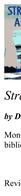

Strangers Among Us

by David C. Woodman

Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995. 136 pages; notes and bibliography. Hardcover, $29.95.

Reviewed by Russell A. Potter

The mystery of the disastrous British Arctic expedition led by Sir John Franklin in 1845 was ostensibly solved in 1859 when Captain Leopold M'Clintock returned to England with a trove of artifacts, the "Victory Point" record signed by the Expedition's leaders, and accounts of scattered skeletons on the coast of King William Island. Yet in the years since, the enigmatic aura of this episode has grown rather than receded, in part thanks to generations of dedicated amateurs who have sought to unravel its details and underlying causes. Indeed, the fate of Franklin's last steps, and have scoured the stones in what has become almost an annual ritual. Retired admirals and eccentric librarians have conceived of their own readings of the evidence, and have burnt much midnight oil poring over maps, charts, and copies of old papers.

I would hasten to emphasize that I do not think such enthusiasm is wasted; indeed, there are many areas of history -- the U.S. Civil War, for one -- which owe a tremendous debt to these dedicated amateurs. But in the case of Franklin, the sheer panoply of speculation -- beginning the moment Franklin was missed with the proceedings of inquiries, the contradictory accounts of the "Esquimaux," and the obsessive passion of individual searchers such as Charles Francis Hall, almost boggles the mind. A substantial portion of it has, unfortunately, been redundant, and much of the rest has been hampered by a lack of well-grounded knowledge of the area, to say nothing of natural history, navigation, or Inuit culture.

David C. Woodman's work has in the past been tossed out by some reviewers with the bathwater of this kind of speculation -- or, if praised, qualified by the sort of stuffy sensibility that declares that what cannot be determined is hardly worth dwelling on. This is extraordinarily unfortunate, as Woodman's is by far the most significant study of the Franklin expedition to be written, and has important implications that reach far beyond the bounds of its immediate subject. More than any previous historian of the Franklin disaster, Woodman has taken the full range of available evidence seriously. He does not -- and given the scope of the evidence, it hardly could -- flesh out *all* the implications of his accounts as regards, say, the history of British-Inuit cultural contact. But he does offer a detailed and provocative litany of the crossed cultural circuits between British and American Franklin searchers and Inuit witnesses, and goes further than anyone else in linking Inuit testimony with other corroborative texts and sources.

Readers of *Strangers Among Us*, however, may first wish to examine Woodman's 1991 volume, *Unravelling the Franklin Mystery: Inuit Testimony*, of which *Strangers* is an outgrowth and extension. *Unravelling* offers the bulk of Inuit testimony, carefully concatenated and summarized in a series of closely-worked chronological chapters; *Strangers* deals only with the question of what may have happened to the Franklin party's last few survivors. Indeed, one could quarrel with Woodman's editors, at whose suggestion the matter of *Strangers* was postponed from the earlier volume. Nevertheless, Woodman's conclusions are well-grounded in the big book its own distinct tone and interest, and anyone familiar with the general outlines of the Franklin case could well begin here, and pursue their interest afterwards in Woodman's earlier book.

Woodman begins with a dramatization of the curious scene of writing of the one surviving official record -- the other documents, after the Victory Point' discovery. This record -- originally only one of several deposited in 1847 by a sledge-crew detached from the ships -- became far more important when, in 1848, it was recovered and added to by the by Expedition's surviving officers. They had just abandoned their ships in the ice, considerably delayed after two years of entrapment in the slow-moving and often dangerous ice of Victoria Strait, that they would never reach their goal aboard them. Franklin had died the year previous, "and the total loss by death in the Expedition has been to this date 9 officers and 15 men." The document was signed by Captains Crozier and Fitzjames, and the former, after his signature, appended a brief and tantalizing line: "and start tomorrow , 26th, for Backs Fish River." This last statement, along with M'Clintock's discovery of an abandoned sledge-borne wholebear a few days' journey further south, as well as scattered skeletons along the southern coast of King William Island, have been interpreted by most historians to mean that the entire party attempted to reach the Fish River in 1848 by manhauling the ship's boats over the ice. It was assumed that their goal was the Hudson's Bay Company outpost on the Great Slave Lake; the fact that this would require hundreds of miles of rowing, portaging, and hauling ungainly wheelbarrows over ice was simply ignored. Recent work by Crozier and Fitzjames has shaded by scurvy or lead-poisoning, and in their demented state imagined such a plan could meet with success.

