

W.J.S. Pullen (1818-1887)



Photograph of Pullen wearing his Baltic and Arctic discovery medals; courtesy of Capt. T.C. Pullen.

Like many of his Victorian contemporaries, William John Samuel Pullen left his mark on the Canadian Arctic during the extensive searches for John Franklin's missing ships and crew. His name is perpetuated by Pullen Island in the Mackenzie River estuary and by Pullen Strait to the east of Little Cornwallis Island. Pullen himself added the island to naval charts; the strait was named in his honour.

Born on 4 December 1813, at Devonport, England, Pullen was the eldest son in a naval family. It was no surprise, then, that he joined the Royal Navy as a First Class Volunteer before his fifteenth birthday. While serving in the Mediterranean Fleet, he passed the provisional examination for second master and was appointed to H.M.S. *Alban* in 1835. On her return to England, the *Alban* carried several passengers, one of them a Colonel William Light, newly appointed Surveyor General of the new colony of South Australia. During the voyage, Light persuaded Pullen to leave the Navy and to join him as Assistant Surveyor, which he did until 1841. The next year, 1842, Pullen returned to England and rejoined the Royal Navy as a mate, being appointed to H.M.S. *Columbia*, engaged in surveying the

Saint John River and the Bay of Fundy until 1848. At that time, he was appointed as first lieutenant of H.M.S. *Plover*, a depot ship for one of the first three searches for Franklin. But it was not until the summer of 1849 that Pullen met up with the *Plover*, which was already in the Pacific when Pullen's appointment was made.

Shortly after joining the *Plover* off Chamisso Island, he was sent with two boats to find a suitable berth for the ship near Cape Lisburne. Finding none, he returned, and the *Plover*, accompanied by H.M.S. *Herald* and the yacht *Nancy Dawson*, proceeded along the coast to Wainwright Inlet. From there, Pullen again set out along the coast in boats, this time to search for signs of Franklin as far east as the Mackenzie River. On passing Point Barrow he found ice conditions so severe that he sent the two larger boats back, continuing himself with one officer and 14 men in two 27-foot gig whale boats and an umiak purchased from the natives. The route to the Mackenzie, lying some 500 miles eastward, was shallow and relatively unknown, while to seaward lay the polar pack. Nevertheless, in spite of bad weather and hostile Eskimos, the small party gained

the Mackenzie on 2 September, and arrived at Fort McPherson four days later. Some of the men were posted at McPherson for the winter; others wintered upriver on Great Slave Lake. Pullen and two men remained at Fort Simpson, where Dr. John Rae was in charge.

The following summer Rae, Pullen, and his party left Fort Simpson, bound for York Factory and England. On Great Slave Lake, however, they met two Indians in a canoe, "bearers of an extra ordinary despatch from England which contained my commission as Commander . . . and also the sanction of the Admiralty for renewed prosecution of the search for Sir John Franklin and his party on the coast, but eastward of the River Mackenzie if Captain Pullen should consider it practicable." Accordingly, Pullen and his men returned to Fort Simpson, where they outfitted themselves and headed down to the Beaufort Sea. They turned east when they met the saltwater, but could reach no farther than Cape Bathurst before an impassable mass of broken, jumbled ice stopped them. After waiting a week for the ice to clear, Pullen turned back to the river. It was on his return that he observed and named Pullen and Hooper Islands, lying to the north and west of Richards Island. They spent a second winter up the Mackenzie before returning to England in 1850.

Less than two years later, Pullen made a second arctic journey. Commanding H.M.S. *North Star*, store-ship for Sir Edward Belcher's 1852-54 expedition, Pullen spent two winters in Erebus and Terror Bay, Beechey Island, and during his stay he made several reconnaissances across Lancaster Sound and up the Wellington Channel. Of the five ships that left England on Belcher's search expedition, only the *North Star*, under Pullen's command, returned. Belcher had ordered the others — H.M. Ships *Resolute*, *Assistance*, *Intrepid*, and *Pioneer* — abandoned, an act for which he was subsequently court-martialled.

Pullen's later career saw the command of H.M.S. *Falcon* against the Russians in 1855 and his promotion to Captain, R.N. in the next year. He commanded H.M.S.

Cyclops, involved in surveying for the submarine telegraph from Suez to Aden and, later, along the coast of Ceylon. After four years in charge of the Bermuda Survey, Pullen was placed on the Retired List in April, 1870. His promotions to rear admiral and vice admiral followed in 1874 and 1879.

He married Abigail Louisa Berton in Saint John, New Brunswick on 25 August 1845, the same year the *Erebus* and *Terror* had sailed for northern waters. Their union produced four sons and one daughter. A typical Victorian naval officer, Pullen was both a deeply religious man and a first-class seaman and navigator. When he died at Torquay, Devonshire, England on 11 January 1887, a life full of naval service ended. No single event in Pullen's contribution to the Arctic was remarkable: his geographical discoveries were clearly minor; his journeys, although strenuous and difficult, were restricted by Pullen's good judgment; and the Franklin searches in which he participated were completely fruitless. Yet without the honest dedication to the task of British officers of Pullen's calibre, the more celebrated but no more important accomplishments could never have been realized.

FURTHER READINGS

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