but merely consider that they have originated in the queries of the traders and the desire of the Indians to excite the curiosity of the questioner in the hope that they obtain something thereby.' He concluded that the noises probably *had* been thunder. If Franklin had been in the vicinity for two successive years he would have sent news somehow to the nearest trading post. Nevertheless, when the reports were made public by the Admiralty, *The Aberdeen Herald* (14 October 1848: 166), invoking the popular 'light in the darkness' metaphor, announced, 'A gleam of hope has just lighted up the public mind.'

The gleam of hope was almost extinguished when Rae encountered evidence of the Franklin disaster in 1854. Yet, as late as 1856 — more than a decade after Franklin's departure for the Arctic and eight years after McPherson and Richardson had expressed strong scepticism about the native report of thunder-like noises and strange boats east of the Mackenzie delta — *The Nautical Magazine* resurrected the old thunder story and said it was worthy of 'very grave consideration,' noting that the *Erebus* and *Terror* had each carried a pair of nine-pounder signal guns, and that the noises could also have resulted from blasting a passage through ice (A.B.B. 1856: 131).

The Warren Point story

In the summer of 1850, HMS *Investigator*, commanded by Robert McClure, approached the Arctic islands from Bering Strait. Whenever Inuit were seen on the shore, officers landed to seek information about their 'lost brothers.' From one group slightly east of the Mackenzie River the explorers heard a story about a white man who had been killed and buried nearby. At Cape Warren (Surgeon Alexander Armstrong called it Point Warren; it is now Warren Point) they landed to examine the alleged burial site. But after finding no grave and nothing to suggest a European presence, the expedition pressed on towards Banks Island. The officers wondered if the story could have related to Richardson's expedition of 1848 (McClure 1856: 88).

McClure's book (1856) was actually written by Sherard Osborn, using McClure's journals; Osborn himself had not been on the expedition. But at the meeting with the Inuit, McClure had been accompanied by Armstrong, Johann Miertsching (the interpreter), and several seamen. Miertsching's journal was not published in English for more than a century (Neatby 1967), so the most reliable eye-witness account available at the time was that of Armstrong (1857). His narrative includes the following important details not present in McClure's sketchy account as interpreted by Osborn: when the men on the ship first sighted the Inuit on shore they noticed one man among them who appeared to be dressed as a European; as the ship got closer fewer Inuit could be seen; after landing and making peace (largely through the efforts of Miertsching) they found only an elderly chief, his wife, and their two sons, one of whom had been badly injured while hunting; they learned that the appearance of the ship had scared off the rest of the people in the camp, who were visible some distance away in their boats; after Armstrong commented on an earring worn by the chief, a metal button of English manufacture, the Eskimos provided 'the startling intelligence that an Indian, *like ourselves*, as they said, *had been killed not far from where we stood*' (Armstrong's italics). Armstrong explained that their term 'Indian' denoted 'all people dissimilar to themselves,' and added, 'the interpreter [Miertsching] concluded it was a European.'

According to the Inuit, a party of strangers had landed earlier on the tip of Warren Point, built a driftwood hut, and lived there for a time. When one of them somehow offended the nearby Inuit, they killed him and buried the body, after which the remaining strangers moved away. Finally the natives revealed that 'the man who had killed him had fled from the encampment that morning in his "kayak," on first seeing the ship, fearing that we had come to chastise him or his tribe for the offence, in accordance with their own savage custom of revenge' (Armstrong 1857: 152–154).

McClure and Armstrong, although both eye-witnesses, did not speak or understand the Eskimo language; they depended on the oral translation into English by Miertsching, whose first language was German but who had learned Eskimo during several years at a Moravian mission in Labrador. Miertsching's account of the incident (Neatby 1967: 52–54) generally corroborates that of Armstrong, but with a few additional details: the chief's name was Kairoluak; the strangers had arrived without a boat; after game animals became scarce they were starving. On two crucial points, however, Miertsching's account differs from that of Armstrong. First, he did *not* mention murder; he said that the Inuit had found the body of the man after his companions had moved away, and Kairoluak then buried it. Second, he concluded that the dead man was *not* a European, and that the account was really 'an old legend derived from some fight with the Indians' (Neatby 1967: 53). Whether Armstrong misunderstood Miertsching's translation or one of them misrepresented the proceedings is not clear.

Of the two eye-witness accounts of the Warren Point episode available in English during the Franklin search, Armstrong's was the more convincing because it was much more detailed and because his narrative had not been rewritten by someone else. It was also the more alarming because it stated that a European had been murdered, and this may have influenced people's ideas about Franklin's route and fate. But was Armstrong truthful? He is said to have drawn 'a most unfriendly portrait of his captain' in his book (Neatby 1967: xii), and he openly criticized McClure for his hasty departure from the alleged site of the dead man's grave. 'I began to doubt if this was the exact locality,' he wrote. 'It was, therefore, much to be regretted, that we did not revisit the encampment and take the Esquimaux chief for a guide' (Armstrong (1857: 157). His version of events may have led a widely read contemporary historian of the Franklin search to criticize McClure for failing to investigate the native report more thoroughly. 'A rigid inquiry should therefore have been instituted,' wrote John Brown (1858: 322). 'Much valuable information might have been elicited regarding the fate of the missing Expedition.' But McClure and his party had spent a total of approximately eight hours ashore at the two sites, questioning the Eskimos and searching for the grave, which had delayed the ship for a day or so. It appears highly unlikely that further research would have uncovered any useful knowledge.

Indian reports from the Back River

Several years later, in 1857, a report from a trading post in the Mackenzie district attracted the attention of Osborn, who sent it to *The Times*. Indians had reported that two abandoned campsites had been seen on an island near the mouth of the Back River. One of the campsites was evidently quite recent and appeared to have accommodated almost a dozen men (Brown 1858: 439). Osborn's letter gave rise to a flurry of contradictory opinions in the pages of the newspaper. Top officials of the Hudson's Bay Company denied any knowledge of the report and accorded it no credibility whatever, while others expressed full confidence in it. Dr King, a perpetual thorn in the sides of both government and company, urged the Admiralty to determine 'the fate of 12 Englishmen, of 12 Servants of the Crown, despatched many years ago upon a perilous errand to an inhospitable region, — of 12 men who have been long since officially recorded as dead, but who, there is nevertheless reasonable ground for believing, are yet alive, and may be rescued from death by an immediate and vigorous effort' (quoted in Barr 1999: 242). Although the Indian report may have raised the hopes of a few individuals, the Admiralty did not undertake any new searching effort. The campsites in question had probably been made during the search expedition of James Anderson and James Stewart down the Back River in 1855.

More than a third of a century later, three men who had been with Anderson and Stewart revealed some more startling news. They testified that when they had used an inflatable boat to reach an island in Chantrey Inlet, one of them had sighted the masts of a ship, but they had kept the information secret because they did not wish to prolong the search any longer (Tyrrell 1910). Did they really see a ship? Franklin's had already been destroyed. Could it have been a boat? The story has been called 'a baffling enigma, one that is unlikely ever to be satisfactorily explained' (Barr 1999: 236).

Rumours in Alaska

In September 1848 HMS *Herald*, commanded by Henry Kellett, arrived in Alaska with supplies for HMS *Plover*. In Kotzebue Sound, Kellett heard a story about white men having been seen in the upper reaches of the Buckland River, which drains into the sound (Fig. 2). They were said to be clothed like sailors and led by an officer who wore gold braid on his uniform, and they appeared to be the vanguard of a larger body of men. The report was three times removed from its source, and its transmission may have been impeded by linguistic difficulties. Kellett's 'interpreter,' a Russian half-breed, did not speak English and Kellett spoke no Russian, so they communicated in Spanish (Bockstoce 1985: 96). It was too late in the season to investigate the news, but the report was not forgotten.

