FOOD, SEX, DEATH, AND QUEST:
THE LITERARY LEGACY OF SIR JOHN FRANKLIN

By
Maureen Eleanor Long

RECOMMENDED:

Approved:
Dean, College of Liberal Arts

Dean, Graduate Studies

Date
FOOD, SEX, DEATH, AND QUEST:
THE LITERARY LEGACY OF SIR JOHN FRANKLIN

A
THESIS

Presented to the Faculty
of the University of Alaska Fairbanks
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By
Maureen Eleanor Long, B.A., B.Ed.

Fairbanks, Alaska
May 2003
ABSTRACT

The story of Sir John Franklin, nineteenth-century British Arctic explorer, has been reinterpreted and reworked by poets, novelists, essayists, and dramatists for more than a century and half. This thesis is an attempt to discover the character and significance of the literary legacy of Sir John Franklin by exploring authors’ uses of four common tropes: food, sex, death, and quest. In analyzing these tropes, this thesis focuses primarily on five works of contemporary Canadian literature: Margaret Atwood’s short story, “The Age of Lead”; Gwendolyn MacEwen’s radio verse play, Terror and Erebus; Geoff Kavanagh’s play, Ditch; Mordecai Richler’s novel, Solomon Gursky Was Here; and Rudy Wiebe’s novel, A Discovery of Strangers. In addition, other works of literature are considered. An appendix lists more than fifty creative works that incorporate Sir John Franklin.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1</td>
<td>Introduction: A Story Richly Fraught with the Materials of Poetic Interest</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2</td>
<td>The Story and the Telling of the Story: History, Literature, and Criticism</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3</td>
<td>Food: The Man Who Ate His Shoes and Other Culinary Curiosities</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4</td>
<td>Sex: Bum, Furtive Gropings, and Leather Madonnas</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5</td>
<td>Death: Frozen Men and Bodies Like Shattered Compasses</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6</td>
<td>Quest: Passages, Pilgrimages, and the Pole of Great Price</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 7</td>
<td>Conclusion: If the Record Is Substantial Enough . . .</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix:</td>
<td>Bibliography of Creative Works that Incorporate Sir John Franklin</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to acknowledge my committee members, Eric Heyne, Terrence Cole, and James Ruppert, for their inspiring expertise, insightful advice, unstinting encouragement, and sustained enthusiasm.

I am grateful for the generous readers who proofread and commented on drafts of this thesis: Amanda Graham, Bente Sorensen, and Jerome Stueart. In addition, I owe a debt of gratitude to Krista Stromberg and Sally Bremner of Yukon College Library for interlibrary loaning above and beyond the call of duty.

Thanks to Grant for unwavering support and patience.

To Aron Senkpiel, my mentor and friend, thank you for so much wisdom and humour, here and elsewhere.
Chapter 1

Introduction: A Story Richly Fraught with the Materials of Poetic Interest

In the introduction to his 1866 lengthy poetic tribute to Sir John Franklin and the discovery of the Northwest Passage, Erasmus H. Brodie writes,

As regards the story which I undertake to narrate, whether I have succeeded in narrating it well or ill, others will judge. If I have not, I am alone to blame, not the story. For it is richly fraught with the materials of poetic interest. (xi)

Brodie’s comment is doubly significant. His poem, unfortunately entitled Euthanasia, is a forgettable piece. He did, alas, narrate Franklin’s story “ill.” But more importantly, Brodie’s introduction to one of the earliest creative interpretations of Sir John Franklin’s story recognizes it as historically significant and of great literary potential. This tale, “richly fraught with the materials of poetic interest,” has been reinterpreted and reworked by poets, novelists, essayists, and dramatists for more than a century and a half. Sir John Franklin, nineteenth-century British polar explorer, besides being the inspiration for reams of historical writings, has also made his way into more than fifty works of literature.
History has always been a rich source of material for literature. From Homer to Shakespeare to James Michener, writers have taken characters, experiences, patterns, and setting—all the ingredients of the story as experienced in real life—and shaped these elements into works of art. Perhaps no life or incident in Canadian history has provided as much literary impetus as that of Sir John Franklin. Moreover, while he lived a life that would make a good story in any locale, he also embodied the quintessential northern story.

Born into a home of modest resources, Franklin entered the British Navy as a teenager and showed promise on an expedition to Australia as well as distinguishing himself in sea battles in England’s defeat of Napoleon. While seemingly ordinary in some respects, he had many friends and few enemies, and he displayed classic knightly characteristics—doggedness, bravery, humility, loyalty, courage, honour, courtesy, fairness, and a readiness to help the weak. He married twice, both times to women who were his superior in birth, beauty, and charm, and perhaps even in intellect and ambition. After the defeat of Napoleon, most of Franklin’s career was tied to the North, the site of his greatest achievements and his grandest failure. He commanded two overland expeditions mapping more than two-thirds of the northern coast of North America. He was credited with finding the Northwest Passage, but in doing so lost his own life and those of 128 men under him (Berton 341).
He and his crew disappeared under grizzly and mysterious circumstances, resulting in years of search and speculation.

Like many great stories, Franklin’s sheds light on universal concerns; intrinsic to all the historical and creative accounts of the Franklin story are four basic human preoccupations: food, sex, death, and quest. The intersection of these preoccupations make Franklin’s a compelling story of timeless interest, but these also have a particular significance for the North and for Arctic explorers. Food is always a concern in the North—the provisioning in face of scarcity, the unusual forms, and the specialized skills required in obtaining it. Sex also has particular implications in the North: the issue of scarcity, especially for Europeans travelling without women; the possible couplings of explorers with locals and amongst each other; the image of wilderness as a woman; and the language of exploration being characteristically couched in violent sexual terms. Death in the North has many characteristic faces, particularly for explorers; these include starvation, freezing, accident, and being killed by natives. Quest is obviously significant to all nineteenth-century exploration of the North. The quest to explore the Arctic and to discover the Northwest Passage had an economic impetus but was also motivated by a desire for heroism and national achievement. The North became, particularly for the British, a place where brave men could do brave things. So for creative writers, the
Franklin story has remarkable potential in its focus on universal human concerns in an exotic northern setting. But Franklin’s is also a story without a conclusion, allowing for endless interpretations and speculation.

Although real people ate, mad love, and died while on what they believed to be heroic quests led by Sir John Franklin, I am particularly interested in authors’ metamorphosis of these motifs into tropes. In this thesis I use “trope” in its conventional sense where a word or phrase is used in a way that changes its standard or literary meaning. Food, sex, death, and quest become tropes of simile, metaphor, symbol, irony, image, and paradox. The literary legacy of Sir John Franklin revolves around these four central tropes that authors interpret in terms of their own time and interests; these tropes, when considered in light of the larger body of literature that incorporates Franklin, address common issues of history, technology, culture, gender, human nature, and the human condition.

This thesis, then, will develop a new understanding of Sir John Franklin’s literary legacy through the exploration of four common tropes. Necessary to setting the stage, Chapter 2, “The Story and the Telling of the Story,” briefly recounts the life of the historical Sir John Franklin, his disappearance, and the subsequent searches for him and his crew. This chapter then reviews the writings about the Franklin story—journals,
biographies, histories, literature, and critical commentary. The next four chapters, 3 to 6, each focus on one of the four tropes of food, sex, death, and quest. Within each of these chapters, I focus primarily on five works of contemporary Canadian literature: Margaret Atwood's short story, "The Age of Lead"; Gwendolyn MacEwen's radio verse play, *Terror and Erebus*; Geoff Kavanagh's play, *Ditch*; Mordecai Richler's novel, *Solomon Gursky Was Here*; and Rudy Wiebe's novel, *A Discovery of Strangers*. In addition, I will discuss other significant texts when they are particularly interesting or illuminating or even just amusing. Chapter 7 will finish by concluding why Franklin has proved such a rich source for creative writers and by summarizing the significance of his literary legacy.

The works that I have chosen to focus on are contemporary (the oldest being MacEwen's *Terror and Erebus* from 1974), they represent major genres, and they have all been recognized in some way for their literary merit. Looking at contemporary pieces illuminates the timelessness of this 150-year-old story, but it also shows the current state of the Franklin literary legacy, where he is portrayed, in many respects, as ironic and anti-heroic. These five are, as well, all Canadian, and I realize that something of the international flavour of the Franklin literary legacy is lost. This choice recognizes, however, that in recent years Canadian writers have shown the most interest in Franklin by making the most significant contribution to the creative discourse about
him. Some, like Aretha van Herk, might argue that too many have dwelt on Franklin. When he comes up in one of her books, she writes, "not again—there should be a veto on Franklin and all his relatives, all his unfortunate crew" (98). However, other Canadians have not tired of him yet. Despite being British, Franklin has become a Canadian story. For Canada as a northern country that defines itself by its relationship to nature, Franklin presents us with a founding myth—a northern Columbus, a Plymouth Rock, a Canadian Homeric myth. The fact that this founding myth is a disaster is especially significant for Canadians; this is one of the lessons that the Canadian Arctic teaches.

In addition, by looking at each of the five works in terms of all four tropes, I want to make the case that these are the four most important tropes associated with Franklin. They arise naturally from the history and then determine the shape of the story in its many literary reinterpretations. This thesis is an attempt to discover the character and significance of the literary legacy of Sir John Franklin. It is not an attempt to analyze the historical Franklin, although these works may, in some ways, illuminate the history and help us to understand the historical man and the enterprise of nineteenth-century exploration.

I am not traipsing over the tundra, gathering relics or analyzing DNA. Nor am I riding an icebreaker through the Northwest Passage, scanning for ships at the bottom of the Arctic Ocean. And I am not an
oral historian, interviewing locals for stories and legends of starving white men staggering south a century and a half ago. Mine is a search through words, an attempt to find on paper, in a literary landscape, the significance of the Franklin story. And perhaps, after all this time, despite advancements in science and generous research grants, the paper conclusions are as complete a discovery as we are likely to make; we are still waiting for word, waiting for words.

It is interesting that Franklin in death has generated so much copy while in life, particularly after his final tragic voyage, he generated frustratingly little paperwork. Indeed, the details of the ultimate fate of the third Franklin expedition are still a mystery because no one survived to tell, and only the scantiest message was recovered. Lady Jane Franklin, even after her husband’s death was confirmed, continued for the rest of her life searching for answers—some evidence to solve the mystery of what happened. In 1870 Lady Franklin, along with her niece and life-long companion Sophie Cracroft, travelled to Sitka, Alaska hoping to find letters or documents from Franklin’s expedition that might have filtered down to the archives in the state capital. A century later Alaskan writer Sheila Nickerson came upon Sophia Cracroft’s diary of the trip and found in it inspiration for her own quest for those who have gone missing. As we begin exploring through the many creative works in which we now find Sir John Franklin, where he is immortalized and finds
new life, we can begin with Sheila Nickerson’s interpretation of Lady Franklin’s theory of disappearance:

The record—the written message—is everything. Press on until you have every bit of evidence that is possible. Never give up. Keep the search alive. While the search lives, the missing person lives. While the search continues, hope continues. As the record is put together, the monument to the missing person grows. If the record is substantial enough, the missing person cannot be lost, ever. Trust the written word. (Nickerson 69)
Chapter 2
The Story and the Telling of the Story:
History, Literature, and Criticism

Speaking about the Franklin story, Margaret Atwood has said, “No story has an immutable meaning that is its only meaning. The powerful stories, and this is a powerful story, attract different interpretations and that’s what makes them powerful stories” (Off). The number of interpretations that the Franklin tale has attracted is incredible. Some of the earliest versions were in his own words, the official Navy journals from his first two expeditions, while historians for more than a century and a half have also told and retold this story. Added to these are the experiences of those searching for Franklin, from the early years after his disappearance to the past couple of decades when scientists, explorers, and speculators have retold the Franklin story and then added to it their own adventures, commentaries, histories, and armchair speculations. And then, of course, there are the reinterpretations that this thesis focuses on, the creative works that are inspired by the Franklin story. In a gradual process of interpretation and reinterpretation, the telling of the story becomes an important story in itself. This chapter briefly reviews the Franklin history and traces some of the many varieties of tellings that it has had, arriving at our own time.
The Story

Born in 1786, John Franklin grew up in the English seaside village of Spilsby in Lincolnshire, England. The Franklins were part of the landed class, though not gentry, and recent generations had been involved in trade, suggesting something of a fall in family fortunes by John’s generation. The second youngest of twelve children, John went to sea at age thirteen, entered the Royal Navy in 1800 at fourteen, and sailed with Matthew Flinders on the *Investigator* on a voyage to explore the coasts of Australia. During the Napoleonic Wars he distinguished himself in the battles of Copenhagen, Trafalgar, and New Orleans. While he sustained no wounds, his hearing was permanently damaged at the Battle of Trafalgar.

Following its defeat of Napoleon, the British Navy needed to employ its ships, sailors, and officers during peacetime and to enable sailors to distinguish themselves and be promoted. In its own version of a make-work project, the Navy turned its focus to exploration and discovery in the Arctic and Africa. Franklin saw his first Arctic experience in 1818 as second-in-command under Captain David Buchan on an unsuccessful voyage to the North Pole by way of the seas north of Spitzbergen.

Between 1819 and 1822, Franklin led his own expedition on an overland journey through what is now northern Canada. The other English officers included surgeon and naturalist John Richardson and
midshipmen George Back and Robert Hood, accompanied by able seaman John Hepburn; the rest of the twenty-person party consisted of Canadians—interpreters, voyageurs, and local Natives. Starting at York Factory on Hudson Bay, the party travelled west to Cumberland House in modern-day Saskatchewan where they spent the first winter. In the spring they travelled to Lake Athabasca, then north to Great Slave Lake where they built Fort Enterprise, northeast of present-day Yellowknife, and wintered there in 1820-1821. Here the Yellowknife hunted and sewed clothes for them, and the legendary feud between George Back and Robert Hood occurred. Their dispute over a young Yellowknife woman nicknamed “Greenstockings” escalated to the challenge of a duel. To preserve harmony, Franklin sent Back south to get supplies on a winter journey of more than 1,200 miles. In the summer of 1821, the whole party trekked across the tundra to the headwaters of the Coppermine River and descended it to the Arctic Ocean. The expedition then travelled eastward, mapping 550 miles of Arctic coast.

This was a remarkable achievement, especially because from the very beginning the journey had been complicated by difficulty in recruiting crew members as well as in obtaining supplies from the two rival and feuding fur companies, the Hudson’s Bay and the North-West. When in the fall of 1821 Franklin continued along the coast and delayed turning his crew back as winter approached, disaster was certain. Events
on the trip from the coast back to the winter quarters at Fort Enterprise included mutiny, starvation, a murder, an execution, and possibly cannibalism, as well as the deaths of eleven of the twenty crew members, Midshipman Hood being the only British casualty. Staggering back across the tundra the crew sustained itself by eating *tripe-de-roche*, a tundra moss, and their boiled worn shoes and untanned leather garments. When reports back to England preceded Franklin, he became famous as “the man who ate his shoes.” Franklin’s published journal was a best seller in England. He had mapped 550 miles of Arctic coast, and for his efforts he was promoted to Captain.

In August of 1823 Captain Franklin married Eleanor Porden, a poet, socialite, and daughter of a wealthy London architect. They had one daughter. Despite deteriorating health, Eleanor was ambitious for her husband and was as anxious as he for him to resume his career as an explorer (Berton 89). He left England in February, 1825 to command a second overland expedition. Eleanor died of tuberculosis just six days after he set sail, although Franklin would not learn of her death until April.

Returning to the Arctic with Franklin were George Back and John Richardson. On this second expedition, 1825 to 1827, they travelled overland to Great Slave Lake and descended the Mackenzie River. Franklin travelled west with Back and others, exploring the northern
coast of what is now the Yukon and Alaska, while Richardson led a small party east, exploring the coastline from the mouth of the Mackenzie to the mouth of the Coppermine. Aside from an encounter with a group of Inuit that ultimately ended well, the trip was a complete success. Franklin returned to England and was knighted.

In 1828, Franklin married Jane Griffin, the thirty-six-year-old daughter of a wealthy silk weaver and friend of Franklin’s first wife, Eleanor. Not the stereotypical Victorian lady, Jane Griffin read voraciously, wrote voluminously, and travelled extensively (Ruszala 42-43). After this second marriage Franklin commanded a twenty-six-gun frigate in the Mediterranean (1830 to 1833). Then from 1836 to 1843, he served as governor of Van Diemen’s Land (Tasmania). Franklin proved a weak governor, no match for the politically astute civil servants under him. Lady Franklin exacerbated his troubles with her over-enthusiasm for reform. The colonials perceived her as a meddler and the real power in the Governor’s office. Franklin was replaced after his seven-year term with no offer of renewal and called back to England, somewhat in disgrace (Berton 140-41).

In 1845, now fifty-nine years old, Franklin secured the command that would immortalize him. Unlike his first two overland expeditions, Franklin’s third was entirely sea-going. The expedition left England in 1845 to complete the last portion of the Northwest Passage. It was the
most lavishly outfitted expedition of its time, with two large ships, a crew of 129 of England’s brightest and best, and the most modern technology, including steam engines and tinned meat and soup. Supplies also included twelve hundred books, fine china and cut glass, silverware, desks, slates, formal dress uniforms, and a variety of toiletries. It was to be something of a sinecure for the aging Franklin.

In July of 1845, a whaling ship watched the *Terror* and *Erebus* sail into Davis Strait. The ships then vanished.

