

## The Search for H M Ships “Erebus” and “Terror”

*Edited version of the presentation by Joe O’Farrell to the McClintock Winter School,  
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When starting my work on this paper, I casually put the rhetorical question to my wife as to how can it be explained that a search of almost 160 years duration, in the decreed place for the missing items, has produced no positive result?

In rather quick time, she replied, helpfully, that this very point has been covered in one of **Anthony de Mello’s** fables. Now some, indeed many, of you may have heard of this 20<sup>th</sup> century Jesuit philosopher and may be familiar with his device of using fables to get us to broaden our thinking.

*“A man was on his knees on the pavement, under the street light, obviously looking for something. A passer-by, having ascertained that the man was looking for a lost key, stopped to help him. After some time, and without any success in finding the missing key, the passer-by asked the man if he had actually lost it there.*

*“No” replied the man, “I lost it in the house.”*

*“But why, then, are you looking here?”*

*“Because this is where the light is.”*

That succinct little fable was the very grist which my mill needed, for it supported the slightly uncomfortable feeling I’ve had about aspects of the “search for the Franklin ships” since I first became interested in polar matters over 30 years ago. Over much of that period, I became increasingly concerned at the “establishment” acceptance of the story as it is now honoured, oftimes with uncorroborated and questionable evidence, while conflicting opinion and testament has, largely, been dismissed with disdain.

For those new to this story, the background can be summarized as follows:

On May 19<sup>th</sup> 1845, two ships, HMS “*Erebus*”, captained by Sir John Franklin, then 58 years old, and HMS “*Terror*”, captained by Irishman Francis Crozier, a fifty-year old polar veteran, left England’s shores with the nation expecting and immortality beckoning. They were charged with finding the fabled NorthWest Passage.

By June, they had reached the west coast of Greenland where they were topped-up by the *Barretto Junior*, the supply ship which had accompanied them out of England for that purpose. The *Barretto Junior* was duly cleared and sent home, bringing letters from several officers and men of the *Erebus* and *Terror*. No-one could have known that these were the last letters of the men from the *Erebus* and *Terror*, or, at least, their last letters ever to be delivered home.

On July 26<sup>th</sup> 1845, the two ships were sighted by a whaler in Melville Bay. Apparently, they were awaiting improved conditions to cross Baffin Bay towards Lancaster Sound. Then they vanished – as if off the face of the earth!

Thus was born the “Franklin Mystery”, and over the past 160 years or so, more books have been written on this subject than on any other single polar topic, and more effort, money and resources have been ploughed into finding these two missing ships than has been applied to any other which has ever disappeared, with the possible exception of *The Titanic*.

At the outset, and again for the benefit of those new to the story, let me start *at the end* by saying that, after almost 160 years of searching, the ships have not been found! The conventional wisdom – and I’ll be giving details of this – decrees that they lie (or at least one of them lies) at the bottom of the sea between a point off the North-West of **King William Island** (where they were beset in the ice) and **Cape Adelaide** on the western side of **Boothia**.

The decreed location comes with great authority, supported as it is by the only known “clue” left by the final remnants of the Franklin party, plus the local eye-witness Inuit testimony. That this area should, therefore, be the one area thoroughly searched over many years, is understandable, indeed demanded.

Allowing for the fact that, whereas much ground has been covered, but not all of the designated search area has, as yet, been investigated, the question lingers as to why, after 160 years of the most intensive searching the maritime world has ever seen, and now using the most sophisticated equipment which science and technology can provide, no trace of the missing ships has been found.

This is both a searcher’s dilemma and a researcher’s conundrum!

I must be very careful here, Ladies and Gentlemen. Many eminent and learned men have, over many years, devoted enormous energies to poring over all the facts known and suspected, and to dissecting every aspect of the story, as have many expert scientists and explorers expended huge amounts of money in the actual searches themselves. On the face of it, therefore, it would be arrogant and presumptuous in the extreme to say that they are looking in the wrong place. They may still be right. And yet, yet, nothing has been found!

