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Why Ross Survived When Franklin Died: Arctic Explorers and the Inuit, 1829–1848

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Why Ross Survived When Franklin Died: Arctic Explorers and the Inuit, 1829–1848

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Abstract

The Franklin expedition disappeared in the High Arctic in the 1840s, looking for the North-West Passage. After a long search, contacts with local Inuit revealed they had all perished. Could the Inuit have saved Franklin's crews? The experience of John and James Ross is instructive. A decade earlier they led a smaller party to an Arctic region near where Franklin's crews landed. They made friends with an Inuit community and learnt useful skills in clothing, diet, shelter and transport. This enabled them to survive *four* Arctic winters and come home safely. But the Franklin expedition was poorly placed to benefit from Inuit contact. They were too numerous and had no interpreters. Trapped in the ice, they did not seek out Inuit villages. Leaving the ships, they turned towards a desert region and abandoned useful equipment. The wrecks of *Erebus* and *Terror* were only discovered in 2014 and 2016, again thanks to Inuit guidance. Britain has transferred the wrecks and their contents to Canada. They will be jointly held by the government and the Inuit people, whose contribution to the Franklin story is finally being recognized.

Keywords: John Franklin, John Ross, James Clark Ross, Inuit, North-West Passage, *Erebus*, *Terror*, clothing, diet, shelter, transport

Introducing Franklin and the Rosses

The genesis of this article goes back to the early 1990s, when I was British High Commissioner to Canada.¹ One day, Robert Grenier, chief

archaeologist at Parks Canada, asked me to call. While I admired his finds from the sixteenth-century Basque whaling ship discovered at Red Bay, Labrador, he told me of his latest project.² He wanted to launch a new search for the ships of Sir John Franklin's expedition of 1845, lost in the Arctic when searching for the North-West Passage. He knew that Royal Navy ships, even as wrecks, remained the property of the British government. He asked for my help in negotiating with the Admiralty a transfer of these rights to Canada. I commended this warmly to London and in due course an agreement was struck in 1997, after I had left Ottawa.³ This would be brought into effect after the ships had been found.

I had a personal interest in exploration in the Canadian Arctic. John Ross and his nephew James Clark Ross, who had led expeditions there in Franklin's time, were remote uncles of mine. James's sister Isabella married William Spence and their daughter Lydia was my great-grandmother.⁴ I had inherited from my father his annotated copy of the massive volume that is the Rosses' record of their second Arctic voyage, but only read it seriously after I was posted in Ottawa.⁵ John Ross wrote most of it and was clearly a determined character who clashed with authority in promoting controversial ideas. In the passages he wrote, James comes over as more conciliatory and sympathetic, which explains his later success in the Antarctic. While I was in Canada, I made several visits to the High Arctic, visiting Inuit settlements and crossing the track of my explorer uncles. I saw on the ground the grim conditions they endured and flew over the North Magnetic Pole, far to the north of where James Ross found it in May 1831.

The search for the *Erebus* and *Terror*, the ships commanded by John Franklin and Francis Crozier, lasted many years, but eventually their wrecks were discovered in 2014 and 2016, respectively. I visited an excellent exhibition of finds from the wrecks, called *Death in the Ice: The Shocking Story of Franklin's Expedition*, at the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, UK, late in 2017. I was struck by how much the Inuit had contributed to this story. They had been the first people to encounter the survivors, both alive and dead, and had preserved oral records of these events. This had enabled them to locate the missing wrecks after Parks Canada had searched for them in vain.

I already knew that John and James Ross had had close contacts with the Inuit, in a part of the Arctic near where the Franklin expedition came to grief. I decided to analyse how the Inuit had helped the Rosses and consider whether they could also have saved Franklin and his crew. For that purpose I have divided this article into five sections:

- the search for the North-West Passage before Franklin;
- the fate of the Franklin expedition, discovered after a long search;
- a narrative of John and James Ross's expedition of 1829–33;
- what the Rosses owed to the Inuit;
- whether Franklin, Crozier and their crew could have been saved.

The Lure of the North-West Passage

The idea of a navigable seaway between the Atlantic and the Pacific, round or through North America, had tantalized seafarers ever since Columbus' first voyage. During the next three centuries many expeditions set off from British ports to search for this North-West Passage. They were led by John Cabot (1497–8), Martin Frobisher (1576–8), Henry Hudson (1610–11), William Baffin (1615–16), James Knight (1719–21), James Cook (1776–9), George Vancouver (1791–4) and many others, competing with French, Spanish and Russian explorers.⁶ Yet no passage was ever found, while Cabot, Hudson, Knight and Cook did not return from their voyages in search of it.

Notwithstanding these failures, in 1818 the Royal Navy embarked on the most intensive search on record, in the area shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1. The North-West Passage.

Source: Map drawn by Reginald Piggott for *The Quest for the Northwest Passage*, by Glyn Williams, published by the Folio Society, 2007. Reproduced by permission.

This campaign was driven by the single-minded Second Secretary of the Admiralty, John Barrow, who was glad to find employment for ships and crews left idle by the end of the Napoleonic Wars.⁷ Barrow first sent two ships round Baffin Bay, commanded by John Ross and Edward Parry; James Ross was a midshipman under his uncle. Two more, commanded by David Buchan and John Franklin, sailed towards the North Pole. Both voyages seemed abortive. The polar voyage did not get past Spitzbergen, although it gave Franklin a passion for the Arctic. In Baffin Bay, Lancaster Sound looked the most promising access to the passage. Ross, however, declared it a dead end, without waiting for Parry's opinion. In revenge for this early setback to his plans, Barrow conducted a vendetta against Ross for the rest of his life.⁸

Parry discreetly challenged Ross's decision, so that Barrow was ready to send him back to Baffin Bay in command of two ships in 1819; James Ross went with him. Parry found Lancaster Sound open and sailed another 500 miles (800 km) westwards in open water, the most successful Arctic voyage of the whole period. He moored for the polar night at Winter Harbour, on what he called Melville Island, and tried to sail on the next year, but ran into impassable ice. He came home convinced that a passage existed, but that it must lie further south.⁹

However, Parry's next three voyages, always with James Ross, were less successful. He hoped there might be a navigable strait leading north-west out of Hudson Bay. On his second voyage he found one – the Fury and Hecla Strait – but it was always blocked with ice.¹⁰ On his third voyage he sailed down Prince Regent Sound, an opening in the south shore of Lancaster Sound, but his second ship, the *Fury*, was wrecked. The crew unloaded all its stores on to what became known as Fury Beach, but the ship was too damaged to repair. Parry had to return home with both crews on one ship.¹¹ For his final voyage he was sent towards the North Pole, with James Ross now his second-in-command. They reached the furthest north yet recorded but had to turn back well short of the Pole.

