JOHN TORRINGTON

From his ice-shrouded tomb,
a 19th-century explorer sheds new light on the
chilling fate of the Franklin expedition

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

It took the scientists from the University of Alberta three days to dig up the grave marked by a wooden headboard on Beechey Island, a desolate spit of tundra and gravel in the Canadian Arctic. Even though it was August, gray clouds slipping low across the sky dropped icy rain and snow on the research team. The scientists needed a pickax to chip through the concrete-hard permafrost. Finally, four feet down, there was the coffin. Gently they pried off the lid.

"It was a startling sight," recalls Owen Beattie, a physical anthropologist. "He looked more alive than dead." Inside the coffin was Petty Officer John Torrington, 20, who died 138 years ago on New Year's Day. The Arctic deep freeze had left his body in a near-perfect state of preservation. "Here we were," says Beattie, "face to face with a member of the Franklin expedition."

The Franklin expedition is one of the great tragedies—and abiding mysteries—of North American exploration. In May 1845, 129 men in two ships, *Erebus* and *Terror,* left Great Britain in search of the Northwest Passage—that elusive waterway connecting the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. The men were handpicked, "the elite of maritime England," as one historian described them; their ships were specially equipped—and loaded with three years' worth of provisions—to withstand the rigors of the North; their commander, John Franklin, 59, had previously led two successful Arctic probes. Yet by the end of 1848 all 129 had died.

"They were successful," says Beattie, "in an unsuccessful way. Nobody survived. But they *did* complete a Northwest Passage."

By traveling southwest from Beechey Island (where Torrington and two other expedition members were buried) to King William Island (where most of the rest of the crew would perish), the men of *Erebus* and *Terror* discovered the missing links in the chain of waterways that is the Northwest Passage. (It wasn't till the early 1900s that the Norwegian Roald Amundsen sailed the route from the Atlantic to the Pacific.) Ironically, far more important were the 40 or so rescue missions sent between 1848 and 1859 to discover what had become of Franklin and his men. Although the "rescuers" came back with very little—scattered bones that showed evidence of cannibalism, personal effects, Eskimo stories about

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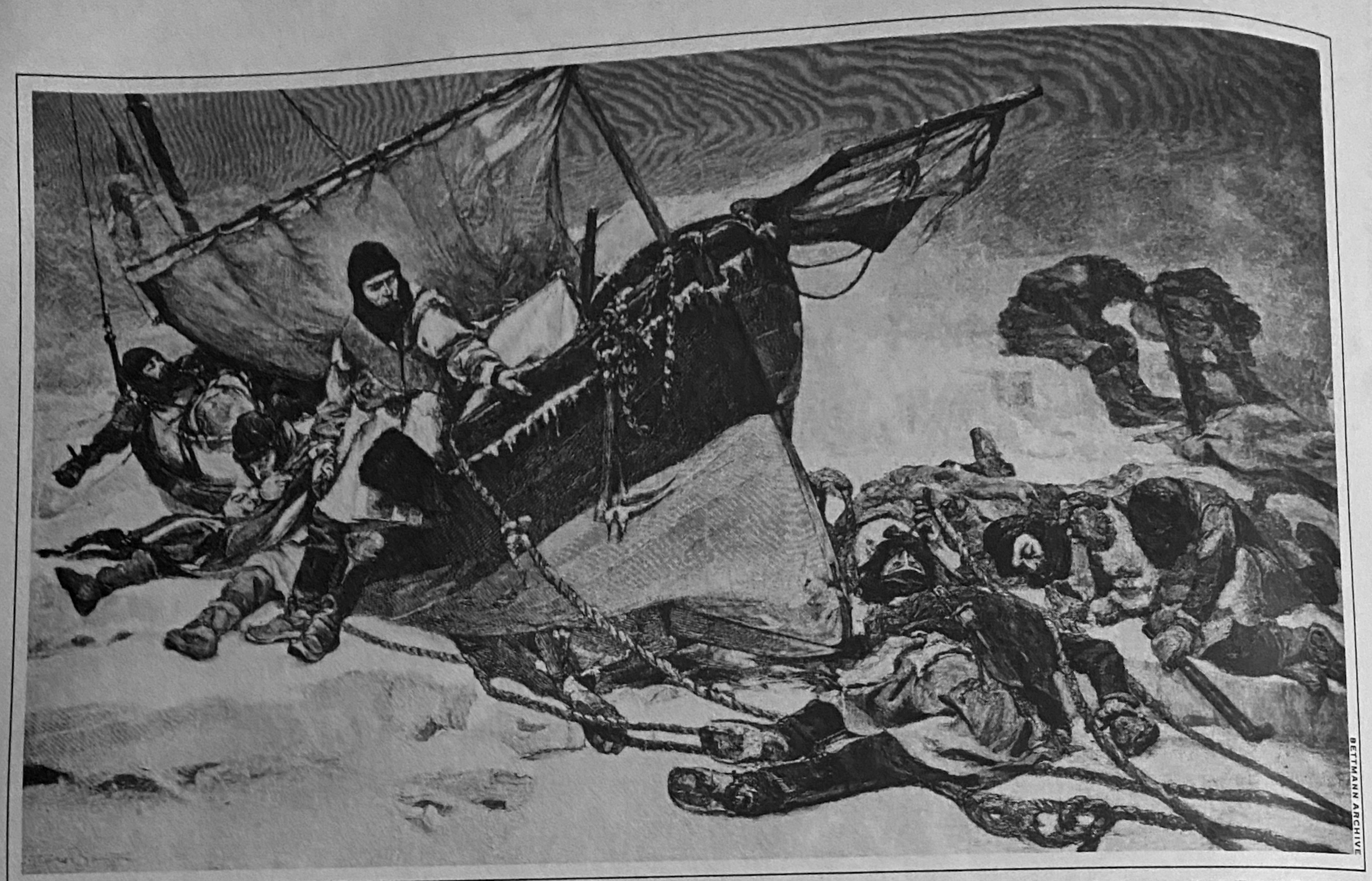