Woodman has always been skeptical of this claim, and rightly so; he does not accept the premise that the officers were demented, or idiots, and he places great trust in the reliability of Inuit accounts which suggest a very different reading of the evidence. He believes that the officers intended to leave the ship and walk south to the mainland, a scene which was reported to be abundant in the area, or to contact the Inuit who were known to congregate there. He argues that one or both of Franklin's ships were later ormanned; one should certainly was, as it was discovered by a coastal hunter off Inuit anchored off an island far to the south in Queen Maud Gulf. Furthermore, while those who remained on King William Island eventually starved to death (not before resorting to cannibalism, an Inuit observation verified by recent forensic evidence), the crew of the surviving ship evidently remained healthy enough an additional year to the Inuit reported that the ship was housed-in as for winter quarters, and its gang-plank was lowered), and some number of survivors left her and made one final attempt to reach a British outpost.

Thus far the argument is passed in *Unravelling*. In *Strangers Among Us*, Woodman follows the trail of Inuit testimony to Chesterfield Inlet, where he has manhandled an incomplete testimony of Inuit witnesses, most of them interviewed in the 1860's by Charles Francis Hall, the first and most persistent amateur to follow Franklin's trail. Hall spent six years in the Arctic interviewing everyone who had the least information: South and Southwest of Baffin Land, the sites listed in Hall's testimony -- in particular an account of an encounter between four Inuit hunters and a party of the land-based portion of the Expedition -- has been incorporated into the standards histories. Others of the Inuit he met, Hall claimed, had seen the ship when it was rescued and nursed back to health by a Netsilik hunter, or that some survivors were seen as far away as the Melville Peninsula, have been largely ignored. Woodman's accomplishment in *Strangers* is to revive these last two possibilities by reconsidering the evidence in detail -- a daunting task, but one which he manages with alacrity and thoroughness.

Woodman deals first with the Melville Peninsula stories, which are the more problematic as they must be sorted out from sightings of Dr. John Rae's travels in the area; Rae visited a number of the same places, and the various witnesses require careful cross-referencing. The Inuit testimonies are suggestive, but a final verdict ultimately turns on such details as whether Rae might have erected cairns that he neglected to mention in his written accounts, or on whether certain sightings are timed correctly to match the date of Rae's travels. Woodman is diligent in presenting all possible readings of the evidence; in the end, he concludes that the Inuit (himself notes) is circumstantial. Rae heard of these Inuit accounts, and was convinced that he himself had been the cause of these sightings, and the builder of a cairn that Hall claimed was the work of Franklin survivors. My own sense is that, while Woodman demonstrates that Franklin survivors could *plausibly* have been the origin of these sightings, he does not show that they *probably* were.

Woodman's second set of tales concerns Inuit sightings of people that they thought were "Et-ker-lin" (Hall's spelling of *Inplit* -- Chipewyans), but that the witnesses on later reflection thought might have been "Kiko-mans"-- Europeans. In regard to sightings of the survivors who had encountered Eskimos previously that not Kabloonans, Woodman offers very plausible reasons why the signs, such as different footprints with deep heel-marks, strange clothing, even strange ar-nuk (dung), might have been misinterpreted as the signs of Franklin men. Yet some sightings, tantalizing incomplete testimony of Inuit witnesses, most of them interviewed in the 1860's by Charles Francis Hall, the first and most persistent amateur to follow Franklin's trail. Hall spent six years in the Arctic interviewing everyone who had the least information: South and Southwest of Baffin Land, the sites listed in Hall's testimony -- in particular an account of an encounter between four Inuit hunters and a party of the land-based portion of the Expedition -- has been incorporated into the standards histories. Others of the Inuit he met, Hall claimed, had seen the ship when it was rescued and nursed back to health by a Netsilik hunter, or that some survivors were seen as far away as the Melville Peninsula, have been largely ignored. Woodman's accomplishment in *Strangers* is to revive these last two possibilities by reconsidering the evidence in detail -- a daunting task, but one which he manages with alacrity and thoroughness.