HMS *Plover* (Fig. 7), commanded by Thomas Edward Laws Moore, arrived too late to connect with the *Herald*, and took up winter quarters on the Asiatic side of Bering Strait, at a place Moore called Emma Harbour. During the

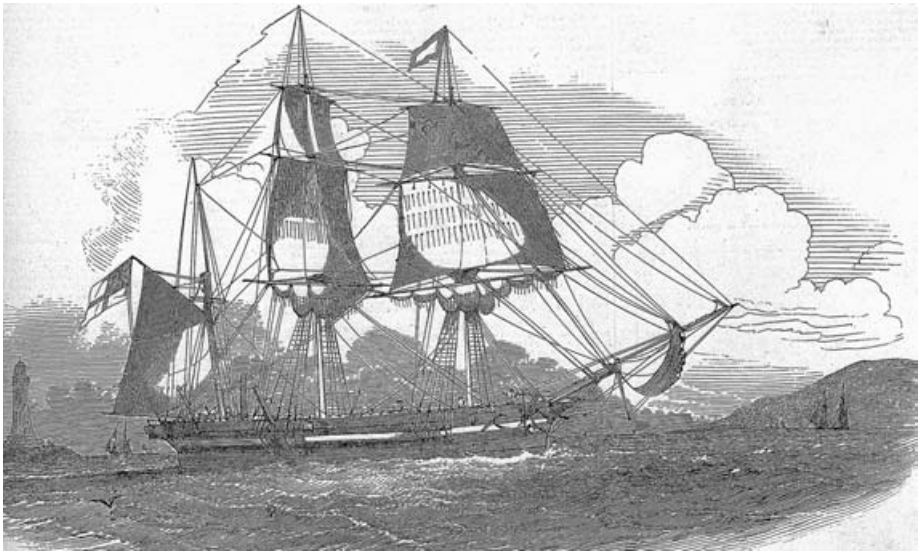

Fig. 7. HMS *Plover*, which sailed to Alaska and remained at the western end of the Northwest Passage for six years. (*The Illustrated London News* 22 January 1848: 39)

winter Chukchi natives told of a shipwreck somewhere to the north. Moore sent travelling parties to investigate, but, despite extensive travels along the coast, they found no ships, wrecked or otherwise. The story appears to have been 'a garbled account of the sighting of the whaling bark *Superior*,' which had spearheaded the advance of the American whaling frontier through Bering Strait the previous summer (Bockstoce 1985: 98). When he reached Kotzebue Sound in November 1849, Moore heard another report from natives of the Buckland River about two ships manned by white men east of Point Barrow, which had been seen — and even boarded — by natives during the summer of 1848, after which the ships had sailed off (Great Britain 1852b: 67).

From 1848 to 1854 the *Plover* stood guard in the Bering Strait region, waiting to assist Franklin if he emerged from the Northwest Passage. The ship usually sailed up to Point Barrow in summer then retreated southward to winter in either Kotzebue Sound or Norton Sound. At various places along the coast, natives came to trade and, after being made aware that a search was in progress for white men in two large ships, they proved more than willing to provide information. When Richard Collinson reached Alaska in HMS *Enterprise*, Moore told him of at least six separate accounts that had reached his ears between March and September 1850 (Collinson 1889: 77–78). Some stories mentioned ships or boats but others did not. One said the whites were at Noo wook but others placed them at the Kopak River or the Ek-ko River (none of these locations was familiar to Moore and his officers). Some native reports said the whites were well, but others said they were starving or dead. In some they were on ships but in others they were in boats. The ships were safe in one account but destroyed by ice in another. In one report the men were building a vessel.

According to one alarming story the white men had been murdered by natives. This was quite believable;

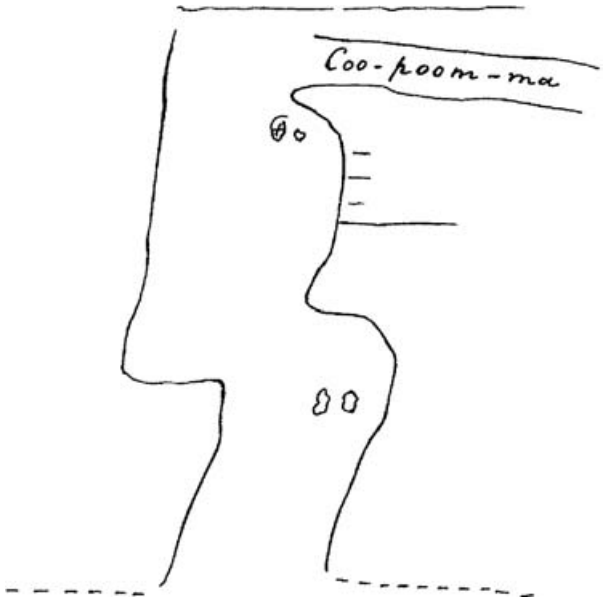

Fig. 8. 'Outline of a River to the Eastward of Point Barrow indicating the burial place of some white men, reported by the natives to have been killed there. Traced from an original drawing of a Wainwright-Inlet Esquimaux.' (Great Britain 1856: following page 72)

some earlier boat expeditions along the north coast, including one under Franklin himself, had experienced tense encounters with hostile groups. A map drawn by an Eskimo (Fig. 8) purported to show the very place where the white men had been killed and their bodies buried, but where on earth was the Coo-poom-ma River? In the many vague reports, the locations and dates of the alleged encounters were never clear. It was impossible to makes sense out of them.

Native reports in Alaska were difficult to confirm or disprove because of the lack of preparation of maritime expeditions for overland travel, the duplicity or hostility

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of some Indian and Eskimo groups, the officers' lack of familiarity with native toponymy, and, of course, the language problem. Furthermore, the activities of searching parties on the north coast of the continent were a potential source of confusion. The rumours might refer, not to Franklin, but to Richardson or Rae in 1848, Pullen, Robert Shedden, or Rae in 1849, Pullen or McClure in 1850, or Collinson in 1851.

Many believed that if the native reports about the north coast had actually related to Franklin they would have been confirmed by search expeditions in that area. That Pullen had not met up with Franklin survivors, their ships or boats, or any evidence of their deaths, 'annuls the credibility of these [native] reports,' wrote Charles Weld of the Royal Society (Weld 1851: 32). However, John Brown (1858: 172) pointed out that, as Pullen had seen no natives for the last 350 miles of his voyage to the Mackenzie, he had been unable to question people, and could easily have missed seeing any tangible evidence of a disaster. Pullen's own account shows that demonstrations of Eskimo hostility east of Point Barrow — including attempted theft, threatening gestures, and the firing of arrows — had made him so fearful of an escalation of violence that he had kept away from the land as much as feasible and had tried to avoid further contact. 'If blood were shed there was no knowing where it would end,' he wrote. Not only would outright warfare jeopardize his mission and the safety of his men, but — whatever its outcome — it would probably cause the natives to take revenge against Franklin's men if any came that way (Pullen 1947: 42). Pullen was in the unenviable position of having to limit his search for evidence of Franklin's expedition in order to minimize the risk to survivors from that very expedition.

As to the origin of the Alaskan rumours, Weld (1851: 32) concurred with the opinion of Kellett that 'they were entirely created by the anxiety of all on board the "Plover" to obtain information, which caused the natives to be fully aware of the subject on which the strangers wished chiefly to be informed.' Obligingly, they invented stories to please, hopeful of being rewarded. Weld warned against placing too much reliance on the reports. His opinion was in accord with those of Chief Factor McPherson and Sir John Richardson regarding stories in the lower Mackenzie River. Yet unauthenticated reports might conceivably be true, at least in part, so the commanders of parties involved in the search could not afford to ignore them. It was their responsibility to find out whether they were authentic or not. Discussing the summer of 1850, when Kellett had reported the entire coast 'alive' with rumours, Brown conceded that there was 'nothing impossible in them' (Brown 1858: 173). Unfortunately, tracking such rumours to their source was very difficult, and could involve serious risks.

