

edinburgh surgeons in search of the north west passage

The Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh has produced many great men – some of them became great without actually doing any surgery. Two in particular were instrumental in the mapping of the Canadian Arctic – in this four part series, Mark Wilson retraces the steps of Harry Goodsir and John Rae.

harry goodsir

Great things were expected from Harry Goodsir, the “rising pathologist and morphologist” who, at the age of 20, was the Conservator of the College museum. He was awarded the Licentiate in Surgery three years earlier and took over the College job from his elder brother (the famous anatomist John Goodsir) in 1843. However, within a year of starting, the College was in financial difficulties with dry rot in the northeast part of the buildings and a considerable cleaning bill from the 9,000 visitors to the museum each year. Cuts had to be made. The public galleries were closed, no new specimens were to be accepted and Goodsir’s salary was reduced, not without protest, by £100 per year.

Goodsir wrote over a dozen scientific and natural history papers and was well regarded. Indeed, Rudolph Virchow dedicated his famous Cellularpathologie (1859) not to a teacher, but to John Goodsir for the work that the two Goodsir brothers had done on cellular anatomy. On 11th March 1845 Harry was offered a post as Acting



Harry Goodsir Conservator of the College Museum, Assistant Surgeon and Naturalist aboard HMS Erebus – probably pictured in 1845 before setting sail

Assistant Surgeon and Naturalist on H.M.S. Erebus, an expedition that aimed to traverse the unmapped (and undiscovered) North West Passage from the Atlantic to Pacific through the Canadian Arctic. Such an expedition was the equivalent of Space exploration today. He was to study “Life” in the arctic. This could have been his making in much the same way as Darwin’s trip on Beagle had been fourteen years before. He asked the College for either leave of absence or acceptance of his resignation. The College granted him temporary leave and his younger brother, Archibald, took over as Conservator. He must have been aware that his leave might be a bit longer than temporary for he took out a life insurance policy for £100.

Sir John Franklin, a veteran arctic explorer, was to Captain the expedition. At the age of 59 he had had an eventful life. He had fought in the Battle of Trafalgar, was the first to circumnavigate and map Australia with Flinders and had commanded two previous arctic expeditions, one of which nearly resulted in starvation. This last expedition had made him famous as the “man



Map of the Canadian Arctic No such maps were available in Franklin's day. It was not even known whether the North West Passage existed (Subsequent expeditions have discovered relics that have elucidated the route the men took)

who ate his boots" – the leather kept him alive until his rescue. He was by far the oldest member of the expedition, the Captaincy of which had been turned down by other sailing greats such as Ross and Parry. His ships' crew was to comprise 129 men including 24 Officers.

'the Admiralty put up a £20,000 reward to anyone who "might render efficient assistance in saving the lives of Sir John Franklin and his squadron". A later revision said half was available to whoever simply knew what had happened to them'

The expedition set off on 31st May 1845 from Greenhithe, Kent. Two converted bomb ships, H.M.S. Erebus (372 Tons) and H.M.S. Terror (326 Tons) had been fitted with steam engines, the new screw propeller and heating. These were the toughest, most advanced vessels in the world. The *London Daily Chronicle*, *Telegraph* and *Illustrated London News* had



The Franklin Memorial Expedition 2003 Retracing the steps of the men around King William Island to Starvation Cove (courtesy of Martin Hartley www.martinhartley.com)

features on them for weeks prior to their departure. They were incredibly well fitted, each with a 1,000 volume library. They had 4,573lbs of lemon juice in 5-gallon kegs to protect against scurvy. Goldner, an East End businessman had won the tender to supply the newly patented tinned food – 15,664lbs of tinned meat, 10,452 pints of tinned soup, 7,839lbs of tinned vegetables and 2,613lbs of tinned potatoes. Since there were no conflicts and most of the world had been mapped, big orders for supplying three years worth of food were rare and such an order was very valuable. Supplying that many tins though proved to be difficult. Goldner got them to the port with only one day to spare. No one had a chance to check them...

Erebus and *Terror* briefly stopped over in Greenland en route to the Canadian Arctic. Letters were sent back. One stated the Goodsir was "delighted when, on June 28th a dredge was sunk to a depth of 300 fathoms and living animals were brought up". The ships were last seen by Whalers entering Lancaster Sound on 26th July 1845. From then on they would have no way of communicating with the outside world...

£20,000
Sterling
(100,000 DOLLARS.)
REWARD.

TO BE GIVEN by her Britannic Majesty's Government to such a private Ship, or distributed among such private Ships, of any Country, as may, in the judgment of the Board of Admiralty, have rendered efficient assistance to

SIR JOHN FRANKLIN,
HIS SHIPS, or their Crews,
and may have contributed directly to extricate them from the Ice.

H. G. WARD,
SECRETARY TO THE ADMIRALTY.
LONDON, 12th MARCH, 1848.

The attention of WHALERS, or any other Ships disposed to aid in this service, is particularly directed to SMITH'S SOUND and JONES'S SOUND, in RAFFIN'S BAY, to REGENT'S INLET and the GULF of BOOTHIA, as well as to any of the Inlets or Channels leading out of BARROW'S STRAIT, or the Sea beyond, either Northward or Southward.

VESSELS Entering through BEHRING'S STRAITS would necessarily direct their search North and South of MELVILLE ISLAND.

NOTE.—Former notices of obtaining Information relative to the Missing Expedition, which has not been heard of since JULY, 1841, are referred to HERMANN A. GRAYTON, Esq., the Britannic Majesty's Consul, BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS; or, ANTHONY BARCLAY, Esq., the Majesty's Consul, NEW YORK.

The reward poster offering £20,000 for assistance finding the Franklin expedition

The ships were carrying enough food for about three years so in 1848 the Admiralty knew it would be running out. There was no news and concern started to mount. In March the Admiralty put up a £20,000 reward to anyone who "might render efficient assistance in saving the lives of Sir John Franklin and his squadron". A later revision said half was available to whoever simply knew what had

happened to them. The Admiralty and Franklin's wife, Lady Jane Franklin, funded expeditions to look for them. They planned a search that had ships going in from the East (through Lancaster Sound), the West (through the Bearing Straits) and trekking expeditions from the South. Harry's younger brother, Robert joined Captain Penny on one such expedition, however no trace was found. Over the following six years there were to be dozens of expeditions, many funded by Lady Jane, that would end up mapping virtually the entire Canadian Arctic.

The land search from the south was under the charge of Franklin's friend and trail mate, Sir John Richardson. He was very highly regarded – on the earlier Franklin overland arctic expedition when many starved to death (and Franklin had eaten his boots) he nobly stayed behind with the sick and weak. He had plenty of volunteers for the search for Franklin, however, he specifically asked for an Edinburgh surgeon who was creating quite a stir at the Hudson Bay Company...

To be continued in the next issue.

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