Woodman deals first with the Melville Peninsula stories, which are the more problematic as they must be sorted out from sightings of Dr. John Rae's travels in the area; Rae visited a number of the same places, and the various witnesses require careful cross-referencing. The Inuit testimonies are suggestive, but a final verdict ultimately turns on such details as whether Rae might have erected cairns that he neglected to mention in his written accounts, or on whether certain sightings are timed correctly to match the date of Rae's travels. Woodman is diligent in presenting all possible readings of the evidence; in the end, he concludes that the Inuit (himself notes) is circumstantial. Rae heard of these Inuit accounts, and was convinced that he himself had been the cause of these sightings, and the builder of a cairn that Hall claimed was the work of Franklin survivors. My own sense is that, while Woodman demonstrates that Franklin survivors could *plausibly* have been the origin of these sightings, he does not show that they *probably* were.

Woodman's second set of tales concerns Inuit sightings of people that they thought were "Et-ker-lin" (Hall's spelling of *Inplit* -- Chipewyans), but that the witnesses on later reflection thought might have been "Kiko-mans"-- Europeans. In regard to sightings of the survivors who had encountered Eskimos previously that not Kabloonans, Woodman offers very plausible reasons why the signs, such as different footprints with deep heel-marks, strange clothing, even strange ar-nuk (dung), might have been misinterpreted as the signs of Franklin men. Yet some sightings, tantalizing survivors. Yet there is a lack, in many instances, of strong corroborative evidence; with the exception of one abandoned camp, where tellitale red-painted meat tins such as were supplied to Franklin's men are reported, no such evidence is mentioned. There are also a number of instances where the behavior of these strangers seems strange indeed, such as when they deliberately scared away some Inuit boys -- hardly a coherent act for desperate survivors. Still, some evidence, such as tales of sign-posts with pointing hands and known trademark of other British Arctic expeditions, and the land route eastward of the Fish River, admit of no alternate explanation; whatever else can be said, it's clear that the whole story of Franklin survivors *cannot* be reconciled with the assumption that every one of the ships complement followed by a single drive south to the Fish River, much less an ascent of it.

Woodman's final case -- and his strongest -- is for a small party of three or four men who were said to have spent a season with a Netsilik hunter named Too-shoo-art-tharliu. These survivors arrived in the spring, and stayed through the summer and possibly even the winter following, eventually heading south towards the Hudson's Bay outpost at Fort Churchill. One of these survivors was described by the hunter named "Aglooka" -- which was Captain Crozier's Inuit name, acquired through name-exchange many years previous when he was a young midshipman with Parry's expedition. Unfortunately, Aglooka's accounts were recorded by Rae, who "doubted" and "at the precise identity of this man would be almost impossible to determine, were it not for two strong pieces of corroborative evidence. Firstly, this man told his Inuit hosts that he had been with Parry at Igloolik, a fact they could not have otherwise learned; Crozier was the only Franklin man to have served under Parry. Secondly, another young Inuk, apparently a son of Too-shoo-art-tharliu, told almost the same story to a whaling captain many years later, and another whaling captain down in Hudson's Bay heard that Aglooka/Crozier had made it as far as Chesterfield Inlet.

