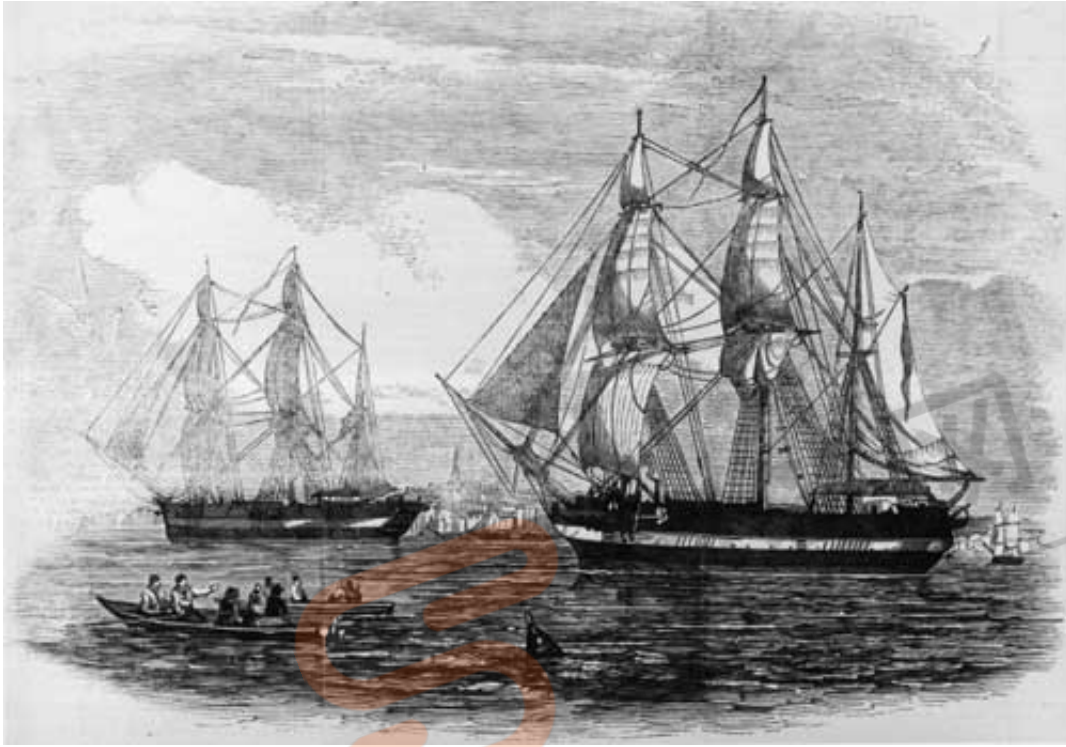


《十八世纪北极探险沉船重见天日》

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The Franklin Ship Myth, Verified



Two weeks ago, as Americans were preoccupied playing Groundhog War in Iraq, a significant discovery was announced in Canada. Yes, yes, of course this is an accepted ground for joking—“Worthwhile Canadian Initiative Yields Results” being the world’s most boring headline, and so on—but in this case the initiative in question really was worthwhile, at least to anyone with an appreciation for Victorian mystery, the winter sublime, and the far north. What had taken place was the discovery, intact and underwater, of one of the two ships of the Franklin expedition, the British naval voyage that went out in search of the Northwest Passage, in 1845, got stranded in the Arctic ice, and was never seen again. (There’s a good, ghostly video of the wreck here.)

The finding of the Franklin ship—there were two, the H.M.S. Erebus and the H.M.S. Terror; no one is yet sure which has been spotted down there—is, for Canadians, a very big deal (“Canada’s Moon Shot,” the Toronto Star called it), since the Franklin expedition has long provided the single most eventful mythological moment in Canada’s admittedly not-exactly-limitlessly mythologized history. Margaret Atwood, in her essay “Concerning Franklin and His Gallant Crew,” from 1991, identifies it as a kind of origin myth of disaster in the Canadian experience. To translate it from Canadian into American terms, it is as if someone had found, in a single moment, the hull of the Titanic, the solution to the mystery of the lost colony at Roanoke, the original flag of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” and the menu for the Donner Party’s last meal.