While the *Plover* was wintering in Kotzebue Sound in 1849–50, Moore sent Lieutenant Pim to the Russian post at St Michael (Michaelowski) to see what the traders had heard about the presence of strange white men in the interior. The Russians thought that the native reports of whites referred to rival traders from the Hudson's Bay Company, which had established Fort Yukon in 1847 (Bockstoce 1985: 106). Pim, on the other hand, believed that some survivors from Franklin's expedition might be living there, and Moore and other officers probably shared his belief. Therefore, in the fall of 1850 Collinson put three men from HMS *Enterprise* ashore at St Michael, under Lieutenant John James Barnard, to attempt to get to the root of the rumours. In late December, on his way to the Russian post at Nulato (also called Darabin, variously spelled) on the Yukon River, Barnard heard yet another rumour; in September 1849 the crew of a ship anchored at Point Barrow had allegedly been murdered by natives, who then destroyed the vessel. After reaching Nulato in mid-January and remaining for a month, Barnard himself experienced an attack — this one real. Marauding Indians killed the Russian governor and more than 50 villagers. Barnard, wounded in nine places, died the next day and his interpreter 'Boski' (Pavil Oclagook) died two months later (Bockstoce 1985: 105–108 ; Brown 1858: 230; Great Britain 1852b: 65–78).

In order to check the rumour about a ship at Point Barrow, Moore sent another small party from HMS *Plover* to the trading post of St Michael in February 1851, commanded by Lieutenant E.J.L. Cooper. The Russian governor expressed confidence in the report but, as he could provide no supporting evidence or additional details, another possible clue to Franklin's whereabouts was left hanging in thin air, unconfirmed and unconfirmable.

In London, *The Leader* (22 February 1851) reported that white men had been seen in Alaska 300–400 miles inland and Russian attempts to reach them with provisions had been thwarted by hostile Indian tribes. According to some Eskimo reports there had been a quarrel and the whites had been murdered. The editor wondered if the story referred to Franklin's men, yet doubted its reliability, but it was probably a version of the Barnard disaster. By the time such reports reached Britain from Alaska, the details, already vague at source, had become hopelessly obscured.

Native rumours: west and east

The profusion of rumours about white men near the Mackenzie River and in coastal Alaska is remarkable. There was nothing like it in the eastern Arctic. But there were significant contrasts between the two regions.

In the western Arctic, ships of the Royal Navy exerted an almost continual presence during most of the Franklin search. HMS *Plover* was in Bering Strait for six consecutive years, supplied each summer by the *Herald* and other ships. The yacht *Nancy Dawson* assisted the search in 1849. HMS *Investigator* passed through in 1850 and HMS *Enterprise*, having visited Alaska in 1850, passed that way again in 1851 to proceed into the Arctic archipelago. In harbours where ships wintered or visited, natives were routinely asked whether they knew about

ships or parties of white men. In addition, the expeditions contacted Russian fur trade posts, where natives were likely to report unusual occurrences. The most northerly posts on the coast were St Michael and Unalakteet on the shores of Norton Sound.

In the eastern Arctic, however, there were no trading posts and there was no expedition ship standing on guard year after year. Only during Belcher's expedition of 1852–54 was a base ship stationed at Beechey Island in Barrow Strait. Furthermore, the search expeditions that traversed Lancaster Sound operated, for the most part, to the north of the zone of Inuit occupancy. The only place near Lancaster Sound where contact with native people occurred with some frequency was at the mouth of Pond Inlet, where whaling ships congregated early in the season, but it was well south of the usual track of search expeditions hurrying into Lancaster Sound.

In a review of the Franklin search in 1856, *The Nautical Magazine* considered that the reports originating with Eskimo and Indian groups from Baffin Bay to western Alaska might be connected. If Franklin's ships had been beset for several years between Melville Island and the mainland coast, they might have been the subject of the rumours from Alaska as well as the Mackenzie district, and even Pond Inlet (where one man said he had been on board the ships). But, 'considering the number of channels through which rumours and reports had to pass before they reached us, affecting perhaps the interests of those parties from whom they first proceeded, it could scarcely be expected that we should receive other than unsatisfactory and apparently improbable stories concerning the absent ships and their crews' (A.B.B. 1856: 129).

Rumours in the Pacific

In March 1850, people in England learned of some remarkable news originating from San Francisco: Sir John Franklin and his men were alive! *The Nautical Standard* of London (9 March 1850) summarized the evolution of the story as follows.

A San Francisco newspaper, the *Public Good*, announced in its issue of 29 December 1849 that an English expedition had rescued Franklin and his men from Prince Regent Inlet, where his ships had spent four years frozen into the ice. The harbinger of this welcome news was 'a gentleman just from Mazatlan, and formerly connected with an independent yacht expedition from England,' who had heard the news in Mexico from the British Consul. Then the *Liverpool Courier* summarized a letter written on 30 December by Charles Peck in San Francisco to his father Samuel in Liverpool. According to the newspaper, Peck had stated that he 'had seen a gentleman from Kamschatka, who informed him that he had seen Sir John Franklin, that he and all his party were quite safe, and coming through the north-west passage.' Finally, on 7 March, the Admiralty corrected the *Courier*'s statement that Franklin had actually been 'seen,' quoting from a letter written by Samuel Peck on 6 March, in which he explained that what his son Charles had really written was that he had met a gentleman 'recently arrived from Kamschatka, with the news of the discovery of Sir John Franklin and all his party. They are all well, and have come through the north-west passage.' Charles Peck had met the informant on the English ship *Blakeley* on the previous day; presumably both men were passengers on the ship, sailing from Mazatlan to San Francisco. The letter he wrote to his father was taken to Panama by a helpful ship captain named Askew and posted there on 2 January 1850. (Mail bound for England was routinely taken overland across the isthmus to be put on board trans-Atlantic mail steamers.)

On receipt of the news, the Admiralty immediately notified Lady Franklin. Her reaction was reported by Charles Weld, who wrote as follows to *The Nautical Standard* (9 March 1850) and other newspapers: 'Lady Franklin, who has the best means of testing the truthfulness of such a report, and to whom it was in the first instance conveyed by telegraph, regards it as utterly devoid of foundation. She considers that it has evidently been derived from the Esquimaux report of last year having at length arrived at Petropolauski, whence it was carried to California.'

Lady Franklin was undoubtedly correct in ascribing the story to the Inuit report at Pond Inlet, but wrong in assuming that it had spread eastward from England across Europe and Asia to Petropavlovsk, and then to Mexico and San Francisco. The 'gentleman from Mazatlan' had been associated with 'an independent expedition from England' — clearly that of Robert Shedden on the *Nancy Dawson* — but this yacht had departed from Petropavlovsk in July 1849, about the same time as the Inuit story was first reported in Pond Inlet, and more than two months before it reached England. After assisting the naval search vessels in northern Alaska, Shedden had sailed the *Nancy Dawson* to Mazatlan, arriving there in mid-November (Cooke and Holland 1978: 182). Already seriously ill, he died there soon after. The un-named man from Mazatlan who communicated the news about Franklin to Charles Peck and the *Public Good*, was probably one of Shedden's officers, possibly his first mate, whose name, according to A.G.E. Jones (1992: 334), was Dunn. There is no reason to doubt the statement in the *Public Good* that he had received the news from the British Consul in Mazatlan. The Consul had probably learned about the story in letters or newspapers from England.

