

Rear-Admiral Sir John Franklin, Commander of Arctic Expeditions (1786-1847)



Sir John Franklin was born April 16, 1786 in England, and he died on June 11, 1847 aboard the HMS Erebus off King William Island, now part of Nunavut when he was 59 years old. Franklin entered the Royal Navy in 1800 when he was 14, was a keen surveyor, and had a strong aptitude for the natural sciences. Early in his career he surveyed much of the coastline of Australia in an expedition with his uncle, and saw naval action in both the Napoleonic Wars and the War of 1812. In 1818, he led his first expedition to find a passage to the Pacific Ocean through the Arctic, but the mission was called off after months of slowly probing through ice in vain. Franklin led a second expedition to the Arctic from 1825-1827, and personally travelled the Mackenzie River toward Alaska, mapping vast distances that were previously unknown. Upon returning to Britain, at 41 years of age Franklin was promoted to Captain and even knighted. From 1836 to 1843, he served as the

lieutenant-governor of what is known as Tasmania, a British penal colony at the time.

In Canada, he is noteworthy for exploring the Arctic, having mapped large portions of Arctic coastline in the high-profile expeditions. On his final, fateful voyage in 1845 the HMS Erebus and Terror became trapped in ice off King William Island, very close to the Northwest Passage. Due to harsh conditions the ships' crews were forced to abandon them for the winter and seek shelter elsewhere.

Unfortunately, despite the fact that the ships carried three years-worth of canned and preserved food, the cans were not of high quality and lead seeped into the food supply. The 129 members of the ships' crew were forced to disembark, they would have had no clue that their food was tainted, and it would not have mattered if they did, for the cold and unforgiving conditions of the North would have been too great to endure for long.

In 1847, two years after the expedition had set sail, the British Admiralty had received no word from Franklin. His wife, Jane Griffin, known as Lady Franklin, urged them to send a search party, but the Admiralty rejected the idea, stating that because the expedition had brought three years-worth of food a search would not take place until three years had passed. In 1848, it launched a search and offered a 20,000 pound reward for finding the expedition. At one point 10 British ships and two American ships were all searching at the same time, and over time, more ships and men were lost searching for Franklin's expedition than in the expedition itself.

Franklin's lost voyage became something of a pop culture phenomenon, with ballads such as "Lady Franklin's Lament" becoming popular at the time. Finally, in 1850, some relics of the expedition were found some 675km north of King William Island, including the graves of three crewmen.

The search for the lost Franklin expedition continued well into the 1990s, when in 1992 the Canadian government designated the Franklin expedition vessels—the Erebus and Terror—a national historic site, despite not knowing the location. Since 2008, Parks Canada had been leading the search for the Franklin expedition, and in 2012, Prime Minister Stephen Harper voiced the federal government's support and interest in the project. In September 2014, 167 years after Sir John Franklin died on his doomed expedition, the HMS Erebus was found.

Throughout his life, Sir John Franklin was both humble and private. Despite gaining notoriety in his home country Britain for his exploits, he was not known to boast publicly about his exploits. He was a best-selling author, having written two popular books about his first two Arctic expeditions and was elected a fellow of the prestigious Royal Society for his exploits.