Since the ships had supplies for thirty-six months, there was little concern for the first two years (Neatby 131). When no report was heard, the Navy sent out two relief ships in 1848, beginning the most massive search and rescue enterprise in history with no less than forty ships sailing during the next decade. Much of this was the result of the unflagging efforts of Lady Franklin, who refused to have her husband’s case put to rest until documents and proof were obtained. However, for years searchers found little beyond the Beechey Island site where the expedition spent its first winter; Beechey Island provided only three graves and a large pile of empty tins as clues—no written record or message.

Finally, in 1854, Dr. John Rae of the Hudson’s Bay Company received evidence of the Franklin expedition from local Inuit who had both relics and testimony that revealed that the crew had perished and
that the last survivors had resorted to cannibalism. Many in England disbelieved the rumours of cannibalism, including Charles Dickens who wrote several articles defending Franklin and his crew; many considered the reports from the Inuit inconclusive evidence, from savages no less. In 1858-9, Leopold M'Clintock, Anglo-Irish explorer and father of Arctic sledging, commanded a search expedition outfitted by Lady Franklin. In May of 1859, the crew of the Fox discovered a cairn at Victory Point on the northwest coast of King William Island with a note that revealed that Sir John Franklin had died on June 11, 1847 and that the following year his crews had abandoned their ships.

While Lady Jane provided much of the impetus for the search for her husband in the decades after his disappearance, and continued to search for him all of her life, the quest for answers to the Franklin mystery did not end with her death in 1875. Over the next century, relics from the Franklin expedition continued to turn up, including gear and corpses, especially in the King William Island area where the last of the crew is believed to have perished. In the 1980s, modern forensic science added a new chapter to the story. In 1981, Canadian forensic anthropologist Owen Beattie examined bones from King William Island corpses of Franklin expedition sailors. Shallow pitting and scaling of the bones indicated severe Vitamin C deficiency, a sign of scurvy. But the scattering of the bones, the selective dismembering of the corpses, and
the grooves in bones, which could have been made only by knives, was conclusive proof that the last survivors of the Franklin expedition had, indeed, succumbed to cannibalism. In 1984, Beattie returned to the Arctic and exhumed the bodies of the three sailors buried at Beechey Island—John Torrington, John Hartnell, and William Braine. Tissue samples from the permafrost-preserved bodies indicated high levels of lead suggestive of lead poisoning. Beattie’s hypothesis was that these high levels of lead leached from the improperly soldered cans of food caused disorientation, anorexia, weakness and fatigue, irritability, stupor, paranoia, abdominal pain, and anemia—the symptoms of lead poisoning that could have contributed to the demise of the expedition. In the 1990s, expeditions to the Arctic searched for Franklin’s boats, but no trace of the *Terror* or *Erebus* has yet been discovered.

The Telling of the Story

There has been a tremendous amount of material written about John Franklin and his career, as well as about his era in polar exploration. Firsthand accounts form the starting point for his paper trail, beginning with Franklin’s own published journals from his first two expeditions, *Narrative of a Journey to the Shores of the Polar Sea, in the Years 1819, 20, 21, and 22*, and *Narrative of a Second Expedition to the Shores of the Polar Sea in the Years 1825, 1826 and 1827*. In the past two
decades, more than a century and a half after the first expedition, Canadian writer C. Stuart Houston edited and published three other journals from the first Franklin expedition: *To the Arctic by Canoe, 1819-21: The Journal and Paintings of Robert Hood, Midshipman with Franklin* (1974); *Arctic Ordeal: The Journal of John Richardson, Surgeon-Naturalist with Franklin, 1820-1822* (1984); and *Arctic Artist: The Journal and Paintings of George Back, Midshipman with Franklin, 1819-1822*, (1994). These additions to information on Franklin did much more than simply add three other versions to the story; they generated another body of literature in the 1980s and 1990s that compared the journals of Franklin and his companions, focusing on ideas of authorship, aesthetics, and alternative interpretations of the expedition. The journals of Hood, Richardson, and Back have enabled researchers such as Canadian academics Ian S. MacLaren and Richard Davis to compare these other accounts with Franklin's official Navy version. As well, MacLaren and Davis have considered the journals in terms of aesthetic vision and response to nature, as have researchers Barbara Belyea and Dennis St-Onge.

Historians have been writing about Franklin, particularly in the context of polar exploration, since before Franklin disappeared. Sir John Barrow, second secretary to the Admiralty of the Navy and godfather of British polar exploration, wrote his own history in 1846, titled *Voyages of*
Discovery and Research Within the Arctic Regions. Various histories written in the late 1800s and early 1900s treated polar exploration as heroic endeavors in the Arctic, with titles such as Arctic Heroes, The Story of Polar Conquest, and Knights of the Frozen Sea. In his 1938 Unsolved Mysteries of the Arctic, arctic explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson devoted a chapter to “The Lost Franklin Expedition.” Highly critical of the British Navy’s method of exploration, Stefansson ascribed Franklin’s failure to his refusal to adapt and to learn from indigenous people. Stefansson’s ideas were taken up by many over time, but he had so many unusual ideas that it took some decades to sort out the ones that made sense. The great polar historian Leslie H. Neatby’s In Quest of the Northwest Passage (1958) is a fair history of Franklin. Neatby acknowledged Stefansson’s criticism as a “harsh process of ‘debunking’ to which all Victorians are liable” (80).

In 1988, Canadian popular historian Pierre Berton published his massive The Arctic Grail: The Quest for the Northwest Passage and the Pole, a highly entertaining book. The portions on Franklin are unflattering and cast polar exploration in the light of the British Navy’s attempt to provide opportunities for its men after the defeat of Napoleon. Berton’s histories focus on character, so it is not surprising that the vivacious and indomitable Lady Jane, whose only Arctic experience was a summer visit to southeast Alaska, gets more space than Sir John. A
recent explosion of new publications and reprints attests to the continued interest in Arctic exploration: Mick Conefrey and Tim Jordan’s 1998 *Icemen: A History of the Arctic and Its Explorers*, companion to the 1997 television series by the same name, looks at man’s relationship with the Arctic and the conquest of the North Pole. Fergus Flemming’s *Barrow’s Boys* (1998) looks at Sir John Barrow, second secretary to the British Admiralty, and his nineteenth-century exploration program, which included the Arctic, Africa, and Antarctica; in 1999, Ann Savours added her *The Search for the Northwest Passage* to the huge collection of writings on Polar exploration; and also in 1999, James P. Delgado published *Across the Top of the World: The Quest for the Northwest Passage*.

Another chapter of the story concerns the speculations about what happened to the Franklin expedition, and many books and articles attempt to address the mystery. Much in the tradition of Vilhjalmur Stefansson’s *Unsolved Mysteries of the Arctic*, these writers try to solve the puzzle, or at least add a piece or two. As discussed earlier, Owen Beattie’s 1984 exhumation of the three frozen corpses from Beechey Island resulted in the subsequent television documentary and book, *Frozen in Time*. David C. Woodman reexamined and reinterpreted Inuit testimony in his 1991 *Unraveling the Franklin Mystery: Inuit Testimony*. Woodman speculates that several survivors lived until 1851, three years
more than was generally believed, and that at least one survivor made it as far south as Hudson Bay. American writer B. J. Rule takes a particularly inventive approach to solving the mystery. A descendant of Sir John Franklin, Rule communicated with his discarnate spirit, first via automatic writing and later through channeling. Rule’s book, *Polar Knight: The Mystery of Sir John Franklin*, confirms most of the widely accepted theories of the Franklin expedition but provides the most unusual research technique. American non-fiction writer Scott Cookman, in *Ice Blink: The Tragic Fate of Sir John Franklin’s Lost Polar Expedition* (2000), presents a controversial theory, by fingerling canned goods supplier Stephan Goldner. Already criticized for supplying canned food that caused lead poisoning, Goldner, as Cookman hypothesizes, provided food that also caused botulism, the ultimate agent of the expedition’s demise. And until the mystery is solved, if it ever is, people will continue to search and speculate about what actually happened.

Two other important books came out in the 1990s looking at the popularity and phenomena of arctic exploration. Beau Riffenburgh’s *The Myth of the Explorer: The Press, Sensationalism, and Geographical Discovery* (1993) considers polar and African exploration and the role that the media played in sensationalizing and mythologizing these. Frances Spufford’s *I May Be Some Time Now: Ice and the English Imagination* (1996) explores the British fascination with snow, ice, and
the poles, and examines the events, attitudes, and culture of nineteenth-century England that set the stage for Robert Falcon Scott’s tragic, yet strangely celebrated, race to and death at the South Pole in 1911. Franklin’s disappearance, the massive search, and Lady Jane’s role as a Penelope are significant events in shaping the British public’s view of polar exploration. Riffenburgh’s and Spufford’s books are particularly important because they take polar exploration out of history and speculation and look at this enterprise in terms of popular phenomena.

The dozens of creative works dedicated to Franklin attest to the appetizing nature of Franklin’s tale. The Franklin story itself, the historical writings, and the continued search have all produced material for creative writers. Alongside the historical and speculative writings on Franklin is a large body of creative works—poems, songs, essays, plays, novels, and short stories—that deal either directly with some aspect of the Franklin story or incorporate images, allusions, or incidents into another story (see Appendix). Beginning shortly after it was believed Franklin was lost, a popular ballad in the heroic tradition, “Lady Franklin’s Lament,” was being sung in England. Charles Dickens, a defender of Franklin and outspoken critic of the cannibalism theory, cowrote a play with Wilkie Collins called The Frozen Deep; set in the Arctic and inspired by the Franklin expedition, it was something of a defense of Franklin. Early references to Franklin occur in Henry David
Thoreau's *Walden* and in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Recently, major Canadian writers have written directly on or incorporated elements of the Franklin story: poets Al Purdy and Gwendolyn MacEwen, novelists Margaret Atwood, Rudy Wiebe, and Mordecai Richler, and folk singer Stan Rogers to name a few. And recently a number of American writers have entered the fray, including Annie Dillard, formerly Alaskan author Sheila Nickerson, and novelists Andrea Barrett and William T. Vollmann. In addition, there are a number of older poems and tributes as well as young adult novels.

The phenomenon of Franklin in creative works has also generated its own commentary. In 1991, Margaret Atwood delivered the Clarendon lectures at the Oxford University, which were later published in a book, *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature*. In these, she discussed four literary motifs of the Canadian North. The first lecture “Concerning Franklin and his Gallant Crew,” focused on Franklin and traced his “literary life after death” in Canadian literature (10). Atwood acknowledges his importance as a Canadian founding myth, but also Canadian writers’ attraction to stories that end tragically at the hand of nature; for Canadians, the Franklin story “means a disaster. And Canadians are fond of a good disaster, especially if it has ice, water, or snow in it” (11-12). Canadian literary critic Sherrill Grace has also, on two occasions, written on the Franklin of Canadian literature. She
published an article looking specifically at Margaret Atwood’s treatment of Franklin and another that provided an analysis of the Franklin myth in the whole of Canadian Literature. In “Franklin Lives: Atwood’s Northern Ghosts,” Grace explores Atwood’s treatment of Franklin in the Clarendon lectures and in Atwood’s short story “The Age of Lead” showing the author’s fascination with ghosts and her use of Franklin as a continually refigured myth and a metaphor for our insatiable appetite for answers. Also in 1995, Grace published “Re-Inventing Franklin,” an exploration of the Franklin myth in Canadian literature in general. Asserting that Franklin is a key topos in Canadian history, Grace explores Canadian reinventions of Franklin as an epic adventurer and tragic hero, as a Canadian mystery story shot through with irony, and finally as a parody; in all three reinterpretations, the figure of Franklin makes a comment on contemporary Canadian culture, with all of these reincarnations in some way inventing our national identity as Canadians.

While both Atwood and Grace look at Franklin in literature, their focus is more specifically Canadian and how Franklin defines Canada, the Canadian North, and Canadian literature. Their interest in this story verifies the significance of Franklin for the Canadian, and indeed, the modern psyche. While I look at many of the same texts, my approach considers the Franklin story specifically in terms of the human preoccupations of food, sex, death and quest, and the literary tactics that
writers employ to explore those preoccupations. I build on the initial work of Grace and Atwood, examining more thoroughly five specific pieces of literature and touching on others. In the course of this analysis, the four tropes of food, sex, death, and quest emerge as central to Franklin’s story and its creative retellings.
Chapter 3

Food: The Man Who Ate His Shoes and Other Culinary Curiosities

Tropes that centre on food and eating are obviously common in literature. From the apple in the Garden of Eden to Shakespeare's numerous banquet scenes and food metaphors to Margaret Atwood's *Edible Woman*, food and its consumption often take on more significance than the literal. Indeed, Margaret Atwood's *The CanLit Foodbook* (1987) combines cookbook and literary anthology; the volume includes recipes from authors with extracts from Canadian prose and poetry on the subject of food. In Western culture, specific foods also carry symbolic meaning: apples, the forbidden fruit, are associated with temptation and knowledge, while bread and wine might be seen as life giving and evocative of Christ. Indeed, so many common expressions are food related that we find ourselves using food metaphorically in our everyday language: “Take that with a grain of salt,” “Sour grapes,” “Upper crust,” and “Where’s the beef?” Cultural anthropologists, particularly Claude Levi-Strauss, have explored the connection of food and sexual longings. And food can also imply character; as Margaret Atwood has written, “You are what you eat’ means one thing to a nutritionist, another to a novelist” (CanLit 2). So the use of food in figurative and symbolical ways is not unfamiliar fare.
Connections between food and Franklin are especially rich. When Lieutenant John Franklin left England in 1819 to command his first expedition into the Arctic, he was an obscure Navy man. By the time he returned to England in 1822, he was famous as “the man who ate his shoes”—dubbed thus because his starving crew brewed up its untanned leather garments for nourishment. Thus, Franklin’s first fame centred on food. Indeed, the more significant episodes of Franklin’s career in the Arctic are heaped with gastronomical intrigue. On this early expedition, besides the partaking of boot broth, the three-year ordeal in the Canadian Arctic included starvation, scurvy, mutiny, a murder, an execution, cannibalism, and the death of half the party. Two decades later, in 1845, the by-then knighted Sir John Franklin returned to the Arctic on his final fateful expedition. What few clues subsequent searches discovered in more than a century and a half of investigation suggest that his crew experienced scurvy, starvation, cannibalism, lead poisoning, and perhaps botulism.

While the search continued, writers and researchers speculated as to what had happened to Franklin’s crew. Interestingly, some of the most significant speculations and breakthroughs during the last century have centred on the role of food in the fate of the final Franklin expedition. This is understandable, as food is crucial to travel in the North. In fact, Robert E. Feeney devotes a whole book to the subject with his 1997 *Polar*
Journeys: The Role of Food and Nutrition in Early Exploration. He comments on the vital role nutrition played in the success or failure of all Arctic expeditions, whether they brought food with them or attempted to live off the land (5). As Feeney notes, the large Franklin expedition was not the only group visiting the Arctic to have food trouble, since gathering food is possible only at certain times of the year and northern hunting requires special skills and knowledge.

But long before Feeney, there had been suspicion about food contributing to the demise of the final Franklin expedition. In 1938 Vilhjalmur Stefansson, explorer and Arctic evangelist, in his Unsolved Mysteries of the Arctic, points to a cultural cause, the unwillingness of the British, and Franklin in particular, to learn from indigenous peoples and to adapt to the polar environment. Stefansson focuses on the expedition’s dietary practices that caused and worsened scurvy, which he believed dealt the expedition’s final blow. As discussed earlier, Owen Beattie’s exhumation of the three frozen corpses from Beechey Island confirmed suspicions about lead poisoning, and his earlier work on King William Island confirmed the cannibalism allegations. Most recently, American non-fiction writer Scott Cookman, in his Ice Blink: The Tragic Fate of Sir John Franklin’s Lost Polar Expedition (2000), also fingers the canned goods supplier Stephan Goldner. Cookman hypothesizes that besides causing lead poisoning, the inferior food also caused botulism. In
this on-going speculation of what happened to Franklin, food continues to be central.

While the mystery and intrigue of the Franklin story make it attractive fare for writers of all sorts, its large helping of food images makes it a story with great potential for gastronomical tropes. For Canadian poet and novelist Margaret Atwood, who has savoured the Franklin story on numerous occasions and in whose work food often figures prominently, it is natural that her dealings with Franklin should focus on that element of his tale. In her short story “The Age of Lead,” the Franklin tale is a source of actual events in the plot, but also a symbol and part of a cluster of food similes and metaphors. Set in Toronto in the mid-eighties, the story centres on Jane, whose friend Vincent has recently died of a mysterious illness. Soon after, Jane watches on television the 1984 exhumation of one of the sailors, John Torrington, from the final Franklin expedition. Torrington was buried on Beechey Island during the first over-wintering of 1845 and 1846. The story alternates between descriptions of the television program and Jane’s reminiscences of her friend Vincent, and parallels are established between Vincent and Torrington and between the expedition and life in modern Toronto. “The Age of Lead” is a story about consequences. Jane and Vincent, teenagers in the 1970s, try to live lives free from conventions and everyday concerns. And they are successful until
Vincent’s illness and death. The two discover that no one lives without consequences and that there are even repercussions for things you were not aware you did. In the parallels between the Franklin expedition and modern-day Toronto, Atwood uses a cluster of startling food similes and images to draw the two story lines together.