A few days after the detailed coverage of the story in *The Nautical Standard*, the Liverpool owners of the *Blakeley* informed the Admiralty that the ship's captain had heard nothing about Franklin during his voyage to San Francisco, and that if authentic news of Franklin's safety had come to his attention he would have taken immediate steps to notify authorities (*The Times* 14 March 1850: 4). This may have brought the matter to a close in London, but the story lingered on in other parts of the world, taking on even more fanciful forms.

A rumour that reached Hong Kong on the ship *Vernon* from California stated that Sir John Franklin had at last solved 'the grand geographical problem' and one of his lieutenants had arrived in San Francisco, intending to take the news to England by way of Panama. *The Nautical Standard* (20 April 1850: 243), stifling a yawn, remarked, 'We imagine that this is no more than the old California rumour brought about two months ago.'

Thus the story about Franklin that originated with Inuit at Pond Inlet in the eastern Arctic in July 1849 had crossed the Atlantic to Britain by early October, recrossed the Atlantic to Mexico and reached California by late December, then rebounded across the ocean for a third time, arriving in Britain by March 1850. During this eight-month voyage, the story had evolved. What had originally been a false — or misunderstood — native report that Franklin was safe but ice-bound in or near Prince Regent Inlet, with two other ships nearby, had mutated into positive statements that he (a) had been rescued from Prince Regent Inlet, (b) had been seen 'coming through' the Northwest Passage, (c) had completed the Passage, and (d) had arrived in California. Yet, the news that James Clark Ross had returned to England in November 1849 without having seen Franklin — which showed that four ships had *not* been beset in the same locality — received little attention outside Britain. One recalls the old adage, well known in Franklin's time, that 'a lie will go round the world while truth is putting its boots on.'

And even that was not the end of the matter. Rumour built upon rumour; speculation subsided in one place only to pop up in another. On several subsequent occasions, Franklin's expedition was reported to have completed the Northwest Passage.

On 8 February 1851, a newspaper in Sydney, Australia, published news that had arrived by ship from Honolulu to the effect that Franklin's ships had been wrecked in 'St George's Sound' in the Sandwich (Hawaiian) Islands. The report then travelled by way of Calcutta to England, where it appeared in a newspaper on 18 June (Grinnell 1848–61 (3) G: 39). But, as the more rapid post from Honolulu to England by way of North America had contained no mention of the story, the newspaper concluded that it was 'groundless.'

In August another rumour circulated in the Sandwich Islands, this one claiming that some persons bearing news of Franklin had arrived at the island of 'Owyhee' [Hawaii]. William Miller, Her Majesty's consul in 'Woahoo' (Oahu), dispatched HMS *Swift* to investigate. Her commander, H. Cornwallis Aldham, reported on 12 September that he had proceeded to Hawaii and with the help of Mr Petman, the chief customs collector in the Hawaiian kingdom, had made inquiries at several ports, but the results had been negative. No ships or persons had arrived from the Arctic. The rumour was therefore condemned as 'mere fabrications,' and Miller wrote to inform the Foreign Office, which in turn notified the Admiralty on 19 February 1852 (Great Britain 1852c: 13–14).

In the autumn of 1851, an Australian newspaper announced that a native in the Aleutian Islands had seen two ships frozen into the ice (*Hobart Town Crier* 12 November 1851). This news reached the Admiralty at the end of April 1852 (Admiralty 1852a). In August the *San Francisco Herald* published a notice that reached England a few months later and was reprinted in the *Dover Telegraph* (28 October 1852). It read: 'We learn that the English discovery ships Erebus and Terror, have arrived at Santa Barbara, with many of their crews down with the scurvy.' The editor of the Dover newspaper commented, with admirable ambiguity: 'We hear there is no foundation, however, which is too good news to be true.'

Franklin's food supply

The Admiralty had equipped Franklin's expedition for three years (Cyriax (1939: 40), but the three years were calculated to commence in western Greenland, not in England. Some of the provisions were carried to Disko Bay in the accompanying transport *Barretto Junior* (sometimes spelled *Baretto*) and then transferred to the discovery ships so that they could start from there fully topped up with food and fuel. Franklin's dispatch of 12 July stated that the ships were ready to start from Greenland 'with supplies of every kind for three years' (*The Times* 12 January 1852: 8). The three years' food would therefore last until mid-July 1848, and most of it could be devoted to the Arctic passage, because, after reaching Bering Strait, Franklin would be able to replenish his stores in the Sandwich (Hawaiian) Islands or elsewhere in the Pacific before undertaking the long voyage back to Britain by way of Cape Horn.

As the years rolled by without word from the expedition, the inevitable steady diminution of its food reserves was in everyone's thoughts. The first official search expeditions departed for Lancaster Sound and Bering Strait only slightly before the theoretical end of Franklin's food in 1848, which provided a sense of urgency — even desperation — to all the search efforts. If the missing men survived beyond July 1848 it would be because they had managed to stretch their resources by rationing, or add to them by hunting. Opinions about their chances of living off the land varied widely. Optimists described the wildlife resources of the Arctic as bountiful, and insisted that if primitive 'savages' could inhabit the region, then of course Franklin's men could too. 'Where the Esquimaux have lived, there Englishmen may live,' Colonel Edward Sabine confidently declared (*Hull Advertiser* 29 March 1850: 8). Pessimists — or, more properly, realists — doubted that the explorers could match the Inuit in hunting prowess (firearms notwithstanding), did not believe that all parts of the Arctic were abundant in game, and thought it likely that an expedition comprising 129 men might be a trifle large to subsist by hunting. The failure of the extraordinary efforts of 1850 and 1851, in which six search expeditions failed to trace Franklin beyond his 1845–46 winter harbour at

Beechey Island, was grist for the pessimist mill. *The Times* (7 October 1851: 6) printed a letter from a reader who identified himself only as 'A Captain, R.N.' He wrote, 'There can now be little doubt of the melancholy fate of Franklin's expedition. To buoy up with false hopes the relatives of the missing crews is only mistaken kindness.'

When the Arctic Committee met a few weeks later to review the expeditions of Austin and Penny, they asked several Arctic experts if they considered it probable that some of the missing expedition were still alive. Of the seven men who expressed an opinion, three stated outright that it was impossible, two conceded that it was possible, but only two felt that it was probable (Great Britain 1852a). Neither of the men who deemed it probable (Richardson and Scoresby) had ever been in the archipelago that had ensnared Franklin, and neither had ever passed an Arctic winter on board ship. Sir John Ross, on the other hand, who had remained ship-bound in the Arctic longer than anyone, insisted that no Englishmen could survive as long as six years (the length of time Franklin had been away). It was a discouraging outlook.

But then a letter to the editor of *The Times* (23 December 1851: 5) gave the optimists an unexpected boost and provided a slender thread of hope for the families and friends of the missing men. William Penny reported that Robert Martin, the Peterhead captain whose whaler *Enterprise* had been the last ship to speak to members of HMS *Erebus* and *Terror* in Baffin Bay, had just revealed a startling piece of news. On the occasion of that last meeting, in late July 1845, Franklin had told him that the expedition had food enough for five years, and could stretch it to seven! Furthermore, his officers had been busy shooting birds and salting them down in casks to augment their supplies.

Martin's revelation brought forth a mean riposte from the 'Captain, R.N.' He insisted that Franklin's ships had carried only three years' food, and that they were so crowded with men and stores when they separated from the transport there was no space in which they could possibly have stored any casks of salted birds. And why, he demanded to know, had Martin waited more than six years in 'rigid silence' before making this public (*The Times* 6 January 1852 : 5).

His implied criticism raised the ire of Martin, who quickly made public a deposition he had made before the Provost of Peterhead, arranged for a statement to be recorded from Robert Walker, his chief mate at the time (who corroborated his account), and wrote as follows to the newspaper : 'My name may not, in your columns, have the same weight with some as the anonymous title of 'A Captain, R.N.,' but, fortunately for me, I think I can claim for myself, where I am known, as much credit for veracity as might be vouchsafed to the 'Captain, R.N.' where he is known, were he to give his name.' After thus chiding the naval officer for hiding behind a cloak of anonymity, Martin responded to the valid question of his long silence on the matter.

