

Charles Codrington Forsyth (ca. 1810–1873)

Forsyth's career in the Arctic was very brief. He was the commander of the first, and least successful, of Lady Franklin's private expeditions in search of her husband and the crews of H.M.S. *Erebus* and *Terror*, missing since 1845. The expedition, based upon the schooner *Prince Albert*, 89¾ tons, "merely made the voyage to the Polar Sea and back," in the words of Richard King. It achieved nothing, although it was the means by which news of the discovery of Franklin's wintering site on Beechey Island was brought back to Britain.

The circumstances of the expedition are, however, of interest. It was so badly organised and had such a heterogeneous collection of participants that its commander would have had to be a genius to make it succeed. Forsyth was certainly no genius, but he was a conspicuously meritorious naval officer, and his exploits both before and after the expedition were such as would lead one to suppose that he was an ideal candidate for such an appointment. There is no reason to doubt that had he been fortunate enough to find himself on the quarterdeck of one of the naval vessels that sailed north instead of on that of a civilian ship with a difficult, not to say mutinous, crew, his name would have a prominent place in the polar hagiography of the period instead of being virtually forgotten.

Forsyth entered the navy on 28 December 1826. His early service was spent on anti-slavery operations on the African coast. Moving to the South Atlantic station, he was posted to the famous H.M.S. *Beagle* under Captain R. Fitzroy. While belonging to that vessel he was active in surveying operations and had much detached duty. He passed the lieutenant's examination on 25 November 1836, but such was the promotion blockage that he was not actually promoted until 1843, by which time he had been employed on operations in Burma and on surveying duties in Australia, where he met the Franklins, Sir John being governor of Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania). As lieutenant, he participated in further anti-slavery operations and in active service in support of the army on the South African coast. He was promoted commander in 1849, a mere six years after being made lieutenant, and this clearly indicates the high opinion of him held in the Admiralty.

When the first mention of a private expedition in search of Franklin was bruited, Forsyth volunteered his services to Lady Franklin, who accepted him with alacrity, appointing him to the command. He had obtained permission from the Admiralty by 27 April 1850 and was the recipient of advice from a number of prominent arctics, among them Beechey, McClintock, and Parry. However, even though Forsyth was to command the expedition, he had nothing to do with the appointment of the mates of the ship or its crew, who were whalers selected by William Hogarth, a confidant of Lady Franklin at Aberdeen, or of the "chief officer" of the expedition, William Parker Snow, who was selected by Lady Franklin herself. Forsyth was not involved in the choice of vessel.

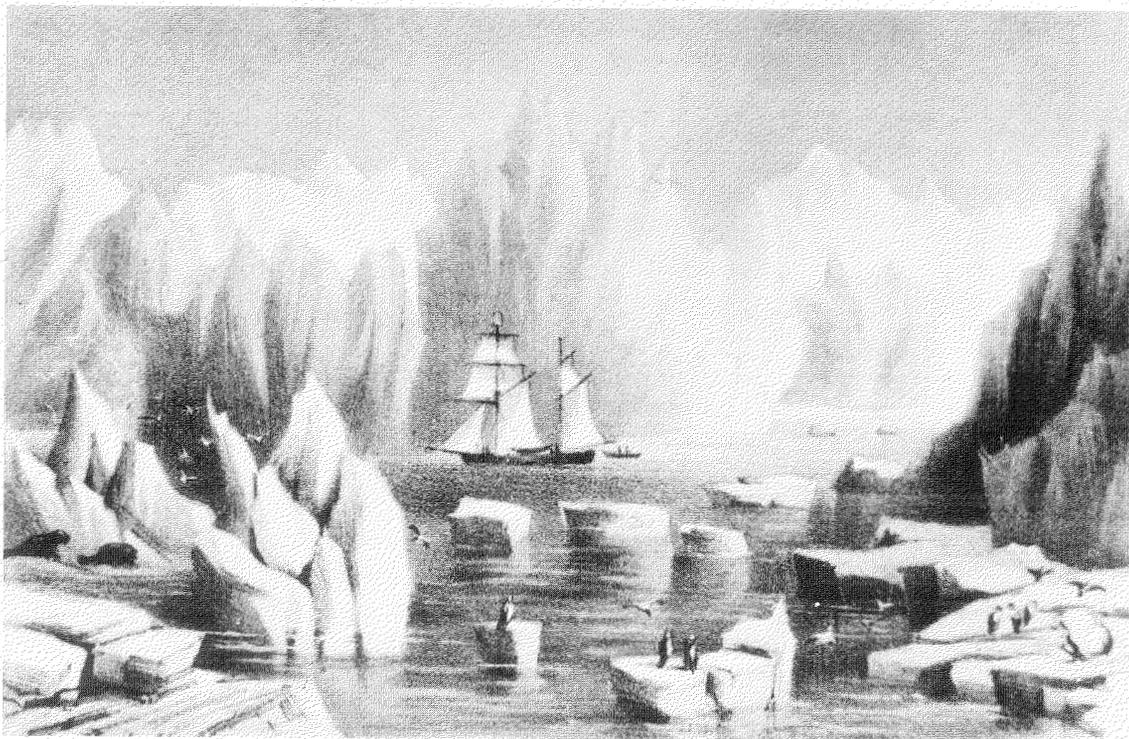
The expedition left Aberdeen on 5 June 1850. It was a disaster. Forsyth was completely out of his depth and could not cope with the novel situation on board. The "culture shock" of a civilian vessel was too much. The mates were incompetent, the crew independent-minded, and Snow was insufferable. "I had not a soul that I could associate with without my condescension being imposed upon, nor could I leave anyone in charge of the vessel." During the 1850 season, there were many naval ships in Barrow Strait, and Forsyth never lost an opportunity to consort with their officers.

