

The Route of Sir John Franklin's Third Arctic Expedition: An Evaluation and Test of an Alternative Hypothesis

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(Received 12 February 1992; accepted in revised form 17 June 1992)

ABSTRACT. An archaeological survey to aid in the determination of the exact route of the last Sir John Franklin expedition following its overwintering at Beechey Island in 1845-46 was conducted in June 1982. The survey was designed to test the hypothesis that the expedition sailed from Beechey Island south to King William Island via McClintock Channel, rather than through Peel Sound and Franklin Strait, as is generally accepted. Surveyed areas included Kilian, Stefansson, and northeast Victoria Islands in northwest McClintock Channel, and Russell and northern Prince of Wales Islands to the northeast of McClintock Channel. Although three cairns associated with Austin's searching expedition of 1850-51 were located, as well as several prehistoric and historic Inuit sites, no structures or materials associated with the Franklin expedition were identified. While inconclusive, the survey essentially completes the examination of coastlines along which the Franklin expedition may have sailed.

Key words: Sir John Franklin, route of third arctic expedition, McClintock Channel

RÉSUMÉ. En juin 1982, on a effectué une étude archéologique destinée à permettre de retracer la route empruntée par la dernière expédition de sir John Franklin après le long hivernage de 1845-46 à l'île Beechey. L'étude avait pour but de vérifier l'hypothèse selon laquelle l'expédition avait navigué de l'île Beechey en direction du sud vers l'île du Roi-Guillaume via le chenal McClintock, plutôt qu'à travers le détroit de Peel et celui de Franklin, comme on le pense habituellement. Les régions de l'étude comprenaient les îles Kilian et Stefansson et le nord-est de l'île Victoria dans la partie nord-ouest du chenal McClintock, ainsi que l'île Russell et la partie septentrionale de l'île du Prince-de-Galles au nord-est du chenal McClintock. Bien qu'on ait localisé trois cairns datant de l'expédition de recherche menée par Austin en 1850-51, ainsi que divers sites inuit préhistoriques et historiques, on n'a pu identifier ni structure ni matériaux remontant à l'expédition Franklin. Si l'étude n'a pas abouti à une conclusion définitive, elle a du moins permis de compléter l'examen du rivage côtier le long duquel l'expédition Franklin a pu naviguer.

Mots clés: sir John Franklin, route de la troisième expédition arctique, chenal McClintock

Traduit pour le journal par Nésida Loyer.

INTRODUCTION

No other episode in arctic history and European exploration has received so much attention as Sir John Franklin's final expedition of 1845-48 in search of a Northwest Passage. The discovery by Rae in 1854 and McClintock in 1859 of the tragic fate of Franklin and his crew, totalling 129 officers and men, raised more questions concerning the expedition than it answered. Among these is the probable course taken by the expedition following its first winter at Beechey Island (1845-46) until the two ships of the discovery attempt, *Erebus* and *Terror*, were deserted off the northwest coast of King William Island on 22 April 1848. Most authors dealing with the expedition, beginning with McClintock (1859), have suggested that the ships turned south at Cape Walker (Fig. 1), sailed down Peel Sound and Franklin Strait during the sailing season of 1846, and were beset off King William Island on 12 September of that year (see, for example, Markham, 1891; Gibson, 1937; Stefansson, 1938; Cyriax, 1939; Wright, 1959; Nanton, 1970; Neatby, 1970; Owen, 1978; Wallace, 1980; Beattie and Geiger, 1988). Unfortunately, no traces of the expedition have ever been found between Beechey Island and King William Island. The lack of traces of the expedition along the Peel Sound - Franklin Strait route, which had been thoroughly examined during the Franklin search era, has generally been attributed to "... the supposition that no landings took place, either because the channels were comparatively unobstructed by ice, or, if they were obstructed, because the ships were not detained inshore" (Cyriax, 1959:36-37).

However, both Findlay (1856) and, in a more detailed discussion, Brown (1860) have suggested that the expedition sailed not down Peel Sound and Franklin Strait, but instead west past Cape Walker and then down McClintock Channel (Fig. 1). While the east side of McClintock Channel (west coast of Prince of Wales Island) had been examined during the Franklin search era by Ommann and Osborn in 1851 and Young in 1859, the examination of the west coast was incomplete. Rae in 1851 (Rae, 1852) had examined the southernmost coastline in the Collinson Peninsula region, as had Collinson in 1853 (Collinson, 1889). To the north, Wyniatt, with McClure's expedition of 1850-55 (Osborn, 1856), had examined the north coast of Victoria Island as far as Glenelg Bay. The intervening coastline remained unexplored and the McClintock Channel area was not visited again until 1905, when Hansen, a member of the Amundsen expedition of 1903-06, examined the west coast from Victoria Strait to Cape Geelmuyden (Amundsen, 1908:353-355). To the north, Storkerson, with Stefansson's expedition of 1913-18, mapped the north coast of Victoria Island as far as Goldsmith Channel, which separates Stefansson Island from Victoria Island (Stefansson, 1919). Mapping of the remaining coastline, including the discovery that Stefansson Island is an island, was not completed until 1947, during the Royal Canadian Air Force aerial photography program (Dunbar and Greenaway, 1956:196).