> I may further add, that on my return from Davis's Straits in 1845 I communicated to the Admiralty the fact of my having seen Sir John Franklin's ships. No notice was taken to me of that communication, and of course no inquiry for particulars was made ; and, if it did not occur to their Lordships at that early period of the absence of the ships, nor afterwards, to address me, it may be considered the less wonderful that I should have made no further communication to them. (*The Times* 14 January 1852: 8)

This effectively silenced the anonymous captain.

Martin found a supporter in C.R. Weld of the Royal Society, who defended his reliability and protested that a seaman of good repute who had made a formal deposition before a magistrate should not be 'ranked as an impostor.' He went on to summarize several cases of Europeans surviving in the Arctic regions, inferring that Franklin and his men could do likewise (*The Times* 7 January 1852: 5). A few weeks later *The Athenaeum* (17 January 1852: 82) also spoke out against the 'anonymous sneering' of the unfortunate captain, cited examples of explorers who had encountered vast concentrations of seabirds in some Arctic regions, and noted that many bird bones had actually been found at Franklin's first wintering site on Beechey Island.

The observation of 'Captain, R.N.' that the ships were very crowded when they left the Whale Fish Islands in Disko Bay was correct, however. Commander James Fitzjames (1845) of HMS *Erebus* had written on 11 July, 'We are now full — very — having three years' provisions and coals, besides the engine. The deck is covered with coals and casks, leaving a small passage fore and aft, and we are very deep in the water.' Yet, Lieutenant W. Nelson Griffiths, who commanded the transport *Barretto Junior*, stated that before he parted from HMS *Erebus* and *Terror* on 12 July 1845 their officers and men had been saving the brine from meat casks so that they could preserve birds and fish secured during the voyage (*The Times* 12 January 1852: 8). Even if there was no space on board Franklin's ships at that moment, the consumption of almost 400 man-meals per day as they proceeded north would steadily empty provision casks in which products of the hunt could then be stored. Or, game secured as they went along could replace part of the daily ration, enabling the preserved food to last longer than planned. The coast of Greenland north of Disko, along which ships were often held up for days or weeks by adverse ice conditions, was famously rich in bird life, and the waters contained an abundance of sea mammals. Some authorities unwisely extrapolated this natural bounty into false conclusions about the availability of wildlife in the North American Arctic archipelago.

Griffiths also noted that in addition to the regular provisions provided by the Admiralty the officers had their own private stock, which included at least six dozen fowls, some pigs, and some sheep, and he stated that three live bullocks carried from England had been slaughtered before leaving Disko Bay, and the meat was hanging from

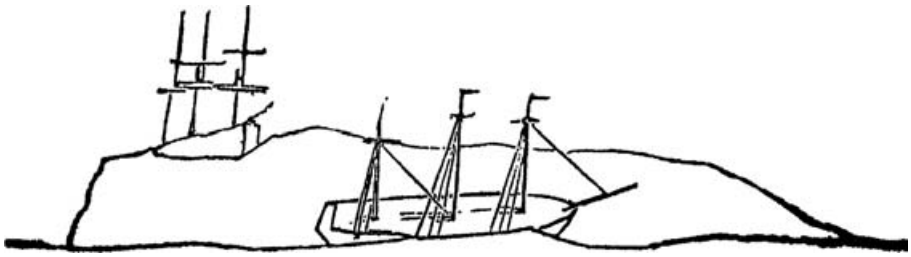

Fig. 9. The abandoned ships seen on an iceberg on the Grand Banks and presumed to be those of Franklin. (*The Illustrated London News* 17 April 1852: 306)

the mainstays of Franklin's ships to be preserved by cold until Christmas. Furthermore, he pointed out that as three men had been sent home ill from Greenland (there were actually five) and three more had died on Beechey Island during the first winter, there were fewer mouths to feed.

The *Barretto Junior* had left the Thames with 10 bullocks on board. Four died on the rough passage through the North Sea, but four replacements were shipped in the Orkney Islands (Cyriax 1939: 57). Whether or not all 10 reached Greenland on the hoof or otherwise — or only the three mentioned by Griffiths — is not clear. The bullocks and the officers' private stock would not have been considered part of the normal ships' provisions. They were extra luxuries, and, along with the country food being secured by shooting, they would have theoretically extended the expedition's duration on full rations beyond three years.

In February 1852 Mrs Thomas Blenky made public a letter written by her husband, ice-master of HMS *Terror*, in Disko Bay on 12 July 1845. He had written: 'we may be from five to six years (it might be into the seventh)' (Cyriax 1939: 66). This lent considerable credibility to Martin's statement. Several years later, P.L. Simmonds (1857: 224) stated that at a private dinner party before leaving the Thames, Franklin himself had advised his friends not to expect him for seven years.

If the food issued to the expedition was sufficient for only three years on full rations, how can one explain the contrary statements made to Martin by Franklin and his officers? Cyriax (1939: 66) suggested that either Martin misunderstood them or they exaggerated, and he favoured the former explanation. But the latter deserves consideration. Their success in securing birds during the two weeks since leaving Disko Bay may have fuelled their already optimistic spirits and convinced them that they could easily supplement their preserved foods by hunting. Franklin knew from experience that animal food on the barren grounds of the continental mainland could be very scarce, but perhaps he believed that two ships would provide excellent bases from which to exploit large populations of game animals, fish, and birds, farther north. An unrealistic confidence in their ability to secure animal food among the Arctic islands may have led Franklin, Blenky, and other officers to speak casually of staying out for five, six, or even seven years. Half-rations, of course, could have lasted for six years, but it is very unlikely that Franklin and his officers had based their calculations on such a drastic policy, which would have had an adverse impact on men's health. They meant seven years on full rations.

Martin's statement and the subsequent discussions about potential sources of food in the Arctic stimulated the fading belief that the missing men might still be alive. There was still a great sense of urgency, however, as the seven years would expire in July 1852, but it was in a climate of renewed hope that preparations began for a large Admiralty search expedition under Sir Edward Belcher. The optimistic interpretation of Franklin's chances of survival was a comfort to Lady Franklin, reinforcing her persistent belief in the existence of the missing men (which lasted long after the Admiralty had given up hope) and contributing to her decision to sponsor further private search expeditions under Inglefield in 1852, Kennedy in 1853–55, and McClintock in 1857–59.

The ships on an iceberg

Of all the reports apparently connected with Franklin's expedition the most bizarre and most puzzling was that of two ships sighted on an iceberg on the Grand Banks east of Newfoundland. The sighting took place in April 1851 but, strange to say, it escaped attention until a year later. When the news finally reached the Admiralty, it caused serious concern and great inconvenience. In the end it could neither be proved nor disproved. It has remained an unsolved mystery, one which a retired naval officer, Rupert Gould, eagerly included in a book entitled *Oddities: a book of unexplained facts* (1944). The following details are taken mainly from Gould's account and from a Blue Book on Arctic expeditions published in 1852 for the House of Commons (Great Britain 1852e).