Whilst I don’t necessarily subscribe to **Cecil Rhode’s** maxim, “if you have an idea, and it is a good idea, if you will only stick to it, it will come out all right”, for this can lead to one becoming a closed mind, I certainly believe that an alternative opinion doesn’t deserve a perfunctory rejection. History, and this includes the polar narrative, has never been well served by those with strong views strongly held. Better that strong views are weakly held, for this, at least, enables a contrary view to be entertained.

In postulating, therefore, a view contrary to the accepted wisdom, I am motivated by nothing more than a desire to see every facet of this extraordinary story fully and thoroughly researched and explored, and to bring to it, not prejudice or historical baggage, but simply an enquiring mind.

As said earlier, Franklin’s two ships, with their complement of 129 men (137 actually signed-on in England, but between no-shows and invalidings, 129 entered the Arctic) left England in May 1845. The expedition was provisioned for 3 years and it was therefore expected to return home in the summer of 1848.

The Admiralty orders to Sir John Franklin specifically included the instruction that he was to “seize every opportunity” of keeping the Admiralty informed of the progress of the expedition.

This implies that the Admiralty expected Franklin’s ships to encounter whalers from time to time, and to send reports home via these whalers.

By the autumn of 1847 (2 years after the expedition sailed), the Admiralty became uneasy at the complete absence of news from Franklin, even though he was not expected to return for another year. Franklin was a naval man to his fingertips, and, as later oft repeated by his wife, the formidable Lady Jane Franklin, he would have carried out all his instructions “to the letter”.

Their Lordships of the Admiralty suspected that something wasn’t quite right with Franklin and his ships, and so Sir John Barrow immediately set about organizing relief expeditions. Over the next six years or so, upwards of 70 ships were sent out in search of Franklin, making it the greatest “search and rescue” mission in maritime history. It continues to this day, though, obviously, the “rescue” aspect has been abandoned.

The narrative of the “Franklin Search” is so enormous in detail and volume as to overwhelm even the most dedicated researcher, let alone an attentive audience, so I’ll confine myself simply to mentioning just two of the ships involved in the search, HMS “*Investigator*” and HMS “*Resolute*”, as these two particular ships have a crucial bearing on my unfolding story.

HMS “*Investigator*”, captained by Wexford-born Robert McClure, became beset in the ice on the north coast of Banks Island during the summer of 1851. In April 1853, still trapped in the ice, she was totally abandoned, and her captain and crew made their escape to nearby Melville Island where they joined up with HMS “*Resolute*”.

HMS “*Resolute*”, captained by Tipperary-born Henry Kellett, was also in the Arctic regions during this period, searching for the missing Franklin Ships. Having overwintered his ship at Melville Island, he was, in circumstances which still remain controversial, ordered by his expedition Commander Sir Edward Belcher to abandon his ship to the ice, and this he reluctantly did in May 1854.

(The “*Resolute*” by this time also accommodated the full complement of “*Investigator*”, so two entire crews had to walk eastwards to Beechey Island where they joined up with the depot ship “*North Star*”.)

Please remember, for later recall, these ships and dates: “*Investigator*” abandoned off Banks Island in 1853, and “*Resolute*” abandoned at Melville Island in 1854.

Let’s deal, firstly, with the only known “clue” left by the Franklin Expedition, ie the celebrated parchment found, twelve years later, by Lt William Hobson in the cairn on King William Island.

The first message on the parchment contains the well-known “mistake” in that reference to 1846-7 should, clearly, have read 1845-6. This message states “all well”. Strange, therefore, that men, “all well” and presumably in full control of their faculties, should have made such a basic and simple error!

The second message, inked around the margins of the first, was written some eleven months later, and reports catastrophe! Curiously, it is very precise with the location of the abandoned ships, ie “5 leagues N.N.W. of.....69° 37’ 42” N, 98° 41’ W”. To my knowledge, the accuracy of these co-ordinates has never been questioned, let alone doubted.

As I said earlier, these co-ordinates indicate a point between the north-west of King William Island and Cape Adelaide on the western side of Boothia. Crucially, this point is very close to where James Clark Ross “fixed” the North Magnetic Pole in 1831.