Meanwhile the Admiralty sent John Franklin, with George Back and George Richardson, on two expeditions to trace the northern coastline of continental Canada.¹² The Hudson's Bay Company provided support with *voyageurs* to paddle canoes and an invaluable Inuit interpreter, Augustus. Their first journey, in 1819–22, was a fearful ordeal and 12 members of the party died. But Franklin learnt from his mistakes and his second voyage, in 1825–7, was much better organized. Taken together, the two expeditions traced 1,900 miles (3,000 km) of the coastline. Westwards Franklin had gone far beyond the Mackenzie River Delta

(off the left-hand edge of Figure 1), to within 160 miles (260 km) of a boat from a naval ship sent through the Bering Strait. Eastwards he had reached Cape Turnagain on the mainland, about 400 miles (640 km) due south of Parry's landfall on Melville Island. It seemed that only a narrow gap remained to complete the North-West Passage.

The Search for the Franklin Expedition

There was a lull in the Navy's search for the North-West Passage during the 1830s. The second voyage by John and James Ross, described fully below, was a private venture. So was the land-based expedition led by George Back, which was sent to search for the missing explorers.¹³ The Admiralty's only Arctic venture by sea was an abortive voyage in Hudson Bay, again led by Back.¹⁴ On land, however, a Hudson's Bay Company expedition, led by Thomas Simpson and Peter Dease, traced the continental coastline another 200 miles (320 km) east of Cape Turnagain, to reach Simpson Strait.¹⁵ The Admiralty shifted their attention to the Antarctic, where James Ross led a successful expedition between 1839 and 1843, with Francis Crozier as second-in-command. They wintered in Tasmania and the Falkland Islands and discovered the Ross Sea, the Ross Ice Shelf and the South Magnetic Pole. Their ships were two converted bomb vessels, the *Erebus* and *Terror*, which came through this demanding voyage very well.¹⁶

John Barrow still hoped to complete the North-West Passage before he retired from the Admiralty on reaching 80. He planned his final expedition, using the *Erebus* and *Terror* again, and wanted it to be led by James Ross. However, James declined, being exhausted by long years of polar exploration; he was also newly married. Instead he recommended Sir John Franklin, whom he had met as Governor of Tasmania, together with his Antarctic colleague Francis Crozier, and these two were chosen. They took aboard a crew of 130 and supplies for three years. Their orders were to sail through Lancaster Sound into Barrow Strait and then head south-west, to strike the coastline that Franklin had mapped earlier. They could, however, head north up the Wellington Channel if that were free of ice. The expedition set sail in May 1845, touched in Greenland and was spotted by several ships crossing Baffin Bay. They were never seen alive again.¹⁷

After years of no news and constant pressure from Jane, Lady Franklin, the Navy launched a massive search, lasting throughout the

years from 1848 to 1854. These ships filled in many blanks on the map. But they found no trace of Franklin, except the graves of three sailors on Beechey Island. In retrospect, it was clear that they had always searched too far to the north or the west. The Crimean War brought these searches to an end, with several ships abandoned in the ice. The Admiralty declared Franklin and all those with him to be dead.

In the end it was land-based searches that produced the answer. George Richardson, who had been with Franklin in the 1820s, supported by John Rae of the Hudson's Bay Company, followed the continental coast between the Mackenzie and Coppermine rivers in 1848–9. They found no traces; like many other searchers, they were too far to the west. Richardson went home, but Rae continued eastwards. He took only a small party, always with an Inuit interpreter, and aimed to live off the land. In August 1851 he found two pieces of worked timber and rightly deduced that they came from Franklin's ships. But he believed, wrongly, that these were much further north. He decided against crossing to King William Land, where he would have seen for himself what had happened to Franklin's crew. Instead, he headed back to his base.¹⁸

In 1854 Rae was leading another expedition, in which he proved clearly that 'King William Land' was an island, separated by open sea from the mainland both to the east and to the south. On his way home he met a group of Inuit who showed him relics that he recognized as coming from Franklin's party. The Inuit told him that some years before seal-hunters had met a large group of exhausted white men dragging sledges and a boat. Later, a number of corpses had been discovered, several showing signs of cannibalism. None of Rae's informants had been eyewitnesses to these events and it was too late in the season for him to reach the sites that year. He decided that he must report this news of Franklin's fate without delay and set off on the long voyage back to London.¹⁹

Rae's story was greeted with disbelief, especially the suggestion of cannibalism. But the relics he brought could not be explained away and further encounters by a Hudson's Bay Company party with Inuit informants confirmed the account. Finally in 1858, Lady Franklin sent out Leopold McClintock in the steam yacht *Fox*, with a small crew including an Inuit interpreter. He visited King William Island, where he found skeletons, with great piles of abandoned equipment, and heard more Inuit testimony. He also found documentary proof of the expedition's fate that showed they were all long dead.²⁰ I shall analyse this in a later section.

Throughout the rest of the nineteenth century more Inuit testimony was collected, especially by expeditions led by Charles Hall and Frederick Schwatka.²¹ In the twentieth century the focus turned to archaeological research and scientific analysis of the remains, which confirmed the accounts of cannibalism. Yet throughout this time the ships were never found.

As the twenty-first century began, Parks Canada hoped the latest underwater technology would enable them to locate the wrecks on the sea-bed. They concentrated their search near the ships' last known position, north-west of King William Island, but found no trace. Yet by now the Inuit communities, having achieved their own territory of Nunavut, were actively joining in the search. They urged that more attention be paid to their oral traditions, as meticulously researched by the historian Louie Kamookak. These accounts insisted that the ships had long remained afloat, with one being sunk in shallow water in Queen Maud Gulf.²²

In 2014 an archaeological team looking along the shore of the Adelaide Peninsula found a metal object that clearly came from a Royal Navy ship. The first underwater search offshore revealed the *Erebus*, only 11 metres down and in a very good state. Parks Canada quickly adjusted their plans and in 2016 included an Inuit crew member, Sammy Kogvik, in their search team. He suggested looking off the south-west coast of King William Island for the second ship. Sure enough, there was the *Terror*, 50 metres down and looking even better than the *Erebus*. By listening to what the Inuit were telling them, Canadian archaeologists discovered Franklin's ships that had been lost for nearly two centuries.²³

The Inuit were known to be in contact with the Franklin expedition after the ships were abandoned. They preserved detailed oral records of what happened to the ships and their crews. The question arises: if Franklin and his ship's company had themselves made contact with the Inuit earlier and learnt from their experience, might they have survived? There is some basis for answering this question. In the years before Franklin's voyage, Captain John Ross and his nephew Commander James Clark Ross, also looking for the North-West Passage, established close links with an Inuit community and learnt a lot from them. They endured *four* Arctic winters, between 1829 and 1833, and finally got home safely. The next sections of this article first give a narrative of the Rosses' voyage and then examine what they learnt from the Inuit.