The sighting occurred on or about 17 April 1851 when the English brig *Renovation*, on a voyage in ballast from Limerick, Ireland, to Quebec, was passing through the dangerous zone of pack ice and icebergs that embraces Newfoundland through the winter and spring. Looking at one particularly large berg (Gould called it an ice floe) between three and five miles away, the deck watch were astonished to see two three-masted, square-rigged ships, both well above the level of the sea, one upright and the other on her beams' ends (Fig. 9). The *Renovation*'s

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mate, several of the crew, and a passenger, all examined the curious spectacle through the ship's one mediocre telescope. They saw no sign of life on the berg nor on its ice-rafted ships, which appeared to have been abandoned. The mate informed Captain Edward Coward, who at the time was in his cabin, allegedly ill. Although the ships on the ice remained in sight for upwards of three-quarters of an hour, neither the mate nor the captain made any effort to approach the iceberg in order to identify the ships or confirm that there were no survivors, even though the possibility of their being HMS *Erebus* and *Terror* was mentioned. This was widely perceived as a gross dereliction of duty. *The Aberdeen Journal* later (21 April 1852: 8) commented: 'we can only regret that, whether an illusory image or a reality, the master and mate of the "Renovation" should have been so forgetful of the interests of humanity, and so stupidly pusilanimous, as to make no attempt to solve the painful question that the sight of the vessels must have suggested.' Discussing the failure to investigate, a newspaper in Canada remarked 'Captain Coward — how appropriate the name!' (*Kingston Whig Standard* 4 May 1852).

Inexplicably, the captain did not even report the incident. An entire year passed before a naval officer in England happened to hear about the episode and had the good sense to inform the Admiralty in London. Although the Lords Commissioners may have considered the notion of a pair of ships being carried on an iceberg from the Arctic regions to Newfoundland highly improbable, they had to investigate the report. It was far from easy, however, because by then the witnesses were dispersed from Italy to Ontario.

Beginning in late March 1852, the Admiralty sought information from men who had heard the story in Quebec or in England, and from men on board the *Renovation* who had actually seen the ships. Supposing that the ships might have been fishing, sealing, or whaling vessels, they made inquiries at ports in Britain and in Newfoundland, without avail. Hoping to get confirmation of the sighting from other sources, they contacted ship-owners whose vessels had crossed the Atlantic at about the same time. Although the Admiralty learned that a German ship, the *Doctor Kneip*, had reported seeing two waterlogged hulks on the Grand Banks shortly after the *Renovation*'s sighting, they did not follow up this avenue of research.

By early June the investigation had run its inconclusive course. If real ships had been seen on the ice and they were not whalers, sealers, or merchant ships, then it seemed very likely that they were Franklin's. But they had almost certainly been abandoned, so if Franklin and his men were still alive they must be found somewhere to the north, along the iceberg's drift path from Baffin Bay. Belcher's five-ship search expedition was already on its way to Lancaster Sound, with instructions that read, in part, 'adverting to the report of two ships having been seen on the ice in the North Atlantic, in the spring of 1851, we think it expedient to draw your attention to this subject, that you may adopt such steps on your way from Baffin Bay, with reference to search and inquiry on the shores of Davis Strait, as you may consider most advisable under the circumstances' (*Nautical Magazine* 1852: 660). On 21 June, Edward Inglefield, preparing to set out in Lady Franklin's small steam-powered *Isabel*, announced that he intended 'to accomplish a perfect examination of the west coast of Baffin Bay and Labrador' (Inglefield 1853: 209) to search for survivors. (He actually covered about a quarter of the 2000-mile distance.)

In late June 1852 the House of Commons ordered the Admiralty correspondence relating to the ships on the ice to be printed. The resultant Blue Book (Great Britain 1852e) amounted to almost 40 pages, which shows that the Admiralty had taken the story very seriously and gone to a great deal of trouble. Its three-month investigation had involved not only its own personnel, but also those of the Foreign Office, the Colonial Office, the Coast Guard, consular officials in Venice, collectors of customs in England, Ireland, and Canada, and shipping interests in Britain and Newfoundland. But in the end it remained a mystery.

Discussion

Exploration hoaxes

Exploration of the world's unknown places has always been susceptible to deception. Because fame, adulation, and money may be garnered by being the first to reach some inaccessible geographical feature, or by accomplishing some highly challenging journey, some explorers have been tempted to falsify their achievements. A few solitary explorers or small groups travelling in remote regions where witnesses were either illiterate or absent have been able to claim success without seriously risking contradiction. In his book *Great exploration hoaxes*, David Roberts (2001) included Frederick A. Cook's ascent of Mount McKinley, Robert E. Peary's expedition to the North Pole, Richard E. Byrd's flight to the North Pole, Cesare Maestri's ascent of Cerra Torre, Donald Crowhurst's circumnavigation, and several other famous alleged feats. In *Cheats, charlatans, and chicanery*, Andreas Schroeder (1997) added Peary's 'farthest north' in 1905–06, his 'discovery' of the non-existent Crocker Land and Jesup Land, Cook's expedition to the North Pole, and Byrd's flight to the South Pole. In *The noose of laurels*, Wally Herbert (1991) exposed Isaac Israel Hayes's misrepresentation of his travels in Kane Basin, and argued persuasively against the validity of Peary's claim to have reached the Pole.

Roberts identified common factors in the background of exploration hoaxers, such as a childhood disability, inadequacy, or loss of a parent, and suggested that they contribute to an obsessive desire to be recognized as manly victors over adversity, hardship, and danger. Other writers have identified in some explorers and adventurers an unrealistic belief in their own powers and place in history, amounting to 'paranoid grandiosity' (Tomalin and Hall 1971: ix)]. Jan Morris (2001) noted that the perpetrators of major exploration hoaxes have been intensely serious in

their efforts to deceive — in contrast to ordinary practical jokers, whose object is merely to amuse.

The hoaxes perpetrated during the Franklin search, however, were different. Although they were about exploration, they were not (as far as is known) perpetrated by the explorers. The hoaxers did not themselves claim to have accomplished anything and did not seek fame or money; indeed, they remained anonymous. Yet, they did not conform to the profile of the common practical joker described by Morris because their objective was not to make people laugh. Anyone ingenious enough to design and carry out the deception of the Gloucester balloon would have known that the result would not be amusement and mirth, but instead an awakening of unreasonable hopes among families and friends of the missing men, and a potentially harmful distraction for those whose job it was to locate them. The Franklin hoaxers appear to have had a desire to inconvenience, to obstruct, to embarrass, to hurt, as if they nursed some grudge against the government, the Admiralty, or society at large. Like modern vandals and graffiti scrawlers who deface the property of more affluent people and institutions, they may have been expressing a sense of alienation, frustration, or lack of power. Like computer-hackers breaching elaborate security systems to disrupt large organizations, they may have been secretly demonstrating their own cleverness. Like the copy-cat postal distributors of anthrax spores in the wake of the terrorist attacks in the United States, they may have found a perverse satisfaction in contributing to a climate of anxiety. Like the makers of crop circles, they may have been simply amusing themselves by exploiting the gullibility of people. One can only speculate on the motivations involved during the Franklin search.

That the Franklin hoaxers meant no harm, but simply failed to foresee the impact of their hoaxes, is hardly credible. What struck people at the time was their utter irresponsibility. Commenting on the Gloucester balloon incident, *The Athenaeum* (11 October 1851: 1070) wrote: 'No doubt, many of our readers will find it hard to believe that this can be a hoax, from the difficulty of understanding what kind of person can possibly occupy themselves with frauds so gratuitous and heartless. Such things are, however, done — incredible as it may seem to honest men . . . .' John Brown (1858: 220, 323) described the perpetrator of the balloon hoax as 'a heartless miscreant,' and was equally contemptuous of those who produced fake drift bottle messages. 'The authors of these deserve the execration of our race,' he wrote, 'for such an act can only be viewed as a vile, cruel design to distress yet more the feelings of those already too painfully distressed.' Another historian of the period expressed similar views:

> I shall not allude here to the many idle stories that have been set afloat from time to time, now of the reported safety of the party, then of their murder by Esquimaux, of clairvoyant discoveries, pigeon expresses, fictitious balloon despatches, and other imaginary accounts, — all of which have been mischievous fabrications, or, what is worse, unpardonable and cruel hoaxes. I envy not the feelings of those who can promulgate such statements, and trifle with the nearest and dearest feelings of the many relatives of more than 130 men, who are so eagerly on the look out for intelligence. (Simmonds 1857: 224)

It is possible (but unproven) that some of the native reports that white men had been seen, met with, or killed, were also hoaxes. In addition to inventing stories to satisfy the eagerness of the whites to obtain information about Franklin, Indian and Eskimo people may have intentionally deceived traders and explorers because they resented the whites' incursions into their territory, their assumption of superiority, their patronizing attitude, and their control over the supply of desirable material goods. Along the north coast of Alaska, Eskimo groups often stole articles from explorers and threatened them. Spreading false rumours may simply have been another, more subtle, means of causing inconvenience to unwanted strangers.