Atwood uses food images to describe both John Torrington and Vincent, setting up obvious parallels in their conditions as frozen men and in their likeness to food. Jane witnesses on the television the exhumation of John Torrington: “They took the lid off the coffin and it was like those maraschino cherries you used to freeze in ice-cube trays for fancy tropical drinks: a vague shape, looming through a solid cloud” (“Lead” 153). He is frozen food. She goes on to describe Torrington further; while he has been well-preserved, “he’s a beige colour, like a gravy stain on linen, instead of pink, but everything is still there. He even has eyeballs, except that they aren’t white but the light brown of milky tea [. . .] tea-stained eyes” (“Lead” 153-4). It is worth noting that Atwood describes Torrington with remarkable accuracy as he appears in the documentary as well as in photos in Owen Beattie’s book. When Vincent is dying in the hospital, he too is frozen: “He lay packed in ice, for the pain. [. . .] Laid out on ice like a salmon [. . .]” (167). In describing her friendship with Vincent, Jane recognizes that he is an unusual person, an acquired taste, but one that she can appreciate: “it was like
appreciating an anchovy, or a stone. He was not everyone’s taste” (165). Both Vincent and John Torrington are frozen men, and Atwood emphasizes their likeness by using food similes to describe them. Both young men die of mysterious illnesses, ones that are not known or diagnosed. While John Torrington would not have experienced the full-blown lead poisoning, for the majority of the Franklin party the very food that they expected to be sustaining them was in fact contributing to their demise. The parallel conditions of the two men and the similar food comparisons tie together the past and the present.

While Jane herself is never described in culinary terms, she uses similar imagery for the possible fate of women. When Jane was younger, her caustic and pessimistic mother continually warned her about “consequences,” particularly as they applied to women. Her mother believed that you were youthful for a short time and then succumbed to some kind of inevitable fall: “You plummeted downwards like an overripe apple and hit the ground with a squash” (157). This is a twist on the sometimes-seductive connotation that apples can have as forbidden fruit. It is an allusion to the apples of Eden and “the fall” that happens. Jane’s mother knows all about giving in to temptation, as she lets it be known that Jane herself is a “consequence.” Families, entrapments, obligations, social conventions—these are the kinds of consequences that Jane and Vincent dedicate their lives to avoiding.
With Vincent’s illness, however, both he and Jane must face consequences, but consequences of some unconscious action; it is an effect without a cause. Before Vincent dies, Jane asks him if the doctors know what is killing him, this mysterious illness that does not yet have a name. Vincent answers with characteristic detached amusement, “Who knows?’ he said. ‘It must have been something I ate”’ (168). Vincent is joking, but he may very well be correct about dying from something he ate. Besides continuing the food imagery, Vincent’s offhand suggestion reinforces the similarities between him and John Torrington. As Jane watches television, the fate of the Franklin expedition is explained: “it was the cans that did it [. . .]. The Franklin expedition was excellently provisioned with tin cans, stuffed full of meat and soup and soldered together with lead. The whole expedition got lead-poisoning. Nobody knew it. Nobody could taste it” (168). Atwood has set up the clear parallels of Vincent and John Torrington as young men dying mysteriously, but the comparisons go further and have much broader thematic implications, comparing the larger circumstances of the Franklin expedition to Toronto in the 1980s.

In the eighties, Jane had noticed that “People were dying. They were dying too early” (166), and in listing the various deaths, she concludes, “It was as if they had been weakened by some mysterious agent, a thing like a colourless gas, scentless and invisible, so that any
germ that happened along could invade their bodies, take them over” (166). Jane begins noticing news items about contaminants in foods: “acid rain, hormones, mercury, pesticides and poisons” (166). “The Age of Lead” refers both to the nineteenth-century Franklin expedition and to present-day Toronto. In both times, food carries mysterious properties, both literal and figurative. It is important to note as well the types of food similes that Atwood employs: Torrington is a maraschino cherry ice cube, tea, and gravy, while Vincent is a salmon on ice (perhaps smoked) and an anchovy. These are appetizers, sauces, specialty foods, and luxuries, not life-sustaining foods. They are also processed food and frozen food, not natural food, and the implication is death by technology. When Jane describes the garbage outside her apartment, once again the foods alluded to are not of a particularly nourishing type: fast food cups, soft drink cans, and take-out food plates. Food in “The Age of Lead” is clearly not the right kind of food.

In Atwood’s story then, there are two levels of understanding with regard to food. Food as a metaphor and symbol helps the reader to visualize and understand the story. Yet paradoxically, food is a symbol of an insidious mystery, a poison. Food sustains life and is so immediate to us that it can be used as metaphor and simile and be almost universally understood and known. On the other hand, this daily and immediate
experience—pleasurable, familiar, and satisfying—may very well be the thing we do not know, the mysterious thing that kills us.

Gwendolyn MacEwen’s 1975 verse play for radio, *Terror and Erebus*, deals with Franklin’s final expedition. Four voices, or characters, narrate the play. Rasmussen (suggesting the explorer-scientist Knud Rasmussen), speaking from a century after the expedition, comments and interprets between the explorers’ speeches. Franklin narrates the first part of the expedition. Crozier (Francis Crozier, Franklin’s second-in-command) recounts the final episodes after Franklin’s death. And an Inuk, Qaqortingneq, interprets the relics and comments on the expedition from an Inuit perspective. Moving through known and speculative events of the historical expedition, the play explores themes of madness, religion, and science and technology through the tropes of irony and paradox. Crozier notes that paradox and irony are appropriate to this place, as he observes, “In extremes all things reverse themselves” (127), and these men are indeed in extremes—extremes of geography, of physical endurance, and of their own lives. In a play infused with irony, food and food images take on an ironic quality as well.

Franklin and Crozier’s experiences leading the expedition are in marked contrast, and the consequences of each man’s period as commander are expressed in religious imagery. Early in the play, Rasmussen likens the Arctic to an “awful monastery” where Franklin led
his men and is now a ghostly priest. Rasmussen imagines Franklin still there in this North-as-cathedral, and addresses him:

[. . .] somewhere walking between
The icons of ice, pensively
like a priest,
Wrapped in the cold holiness of snow,
of your own memory. (122)

Franklin died before things went really bad but haunts the landscape and is haunted by what happens to his men. Yet his wanderings are clean, cold, and aesthetic. This is in marked contrast to the graphic reality of Crozier’s wanderings through the Arctic hell, as leader of the expedition at its lowest points:

Oh Hell! Look, Lord, look how
They fall back behind me!
The snow turns red, there are sounds
of men puking, and sounds
Of knives scraping bone.
They are eating
one of their dead. (128)

Franklin’s “awful monastery,” while hardly a pleasant image, is nothing like the hell to which the crew is eventually consigned. Canadian literary critic Sherrill Grace has observed the dual view of the North as “a place
of spiritual beauty, silence, even transcendence, and of terror—a place of isolation, madness, and death” (“Degrees” xi). The beginning of the expedition may maintain some of the illusion of spiritual beauty and transcendence, but the other extreme is, of course, the terror that the crew experiences in their final days.

As MacEwen interprets the expedition, so much of what goes wrong has to do with starvation, but the horror asserts itself in what the men are forced to eat. Continuing with the religious theme, Crozier ironically completes “The Lord’s Prayer,” which he has been praying intermittently since the crew abandoned the ships on Good Friday, April 21, 1848 (after the Last Supper): “Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us / The kind of bread and blood and meat we’ve tasted” (128). Food, besides being life giving, has a sacramental nature; we use it as an offering and for it we give thanks. The paradox, for Crozier, is of praying for food on one hand, but asking for forgiveness for the kind of food on the other hand. In this land of ironic reversals, everything is mixed up. MacEwen links cannibalism to religion, a not completely outlandish connection when we consider the Eucharist, which involves consuming the body and blood of Christ. Consuming the body and blood of your neighbour, however, is monstrous in our culture, under any circumstances, and Crozier must pray for forgiveness.
This is, as Crozier might expect, because the Arctic is filled with these paradoxes. The ships are frozen in the ice pack, and Crozier notes that although the ice moves southward, it does him no good. He and his men do not have time to wait: “It [the ice] has eternity to drift south. It doesn’t eat, doesn’t get scurvy, / Doesn’t die as my men are dying” (125). Continuing with the religious theme, Crozier acknowledges that in the beginning God gave light and it was good. However, the light blinds the men and they fall back “clutching their scorched eyes” (127). Crozier asks, “Whoever said that Hell was darkness?” (127). And when his crew is blind, helpless, and hardly alive, still they feel hunger. Crozier laments, “Though all our senses fall apart / we still must eat” (128). In the contrary North, where God’s good light is not good and science is useless, how does one pray to a God who lets this happen? And when God does not answer prayers, one must, paradoxically, ask for forgiveness for what is not given, but simply must be taken.

_Ditch_, the 1996 drama by Canadian playwright Geoff Kavanagh, involves two of the last surviving members of the final Franklin Expedition. The two-character play takes place entirely in a ditch. The fictional Hennesey and Whitbread have been abandoned by the healthier men who are returning to the ship to find food. While Whitbread is gravely ill and Hennesey is lame, the play also suggests that they have been left behind together because they are gay, although Hennesey
continually denies his love for Whitbread. Whitbread, ironic but realistic, is fully aware of his homosexuality, his love for Hennesey, and his imminent death. On the other hand, Hennesey, in all things, is in denial and the play centres on his coming to terms with his love, sexuality, and impending doom. While the play focuses on these individuals, it also makes a larger social comment, suggested by reviewers, about the isolation of homosexuality and in particular the isolating condition of AIDS (Chalykoff 138). In the play, both men are unwell but are ultimately dying of starvation. In this condition, naturally they talk lots about food, but much of this is ironic and darkly humourous, highlighting the contrast of the two characters and the ironies of the situation in which they find themselves. Their names as well, Whitbread and Hennesey, suggest food and drink, bread and wine; they complement one another and are appropriately left together.

One part of their banter involves imagining a visit by Queen Victoria to the site of the expedition’s demise, and most of the humour of this fictional tour centres on food. Whitbread dreams up the Queen’s tour, assuming the voice of an imaginary tour guide: “This is where six of them died on a single afternoon; this is where the two queer ones ended up in a ditch together [. . .]” (160). Hennesey, fearful of being eaten by animals and “threatening” often to kill Whitbread, takes up the tour guide’s dialogue: “Notice how one of them’s been shot and the other
torn apart by wolves” (160). And Whitbread, who can imagine a fate worse than being abandoned with his lover, continues her Majesty’s tour with, “And over where the ships used to be—we’ll see how the rest of the men had to eat themselves” (160); Hennesey tells him to stop, but Whitbread continues:

“There was nothing else for them to eat. [. . .] Notice the knife marks on the bone, Ma’am. They obviously started carving the fleshier parts first. We’ll be having a nice bit of flank steak on the yacht tonight to commemorate the event.” (161)

The exchange points to some of the larger themes of the play. The notion of these two parodying the Queen’s celebration tour shows that they are not completely committed to the expedition’s philosophy and dream, and as the “queer ones” they are further alienated. As well, at this early stage in the play, Hennesey has not faced the reality of his situation. Whitbread, while darkly ironic about the bit of “flank steak” for the Queen, recounts the actual events: the two of them in a ditch, six dying in a day, the crew resorting to cannibalism. Hennesey, in his continuing denial, does not take up any of these themes.

As the men become weaker, Hennesey urges Whitbread to eat, but Whitbread sees this as pointless. Hennesey contemplates shooting a bear and wonders how long they could eat on it, so Whitbread asks why he does not go hunting:
HENNESEY. Because we're the bloody hunted—are we?

We're bait.

WHITBRED. The about to be eaten . . .

HENNESEY. What the whole fucking world's trying to eat—

WHITBREAD. Do you think we'll be able to hold them off with our guns till we starve to death? That would be eating away at ourselves, wouldn't it? Beating everyone to the punch.

HENNESEY. (handing him the plate with the food) Here—eat this.

WHITBREAD. (refusing it) I'd rather gnaw on me own thumb—speeds things up a bit. (170-171)

This exchange reinforces them as victims, the “about to be eaten,” and once again underscores the difference between Whitbread and Hennesey. Hennesey worries about animals eating them, while Whitbread's hope of holding “everyone” off suggests that he fears their fellow shipmates more than wolves or bears, probably a more legitimate concern. Hennesey refuses to respond and presses Whitbread to eat, both acts of denial: he denies the threat of his fellow sailors, believes that the crew will return to save them, and denies the pointlessness of eating.

Hennesey does not show tenderness and kindness until Whitbread’s final hours. He tries to occupy Whitbread with stories and
tells about his life in London before entering the Navy. Ironically, Hennesey used to have an onion soup cart. His mother encouraged him to give it up and join the Navy, which he resisted until someone stole his cart. Whitbread, who has been unwilling to eat throughout the play, concedes, “Some of that soup would be good now” (176). Later, with what little food they have, Hennesey tries to feed Whitbread, saying “Pretend it’s some of the soup you said you’d like,” and Whitbread answers, “I don’t want to pretend” (177). Hennesey, while it is clear he has turned the corner, tells Whitbread that pretending is all they have left: they must pretend they meant to end up in the ditch together, pretend it is what they wanted, and pretend that there is a purpose to the expedition and their place on it. In Ditch, food is the source of much of the dark humour, points to the irony of the characters’ situation, and emphasizes the contrast in the characters’ denial and acceptance of reality.

In a very different take on the final Franklin expedition, Mordecai Richler’s 1989 novel, Solomon Gursky Was Here, traces a century and a half of the Gursky liquor dynasty, whose history in Canada Richler ingeniously ties to the last Franklin expedition, one of Canada’s main origin myths. Nominated for a Booker Prize and winner of the Commonwealth Writer’s Award, this satirical novel takes its title from the enigmatic Solomon Gursky, a mysterious Kilroy-type character who is present at virtually every major event in the twentieth century, from the
It is fitting that his grandfather, Ephraim Gursky, was not only one of just two Jewish sailors on the final Franklin expedition but was its only survivor. This panoramic novel covers many big ideas, but two central themes examine what it means to be Jewish, particularly Jewish in Canada, as well as exploring the ideas of birthright and inheritance. In these, the Franklin expedition and connections to food are crucial to illuminating these larger themes.

It is by virtue of being Jewish that the Gursky patriarch, Ephraim, survives the final Franklin expedition—he brought his own kosher food. Richler describes the provisioning of the expedition, telling about some of the officers’ personal provisions, and then adds some information, not usually found in histories:

And then on the dark night before they sailed out of Stromness Harbour, in the Orkneys, their last home port, there was the curious case of the assistant surgeon of the Erebus boarding with a cabin boy wearing a silk top hat, the two of them lugging sacks of personal provisions. Six coils of stuffed derma, four dozen kosher salamis, a keg of schmaltz herring and uncounted jars of chicken fat, their pockets bulging with garlic cloves. The assistant surgeon and the cabin boy were jabbering in some guttural tongue, which the
third lieutenant, whose watch it was, took to be a German
dialect. On inquiry, however, the cabin boy insisted it was a
patois that he and the assistant surgeon had picked up on a
voyage to the South Seas. (46)

This private provisioning is the key to Ephraim’s survival—he does not
eat as much of the other food and thereby avoids lead poisoning. Moses
Berger—academic, historian and Gursky biographer—describes Izzy and
Ephraim’s deliverance as the result of “their secret hoard of Jewish soul
food” (432). That these two survive this tragedy by eating kosher food is
irreverent and hilarious, but it is also more than that. These two should
not have been on the voyage because they were Jewish, and fictional
historians in the novel continually deny their presence, despite
compelling evidence. Later, Ephraim’s grandson Solomon lobbies for
Jewish immigration during the 1930s and ends up being targeted for
bootlegging and eventually has to disappear. In this ironic twist of
history, on the doomed Franklin expedition being Jewish meant that one
was considered inferior but also insured survival, while at so many other
times and places in the period that the novel covers, being Jewish meant
persecution and often death. As well, the survivors of this Canadian
myth of origin are of an ethnic group that was unwelcome in Canada.

Ephraim leaves his legacy in Canada in other ways as well, and his
progeny are not restricted to the official Gursky family tree. He fathers
numerous children in the Canadian Arctic, who are also identified by their dietary practices. In a journal by fictional searcher Waldo Logan of Boston, Captain Logan writes about meeting two “Esquimaux” boys; the boys bring lots of food on board the ship, “But Ephraim, the younger one, would not eat before salting his bread and mumbling a blessing over it. I couldn’t catch most of it, but I did learn that the Esquimaux word for bread is *lechem*” (195-196). Moses Berger speculates that Ephraim had converts as well as descendants among the Inuit, and the name “Ephraim” and the dietary practices are his proof. The Gurskys have a respect and affinity for the Inuit, and Richler suggests parallels between Jewish and Inuit culture. Both cultures survive despite inhospitable environments—social and physical—and both cultures could be considered marvels of human adaptation to inclement surroundings.

Richler also exploits the rich literary possibilities of cannibalism associated with the Franklin expedition. Henry Gursky, the eccentric son of Solomon, marries an Inuk and lives as a Hasidic Jew on the Canadian Arctic coast. On an annual journey before Passover, Henry, his son Isaac, and Johnny, a friend of Isaac’s, go missing for twenty-three days on what should be a five-day journey. Isaac Gursky, the sole survivor, reports that his father died of a broken neck and his friend starved to death, because Johnny refused to eat Henry. Isaac claims to have waited many days before setting in on Henry. However, the searchers find Henry
stored in handy portions in tidy little freezer bags. One local comments that had Isaac waited, “Henry’s body would have been harder than a frozen log. Splinters is what he would have got, not *boeuf bourgignon*” (526). Fifteen-year old Isaac, who was home in the Arctic on a break from his Hasidic school in New York City, has to go before a committee at the school. In considering Isaac’s sin they ask him how he could eat his own father—why not eat the other boy? “The other one was *trayf,*’ Isaac responded, glaring at them” (528). Johnny, it seems, was not kosher.

