

Richard King (1810-1876)

Dr. Richard King was an explorer, geographer, and ethnologist who commented discerningly upon much that happened in arctic exploration in the period 1833-1869. The Cassandra of this period, he prophesied accurately a good deal of the arctic map and of arctic happenings without, however, gaining public acceptance for his predictions.

Born sometime in the period between January and May 1810, King was educated at St. Paul's School, the Apothecaries Society, and Guy's and St. Thomas Hospital, all in London. Recently qualified with the Royal College of Surgeons, he joined the expedition of Sir George Back, R.N., down the Back River in 1833-1835, as naturalist, medical officer, and second-in-command. On that trip he differed with his commander on the nature of Boothia and upon style and method in arctic exploration. Back's method was to travel "heavy," with a primarily naval and military party that favoured equipment from home; King's was to travel "light," with a small party and fur trade equipment, methods, and personnel.

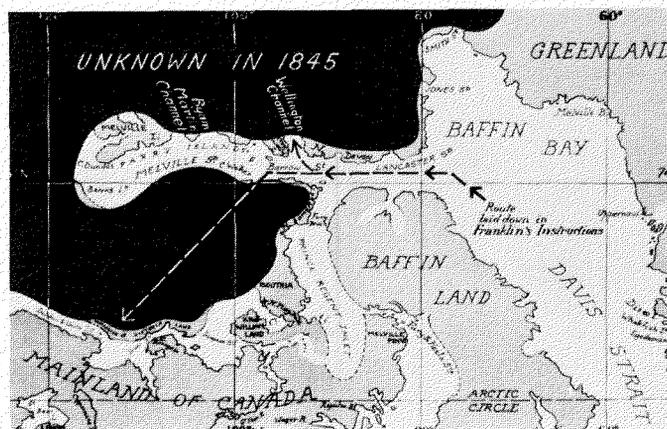
On his return to England, King published his own account of Back's expedition and suspected (rightly) that Boothia was peninsular. Back's River was the most suitable means, he said, to delineate Boothia and so complete a Northwest Passage by a land approach. He warned against Back's 1836 sea expedition through Foxe Basin but could find no sponsor for his own alternative plan. A difficult man, he had alienated the Navy, the Hudson's Bay Company, the Royal Geographical Society, and Back himself.

Frustrated in exploration, King became eminent in his profession. An obstetrician, he helped, in practice and writing, in the remarkable nineteenth-century lowering of infant mortality. He was for a time editor of the *Medical Times* and was a pioneer in the use of statistics in medical research. He was on the councils of the Statistical Society and the British Association for the Advancement of Science. He also showed an interest in Amerindians and the Inuit and contributed in this regard to the *Ethnological Journal*. He was a founding member of the British Ethnological Society and, later, of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland.

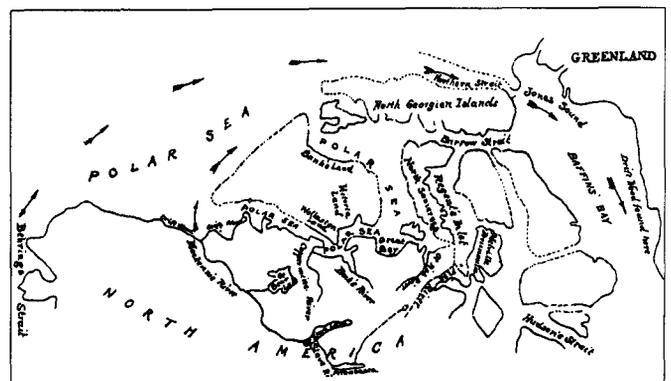
In 1845 the Board of Admiralty felt that discovery of a Northwest Passage westward from Baffin Bay and eastward from Bering Strait was all but completed. All that remained was

to "cross the threshold." It sent out the vessels *Erebus* and *Terror* through Baffin Bay under Sir John Franklin to finish the job. King felt that discovery of a passage would be completed to the west of Boothia, but he continued to stress inland and civilian means to do this; he warned that Franklin was being sent out "to become the nucleus of an iceberg." Using a combination of geographical data (some of his own discernment) and anthropological and other reasoning, King produced a remarkable sketch map of the Arctic as he saw it, which had a number of correct and newly visualized features, and which contrasted sharply with the Navy's current view of the Arctic. For example, just as he had once trusted direct information from the Inuit themselves (when he was with Back) in order to perceive a coastal Northwest Passage, so King now used his observations of the Inuit cultures and their distribution in order to recognize a more northerly passage. In our own day, some of King's views have been borne out by archaeological findings on Greenland and Ellesmere Island. King had also suggested, in writing, the existence of Prince of Wales Strait and had realized, ahead of others, the large size of Victoria Island. Indeed, the obvious implication of King's map was that Franklin's party had been ordered to sail across impervious land where, as we know today, Victoria Island is situated. Franklin's party might become embayed in ice, King said, leading not to discovery of a passage but instead to a perhaps lengthy hiatus in the quest for one.