Embellishment of stories

The act of recounting an interesting story puts the teller in a position of prominence, and elicits admiration. By being the sole possessor of certain experiences or particular news, he has knowledge to impart to listeners, and in doing so he is able to exert influence and power. If the listeners have no way of disproving the story, the raconteur may be tempted to exaggerate the details or even to disguise falsehood as fact.

In *The triumph of the narrative*, journalist Robert Fulford (1999: 63–68) recounted efforts to verify a 'true' story that was making the rounds in the 1960s, in which the driver of a ready-mix cement truck found the Cadillac of his wife's lover parked in the driveway, and to take revenge he filled the Cadillac with tons of concrete. The story was immensely appealing, but it seemed too good to be authentic, yet all attempts by Fulford and others to trace its origin and verify its content failed. Over a period of more than a dozen years it kept cropping up in newspapers and magazines — in Ontario, in Michigan, in Texas, in Oregon, in Norway, even in Africa. As it spread, it evolved, and the incorporation of many colourful details made it even more satisfying. Evidently the entire story was an invention. Fulford presented it as an example of 'urban legend,' a form of enduring folk narrative that gains widespread acceptance because the story has very strong appeal, and most people are not inclined to regard it critically. 'Clearly, the gratification we feel disarms scepticism. It may be that the telling and the listening together amount to a collaborative pleasure that no one wants to mar with harsh discussions of proof or likelihood' (Fulford 1999: 68).

In nineteenth-century Britain, there was a similar acceptance and uncritical repetition of unconfirmed reports about Franklin's safety, and a tendency for such stories to be embellished with each telling. Charles Dickens and

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others felt that exaggerating and inventing stories was a characteristic of 'savages,' but the inhabitants of the northern regions did not hold a monopoly on distorting facts. The Warren Point encounter was described by three European eye-witnesses, two of them naval officers and one a missionary, but they did not agree on the details. The story told by Pond Inlet Eskimos to the captain of the *Chieftain*, 'even in its passage through one ship. . .changed features and gathered importance wonderfully' (Goodsir 1950: 75), and long after the report — or at least the European's understanding of it — had been disproved, it sprang up around the Pacific in new and more fanciful guises. The tendency to enhance stories may be a universal human trait, to which British explorers in the Arctic were not exceptions.

The intense personal and national hope for the survival of Franklin and his men created a climate in which rumours and hoaxes were often accorded undeserved credence. This was recognized by at least one perceptive observer:

> We notice this letter [regarding the glass balls found in northern Russia] to show the wide-world interest the prolonged absence of our unfortunate countrymen, and the extraordinary efforts made by England for their recovery, has created. Every circumstance, however trifling, which could be supposed to emanate from the north, became invested with importance, and linked to the all-absorbing subject. This solicitude was felt from the shores of the Scheldt to North Cape, and from North Cape to the Strait of Behring; but joined to this noble feeling was much wildness of thought as to the probable course and position of the unfortunate Franklin and his companions; hence, however well meant, the feeling, *by its very intensity, often contributed to render confusion more confounded*. (Brown 1858: 272; Brown's italics)

The language problem

Many of the leads originating with native informants were misleading or useless, not simply because stories tended to grow in the telling but also because they were corrupted during translation.

Although European knowledge of Arctic geography was incomplete when the Franklin search began, it was clear to the Admiralty that a voyage from Baffin Bay to Bering Strait would probably encounter Eskimo people, whose ecumene extended from Greenland to eastern Siberia (Fig. 1). Explorers had learned that they lived successfully in a harsh environment, travelled over extensive areas, exchanged goods and information with adjacent groups, were careful observers of geographical features, and could draw, from memory, remarkably accurate maps depicting the distribution of land and sea. What an invaluable resource these people could be for those who sought Franklin! Surely news of large ships manned by white-skinned strangers possessing marvellous material goods would spread widely among these nomadic hunting groups, and with their broad geographical knowledge and cartographic skills they could direct the searchers to the appropriate location.

Adjacent to the Eskimo domain, a variety of Indian groups inhabited the sub-Arctic region extending from Labrador to interior Alaska. They were far south of Franklin's intended track (although close in the lower Mackenzie basin), but they might possess indirect intelligence of Franklin obtained through contacts with Eskimo groups, or even by direct knowledge if the crews had abandoned their ships and headed overland towards trading posts.

At each end of the Northwest Passage there were settlements established by European colonial powers — Danish administrative and trading centers on the west coast of Greenland and Russian American Company posts on both sides of Bering Strait (Fig. 1). Between these extremities fur trade posts of the Hudson's Bay Company existed in southern Hudson Bay and in the Mackenzie River basin. Because the various posts were foci of far-reaching trade relationships, they were important information nodes to which reports of transient white men were likely to be conveyed. But at the Greenland posts, colonial officials spoke Danish, and in Alaska, fur traders and administrators spoke Russian. Only in the Hudson Bay and the Mackenzie districts did the managers of European outposts speak English.

The key foreign languages for the maritime search expeditions were therefore Danish at Greenland posts, Russian at Alaskan posts, and Inuit (or Inupiaq) extending right across the Arctic from Greenland as far as Norton Sound in Bering Strait. Although the Inuit language included a number of dialects, they were similar enough to be mutually intelligible to a fair degree.

Almost no officers had fluency in any of these languages, however. Sir John Ross described himself as the only officer in the Royal Navy who spoke Danish (Great Britain 1852d: 2), and he rightly saw this an advantage because an interpreter hired in Greenland would likely be capable of translating only between the Inuit language and Danish. (Carl Petersen, the Dane hired by Penny and later by Kane and McClintock, could speak English as well, but this was rare.)

Russian was just as uncommon among naval officers, resulting in the amusing image of Kellett, an English officer, resorting to Spanish in order to talk with a Russian interpreter in Alaska.

The ships departing in 1850 were supplied with 'a number of copies of . . . a highly useful and easily understood vocabulary of the Esquimaux language, compiled by Captain Washington, RN, from the larger works on the subject, and suitable for carrying in the pocket on land excursions or over the ice' (*The Illustrated London News* 11 May 1850: 333). Sir John Ross gave a copy of the vocabulary (which was based on the Labrador dialect of the Inuit language) to Captain Lewis Platon, Greenland's Inspector-General in Holsteinborg, and Platon, with the assistance of Mr Nosted, a missionary, set about preparing a Greenlandic–English version. The work of translating

English words into Danish, then into Greenlandic, and vice versa, took almost two years, after which there were consultations with 'Erasmus York' (Kallihirua), the young man who had been brought back from Cape York on Erasmus Ommanney's ship *Assistance* in 1851 and was now enrolled in a Missionary Training College in Canterbury. The final stages of revision were carried out by two men at the college who are not known to have had any familiarity with the Inuit language, one a warden and the other a professor of Sanskrit ! The result was the *Greenland–Eskimo vocabulary, for the use of the Arctic expeditions*, which not only translated more than 1500 words in both directions between English and Inuit but also contained a selection of useful phrases. Among them were greetings such as 'Good day to you, friends We are friends come from England Here is some tobacco for you ... We will give you beads for furs.' For enquiries specifically about Franklin, there were questions such as, 'Have you seen any large ships lately?' To encourage them to report information about white men, there were incentives such as, 'the Queen of England will give a large reward to any of the Innuit [*sic*] who will bring news of them' (Washington 1853: 101, 102, 105).

