

THE FRANKLIN LETTER

Recently the AINA Library was fortunate in procuring a letter signed by Sir John Franklin. It is addressed to Commissioner Robert Barrie and was written from Fort Franklin on Great Bear Lake in the fall of 1825, during Franklin's second expedition to the Canadian Arctic.

The text of the long and closely written letter is given below in its entirety, except for a few illegible words which have been indicated in each case by three points.

*Letter from Captain Franklin
to Commissioner Barrie R.N.
Kingston
Upper Canada*

*Fort Franklin Great Bear Lake Lat 65.12N
Long 123.5W*

MY DEAR SIR:

You will be glad to learn that we carried the favorable season with which we commenced our operations with us to the Mackenzie River — in which we arrived as early as the first week in August. This was of the greatest importance as it enabled us to gain information and to take some steps towards facilitating our future progress along the Sea Coast. Having overtaken the boats which had been sent from England the preceding year. I went down to the sea in the barges [. . .] them accompanied by Mr. Kendall and we were rejoiced at finding the Salt Water in Lat 69°29' N and Long 135° 40W on the day six months after our departure from Liverpool. We could see no ice nor any obstruction to the passage of the ships under Parry — when they reach so far to the westward. This view was obtained from the summit of our island to which we traversed distant about 20 miles from the river. We also saw the direction of the Coast East and West and consequently ascertained in what way our course must be steered next spring. The Esquimaux were absent at the time being employed catching whales and seals to the Eastward — but we left many presents in their lodges and took other steps to [. . .] easy, an interview between when we return to that quarter in the spring. We found plenty of drift-timber on the extreme shores — and saw several Moose and Reindeer — and large flocks of Geese, Cranes and Swans at the mouth of the river — we were

caught by gales on two occasions but did not regret the circumstances as they afforded us the opportunity of perceiving that our boat managed extremely well under oars as well as sails in a very awkward swell. Dr. Richardson has made an excursion round the northern boundaries of this lake and found its nearest approach to the Copper Mine River — and consequently he has ascertained the point to which his course must be directed on his return from the mouth of that River to this place—. While we were thus employed, Leut. Back superintended the building of this establishment (which my friends in my absence named Franklin) and very soon after the whole party had re-assembled here — the houses were finished and we took up our winter quarters — the expedition having travelled since it landed at New York about 5000 miles — Our principal dependence for support is on Fish which the Lake supplies in abundance but we have killed some Moose and Reindeer — though now these animals are retiring to better wooded parts of the country — and when the weather becomes severe we must not expect to have many remaining in our vicinity — The houses both of the officers and men are comfortably arranged — we are well provided with warm clothing and other essential articles, and on the whole our situation and prospects are as good as we could possibly wish — As yet we have had no severe weather, and as our present residence is in a Country of the secondary formation and therefore less elevated than that about Fort Enterprise which is in the primitive — it is probable we may not have the temperature so low at this place, as we had there — This country in fact is decidedly better for travellers — than the barren grounds — Eastward of the Copper Mine River — which I am ever convinced are of all others in America the most hazardous for services like ours — The animals fly from here on the first threat of the season changing and you are then deprived at once of food, as well as fuel, but here, the Reindeer seem to remain till the ice sets in, and then you have wood in abundance — to keep you warm — The season however during which operations can be carried on along the Coast does not exceed seven weeks — The Ice must separate from the shore and a passage be opened before you can begin and your place of destination or some secure situation must be gained on the first symptom of its return — or when the stormy weather commences which is a sure picture — to the beginning of the winter — as to the effecting anything by the way of discovery of walking along these Northern Coasts — I am decidedly convinced of its impracticality — You can neither carry provisions nor be certain of fuel or such a Service and the attempt would be madness — If these shores be surveyed — I have notes taken in [. .] — it must be done from the water wither in ships or boats — and I think shortness of season and want of provisions are the only impediments to the passage being ascertained — As to its existence there is in my mind not the slightest doubt — we have already seen the Sea from ice from 109° — to 115½ West and again at 136°, Parry has [. .] even navigatable for a ship to Melville Island — and I trust that he has by this time forced it much farther West — by the way of Regents Inlet — and the Russians have

seen open water at Tay Cape — with these evidences of the water being open in different parts. I cannot but think the man very sceptical who doubts the fact of its continuation — but whether it be navigable or not at all seasons — is quite another question — but I ardently hope that the present inquiries of Parry [. . .] may set the long contested point at rest.

We have got a very delicate needle placed in the Magnetic Meridian for the purpose of continuing the series of observations on the influence which the Aurora Boreales may have upon it — which we commenced on my last voyage — and we have found that during the presence of that Phenomenon and especially when it appears through a hazy atmosphere — the needle is governed in its motions by the same laws as it appeared to be at Fort Enterprise, these motions in the needle are supposed to be the effect of the Electricity generated by the Aurora — and since the intimate connection of the Electricity — & magnetism has been ascertained, and that the former will produce the latter — the inquiry into these subjects has been followed with much interest. I should like to see similar observations made in different parts where the Aurora appears frequently — and perhaps you would allow me to ask whether any could be made at Kingston. A needle without the card placed within the divided circle of an Azimuth Compass would answer very well — providing the Compass was placed level on a firm stand, apart from iron and every extraneous attractions as much as possible — This, to be set in the direction of the Magnetic Meridian and its position noted several times in the day — and as particularly whether the Aurora appears — The point from whence the Aurora proceeded should be noted, its form, whether arched or not — and in what quarter it vanished — The temp of Atmosphere — and the true direction and force of the wind — The HBC. send a packet from Canada every 1st of May. I shall be extremely glad to hear from you by this conveyance — I hope you had a pleasant passage to and from England, and that you left Mrs. Barrie quite well.

Believe me dear Sir

Very truly yours

JOHN FRANKLIN.