

Victor Kennedy

University of Maribor

Faculty of Education, Department of English and American Studies

An Exploration of Canadian Identity in Recent Literary Narratives of the Franklin Expeditions

Summary

Sir John Franklin's three expeditions to the high Arctic in 1819, 1825, and 1845 have become the stuff of Canadian legend, enshrined in history books, songs, short stories, novels, and web sites. Franklin set out in 1845 to discover the Northwest Passage with the most advanced technology the British Empire could muster, and disappeared forever. Many rescue explorations found only scant evidence of the Expedition, and the mystery was finally solved only recently. This paper will explore four recent fictional works on Franklin's expeditions, Stan Rogers' song "Northwest Passage", Margaret Atwood's short story "The Age of Lead", Rudy Wiebe's *A Discovery of Strangers*, and John Wilson's *North with Franklin: the Lost Journals of James Fitzjames*, to see how Franklin's ghost has haunted the hopes and values of nineteenth-century, as well as modern, Canada.

Key Words: Canadian literature and culture, Franklin Expedition, Stan Rogers ("Northwest Passage"), Margaret Atwood ("The Age of Lead"), Rudy Wiebe (*Discovery of Strangers*), John Wilson (*North with Franklin*)

Po poteh kanadske identitete v sodobnih literarnih pripovedih o odpravah Johna Franklina

Povzetek

Sir John Franklin se je s svojimi tremi odpravami na Arktiko v letih 1819, 1825 in 1845 neminljivo zapisal v anale kanadskih legend, zgodovinskih učbenikov, pesmi kratkih zgodb in spletnih strani. Leta 1845 se je Franklin odpravil z namenom, da razišče severozahodni prehod, opremljen z najsodobnejšo tehnologijo, ki jo je takrat premogel britanski imperij, nakar je za vselej izginil. Številne reševalne odprave so naletele zgolj na pomanjkljive sledove, potem pa je skrivnost pred kratkim izplavala na površje. Članek se loteva štirih sodobnih literarnih upodobitev Franklinovih odprav: pesmi "Severozahodni prehod" ("Northwest Passage") Stana Rogersa, novele "Doba svinca" ("The Age of Lead") Margaret Atwood, *Odkritje tujcev* (*A Discovery of Strangers*) pisatelja Rudyja Wiebeja ter dela *Na sever s Franklinom: izgubljeni dnevnik Jamesa Fitzjamesa* (*North with Franklin: the Lost Journals of James Fitzjames*) avtorja Johna Wilsona. Iz vseh teh del veje Franklinov duh, ki je prežemal upe in vrednote Kanade devetnajstega stoletja in ki jih prežema še danes.

Ključne besede: kanadska književnost in kultura, Franklinova odprava, Stan Rogers ("Northwest Passage"), Margaret Atwood ("The Age of Lead"), Rudy Wiebe (*Discovery of Strangers*), John Wilson (*North with Franklin*)

An Exploration of Canadian Identity in Recent Literary Narratives of the Franklin Expeditions

The last voyage of Sir John Franklin and his expedition to explore the Canadian north and to find the Northwest Passage has become the stuff of Canadian legend, inspiring songs, stories, novels, chapters in history books, and now web sites. The expedition was a catastrophe. Franklin and his men set off in 1845 and disappeared, almost without a trace, and for over a hundred years no one knew what had happened to them. What is it about Canadians that makes them celebrate such an enigma?

Franklin, an English naval officer, led three expeditions into Canada's high Arctic: the first, in 1819-21, north from Great Slave Lake along the Coppermine River to the Arctic Ocean; the second in 1825, north from Fort Franklin, on Great Bear River, along the Mackenzie River to the Beaufort Sea. For his reports of these discoveries, he was knighted in 1829 and made governor of Van Diemen's Land, now Tasmania. In May, 1845 Franklin left London on an expedition with two ships, the *Erebus* and *Terror*, and 134 men. They were last seen in Baffin Bay on June 26. From 1847 to 1859, thirty rescue expeditions were sent to find Franklin. In 1854, the first remains of the expedition were found by John Rae of the Hudson's Bay Company on King William Island. Since 1854, the reasons for the failure of Franklin's last expedition have been hotly debated, and the story of the expedition has become a Canadian legend.

In the last couple of decades of the twentieth century, the Franklin Expeditions were the subject of popular music and literature. Stan Rogers, a Canadian folksinger who died tragically in an airplane fire in 1983, wrote "Northwest Passage" to celebrate Franklin and other early explorers, and Margaret Atwood, Rudy Wiebe, and John Wilson based a short story and two novels on the Franklin Expeditions.