An opportunity to search the previously unexamined west shore of McClintock Channel for Franklin expedition-related materials, and thus test the Findlay-Brown hypothesis, was afforded the authors in June 1982 and forms the subject of this note.

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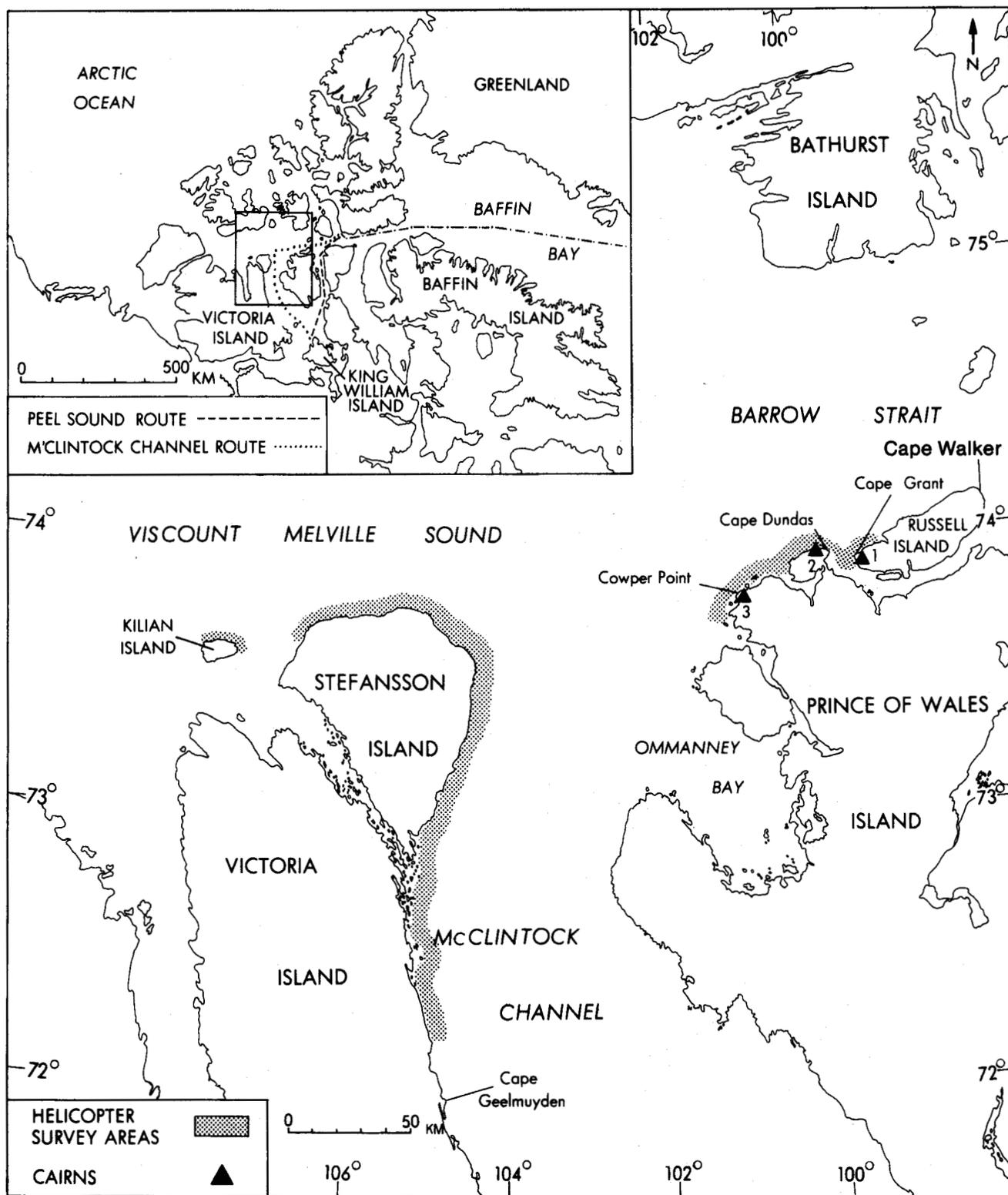


FIG. 1. Northern McClintock Channel and neighbouring regions showing survey areas. Inset indicates both Peel Sound-Franklin Strait and McClintock Channel routes.

THE 1982 SURVEY

Although initially designed as a survey to locate 19th-century Inuit sites (see, e.g., Hickey, 1979, 1984; Savelle, 1981), the 1982 survey was modified on the basis of two factors. First, we agreed that the possibility that Franklin had in fact sailed

(or become beset and drifted) down McClintock Channel rather than Peel Sound and Franklin Strait should be tested as a legitimate hypothesis of long standing. If the expedition had taken this route, members of the expedition may have managed to land at some point and leave a record and/or other traces.