John and James Ross's Expedition

After his abortive first Arctic voyage, John Ross was discredited with the Navy and never got another command, though James was promoted steadily. Yet John was determined to restore his reputation by another attempt on the North-West Passage. He found a private sponsor in Felix Booth, the creator of Booth's Gin, who backed him for the cost of a small paddle steamer, the *Victory*, three years' supplies and a complement of 23, including John and James. They set off in the summer of 1829, heading for Prince Regent Inlet.

Their first stop was at Fury Beach, where James had been wrecked on Parry's third voyage. They replenished their supplies from the stores abandoned there and went on southwards, always by sail, as the ship's engine proved useless. Three hundred miles (480 km) further down the Inlet they anchored for their first winter in Felix Harbour. In January 1830 a community of about a hundred Inuit settled in nearby and established close and friendly relations. James was fluent in their language and one of the Inuit women present had met Parry's ships. The ship's carpenter made a wooden leg for Tullahiu, an Inuk who had been maimed by a polar bear; this made a very favourable impression.²⁴

The Rosses hoped to find a seaway westwards through the long peninsula they named 'Boothia' after their sponsor; but there was not one. James, however, made a long sledge journey over the peninsula and then crossed the stretch of sea beyond it. (This was frozen in 1830, but he found it open water a year later, during his trip to the North Magnetic Pole.) He reached an island (he named it Matty Island) and then a further landmass, which he named after William, then Duke of Clarence but soon to be king. (In their published chart it appears as King William Land.) James pressed on as far as his stores allowed, to what he called Victory Point, barely 200 miles (320 km) from Cape Turnagain, Franklin's easternmost point.²⁵ Eighteen years later the crews of the *Erebus* and *Terror* would land here after abandoning their ships in the ice, as explained later in this article.

On his return, being short of supplies, James cut straight across the frozen sea to Boothia and did not explore the south-east coast of King William Land, which was obscured by haze. To James's anger, the chart later published by John in his report of the voyage showed the bay to the south closed by a wholly fictitious dotted line, making King William Land part of the continent, like Boothia.²⁶ This too will come into the Franklin story later.

Later that summer the Inuit moved away. The Rosses hoped the ice would allow them to sail back up Prince Regent's Inlet and explore further west. But after only 4 miles (6.5 km) the ship was frozen in for another year. The winter was colder and the Inuit did not return until April 1831. In June, James made a second long sledge journey, in which he successfully reached the site of the North Magnetic Pole, the main achievement of the whole expedition.²⁷ After the Inuit left them in August, the Rosses tried in vain to sail away, but were soon iced in once more. In their new harbour they were beyond the range of the Inuit and did not see them again.

After their third winter John concluded that they would never get the ship out. In spring 1832, with intense labour, the crew hauled sledges of supplies 200 miles (320 km) northwards, so as to reach Fury Beach and escape in boats that had been left there. On arrival they built a house of spars and canvas and waited for the weather to clear. In August they sailed north to reach Lancaster Sound, but found it completely blocked with ice. Yet again they had failed to escape. They had to retreat to their house at Fury Beach.

Their fourth winter, in what they called Somerset House, was the worst of all. As they were further north, it was colder and stayed dark for longer. Even with what remained from the *Fury*, provisions were running short. Most of the crew, including John Ross himself, developed signs of scurvy and the carpenter died of it. At last summer arrived and they could launch the boats again. After an anxious wait, the ice cleared. With a good wind, they sailed 72 miles (115 km) along Lancaster Sound in one day, but then had either to row or to sit out storms on land. On 18 August they sighted a whaling ship – they were saved. The mate of the ship assured John Ross 'that I had been dead two years; I easily convinced him that was a premature conclusion'.²⁸ The expedition was back in England by mid-October 1833.

During their long absence a rescue expedition had been mounted, led by George Back, who had explored with Franklin. This aimed to reach the Rosses overland from the south, by descending the Great Fish River. Back and his party kept going even when they learnt the Rosses had got home. After a difficult passage of the river they reached the open sea at the mouth of Chantrey Inlet. Here the weather got worse and their supplies were short, so they did not go further. Back looked out to sea and saw a dark grey sky to the north, but he could not decide if that meant open water. However, he thought there was a channel to the east, which would link up with Prince Regent Inlet.²⁹

When George Back got home in 1835, John Ross learnt his views and drew different conclusions. While the Appendix to his report was in proof, he inserted a page headed 'Captain Back', with a passage that reads:

The result of this enterprise has proved that the line of coast southward of the Isthmus of Boothia had not been completely examined ... Making into a bay the land between the isthmus and Matty Island was incorrect ... It is very probable that the land to the westward is an island, [but] I am not of the opinion that the western sea joins with Prince Regent's Inlet.³⁰

In tortuous prose, Ross admits that he was wrong about the dotted line in his chart and recognizes that Prince William Island was not attached to the mainland.

The Rosses' Debt to the Inuit

John Ross was a difficult man: stubborn, opinionated and reluctant to give others any credit, even his nephew James. But he was also a perceptive and unconventional thinker and well ahead of his time in his attitude to the Inuit (whom he called Esquimaux). Right from his first Arctic voyage, John Ross had developed an active interest in them. He took with him an Inuit interpreter called Sacheuse, who was also an artist. When his ships met a group of Inuit on northern Greenland, Sacheuse was able to communicate with them and gain their confidence. John Ross invited them on board his ship and soon faced a classic case of pilfering. One of the visitors slipped into Ross's cabin and took his telescope, razors and scissors. When challenged, however, he readily gave them up; this showed Ross how to respond in future.³¹

James Ross had extended contact with the Inuit when serving on Parry's second voyage. The expedition spent two winters in close contact with Inuit communities. Parry gives a full account of them in his report, which is admirably illustrated by George Lyon, his second-in-command. Lyon also published his private diary, with more Inuit details.³² Yet Parry did not have an interpreter and admits to 'our imperfect knowledge of their language'.³³ His report adopts a condescending attitude to the Inuit, judging them by British nineteenth-century moral standards and showing a poor understanding of Inuit society. He condemns them for 'deep-rooted selfishness', including envy, ingratitude and dishonesty,

as well as for sexual laxity and inhumanity to the old.³⁴ James Ross, however, clearly developed a more positive view of the Inuit and used to good advantage the time he spent among them. He taught himself to speak Inuktitut fluently and also learnt how to manage a dog-sled.