In terrestrial magnetic terms, the closer one gets to the Magnetic Pole, the less reliable is the compass, and, being **that** close to the Magnetic Pole, it would have been practically useless! Any reading, therefore, would have had to be made by dead-reckoning, and dead-reckoning was unlikely to be anywhere near as accurate as a compass reading. Accurate dead-reckoning by sound and healthy men is hard enough, but by men *in-extremis*? The question therefore begs to be asked: if sound and healthy men can make a basic mistake with something as simple as a year-date, how reliable is a very precise nautical co-ordinate taken by men at the end of their tether, and by dead-reckoning?

Let’s turn now to the other area of great significance to be sifted out from the plethora of detail surrounding the search for the Franklin ships, and concentrate on what has become known as the “inuit testimony”.

This testimony was garnered over the ensuing 30 years, and has, generally, been acknowledged as the accepted state of affairs. Indeed, to this very day, most of the search expeditions, including the eminent Irish-Canadian Franklin Search Expedition, (whose work is still ongoing) declare that the rationale behind searching in the Adelaide Peninsula area (ie where the light is) is based, primarily, on this “inuit testimony”.

However, it should be regarded as important that very little of this testimony was gleaned in the years immediately after the disappearance of the Franklin ships. Scot, John Rae of the Hudson’s Bay Company was the first to provide substantial inuit recall of the events, but this was in 1854, some 6 years after the event. Irishman Francis McClintock added to the store of knowledge in 1859, and in 1869 and 1879, two Americans, Hall and Schwatka (respectively) completed what they regarded as the last missing pieces of the jig-saw. Thus, the “inuit testimony” comprises quite a large chunk of 30-year old hearsay.

In this regard, I have always found it curiously inconsistent that, between 1848 and 1853, ie in the 5 years immediately following the disappearance of the Franklin ships, most inuit stories (and there were very few in this period) relating to Franklin’s ships were largely dismissed as being the impudent invention of wiley natives intent only on scooping the reward on offer for information on the missing ships. But by 1854 and again in 1859 (ie between 6 and 9 years after the event) everything told to John Rae and Francis McClintock was accepted as being substantially correct.

It should also be regarded as highly significant that very, very little of what is now known as “the inuit testimony” was taken from direct eye-witnesses, but rather from others to whom the story was subsequently told. The Russians have a saying: “he lies like an eye-witness”! This is less offensive than it sounds, and is, simply, a way of

saying that ordinary people, when in the spotlight and seduced by their unexpected 15-minutes of fame, do not lie deliberately, but are inclined to tell their questioner what they think the questioner expects of them, or wishes them to say!

It is indisputable, and therefore accepted by all, that the Inuit were in close proximity to, and in contact with, the men of the Franklin's ships after they were abandoned in the ice off King William Island. What is open to question is what contact, if any, did they have with the ships themselves after they were abandoned.

The conventional story, as deduced firstly by McClintock in 1859, and corroborated by Hall in 1869 and then by Schwatka in 1879, was that one of the ships drifted ashore and was wrecked, with Inuit accounts saying that one sank in deep water. Indeed, McClintock was told by the Inuit that both ships had been beset in the ice, and that one of them had been sunk out at sea, though he added, crucially, that no Inuit then present had seen the actual happening. He also learned that the other ship had been forced ashore by the ice, and that on board was found "the body of a large white man with very big teeth". Please remember that all this was told to McClintock more than 10 years after the events.

Please remember, also, that at that period in time, 1840-1870, the Inuit did not have much, if any, written recorded history or legend. It was all verbal, passed from generation to generation by word of mouth. The Inuit were a distinctly tribal people, with rare intercommunications even where the tribes were only 20 or so miles apart. Each tribe was likely to have a slight variation of language, a local dialect if you like. It's also important to factor in, especially in the Franklin story, that some of the detail comes from or via the North American Indians, who, traditionally, were implacable enemies of the Inuit.

If, therefore, one takes into account all these factors, plus the linguistic nightmare of French-speaking, but not Inuktitut understanding, Indians relating events to Inuktitut-speaking but not French-understanding Inuit, and both – without any English - having to translate events to English officers who spoke neither French nor Inuktitut, it is perfectly understandable if some vital information got lost in translation.

Now my purpose in raising this issue is not to discredit, in any way, the 'Inuit testimony', but, rather, to point out some factors which, totally unwittingly and with the purest of truthful intentions on the part of the native participants, might give cause to a slight rethink and a re-evaluation of some of the statements now generally accepted as gospel. I wish to tread very carefully here, because I do not wish motives to be imputed to me where none exist!

