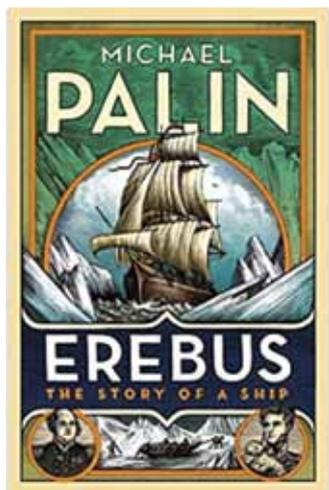


# Book Reviews



## **Erebus: The Story of a Ship,**

Michael Palin

**Hardcover:** 352 pages

**Price:** £10.00

**Publisher:** Random House Books (20.09.18)

**ISBN-10:** 184794812X

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(Different cover design)

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## **Reviewed by**

**Len Wingfield**

**I**N RECENT YEARS we have been satiated with stories of Franklin's attempt to find the Northwest Passage, TV pictures of mummified crewmen and so on. However Palin, past President of the Royal Geographical Society, has written a book that revived my keen interest. It covers the



story of the *Erebus* and her sister ship *Terror*, from their building to the discovery of their wrecks and the latest evidence suggesting reasons for the disastrous ending of Franklin's expedition.

Franklin's failure overshadows the brilliant successes of the earlier Antarctic discoveries by the same two ships. Sir John Ross and then James Clark Ross were fine commanders and both were lucky, the latter particularly so. At one point in poor visibility and severe winds, both the *Erebus* and the *Terror* were squeezed together in a narrow lane between two icebergs with no room to manoeuvre. They collided with each other, hitting the sides of the icebergs, receiving severe damage, the *Erebus* losing its fore topmast and bowsprit, thus having to sail through stern-boarding and with *Terror's* anchor too deeply embedded in its side to be removed! Then they had to sail round Cape Horn with dodgy lash-up repairs!

Franklin was not lucky. Fatally, his expedition coincided with three exceptionally cold winters. There were issues with the food, which was poor quality and/or poisoned from lead soldered food tins. Palin has challenged this popular theory, pointing out that the corpses could be expected to contain lead, from the lead water pipes commonly used at that time. (And still in my time!)

Above all, like so many at that time, he failed to learn from the native Inuit. Franklin's devoted and influential wife Jane tirelessly campaigned for rescue bids to be mounted, offering a huge reward for information on Franklin's fate. Dr John Rae, who did befriend and learn from the Inuit, mounted a very successful expedition but was vilified when he reported evidence of cannibalism.

Lady Franklin's 'Pretty Popsy' portrait belies the

fact that she was more of a Margaret Thatcher type and a major player in the Northwest Passage drama. **LW**



Above: Portrait of Lady Jane Franklin

Below: Sir John Franklin, painted by J. Jackson, RA. Engraved by E. Finden. Published by John Murray, 1828

Bottom: Two unforgettable images from the time: 'They forged the last link with their lives' by William Thomas Smith, and Landseer's 'Man Proposes, God Disposes'



## Captain Sir John Franklin ~ Filling in the Gaps



I avoided using this tired old image (left) for Len's review. It supports the opinion that Franklin was weak and past it. In fact he was the obvious popular choice and had the required expertise and experience to lead the expedition. The pitiless daguerrotype reveals only two things: he was almost 60, and he was suffering badly from influenza.

His first ill-fated land exploration on the Coppermine River, 1819-1822, taught him a lot, as did the later, fully successful Mackenzie River venture, 1825-1827. It has been said that his leadership of the first one was won by his personal charm '...because he had nothing else to recommend him,' despite the facts that he had fought at Trafalgar and the Battle of New Orleans, and had sailed with Flinders on the first circumnavigation of Australia.



(Left) This is Akaitcho, Chief of the Copper Indians, who saved the lives of the remnants of Franklin's first expedition by guiding them and giving them food – at a reasonable arranged price, which he never received but didn't complain about, being philosophical about British poverty! Franklin did appreciate the need to cultivate good relations with the indigenous population, but contacts with them were always complicated – for instance, the Indians were frightened of the Inuit and kept well away. This typically dislocated British journeys in territory that was occupied by both.



Franklin was supposed to be unfit, with poor circulation, often feeling cold in an English summer – it was also said that he would not move without drinking tea and only eight miles a day when he did. But he acquitted himself well and the venture on the Coppermine failed because the two fur trading companies in Canada that had promised to victual the group did nothing of the sort; they were too busy warring with each other. In the event, Franklin did not attain his goals. Murder and cannibalism prevailed, and over half the men died of starvation, for which Franklin had to accept responsibility. On the other hand, he quelled a mutiny,



and showed that he was more than tough enough to survive – wearing out his snowshoes completely – and became so famous as the man who had to eat his boots to survive (actually soft uncured moose hide moccasins) that the public forgave him everything.

The expedition, even though it failed, had covered 5,500 miles. Franklin's second land expedition, following the Mackenzie River, was a total success and showed how he had learned to organise and stand on his own two feet. Their winter quarters were positively luxurious and they wanted for nothing.

Franklin showed his versatility by designing lightweight boats, the largest 26ft long with a payload of nine men and three tons of equipment, yet it could be carried empty by six men. He took a light collapsible boat for river crossings. They added more than 1,000 miles of new coastline to the map and he was subsequently knighted.

Lady Jane, ever the organiser, arranged for 13 officers from *Erebus* and Captain Crozier of *Terror* to have their images taken on daguerrotypes, May 16, 1845.

A number of the officers wear their caps at rakish angles with sardonic smiles playing about their lips, like Lt. Graham Gore (left), as if exasperated by her ladyship's meddling, but this seems not to have been the case. The men took a boyish pleasure in the novelty of it all – James FitzJames, senior officer in *Erebus*, had an extra one taken for his family. They were technicians themselves, after all. These head and shoulders shots were a guinea apiece (one pound, one shilling). The exposure times were anything from a few seconds to five minutes, depending on the light, so the clarity of the images shows that they all kept seriously still and behaved themselves.

At the bottom is James Reid, Ice Master, a whaling captain from Aberdeen in his late forties, who had sailed in the Arctic since the age of 13. He wrote to his wife, unable to contain his enthusiasm, 'Lady Franklin has ordered all the officers' likenesses to be taken, and mine among the rest, with my uniform on.'

Keith Muscott