BETTMANN ARCHIVE

In their struggle to survive, Franklin's men dragged their provisions in 800-pound lifeboats across miles of ice.

a starving, ragtag band of white men—they did manage to explore and map much of northern Canada.

"Our research team is simply an extension of those earlier searches," says Beattie. "We're trying to find out what caused the disaster."

Torrington, a steam boiler attendant from Manchester, was the first of Franklin's men to die. According to the *Terror*'s muster book at the Public Records Office in London, John Torrington volunteered for the Royal Navy on May 12, 1845. He was paid "fifteen pounds twelve shillings," which was "three months in advance, double pay." After exhuming Torrington's body, the scientists performed an autopsy. From the condition of his lungs, they deduced that he was probably a smoker who came—as Torrington did—from an industrial area. Preliminary diagnosis of cause of death: pneumonia. "In the coming months," says Beattie, "we'll be analyzing hair and nail samples to see if other health problems can be identified. We want to build a scenario that would explain the mystery of other deaths."

Torrington's arms, hands and feet were carefully bound. "The care he was buried with," Beattie speculates, "might mean that at this time, things were still going well on the expedition." During the four-hour autopsy, performed in the open air (a tent would not withstand the wind and was too dark), each of Torrington's organs was dissected and small samples were taken. Beattie's team then re-dressed the body, replaced it in the coffin and reburied it. Using photos Beattie had taken earlier, they painstakingly restored the grave site stone by stone. "I work with the bones of dead people every day," Beattie explains. "I'm sensitive to the fact that they *were* people. None of us felt we were violating a privacy."

Most historians blame a vicious sequence of scurvy and starvation for the Franklin disaster, speculating that scurvy so weakened the men that they were unable to hunt the vitamin-rich fresh meat they needed to survive. The University of Alberta researchers want to investigate other possible contributing factors to the crew's destruction. They found high levels of lead in Torrington's bones—perhaps from badly soldered tin cans—and there may have been lead in the bones of those who died on King William Island. In fact, this might help to explain some of the seemingly irrational decisions made by Franklin and his men, such as their abandonment of *Erebus* and *Terror* in the spring of 1848. Neither ship has ever been found.

Beattie and his six-member team will return to Beechey Island next summer to disinter and examine the remains of Seaman John Hartnell and William Braine, a private in the Royal Marines. The scientists' original goal last August had been to exhume all three bodies, but they decided not to rush the process. "We were prepared to find someone well preserved," says the anthropologist. What neither he nor his colleagues were prepared for was their "visceral response" to the face of the 20-year-old who had been dead for more than a century. "It looked," says Beattie, "like there was somebody in there looking out at the world looking in at him." Before the coffin was resealed, the scientists at the grave site placed a note in it that was written by a woman on Beattie's team, Geraldine Ruszala, and signed by all of them. "We had some serious thoughts," says Beattie. "I don't want to get too shmaltzy about it. It's simply a private note about our feelings as human beings."

JACK FRIEDMAN