I hope you are all still with me, for I now need to turn the clock back eight years, from 1859 to 1851.

A very strange thing happened in May 1851. An item appeared in (of all places) the May 28<sup>th</sup> 1851 issue of "The Limerick Chronicle", an Irish newspaper. Written by a John Supple Lynch of Limerick, to his uncle in England, it relates the story of his voyage on the "Renovation" from Limerick to Quebec, Canada, and, how, close to Newfoundland on or about April 20<sup>th</sup> of that year, his ship passed within a few miles of a big ice-flow upon which were stranded two ships. He said that the ships looked to have been abandoned, for, having studied them through the telescope, no sign of life or movement could be detected. Obviously a man reasonably acquainted with

maritime affairs, he formed the opinion that they were consorts, and, surprisingly, expressed the view that they must be the missing Franklin ships. He added that the mate of his ship also observed the scene, but not the captain, for he was ill in his bunk below.

For two specific reasons, I find this letter quite fascinating.

Firstly, it shows the widespread knowledge of, and interest in, the Franklin Expedition of 1845. It's quite unbelievable that this man, who described himself to the subsequent Admiralty Enquiry as "an ordinary man", should, in the Limerick of 1851, and as a post-famine emigrant to Canada to start a new life, even be aware of, or have any interest in, the goings-on of his colonial masters and in the Arctic to boot!

Secondly, it's very strange, but eminently understandable (bearing in mind the rather parochial circulation of a newspaper such as "The Limerick Chronicle") that this matter did not come sooner to the attention of the Admiralty in London.

Indeed, it may never have come to any official attention were it not for the fact that the captain of the "*Renovation*", on arrival in Quebec, and no doubt at the prompting of his passenger John Lynch, mentioned the episode to his fellow sea-faring colleagues, and, in this way, the matter eventually came to the attention of the Authorities in London. Further interest in the matter was generated by a letter which appeared in The (London) Times of May 8<sup>th</sup> 1852, almost a year after John Lynch's letter appeared in "The Limerick Chronicle". It corroborated exactly what John Lynch's letter said.

Remember we're talking here of 1852, four years **after** the presumed disappearance of the Franklin ships, but two years **before** the discoveries of John Rae (who subsequently received for Admiralty reward of ten thousand pounds for being the first to discover the fate of Sir John Franklin), and seven years **before** Sir Francis McClintock officially closed the story. (He, also, received an award, this one being five thousand pounds, but this was paid by Parliament, not by The Admiralty.)

By the time "The Times" letter appeared, May 1852, British public opinion was in full cry over the fate of Franklin, his crews and his ships, and both Parliament and The Admiralty came in for severe criticism, from both the public and the press, over their handling of the affair. The public demanded to know what had happened to their heroes, and what the Admiralty was doing about getting them home.

Damaged by this public opprobrium, and spurred by "The Times" letter, Parliament and The Admiralty jumped into frenetic action. Parliament instructed The Admiralty to conduct an immediate enquiry into what became known as "The Ships seen in the Ice", and The Admiralty responded with extraordinary promptness.

Limerick-man John Lynch became the main focus of the enquiry, and he was subject to numerous letters from the Admiralty and its Officers, plus three separate interrogations (these were conducted in Canada, as he was by then living there). He was absolutely unwaivering in his testimony that he had seen two ships embedded in an ice-floe off Newfoundland in April 1851. Furthermore, he held the view that it was *possible* that these two ships were the *Erebus* and *Terror*. He was adjudged, in the official public account of the enquiry, to be a man of the highest integrity, and his evidence survived all attempts to dislodge it.

There was, of course, corroborating evidence produced by the mate of “Renovation”, plus the evidence of a second ship in the area at the time.

As I said, The Admiralty conducted this enquiry with alarming speed, and, on June 22<sup>nd</sup> 1852, the House of Commons ordered the Report to be printed. The Report, officially entitled “Vessels in the North Atlantic: copies of communications between the Admiralty and any Public Authorities at home and abroad, in reference to certain vessels observed on an ice-berg in the North Atlantic in 1851, and supposed to have been abandoned.”, lies in the archives of The National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London.