During the time spent with the Inuit on his second voyage, John Ross recognized that they were perfectly adapted to life in the inhospitable Arctic. His view of them was much more positive than Parry's and he explicitly rejects most of the vices that Parry imputes to them.³⁵ He was prepared to deal with pilfering and set up a system of barter to deter it. He found the Inuit cheerful and good-humoured and thought they had a positive influence on his crew.

Both the Rosses were always ready to learn from the Inuit, but they did not seek to change their ways. On leaving them, John wrote:

We had sold them no rum, we had introduced no diseases among them ... nor had we done aught to render them less virtuous or less happy than we had found them.³⁶

He closely observed Inuit practice as regards clothing, diet, shelter and transport, adopting aspects of all four in ways that greatly helped his crew, even after contact with the Inuit was broken. I shall examine each subject in turn.

Clothing

As soon as John Ross met the Inuit, he commented:

Their appearance was very superior to our own, being at least as well clothed and far better fed.³⁷

He describes what they wore in great detail. Everything was made of skins, mainly deerskin (from caribou, which Ross called reindeer), bear-skin (from polar bear) or sealskin. They had hooded jackets, trousers, boots and gloves, all made in double layers; the inner layer had the fur inside and the outer one the fur outside.³⁸

In the Appendix to his main report John Ross gives character sketches of the Inuit families they met, plus what amount to fashion plates to show the clothes they wore.³⁹ Figures 2 to 5 provide some examples:

- Figure 2 shows Kunana, a famous bear-hunter, who wore a jacket and trousers made out of polar bearskin, and is depicted holding a large bunch of salmon.

- Figure 3 shows Neweetioke in a deerskin jacket, while Konyaroklik has a bearskin jacket with deerskin sleeves; both have bearskin trousers.
- Figure 4 shows Otoogiu and his son Illictu, in deerskin jackets and sealskin trousers; Illictu acted as a guide to James Ross.
- Figure 5 shows Kakikagiu, the woman who had seen Parry's ships, between her husbands, Poyettak and Aknalua. All three have deerskin jackets. Their trousers are bearskin (Aknalua), sealskin (Kakikagiu) and deerskin (Poyettak, another of James's guides).

Ross found that the Inuits' clothes were 'much more useful for the men than those we had brought from England'. He set out to acquire as large a stock as he needed, either as made-up jackets and trousers or in the form of skins. Many were supplied by the families illustrated. Within six weeks of first meeting the Inuit, he says: 'we were in a fair way to get an ample



Figure 2. Inuit man wearing polar bearskin.
 Source: Ross, *Second Voyage*, Appendix 31, 33, 39 and 47.



Figure 3. Two Inuit men in deerskin and bearskin.
Source: Ross, *Second Voyage*, Appendix 31, 33, 39 and 47.

supply of clothing for a long time'. As long as they had contact with the Inuit, he continues to note purchases of garments or skins for clothing. The Inuit would also bring gifts of boots or gloves for members of the crew.⁴⁰

The crew seem to have accepted these different outfits without complaint. They would have found them warmer, more durable and more waterproof than their usual woollen clothes. (George Lyon reckoned that the skin garments were ten times warmer than wool, though less comfortable to wear.)⁴¹ After the crew left the shelter of the ship to move north, deerskins were also being used as bedding, while John himself had a large bearskin.

In their final hard winter, their fur clothes were becoming too worn to permit work outside. But the crew were wearing them at the time of their final rescue, because Ross describes them as:

A miserable-looking set of wretches ... unshaven, dirty, *dressed in the rags of wild beasts* instead of the tatters of civilisation.⁴²

Diet

The expedition was supplied with salt provisions, plus some canned food from the *Fury's* stores. But John Ross considered this inadequate for an Arctic voyage. He argued that 'the large use of oil and fat meats is the true secret of life in these frozen countries'.⁴³ He also knew the usual naval diet would lead to scurvy before long, unless it could be varied by fresh food. He saw that the Inuit were in excellent health and hoped their diet could help to keep his men healthy too.

The local Inuit lived wholly off meat and fish; their only vegetable was what they found in caribou stomachs, regarded as a great delicacy. Their staples were seal and seal oil; salmon with other fish; and caribou



Figure 4. Two Inuit men in deerskin and sealskin.
Source: Ross, *Second Voyage*, Appendix 31, 33, 39 and 47.



Figure 5. Inuit woman with two men, in deerskin, sealskin and bearskin.
Source: Ross, *Second Voyage*, Appendix 31, 33, 39 and 47.

venison. They also ate bear and musk-ox when they could get them and trapped smaller mammals like foxes and hares as well as water-birds. Ross comments on the presence of game, even in winter; I myself saw musk-ox, caribou, wolf, fox and hare during my visits to the far north.

It appears that Ross could never get his crew to eat seal until starvation threatened. Before that seal was only fed to their dogs. Venison was always welcome, as was beef from the musk-ox James shot on an early sledge journey (Figure 6).⁴⁴ The cold climate allowed Inuit households to store meat and fish over long periods and they shared this freely with Ross's men; for example, Kumana supplied 15 pounds of excellent venison.⁴⁵ James Ross, evidently a crack shot, often shot hares and game birds like grouse and partridge for the pot.



Figure 6. James Ross shooting a musk-ox.
Source: Ross, *Second Voyage*, 350. *Note:* stripes are in the original.

Reluctantly the men would eat fish, which was available in great quantity.⁴⁶ When the Inuit reappeared in April 1831, they supplied Ross with 250 pounds of fish, which was 14 days of fresh provisions for the whole crew. But the richest supply of fish came in midsummer, when the melting ice caused the salmon to run. In 1830 the Rosses bought 220 fish weighing 5 pounds apiece, nearly half a ton of salmon. The following year they got over ten times as much, a total of 2,800 fish, and spent days preserving it in ice or vinegar. The Inuit left them after the salmon run, possibly for caribou hunting further south. The Rosses often saw small caribou herds and even larger ones, but never recorded James shooting them.

