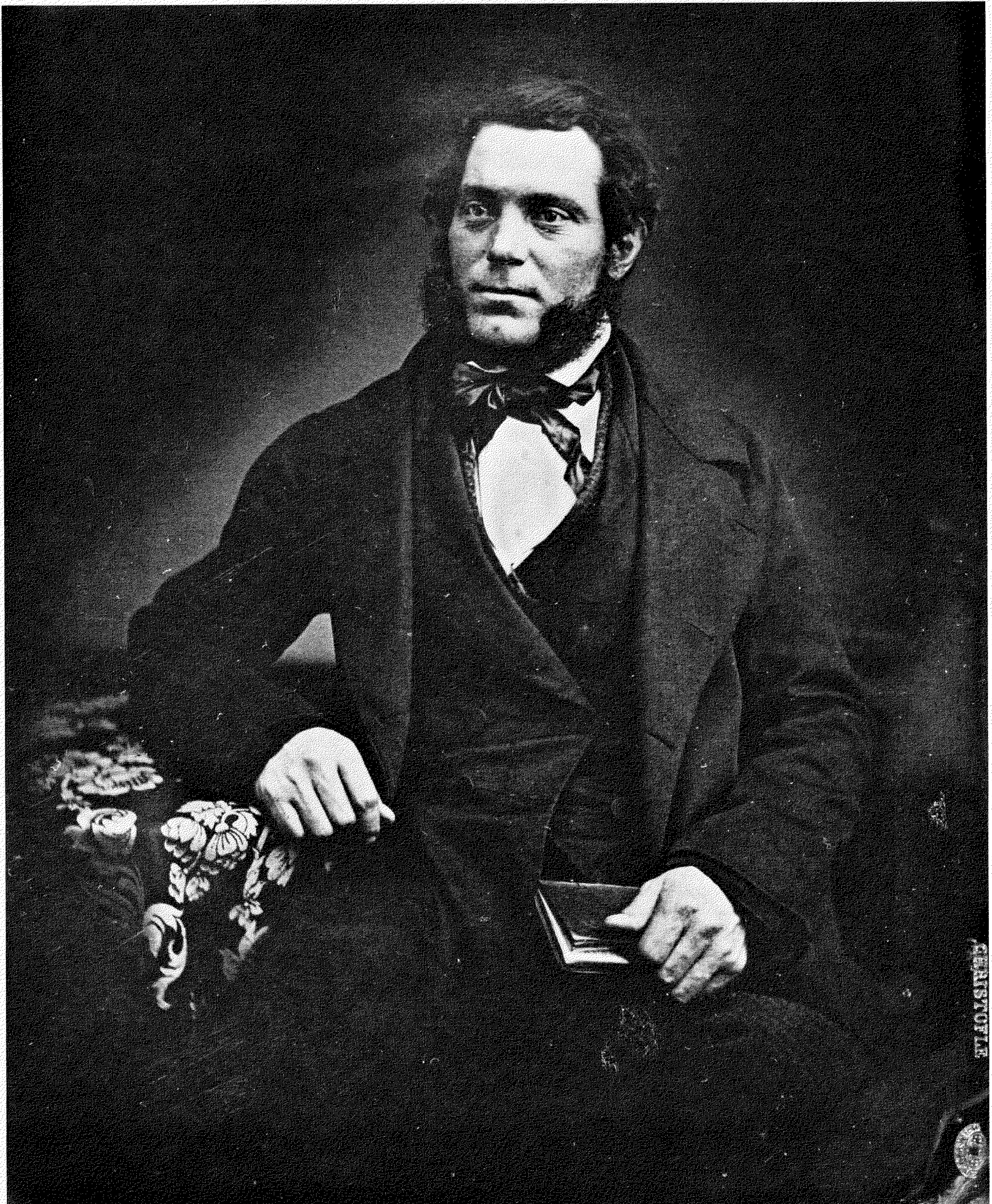
Johann August Miertsching (1817-1877)



The German Moravian missionary J.A. Miertsching holds a unique position among the historiographers of the Canadian Arctic. He is less inhibited and stereotyped than the naval officers whose journals are the chief primary sources for the great period of polar discovery, 1818-1859. He did not belong to the naval club; he was a civilian, writing in a foreign tongue and acutely sensitive to a novel environment, and despite his obvious good nature and his sentimental attachment to the captain under whom he served, he inserted much that a naval officer would have suppressed for the credit of the service and that a sailor would have omitted simply because he took it for granted.