It’s a most interesting volume, containing as it does copies of all the communications with the various parties, persons, and bodies involved. But, having set out all the correspondence, it stops dead. Absolutely dead. It doesn’t reach any conclusion, or make any determination. The last piece of correspondence in the Report is a rather innocuous Statement from an Edward Griffiths, Lieutenant RN, Government Emigration Office, Waterford, Ireland, dated May 27<sup>th</sup> 1852, in which he proffers the opinion that, because the “ships on the ice” were seen, allegedly, by only two passing ships, and by none of the many hundred of other ships which ply this route, he doubts the veracity of the entire story.

And this brings me to another little point! In the myriad of books written about the Franklin mystery, very few make any reference to this Admiralty Enquiry and the story of “the ships in the ice”, and, in the case of those few which do, it is either stated or implied, or the reader is forced to infer, that the Admiralty reached the conclusion that there was no substance to the story of “the ships in the ice”. This is patently untrue. The Admiralty reached no such conclusion. In fact, they reached none!

Why did the Admiralty not make a determination? Clearly, Parliament’s terms of reference in establishing the Enquiry enabled them to do so. In truth, however, it must be acknowledged that, in 1852, the idea of a ship extricating itself from the ice off King William Island, and manifesting itself later some 2000 miles away, was fanciful in the extreme, and would undoubtedly leave open to derision anyone who might come to, or support, that conclusion.

It has been suggested, perhaps mischievously, perhaps with a grain of truth, that the answer may have had something to do with the fact that a reward of twenty-thousand pounds was, by then, on offer to the first person to establish the fate of Franklin and/or his ships, and that their Lordships couldn’t countenance an award of that amount going to someone other than one of their own! The grain of truth may lie in the analogous experience of John Harrison and his Harrison Clock some eighty years earlier. [Harrison, a commoner, battled for most of his life to secure the Govt award of 20,000 pounds for his discovery of “longitude”. However, the Authorities favoured Nevil Maskelyne (the Astronomer Royal, and one of their own) even to the point of allowing Maskelyne, one of the competitors for the award, to become the adjudicator of the winner. Harrison eventually got the reward from King George 3<sup>rd</sup> in 1773.]

But I digress.

Had the Admiralty Enquiry occurred in 1855, rather than in 1852, the outcome might have been entirely different, for in that year, a very strange thing occurred, and one which no-one could have foreseen.

Remember HMS “*Resolute*”, captained by Tipperary-born Henry Kellett, and which was abandoned in the ice off Melville Island in May 1854? Well, *mirabile dictu*, but didn’t that very ship drift for over 1000 miles eastwards, and was found in Davis Strait, just over a year later, in Sept 1855, by Captain Buddington in his US Whaler, *George Henry*.

(There’s a lovely post-script to this story: “*Resolute*” was taken back to America, fully restored, and in Dec 1856 presented to Queen Victoria and the British People “as a goodwill offering.” Eventually broken-up in 1880, a “writing table” was made from her timbers, and shipped to America as a gift from Queen Victoria to President Hayes. The handsomely carved desk is said to have been recovered from the vaults of the White House by President John F Kennedy, and, to this day, adorns the Oval Office in the White House.)

The “*Resolute*” established, quite clearly, that, yes, it was possible for a ship to drift eastwards in the ice (at least, from the Melville Island area) and to emerge over 1000 miles later in Davis Strait. Furthermore, once it reached Davis Strait, it would, inexorably (for that was the prevailing current) have drifted into open seas and would have passed east of Newfoundland – the precise location where the “ships on the ice” were seen by the “*Renovation*”.

But if the “ships on the ice” really were *Erebus* and *Terror*, then they would have had to drift, not just over 2000 miles to reach that point, but they would have had to extricate themselves northwards from their beset point off King William Island, assuming that **was** their beset point! The prevailing trend of the ice where the two ships were abandoned is south-eastwards, whereas to reach Barrow Strait they would have had to make their way northwards. A physical impossibility? Probably, yes.

But that would be to ignore the strange phenomena which can sometimes occur in these tortuous waters, whereby the south-eastward set of the ice down McClintock Strait may occasionally set up a counter-drift up Franklin Channel and Peel Sound, thus bringing the beset ships into Barrow Strait. From there, they would be set down Lancaster Sound, and so, ultimately, into the Atlantic.