Once again, a Gursky survives in the Arctic by what he eats and is willing to eat. This is also about inheritance and birthright. Ephraim’s legacy skips his ineffectual son Aaron, and Ephraim bequeaths his birthright and wisdom to his grandson Solomon. Likewise, the kind but weak Henry is skipped over for Isaac, who consumes his father to claim his inheritance. Isaac also embodies the two strong cultures—he is both Jewish and Inuit. Finally, the novel ends with the suggestion that young Isaac will eventually vie for leadership of the Gursky dynasty.

Examining a different episode in the Franklin story, Canadian author Rudy Wiebe’s *A Discovery of Strangers*, winner of the 1994 Governor General’s Award for Fiction, is an interpretation of the first Franklin overland expedition of 1819 to 1822. The novel focuses on the love story of “Greenstockings” (the Yellowknife woman) and Midshipman Robert Hood, the relationship between the Yellowknife and the explorers,
and the disastrous and fatal journey back from the coast in the fall of 1821. Wiebe’s novel has many recurring image patterns, including fire, dreams, songs, and, of course, food. Through food and the acts of feeding and consuming, Wiebe explores some larger themes about the relationships among these many people. Food becomes a symbol of love, cultural and racial difference, and class inequities and hypocrisy.

Beginning with the romance, food images and the act of eating express love between Robert Hood and Greenstockings. Their love scene shows them sharing a meal in the lodge of Greenstockings’ parents; it is warm, smoky, and fire-lit while “Greenstockings cooks her favourite food for Hood” (157). Sounding very much like a Renaissance poet, she tells Hood, although he cannot understand her language, “We can together,’ she says, ‘eat it all, all the sweet and bitter things I put into it’” (158). This sensuous and suggestive passage continues with Hood imagining her in his home north of Manchester, and he fantasizes about feeding her apples.

“...I wish I could put one in your mouth, how can your mouth never have felt an apple? Crisp, cracking between your beautiful teeth. And you smile, rocking that caribou gut full of whatever you’ve stuffed in there, I’d stuff you with anything you want . . . .” (160)
Hood, the son of a clergyman, knows all too well the implications of apples as symbol of sin and temptation. Greenstockings knows nothing of apples or Christian allusions, nor of the English language, for that matter. In her own language, she sings to Hood songs that her mother sang to her and explains to him the loving gestures involved in preparing food:

“For you, I took this stomach out of the animal and poured in its blood and chewed small pieces of ribs and fat, chewed them soft mouthful by mouthful until there were enough to fill you, and spit them into the stomach until it was full, here it is, cooked and smoked too, full and wanting to be eaten, you can eat and I will eat with you, our fingers feeding each other.” (163)

This intensely erotic passage repeats “fill” and “full”; besides an erotic suggestiveness, there is also the irony that once Hood leaves Greenstockings for his starving trek to the Arctic Ocean, he will never be full again. Wiebe exploits the traditionally sensuous nature of food as well as the bridging of culture through food and the sharing of food.

Although the cultures eat different foods, the loving gesture is the same. Hood uses a silver spoon to feed her “the savage Concoction” (168). And then in the closest, most intimate moment, Wiebe walks a fine line
between the erotic and the off-putting. Greenstockings begins to clean Hood of lice, saying “Now you will feed me” (174). Her fingers strip the lice, place them cluster by scrabbing cluster between her teeth. Her full lips close, her jaw shifts and he hears the lice being crushed, and then she swallows them. Her close face above him soothes him so completely out of his revulsion that he will remember nothing of this moment but her ethereal face. (175)

Despite the ability of the young lovers to cross cultures to intimacy, the other British officers and Yellowknife people cannot finally communicate. Wiebe explores issues of cultural difference as played out in cycles of feeding and providing food. The first pattern established has the Yellowknife hunting for the expedition. They are amazed by the voracious appetites of the Canadian “paddle slaves,” as they call the voyageurs, as well as of the British officers. In attempting to provide meat, the Yellowknife dedicate their best hunters and in doing so put their own people at risk, as well as practicing a kind of hunting that alienates them from the land and animals. Keskarrah, Yellowknife elder and Greenstockings’s father, warns about all the slaughter of caribou and the coldness of hunting with guns. He asks one of the hunters, mildly, “What kind of hunting is that, [...] when a hunter no longer touches an animal until it is dead and its life is spreading out in the
snow?” (115). As a conscience for his people, Keskarrah probes further, “For what purpose? […] For huge, fat men in gigantic canoes? These strangers?” (116). The hunters, however, feel some obligation to the English and are flattered and bribed by the trinkets, medals, and liquor that the English give out.

For Wiebe in *A Discovery of Strangers*, food implies a form of shorthand for character as well as suggesting culture and cultural meaning. The whites are desperate, demanding, and fussy about food. The Yellowknife, on the other hand, eat what the whites will not and are grateful to the land for the giving of food. And for the voyageurs, as seen through British eyes, food is the only thing that can get them thinking. In an excerpt from Hood’s actual journal that Wiebe quotes, Hood comments on the passivity of the voyageurs after food arrives—“The Canadians never exercising reflection unless they are hungry” (57)—implying that they are governed only by appetite. The English, who come to this country condescending and full of self-importance, and who come on orders from the “great father across the seas,” expect the Yellowknife to feed and guide them on this “quest,” which the Yellowknife see as little more than a fool’s errand. They associate the explorers with voracious appetites, always consuming: Greenstockings tells about the emaciated Back and the voyageurs arriving at the Yellowknife camp after travelling from the coast, “and obviously, wherever and whenever Whites appear
they always need food, right now, food!” (297). It is winter and the
Yellowknife people may not have food for themselves but, as Keskarrah
explains, “We couldn’t, of course, [...] withhold food from anyone if we
have some, especially from those to whom we have already given
hospitality” (299). In a passage recorded from Dr. John Richardson’s
actual journal, the historic Richardson wrote, “The Indians cooked for us
and fed us as if we had been children, evincing a degree of humanity that
would have done honour to the most civilized of nations” (295).

Food also underscores the class distinctions within the exploring
party. Upon returning south from the Arctic coast, they become
separated into smaller groups, with the stronger men going on ahead for
help. Richardson, Hood, and Hepburn are joined by the much stronger
Mohawk voyageur Michel Terohaute who goes out hunting daily for them.
He returns to the Englishmen with what he claims to be meat from the
carcass of a newly killed wolf, but it soon becomes clear that the meat is
not wolf, but in fact one of the other voyageurs. This episode in the novel,
as in the actual history, ends grimly, with the strengthening Michel
growing increasingly threatening, and finally killing the nearly dead
Hood. Richardson, fearing both for his safety and for Hepburn’s, executes
Michel. So now what was a truly dark episode, which one can hardly
imagine getting worse, takes a sinister turn.
The episode of Richardson and Hepburn’s return to Fort Enterprise is told from two perspectives. First, Richardson writes a polite and fairly clinical letter to Robert Hood’s father. The second version, told from Hepburn’s perspective, sounds as though it is being told to another sailor, in a bar or the like. Hepburn’s language suggests an intimacy and perhaps an openness one might attribute to having had a few drinks. After Richardson shoots Michel, Hepburn says, “an’ in those three days, ‘snowbound’, I ate a lot of him” (291). Hepburn recognizes the cycle of consumption and its ironies, commenting,

“[Michel was] so strong from the voyageurs he’d fed off, Canadians, as we called them, feeding a Canadian—an’ him an Indian—feeding me, a circle the way we’d done it anyways for two years, though this was slightly more personal, you might say.” (291)

Richardson, surgeon and naturalist, instructs Hepburn on how to consume Michel—starting with the good muscle, beginning with a broth, then boiled, and finally a roast, consuming slowly so as not to get ill. Richardson, however, will have none of eating Michel, as Richardson has principle. Hepburn lugs the officer to Fort Enterprise where Hepburn is also able to attend to Franklin and is later recognized by Franklin for his fortitude. Hepburn comments ironically, “How lucky, me of the bottom class, somehow had all this amazing strength to offer them” (292).
Hepburn muses on serving his superiors, that it is much more than simply attending to their physical needs: “If you care for them, you do what’s needed so they can return home with their great principles safe an’ precious as the crown jewels of England” (293). Somehow Richardson’s actions seem almost worse than those of the openly violent Michel Terohauite, perhaps because of the pretensions of civilization, the quibbling about consumption (direct or indirect), and the coldly calculated and clinical approach to cannibalism. Richardson and the other officers practice a not-getting-your-fingers-greasy kind of cannibalism. And yet the plucky, gossipy Hepburn retains a gallows humour. He explains about “long pig” (humans), and then muses on his distaste for bacon: “Meat is . . . meat. If I have to I’ll eat anything. Even bacon, though I can’t stand the smell of it, always stinks too Mohawk to me, ha-ha!” (293).

For something completely different, there are a couple of other texts that do interesting things with food. The first is Nancy Cato’s novel, *North-West by South* (1965). Set during Franklin’s years in Tasmania, this novel of manners focuses on the domestic concerns of the governor’s household and the small colonial capital of Hobart. Cato uses food and drink to reveal characteristics such as gluttony, lack of self-discipline, excess of appetite, and even foolishness. Hood’s comment about the voyageurs being governed by appetite is not unlike the approach Cato
takes, except she applies it to Franklin. After recounting the deprivation of the first Franklin expedition, the author comments, “Little wonder he enjoyed his food nowadays, was a bit overweight” (5); it seems he enjoyed his food a little overly much, at least according to Lady Jane, who “felt a strange sinking at her heart [as she looked at him]. He had put on weight on the voyage, and he smelt of snuff” (16). Jane is particularly concerned with John’s weight, and she quizzes him about it: “What do you weigh now, Sir J., is it fifteen stone?” apparently underestimating as Sir John’s answers, “‘All of that I fear. My new uniforms are a shade tight already’” (26). Cato in these early chapters of her book has set up Sir John as a comic figure, full of virtue and pomp, but out of his element and not completely in control of his appetites, parading around colonial Tasmania in uniforms that are too tight. And the ever-competent, if somewhat controlling, Lady Jane is pained when the local press described him as “of short stature, and rather corpulent” (27). Later, Cato uses an appropriate simile to describe the anxiousness Sir John felt as he waited on his possible appointment for his final voyage in 1845: “Sir John was eager as a school-boy for a promised treat” (383).

Lady Jane’s attitude to Sir John’s eating habits is thematically significant. She broods like the mother of a teenaged girl, embarrassed by her daughter’s plumpness. In addition to his lack of control over his eating, Sir John’s fondness for alcohol, as presented by Cato, also points
to a weakness in character, or at least a worry for Lady Jane, who is in Cato’s novel presented as meddling and controlling. Jane is anxious, perhaps overly, about John’s drinking. At a dinner hosted at the governor’s house, “Sir John presided genially at the head of the table. Jane watched anxiously the number of glasses of wine he took, while keeping up a conversation in French at her end of the table” (103) This imagery suggests a mother and child kind of relationship and implies that Sir John was not all Jane expected or wanted—his tastes were more common and his ambitions more modest than Jane’s. His attitude to food and drink seems childish, less sophisticated, and more like the voyageurs of his first expedition. In the novel, Cato uses food and drink to show character, but also to indicate complex domestic relationships. The lithe and youthful Lady Jane, a dominatrix of the dinner table, appears cool and frigid in her lack of appetite, and her meddlesome controlling of Sir John’s eating habit extends to his work as governor. When Jane is away, he is fat and happy, at home as head of the household as well as governor of Van Diemen’s Land.

Canadian Al Purdy’s *The North West Passage* (1967) has the poet poring over maps and contemplating polar exploration as he waits in his hotel room for a plane to take him north from Frobisher Bay (Iqaluit). The poem begins ironically and irreverently:

THE NORTH WEST PASSAGE
is found

needs no more searching. (79)

The casualness of the poet is appropriate because his contemplation is, he says "for lack of anything better to do [. . .] I amuse myself."

Throughout the poem are references to food, mostly to the poet's own much anticipated dinner. He claims that Frobisher, "shot in the buttocks by a Skraeling," was hoping "to reach Mrs. Frobisher in time for tea" (79), which reminds him that "it's two hours until dinner / tho I'm not really very hungry just now" (79-80). Looking at the map, the poet muses about liquor and is reminded of Ellef and Amund Rignes, "heroic Norwegian brewers," as well as English gin distiller Boothia. He considers Luke Foxe's cook, who "served 'beer in small cans' to the sailors / and it didn't last one nautical mile" (80), while on the other hand, on a big jet you have the stewardess bring you "the New Yorker with a double whiskey / and make it last a thousand miles" (80). The poet offhandedly thinks of Lady Franklin who "once traded her tears for ships," although now "she doesn't answer the phone" (81). He has been trying to kill time, yet it is still half an hour to dinner. The poem finishes:

and I can't think of anything more to say

about the North West Passage

but I'll think of something

maybe
a break-thru
to strawberries and ice cream for dinner (81)

The casual tone and the many food images underscore the irony of how relatively easy it is to travel in the North at the end of the twentieth century. While many early explorers starved, this latter-day traveller can enjoy strawberries and ice cream. Preoccupied with food and drink, the poet casts himself not as a heroic expeditionary but with the voyageurs, exercising reflection (and writing poems) only when hungry. As well, his more modest strawberries-and-ice-cream breakthrough is all that is possible because the Northwest Passage is found and the heroics are over. Purdy’s poem illustrates once again that food, a vital element in the Franklin story and a critical component in northern travel, becomes a rich and often ironic trope in later literary works.
CHAPTER 4

Sex: Bum, Furtive Gropings, and Leather Madonnas

While the North is recognized as exotic, for the most part it seems to lack the sexual associations of other exotic locations such as the tropics, the Far East, and Arabia. Yet writing about the North does often include a number of literal and figurative couplings: explorers penetrating the northern wilderness, winning the hand of the virgin ice queen, returning to Penelope-like wives waiting at home, explorers dallying with locals, and sailors consorting among themselves. From these fairly limited possibilities, authors make much. Nineteenth-century Europeans characterized the North as pure and feminine, an alluring and beautiful woman. An 1875 Punch cartoon shows an ice queen on top of a glacier with polar bears at her feet and a caption that reads “Waiting to Be Won,” with reference to the North Pole (Grace, “From Nelvana” 24). This feminization of the North is an extension of ideas about most non-European and uncharted lands. Mary Paniccia Carden writes about the American West: “In the romantic script of frontier violence, America was begotten by self-made men on the sometimes pliant, sometimes resistant, but always feminized wilderness” (276). Srilata Ravi echoes this in discussing European travel writing in the Orient: “Nature and landscape in travel writings and fictions were depicted in feminine
metaphors. (Sexual metaphors of domination and penetration pervade the description of Other space)” (58). As well, a point of cultural difference and true puzzle for indigenous people, particularly the Inuit, was why the European Arctic explorers travelled without women; Native Americans saw women as essential for the particular work they did as well as for companionship. And this travelling with men alone has other implications, including the unofficial Navy tradition of “rum, bum, and the lash.” When on shore, it was generally expected that sailors would engage in sex with local women.

The biography of John Franklin presents many possibilities for exploring sexual themes. Franklin was, of course, an Arctic explorer attempting to subdue the northern wilderness and penetrate the Northwest Passage. Curiously, the religious and reserved Franklin married two passionate and energetic women. His second wife, Jane Franklin, became the archetypal hero’s waiting wife—a nineteenth-century Penelope, waiting for her Ulysses. Franklin’s first command included the challenge of a duel between his two young midshipmen, Hood and Back, over the affections of the Yellowknife woman, Greenstockings. Finally, all this takes place in the realm of nineteenth-century naval exploration that had groups of men travelling together for months or years at a time with only the occasional possibility of sexual relief with locals. While obviously no mention is ever made in the official
Navy journals of men fraternizing with each other, this possibility is one on which later writers had speculated. This is all material for the creative writer incorporating Franklin’s story: feminized landscape, love stories, cross-cultural alliances, homosexuality, aloneness, and the one waiting at home.

To return to Margaret Atwood’s short story “The Age of Lead,” we can see how sexual tropes underscore the themes of consequence and the connection of past and present, just as food imagery did. Our main character Jane’s interest in Franklin predates watching the exhumation of John Torrington on television. In high school, she was fascinated by Arctic exploration. While less exotic than Marco Polo or the Nile, northern exploration appeals to her female, teenage sensibilities: “There was something daring and noble about it, despite all of the losses and failures, or perhaps because of them. It was like having sex, in high school, in those days before the Pill, even if you took precautions” (156). This simile unites the lives of Arctic explorers and young women in their risky endeavors, endeavors that have repercussions. Jane goes on to explain her mother’s views of sex and the “consequences” that follow: “the weightiness of the body, the growing flesh hauled around like a bundle, the tiny frill-framed goblin head in the carriage” (157). Jane’s bitter mother knows all about this because Jane herself was a consequence. Having a baby, the consequence of sex, involves many
fallings: “you fell, and everything about you fell. You got fallen arches and a fallen womb, and your hair and teeth fell out. That’s what having a baby did to you. It subjected you to the force of gravity” (157). With the exception of fallen arches and womb, being pregnant sounds strangely similar to the effects of lead poisoning. This image of heaviness, a weight like lead, runs throughout the story, bringing together the nineteenth-century exploration and our own time. In this analogy, women have much in common with Franklin’s crew; the consequence of both sex and Arctic exploration is to eventually be subjected to the force of gravity.