The basic outlines of what happened to Franklin and his crew after they foundered in the Victoria Strait had long been surmised from various kinds of evidence, chiefly the testimony of the local Inuit people, who, in 1854, told an explorer named John Rae of a group of around thirty-five Europeans who had died of starvation while struggling south. Graves and other remains of the Franklin crew also turned up on two Arctic islands, and have over the years

been subject to scientific examination, revealing, or seeming to, that the men of the expedition had already been self-poisoned by badly tinned food. But the details of what had happened remained murky, at times horrifying, and often bowdlerized. One of the significant things about the Franklin expedition, as I wrote in my book “Winter,” is that, though the voyage was a failure, the relentless search for its relics gave polar exploration the existential accents that it would keep well into the time of Scott and Shackleton. Every expedition that went out in search of Franklin, through the next decades, threatened itself to become lost, and sometimes did. It was a form of throwing good explorers after bad. The search for Franklin became far more significant than Franklin, leading to much newly mapped territory and many frozen English faces.

One of the spark plugs of the discovery of Franklin’s boat was the Canadian philanthropist and Arctic lover Jim Balsillie, who, working closely with the scientists of Parks Canada, the Prime Minister’s office, and the Royal Canadian Navy made it possible to build a “platform”—a big and hardy ship, called the Martin Bergmann, in honor of a colleague killed in a plane crash, in 2011—which could be used as a kind of floating home base for the dedicated and frequently chilly searchers. Balsillie, who made his fortune as one of the founders of Research in Motion, the firm that gave the world the BlackBerry, now devotes himself to an array of good and sometimes quixotic causes. (A friend of mine, he was also our own Malcolm Gladwell’s roommate at Trinity College, in Toronto; Canada can be a very small nation.) “I’d like to pretend we had a prescient and beautiful plan,” he said the other afternoon from Toronto. “In truth, it was all improvisation and a bit of luck. It’s mostly just doggedness that counts when you’re dragging sonar equipment across the ocean floor. I call it mowing the lawn, and the questions are mostly who has a bigger mower and who mows longer.

“There were two areas we planned on searching, one northern and one more southern, and we were hoping to do the northern search first. But there was more ice there than there had been in twenty years, so we had to look south. It was like, you know, the old joke about the drunk looking for his car keys outside, even though he lost them inside, because the light is better there. But, in this case, that’s where the car keys were.”

During that southern search, a helicopter pilot named Andrew Stirling, working under the guidance of the archaeologist Doug Stenton, began a “walk survey” of a previously unsurveyed island. “And that’s where they found it: a davit,” Balsillie said—a pulley system for deploying lifeboats. “So anyway, they looked at it and—a heart-stopping moment this was—it had the little arrows of the Royal Navy on it. So they said, ‘Let’s get over to this island and start searching right now.’ They redeployed within hours and—well, they found it.

“The basic take is that it is pretty clear now. These guys [the Franklin crew] went down Victoria Strait, they got stuck—irrefutably, I think—in the most forbidding, awful part of the Arctic, where the ice pushes down—they just got stuck in the ice. They got stuck really bad. And then what happened was that they were voyaging from Victoria Island, and they came back to the vessel and the ice broke and they actually sailed again, for a while. I think the ice broke and they sailed it down, and then they were moving around and they got close to shoals. And they said, ‘Let’s leave the ship and see if we can catch a Hudson’s Bay [trading] post.’ I think that’s what happened. Where they were sailing there’s incredible potential for near misses in shoals—the Bergmann was mowing the lawn in forty metres of water. The boat must have been caught up and stuck, or near stuck, and they found the best place they could to land. And they started walking.” Balsillie explained that these new findings made sense of many other puzzling details in the pieced-together accounts—including Inuit lore of a “ghost ship” seen sailing south, presumably the relaunched Franklin vessel.

Part of the mythology of the Franklin expedition—the Donner Party bit—involves their apparent descent into cannibalism. “From the mutilated state of many of the corpses, and the contents of the kettles, it is evident that our wretched countrymen had been driven to the last resource—cannibalism—as a means of prolonging existence,” John Rae reported—a conclusion which for some reason infuriated the great Charles Dickens, who collaborated with his friend Wilkie Collins on a Franklin-themed play, “The Frozen Deep,” and fixed some of the responsibility on the guiltless Inuit themselves. “We have yet to learn what knowledge the white man—lost, houseless, shipless,

