

Quest for Franklin trek continues

by Sherri Ritchie

In May of 1945, Sir John Franklin and a crew of 129 set out down the Thames River on what was expected to be a successful quest for a northwest passage through the Arctic islands.

In July of 1845, the group was spotted heading towards Lancaster Sound, and that was the last that was ever seen of them. None of the crew survived the trek, and the mystery of the fated Franklin Expedition has engaged many in the search for clues as to what happened.

It's been within the last five years that the pieces of this puzzle have begun to be unearthed by a team of 11 researchers working out of the University of Alberta.

Dr. Owen Beattie, project director, said "the exception is notable because no one survived. So little of the area was uncharted, the chances of not making it through were slim and many of the crew had previous arctic experience. So there was every expectation of success."

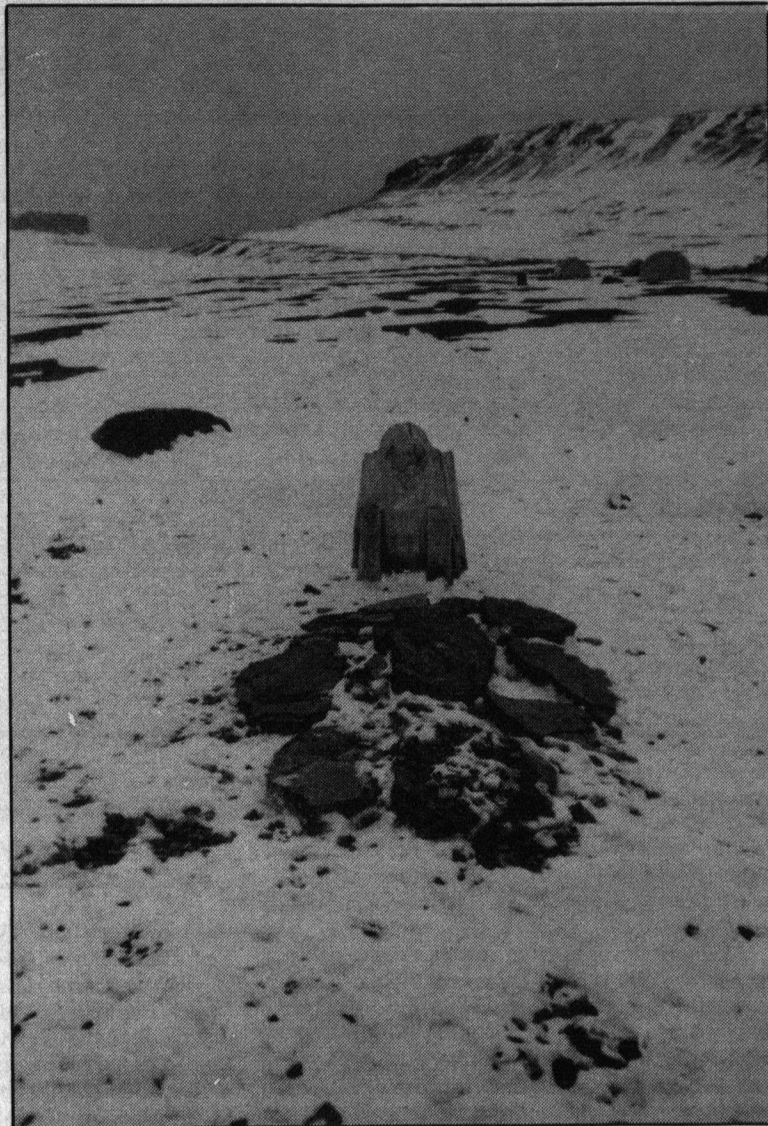
Beattie began in 1981 with a student from the U of A to locate and study the sites of the Franklin Expedition. One of the sites is located on King William Island where there are remains of crew members on the surface. The other is on Beechy Island, where three members of the crew had been buried before catastrophe struck.

On King William Island Beattie said "we're interested in the human bones left on the surface... We're trying to sort out where they (the crew) had gone, using the bones to tell the story."

The research team has quite thoroughly put together the story of the expedition.

"Franklin had a number of options," said Beattie. "He followed a known route, made some new discoveries, and spent the winter of 1845-46 at Beechy Island." Here the first three crew members were buried: John Hartnell, William Braine, and John Torrington.

In July of 1846, Franklin sailed south towards King William Island but ran into Arctic pack ice. Here they were stuck for two years and on April 22, 1848, Beattie said "for some reason they deserted the ships. We know there were 24 deaths before they abandoned the ships and we can suggest there was something wrong — either medically or some accident."



Able seaman Hartnell's gravesite

Some of the men walked over land, some over ice, dragging lifeboats on huge sledges. All perished.

In 1981, Beattie and his colleagues studied the "very fragmentary skeletal remains from 8-15 individuals" at the King William site.

"Most everything was on the surface so there was almost nothing left," said Beattie. "It was all in the final stages of disintegration." From these remains, they discovered high levels of lead in some of the bones, which may have played a role in the decline of the over-all health of the crew.

In 1984, Beattie's team exhumed the body of John Torrington on Beechy Island. He, as well as the other two later exhumed, was found to be near perfectly preserved in the permafrost.

"The unique nature of the sight," said Beattie, "is that we know ex-

actly the day they died. And you can conduct a standard autopsy as you would in a hospital."

Beattie completed the work on Torrington that year and this past June returned to Beechy Island to examine the last two bodies. They were exhumed and autopsied on the site, tissue samples were taken for further lab study, and they were then reburied.

In studying the bodies, project pathologist Dr. Roger Amy first looked for external evidence of injury or sickness and found none. He then examined the internal organs and found that all three



Beattie's campsite on Beechy Island

men had tuberculosis.

One very interesting find was that John Hartnell had been autopsied before being buried Amy said, which "made it fascinating for me, as I had the privilege of following the steps of my predecessors to do the procedure."

Besides the historical interest in the project, there are medical implications.

"The tissues aren't preserved perfectly" said Beattie, "but they were frozen for 140 years and some unique changes have taken place." It's these changes that are the concern of Dr. Amy.

"First we're looking to see if microorganisms can survive for that length of time under the conditions present," said Amy.

Viruses can't but it's difficult to say with bacteria, "because it is so easy to contaminate your tissue samples," he said.

The second aspect they're looking at is the nuclear material. On viewing slides of the samples, one can see the nuclei of all the cells had disintegrated.

Dr. Peter Lewin of Toronto's Hospital for Sick Children has invited the researchers to send samples to be studied for any remaining nuclear material.

The project receives support from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Can-

ada, Polar Continental Shelf Project - Energy Mines and Resources Canada, University of Alberta, Royal Institute of Northern Studies, and the Park Nicollet Medical Foundation.

Beattie says the project should be completed in about two years at which time there will be a series of papers and two books published.

Photos courtesy O. Beattie

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