In their last two years, with provisions dwindling, they made good use of trapping methods learnt from the Inuit. In their last winter the *Fury's* stores only provided flour for bread and preserved vegetables. Their main source of meat came from trapped foxes, plus two bears and a seal shot by James, which the men were now prepared to eat. As spring arrived they added many game birds—ducks, geese, grouse and partridge—plus small seabirds they called dovekies.⁴⁷ In winter, lack of fresh food plus inactivity caused scurvy to make inroads in the crew. This grew worse with each year and affected even John Ross. But fresh meat and outdoor exercise in the spring cured everyone, except the unfortunate carpenter.

Shelter and Thirst

Arctic explorers suffered not only from hunger, but also thirst. For most of the year there was no fresh water to drink unless it had been melted artificially. This was a problem whenever they were away from the stoves on the ship. They needed to carry a seal-oil lamp, with the oil for it, to melt enough snow; this was much easier done under cover.⁴⁸ The Rosses believed that plenty of fresh water also helped to deter scurvy.

They greatly admired the Inuits' skill in building perfect hemispherical igloos, complete with an ice window-pane to give light (Figure 7 shows a village of igloos).⁴⁹ James found his guides on sledge journeys could build a complete igloo in 30–45 minutes, while on his trip to the Magnetic Pole he was glad to reuse old snow houses. The Rosses never mastered igloo-building, but they learnt to pile up snow on a framework of spars and canvas. Structures of this kind could shelter up to 14 men on their long trek north to Fury Beach.⁵⁰ Once there, they relied on Somerset House to shelter them through the winter (Figure 8). As the temperature dropped to minus 35 degrees celsius, they added ever thicker layers of snow to the roof and the walls.⁵¹ They understood the insulating qualities of snow and still had supplies of coal left from the *Fury*, so that no one died of cold.

Transport

John and James Ross hoped they would find a North-West Passage navigable by sea. But they also made provision for land travel. On his first



Figure 7. Inuit village of igloos.
Source: Ross, *Second Voyage*, 249.

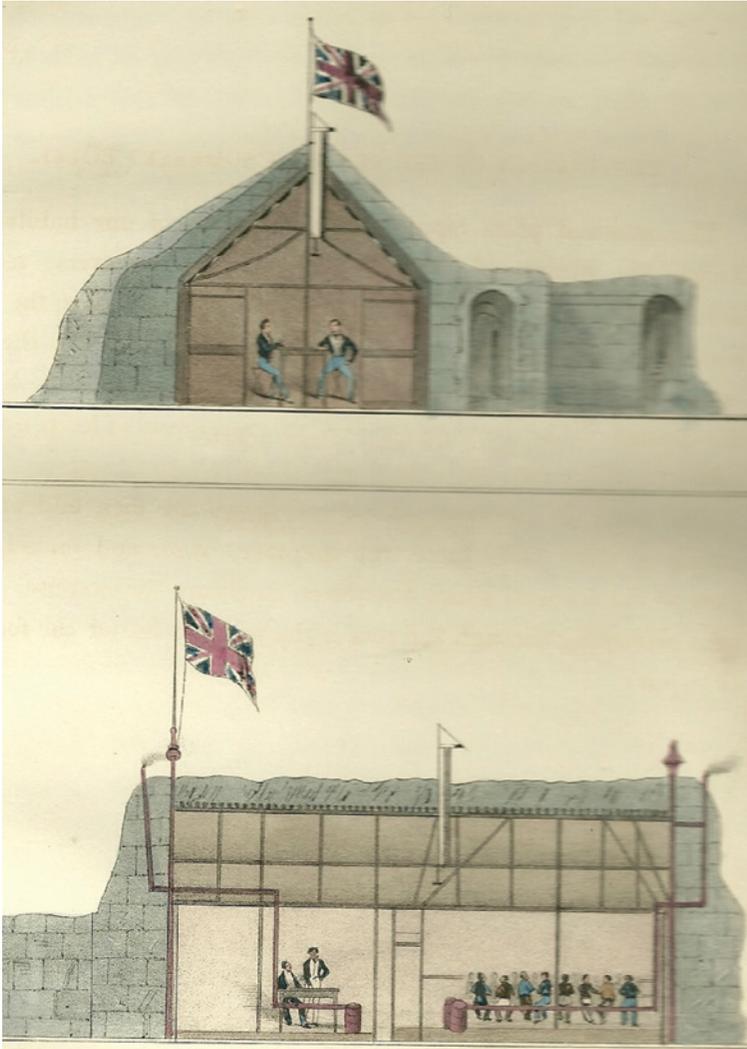


Figure 8. 'Somerset House', where Ross's crew spent the last winter.
Source: Ross, Second Voyage, 688.

voyage John had carefully studied the sledges used by the Inuit they met and included a sketch of one in his published report. When his second expedition stopped off in Greenland, John Ross bought six dogs for sledging, as James had learnt the art while with Parry. In fact, the Rosses found they could get better dogs from their Inuit neighbours and built up their team through local purchase.⁵²

James made several exploratory journeys, taking Thomas Blanky, the first mate and one or two Inuit guides, travelling rapidly with two sledges pulled by six dogs apiece. They went west across Boothia for several days and later north along the coast.⁵³ This encouraged James to make his most ambitious journey westward with the two sledges pulled by eight dogs in all. He took Thomas Abernethy, the second mate, as Blanky was prone to snow blindness, plus two crew members, but no guides. They covered about 200 miles (320 km) from the ship in 13 days, before turning back from Victory Point on King William Island. But James had driven his dogs too hard, not realizing that they should always have a day of rest after four days on the trail.⁵⁴ By the time they got back to the ship, after three weeks away, only two survived.

Thereafter the expedition became more cautious. Sledges were now pulled by the crew, or by dogs and men combined (see Figure 9). James did not take dogs on his journey to the North Magnetic Pole. The expedition still kept their dogs after the Inuit left, but were unable to feed them when their provisions ran short. Thus, they gained less from Inuit travel methods than their other practices. Parry and Lyon had made much more use of dog sledges and calculated they could cover 25–30 miles (40–48 km) in a day, even over difficult terrain.⁵⁵



Figure 9. Sledge pulled by dogs and men.
Source: Ross, *Second Voyage*, 531.

Thanks to what they received and learnt from the Inuit, the Rosses and their crew survived longer in the High Arctic than any other expedition of the period. One man died from scurvy in their last winter and two others had died earlier from diseases brought from England. All the others escaped from their Arctic ordeal and came safely home.

Could the Franklin and Crozier Expedition Have Been Saved?

