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Consuming Empires: British Arctic Exploration and The Franklin Expedition

British Arctic exploration was at its peak during the nineteenth century, a period of time in which Britain had already colonized widespread regions of the globe, from India to the Caribbean, and was seeking to continue pushing the forefront of exploration. As the world's dominant naval power, Britain sought to control the world's oceans. In peace time, Britain was able to dedicate its vast fleet to exploration of new frontiers. In the mid-nineteenth century, these frontiers were the Arctic regions, and Britain would send many expeditions to explore and chart these regions. The British had a variety of goals in exploring the Arctic. Scientifically, they sought to gather data on weather patterns, flora and fauna, and indigenous populations. They also sought new routes to Asia, through a theorized "open polar sea" north of the ice sheets.¹ Lastly, but certainly not least, the British sought to display their superiority over other European nations as they all competed for influence on the world stage. Arctic exploration was a desire not just of the British government, but an idea that captured the interest of the public as well. The British public had a great fascination with Arctic exploration, and consumed with great veracity media which depicted the Arctic exploits of their countrymen. It is with this

¹ CARTER, CHRISTOPHER. ""THE SEA FRYSETH NOT": SCIENCE AND THE OPEN POLAR SEA IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY." *Earth Sciences History* 32, no. 2 (2013): 235-51. Accessed April 1, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24140013>.

context that we can begin to examine an image that appeared in the *Illustrated London News* on May 24, 1845.



Figure 1. "H.M.S. "Erebus" and "Terror", *The Illustrated London News*, May 24, 1845

This image, which appeared in volume six of the *Illustrated London News*, depicts two Arctic exploration ships, the H.M.S. Erebus and H.M.S. Terror. The *Illustrated London News* was the world's first illustrated weekly news magazine² and was highly successful. Published in a time period in Britain of rapidly increasing literacy, cheaper printing, and a growing middle class with disposable income, the *Illustrated London News* and other newspapers like it could reach tens of thousands of readers. This was a period in which mass media truly became a force capable of influencing public opinion and culture. The public was eager to consume stories of

² "History of Magazines." Magazines.com. Accessed May 6, 2021. <https://www.magazines.com/history-of-magazines>.

their nation's achievements, and the *Illustrated London News* was keen to provide this service. The two ships in this image are depicted departing from London, at the very beginning of what would become known as The Franklin Expedition. This expedition held a special place in the interest of the British public. Its mission was to find to the Northwest Passage, a long standing and lofty goal of the British. The expedition was led by the renowned Sir John Franklin and equipped with all the latest technology the British Empire had to offer. This image's significance is in how it demonstrates the interest the public held in Britain's imperial mission and the heroic status attributed to the men who performed it. To understand how important this mission was to the British, we must first understand it's objective, the Northwest Passage.

The discovery of the Northwest Passage, a theorized open sea route through the Arctic above North America, was a long standing objective of the British Admiralty. Britain had been performing Arctic expeditions since as early as 1553, under King Henry VIII. The Franklin Expedition was to be the fifty-eighth such Arctic expedition. The goal of discovering a sea route to the Pacific above North America was a goal deeply engrained in the British public consciousness. There were a variety of reasons for seeking this passage, and for Arctic exploration in general. One of these reasons was the furthering of scientific knowledge. This was a period of time in which Europe had taken a great interest in science and the study of the natural world. Sir John Barrow, who served as the second secretary of the British Admiralty from 1803 to 1845, would write, "[the] enterprize [of Arctic exploration] itself... may be truly characterized as one of the most liberal and disinterested that was ever undertaken, ... having for its primary object that of the advancement of science, for its own sake, without any selfish

or interested views.”³ This shows the extreme importance the British put on scientific advancement, labeling it as one of the primary objectives of Arctic exploration. The Admiralty sought to gather data for a wide variety of scientific disciplines, instructing naval officers to take detailed notes on weather patterns, oceanography, geography, animals, plants, and indigenous populations. The expeditions would also carry a large number of canisters for preservation of physical samples of plants, animals, and other artifacts. Another objective of the search for the Northwest Passage was to find an alternate route to America's west coast and to Asia. Having an alternate route could prove very useful to the British for trade and warfare. It could also save large amounts of time spent sailing around South America's Cape Horn and Africa's Cape of Good Hope, especially in a period before the Suez or Panama canals. The discovery of this new sea route would also allow the British to display their superiority over the other European powers with whom there was great competition over colonies, resources, and international influence. Discovery of the Northwest Passage would be an illustrious achievement to exhibit to the other European powers, and would bring great pride to the British people.