As we saw in the food chapter, Vincent and Torrington provide the main parallel between the nineteenth century and the present, but Jane too has her counterparts in the Franklin expedition. In reminiscing about her relationship with Vincent, Jane’s other relationships over the years are revealed. In high school and university, Jane and Vincent never really go out together—“Instead they made fun of going out” (160). For the many years that they drift apart, Jane lives with a number of men but she never completely unpacks, never committing fully, always ready to move on. When Vincent and Jane reunite in Toronto, they try to become lovers but do not “make a success of it” (164). Vincent cannot take sex seriously, and Jane wonders if he is gay. At the time of Vincent’s death, and for some time before that, Jane has not been in a relationship. When she watches the documentary on the exhumation of
John Torrington, she wonders: “What did they do for love, on such a ship, at such a time? Furtive solitary gropings, confused and mournful dreams, the sublimation of novels. The usual, among those who have become solitary” (165). This tells us as much about Jane than it does about the men on the Franklin expedition. Her comment, “the usual,” in its casualness, suggests that Jane, as one of “the solitary” herself, is intimately familiar with their habits. This contrasts the attraction that Jane has to polar exploration as a teenager when she images it as a romantic risk like sex without the Pill. As an adult she is able to imagine the reality of exploration; the excitement of the risk is replaced by the reality of the sad solitary undertaking for a group of men. Jane goes below the decks and sees the consequences. Sex, like food, links together the two ages of lead, illuminating parallels of characters and consequences.

Gwendolyn MacEwen’s 1975 radio play *Terror and Erebus* also employs sexual tropes, exploring the notion of a feminized North and the masculine explorers penetrating that realm. MacEwen, however, overturns the image of the North as a beautiful virgin waiting to be won. Rasmussen, the voice of a latter-day searcher, speculates about Franklin’s hopes as the expedition spends its second winter trapped in the ice of Victoria Strait:

Pray you could drive the ships
Through the yielding, melting floes,
    drive and press down
Into the giant virginal strait of
    Victoria.
But perhaps she might not yield,
She might not let you enter,
    but might grip
And hold you cursed forever in her stubborn
    loins,
    her horrible house,
The white asylum in an ugly marriage. (123)

MacEwen's *Terror and Erebus* takes the feminized image of the Arctic, familiar to nineteen century explorers, and turns the triumph over geographic maidenhood into a nightmarish imprisonment. MacEwen also suggests the legendary fear-inducing image of the *vagina dentata* (toothed vagina) that can emasculate men. This expedition is not the glorious triumph of exploration, science and national pride, played out on a metaphor of romantic conquest. The feminine, virginal North not only guards her secrets but is prepared to destroy attempts to overcome her—she is not at all passively "waiting to be won."
Later, the ships are trapped in the ice and eventually the men abandon the ships. Rasmussen presents this as the product of the earlier violent coupling:

You set out from the ships

In a kind of horrible birth,

a forced expulsion

From the two wombs, solid at least,

Three-dimensional, smelling of wood

And metal and familiar things. (126)

While the ships do not provide the warm comfort we might expect of wombs, they are solid and familiar, and the sailors are shocked and disoriented at being forced out. Nothing good can be expected to come of this ugly coupling and its subsequent violent birth. Later, after the trek south proves impossible, Crozier sends thirty men back to the ships, only five of whom make it to “the wombs, in the / wooden hulls” where they die. Unable to endure repeating the earlier expulsion, these five,

Who could not a second time

Bear the birth, the going forth,

the expulsion

into pure worlds of ice. (129)

The conception and birth are equally horrific. In this Arctic of paradoxes, MacEwen rewrites the story of conquest and discovery, turning it on
itself. The conquest over the virginal passage becomes a rape in reverse and all that issues from this coupling is disaster. What is most unusual in MacEwen's treatment is not simply the coy female Arctic guarding her secrets in some demure gesture of geographic modesty, but a virgin with the strength to crush her suitor.

In *Ditch*, Geoff Kavanagh explores another kind of sexuality—in the words of the period, "the love that dare not speak its name." One of the central themes of the play is the coming to terms with homosexuality, but like all-important issues in the play, it is approached through dark humour. The Franklin expedition is famous for, among other things, the puzzling and seemingly useless items found by searchers—books, silverware, grooming items, soap, etc.—and the play presents a possible explanation for these peculiar items. Hennesey finds a conch shell (not among the recorded relics found on the actual expedition) and wonders why they have been hauling a conch shell around the tundra. Whitbread explains, "We've been dragging something lucky for everyone. Where were you when the officers decided how many lucky possessions were needed to ensure success?" (145). The conch, suggestive of female genitalia, is referred to a number of times. Hennesey, who often threatens to kill Whitbread, suggests he might do it with the conch: "Smash in his teeth with the cold bit of comfort that looks like a cunt from home" (146). Hennesey contemplates the perversity of the conch, likens it to the
perversity of Whitbread (who is more openly homosexual), and concludes that at least the conch owner was “natural.” The conch shows up later, when Hennesey jokes that Whitbread will get jealous and kill him for becoming “overly attached to some bastard’s conch” (156). The conch shell is simply funny, but it is also symbolic of the predominant heterosexual culture from which these two men come. As an absurd possible instrument of both their deaths, the conch threatens them in different ways. Hennesey is threatened by his feelings for Whitbread and wants to lash out. Whitbread is threatened, not by jealousy, but by the prevailing sexual attitudes of the period that make it difficult for Hennesey to admit his love. Some perversities are worse than others, and the men have hauled this conch around the tundra as a subtle reminder that the perversity of Whitbread and Hennesey is considered one of the worst.

Hennesey spends most of the play denying his sexuality and his love for Whitbread, and indeed denying almost everything. Hennesey tries to pretend that all the other sailors were engaged in homosexual acts, suggesting that he was not the only one to be with Whitbread. He cruelly attacks Whitbread:

They were lined up to have a go at you. We used to draw lots for it in the mess—who’s going to fuck Whitbread? We were going to string a blanket up, give you your own little corner
where you wouldn’t have to freeze your arse but it became such a game, hunting you down, the whore up on deck; half-frozen but still ready . . . (150)

It is impossible to tell how much of this is true, the other sailors taking advantage of Whitbread, but when Hennesey tells Whitbread not to make it sound like he was the only one, Whitbread answers simply, “You weren’t?” (150). For Whitbread, Hennesey was the only one. In denying his sexual orientation and his love for Whitbread for much of the play, Hennesey denies Whitbread human touch, the comfort that Whitbread craves. Whitbread asks Hennesey repeatedly to come into the ditch, wanting to hold him, but Hennesey refuses. Not until Whitbread is close to death does Hennesey touch him. Only after Whitbread’s death does Hennesey finally declare that he loved Whitbread.

Whitbread’s last attempt to act, long after he is no longer interested in eating, is a wish to bathe one last time, a longing that suggests a number of cultural allusions. Whitbread wants to swim, “Like two Greeks swimming the Hellespont” (165), alluding to an idyllic time when his sexuality might have been more readily accepted. Hennesey modifies the exercise to “Like two old chums” (165), and then dismisses it altogether, claiming to be afraid of drowning. Whitbread persists, insisting it is their last chance to wash some of the “muck off” and that “It would be good to be clean again” (167). The two have a lengthy
exchange about Jonah and morals, about the rest of the crew not being particularly moral either. Whitbread says they are not that special and Hennesey replies, throwing back Whitbread’s allusion, “Special—we’re the two Greeks swimming for Jesus in Hell’s pond, aren’t we?” (168).

Whitbread, while he is certain of his love for Hennesey, must come to terms with his culture’s views of sexuality and his own Christian beliefs as well. He wants to take responsibility for their situation. “This is hell, my happiness at your expense, come down and complete it” (159), he tells Hennesey. Whitbread must accept that he is happy in what his culture considers Hell.

Whitbread never does get to swim, as he is clearly too weak, but he does finally get clean in death. Hennesey cleans his corpse, and while attending to the body, Hennesey faces both his love and his regret:

Your back—I’ve never seen your back. I always had your shirt thrown over it . . . We could fuck if you weren’t . . . Is that what you wanted—”Come down into the boat.” I should’ve done it—what would it have mattered? (183)

Using the sponge, Hennesey smells it and recognizes it as Whitbread’s “lucky” sponge. Appropriately, Whitbread chose a sponge for his lucky object. His wish to be clean is both physical and spiritual, a desire to be clean of the filth and muck imposed on him by his culture and his religion because of his sexuality. Ditch, then, explores the burden that
society places on individuals who differ; the metaphorical burden is made tangible in the play by the suggestively female conch and the irony of the two men using it to threaten one another and being threatened by it. The swim—to be like the Greeks and to be finally clean—never happens. While Hennesey's final caring for Whitbread's body shows love and acceptance, it is too late. *Ditch* shows the alienation of homosexuality and illness, and the ultimate isolation of death.

In *Solomon Gursky Was Here*, Mordecai Richler generates plot twists and humour based on speculations about deviant sexual activities on the *Terror* and *Erebus*. In the novel, a number of Hebraic artifacts have academics squabbling, foremost among them Gursky biographer Moses Berger. When at a meeting of the Arctic Society Professor Knowlton Hardy dismisses these Jewish items as red herring—or perhaps "schmaltz herring"—Moses points out that some officers had much more bizarre objects in their possession and begins listing unpublished articles found in the searches: "a filigreed black suspender belt, several pairs of frothy garters, some silk panties, three corsets, two female wigs, and four diaphanous petticoats" (50). Moses smirks as he notes these items, but the distinguished professor dismisses them as perfectly innocent, part of the on-board theatre productions. While Moses is eventually expelled from the Arctic Society, Solomon Gursky's diaries, which record Ephraim's memories, confirm Moses's speculations about
Jews on the final Franklin expedition and the use of these other titillating relics.

As Ephraim reports, during the long winter frozen in the ice, “Cabin boys and the more comely of the able sailors and marines took to demanding exorbitant fees for their favours from smitten officers” (433). In the final days of the expedition, Ephraim explains how a demented Philip “Dolly” Norton, a nightmarish cross-dresser, spends his last days in wig, make-up, and ball gown, leading his gang of admirers. Dolly attempts to seduce Ephraim into revealing his food supply, and Dolly’s trek south with his motley gang explains many of the real relics that have puzzled researchers for decades: “Silk handkerchiefs, scented soap, sponges, slippers, toothbrushes and hair-combs. This is to say, just about everything required for the toilette of the demented “Dolly” Norton and his entourage” (435). The actual relics found on King William Island have always been a puzzle, and Richler gives us an intriguing explanation. In a novel that parodies Canadian history, it is only appropriate that the staid British Navy was up to hanky panky, Richler adding another taboo to the sailors’ list of transgressions. Richler also parodies academics in their refusal to admit evidence that reflects ill on Franklin. The historians want to keep the history clean of Jews and cross-dressers, denying any evidence that might contradict the WASP purity of Arctic endeavor.
Almost everything about Ephraim as Gursky patriarch is of mythic proportions. His varied list of occupations includes forger of official documents, gentleman's pickpocket, society lady favourite, transport to Australia, sole survivor of the Franklin expedition, Klondike stampeder, Inuit shaman, and founder of a new religion. Appropriately, his libido is similarly legendary. In addition to Aaron, of the official Gursky family tree, Ephraim has “twenty-seven unacknowledged offspring, not all of them the same colour” (240). Ephraim, like a phoenix from the ashes or Noah from the Ark, emerges from the doomed Franklin expedition to populate Canada, or at least to give it his best shot.

In a story peppered with allusions, Richler also ties in references to the first Franklin expedition and the legendary Greenstockings. Greenstockings, the actual Yellowknife woman over whom Midshipmen Hood and Back feuded on the first expedition, is referred to by the old Orkney boatman (presumably Hepburn), who tells Ephraim about the Arctic while both men are prisoners in Newgate. The boatman recounts the final days of the first Franklin expedition, waiting for relief: “But the worst of it was we did not know whether poor Mr. Back, lusting after that Indian harlot, had perished on his trek or would he return to us with supplies” (416). The boatman goes on to explain that Hood and Back were both smitten by Greenstockings and that he prevented them killing each other by removing the charges from their pistols. Ephraim asks if
he spied on them, and the old boatman denies this. However, after he
dies, Ephraim searches the body and finds “a soiled and torn sketch of a
beautiful nude Indian girl, whom he would learn years later was Green
Stockings” (422). She, along with the old boatman’s tale, is part of what
lures Ephraim to the Arctic. Decades later, on the Canadian prairie,
Ephraim settles down “in a tarpaper shack on the reservation with Lena
Green Stockings” (147). Ephraim is fulfilling his destiny. Like the
characters in the story that inspired him to go north, Ephraim too will
have his own Greenstockings.

Rudy Wiebe’s A Discovery of Strangers, about Franklin’s first
expedition north, has at its heart the love story of Robert Hood and
Greenstockings, and the legendary duel between the two young
midshipmen, Back and Hood. The duel between Back and Hood did not
appear in any official reports of the 1819-1822 expedition, but Joseph
Rene Bellot records that he heard the story from John Hepburn some
thirty years later when Bellot and Hepburn were on one of the searches
for Franklin (Davis, “Fact and Fancy” 8). In Wiebe’s fleshing out of the
legend, the duel, as least from Back’s perspective, is as much about
young men competing as it is about love for Greenstockings. Initially,
Back is interested in Greenstockings’s younger sister Greywing. The
more proper Hood comments on her youth, and in doing so, draws
Back’s attention to Greenstockings. Back recognizes her beauty in his
description of her lifting water: “Never in my life have I seen such a stunning shape—face—if she lived in Italy she’d be burning on walls, a leather Madonna lifting water” (56). It is a beautiful tribute, but Hepburn, in what seems to be a confidential report to the Navy about the duel, interprets Back’s attraction to Greenstockings as being provoked by Hood. Hepburn reports that because the sentimental Hood saw Greenstockings as a “romance,” Hood forced Back into seeing her the same way, and the competitive Back had to prove he could be the wooing hero too. However, Back’s approach is less subtle. He attempts simply to take Greenstockings, and she pulls a knife on him, cutting his pants open. When Hood finds out, he immediately challenges Back to a duel for the lady’s honour. Hepburn tells Richardson, and Richardson instructs him to take the charges out of the pistols. The two young men have a mock duel and although Hood would clearly have been killed, he remains calm and composed while Back is sweating and unsteady. After the two “shoot” each other, Richardson announces that the “charade” should suffice. That winter, however, Franklin sends Back south for supplies, presumably to keep peace at Fort Enterprise. In the novel, the duel shows much about the characters of the two young men—the brash competitiveness of Back and the sentimental romanticism of Hood.

Indeed, Hood’s gentleness proves unique among men in the novel, as A Discovery of Strangers explores notions of men’s inherent tendency
towards sexual violence. Greenstockings, as the most beautiful woman in her land, recognizes that men will always be pursuing her, and all Yellowknife women know that men are a burden they must bear: “the inescapable power and fear—sometimes joy, often brutality, even terror—that men forever carry about them like their cocks, limp or rigid, hanging somehow gently possibly tender or abruptly lethal” (32). Sexuality has this double nature, that can be “like passing sunshine and more black, pounding, bitter weather” (32). In the two young Englishmen, Greenstockings sees this duality—Hood the gentle and Back the violent. However, long before the English come, Greenstockings realizes that she is to be pursued by men and will be taken by the strongest. While she feels powerful, as if she is “so strong and smart that she could marry anyone she wanted,” she also knows that “there are men tearing at her, and will be for the rest of her life” (139). She has lived with Broadface, a handsome young Yellowknife hunter, for some time and knows that other men desire her. When the English arrive, Hood and Back both pursue her, and she is warned that the Mohawk, Michel Terohaute, plans to steal her as well. After her brief love affair with Hood, Michel does indeed steal her. While he is stopped and punished, it is not until after he has beaten her. Throughout the story Greenstockings tries to assert her right to choose whom to love, but knows that someone stronger may simply steal her. In the end, she makes a compromise by staying with Broadface
and sharing him with her sister. He seems to be a good man, but more importantly, he is strong enough to protect her.

In Robert Hood, however, Greenstockings sees something completely different. Often repeated through their wooing and love-making is how Hood differs from other men. As Hood draws her portrait, Greenstockings sees his uniqueness: “He is different, so quick to understand and so stupid,” and she can say anything to him because “his incomprehension gives her freedom” (160). Despite his stupidity, she finds him attractive because of the “gentle demandlessness that drifts about him” (161). When she is alone in the lodge she feels what, “she comprehends to be the memory of his gentle tenderness, the kind of undemand he offers her humming a desire within her . . . strange . . . strange” (161). They have a love affair, which ends abruptly when Michel steals her. In the fort, Hood comes to her, weeping and trying to comfort her. “A man so gentle and delicately perceptive and intense; and ultimately useless” (207). While she and Hood have had a strange and beautiful moment, Greenstockings knows that it cannot be more than brief:

Wherever many men are, they can exist only within a certain violence, and they will try to break you again and again. If you were to live in delight and difference with one for long,
you would have to kill all the other men in the world. (207-208)

Despite Greenstockings’s strength, this sexual violence will always haunt her, so she makes the compromise of choosing Broadface, a man who can protect her.