Miertsching was born in Saxony, Germany, in 1817, and trained as a missionary of the Moravian Church. In this capacity he served for some years on the Labrador station of Ogkak and mastered the Eskimo language. He was home on furlough when directed by the rulers of his Order to report to the British Admiralty for service on an arctic discovery ship.

As part of the search for the missing ships of Sir John Franklin, the Admiralty proposed to send two ships by way of Cape Horn and Bering Strait to the western American Arctic. Captain Richard Collinson was assigned to the command; Miertsching was to serve as interpreter for the interrogation of the natives of the arctic shoreline. In the hurry of departure he was temporarily berthed on the second ship, the *Investigator*, under Commander Robert McClure. It so happened that he was never transferred, but remained with McClure for the five years of his all-but-disastrous cruise. If Collinson had had the young German aboard he would have given him a safer and duller time and, with the means of questioning the natives of Victoria Island, would in all probability have discovered Franklin's fate. Nonetheless, it was good fortune which reserved the voluble and impressible German to be McClure's shipmate throughout, and in his memoir to give permanence to the fantastic misadventures of the *Investigator*.

The two ships sailed from Plymouth in January, 1850. They were soon parted in foul weather. The *Investigator* was the first to arrive at Bering Strait, and the rash and ambitious McClure, disregarding his obligation to keep a rendezvous with Collinson, plunged into the arctic ice alone. Through Miertsching he questioned Eskimos scattered along the Alaskan and Canadian north shores. He encountered frightful dangers in exploring the last link in the Northwest Passage, Prince of Wales Strait, but found its northern outlet blocked by ice. In the summer of 1851, he rounded Banks Island and saw his ship almost crushed against the rocks of its northwest shore by a massive gale-driven pack. For the winter he berthed his ship in Mercy Bay on the Banks Island north shore, where she was permanently frozen in and her crew reduced to extremity by cold and hunger. They were barely saved from Franklin's fate by a rescue squadron, and the party returned to England in October, 1854, after an absence of almost five years.

When the ship was abandoned at Mercy Bay, McClure, perhaps fearing that revelation of the frightful danger and suffering which his headlong tactics had inflicted on his crew would dim his glory as discoverer of the Passage, collected his officers' journals and conveniently mislaid them. The surgeon Armstrong contrived to preserve his diary; the resolute Miertsching rewrote his. He was intimate with his captain, but not uncritical, and seems to give a fair portrait of that brave, worthy, but not unflawed discoverer. His great service to the expedition was as its historian. He made a good reproduction of the lost portion of his journal largely from memory and pencilled notes. Armstrong's record is the more exactly factual and reliable, but Miertsching achieves the "truth of poetry" by a convincing representation of the atmosphere of the voyage in its varied phases and of the emotions of the participants. His lurid portrayal of danger at the narrows of Prince of Wales Strait and off the northwest coast of Banks Island, and the ship's passage through a narrow gorge hemmed in on both sides by walls of ice are in substance confirmed by the grave, unemotional Armstrong. The emotions he expresses when after four years in the barren wilderness he passed up the Thames amid the sights, sounds, and animation of civilized life deserves to be a polar classic. Dramatic too is his description of the grief of women and children who met the returning crew on the dock to greet the father — who "had not come back." Armstrong neither suppresses nor stresses the misery of the starving crew at Mercy Bay. Miertsching depicts it without restraint.

The excellent training of a Moravian missionary enabled him to serve the crew as tinsmith, carpenter, and shoe-repair man. As a teacher of the gospel he was restricted by his rank as officer, but he gave advice freely to those who asked for it, and no one can read of his dealings with the bereaved Eskimo mother and the dying Marine without perceiving his humanity and the depth of his religious conviction.

After he had enjoyed a period of rest in Germany, his directors, out of regard for his health, assigned him to a mission in South Africa. But he never ceased to regret his Eskimos and the harsh invigorating Labrador climate. Eventually he retired to Germany, where he died worn out before the age of sixty.

After the voyage he published in German an account of it, dealing lightly with its grimmest aspects. His original journal first appeared in English in 1967.

FURTHER READINGS

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