By the time of The Franklin Expedition, a large amount of progress had already been made on the Northwest Passage. Previous expeditions had mapped much of the eastern and western sides of the passage, but there was still a crucial missing link in the middle. No entirely navigable route was yet known, however, Britain was confident that a passage existed and that the final link would soon be found. The Franklin Expedition itself was confident that their

³ Behrisch, Erika. "'Far as the Eye Can Reach': Scientific Exploration and Explorers' Poetry in the Arctic, 1832-1852." *Victorian Poetry* 41, no. 1 (2003): 74. Accessed April 1, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40002871>.

expedition would be *the* expedition to discover the final piece of the Northwest Passage and sail straight through the Arctic to the Pacific Ocean. A key figure in this expedition was its namesake, the expedition's commander Sir John Franklin, who himself insisted they would be through the Northwest Passage in a single year.⁴

Sir John Franklin is an important figure to study in examining how the British public viewed these expeditions. An expedition's commander was often treated as a figure representing the entire expedition, evidenced in the expedition's colloquial name of The Franklin Expedition. It is thus important to look at how the Admiralty chose its commanders. The Admiralty had a number of experienced commanders to choose from, such as Sir William Edward Parry, Sir James Ross, or Francis Crozier, but the decision ultimately fell to Sir John Franklin due to a combination of availability, Arctic experience, and leadership capabilities. Franklin had led a long and successful naval career, participating in a number of significant naval battles, the first circumnavigation of Australia, and two overland expeditions in the Arctic, in which he charted large areas of the Arctic coastline.⁵ Additionally, Franklin had served as the colonial governor of Tasmania for a period of three years, a role he was noted as filling quite successfully. In addition to his naval exploits, Franklin was known as an eminent explorer in Britain. He exemplified the British ideal of a Christian gentleman explorer, similar to the famed African explorer David Livingstone. Franklin was a committed and genuine Evangelical Christian

⁴ Durey, Michael. "EXPLORATION AT THE EDGE: REASSESSING THE FATE OF SIR JOHN FRANKLIN'S LAST ARCTIC EXPEDITION." *The Great Circle* 30, no. 2 (2008): 13. Accessed April 1, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41563270>.

⁵ Durey, Michael. "EXPLORATION AT THE EDGE: REASSESSING THE FATE OF SIR JOHN FRANKLIN'S LAST ARCTIC EXPEDITION." *The Great Circle* 30, no. 2 (2008): 18-20. Accessed April 1, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41563270>.

who stuck to his ideals and virtues. On return from his first overland Arctic expedition, which had been met with extreme hardship and tragedy, Franklin was noted as having "...demonstrated the noble virtues of bravery, selflessness, and the acceptance of self-sacrifice in a cause."⁶ On this expedition Franklin had proved, in spite of those who had doubted his qualifications for the role, that he was capable of surviving multiple Arctic winters in dire conditions. On his return to Britain, he was lionized and treated as a classic Victorian hero of the empire. Not only was Franklin a popular figure amongst the British public, but he was also well-liked and respected by his crews, who knew him as an authoritative yet kind and empathetic leader. If ever there was man who could break through the long sought after Northwest Passage, the Admiralty considered Sir John Franklin the man to do it.

