

Hi Russell,

I wasn't ignoring your email or your very interesting blogs on the Irving grave, but delayed in responding simply to review my own writings (people assume, incorrectly, that I have memorized my own work), and a few other sources (Supunger originals, Hobson, Schwatka, Gilder) before "wading in." I also had a memory that I had already responded to some of the questions now being raised with another correspondent way back (as it turns out) in 1994! So here goes:

My correspondent had brought up the possibility that Bayne and Supunger were both speaking of the same grave site, and that it was the one at "Victory Pt". He quite rightly pointed out that the identification of that grave with Irving was tenuous, but didn't quite jump to the conclusion that it was Franklin's. My transcribed response to him follows:

*"The question of 'Irving's' grave is certainly perplexing, being another of those tantalizing issues related to Franklin. You are correct in your opinion that the grave may not be Irving's just because his math medal is associated with it - as you note nobody assumes Franklin was still alive among the marchers even though his Hanoverian medal and cutlery were found at campsites, and I have elsewhere questioned the identity of the 'Peglar' skeleton which is usually assumed because of the association with his seaman's book and correspondence.*

*The Irving association does seem to be supported by the fact that the description of the remains (particularly the clothing) indicate that the occupant was an officer (although that only statistically improves Irving's chances - it could have been Gore or Des Vouex), and that the description of the medal's location strongly implies that it was found inside the grave, absently moved to the periphery, and then forgotten.*

*Your contention that the grave was actually that spoken of in the Bayne account is also possible, but runs into the problem that the Bayne account at its source is of a contemporary "witnessed" burial. By all Inuit accounts the Franklin relics to the north of the "boat place" (Erebus Bay) were unknown to them until after McClintock's visit - and this seems to be borne out by the fact that they were undisturbed between 1848 and 1859. The topography of the Bayne story (SW-NE ridge with "sharp" edge and sandy spots) also doesn't seem to correlate well with that around Crozier's Landing.*

*Although I do not think the Bayne account refers to this grave until this summer I did think that the grave and "vaults" spoken of by Supunger (Hall's Seepunger) were to be found here, or nearby. As you know my 10-person search team spent over a week searching the area meticulously, and could not find the vaults or graves spoken of by Supunger. We did find one rectangular excavation which may correspond to Irving's grave (although we were later told that the modern cairn at Crozier's Landing had been build over it - but I can't verify that).*

*Our lack of success in identifying the features spoken of by Supunger was quite a disappointment for me as the circumstantial evidence seemed quite strong, with many of the details (iron stoves, distance inland, location in relation to Ross' Victory Point) seemed strongly corroborative, but I have to conclude that Supunger's account actually is of another site between Cape Felix and Collinson Inlet (perhaps near Cape Maria Louisa or at Wall Bay where Hobson and Ocknawarole spoke of other kobluna camps). I hope to search that entire coast next year on another expedition.*

*The result of our summer expedition seems to be the very unsatisfactory conclusion that there are actually three burial sites!*

- 1. Bayne's account of a witnessed burial must lie to the south of Victory Point, presumably near the "boat place" which according to the Inuit was where they first had contact with Franklin's expedition (one other account of an officer's grave built with care - indeed the only other subsurface one - is at Le Vesconte Pt in Erebus Bay and, curiously, is associated with a sandy hill).*
- 2. Then there is the "Irving" grave at Crozier's Landing (south of Ross' and modern Victory Pt).*
- 3. Finally there is Supunger's deep grave located somewhere between Cape Felix and Victory Point (which has yet to be found - wish us luck)!"*

As a measure of my mental inflexibility I find on re-reading this old letter that I have not really changed my opinion on any major point. In fact the only major change I would make is that the rectangular "grave" we found is almost certainly the "Irving" one as the comparison below seems to verify.



Comparison of Irving's grave drawing (Klutschak) with grave found near Crozier's Landing by "Project Supunger" 1994 (Woodman). A & B – Head and "pillow" stones, C – Side stone with tapering end pointing towards head, D – Large "foot" covering stone still in place.