Unlike the Rosses and their crew, none of the Franklin expedition survived. In principle, Inuit contacts and technology could have saved them too. But the way their expedition was organized made this unlikely to happen. The Admiralty did not believe it would be necessary for the officers and men to go far from the ships, whether they were at sea or moored for the winter. The ships provided the crew with all they needed in the way of food, fresh water, clothing, shelter and transport, at least as long as their supplies lasted. But they were poorly prepared to operate on land or to interact with any Inuit they might meet.

One problem was the size of the expedition, at nearly 130 men. Most Inuit settlements in the region were small in numbers and lived near the margin of survival. The one encountered by the Rosses had barely a hundred inhabitants, including women, children and old people. This was the most that the harsh terrain could sustain. When Inuit hunters met large groups of Franklin survivors, they did not have the resources to support them. In contrast, it was much easier for the Inuit to help and interact with the small parties led by Ross, Rae and McClintock.

Many of the crew, both officers and men, had experience of polar conditions at sea, either from whaling voyages or serving on *Erebus* and *Terror* in the Antarctic. But few are known to have dealt closely with the Inuit before. Franklin himself, on his second expedition back in 1826, had a tense stand-off with an unusually large and aggressive group of Inuit, which must have left an unpleasant memory.⁵⁶ Otherwise, Crozier had been on Parry's second voyage; Thomas Blanky, ice master on the *Terror*, had been with the Rosses; and Alexander McDonald, the *Terror's* second surgeon, had written a book on an Inuk who visited Scotland.⁵⁷ Unlike most other Arctic voyages, by Ross, Rae, McClintock and even Franklin himself in the 1820s, they did not have an Inuit interpreter or a senior officer fluent in Inuktitut like James Ross. Two officers spent their last halt in Greenland compiling a glossary of useful words from the Inuit community there, but this was a last-minute stop-gap.⁵⁸ The expedition

would face severe problems of communication with any Inuit they might meet.

Only one piece of written evidence survives to explain what the expedition did after leaving Baffin Bay. This consists of two notes written across a printed form left in a stone cairn, found by William Hobson, McClintock's second-in-command.⁵⁹ The first note, dated May 1847, briefly explains the expedition's movements up until then. Their orders encouraged them to investigate seaways leading north from Lancaster Sound, which they achieved in their first year by sailing round Cornwallis Island. They spent the winter of 1845–6 on Beechey Island. (Three sailors died there of diseases they had brought from England.)⁶⁰

Their key instruction was to sail south-westwards until they could pick up the coast of the mainland leading towards Bering Strait. Just west of Prince Regent Inlet, found by John Ross to be a dead end, they discovered a new seaway heading south, now called Peel Sound. They followed it for 300 miles (480 km) till they were trapped in the ice in September 1846 just north-west of King William Island, as shown in Figure 10 below. There they spent their second winter. In May 1847, when travelling conditions improved, Lieutenant Graham Gore of the *Erebus*, with the ship's second mate and six men, came ashore. They landed at Victory Point, which had been James Ross's furthest west in

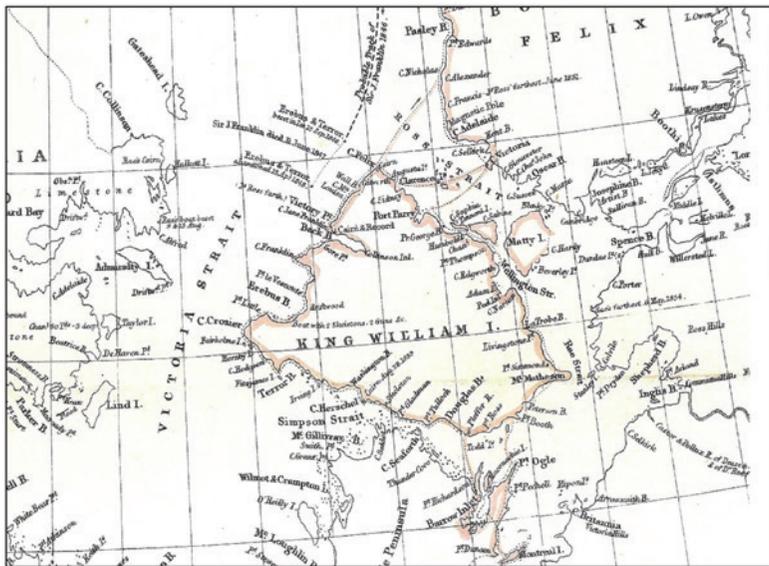


Figure 10. King William Island.
Source: McClintock, *Voyage of the Fox*: from map drawn by John Arrowsmith, 1859.

1830. They left the first note, signing off with the words 'all well'. So far, the expedition had met all their objectives; but their luck would now change fatally.

It is not clear what course the ships were on when the ice trapped them. Hobson believed that Franklin planned to pass west of King William Island. He described the ice he saw and believed this showed how Franklin 'leaving clear water, pressed his ships into the pack when he tried to force them through Victoria Strait'. In 1830 James Ross had thought that would be impossible, as the strait contained 'the heaviest masses [of ice] I have ever seen in such a situation'.⁶¹ Even so, McClintock shared Hobson's view, because:

Had Sir John Franklin known that a channel existed on the eastern side of King William's *Land* (so named by Sir John Ross) ... he would not have risked the besetment of his ships ... But Franklin was furnished with charts that indicated no opening to the eastward ... he consequently had but one course open to him.

This view has been widely held.⁶²

Yet John Ross had changed his mind, as noted above. In the light of Back's experience, he had concluded that there was probably a seaway to the east and south of what he recognized to be King William Island. John's *mea culpa* was hidden away in his Appendix, where many people may not have noticed it. But Franklin and Crozier, as friends of both the Rosses, should have been aware of it. They could thus have been aiming for the eastward channel, where James Ross had found open water. If they had succeeded, the Franklin expedition could have become the first ships to complete the North-West Passage, following the route eventually used by Roald Amundsen in 1903. Yet whichever way Franklin meant to go, the ice trapped his ships first and would not release them.