In Rogers's 1981 song, "Northwest Passage", Franklin and his expedition are the main motif, although several other early explorers of Canada are mentioned:

Northwest Passage

Ah for just one time I would take the Northwest Passage
To find the hand of Franklin reaching for the Beaufort Sea
Tracing one warm line through a land so wide and savage
And make a northwest passage to the sea

Rogers' song struck a responsive chord in Canadian listeners, and was often played on Peter Gzowski's CBC radio program, *Morningside*. Its appeal can be partly laid to Rogers' haunting *a capella* performance, but equally to the resonance of the lyrics. Many Canadians spend much of their leisure time hiking and canoeing in the great north woods, but few can claim to have explored the wilderness to the extent that Franklin and Rogers' narrator can, and those who have

spent any time in Canada's north know well that very, very few of us would survive the attempt. Even with the best modern equipment, which Franklin and his expeditions did not have, the Canadian North is a cold, inhospitable place, and many early explorers succumbed to Franklin's fate. Even today, survival in the north depends on trade with the south and, sadly, traditional survival skills have largely been lost. Modern Nunavut schools now teach courses in traditional survival skills. It is a sobering thought to anyone who visits the Canadian North that the survival time of an unprotected person in winter can be measured in minutes.

Despite a common cultural fascination with heroic acts of endurance in the north, very few Canadians have ever been to the far north. Most have only ever been exposed to Toronto or Montreal winters, to the hardships of frozen plumbing, and cars that won't start. The north is something known only from history and geography tests in school. Those tests, however, and programs like Gzowski's, elicit curiosity about the early explorers of the country. Rogers' song traces Franklin's route on a modern highway, but the landscape evokes an imaginative vision of the difficulties Franklin and his men must have faced from the land, the weather, and the uncertainty of travelling in an unknown land. Rogers also indulges in a bit of typically Canadian self-deprecating irony by having his speaker identify himself as "This tardiest explorer driving hard across the plain." Compared to the stories of heroism to which Canadians are constantly exposed from their southern neighbours, Canadian history seems largely stories of failure, of explorers who take wrong turns and freeze to death, and, in the case of Franklin's men, even resort to cannibalism. Is there any wonder that many Canadians consider their own history boring, and know more about American history than their own?

Songwriters like Rogers and novelists like Atwood and Wiebe brought stories of the explorers who tried and failed, and the success of those who followed, back into cultural prominence. Although Franklin was a hero in his own time, modern accounts, both historical and fictional, focus instead on his lack of preparation, and stubborn refusal to consider either the warnings or the survival expertise of his native Canadian guides. Determination may be one of the character traits Canadians see and prize in themselves, but pigheadedness is not. Rather, it is the determination of his rescuers that is prized, and the ability to learn from mistakes. This is the theme of Atwood's story, the stick-to-itiveness that results in a solution to the mystery, even if it takes a hundred years to find it.

Margaret Atwood's short story "The Age of Lead" refers to the discovery of the body of John Torrington, who died during Franklin's last expedition, 1845–1847. The narrator is watching a television documentary about the autopsy being performed on Torrington's recently discovered body (a reference to a television program based on Owen Beattie's work):

The scientists are back on the screen. They are excited, their earnest mouths are twitching, you could almost call them joyful. They know why John Torrington died, they know, at last, why the Franklin Expedition went so terribly wrong. They've snipped off pieces of John Torrington, a fingernail, a lock of hair, they've run them through machines and come out with their answers.

There is a shot of an old tin can, pulled open to show the seam. It looks like a bomb casing. A finger points: it was the tin cans that did it, a new invention back then, a new technology, the ultimate defence against starvation and scurvy. The Franklin Expedition was excellently provisioned with tin cans, stuffed full of meat and soup and soldered together with lead. The whole expedition got lead poisoning. Nobody knew it. Nobody could taste it. It invaded their bones, their lungs, their brains, weakening them and confusing their thinking, so that at the end those that had not yet died in the ships set out in an idiotic trek across the stony, icy ground, pulling a lifeboat laden with down with toothbrushes, soap, handkerchiefs, and slippers, useless pieces of junk. When they were found ten years later, they were skeletons in tattered coats, lying where they'd collapsed. They'd been heading back toward the ships. It was what they'd been eating that killed them. (Atwood 1991, 168-9)

Atwood's writing embodies what is probably the defining characteristic of Canadian writing, a self-deprecating irony and a sardonic sense of humour. The irony of this passage, that Franklin and his men were done in by the very thing they expected would save them, their state-of-the-Victorian-art technology, is reflected in the title of the story. There is a double irony in the tone of Atwood's narrative voice in the first paragraph. The same hubris seen in Franklin's plans is repeated in the joyfulness of Atwood's "scientists". Her narrator invites the reader to see the same mistaken reliance on science in the modern detectives that resulted in Franklin's death. The implication is that there was no single element to blame, that the whole enterprise was doomed, that Franklin and his men had bitten off more than they could chew, although the lead poisoning is seen as the main cause.