Besides these five primary texts, another text that makes particularly interesting use of the trope of sex in the Franklin story is John Hanlon’s *The Frozen Franklin* (1990). This mystery novel features the hapless Prestor John Riordan, a late-night-radio talk-show host from a country music station out of the Matanuska Valley, Alaska. Several Australians descend on the valley in a race to the Arctic to find the corpse of Sir John Franklin, believing that a valuable land deed is on the body. Australian petty thief Frankie (Franklin) Stubbs claims to be Sir John Franklin’s heir, a descendant of the illegitimate child of Maggie Stubbs and Franklin. The story goes that when the teenage Franklin sailed to explore the shores of Australia with Matthew Flinders, he had a fling with Maggie Stubbs. Many years later, wanting to take responsibility for his offspring, Franklin writes to Maggie Stubbs, promising to sail to Australia once he completes the Northwest Passage. He has in his possession, he claims, something to ease the mother and child’s financial burden. Frankie and the other Australian thugs assume that it is a deed to land in Australia. *The Frozen Franklin* is not great literature, but it is
fun, and it shows the great adaptability of Franklin’s tale. What makes this interpretation even more humourous is that it goes against all of the prevailing views that we have of John Franklin. Contrasting the religious, stalwart, self-denying officer and loyal husband with which we are familiar, Hanlon gives us a horny teenager fathering illegitimate children within an Australian transport. Sexuality has great potential for literature because it illuminates character, but its potential in Franklin’s story also lies in the fact that the less-open Victoria period gives us few details, leaving lots of room for speculation.
Chapter 5

Death: Frozen Men and Bodies Like Shattered Compasses

People can die anywhere, but the North seems to take a disproportionate number of the people who venture to its far reaches, and the North has its own characteristic kinds of death. The obvious forms include starvation, freezing, hypothermia, drowning in cold water, death at the hand of nature or indigenous people, murder, madness, or simply unexplained disappearance. Writer, poet, and former Alaskan Sheila Nickerson, in her book Disappearance, begins her contemplation on northern life, “I live in a place where people disappear. Alaska. Too large to comprehend. People go out in planes, boats, on foot, and are never heard from again” (3). Her meditation goes on to include all of the North as susceptible to “disappearance,” and Franklin figures prominently in her discussion. If the mystery of disappearance does get solved, it is usually explained by one of the typical northern deaths.

Traditionally western culture has seen west as the direction of death, but North Americans have a revision; the hero riding into the sunset is usually going west to establish a new civilization. The West implies rebirth and opportunity. The North, with its cold and barren landscape, is a more appropriate site for death. In the British imagination of the nineteenth century, the Arctic became the site of
heroism, manly endeavor, and, following Franklin, heroic martyrdom. Erasmus H. Brodie’s *Euthanasia*, referred to at the beginning of this thesis, uses “euthanasia” not in our modern sense of “mercy killing,” but in the Greek origin of the word, “easy death” or “peaceful death.” This has two implications for the Victorian view of Arctic exploration. In popular thinking of the time, the North, with its white purity, seemed a pleasant place to die. As well, notions of martyrdom involved in Arctic exploration and sacrifice for one’s country also implied a sanctioning of an Arctic death. In the Canadian imagination and literature, the North becomes threatening. In Margaret Atwood’s collection of lectures, *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature*, she discusses the North as the site of mystery, untamed wilderness, and, frequently, disaster. Appropriately, her first chapter is about Franklin, “Concerning Franklin and His Gallant Crew.”

Sir John Franklin witnessed an unusual number and variety of deaths even for a soldier-sailor and an explorer, and one might argue that death is at the root of Franklin’s popular mystique. In *A Discovery of Strangers*, as the expedition prepares to go north, Wiebe writes,

> The Lieutenant [Franklin] [. . .] certainly does not suspect that the various manifestations of death he will meet on this four-year journey to the shores of the Polar Sea will make
him as famous as if he were the first person to walk physically upon the moon. (143)

The manifestations will include starvation, exhaustion, freezing, murder, and execution, with more than half of the party dying. Of course Franklin’s final expedition has an unprecedented 129 perishing, and his ships on this journey have the bad-luck names of *Terror* and *Erebus*.

In contrast to all of this dying was Lady Jane’s valiant effort to keep her husband officially “alive.” She refused to wear black until nearly a decade after Franklin’s disappearance, when his death was finally confirmed. And that death itself was an ironic one for an explorer. On the disastrous third expedition, Franklin died of a stroke or a heart attack, it is believed, long before the rest of his crew—he could have died that way in his bedroom in London. For the rest, the sensational reports of grizzly deaths on their crazy trek across the tundra and finally resorting to cannibalism have always proved fascinating and controversial. Arguably, much of the recent renewed interest in Franklin has arisen from the exhumation of the corpses of John Torrington, William Braine, and John Hartnell from the Beechey Island grave sites, men who have come back to us from the dead.

“*The Age of Lead*” revolves around that very documentary of the Beechey Island exhumations. In watching this program on television, Jane has occasion to contemplate death, particularly the death of her
friend Vincent. A horror movie motif runs throughout the story, with Torrington and Vincent both described using monstrous images. Torrington appears to be much the same as when he was buried, although “the freezing water has pushed his lips away from his teeth into an astonished snarl” (153). There is, of course, something very eerie about this man, frozen for a century and a half, coming back to life. Torrington seems to look at Jane through the television: “[. . .] he regards Jane: an indecipherable gaze, innocent, ferocious, amazed, but contemplative, like a werewolf meditating, caught in a flash of lightning at the exact split second of his tumultuous change” (154). Besides being a scene out of a B-grade werewolf movie, there is also an aspect of Night of the Living Dead about John Torrington, whose bare feet bother Jane. The commentator on the documentary notes that the young sailor’s toes were tied together to keep the body tidy for burial, but Jane is unsure. “His arms are tied to his body, his ankles are tied together. You do that when you don’t want a person walking around” (161).

Horror and science fiction movie allusions surround Vincent as well. Seeing the frozen man, Jane decides that there is nothing sinister about him, and she is reminded of a saying of Vincent’s: “What you sees is what you gets, as Vincent also used to say, crossing his eyes, baring his teeth at one side, pushing his nose into a horror-movie snout” (154-155). Vincent, on his deathbed, first denies to Jane that he is going to die
but then resorts to his characteristic detached humour. He tells her that the pod people from outer space got him. “They said, ‘All I want is your poddy’” (168). Vincent’s name also signifies; in a story with a “Jane” suggestive of Lady Jane Franklin, his name seems an allusion to scary movie patriarch Vincent Price. “The Age of Lead”/Night of the Living Dead horror movie motif underscores both how monstrous that time was and how very scary our own time is becoming.

For Jane, the Franklin expedition is an analogy for her own time, one that helps to give her life meaning. Using Arctic imagery, she recalls Vincent on his deathbed:

It was white in his room, wintry. He lay packed in ice, for the pain. A white sheet wrapped him, his white thin feet poked out the bottom of it. They were so pale and cold. Jane took one look at him, laid out on ice like a salmon, and began to cry. (167)

Vincent has a mutated virus travelling up his spine, one that the doctors have not even named yet. It is clearly symbolic of various mysterious twentieth-century diseases.

Jane recognizes similarities to John Torrington. Watching the television documentary, Jane notes Torrington’s bare feet, white rather than beige; “there is something intensely painful to Jane about the absence of socks” (161). She also contemplates John Torrington’s dying
on the ship, "surrounded by the creaking of the wooden hull and the stale odours of men far too long enclosed" (165). She wonders if anyone held his hand or comforted him, as she does with Vincent, and wonders as well what they told him was killing him: "Consumption, brain-fever, Original Sin. All those Victorian reasons which meant nothing and were the wrong ones. But they must have been comforting. If you are dying, you want to know why" (165-166). While Vincent and John Torrington have many things in common in their dying, there are significant differences. Torrington may not have the comfort of a female friend, but he does have the comfort of a diagnosis, even if it is wrong. As with food and sex, death on the Franklin expedition and in current-day Toronto ties the two periods together. The mysteriousness of what was killing the Franklin crew parallels the mystery of Vincent's illness and the litany of people Jane knew who were dying too early: a client with bone cancer, one with a heart attack, an acquaintance with AIDS and his lover of suicide, emphysema, hepatitis, and spinal meningitis. This reminds us of John Torrington who may have thought he knew what was killing him (one of the Victorian causes that were always wrong). The suggestion makes the reader wonder about the accuracy of diagnoses we make about illness and death and if something more insidious is the cause.

John Torrington, Jane observes, as an early death on the expedition, got a coffin, nameplate, plot, burial service, and prayers. As
things become desperate, some get a stone cairn, and then the last to die get nothing:

They ended up as bones, and as the soles of boots and the occasional button, sprinkled over the frozen stony treeless relentless ground in a trail heading south. It was like the trails in fairy tales, of bread crumbs or seeds or white stones. But in this case nothing had sprouted up or lit up in the moonlight, forming a miraculous pathway to life. (155)

This is reminiscent of the debris that Jane finds on the sidewalk running past her house. Jane’s story and her comforting of Vincent are a tribute to him, as one of the early deaths. She may wonder if she herself will be one of the later ones to die on the trek across the tundra, without a comforter or proper burial rites.

Death haunts Gwendolyn MacEwen’s radio play *Terror and Erebus*. In fact, two of the four voices, Franklin and Crozier, are ghosts, speaking to us from the dead, and MacEwen uses religious imagery to talk about death. Rasmussen addresses Franklin whom he imagines is still somehow present:

[. . .] somewhere walking between

The icons of ice, pensively

like a priest,

Wrapped in the cold holiness of snow,
Much later, Crozier describes the leaving of the ships, Easter Sunday, 1848. They pray and sing hymns: “We are all of us crucified / before an ugly Easter” (126). And in a striking passage describing the return of thirty men to the ships, Rasmussen gives the variety of poses of death:

Thirty good men.

On the way back all of them but five
died,

Knelt before the sun for the last time
and died,

Knelt like priests in the whiteness
and died,

on their knees, died,

Or stretched straight out,

Or sitting in a brief stop
which never ended,
died.

It does not matter now. (128)

The form of this passage is striking. The repetition of “died” and the tumbling of many lines to their end, “died,” suggests an overwhelming inevitability and rapidity of death. The simile of being likened to priests is
appropriate for men who left their ships on Easter Sunday and are finally returning.

As with the recurring religious imagery in *Terror and Erebus*, death is also associated with science. The poem begins with Rasmussen contemplating the white bones he finds:

And sometimes I find their bodies
Like shattered compasses, like sciences
Gone mad, pointing in a hundred directions
at once—

The last whirling graph of their agony. (121)

This passage highlights two main ideas from the play. First, the "bodies like shattered compasses" suggests the failure of science. Second, their deaths resound with irony because the sailors themselves became the compasses that ultimately failed them. As markers for loss, sacrifice, and suffering, the bodies of the dead sailors prove better for navigation than the instruments on which those sailors relied.

After Franklin's death, Crozier takes command. Rasmussen explains that Crozier, as a scientist, understands magnetism but may not understand its particular laws regarding human life. Rasmussen asks:

Crozier, what laws govern
This final tug of war
between life and death;

These human polarities?

The ice

Is its own argument. (125)

Crozier concedes defeat when he says, “we came to the end of science” (130). In the end, it is not the North that pulls, but death, the ultimate magnet and the final polarity. Crozier contemplates:

What magnet do I know of

That will pull us south?

None,

none but the last inevitable

one—

Death who draws,

Death who reaches out his pulling arms

And draws men along like filings

on a paper. (130)

The instruments and technology that should have prevented disaster are useless and overpowered by the magnetic force of death.

Besides becoming compasses, the men become the maps and charts that have failed to help them navigate. As sickness begins to overtake the men, Franklin can see this in their faces and in how it affects their minds. Franklin says, “I can read the disease in their souls;
/ It’s a mildewed chart / on their flesh" (124). The association of death
and charting continues with Rasmussen wishing to find Franklin:

Ah Franklin! I would like to find you
Now, your body spreadeagle like a star,
A human constellation in the snow.

The earth insists
There is but one geography, but then
There is another still—

The complex, crushed geography of men. (122)

All these similes and images build to a complex charting of the land in
human remains, a mapping of death and suffering. Where the technology
and navigation tools of their time failed these sailors, their own bodies in
death now mark the way.

Death and gallows humour dominate the dialogue in Geoff
Kavanagh’s Ditch. The play opens with the two characters
anachronistically placing their deaths and the subsequent discovery of
their bodies in historical context. Whitbread, sitting an the abandoned
boat in the ditch, writes a letter to whomever finds his body. He indicates
the date and place: “Springtime, 1848; a place that’ll have to wait till
someone gets famous finding corpses here to be named” (142).
Whitbread, with ironic foreknowledge of the significance of finding the
lost sailors, of which he is one, pretends to be a searcher: “I could count
four corpses without moving my head.’ Somebody could be knighted for saying that” (143). He presents, as well, the riddle that has caused more than a century and a half of speculation—curious relics, the way the boats were facing and the way that the bodies fell:

Historians will have to play this game—how two men out of a hundred and five became separate from the rest and died in a ditch together. A gruesome discovery for the searchers sent out: a puzzle to be marveled at behind any more fashionable news of war . . . (142)

This is, of course, exactly what will happen, searchers confounded by the relics, with their discoveries eventually taking a back seat to news about the Crimean War (1853-1856) and the American Civil War (1861-1865).

The darkly humourous discussion of killing runs throughout the play. Hennesey decides not to try shooting a bear—anything but a perfect shot would simply make a bear angry. In the event of a bear attack, Hennesey asks Whitbread to shoot him instead of the bear. If Whitbread chooses, he can turn the other gun on himself too (145). When they hear wolves, Hennesey asks Whitbread if he thinks he could shoot a wolf, to which Whitbread replies that he would shoot himself instead: “I’m not going to live anyway—why kill a perfectly good wolf” (154). Hennesey retorts that the wolf might kill him, and Whitbread offers to kill himself so that Hennesey could drag his body away as a sort of offering or decoy
for the wolf. There is also the recurrence of Hennesey threatening to kill Whitbread—bash him "one with the lucky conch!" (152). And so it goes. This witty, ironic dialogue is so much "whistling past the graveyard."

Eventually Whitbread does want to stop acting as though they are not going to die, recognizing that this pretense somehow degrades them (162). In a similar gesture to his desire to bathe, Whitbread wants to maintain dignity in his final hours, something that his sexuality and his miserable fate have not allowed him.

In contrast to the doomed characters in Ditch, Ephraim Gursky in Mordecai Richler's Solomon Gursky Was Here defies death. Ephraim, as sole survivor of the Franklin expedition, goes on to influence Canadian history and becomes patriarch of Canada's great liquor dynasty, McTavish Distillers. Ephraim's survival abounds with irony. Having forged documents to get on this disastrous voyage seems a terribly unlucky twist for Ephraim, yet he turns his luck around, becoming the expedition's only survivor. Also ironic is his having the key to the nineteenth century's greatest mystery and not being able to tell about it. Nor can Ephraim celebrate his survival. When so many others die, defying mortality also brings with it the burden of guilt.

Ephraim's grandson Solomon seems almost immortal as well. After fleeing trial in Canada, he reincarnates himself many times during the ensuing decades, eluding authorities as well as his biographer Moses
Berger. Periodically sending Moses his journals, Solomon strings Moses along, keeping him always informed, yet hungry for more. In one journal, Solomon writes, “I once told you that you were no more than a figment of my imagination. Therefore, if you continue to exist, so must I” (556). The clever Solomon surely recognizes the ironic solipsism of his statement. Solomon Gursky has been believed to be dead by everyone for decades. Only in Moses Berger’s mind does he exist. And Moses, as Solomon’s eventual biographer, can grant him immortality in print. Solomon exists only as long as Moses lives and remains interested.

The North is at the heart of the Gursky story and while it is the place where Ephraim defies death, it is also the place to which he returns to die. When Solomon is nine years old and Ephraim ninety-one, the old man takes Solomon, his chosen heir, on a journey from the Saskatchewan Prairies to the Polar Sea. Solomon asks where they are going, and in an exchange often repeated in the novel Ephraim replies:

“We’re heading north.”

“Where?”

“Far.” (34)

After Ephraim has passed on his knowledge and legacy to Solomon, he tells Solomon that the Inuit will come. They will hide Ephraim until the old man dies. Decades later, Moses, who wonders if Solomon is still alive, is outside raking leaves. Moses thinks that Solomon must surely be
dead, but just then a black Gypsy Moth airplane, the kind that Solomon flew, passes low and then begins to climb, and Moses knows where: “North. Where north? Far” (556). In Solomon Gursky Was Here North becomes a place where these almost immortal and mythic characters are reborn and return to die.

In Rudy Wiebe’s A Discovery of Strangers, it seems that the British explorers bring death to the North; it comes with them to the Yellowknife’s land. The English arrive, noisily declaring themselves, and the Yellowknife associate this noise with death, in the blasting of guns and chopping of trees. The Yellowknife worry that all this noise will scare the animals away forever. Greenstockings and her mother hear the crash of English axes felling timber to build Fort Enterprise, and the young woman fears that soon the trees will all be dead, “Killed by these English,” and she imagines the trees as the building, “piled up on one another into square naked corners [. . .] their brown dried blood sticking them together into walls wherever they touch” (38-39). For the Yellowknife, the world all around them is alive and must be respected, something that the English do not understand. This cultural difference is even more pronounced with respect to animals.