The 1847 note does not say why Gore's party had landed at Victory Point. They could well have been the party that set up a magnetic observatory close to Cape Felix, the northern tip of King William Island. Hobson found traces of the observatory campsite, which could have held up to 12 men. They had shot game for the pot and left rapidly, leaving blankets and furs behind.⁶³

In going from Victory Point to Cape Felix, Gore and his party would have been following James Ross's route from Boothia. If they had explored further, on a trail that had taken James 10 days to cover, they would have reached the Inuit villages that had befriended the Ross expedition. These villages were already familiar with white explorers, so that

communication should not have been a problem. McClintock even met a man who had known James Ross.⁶⁴ The Inuit should have been ready to supply sailors with fresh food and warmer clothing from their stores, especially if these came in small groups. They could also show them how to drive dog-sledges and build snow houses. Exploration in this direction would also confirm that the way to complete the Passage was by going east and south of King William Island. This might have saved the expedition, even if Franklin himself did not survive. But again it is clear that none of this happened.

The following year, in April 1848, a second, longer message was added to the original form found by Hobson. It conveyed tragic news. Sir John Franklin had died as long ago as June 1847. The ships had not been released during the summer. Instead they had moved barely 25 miles (40 km) before being beset in the ice for another winter. By now, nine officers and fifteen men in all had died; these included 'the late Commander Gore', evidently promoted after Franklin's death. Francis Crozier, in overall command, and James Fitzjames, as captain of the *Erebus*, were abandoning the ships and leading the 105 survivors towards Back's Great Fish River, over 200 miles (320 km) away across Simpson Strait.

The party had decided to turn anti-clockwise round the west and south of the island, rather than clockwise past Cape Felix. This was the wrong decision. The clockwise direction followed a route where James Ross had shot game; it would pass within range of Inuit settlements, as already noted; by heading north up Boothia they could reach the supplies on Fury Beach; and beyond that come to the shores of Lancaster Sound, frequented by whaling ships. There were huge risks, which Thomas Blanky knew at first hand from his ordeal with the Rosses. He might therefore have advised against it, if he were still alive. The distance was great, the stores at Fury Beach were much depleted and Lancaster Sound might be impassable with ice.⁶⁵ Yet the route chosen proved even worse. The west and south coasts of the island were devoid of human or even animal life. Inuit only came there in small seal-hunting parties. They did not have the means to help the large parties of struggling sailors that they met, even though 'they fell down and died as they walked'. When McClintock visited the scene he found abandoned clothes and equipment largely undisturbed, showing how few people had been there in the last decade.⁶⁶

The Inuits' oral testimony and the objects found by McClintock and later researchers showed how woefully ill-equipped the expedition had become to operate on land away from the ships. They had endured three

winters on navy rations, without the variety of fresh food. Their supplies were running low and anti-scorbutics, like lime juice, were losing their power. Scurvy would certainly be prevalent, with consequent lassitude and depression. On leaving the ships, the crews took all the food they had (except the unfamiliar chocolate), but it was not enough. They abandoned at least two of the shotguns they had for shooting game. They left behind great piles of clothes to keep them warm, even though these were of wool not skins. They pulled their heavy and cumbersome sledges themselves, not using dogs. They did not appear to build snow huts for shelter. With greater attention to Inuit practices and the capacity to communicate with them, they might have survived longer, with a better chance of being saved. As it was, scurvy, starvation and hypothermia killed them all.

Conclusion: What Can the Inuit Teach Us?

When McClintock's account of his voyage came out in 1859, it redeemed the reputation of Sir John Franklin. He had died while the expedition could still have succeeded and before the crews were reduced to cannibalism. The course of the North-West Passage, such as it was, had now become clear, but the Admiralty lost interest completely. Barrow and John Ross were dead. James Ross, already mourning his wife, was greatly saddened by the fate of his friends Franklin and Crozier, who had led the expedition in his place. Thereafter, people in Britain and later in Canada took only an intermittent interest in Arctic exploration. But the Inuit cherished their oral records of what had happened in their own territory, where the white explorers were interlopers.

As underwater archaeology became more scientific and rewarding at the end of the twentieth century, Canadian researchers took up the search for the elusive wrecks of earlier voyages in their waters. The success of Robert Grenier's excavations in Labrador encouraged more ambitious ventures into the Arctic. But for many years Parks Canada relied on the extensive records left by British explorers and paid little attention to the oral accounts preserved by the Inuit. However, the discovery of the *Erebus* and *Terror*, in the early years of Nunavut, has produced a fundamental change in attitude towards the local Inuit by the Canadian government and other researchers.

The agreement between the United Kingdom and Canada on transferring the wrecks was brought into effect in the summer of 2018. This allowed the UK to retain artefacts of outstanding significance to the

Royal Navy. After negotiation, it was agreed that the British government would keep the 65 items found on the *Erebus* from 2014 to 2017.⁶⁷ All future finds, together with the wrecks themselves, were to be transferred to Canada, comprising both the Federal government and the Inuit community. This transfer took place symbolically when the British Deputy High Commissioner, the Canadian Minister for Environment and Climate Change and several Inuit representatives visited the wreck site of the *Erebus* in September 2018.⁶⁸ Henceforth, both wrecks and everything found in them would be jointly owned by Parks Canada, for the Canadian government, and the Inuit Heritage Trust. They should yield a rich haul of artefacts and possibly even written records, especially from the *Terror*. In 2019 a remotely operated vehicle was able to explore the ship's lower deck. It recorded 20 cabins and compartments, including Captain Crozier's cabin.⁶⁹ The items visible were remarkably preserved and included several chests and cabinets that appeared intact. For the finds from both ships a new museum is being considered at Gjoa Haven, while the Inuit have stationed 'Guardians' at the two wrecks.

These developments show how the contributions of the Inuit themselves, both past and present, are finally being recognized today. This article seeks to add a new dimension, by focusing on the impact made on naval explorers by Inuit practices and technology of the time. It demonstrates how these could determine the survival of early British crews, making the difference between life and death.