In fact, Franklin's party did become embayed in ice. It sought safety by making toward the Back River, but by 1848 or 1849, all the party had perished. At home King had predicted in June 1847 that scurvy and starvation would threaten "the lives of 126 [actually 129] of our fellow creatures . . . whose miseries above most men I can comprehend." Strongly motivated by his medical training, he specified an area to the west of Boothia and toward the mouth of the Back River where, he wrote, the Franklin party might be found. He asked once again for support to go down the Back River, a project he tried again to initiate in succeeding letters to officialdom in 1848 and 1850. Had such a trip been made, it would likely have directed the search for Franklin to the right quarter at an early stage. But the answer was always "no," and the search by numerous expeditions under the Navy, the HBC, and private sponsors became diverted



King's view of the Arctic, 1845.



The Admiralty's view of the Arctic, 1845.

far to the north and west of the right location. Ironically, Lady Franklin had a strong and accurate feeling that one should search the Boothia area; nevertheless, she stressed reaching this area by sea, not by the inland means of the Back River, which King favoured. Partly for this reason, King was as alienated from her as he was from almost all the other "Arctics" of the period. Indeed, an irony is that dislike of King probably helped divert the search away from that same Boothia area that he rightly advocated.

Indisputable concrete news of the lost party came in 1854. In that year Dr. John Rae, of the HBC, who had already proved that (as King had predicted) Boothia is peninsular, now met Pelly Bay Inuit when he was attempting to complete exploration of the northern coast of North America. These Inuit had Franklin party artifacts, and they also carried news, gathered from other Inuit, of a party perishing at a great river in the west. James Anderson's HBC expedition of 1855 and Captain Leopold M'Clintock's 1857-1859 expedition aboard the *Fox* amplified upon this evidence, thus confirming much that King had predicted. Indeed, the *Fox* expedition found the only written document we have of the Franklin party's progress after it entered upon exploration, and that document closes with the words, "and start on to-morrow . . . for Back's Fish River." It was M'Clintock's expedition that had also completed discovery of Boothia and final knowledge of a coastal or "Franklin's" Northwest Passage, which King had also to a large extent predicted. A great deal had happened according to the views and predictions of the discerning but unfortunate surgeon.

Richard King tried again in 1856, after John Rae's initial discovery of Franklin's fate, to go down the Back River in search of the Franklin party or signs of it, but again he was unsuccessful in securing sponsorship. In 1855 he published his correspondence with the Admiralty and other writings regarding the Arctic under the title *The Franklin Expedition from First to Last*. In January 1856, he became a vocal claimant for the Admiralty's award of £10,000 for initial news of the lost Franklin party. Admiralty files suggest to us today that in adjudication for the award — given to John Rae — King may have been runner-up.

By 1855 King had won a measure of sympathy from the public in regard to his arctic activities. This was counterbalanced, nevertheless, by King's own eccentricities. He lived some 20 years more, dying in relative obscurity on 4 February 1876. It was the very year when, in sending out the Nares arctic

expedition, the Royal Navy was again making (from King's point of view) many of the same mistakes as made by the lost Franklin expedition.

It is typical of Richard King's role in the arctic story that there is no known portrait of him. Faceless himself in the extant records so far as we know them, he had delineated or anticipated much of the topography of the Canadian Arctic. He had gone to that region only once, and yet had perceived and forecast much that was accurate in regard to its map and to events in the unrolling of it. His work on the Arctic still helps us to understand what other explorers had done — and failed to do — in discovery of the region. Indeed, had King not existed, perhaps "someone would have had to invent him," so as to shed light upon certain arctic realities of which King had been very aware and of which most of his contemporaries had not been. He had predicted the existence of Queen Maud Gulf, the peninsularity of Boothia, the insularity of King William Island, both a coastal and a more northern Northwest Passage, and a superiority of the latter over the former as a navigable channel. He had warned against Back's ill-fated expedition of 1836 and the still more ill-fated Franklin expedition of 1845; he had also predicted (perhaps his most famous forecast) where the lost Franklin expedition would be found and what the causes of its loss might be. The Cassandra of arctic exploration in its greatest era, his fate had been to know and prophesy future arctic events and future knowledge of the Arctic without, however, the public believing his prophesies until much later, when there was a tendency to forget that it was he who had made them in the first place.

FURTHER READINGS

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