To ensure that this expedition would have all the necessary tools to accomplish their objective, the *Erebus* and *Terror* were outfitted with the most modern technology available. Throughout the previous centuries, cutting edge technology had played a crucial role in Europe's world dominance, and this expedition would be no exception. Both ships had been initially built for warfare, but were refitted for Arctic exploration and had returned from multiple successful expeditions previously. Both ships had been equipped with thick iron plating, which aided in ice breaking and durability. In addition, for this particular expedition, both were equipped with new, state of the art, steam-powered screw propellers. Though steam engines had been used on ships for nearly forty years at this point, they had utilized paddle

⁶ Durey, Michael. "EXPLORATION AT THE EDGE: REASSESSING THE FATE OF SIR JOHN FRANKLIN'S LAST ARCTIC EXPEDITION." *The Great Circle* 30, no. 2 (2008): 19. Accessed April 1 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41563270>.

wheels to propel themselves, which were unsuitable for Arctic conditions. The screw propeller could be used in Arctic conditions and could aid in ice-breaking. Additionally, the steam engines could be used to centrally heat the ships, a welcome advancement in the freezing Arctic temperatures. For supplies, the expedition was equipped with the newly invented tinned food, which could last years. They received enough supplies to last three years under normal conditions or five years under strict rationing. The expedition was even equipped with the brand new Daguerreotype camera for the purpose of photographically documenting their mission.

Overall, the expedition was equipped with all the greatest technology that British industry and ingenuity could offer. This contributed to the certainty that this would surely be expedition to finally navigate the entire Northwest Passage. The departure of this expedition, on a historic and imposing mission, led by an experienced and famous commander, heavily provisioned and with the most modern technology available at its disposal, was of great national interest to the people of Britain. It would be written about in the *Illustrated London News* and numerous other publications in Britain, capturing the fascination and enthusiasm of the British public. The expedition and its portrayal in the media projected Britain's imperial endeavor to explore every corner of the Earth and to exercise their control over the world's oceans. With 129 men and three to five years' worth of provisions, the Erebus and the Terror would set out for the Arctic. There could not have been more national pride riding on the outcome of The Franklin Expedition.

Unfortunately for the British, this expedition would not be the one to successfully navigate the Northwest Passage. One year into the expedition, the Erebus and the Terror would

both become trapped in the ice sheet north of King William Island in the Arctic Archipelago. Confident that the ice would melt in the summer, the crews decided to wait out the Arctic winter on board the ships. The crews would end up waiting two years with no break in the ice sheet and no rescue expedition coming to their aid. By this point 21 men has already died, including Sir John Franklin himself and a staggeringly high nine officers, 37.5 percent of the expedition's officers.⁷ The decision was made to abandon the ships and seek rescue on foot. The plan was to make the 650 mile trek south to a Hudson Bay Company outpost on the Great Slave Lake. However, on this journey all remaining crew would die of starvation, scurvy, and exposure. The entire story of what happened to The Franklin Expedition has never been fully reconstructed, but the British would spend the next decade attempting to uncover its fate.

Due to the lack of any long range communication method to the Arctic in this time period, the Admiralty had no information to imply the failure of the expedition. Some publications in Britain would call for a rescue expedition to be sent after just one year from when The Franklin Expedition departed, including pleas from Lady Franklin, Sir John Franklin's wife. The Admiralty would refuse any rescue missions at this point, still optimistic about the expedition's success, albeit on a slower time scale then hoped for. After two years with no communication or sign of the crew, the Admiralty began sending the first of many search and rescue missions for the lost expedition. Much of the British public remained optimistic about the crew's survival, referencing previous such feats of Arctic survival by the British, including

⁷ Durey, Michael. "EXPLORATION AT THE EDGE: REASSESSING THE FATE OF SIR JOHN FRANKLIN'S LAST ARCTIC EXPEDITION." *The Great Circle* 30, no. 2 (2008): 23. Accessed April 1, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41563270>.