Whether or not this survivor was in fact Crozier -- which Woodman, who believes that Inuit stories of the death of a captain earlier in the expedition concern Crozier, thinks he was not -- his story is one that cannot easily be brushed aside. He was certainly not an Eskerlin, and his circumstances and travels do not correspond with either of Dr. Rae's visits to the area. He evidently wore an officer's uniform, and among his gifts to his hosts was a naval sword -- neither of which could apply to Rae. This "Aglooka," in fact gave 'nearly everything he had to Too-shoo-art-tharu before departing with a Netsilik guide and two companions for the nearest or eastward, for the overland route to Chesterfield Inlet. The Quimirmiut of Wager Bay, through whose country he would have passed, reported his presence there to their neighbors among the Netsilik, whom Hall later interviewed. Finally, a certain Captain Fisher of the whaler *Ansel Gibbs* reported to Hall that he had heard that this stranger had starved or possibly been killed after he arrived, though the evidence (and possibly the translation) was sketchy.

Why these stories, corroborated by testimony spanning a considerable time and distance, have never been taken seriously before is hard to say. Hall himself, after he became convinced that Franklin survivors could be alive, turned against his Inuit informants, accusing them of allowing heroic men to starve to death. And, with the discovery of further bones and artifacts on King William Island, most of the efforts have been concentrated in that area, to the neglect of searching any further on the mainland. The wreck of Franklin's last ship, though its approximate location is fairly certain, has never been the object of a determined search such as that which found the wreck of the *Breadalbane* (a ship that participated in the early search for Franklin) a few years back. Any Inuit testimony that Woodman's hypotheses seem too stark, which if it could offer any clear physical evidence, would be the only means to fully test the veracity of these accounts, Woodman is quite right to observe that such testimony, when collected and tracked down, has been ignored, even willfully, even cunningly accurate. The Inuit remembered Martin Frobisher's abortive attempt to find Arctic gold centuries after his departure, and guided Hall to the exact spot, long lost to historians.

Woodman should have the honor of having brought together the large and hitherto inaccessible body of Inuit testimony on Franklin's fate, testimony which dramatically demonstrates the limits of conventional history. Many historians who have ignored the testimony of the people Charles Dickens (among many others) denigrated as 'babbling savages.' Woodman has also traced, with diligence, all possible sources, and has even gone himself to Hudson's Bay and to King William Island with a full-fledged archaeological expedition, equipped with satellite-positioning equipment and ground-penetrating radar. That he has so far been unable to locate much physical evidence is partly due to the same passion that motivates his own work, unfortunately, long years of neglect and down Arctic decades in search of relics, would-be Franklin-finders have destroyed or scattered what might have been invaluable evidence. Time, too, has done its work, scouring the coasts with ice and rotting away boot-heels and broadcloth.

The mystery remains alive, and the past few years have seen not only Woodman's work, but three other books and a recent documentary devoted to the Franklin saga, including Margaret Atwood's wryly engaging lecture on the subject on Volume. [1] Unfortunately, the old orthodoxies, such as the "ascent of the Fish River" tale, persist. It is the hope of this reviewer that Woodman's books will finally gain the attention they deserve. McGill-Queen's University Press would do well to consider combining both in an affordable single paperback volume. The Inuit witnesses in these volumes confirm the value and worth of oral history, and demonstrate that a culture's collective memory often can recall with astonishing lucidity facts lost to scholars who rely solely on written European records. As has been long realized among historians of westward expansion in the United States, to ignore Native testimony is to falsify history; that the inland waterways of the Canadian Arctic were first traversed by Inuit and not by European adventurers hardly diminishes such exploration from the history of colonialism. David Woodman's work in recovering and making thoughtful use of Inuit testimony is thus not only an invaluable contribution to the study of Franklin, but to the whole history of British Arctic exploration, and should serve as the foundation for further work for many years to come.

1 Margaret Atwood, "Concerning Franklin and his Gallant Crew," in *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canada*, ed. Atwood (Toronto: Anansi, 1995). Other Franklin books: The novels are Mordecai Richler, *Solomon Gursky Was Here* (NY: Alfred A, Knopf, 1990); William T. Vollmann, *The Rifles* (NY: Viking Books, 1994); and Rudy Wiebe, *A Discovery of Strangers* (Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 1995).