

Manitoba History : David C. Woodman, Unravelling the Franklin Mystery : Inuit Testimony

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David C. Woodman. Unravelling the Franklin Mystery : Inuit Testimony . McGill-Queen's University Press, Spring 1991. xviii + 390 pp., ill., maps, bibliography, index. ISBN 0-7735-0833-3 (cloth), 0-7735-0936-4

David C. Woodman's revisionist history of Sir John Franklin's attempt to find a passage through the arctic waters of North America in the late 1840s will delight some exploration scholars, and confound others. His reconstruction of the events befalling the largest, most publicized expedition undertaken by a European power in more than 300 years of overseas exploration differs in several particulars from earlier accounts. For example, Woodman does not agree with earlier accounts that claim Inuit approached the ships only after they were abandoned by their crews. His evidence has led him to accept that Inuit frequented the ships almost from the moment of arrival at King William Island and that many of them knew Franklin personally. He has also questioned the standard interpretation that the expedition's survivors made an unplanned and disorganized attempt to reach Great Bear Lake via the Great Fish River (Back's River) in 1848, after two years in the ice of Victoria Strait. He suggests instead that their goal was Repulse Bay, and that the caches of "abandoned" supplies along the west coast of King William Island were actually depots laid down in advance, indicating an exodus more carefully and rationally undertaken than previous histories have allowed. The revisions add human interest to a story that has fascinated both amateur and professional historians of exploration for a century and a half. They provide more accurate

descriptions of actual events, and more rational explanations of the choices made by the 134 crew members whose attempts to survive and escape the harsh realities of the arctic ended with the loss of all lives, and they do much to repair the reputations of the officers and men who come across in earlier accounts as incompetents. But while the solution of yet another historical puzzle may amuse and satisfy armchair explorers and antiquarian historians, it would have little or no significance to historians or to historiography today unless it did something more than produce a new and revised chronicle of the lost expedition. Happily, *Unravelling the Franklin Mystery* does much more.

Mr. Woodman, an officer on the Oceanographic Research Vessel *Endeavour*, seems to have approached historical research without the usual historian's training, and therefore, without the usual historian's biases. Apparently he rejected the notion, long held by too many historians, that documents produced by European observers are the preferred sources of information for historical research. Or perhaps he was simply not aware that much acceptable scholarship is heavily biased in favour of the European eyewitness account. Either way, three cheers for David Woodman. He has examined Inuit oral testimony concerning the activities and fate of Franklin's men without preconceived ideas about its accuracy, weighed and tested each piece of information on its own merits and within its own context, and produced a work whose greatest significance is its contribution to historical methodology.

Woodman has assumed that Inuit are at least as capable as Europeans of observing events, and of reporting accurately what they have seen. He has also assumed that indigenous peoples of the time had a better understanding of human reactions to cold, hunger, scarce resources, difficult travelling conditions, and other environmental pressures of their own country than the temporary, summer visitors from Europe could have had. Both assumptions are long overdue in the construction of histories that involve non-literate societies.

Woodman has been explicit rather than assumptive in identifying many of the pitfalls of so-called “oral” history. He blames much of the confusion evident in earlier accounts of the events of 1845- 1851 on the inability, or refusal, of European observers to accept the fact that the Inuit language is at least as complex and sophisticated as any European language, and that there were important dialect differences among Inuit social groups. European understanding of Inuktitut was nearly always faulty and inadequate. Even Inuit translators had difficulty with unfamiliar dialects. Two of the most famous arctic interpreters, the Greenlander Adam Beck, who made a career of interpreting for European and American explorers and whalers, and Tookoolitoo, interpreter for Charles Francis Hall, and reputedly one of the best of nineteenth century Inuktitut linguists, sometimes had more trouble with unfamiliar Inuit dialects than they had with English. The logs, diaries and memoirs of European observers in the arctic are filled with mistranslation and false identifications of people and places, as well as distorted descriptions of aboriginal social organization and worldviews. Histories based on the flawed documents have repeated many mistaken ideas.

Woodman, by being alert to the problems, has managed to avoid similar traps. He has tested every piece of evidence arising from both Inuit and European oral sources for reliability, authenticity, and accurate translation, and searched the oral and written records for corroboration. He has refused to accept any single piece of evidence from any source without supporting evidence from another source. The result is much more than a new reading of an old and mysterious tragedy. His re-examination of the oral testimony of Inuit observers has made sense out of a mass of evidence which earlier researchers neglected or discarded.

While Woodman insists that his unravelling of the Franklin mystery is speculative reconstruction subject to yet more revision, his approach to historical research and his presentation of the material show less bias and account for more of the known facts than previous works on the subject. In presenting the oral testimony along with other known evidence, Woodman has produced a more plausible and rational narrative than any of his predecessors.

Perhaps more importantly, he has shown that the integration of evidence from several sources—oral testimony, material remains and documents—is a fruitful approach which allows individual pieces of data to support, impugn, or correct each other. Through his treatment of previously misunderstood and neglected oral sources, Woodman has produced a work that is a valuable methodological guide for historians as well as an exciting and sympathetic retelling of an old story.

The book displays meticulous housekeeping. The maps are clear, uncluttered, and easy to read, but many readers will wish for an additional map or two showing the larger geographical setting. Quoted material is nicely edited so that it is intelligible to readers unfamiliar with nineteenth century spelling and manners of speech. Inuktitut words are translated wherever they appear, relieving the reader of the need to memorize them on first reading or search back in the text for their meanings. Crew lists and Inuit genealogies make it easy to keep the personae of the story clear. A useful and comprehensive bibliography, a more than adequate index, and a ban on hard-to-find endnotes make the finished product very user-friendly.