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Notes

1 This article is based on a lecture I delivered at the UCL Institute of the Americas in July 2018.

2 Grenier et al., *The Underwater Archaeology of Red Bay*.

3 Palin, *Erebus*, 295–6.

- 4 James called a striking Arctic headland Cape Isabella, as he first sighted it on his sister Isabella's birthday.
- 5 Ross, *Narrative of a Second Voyage*. I do not own the Appendix but have consulted the copy in the Library of the Travellers Club, which holds all the original Arctic explorers' reports from this period, as cited below. A full biography of the two Rosses is in M.J. Ross (a great-grandson of James), *Polar Pioneers*.
- 6 Williams, *Arctic Labyrinth*, 15–60, 83–97, 132–48, 161–5.
- 7 Fleming, *Barrow's Boys*.
- 8 John Ross's account is in *A Voyage of Discovery*. For Barrow's vendetta against John, see Ross, *Polar Pioneers*, 58–60, 186–7, 286–90.
- 9 Parry, *Journal of a Voyage*.
- 10 Parry, *Journal of a Second Voyage*.
- 11 Parry, *Journal of a Third Voyage*. At the same time George Lyon, the second-in-command of Parry's second voyage, led an abortive expedition into Hudson's Bay; see Lyon, *A Brief Narrative of an Unsuccessful Attempt*.
- 12 Franklin, *Narrative of a Journey to the Shores 1819, 20, 21 and 22*, 1823; Franklin, *Narrative of a Journey to the Shores 1825, 1826 and 1827*.
- 13 Back, *Narrative of the Arctic Land*.
- 14 Back, *Narrative of an Expedition*.
- 15 Barr, ed., *From Barrow to Boothia*.
- 16 Ross, *Polar Pioneers*, 215–54; Palin, *Erebus*, 49–185.
- 17 The modern literature on the search for Franklin is extensive. In addition to Ross, *Polar Pioneers*; Fleming, *Barrow's Boys*; Williams, *Arctic Labyrinth*; Palin, *Erebus*, I have drawn on: Berton, *The Arctic Grail*, McGoogan, *Fatal Passage*; Lambert, *Franklin*; Hatfield, *Lines in the Ice*; and Hutchinson, *Sir John Franklin*.
- 18 McGoogan, *Fatal Passage*, 79–106 and 142–7.
- 19 McGoogan, *Fatal Passage*, 181–97; Palin, *Erebus*, 248–53.
- 20 McClintock, *The Voyage of the Fox*.
- 21 Williams, *Arctic Labyrinth*, 348–53.
- 22 Hutchinson, *Sir John Franklin*, 139–43; Palin, *Erebus*, 277–90; obituaries of Louie Kamookak in *The Economist*, 12 April 2018, 82, and *The Times*, 28 May 2018, 43.
- 23 Hutchinson, *Sir John Franklin*, 151–65; Palin, *Erebus*, 1–3, 298–301.
- 24 Ross, *Second Voyage*, 242–55.
- 25 James's account of his sledge journey is inserted into Ross, *Second Voyage*, 401–35.
- 26 Ross, *Polar Pioneers*, 183–5.
- 27 James's record of his journey to locate the North Magnetic Pole is in Ross, *Second Voyage*, 549–66. John Ross later added a chapter to the volume trying to claim the credit, which also angered James.
- 28 Ross, *Second Voyage*, 720.
- 29 Back, *Arctic Land Journey*, 424–5.
- 30 Ross, *Second Voyage*, Appendix, unnumbered page after cxxviii.
- 31 Ross, *Voyage of Discovery*, 80–135.
- 32 Lyon, *The Private Journal*. Parry, *Second Voyage*, and Lyon have much more descriptive material about the Inuit than John Ross, with more artistic drawings compared with Ross's naïve watercolours.
- 33 Parry, *Second Voyage*, xvii; his account of Inuit language is right at the end of his book.
- 34 Parry, *Second Voyage*, 219, 412, 521–34; Lyon shares some of Parry's views, but differs on honesty – *Private Journal*, 347–52.
- 35 Ross, *Second Voyage*, Appendix, 4–20.
- 36 Ross, *Second Voyage*, 585.
- 37 Ross, *Second Voyage*, 245.
- 38 Ross, *Second Voyage*, 243–4.
- 39 Ross, *Second Voyage*, Appendix, 31–47.
- 40 Ross, *Second Voyage*, 274–86, 299, 320, 333, 537, 578; the quotations are from 278 and 286.
- 41 Lyon, *Private Journal*, 317.
- 42 Ross, *Second Voyage*, 721 (emphasis added).
- 43 Ross, *Second Voyage*, 201–2. See also the surgeon's report in Appendix, cxxiii: 'Regular nutritious diet and plenty of it should be the rule in serving out provision for a northern expedition'.
- 44 Ross, *Second Voyage*, 350–1.
- 45 Ross, *Second Voyage*, 262; Appendix, 33.
- 46 Ross, *Second Voyage*, 450, 514, 547, 576–83.
- 47 Ross, *Second Voyage*, 698–703 (bears, seals and foxes); 706–14 (seabirds and waterfowl).
- 48 Ross, *Second Voyage*, 317, 573.
- 49 Ross, *Second Voyage*, 249, 298.
- 50 Ross, *Second Voyage*, 634.
- 51 Ross, *Second Voyage*, 680.
- 52 Ross, *Second Voyage*, 299.
- 53 Ross, *Second Voyage*, 304–71.
- 54 Ross, *Second Voyage*, 401–35 describes the sledge journey; for over-driving dogs, see 426.
- 55 Parry, *Second Voyage*, 517–21.
- 56 Williams, *Arctic Labyrinth*, 210.

- 57 Hutchinson, *Sir John Franklin*, 60–77; Hatfield, *Lines in the Ice*, 132–3.
- 58 Palin, *Erebus*, 226.
- 59 A facsimile and the full text of both notes is in Hutchinson, *Sir John Franklin*, 134–5. The second note explains that the original form was found under a cairn built by James Ross when he came there in 1830. See also McClintock, *Voyage of the Fox*, 283–9, likewise with facsimile.
- 60 Their graves were later found and excavated; see Hutchinson, *Sir John Franklin*, 107–15, 149.
- 61 Hobson quoted in McClintock, *Voyage of the Fox*, 341. James Ross in Ross, *Second Voyage*, 416.
- 62 McClintock, *Voyage of the Fox*, 315 (italics in original), quoted with commentary in Ross, *Polar Pioneers*, 380–1. For a modern view, see Palin, *Erebus*, 264.
- 63 Hutchinson, *Sir John Franklin*, 132–3; Palin, *Erebus*, 255–6.
- 64 McClintock, *Voyage of the Fox*, 233.
- 65 McClintock, *Voyage of the Fox*, 242–4, records flour and preserved vegetables at Fury Beach but no meat.
- 66 McClintock, *Voyage of the Fox*, 260, 295, 304–6.
- 67 ‘Government of Canada receives historic gift of Franklin shipwrecks from United Kingdom’, Parks Canada News Release, 26 April 2018.
- 68 ‘First artefacts jointly owned by Canada and Inuit recovered from Franklin wrecks’, Parks Canada News Release, 26 September 2018.
- 69 ‘Government of Canada releases remarkable images of the wreck of HMS *Terror*’, Parks Canada News Release, 28 August 2019.

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In There, 2000; and *Staying Together*, 2005) and a volume of memoirs (*Economic Diplomat*, 2010).

Conflict of Interests

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interests with this work.