I would also like to say that there seems to be quite a lot of discussion and confusion among your readers about the actual locations of "Victory Pt" as determined by J.C. Ross,

the location of the original Ross cairn, the location of Crozier's abandonment camp, etc. It might be useful for them to review Cyriax's excellent discussion of this in his "The Position of Victory Point." Polar Record 6 (1952): 496-507. Here he musters all the information and essentially proves that Ross' point is the modern one, about 2.5 miles north(not 4 but Irving was tired and it is tough walking!) of the place where Crozier's men came ashore (I have tried to lead a movement to call the latter "Crozier's Landing" for years!).

A few quibbles:

You mention that you doubt that a grave of "such size and form would have been well beyond the powers of any group of stragglers returning to the ships." Actually the fact that Irving was buried here is one of the main pillars of my contention that a return to the ships did occur in 1848 (otherwise they wouldn't have been manned in Erebus Bay in 1849 when the Inuit met them), but my assessment is that 105 men didn't get very far and were back in the ships within a month after finding that they managed only 3 miles a day or so. This is a far different scenario than that the weakened survivors were from the southern "death camps" (which in my scheme are two years in the future). Most of the 105 would have walked both ways (only 1 grave in Seal Bay, then 2 in "Two grave bay" that are probably from this first march) and there would have been plenty of manpower available to build the grave that we found.

You state, while comparing Supunger's remembrance and the Irving tomb skeletal remains that "in both graves parts of the skeleton were scattered about, and the skull was not at the "head" of the tomb." Not sure what you mean by the "head" of the tomb, what Schwatka actually wrote was that "The skull (indisputably that of a white man) lay outside [the grave], with other human bones." Actually Supunger's actual text is: "They found a hole of the depth from the feet up to the navel & of a length more than a man's height & wider than the width of a man's shoulders & this was all nicely walled with flat stones placed one above another, flatwise. In this vault they found a clasp knife, a skeleton bone of a man's leg & a human head (skull) ... Near this vault they saw parts of a human skeleton with fragments of clothing on the limbs. There was no head about these skeleton bones & Supunger & his uncle concluded that the same wild animal that had made the hole in the vault had taken these skeleton bones out of the vault & dragged them where he & his uncle saw them." This text shows that the skull was actually still in the "vault" (perhaps it was too large for the "wild animal" to drag out from what must have been a small hole, otherwise Supunger and his uncle wouldn't have needed to lift heavy stones to peek in. Presumably the animal (fox? wolverine? lemming? could get through the little hole, and it could drag the smaller bones out to the surface). You seem to think that this was a polar bear but Supunger doesn't relate the "wild animal" who made the hole (see discussion of polar bear below). Also the details about how long and deep the vault was don't fit the "Irving" grave (feet to navel = at least 3 feet deep, the "Irving" grave is less than 1 foot deep and only about 4 feet long, I laid down in it and had to draw up my knees and tuck my head on my chest).

As for the wooden “marker” you state that “It had been chewed off a few feet above ground by a polar bear” and you further note that “The chewed-off part was also recovered by Supunger, and he showed Hall that two parts together would have been about four feet in height. If there were a cross-piece, one wonders where it would have gone.” As far as I could discover Supunger never mentioned that it was a polar bear that broke off the marker, although that was likely as polar bears detest anything vertical and are practically the only animals (with the possible exception of the timid Musk-ox) strong enough to break such a pole. What Supunger actually states was that “they saw a stick standing erect wh. had been broken off & the part broken off lying close by ... The part of the stick or pillar standing was about 4 feet high as indicated by Supunger on my person & the whole height on replacing the part broken off, about six feet from the ground.” No mention of “chewing” or “polar bear” that I can find, and the indication is that the two pieces fit together to form a six foot vertical pole rather than a standing pole and a cross piece. I would think that a flag might have been attached originally.

As always your blog has kept the fire under the scholarly (and not-so-scholarly) community and rightly keeps us from being complacent and forces us to reassess our assumptions (which abound). All of the above is susceptible to correction or alternative analysis, but my conclusions are:

- the grave is probably Irving’s and is good supportive evidence of an abortive 1848 abandonment
- the Bayne story does not fit the topography of Crozier’s Landing and needs Inuit-European contact for which there is no evidence in 1848
- Supunger’s vault was too deep, and differently constructed (note sidewalls “all nicely walled with flat stones placed one above another, flatwise.”) from Irving’s grave
- I am pretty sure that I laid down in Irving’s grave in 1994, and therefore have a pretty good idea of its nature.

Cheers as always,

Dave