And that was precisely what happened to Sir Allen Young in his yacht “*Pandora*” some twenty-five years later in 1875, as he was attempting to traverse a NorthWest Passage. He was coming down Franklin Channel, with high hopes of success, for he had found Peel Sound, and almost half of Franklin Channel, free of ice. Then half-way down, he was blocked by pack-ice drifting northwards.

That pack-ice, which blocked Sir Allen Young and “*Pandora*”, could only have come from the area to the north of King William Island (the precise area where *Erebus* and *Terror* were beset). So if such a clearance took place in 1875, how can it be reasonably argued that such a clearance could **not** have occurred in 1848?

Similarly, there are documented reports of strange goings-on in Dolphin & Union Strait, not too far away from King William Island. Robert McClure logged that the current here runs in an east by north direction. Richard Collinson recorded that the current is eastwards. Sir John Richardson was emphatic it is to the westward, while the American captain, Vilhjalmur Stefansson recorded his observation that the current through Dolphin & Union Strait alternates.



To conclude this particular point, therefore, I contend that it was possible, and I won't put it any stronger than that, that *Erebus* and *Terror* could have drifted northwards into Barrow Strait, emerged through Lancaster Sound into Davis Strait, and from there to Newfoundland where they were observed as "the ships in the ice".

The final piece of alternative conjecture I wish to share with you relates to the testimony of the Inuit that they observed one of the ships (either the *Erebus* or *Terror*) beset in the ice off King William Island after the other was said to have sunk. Bearing in mind that this testimony was adduced many years after the event, it is surprising that it has become accepted, so easily and without equivocation, that it was either the *Erebus* or *Terror*.

In fairness to those who questioned the Inuit on it, they interrogated them in quite a robust manner, leaving no stone unturned in their endeavors to prove that it couldn't possibly be a ship other than Franklin's. Some of the sceptics had contended that it might, possibly, be the "*Investigator*" which, as you may recall I alluded to earlier, had been beset in the ice off Banks Island and abandoned by its captain, Wexford-born Robert McClure, in 1853.

By this time, the story of "the ships in the ice" was well known, and it was therefore imperative that a line be drawn somewhere. Clearly, if the ship described by the Inuit was proven to be one of the two Franklin ships, then "the ships in the ice" couldn't possibly have been Franklin's. On the other hand, if the ship described by the Inuit was established to have been one of the other abandoned ships, ie "*Investigator*", then it re-opened the possibility that the "ships in the ice" were, in fact, Franklin's. There was therefore quite a lot riding on this particular issue.

After exhaustive questioning on the appearance, rigging, attitude, and general state of the vessel being described, the Inuit seemed to satisfy the test required, ie that it **was** one of Franklin's ships. The clincher seems to have been the answer provided by the Inuit to the question as to how many boats she was carrying. When the reply came that she was carrying 4 at the sides and one over the stern, the file was deemed closed, for that was exactly the number carried by both *Erebus* and *Terror*. By contrast, the only other ship it could have been, ie "*Investigator*", carried seven.

It's a pity, therefore, that a little more enquiry was not made about "*Investigator*" which, at that time, was known to have been abandoned and was presumed either sunk or drifting somewhere in the arctic wastes. True, she was fitted with seven boats, but her records state that one was landed at the depot established on Princess Royal Island in Prince of Wales's Strait, and another was landed at Mercy Bay on the north coast of Banks Island just before "*Investigator*" was abandoned in April 1853. At the time she was abandoned, therefore, she was left with four boats suspended from davits over the sides, with the captain's gig over the stern; *exactly as the Inuit had described!!!!*

There's no record of the Inuit being asked if the ship they saw had a bowsprit or a figurehead. It will be recalled that I mentioned earlier that, when the Inuit went on board the deserted ship, they found "the body of a large man with very big teeth". If it was the *Erebus* or *Terror*, there is every possibility that a dead man might have been on board. However, that could never have been the case if the ship was "*Investigator*" for that particular ship was abandoned in a most orderly fashion with all hands accounted for and safe.