The massive killing of animals to support the British expedition causes discord among the Yellowknife. Because the Yellowknife believe that the animals give themselves, allow themselves to be killed, this
sacrifice deserves respect and thankfulness. Keskarrah, elder and Greenstockings's father, criticizes the new method of hunting where hunters fire guns from great distances without touching the animal until long after it dies (115). He tells Broadface, a hunter, that shooting animals is wrong, that it is not the way numberless beautiful caribou, who always will make it possible for human beings to live, should be forced to die. There is too much sacrifice being demanded. There is no consideration or tenderness left in so much long-distance killing; only noise and stink. (115-116)

He asks for what, and answers himself, "For huge, fat men in gigantic canoes? These strangers?" (116). Greenstockings echoes her father's sentiments, criticizing her own hunters: "they'll kill all the animals, so many they'll go away to avoid being killed" (36). The Yellowknife become increasingly dependent upon the British for supplies and shot, and again Keskarrah speaks for his people. He reminds them that they have lots of ways of killing, they do not need more, and they should not have to beg the British for powder, beg others in their own land (264).

The mass slaughter of trees and animals constitutes only part of the carnage on the expedition. More than half of the party died on Franklin's first journey, and Hepburn notes the irony that all but one British officer survived while ten of the twelve voyageurs died.
in his candid pub scene, attributes this to the voyageurs having to carry so much useless stuff. Despite being so very strong, “they got caught on a neat point: what between starving an’ dropping of scurvy an’ freezing, they were just worked to death” (289). By the time they need to walk back across the tundra, the expedition’s labourers have no strength left. Ultimately, class differences determine who will survive. One class’s heroic martyrdom is another class’s senseless death.

In *A Discovery of Strangers*, while the British seem to be accompanied by death, death is already there waiting for them. During the winter that the expedition waits at Fort Enterprise, Greenstockings’s mother Birdseye dreams their whole journey to the Everlasting Ice and back, presaging the tragedy and the deaths. Even before Greenstockings and Hood become lovers, Greenstockings knows that he will die and feels free to love him because, she reasons, she cannot possibly do him any harm (84). She is wrong however; Michel, who steals her and is punished, gets his revenge on Hood. Once Hood has endured all his suffering from starvation and scurvy, in the last moments before he dies, Michel kills him with a shot in the back of the head (251). Ironically, after all of Hood’s suffering he is denied a peaceful death. Birdseye has dreamt this too, although Greenstockings did not completely understand.

The crew’s disaster is also foretold. Keskarrah warns Franklin that the journey will end at the double rapids on the Coppermine River, that
they will spend days stranded there, unable to cross, and that this will be the turning point of their journey. Franklin gives Keskarrah a patronizing smile and says that in such a large land, they will be sure to avoid the fatal double rapids. Keskarrah knows the “inevitability of the land” and leaves Franklin to his unchangeable fate (206-207). The fate of the expedition is charged with irony: irony in failing to heed the warnings, irony in knowing what will happen but being unable to prevent the tragedy anyway, and irony in the British believing that they are men in control of their own destinies.

Two other pieces illuminate interesting aspects of Franklin’s symbolic association with death. J. Macdonald Oxley’s *North Overland with Franklin* (1901) is a typical boys’ adventure story. The protagonist, a young Cree and French boy named Dennis Latour, travels with Franklin on a fictionalized version of the 1819-1822 expedition. While following the basic plot of the expedition (clearly the author uses Franklin’s journal), the novel presents a series of Dennis’s misadventures. Chapter after chapter, the vain and spirited boy gets himself into scrapes by showing off, each time narrowly escaping disaster. Eventually Dennis learns humility and kindness from Franklin, who acts as a father figure on the adventure. Worth noting is that Dennis’s adventures, for the most part, centre on hunting, and Dennis, by the end of the novel, has a list of kills worthy of any trophy hunter. He bags an eagle, wood partridge, a
bear, moose, deer, many buffalo, and a musk ox. The book is a product of its time and genre. The adventure story, with a young man asserting himself in the wilds by hunting animals, gets reexamined in later decades. Wiebe's *A Discovery of Strangers*, for example, calls all this carnage into question. In terms of plot, the first Franklin expedition gives a perfect opportunity for adventure and the shooting of animals, a chance for a young man to mature and assert himself. That completely different genres, themes, and time periods can employ essentially the same events attests to the malleability of the Franklin story.

Pop music icon James Taylor’s song “The Frozen Man” is inspired by photos of John Torrington and the sailors exhumed on Beechey Island. Many have noted how disarmingly alive they seem, and Taylor imagines that modern technology has brought one of them back to life. Casting him a little later, Taylor’s frozen man is William James McPhee, a Liverpool sailor who drowned at sea. The frozen man explains that doctors revived him and that the newspapers now call him “state of the art.” However, when children see him they cry in fear. When the frozen man visits his grave, he learns that his wife and daughter have both died of old age. The refrain in this sad ballad is “Lord have mercy on the frozen man,” and the sailor finishes with, “See here, when I die make sure I'm gone / Don't leave 'em nothing to work on.” So much for the promise of cryogenics. Taylor’s song makes a unique contribution to the
literature because it takes on the notion of ghosts and the truly haunting presence that John Torrington and the other sailors from Beechey Island have had in the public imagination; in the photographs, those men seem so close to being alive.

Death tropes in the literature that incorporates Franklin are obviously appropriate to his story, but death finds a significant place in all of literature. In the introduction to a collection of essays on novelists' representations of death, Diana York Blaine writes, "Because death can finally be known only through the stories that we tell about it, the novel functions as a logical site for representations of mortality." For "novel," one might read "literature." Interestingly, in the way that death is unknown to us, so too is the final destiny of Franklin and his crew. At this point, only through literature and imaginative works can the story find closure.
Chapter 6

**Quest: Passages, Pilgrimages, and the Pole of Great Price**

The notion of quest can be adapted to almost any story. Joseph Campbell’s “monomyth” (as James Joyce coined it) delineates the prototypical quest. In his seminal book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell outlines the “standard path of the mythological adventure hero,” which he claims is found in all cultures and in every century:

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from his mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man. (30)

All our archetypal heroes reenact this pattern: Ulysses, Jesus, Mohammed, Jason, the Buddha, Moses, King Arthur, medieval knights, and Arctic explorers.

The North works superbly as a place to launch a quest. It became a place of the Golden Fleece or Holy Grail, inherently mysterious, inhospitable, and inaccessible. Decades before Franklin’s third expedition, British whalers such as William Scoresby were questioning the commercial practicality of the Northwest Passage (Berton 25). Discovery and conquest of the passage became almost more precious as
a feat of national pride. Pierre Berton's history of the search for the Northwest Passage and the North Pole pulls together these ideas in its title, *The Arctic Grail: The Quest for the North West Passage and the North Pole, 1818-1909*, casting this whole period of Arctic exploration in the image of mediaeval knights.

Franklin filled the role of questing hero a number of times in his career, and he and his Arctic explorer colleagues were often referred to as polar knights or knights of the Arctic. Franklin’s first command, the overland expedition of 1819-1822, fulfills the classic quest pattern. Its popular appeal was, no doubt, partly due to its sensational nature; however, if Campbell is correct, the quest paradigm that it reenacted would have struck a chord deep in the human psyche. As soon as Franklin left England in 1819 the trials began—difficulty recruiting men, problems with obtaining supplies, a bickering and mutinous crew, a seductive woman, dueling suitors, bad weather, starvation, murder, an execution, cannibalism, and the hero narrowly escaping death. Franklin lived, mapped much of the Canadian Arctic coast, returned to England, was promoted, made money, and married the vivacious Eleanor Pordon. Franklin’s first expedition, despite all the tragedy, was a perfect quest. The problem with Franklin’s second journey to the Arctic coast is that while it was much more successful as a Navy expedition, it was disappointing as a quest—not nearly enough trials. The only bit of real
adventure was an encounter with some Inuit, and, in comparing
Franklin’s travel journals to his published book, Richard Davis suggests
that Franklin spiced up this episode for publication (“Explorer Cum”).
Nonetheless, this trip earned Franklin a knighthood. For Franklin’s final
trip, we have a better quest, but one that finishes poorly—plenty of trials
but no reintegration into society. Franklin does get credit for discovering
the Northwest Passage, but it smacks a little of winning Miss
Congeniality. Interestingly, from the point of view of literature, much
more is made of the final journey. For contemporary writers this final
expedition is especially fruitful as a failed quest—Franklin becomes anti­
heroic and ironic. Creative writers have drawn on Franklin’s whole life for
material, but some episodes give authors more with which to work. While
Rudy Wiebe’s *A Discovery of Strangers* fictionalizes the first expedition
and Nancy Cato is able to make much of the intrigues of Franklin’s
tenure in Van Dieman’s land, nobody touches the second, very
successful trip. The second journey suffers because it lacks the true
conflict that we expect from literature and from quests.

In Margaret Atwood’s “The Age of Lead,” Jane is attracted to the
documentary on the Franklin expedition because of the parallels she
draws between John Torrington and her recently dead friend Vincent,
but her affinity for Arctic exploration began as a teenager. This is where
she likens exploration to sex before the Pill:
[. . .] the idea of exploration appealed to her then: to get onto
a boat and just go somewhere, somewhere mapless, off into
the unknown. To launch yourself into fright; to find things
out. There was something daring and noble about it, despite
all of the losses and failures, or perhaps because of them. It
was like having sex, in high school, in those days before the
Pill, even if you took precautions. If you were a girl, that is.
(156)

Arctic exploration comes to stand for the epitome of feminine risk and
masculine derring-do. Jane distinguishes between the explorations of
Marco Polo or of the headwaters of the Nile, which are more exotic, and
perhaps more like the escapades of teenaged boys at the beginning of the
1960s, for whom sex was not such a risk. Boys had to do other things:
“things with weapons or large amounts of alcohol, or high-speed
vehicles” (156). For Jane as a teenager, the Franklin expedition
represented a launch into fright, a risk. As an adult, looking back with
more experience, she sees the Franklin expedition as a metaphor for
mysterious death and a contaminated environment. Atwood’s story, in
this way, partially explains the richness of the Franklin story. It can
mean such completely different things to one woman in the early 1960s
in Toronto than it does to her some twenty years later.
In “The Age of Lead,” the initial attraction of the romance of the quest is overturned by the realities of the quest. Once the deaths and losses that provided some of the romance become real, things change. Where young Jane sees the excitement of the embarking, her mature self focuses on the end of the expedition, the quest gone bad. She describes, near the end of the story, the consequences of the lead poisoning and the last movement of the quest:

It invaded their bones, their lungs, their brains, weakening them and confusing their thinking, so that at the end those that had not died in the ships set out on an idiotic trek across the stony, icy ground pulling a lifeboat laden down with tooth brushes, soap, handkerchiefs, and slippers, useless pieces of junk. (168)

Jane sees a parallel trek that occurs in front of her house and the relics that are left behind each morning:

She picks them up, clears them away, but they appear again overnight, like a trail left by an army on the march or by the fleeing residents of a city under bombardment, discarding the objects that were once thought essential but are now too heavy to carry. (169)

“The Age of Lead” points to parallels in history, our time with Franklin’s time, but it also suggests the human condition. Quests are for the young
and heroic. In youth, the beginning of the quest is hopeful and romantic, without much care or attention to particulars. Later, the reality of the quest sets in with all its complications and consequences.

In *Terror and Erebus*, Gwendolyn MacEwen deals with the quest in three main ways: first, one period’s arduous quest becomes another period’s commonplace trip; second, quest for one culture may be completely unfathomable to another; and third, quest can be less a triumph over geography than a willing of the mind. To begin, Rasmussen, coming a century after the third Franklin expedition, notes the irony of the ease of his travels compared to the agony of Franklin’s expedition. Where Franklin’s crew “marked the / way with bones” and “their bodies / Like shattered compasses,” Rasmussen contemplates his own coming to the Arctic: “A century later, my pockets stuffed with / comfortable maps” (121). At the end of the play, Rasmussen returns to this contrast of past and present, using a metaphor linking bones and compasses. Since no papers survive, Rasmussen reads the remains, these human journals:

I’ve seen the skulls of your men
in the snow, their terrible bones
Arranged around cairns like
compasses,
Marking out all the latitudes
and longitudes

of men. (132)

Rasmussen recognizes how hard the knowledge was won and in that lies the irony of the ease with which others are able to follow: “And great white ships plough through it / Over and over again, / Packed with cargo and carefree men” (133). It is as if time has made the achievement, the quest, almost nothing at all.

The Inuk, Qaqortingneq, interprets the play and the expedition from the Inuit point of view, one that does not understand this quest. As Eve D'Aeth writes in an introduction to the play, “For Qaqortingnek (sic), the western metaphorical and literal exploration does not exist: he is at home, dealing only with actuality” (112). Qaqortingneq, reporting to Rasmussen, tells about “our fathers” finding a ship, and the refrain throughout his story is “they did not understand” (131)—about the ship, about the guns, about the darkness in the hull, and about the significance of papers. Indeed, the children play with the papers: “They threw them into the wind / Like birds . . .” (132). Qaqortingneq’s interpretation reveals a number of things. Because another culture completely misunderstands the endeavor of Arctic exploration, this suggests the cultural relativity of the concept of quest. But there is also the strange eeriness of the people who live there simply coming to explore the boat, the site of so much significance and suffering, that for them
signifies so little. The site where the English Navy’s best and brightest perished is where Inuit children play, scattering precious documents to the wind.

In a related notion, quest may be not just culturally relative, but so individually relative as to be the product of a single mind. Rasmussen suggests that Franklin did not just discover the Northwest Passage, rather he somehow created it by a willing of the mind. Rasmussen begins this contemplation by imagining Franklin’s body as a constellation in the snow. He continues:

You carried all maps within you;
Land masses moved in relation to you—
As though you created the passage
By willing it to be.
Ah Franklin!
To follow you one does not need geography. (122)

The quest then, as Rasmussen imagines it, is partly geographical and partly spiritual. Its twofold nature involves,

Seeking a passage from imagination to reality,
Seeking a passage from land to land by sea. (122)
And finally, when the whole thing is done and when ships and men pass through the Northwest Passage with relative ease,

It is as though no one had to prove it
Because the passage was always there.
Or . . . is it that the way was invented,
Franklin?

That you cracked the passage open
With the force of your sheer certainty?
Or is it that you cannot know,
Can never know,
Where the passage lies
Between conjecture and reality . . . ? (133)

MacEwen presents us with a mystical interpretation of Franklin’s achievement. Franklin’s culture created this particular quest, one that the Inuit in their homeland do not understand. But more than that, as McEwan suggests, Franklin himself may have somehow created the passage. He never travelled through it—it would be more than fifty years before Roald Amundsen did that—but Franklin found the passage and may have somehow willed it into being.

Geoff Kavanagh’s *Ditch* undercuts the quest theme in many ways. Whitbread and Hennesey are not questing heroes initiated into adventure, overcoming trials and temptations, and returning home to
claim prizes and women. Instead, they are two common sailors on the expedition because of bad luck, succumbing to temptations, failing their trials, dying on the quest, and not interested in women anyway. As we find out, Hennesey joined the Navy when his business was destroyed—his onion soup cart was stolen. Whitbread was expelled from school, presumably for his homosexuality. The men are down on their luck and not heroic agents of their own destinies. The humourous dialogue, while showing they are clever, ironic characters, indicates that they lack almost all heroic qualities: bravery, fortitude, strength, endurance, and spirit. They do, however, in the end, show loyalty, kindness, and love. Kavanagh considers quest from the point of view of the less heroic members of the expedition. While we often focus the face of the hero with a thousand faces, heroic endeavor involves thousands of faces that are not the hero's; others who row the boats, carry packs, set sails, cook meals, man-haul sledges, and serve officers. Hennesey and Whitbread are not heroes, but ordinary men, and this seems to be a more important story for our time.

The two men do question the purpose of the quest. At the beginning, Hennesey says bitterly,

Nineteen months stuck in the ice trying to find the quick way to China! It wasn't much though, was it? We had fun, didn't
we—watching everybody go mad, get sick, start dying?

Wasn’t that worth the quick route. (143)

Later, Hennesey revises some of his thinking and tries to make sense of the whole expedition:

What was the friggin’ purpose, did you ever wonder? They knew there wasn’t any trade route through here years ago—it was all just to get to the other side. For what? So that we could say we did it, so we could sit around the pub for the rest of our lives talking about the year we spent on the fucking ice. (178)

Finally, Hennesey speculates what will be named in their honour: “The Two Wolf-Eaten Bastards in a Ditch Tea Company’ or ‘Broken Food Stockings or Buggers Handkerchiefs’” (179). Surely some of the sailors on the lower decks would have questioned an expedition such as this, even though Hennesey’s irony reveals a very late twentieth-century perspective. He emphasizes the human sacrifice that ordinary sailors like himself and Whitbread made for very little pay: the wages of sailors and bragging rights as old men in a pub.