Franklin's first overland expedition. As time progressed however, concern and anxiety over the crew's fate grew. In examining the British reaction to the expedition's disappearance, historian James Marlow would write, "[Franklin's] disappearance caused gusts of concern and almost, indeed, of national hysteria... Franklin was the model of the British hero, and the entire reading-class felt implicated in his fate."⁸ The interest in the expedition truly was nationwide; the reading public were deeply concerned about the fate of the expedition. After nearly six years of rescue expeditions though, pretty much all hope had been given up of finding the crew alive. However, expeditions continued to be sent out in search of evidence of what may have happened to the lost expedition. There was a general disbelief that a well-equipped expedition of Britain's best men could simply disappear without a trace. Despite this, The Franklin Expedition would come to be viewed as martyrs to the British imperial cause. The men were considered heroes of the empire who gave their lives pushing the forefront of exploration. However, one search expedition would put this status in jeopardy.

In 1854, Dr. John Rae of the Hudson Bay Company was searching for evidence of The Franklin Expedition when he came upon Inuits carrying artifacts from the expedition. The Inuits would first tell Rae of seeing about forty white men dragging sleds through the Arctic 5 years prior. The Inuit later happened upon a decrepit camp where they made a startling discovery. As Dr. Rae would relay to the Admiralty, the Inuits stated, "From the mutilated state of many of the bodies and the contents of the kettles, it is evident that our wretched Countrymen had

⁸ Marlow, James E. "The Fate of Sir John Franklin: Three Phases of Response in Victorian Periodicals." *Victorian Periodicals Review* 15, no. 1 (1982): 3. Accessed April 1, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20082015>.

been driven to the last dread alternative, as a means of sustaining life.”⁹ In short, the Inuits had discovered evidence that the crew had resorted to cannibalism as a last ditch means of survival. However, when Rae reported these findings, many in Britain accused him of not performing his due diligence in verifying the claims of the Inuit. Rae had chosen to rush back to Britain with his newfound information rather than search for the decrepit camp himself. Many in Britain did not trust the word of the Inuit, who they viewed as uncivilized savages looking to discredit honorable British sailors. Many notable British writers would also refute the claim of cannibalism, putting it entirely outside the realm of possibility. Charles Dickens would write, “No statement of cannibalism, whether on the deep or on dry land, is to be admitted suppositiously, or inferentially, or on any but the most direct and positive evidence...”¹⁰ Despite being an experienced Arctic explorer and being known for his integrity, Rae’s account was largely discredited by the British public. The idea that their countrymen would resort to so awful an act rather than accept their sacrifice to the cause of imperialism was unacceptable to the British public, and the theory was widely denounced. The view of the men as martyrs prevailed and, after a brief scandal, they were returned to the pantheon of British heroes in the public consciousness.

Overall, British Arctic exploration and especially the lost Franklin Expedition serve as good case studies of British imperialism. They exemplify the British desire to rule the seas,

⁹ Marlow, James E. "The Fate of Sir John Franklin: Three Phases of Response in Victorian Periodicals." *Victorian Periodicals Review* 15, no. 1 (1982): 5. Accessed April 1, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20082015>.

¹⁰ Marlow, James E. "The Fate of Sir John Franklin: Three Phases of Response in Victorian Periodicals." *Victorian Periodicals Review* 15, no. 1 (1982): 7. Accessed April 1, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20082015>.

project their naval power across the world, and drive the forefront of European exploration.

These goals were not solely those of the British government, but of the public as well, who took great fascination in their countrymen's imperial exploits. The growth of mass media in this period enabled large swaths of the public to follow stories such as that of The Franklin Expedition, and the men who were in these stories were treated as heroes of the empire, especially their leaders such as Sir John Franklin. The Arctic expeditions were supported by the greatest technological innovations of the era, adding to their grandiosity. New inventions like the steam-powered screw propeller, canned goods, and the daguerreotype camera were both a means of driving exploration, as well as results of the strong scientific interest of the British empire. The public took a lot of pride in their nation, and when faced with failure such as that of the Franklin Expedition, would recognize the deaths only as dedication to furthering the cause of imperialism. When faced with controversy, the British press and public would vehemently deny any lapse in virtue of their countrymen. Thus, British imperialism would create heroic stories of even its greatest failures.