Rudy Wiebe's *A Discovery of Strangers* dramatizes Franklin's earlier 1820-1821 expedition along the Coppermine River to its mouth in the Arctic Ocean. Wiebe, like Atwood, explores the idea that one of the problems that caused Franklin and his men difficulties was their preoccupation with material goods and failure to appreciate the wisdom and warning of their Native Canadian hosts. Taking too much equipment and not enough food resulted in starvation and finally cannibalism:

The name for it is "long pig", you ever heard of that?

Ask any English tar an' he'll tell you. Give him a drink, an' he'll tell you more than you can stomach, ha-ha!

Stomach all right it is, an' was, all of them bloody big Canadian paddlers dead, just dropped an' dead on that trek from the Northern Ocean over all those rivers an' barrens an' snowdrifts an' rocks an' that big double rapid on the Coppermine, Obstruction Rapids, what took us nine days trying to get across till St. Germain, who could do anything, made that cup out of canvas an' we pulled ourselves across one by one--the rapids really finished us. But those Canadians were dead, an' our English officers alive--except poor Hood shot when he lies dying already, our officers live to come home an' every one of them quick as a winking Knight of the Garter an' famous.

An' me too, alive, the one yattering tar daft enough to go every step with them when even the Orkneymen--God be blessed, quick Orkneymen!--know enough to run early in the

hard going, me a sailor of the bottom class given a soft lick on the London docks all those years, an' now more than soft in the sweet air of Van Diemen's Land, sweet if you ain't a gaolbird here, all because I come alive out of that trek, you think ten Canadian voyageurs are falling down dead because they were *weaker* than us? Ha! (286)

Wiebe's narrator in this passage is one of the common sailors, not one of the officers, and his story reveals one of the truths that the official explanation of the expedition would rather have kept hidden, that the survivors of this early expedition had resorted to cannibalism. The would-be survivors of the last expedition also tried this desperate measure but it failed them. Charles Dickens was so horrified by the thought that an English sailor could stoop to such a savage measure that he rejected out of hand the story of one of Franklin's would-be rescuers in his periodical *Household Words*:

Dr. Rae may be considered to have established, by the mute but solemn testimony of the relics he has brought home, that Sir John Franklin and his party are no more. But, there is one passage in his melancholy report, some examination into the probabilities and improbabilities of which, we hope will tend to the consolation of those who take the nearest and dearest interest in the fate of that unfortunate expedition, by leading to the conclusion that there is no reason whatever to believe, that any of its members prolonged their existence by the dreadful expedient of eating the bodies of their dead companions. Quite apart from the very loose and unreliable nature of the Esquimaux [i.e. Inuit] representations (on which it would be necessary to receive with great caution, even the commonest and most natural occurrence), we believe we shall show, that close analogy and the mass of experience are decidedly against the reception of any such statement, and that it is in highest degree improbable that such men as the officers and crews of the two lost ships would or could, in any extremity of hunger, alleviate the pains of starvation by this horrible means. (Dickens 1854)

Wiebe's sailor goes on to develop a second theme: what killed Franklin's expedition was its dependence on what the Victorians considered their strength, materialism (some would go further and say technology):

Why ten of twelve falling down? I'll tell you: they had carried so much of our useless stuff – useless for staying alive, if that's what you're after in that country, an' what else can you chase there once you're forced to get down to it? – carrying so much stuff even on foot in bloody big packs even after all the canoes were smashed, that strong as they were, they got caught on a neat point: what between starvin' and droppin' of scurvy an' freezing, they were just *worked* to death. (288–9)

Elsewhere in Wiebe's novel, Franklin and his men ignore the advice of their native Canadian guides, considering the opinions of those "savages" to be beneath their notice. Wiebe points out that the survival lessons of the native Canadians were honed over millennia of successful adaptation to the conditions of the land, an insight it seems incredible that the supposedly

educated English officers could be blind to. Although Wiebe chose to write about Franklin's 1821 expedition, it was the same materialistic hubris and failure to heed the warnings of the local inhabitants that resulted in the final disaster of the last expedition over twenty years later.