Second, if members of the expedition had in fact landed and left records and/or other traces, there was a possibility that these might still be located, since the northwestern part of McClintock Channel between Cape Geelmuyden (Hansen's farthest from the south; see Amundsen, 1908:353-355) and Goldsmith Channel (Storkerson's farthest from the west; see Stefansson, 1919) and the entire Stefansson Island coastline remained archaeologically unknown.

The survey was conducted over a three-day period (25-27 June) using a Bell 206B helicopter and utilizing fuel caches established during the spring. The survey route is represented in Figure 1. The survey party consisted of the three authors as observers and J. Sawicki, pilot.

The first leg of the survey, from Resolute Bay to the northwestern shore of Prince of Wales Island, included the examination of Cape Grant on Russell Island and Cape Dundas and Cowper Point on Prince of Wales Island. Cairns had been erected at all three localities in 1851 during the Franklin search by members of the Austin expedition of 1850-51 (Great Britain, Parliament, 1852), and none of the three, to our knowledge, had since been located and documented. All three cairns were easily located and their locations are indicated on Figure 1.

The second leg of the survey began with a flight across the northern entrance of McClintock Channel to Stefansson Island. Stefansson Island and northeast Victoria Island are poorly drained, lake-dotted glaciated lowland areas (generally less than 150 m above sea level) underlain by flat-lying to gently dipping Paleozoic dolomite and minor limestone, sandstone, and shale (Thorsteinsson and Tozer, 1962:8). Much of the landscape is characterized by drumlins and drumlinoid ridges, resulting in a regular but complex "grain" when seen from the air (Thorsteinsson and Tozer, 1962:8), while other relatively higher areas tend to be dominated by hilly, morainal topography. Bedrock outcrops occur primarily along rivers and, particularly in the northwest Stefansson Island area, along coastlines. The predominantly low, gentle relief, together with expansive series of elevated strandlines along much of the coast, although limiting the number of possible locations that might be considered conspicuous landmarks, at the same time permits easy, generally immediate, recognition of artificial relief features. The survey included the entire north and east coasts of Stefansson Island, the northeast coast of Victoria Island from Goldsmith Channel south to latitude 72° 20', and the north coast of Kilian Island, a total surveyed distance of approximately 325 km (Fig. 1). Although the coastline between latitude 72° 20' and Cape Geelmuyden (Hansen's farthest) was also flown, time constraints prevented the close examination of this section. The entire coastline along the survey route was examined in detail, particular attention being paid to capes and prominent ridges and knolls, and depending upon local topography, the survey extended up to 1 km inland.

Five archaeological sites were recorded in the area, none of which can be attributed to the Franklin or any other European or Euroamerican expedition; all are of prehistoric Inuit origin.

DISCUSSION

Four possibilities exist to explain the lack of evidence of the Franklin expedition in the McClintock Channel area. First, Franklin may well have sailed down Peel Sound rather than McClintock Channel; second, the expedition may have sailed down McClintock Channel but failed to leave any trace, much

as Cyriax (1959:36-37) has postulated for the Peel Sound route; third, traces may in fact have been left but have since been destroyed by natural or human processes; finally, traces may exist but were not observed during the survey.

The latter two possibilities appear to us to be remote. The area is and has been recently uninhabited, extremely remote, and visits to the area have been infrequent. In our opinion it is unlikely that any existing sites would have been disturbed by humans. Furthermore, it is unlikely that natural processes would have destroyed or masked features such as cairns or tent rings, especially given the excellent preservation of the prehistoric structures observed in the area. Regarding the reliability of aerial observation techniques, the ease with which the 1851 cairns on Russell and Prince of Wales islands and the archaeological sites on both sides of McClintock Channel were located suggests that any structures that might have been associated with the Franklin expedition were not overlooked during our survey.

Unfortunately, the results of the survey do not resolve the problem of choices between the two possibilities, i.e., Peel Sound-Franklin Strait vs. McClintock Channel. Nevertheless, we feel the survey does represent a contribution in that it essentially completes the examination of coastlines along which Franklin might possibly have sailed, a task that, since Hansen in 1905, had been left unattempted. In addition, we feel that readers who may be interested in the Franklin story but unfamiliar with the arguments of Findlay (1856) and particularly Brown (1860) would benefit from consideration of the theses of two unjustifiably ignored arctic "theoreticians."

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors wish to acknowledge the generous aid of the Boreal Institute for Northern Studies (University of Alberta) and the Polar Continental Shelf Project (Energy, Mines and Resources, Canada), which allowed this fieldwork to be undertaken. The larger research projects that form a backdrop to this work have also been supported by these agencies, and as well by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. We gratefully acknowledge their support.

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