Mordecai Richler’s *Solomon Gursky Was Here* involves a number of levels of quest. The charming and elusive Solomon Gursky initiates and then leads his seeker, Moses Berger. Moses spends decades following Solomon around the world, trying to piece together Solomon’s story. The
novel begins with a middle-aged Moses searching for his Silver Doctor salmon fly, looking through his comprehensive Arctic library, clippings and notes about the Gurskys, and Solomon's journals. Moses thinks back to his father taking him to a Gursky birthday when Moses was eleven, and he wonders how his life might have been different if he had not become obsessed with the Gurskys and Solomon. "The legendary Solomon. His bane, his spur" (11). We imagine Moses, the fisherman, spending his life trying to tease this fish from the water. However, when his Silver Doctor shows up at the end of the novel, Moses comes to a sudden realization:

His Silver Doctor. After all his years on the rivers it finally struck him that he wasn't the angler but the salmon. A teasing, gleeful Solomon casting the flies over his head, getting him to roll, rise and dance at will. Sea-bright Moses was when he first took the hook, but no more than a black salmon now, ice-bound in a dark river, the open sea closed to him. (550)

Moses is obliged, finally, to write the biography of Solomon Gursky. He has, however, spent his life chasing the illusion, the shape-shifting raven Solomon. This shows one possible danger of the quest—the potential for a less-than-sincere mentor to take advantage of the eager, enthusiastic initiate, sending him on a fool's errand.
Solomon Gursky Was Here also explores the significance of the Arctic as a particular site for quest. Stories of the Arctic with its cold cleanliness hold the same spell for Ephraim as they did for many in Victorian England. Ephraim Gursky, prisoner in Newgate, becomes captivated by the tales of the Orkney boatman, an unnamed inmate whom we assume to be John Hepburn. In exchange for food and tobacco, the boatman regales young Ephraim with tales of his journey with Lieutenant John Franklin to the shores of the Polar Sea:

In that stifling cell that crawled with lice, cockroaches, and sewer rats, that stank of excrement and urine and reverberated with the hacking of men already taken with typhus, Ephraim dreamt of a cool white land where the summer sun never set and herds of reindeer extended as far as the horizon. (418-419)

For a man like Ephraim, who has spent his life in London, the seedy side of London at that, this must seem like heaven. The Canadian North becomes his promised land. Ironically, yet appropriately, Ephraim's initiation occurs in prison. This anti-hero is sent on his quest, joins the Franklin expedition, survives that ordeal, founds an Arctic religion, fathers twenty-eight children, and becomes patriarch of a liquor dynasty. As an old man, Ephraim takes the young Solomon to the Arctic and explains to the boy, “It was the dying Orkneyman,’ he said, “the boatman
I met in Newgate prison, who led me and now you to this shore” (42). Ephraim then initiates Solomon, teaching him Jewish traditions, to hunt, to read Latin, to handle dogs, and to live in the North—in other words, skills to survive. Ephraim, at ninety-one, remains in the Arctic to die while Solomon returns south to fulfill his destiny, which continues to be linked to the North. Appropriate to this comic myth, our hero Ephraim is a petty criminal sent forth from Newgate. He sneaks onto the boat by forging a letter from Lady Jane, and survives by his wits, nerve, good luck, and observance of a kosher diet.

In *A Discovery of Strangers* Rudy Wiebe explores quest in terms of related notions of conquest, discovery, and sacrifice, emphasizing the irony of the endeavor and the misunderstanding between cultures. The cultural misunderstandings begin immediately with Back’s reading of the King’s royal proclamation on the expedition. The proclamation to the Yellowknife states that the explorers have come as warriors and “have not come to trade, but to establish good relations between us and yourselves, and to discover the resources of your country.” If the Yellowknife assist the expedition, the King will send huge ships to trade with them and their enemies will “fade away with envy at your wealth and power” (42). Instead of wowing the Yellowknife, this pompous speech leads to much shrewd and comical questioning. To begin, the Yellowknife are alarmed by the “huge ships.” Back assumes that they are too
backward to comprehend such large ships; however, in Wiebe's presentation, it is more likely that the Yellowknife, who know their land so intimately, realize that ships that large could never reach them. When Hood produces a sketch of a ship from Hudson Bay, the Yellowknife immediately focus on the Inuit in the kayaks, ignoring the ships. They despair that the British have traded with their enemies, the "Raw-Meat Eaters." The explorers say that the Great Father wants his children to live in peace, to which old Keskarrah asks, why then have they come as warriors and not traders. A frustrated Back concludes, "What can the inhabitants of such a desolate land understand concerning the political and national philosophies of an empire?" (44). The Yellowknife never do understand the British quest and perhaps, if they had understood the long-term consequences, might not have been so helpful. They assist the British because the explorers bring things that the Yellowknife want—needles, guns, shot, trinkets—and later because the British need help, because no Yellowknife would let fellow human beings starve. But the Yellowknife never understand the purpose of the expedition, many times questioning why the explorers want to go to the Everlasting Ice and repeatedly telling the British that there is nothing there.

The British quest also involves its related concept of conquest. Franklin's party is not an army invading a country so it conquers by other means—by naming everything. In an attempt to appropriate
Greenstockings, the British give her that name, one that they can easily say; only Hood ever attempts to say her Yellowknife name. Ironically, the British name a lake after her which is not her name anyway: “The lake they named after her, later, was no more than an infinitesimal detail in their grand attempt to rename the entire country.” The absurdity of this endless naming is not lost on Greenstockings. She reflects:

These English. Who also tried to name every lake and river with whatever sound slips from their mouths: Singing Lake and Aurora and Grizzle Bear and Snare lakes and Starvation River, or the names of hunters, Longleg, Baldhead, Humpy, Little Forehead, and a hundred other things, or a thousand—it is truly difficult for a few men who glance at it once to name an entire country. (22)

The British believe in the power of naming to appropriate land and to pay tribute. However, Greenstockings notes the futility of their naming of a number of lakes after the voyageurs: “As if [this naming] would change the People’s memory of their strength and dancing and laughter, or how miserably they died” (24). Both the British and the Yellowknife understand the power of naming, but the Yellowknife understanding is more subtle; they recognize that names given casually or out of guilt lack meaning.
Discovery is integral to quest and to this novel, as its title indicates. Many readers begin the book assuming that the discovery is done by the Europeans, and the strangers are the Yellowknife. The king’s proclamation indicates the expedition is to “discover the resources” of the Yellowknife’s land. Soon, however, we learn that the discoveries go different directions and that all the people are strangers. The Yellowknife frequently refer to the British as the strangers. Greenstockings often notes the strangeness of Hood, especially his “undemandedness,” and wonders if he is a character from one of her people’s stories: “Snow Man?—a story of a stranger, of danger coming and going—or bones, the hard necessity of eating?” (21).

Another ironic discovery occurs within the expedition party at the fatal delay at the double rapids on Coppermine River. Richardson attempts to swim across the freezing water and must be pulled out after a few strokes. In stripping him to dry and warm him, the voyageurs are “dumbfounded at the revelation of his body. [. . .] As if they had clawed over thousands of miles of sea and land and back over the land again, to discover no more than each other’s walking skeletons” (232). Geographical discoveries prove secondary to the discoveries of each other. Faced with possible death, the crewmembers also discover what they are willing to do to survive.
The importance of sacrifice to the British notion of quest comes to be questioned in the expedition's darker hours. On the trip back from the coast, Hood, Hepburn, Richardson, and Michel have been left behind by the stronger members. While Michel sleeps, the three Navy men contemplate their hunger and their mortality:

If Michel were awake and if he, after two years of working for them, had some understanding of what it was these strangers wanted so badly to find that it made them drag themselves so mercilessly over oceans and lands, a trek on which they expected every inhabitant they met to be similarly sacrificial and assist them for nothing more than what they had already decided was "proper compensation", yes, to slave for them to the very point of death, perhaps then Michel too would be weeping. However, it is Hepburn who sobs aloud. (242)

Yet as distraught as Hepburn seems here, he is able to put the quest into perspective in his own life. Presented with two possibilities of senseless sacrifice, he chooses the one in the Arctic. A voice of reason, yet a product of his time and culture, Hepburn decides:

I prefer to collapse carrying a good man across snow than to firing massive guns at lads who, like myself, have been stolen from our birthplace and are as ignorant as I about the
grand Empire purpose of our miserable deaths; or our mutilations, body and soul. Having suffered both, I prefer starvation to war. (106)

While for Hepburn this quest is palatable as the lesser of two evils, to the Yellowknife the British expedition seems simply senseless. The Yellowknife’s continual questioning of the quest reminds the reader that it needs to be questioned and that the cost of such endeavors is often too high.

Many other writers have taken up the Franklin story as a metaphor for their own spiritual quests, one of the earliest being Henry David Thoreau. In *Walden*, the story of the author’s year and a half living off the land in nineteenth-century Massachusetts, Thoreau advocates an inward journey, an exploration of one’s personal undiscovered reaches. Published in 1854, *Walden* takes place during the search for Franklin, just as Americans were becoming involved. In his “Conclusion” Thoreau asks,

Is Franklin the only man who is lost, that his wife should be so earnest to find him? Does Mr. Grinnell [an American who funded a search party] know where he himself is? Be rather the Mungo Park, the Lewis and Clarke and Frobisher, of your own streams and oceans; explore your own higher latitudes,—with shiploads of preserved meats to support
you, if they be necessary; and pile the empty cans sky-high for a sign. Were preserved meats invented to preserve meat merely? Nay, be a Columbus to whole new Continents and worlds within you, opening new channels, not of trade, but of thought. (189)

Thoreau notes the preserved meats and presumably refers to the empty tins piled at Beechey Island. Thoreau contrasts the expense and effort of geographical discovery with the more important odyssey of self-discovery.

In Annie Dillard’s essay “Exploration to the Pole” (1982), she uses Arctic exploration as an extended metaphor for her own search for God and the Absolute. Alternating between the story of her own spiritual quest and various histories of polar exploration, she draws parallels between the sublime nature of quests and the absurdity of the human seekers. She notes that while the Franklin expedition itself was fruitless, it led to the most productive period in Arctic exploration. She talks about the Pole of Relative Inaccessibility, the imaginary pole in the Arctic Ocean farthest from land in any direction, and that this is consolation for those who after Peary “had nowhere special to go” (36). The Absolute then, is the Pole of Relative Inaccessibility in metaphysics, that point of spirit farthest form every accessible point of spirit in all directions. Dillard calls this, in an inspired pun, “the pole of great price” (37). It is what she is seeking. From the accounts of explorers like John Franklin and Robert
Falcon Scott, she gathers that they sought “something of the sublime. Simplicity and purity attracted them; they set out to perform clear tasks in uncontaminated lands” (46). She looks at the technology of the Franklin expedition, in many ways “adapted only to conditions in the Royal Navy’s officers’ club in England” (42). Alternatively, she looks at her Sundays at her Catholic Church, with a less than polished youth choir, an uninspiring liturgy, and reluctant parishioners. She realizes that this comically banal setting is critical to her spiritual journey. Whether the quest is Arctic or spiritual, Dillard leaves us to grapple with the absurd behaviour of human beings in our questing for the sublime.

Canadian folk musician Stan Rogers also looks at Franklin in his song “Northwest Passage,” and, for Rogers as well, polar exploration becomes a metaphor for his own spiritual journey. Rather than a quest into the unknown, the modern seeker makes a pilgrimage instead. The singer is driving across Canada and meditating on the many explorers who went before him. He does not have to endure the trials of the first explorers, but he is on a quest nonetheless. The chorus brings us back to Franklin:

Ah, for just one time I would take the Northwest Passage To find the hand of Franklin reaching for the Beaufort Sea; Tracing one warm line through a land so wild and savage And make a Northwest Passage to the sea.
The singer compares himself to earlier explorers, men who lived settled lives but took up exploring. As Margaret Atwood has written, Roger’s journey is a metaphor, a spiritual journey, “because the real, physical puzzle has been solved and the way made easy; but it’s been solved by the dead explorers, who are somehow there, incarnate, in the routes they helped to trace” (Atwood, *Strange Things* 33). This is Franklin, still somehow alive and “reaching for Beaufort Sea.”
CHAPTER 7

Conclusion: If the Record Is Substantial Enough . . .

Franklin disappeared, but Franklin will never be completely lost. Given Lady Franklin’s relentless search for documents concerning her husband, she might take some comfort in the volumes that have been written about him, the paper legacy that guarantees he will never be completely lost. However, Lady Jane was looking for a different kind of record, something that gave historical proof, not necessarily the reinterpretations of her husband by creative writers. She was, in fact, hoping for the kind of proof that someone like Robert Falcon Scott provided for his own fatal journey.

In Britain’s high age of polar exploration of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the British had two martyrs to the enterprise, one for each pole—John Franklin in the North and Robert Falcon Scott in the South. Franklin’s disaster of the 1840s and 1850s was to some degree eclipsed (particularly in England) by Scott’s disaster in 1912. Scott’s expedition was more recent, but more importantly, he eclipsed Franklin (and arguably his rival Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen who actually beat him to the South Pole) by leaving a diary of his heroic martyrdom to exploration. Scott did not write the usual dry Navy journal but a moving document of bravery, heroism, and fine conception. Few
writers could produce such stirring prose under the most ideal of circumstances let alone in a tent at freezing temperatures with winds blowing and comrades dying. The journal guaranteed heroism, for a time, for Scott and his men, but it also gave his story closure. Scott's tale has been reevaluated in the ensuing decades, but it is not nearly so open to creative conjecture as Franklin's. Franklin did not leave a conclusive document, the proof on paper that his wife searched desperately for for the rest of her life. And in this omission is the seed of Franklin's afterlife in literature, where his story's potential for speculation eclipses Scott's. The creative literature that incorporates Franklin addresses some of the mystery. As well, it tells us about the man and polar exploration, about the literature itself, and most importantly about ourselves.

One of the central aspects of Franklin's story that the recent creative works I have discussed focus on is the irony that infuses his career. Franklin's tale is a veritable catalogue of irony. His first two expeditions were successful in terms of geographical achievement, as he mapped more than two-thirds of the northern coast of North America; however, he is most famous for the grand failure of his final expedition. Franklin and his men are sometimes given credit for finding the Northwest Passage, but all died in the process. His final expedition, employing the most current of nineteenth-century technology, failed miserably because that technology proved useless in the North; the
canned food, a Victorian technological wonder that should have prevented starvation, turned out to cause lead poisoning. After his disappearance, the search for Franklin proved more fruitful for discovery of the unknown Arctic than any of his own expeditions or previous exploration had. And after dedicating much money and many lives to discovering the passage, the British never did use it. Franklin’s personal life is similarly riddled with irony. Described as an earnest, plodding sort of man, Franklin married two brilliant, sparkling women. His second wife, the ambitious and independent Jane Franklin, dedicated the last thirty years of her life to searching for a dead husband. Even his death is ironic—dying, it is believed, of a stroke or heart attack, and thereby avoiding a more appropriately adventurous death. The exhumations on Beechey Island in the 1980s and the bones recovered from King William Island are also infused with irony. They are Lazarus back from the dead giving us some of the most important clues that these men failed to leave while they lived. Franklin’s story, so filled with irony, has made possible many of the ironic interpretations in contemporary literature.

Despite the fictional nature of the pieces considered in this thesis, each treatment tells us a little something more about the Franklin expeditions, polar exploration, and the larger enterprise of European exploration westward. While we cannot expect creative works to add facts or actual discoveries, literature can show us different perspectives. These
works remind us of the individual human costs of exploration when the
tendency is to view it nationally or collectively. Literature also demands
an acknowledgment of the price paid by indigenous peoples in
exploration and its aftermath and suggests the possibility of other
versions of the events, versions true to human nature and art, but not
necessarily verifiable in history. Margaret Atwood takes us into the hull
of the ship, Gwendolyn McEwen walks us across the tundra, Rudy Wiebe
puts us into smoky fire-lit lodges, and Mordecai Richler and Geoff
Kavanagh recreate the last days of final survivors on King William Island.
Literature questions the heroic nature of quests by presenting the
starkness of the misery and suffering; it foregrounds hubris in human’s
interaction with nature and land; and it highlights the folly of supreme
reliance on technology—all lessons for our own time. Literary treatments
of Franklin not only tell us about his expedition, but also tell us about
exploration in general.

And most importantly, particularly when we consider the five
pieces of contemporary literature that I have focused on in this thesis,
the reinterpretations of Sir John Franklin tell us about ourselves as
Canadians and as human beings—our need to find ourselves in a myth
of origin and yet to define ourselves against it and through this myth to
continue clarifying our enduring relationship to the land and to nature.
The literature attests to our need to rewrite our myths of origin to include
others who are often overlooked: First Nations, Inuit, Jews, homosexuals, women, voyageurs, and deckhands. The literature speaks to the compelling nature of mysteries and to the attraction of irony. Where creative writings of fifty or a hundred years ago might have stressed the heroism of Franklin, our own time reevaluates his story in terms of our own needs and concerns. A story as malleable as Franklin’s changes over time to make it useable history for different periods. The current literature on Franklin also attests to our continued longing for quests and the irony of being faced with nowhere in particular to go. And the retellings of the Franklin story confirm the significance of good stories, those that tell us about basic human preoccupations such as food, sex, death, and quest.

Writing about Scott, Francis Spufford noted the many reinterpretations of Scott in history and popular culture: “[. . .] stories do survive; Scott’s story in particular survives. Like any successful myth, it provides a skeleton ready to be dressed over and over in the different flesh different decades feel appropriate” (4). If this is true for Scott’s story, how much truer it must be for Franklin’s, given its many mysteries, multiple narratives, and large cast of characters. This study looks especially at the styles in which authors of the 1990s have chosen to flesh out the skeleton of Franklin’s myth.


APPENDIX

Bibliography of Creative Works that Incorporate Franklin


Brodie, Erasmus H. *Euthanasia: A Poem in four Cantos of Spenserian Metre on The Discovery of the North-West Passage By Sir John Franklin, Knight.* London, UK: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1866.

Brundle, John. *Across the Arctic Seas.* John Brundle: Roche’s Point, ON, 1951.


