

*Status of the History of the Lost Franklin Expedition of  
1845*

Dr. M. John Roobol, Retired Geologist

---

A first modern reconstruction of the history of the lost 1845 Arctic expedition of Sir John Franklin was made by Captain David Woodman (1991 and 1995). A second attempt was by John Roobol in 2019. Both relied heavily on Inuit testimony as there were no survivors and the two ships were not found until 2014 (Erebus) and 2016 (Terror). As data begins to accumulate from the Parks Canada investigation of the sunken wrecks of Erebus and Terror, some modification of the reconstructed history becomes possible. Critical new data is that Terror found in Terror Bay has three masts broken and lying along her starboard side still attached to the hull. She was rigged for winter quarters when she sank. Her propeller is lowered in the use position. She was abandoned and sealed up when she sank. A summary of the latest understanding follows:

1. The ships departed Woolwich for Greenhithe on May 12th 1845.
2. The ships arrived at Disko Island, Greenland on 4th July 1845.
3. 1845: Sail through Lancaster Sound and Barrow Strait to ascend Wellington Channel and circumnavigate Cornwallis Island and then make winter quarters behind Beechey Island (1847 record).
4. 1846: Sail south down Peel Sound and Franklin Strait to arrive in Poctes/Poet's Bay. Explore Poctes Bay and put ashore sledge parties for land exploration (Inuit testimony).
5. Both ships frozen into the ice stream to the west of King William Island on 12th September 1846 (1848 Record). The position of the propeller on Terror suggests they were trying to force a passage through the ice when frozen in.
6. 1847: An eight-man party maps an ice-filled North-West Passage to the west of King William Island in May 1847 (1847 Record)
7. Sir John Franklin dies on 11th June 1847 (1848 record).

8. In summer 1847, shortly after the death of Sir John Franklin, with Terror still rigged for winter quarters, the ship may have been thrown over onto her starboard side by ice movements breaking all three masts (Roobol, 2019). Some men working in her hold were killed. Alternatively Captain David Woodman believes that Terror was later sailed to Terror Bay, where she was crushed by the ice and sank.

9. Roobol (2019) suggests Captain Crozier took his men ashore to King William Island and built a camp at what is today known as Crozier's Landing. The camp contained much portable equipment and was a response to the ships being in grave danger. There was more equipment than was needed for the 1848 retreat. The first purpose of the camp was as a base for survival in case Erebus was also damaged by ice movements. There were thirteen tent circles in the camp - enough to accommodate the full 51-man crew of Terror.

10. A note preserved in the Peglar papers may identify this as Terror Camp. The note reads "Erebus' tell the Captain you and Peglar on bord onn hay The Terror camp is clear". Possibly Terror's Captain of the Foretop Harry Peglar and one other were the last to leave Terror camp to move aboard Erebus for the winter of 1847-48.

11. Winter 1847-48 was a miserable affair with both crews crowded aboard HMS Erebus with many deaths. In the long dark winter bodies were put into the bunks of the abandoned HMS Terror.

12. On 26th April 1848, the 105 surviving men abandoned the ships and started south, hauling boats on sledges. To that date 9 officers and 15 men had died.

13. Bad weather in a summer that barely existed, resulted in the retreat making only 100 miles. Both Woodman and Roobol agree that the two boats found abandoned in Erebus Bay were from this retreat. Roobol believes two other boats reached Terror Bay and one went on to Douglas Bay.

14. About a half of the men returned to Erebus and remanned her (possibly also Terror as suggested by Captain David Woodman). About a half of the men were left in three camps with hunters. Failure of the caribou to arrive that summer resulted in their deaths. There was some cannibalism at the camps.

15. In late 1848, the remanned Erebus was released before everything at the Crozier's Landing camp could be reloaded aboard her (in particular the tent filled with heavy clothing). She was worked along the coast to the area of Terror Bay or the Royal Geographical Society Island of Umnguyaluk (Roobol, 2019). There she remained for at least a year but in contact with the Inuit. Captain David Woodman has her accompanied by a remanned Terror.

16. A senior officer probably Captain Crozier is believed to have died in summer 1849 or 1850. He received a full military funeral and was buried ashore. In an adjacent vault papers were sealed in cement. These events were witnessed by the Inuit.

17. Captain David Woodman has suggested that with a remanned Terror in Terror Bay, a camp was built in 1850. Alternatively if Terror was abandoned in 1847, then the ship in Terror Bay might be Erebus.

18. Captain David Woodman proposed that Terror was crushed by the ice in Terror Bay where she sank. Roobol (2019) has the deserted ship drifting through Alexandra Channel in 1850 or later (after Erebus had moved on), probably with bodies aboard. She was found by the Inuit who entered her hold and cut a window, so she sank in Terror Bay.

19. Summer 1850, around 40 men set out on a second overland retreat. In Washington Bay they meet four families of Inuit who describe them as thin, some with blackened gums. Their leader makes a pantomime to describe his ship being crushed and thrown over by the ice. This second retreat was recognised by Captain David Woodman from the report of Dr. John Rae.

20. Four survivors of the 1850 retreat are found by Inook-poo-zhe-jook who feeds them over the winter. Two are ill and die. In summer 1851, the last two survivors set out south with an Inuit guide for Fort Churchill, but do not arrive.

21. Around a dozen men remained aboard Erebus with one senior officer probably Captain Fitzjames probably in Terror Bay or at Umnguyaaluk Island. In late 1850 Erebus completed the North-West Passage and arrived in the open water channel along the northern coast of the America continent. There the last officer died and his body was placed in the great cabin. A boat probably left the ship heading for the Mackenzie River.

22. Through 1850 to 1852, a group of four men – the best hunters – together with the ships dog Neptune remained aboard Erebus, but leave her on hunting trips. While absent on one of these, the ship is found by Inuit who break into her and destroy one of her boats. The Inuit report seeing the footprints of the hunters and their dog and finding the site where they killed a young deer.

23. The hunters leave Erebus in 1851 or 1852 and march to Iwillik or Repulse Bay on the Melville Peninsula, some 250 miles from Igloodik Island and 600 miles to Fort Churchill. This final stage also results from the meticulous work of Captain David Woodman.

24. Erebus drifts ashore on a small island where she is salvaged for many years by the Inuit. Finally she is rafted off by ice and sinks in shallow water in Wilmot and Crampton Bay with her masts standing through the water. Her masts and bowsprit are eventually broken off by drifting ice.

## Recommended Reading

Eber, Dorothy Harley, 2008, *Encounters on the Passage: Inuit meet the Explorers*, University of Toronto Press.

McClintock, F.L., 1859, 2012, *The Voyage of the Fox in Arctic Seas*: John Murray, London. Reprinted Cambridge University Press.

Potter, R.A., 2016, *Finding Franklin. The untold story of a 165-year search*: McGill-Queens University Press, Montreal and Kingston.

Roobol, M.J., 2019a, *Franklin's Fate*: The Conrad Press, Canterbury, UK.

Roobol, M.J., 2019b, *Trapped – A Novel*, The Conrad Press, Canterbury, UK.

Woodman, David C., 1991, 2015, *Unravelling the Franklin Mystery – Inuit Testimony*: McGill-Queens University Press, Montreal & Kingston, London, Buffalo.

Woodman, David, 1995, *Strangers among us*: McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal & Kingston, London, Buffalo.

**Acknowledgements:** I would like to thank Captain David Woodman for a most stimulating exchange of correspondence on the history of the expedition.