The instructions of the expedition were for the vessel to penetrate Prince Regent Inlet, to establish winter quarters, and then for two travelling parties to examine the western coast of Boothia. Clearly, this was the very area that required searching, and one of the great unknowns of polar history revolves around the question of whether the *Prince Albert* parties would have been able to obtain early information concerning the fate of Franklin. The ship duly entered the inlet, but Forsyth, after seeking the opinion of the mates, of the crew, and of Snow, decided on 22 August 1850 that the ice could not be penetrated and retraced his path. Passing near Cape Riley, Snow went ashore and obtained news of the relics that had been found by one of the other expeditions which indicated that Franklin had wintered nearby. It seems clear, in retrospect, that this was a godsend to Forsyth, who now had a splendid excuse for abandoning the expedition and for returning to Britain. This he determined to do. He was careful to ensure that, on meeting H.M.S. *North Star*, a vessel also returning home but a faster sailer than *Prince Albert*, he did not give news of the discovery of the wintering site to Mr. Saunders, her commander. Forsyth did not wish Saunders to steal his thunder.

In the event, the reception accorded Forsyth was all that he could have desired, although the Franklin *ménage* was furious at his early return. Barrow considered that he had accomplished "one of the most extraordinary voyages ever performed in the polar seas," while Forsyth commented that he had received letters that showed the return had "given fresh hopes to many an aching heart." There was also much favourable comment in the press.

The aftermath of the voyage is also of interest. Forsyth was not involved in future planning, but Snow certainly was. He published his journals as *Voyage of the 'Prince Albert' in search of Sir John Franklin*, and the book was intended to serve Lady Franklin's aim of raising fresh funds for a further expedition and for its author as a means of securing his promotion. With the arrival of William Kennedy from Canada, however, Snow's place in Lady Franklin's estimation rapidly declined, and he never again went to the Arctic. The second *Prince Albert* expedition is history.

Forsyth returned, with, we imagine, a sigh of relief, to an orthodox naval career. After having been inspecting-com-



The "Prince Albert" surrounded by icebergs. From Snow's *Voyage of the 'Prince Albert'*...

mander of the Coast Guard at Berwick-on-Tweed and Brighton, he was appointed to the command of H.M.S. *Hornet*, a steam vessel. This was the high spot for Forsyth, since he found himself engaged in two wars, both in the far east theatre. These were hostilities against the Russians on the Siberian coast between 1854 and 1855 as part of the Crimean War and against the Chinese in 1856 and 1857. Forsyth conducted himself with distinction, especially in the latter operations, and *Hornet* was engaged in several battles. In one, she fought no fewer than 150 "war junks" and defeated them. He was promoted captain on 10 August 1857 and received the command of H.M.S. *Valorous* at the Cape and then of coast-guard vessels on the Humber. He retired in April 1870 and died in 1873.

Despite the brevity and lack of distinction of his arctic

career, Forsyth's name endures on the map of northern Canada. Two localities are named after him: Forsyth Bay and Forsyth Point on Prince of Wales Island.

FURTHER READINGS

SNOW, WILLIAM PARKER. 1851. *Voyage of the 'Prince Albert' in search of Sir John Franklin: a narrative of every-day life in the Arctic seas*. London: Longman.

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