A transcript of the Inuit testimony shows that the man was so big that five men could not lift or move him. No such 500lb person was, or could have been, aboard either or any ship. It's fanciful, I know, but it is just possible that the Inuit, never having seen a ship's figurehead before, could have mistaken it for a large dead man. As for the extraordinary addition by the Inuit of the words "with big teeth", it's just possible that the figurehead did indeed have large carved teeth. They may even have been firmly clenched, in the manner of the wood sculptures of the day, for the ship HMS "*Investigator*" was, after all, originally named "*Resolution*". (This fanciful notion is not new: it was first postulated by Rear Admiral Noel Wright in the 1950s.)

**If** the conjecture that the Inuit mistakingly took the large carved wood figurehead for "the large dead man" is correct, then the ship could not have been either "*Erebus*" or "*Terror*" for neither had a figurehead. Both had conventional bowsprits.

**If** the number of boats carried by "*Investigator*" at the time of her abandonment had been properly ascertained, then it would have – in conjunction with the figurehead issue as mentioned above – significantly enhanced the probability that the ship described by the Inuit was, in fact, "*Investigator*".

**If** "*Investigator*" **was** deemed to have been the ship described by the Inuit, then it opens the possibility that the "ships seen in the ice" were "*Erebus*" and "*Terror*",

and

**If** only Captain Coward, Master of the "*Renovation*", had not been confined ill to his bunk, but had stood off the ice-floe at Newfoundland and investigated the two ships thereon more closely.....

But, as in all great mysteries, so many "if's" !!!

The hypotheses, as I've outlined them in my talk, might not pass the strict legal criminal test of "beyond all reasonable doubt", but I contend that they would stand a fair chance of meeting the civil equivalent of "on the balance of probabilities".

Notwithstanding that the mystery of the Franklin ships is now regarded, for all intents and purposes, as closed, questions still remain, and may forever remain.

The British Government clearly regard the matter as closed, for in August 1997, they signed a "Memorandum of Understanding" with the Government of Canada, effectively handing over to Canada "custody and control of the wrecks and their contents." If ever finality and closure was to be applied, this is it, for there is no precedent for the British Government ever having previously surrendered a shipwreck to a foreign power.

In any talk on the Franklin Mystery, it would be most remiss of the speaker, and, indeed, morally indefensible, for some acknowledgment not to be made in commemoration of the men who suffered and died, and I'm fulfilling my own sense of duty by doing so now. In this respect, I can do no better than to quote the most eloquent, but defiant, letter sent by Lady Jane Franklin to the Admiralty on her hearing, in 1854, that the Admiralty was formally ending the search for the Franklin Expedition,

and that the names of her husband and his officers and men were to be removed from the Navy List.

“When Arctic Expeditions for the sake of the missing navigators have long ceased to be familiar to the public ear, and wars and rumours of wars have passed away, the interest in those geographical and other problems which were left unsolved in the year 1854 will again appear worthy of a great national effort for their solution; and then will arise, in touching association, the memory of the men who, in pursuit of this knowledge, and in obedience to their country’s commands, first penetrated into the fastnesses of the North, and were left there to their fate.”

Thank you, Ladies and Gentlemen, for your attentive listening, and I hope I have given you some sense of the unresolved conflicts still present in the Franklin story, even after 160 years. The road I have travelled with you undoubtedly reflects the sentiments of Thoreau when he wrote “ if a man does not keep pace with his companions, it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music that he hears”.

In remembering Anthony de Mello (who I introduced at the beginning) I have tried to say that, even though most of the evidence points to the light being in the right place, it can sometimes happen, only sometimes, that what we seek is to be found only where the light isn’t.

In summation, therefore, the facts and the opinions remain somewhat in conflict, and it is likely that these conflicts will remain until, and unless, the missing ships are found. But, when considering facts, we would be wise to bear in mind that wonderful retort of **Donald Rumsfeld** (former US Defense Secretary) who, when challenged by a reporter as to the accuracy and provenance of the facts he was outlining, replied witheringly:

*“There are known knowns; there are things we know we know.  
We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don’t know we don’t know.”*

In the context of the mystery surrounding the missing Franklin ships, I couldn’t have summed it up better myself!

Thank you.

\*\*\*\*\* END \*\*\*\*\*