As the vocabulary included input from German missionaries in Labrador, a Danish administrator and a missionary in southwestern Greenland, and a Greenlander from the Thule district, it probably included elements of three different dialects spoken in the eastern Arctic. It does not, however, appear to have included elements specific to the Eastern Inuktitut dialect spoken on northern Baffin Island, where the entrance to the Northwest Passage was located, but perhaps this was not a significant disadvantage.

Dictionary and phrase books can be very useful, but, as any tourist knows, they do not enable one to *converse* in an unfamiliar language. And if one confidently poses a question learned from a phrase book, with convincing pronunciation, it may give the erroneous idea that the speaker knows the language, and thus lead to a torrent of rapid and incomprehensible speech on the part of the other. John Ross, who probably knew more Inuit words than any other British officer, recognized the shortcomings of such linguistic aids. Even though he had a copy of the first vocabulary with him in 1850, he hired an interpreter at Greenland.

Nothing illustrates the difficulties imposed by language differences better than Adam Beck's massacre story. The men from Cape York in the far north gave their report in the Thule dialect (Avanersuarmiutut) to Beck, who was familiar with the West Greenlandic dialect (Kitaamiutut) spoken in the south. Beck told his story to an English steward who was said to have had learned some Inuktitut at a trading post in Hudson Bay. Beck then used his second language, Danish, to tell it to Ross, for whom Danish was a foreign language, and Ross in turn translated it into English. How well any of these men spoke and understood the various languages and dialects is uncertain.

Written versions went through a complicated process. Beck wrote down his story on HMS *Assistance* on 17 August, and on the following day he did the same on the *Felix*. Both accounts were written in Greenlandic Inuit (Kalaallisut), using the Latin alphabet, and he signed them 'Aglagtok Adam Beek.' Most writers have omitted his native name and spelled his last name 'Beck.' His statements were published untranslated (one wonders why!) in *The Times* (1 October 1851) and were later rendered into English (Cyriax 1962: 46–47). Written depositions that he made at Godhaven were sent by the Hudson's Bay Company to Denmark and Germany, where Moravian translators had enormous difficulties in making sense out of his accounts, in which the spelling and grammar were atrocious. Finally the Danish and German versions were translated into English. The end result in the latter case was a garbled text entitled 'English version of the German translation of an Esquimaux–Greenlandish document' (Great Britain 1852b: 135–137). In such a convoluted chain of transmission, involving four languages with translations carried out in four countries, is it any surprise that the final English texts made little sense, and that the various versions did not agree with each other? Translation was not only difficult and prone to errors, but it took an inordinate amount of time. Half a year passed between the end of August 1851, when Beck made his depositions at Greenland, and the completion of an English translation from Germany. This was a full year and a half after the encounter at Cape York that had generated the massacre story!

Clearly, it was not feasible for each expedition to carry enough interpreters to translate all the languages of the northern regions through which Franklin and his men might have passed, or in which some news of their presence might be circulating, but the maritime expeditions between Greenland and Bering Strait operated in the domain of the Inuit language, and to find interpreters would not have involved insurmountable problems. The small privately sponsored expeditions under John Ross, Kane, and McClintock, and the government expedition commanded by William Penny, all managed to hire interpreters in Greenland (the men also helped with travelling and hunting), but of the eight Admiralty search and supply expeditions under naval command that entered the Arctic islands, comprising 18 ships (Ross 2002b: 65), only one — that of Collinson — included an interpreter.

Ironically, Collinson's interpreter, Miertsching, was not available when he was most needed. His transfer from McClure's *Investigator* to the *Enterprise* had been scheduled to take place in Honolulu but, after the two ships failed to rendezvous there, McClure ignored his orders and proceeded into the Arctic on his own. As a result, when Collinson met Inuit in 1853 on the eastern part of Victoria Island (unknowingly close to the scene of the Franklin disaster) and they appeared to be describing a ship trapped in the ice (presumably one of Franklin's), his interpreter was 500 miles away with no Inuit within sight.

To partly offset the absence of Miertsching, Collinson had intended that Lieutenant John James Barnard, assistant-surgeon Edward Adams, and seaman Thomas Cousins would gain some proficiency in the Eskimo language when he left them at Michaelowski to investigate reports of white men in the interior. But Barrnard's murder had ended that scheme.

If the Admiralty had provided Inuit interpreters for their ships, James Clark Ross, Austin, or Belcher might have been able to learn the real location of the Franklin tragedy by carefully interviewing people at Pond Inlet; Moore, Collinson, and others would probably have been more successful at assessing native reports and defusing hostility in Alaska; and at Victoria Island Collinson 'would have had the Eskimo report clearly interpreted, and he would have learned the scene of the disaster' (Neatby 1970: 225).

Inconvenience to the Admiralty

The Admiralty had to consider every bit of incoming information relating to Franklin. A useful modern analogy is that of a police department that receives scores of tips from citizens who want to help it solve a particular crime. The police know that some of the reports will probably prove to be inaccurate, and some misleading — perhaps intentionally so. They know that some of the informants may be forgetful, mistaken, dishonest, or motivated by a desire for publicity or even revenge. But they have to investigate every report, time-consuming as it may be, because one of those tips might lead to the solution of the crime.

Although the Admiralty could quickly eliminate a few reports and rumours that were too vague, too old, too improbable, or obviously fake, they had to carefully investigate all the others. They examined tangible evidence such as drift messages, balloons, and pieces of wood. They interviewed witnesses and bearers of news. They corresponded with customs officers, coast guard personnel, consular officials, policemen, fur traders, and private individuals. They sent officers to towns in Britain and Ireland, and enlisted the help of officials in Canada, Newfoundland, Denmark, Germany, Russia, and Italy. They summoned whaling captains from northern ports and consulted experts in London. False leads caused a naval ship to be sent from Oahu to Hawaii, two men to be sent inland to their deaths in Alaska, several search ships to waste time near Cape York, two expeditions to seek an elusive pile of rocks in Jones Sound, various shore parties to search for a metal sign on Beechey Island, and one expedition to look for the crews of two ships seen on an iceberg off Newfoundland.

For the Admiralty, and for expeditions in the Arctic, the most troublesome investigations, in approximate descending order of effort expended, were those relating to: (a) the two ships on an iceberg; (b) the Gloucester balloon; (c) Beck's massacre story; (d) the cairn in Jones Sound; (e) the *Chieftain* report of four ships trapped in the ice; (f) various native reports in Alaska; and (g) rumours in Hawaii. But some degree of investigative effort was also required for clairvoyants' statements, the Point Warren report, several drift messages, the Russian glass balls, and a number of apocryphal stories of the missing expedition.

Regrettably, many potential clues turned out to be false. None of the leads described in this paper helped to find Franklin's missing expedition. In fact, they hindered the search. The considerable time and resources expended in running down rumours and hoaxes could have been much better spent in more crucial tasks, such as planning search strategy and organizing new expeditions. Not least important was the impact on families and friends of Franklin and his men, whose hopes rose and fell as a multitude of reports about the expedition were made public, only to be disproved or discredited later. 'Theory was busy, but without effect; and rumour, with her false reports . . . agitated many a desponding fireside' (Brown 1858: 323).

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Abbreviations

AB = Arctic Bibliography (see Tremaine 1959)
ADM = Admiralty
AGS = American Geographical Society
PRO = Public Record Office, London
SC = Stefansson Collection, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH, USA
SPRI = Scott Polar Research Institute, Cambridge

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