

John Richardson (1787-1865)



Sir John Richardson first achieved fame as a surgeon and naturalist with the two arctic land expeditions led by John Franklin in 1819-22 and 1825-27. A true generalist, Richardson was competent in geology, mammalogy, ichthyology, and botany — including the difficult field of lichenology — and soon became knowledgeable in ornithology. He wrote three of the four volumes of *Fauna Boreali-Americana*, contributed most of the plants for Hooker's *Flora Boreali-Americana*, and edited zoological appendices for the voyages of Parry, Ross, Back, Beechey, Kellett, and Belcher. A formidable ichthyologist who described 43 still-accepted genera and over 200 new species of fish, he was also a key member of the Strickland Committee, which set the rules of zoological nomenclature.

The oldest of 12 children of Gabriel Richardson and his wife Anne, née Mundell, John was born in Dumfries, Scotland, on 5 November 1787. His father was a brewer and, for a time, provost of Dumfries. A precocious boy, John learned to read at four years of age and was apprenticed to his surgeon uncle at thirteen. During the winters he attended classes in Edinburgh, obtaining his licence from the Royal College of Surgeons in 1807. He then served seven years in the Royal Navy, throughout much of the Napoleonic Wars, and spent five months with the Royal Marines in Halifax, Montreal, and the Richelieu Valley during the War of 1812-14.

Richardson returned to Edinburgh for another winter of study, wrote a thesis on yellow fever (in Latin), and obtained his M.D. degree in 1816. He began medical practice in Leith, the port of Edinburgh, but his ability as a naturalist soon gained him an appointment with the Franklin expedition. His previously unpublished journal, more direct and more succinct than Franklin's, describes the ordeal of arctic exploration in birchbark canoes and the harrowing return trek across the Barrens, on which 11 of 20 members of the party perished. Richardson details happenings on 51 days not covered by Franklin's account. He reports frankly some items that Franklin omitted — for example, how the starving men, reduced to eating year-old caribou robes from the refuse of the previous winter's camp, found warble-fly larvae a delicacy.

During the second Franklin expedition, Richardson mapped by canoe and ice sledge most of the shoreline of Great Bear Lake, the fourth largest lake in North America. In the following summer, after parting with Franklin at the mouth of the Mackenzie, Richardson's party turned east to explore and map 863 miles of unknown coastline as far as the Coppermine River, thus linking up with the coastal survey conducted to the east of that river during the first Franklin expedition. He then made one of the most remarkable journeys of any birdwatcher before or since: in order to join his assistant naturalist, Thomas Drummond, in time to study the spring bird migration on the Saskatchewan, Richardson left Great Slave Lake on Christmas Day and walked over 900 miles through the snow, to arrive at Carlton on 12 February 1827.

When the return of John Franklin's third and final attempt to find the Northwest Passage, this time by ship, was overdue, Richardson and fellow doctor John Rae in 1848 made the fastest canoe trip on record, leaving Sault Ste. Marie on 3 May and arriving at the mouth of the Mackenzie on 3 August. After a month of futile search along the familiar arctic shore, Richardson, now 60, kept up with the younger men on the 15-day overland march back to Great Bear Lake.

In his medical career, Richardson became the chief medical officer at Haslar Hospital, Gosport, then the largest hospital in the world and the largest brick building in the British empire. He consulted with Florence Nightingale, raised the quality of nursing care in the navy, improved the treatment of mental disease in sailors, and introduced general anesthesia into naval surgery.

Richardson was knighted in 1846 and was made Companion of the Bath in 1850, received the Royal Medal of the Royal Society of London in 1856, and was granted the degree of LL.D. from Trinity College, Dublin, in 1857. He died near Grasmere on 5 June 1865 and is buried near William Wordsworth. His name is perpetuated by numerous plants, fish, birds, and mammals (including Richardson's ground squirrel), and by such geographical features as the Richardson Mountains and Richardson River. As David A. Stewart has said:

He had in his life many of the conventional honours and some special marks of distinction as well. His was perhaps a life of industry more than a life of genius, but it was a full, good life, and in many ways a great life. It is not every day that we meet in one person — surgeon, physician, sailor, soldier, administrator, explorer, naturalist, author, and scholar, who has been eminent in some roles and commendable in all.

#### FURTHER READINGS

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