In contrast, John Wilson's novel *North with Franklin: the Lost Journals of James Fitzjames* directly confronts the final expedition. It is a fictional recreation of the private journal of the captain of Franklin's ship *Erebus* on the 1846-1849 voyage. The early part of the novel contains excerpts from Fitzjames' journal, but the rest is Wilson's creation. The expedition left Greenland in 1846 and met a whaling ship, transferred some letters home along with a portion of Fitzjames' journal, and was never seen again, although, as Wilson notes in his afterword, several bodies of crew members were discovered by other Arctic expeditions many years later.

The novel describes the early successes of the expedition, including the final traverse, on foot, of the Northwest Passage, the initial reason for the expedition. However, as time went by the expedition suffered reverses, including both becoming inextricably trapped in the ice and being unable to escape for two years owing to short summer sailing seasons, increasing sickness and death from exposure, frostbite, amputations, exhaustion, scurvy, an inexplicable illness which one of the ships' doctors diagnoses as being connected with their canned food, and finally starvation and cannibalism. Here we have not just a single cause, as in Atwood's story, but a combination of factors (leading to the suspicion that Atwood's "scientists" may be as mistaken in their singlemindedness as Franklin was). Wilson thus builds upon the themes and theories proposed in the earlier stories of Atwood and Wiebe, as well as in actual historic accounts, and adds some philosophizing between Fitzjames and Captain Crozier of Franklin's second ship, *Terror*. Crozier, who has been in the Arctic before, argues with Franklin and Fitzjames about the value of learning from the experience of the natives. Fitzjames responds with the standard British line:

Undeniably, Crozier knows much of these lands, but surely he cannot seriously believe that the natives who live here, accomplished though they may be in naming snow, can hold a candle to us when it comes to mechanical accomplishment and fitness to survive in almost every circumstance. (74)

After some argument, Franklin ends the discussion with a blanket statement: "Our means of doing things is different, but superior, to the primitives in this land" (83), and Fitzjames sums up his agreement in his journal, addressed to his sister-in-law, Elizabeth: "I also have no desire to adopt Esquimaux ways, dress in stinking skins, live in a snow house, and eat raw seal meat. My uniform, bunk, and roast beef will suffice, thank you" (83). Ironically, near the end of the novel, after Crozier's death, Fitzjames does take to wearing Crozier's sealskin suit, finding it warmer than his English officer's uniform, and to eating seal meat and blubber after the ship's doctor voices his suspicion that the canned food has been poisoning the crew, but by this time it is too late to save him or his crew. Wilson dramatizes the debate, taking licence to do so because almost no information survived the catastrophe. Giving Crozier the more modern, enlightened position redeems the British navy and makes blame more a matter of individual failure rather than national myopia.

In one of their last conversations, Crozier explains his early doubts about the whole enterprise of Arctic exploration:

The danger is that our successful machines give us false confidence and an overweening arrogance. We come to think that we can achieve anything we wish, but as we strive for achievements outside our ken, we will be bound to fail; as we have failed. (247)

The danger, he goes on to say, lies not just in over reliance on technology, but on a broader failure to understand our place in the world:

It is a failure because we come here in arrogance thinking that we can dominate nature. We cannot. We are at its mercy and it can snuff us out as easily as we can extinguish a candle. Any attempt to defeat nature, to overcome it, is doomed. Even if nature allows us a few moments of victory, ultimately we are doomed. (248)

The message these modern writers derive from the story of the Franklin Expedition is threefold. The traditional view of the explorers, admiration for their bravery and determination, is still valid. Even today, the far north is a cold, inhospitable landscape, not to be taken lightly. To survive there, even with modern technology, is still a challenge. Rogers' ballad embodies this theme. Wiebe and Atwood bring a postmodern irony to this view, however. Franklin and his men fell victim to their narrow-mindedness and hubris by depending solely on their military hierarchy and technology which, although successful in building an empire, fell short against the vast landscape. Both writers also point out that unless we learn from their mistakes, modern civilization and culture still depend on the basic assumptions that led Franklin astray, and that we are just as likely to fall into the same trap. Wilson goes further, with a reminder reminiscent of current thinking on ecology and environmental science.

Perhaps there is an American equivalent; perhaps Canadians prefer their heroes like Shane, who don't grow old, or fade away, but ride off into the wilderness to disappear. It helps to maintain the mystery. It has been said, for example, by Margaret Atwood in *Survival*, that Canadian literature is about the search for identity. Certainly, Wiebe has written many stories that deal with this quest, from the voice of Almighty Voice in "Where is the Voice Coming From?" to "The Naming of Albert Johnson," who remains anonymous even after he has been named. Here, the question of identity is not so much the character's name, or their official identity, but the modern reader's perception of them. Were the explorers the heroic role models they are portrayed in the history books, and in Stan Rogers' song, or something else, and what does our judgement of them say about us?

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