

Frederick Schwatka (1849-1892)

In this age of specialization, to conceive of one man achieving professional status in law, medicine, and the military is difficult. Yet in spite of having gained recognition as a certified barrister, a trained medical doctor, and a fighting cavalry officer, Frederick Schwatka will best be remembered as a superlative arctic traveller who brought the 30-year-long search for the missing Franklin expedition to a close. He not only made the longest sled journey on record at the time, but in gathering his nearly conclusive evidence that none of Franklin's official or scientific papers had survived, Schwatka made clear that white men could travel extensively in the Arctic without serious injury or illness if they adopted native methods, a "discovery" often attributed to Vilhjalmur Stefansson some three decades later.



Portrait from William Gilder's *Schwatka's Search*

Like so many other men of achievement, Schwatka rose from modest origins. Born the son of a cooper on 29 September 1849 in Galena, Illinois, the young Schwatka spent his first 10 years in the American midwest. In 1859 his family moved west to Salem, Oregon. Even though he was apprenticed to a printer for several years, his diligent study at Willamette University earned him an appointment at West Point, the United States Military Academy in Virginia. Upon graduation in 1871, Schwatka was commissioned as second lieutenant in the Third Cavalry. Over the next six or seven years, which included Custer's defeat at the Little Big Horn

and Chief Crazy Horse's surrender, Schwatka served as a fighting officer at several prairie and desert postings in the American West. Amazingly, Schwatka not only served during this turbulent period in the West, but he also managed to study both law and medicine. Admitted to the Nebraska bar in 1875, he received his medical degree from the prestigious Bellevue Hospital Medical College in New York City the following year.

Schwatka's arctic interests were sparked in the 1860s, when newspapers reported C.F. Hall's searches for Franklin's missing ships and crew. A decade later, whaling captain Thomas Barry returned from the Arctic with a silver spoon bearing the Franklin crest and a report that documents of the lost expedition lay in a cairn on an island in the Gulf of Boothia. The recovery of such papers would be invaluable, not only for answers they might provide about Franklin's fate, but for the scientific information they contained. None of the official papers had ever been recovered, with the single exception of Captain Crozier's notice, discovered in 1859, that the ships had been abandoned. A search, sponsored by the American Geographical Society and financed by private backers, began to take shape, and Schwatka volunteered to lead it. In spite of his lack of arctic experience, he was given command.

On 19 June 1878 the schooner *Eothen*, supplied by an American whaling firm, sailed from New York. The party comprised five men, including William Henry Gilder, scientific reporter for the *New York Herald*, and "Eskimo Joe" Ebierbing, an Inuk who had served as guide and interpreter for a number of Franklin searches. They set up a winter base camp near Daly Bay before Schwatka reconnoitered an overland route to the Wager River, which he accomplished in the heart of winter. Early the following spring, accompanied by about 12 Inuit, the men began the 5232-km sled journey — at the time the longest on record — that took them to King William Island, along its west coast, and back to explore the Adelaide Peninsula before turning up the Back and Meadowbank rivers and returning to Camp Daly on 4 March 1880. They had been gone from the base camp for 11 months and 20 days. When they returned, they discovered that the *Eothen* had neither waited for them nor left supplies, so Schwatka's party continued to Marble Island, where the whaling vessel *George and Mary* gave them passage back to New Bedford.

Captain Barry's rumour of the cache of papers proved unfounded. Schwatka located a single document — a copy of the Crozier notice found by Lt. Hobson in 1859. Furthermore, the Inuit assured Schwatka that all other papers had been destroyed. To be sure, Schwatka did find numerous relics of the missing expedition, including part of one of the ship's boats, a miscellaneous collection of buttons and remnants of cloth, and several graves and corpses. He gave decent burial to all mortal remains and positively identified the grave of Lt. John Irving, third officer of the *Terror*. As well, he made a number of minor geographical discoveries, including a branch of the Back River, which Schwatka named after President

Hayes, and Sherman Inlet and Basin on the Adelaide Peninsula.

Yet the genuine significance of "Schwatka's search" — as this exhaustive investigation of the region came to be popularly termed — is that it laid to rest any hope that the records of the Franklin party would ever be retrieved. Schwatka's incredible year-long sled journey had closed off the Franklin search, while it simultaneously opened new possibilities in arctic travel if scientific and exploratory parties would adopt native methods.

Schwatka returned to the North in 1883, when the Army sent him on a reconnaissance of the Yukon River. With a small party, he built a raft and descended the river from head to mouth, a raft journey of over 2095 km and, again, a record. Shortly after his return, he resigned from the Army, but continued exploring and writing of his travels. He returned to Alaska in 1886, leading the *New York Times*' Alaska Exploring Expedition, and again in 1891. In 1889 and 1890, he made three trips into northwestern Mexico, following them with books and lectures on his experiences.

Charles Francis Hall first stirred Schwatka's northern interests. Both men were United States citizens searching for signs of a lost British expedition in what is today the Canadian Arctic. Neither had arctic experience when he began his search. While Hall showed rather conclusively that no Franklin survivors remained, Schwatka made clear that no official papers remained. These men shared one final similarity — they both died of drug overdoses. An autopsy of Hall's remains showed lethal amounts of arsenic present. On 2 November 1892, in Portland, Oregon, Schwatka died of a self-administered overdose of laudanum, an analgesic he used regularly to combat a painful stomach disorder. By most accounts, the overdose was entirely accidental, but such accidents must be rare among members of the medical profession.



Lieutenant Schwatka showing the Eskimos the *Illustrated London News*. From *The Search for Franklin* (1882), author anonymous.

FURTHER READINGS

- GILDER, WILLIAM H. 1881. *Schwatka's Search: Sledging in the Arctic in Quest of the Franklin Records*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- SCHWATKA, FREDERICK. 1883. *Along Alaska's Great River: A Popular Account of the Travels of an Alaska Exploring Expedition along the Great Yukon River*. New York: Cassell & Co.
- _____. 1885. *Nimrod in the North*. New York: Cassell & Co.
- STACKPOLE, EDOUARD A. (ed.). 1977. *The Long Arctic Search: The Narrative of Lieutenant Frederick Schwatka, U.S.A.* Chester, Connecticut: The Pequot Press.

Richard C. Davis
 Department of English
 University of Calgary
 Calgary, Alberta, Canada
 T2N 1N4