

**David C. WOODMAN, *Unravelling the Franklin Mystery: Inuit Testimony* (Montréal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991, xiv+390 p., ISBN 0-7735-0833-3)**

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Martin Heidegger, Bausinger's resolutely empirical approach deals more with a comparison of supposed concrete realizations of ideas (i.e., forms of folklore) than with the questions of intention, motivation, and strategy which underlie those realizations. Despite the fact that this collection of essays raises far more problems than it solves, Bausinger has effectively isolated and charted the precise nature of the challenges folklorists face in working with advanced technological societies. His consistently gloomy assessment of the future of such traditional genres as storytelling, festival, and folksong implicitly suggest their transformation into new genres perhaps better suited to the artistic articulation of socially constituted mental constructs within the informational chaos of modern society. For that reason alone, this book should be required reading in any Folklore curriculum.

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David C. WOODMAN, *Unravelling the Franklin Mystery: Inuit Testimony* (Montréal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991, xiv+390 p., ISBN 0-7735-0833-3).

The rediscovery of America in 1492 was only the first in a long series of European attempts to reach Asia by a westward route. Continuing belief in a water passage through or around the New World lay behind dozens of unsuccessful searching expeditions. The navigable strait proved to be a geographical illusion created out of hope, hoax, and scientific error that persisted for 350 years.

In the early nineteenth century, continuing rumours encouraged the British Admiralty to begin an official search for a northwest passage. Profit was one motive; the perceived need to prevent Russian and American expansion into British North American territory was another. National pride also played its part. England was mistress of the seas, owner of the world's largest navy and merchant marine, and her ruling class felt the need to prove her pre-eminence in all things maritime. As John Barrow, Second Lord of the Admiralty from 1804 to 1845, pointed out, England had to be first to conquer the northwest passage or "be laughed at by all the world".<sup>1</sup> Under his goad, expeditions under Captains Ross,

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1. John Barrow quoted in Richard J. CYRIAX, *Sir John Franklin's Last Arctic Expedition*, London, 1939: 19-20.

Parry, Lyon, and Franklin were dispatched between 1818 and 1825, and in 1845, the most massive assault on the arctic in more than three centuries of European exploration was undertaken.

Sir John Franklin was given command of two ships, *Erebus* and *Terror*, and 134 officers and men, with a five-year supply of salted meats, lemon juice, arms, powder, and state-of-the-art scientific equipment. The Commander took a library of 1200 books, a monogrammed silver tea service, and his personalized china. The sailing, on May 19, 1845, was marked by all the publicity and fanfare that London could muster. Members of the Royal Family were among well-wishers, and flag-waving crowds lined the banks of the Thames. On June 3, the ships left Stromness; on July 26, they were seen by the whalers *Enterprise* and *Prince of Wales* in North Baffin Bay; the next day they disappeared into the arctic.

When the expedition did not return two years later, the Admiralty and the British public began to worry. From 1848 to 1854, hundreds of thousands of pounds, hundreds of men, and dozens of ships combed the arctic for traces of the missing crews. In the summer of 1854, Dr. John Rae of the Hudson's Bay Company returned with the first solid news of the lost expedition. Inuit had told him of the scurvy, death, and starvation that overtook the explorers. What was worse, Rae reported in the *Times* (Oct. 23, 1854), "From the mutilated state of many of the corpses, and the contents of the kettles, it is evident that our miserable countrymen had been driven to the last resource — cannibalism — as a means of prolonging existence."

The British public reacted with horrified disbelief. Hendrick Van Loon recorded his father's memory of the "shock of horror that had swept across the civilized world" at Rae's report. Charles Dickens, in outrage, grief, and anger, blamed the Inuit for failing to rescue Franklin and his men. He even suggested that proofs of cannibalism — human joints neatly severed by steel knives — pointed to Inuit desecrations of "brave and enterprising explorers" who could never have given in to "the last resource".<sup>2</sup>

Such is the background to David Woodman's narrative of the tragic events in the Canadian central arctic in 1845-51. The evidence gathered by what he calls the "largest manhunt in history" (p. 3) resulted in a broad outline of events, and a few confused and contradictory details. The tragedy, with its elements of "struggle, shipwreck, murder, massacre, cannibalism, and controversy" has been of absorbing interest, even obsession over the past 150 years, as the enormous literature on the subject shows. But "argument as to the exact chain of events which led to the tragedy", writes Woodman, "continues to this day" (p. 5).

Woodman undertakes to examine the riddle one more time, but he produces no mere summary or reiteration of past works. In revising the usual reconstructions, Woodman rejects the main elements of the standard narrative:

2. Charles DICKENS, *The Lost Arctic Voyagers*, Household Words, December 2, 1854, p. 365, 392.

that Franklin's ships sailed directly into Victoria Strait, that Inuit did not visit the ships until they were abandoned by their crews, that the destination of the survivors was Great Bear Lake, and that the last died in 1848. He suggests instead that Franklin initially sought a way down the east side of King William Island, that Inuit were frequent visitors to the ships while they were still manned and many knew Franklin personally, that the destination of the survivors was Repulse Bay, and that the last died in 1851. His identification of Akoodla, the mystery man of the Inuit recollections, will surprise many readers.

While his revisionist narrative provides enough food for thought to satisfy Franklin mystery armchair detectives for a long time, it is his approach to the evidence that makes the book stand out from its predecessors. Europeans have tended to ignore or undervalue the testimony of Inuit eyewitnesses and secondary witnesses for a century and a half. Woodman chooses to reconstruct events in the central Canadian arctic during the years 1845-51 using aboriginal accounts collected by a long list of European ethnographers, from Rae (1848) to Rasmussen (1922-23).

In choosing his method, Woodman assumes that Inuit honesty and respect for truth are at least the equal of any other ethnic group and their powers of observation probably greater. His second assumption is that their recollections of events should have a "discoverable factual basis" (p. 6). His third is that Inuit, and by extension, other tribal peoples, are capable of thinking historically. It is a position contrary to that of many scholars, but one with which I wholeheartedly agree. In his hands, and subjected to numerous tests of reliability and authenticity, even second-hand evidence yields its kernels of reliable testimony.

A spare outline of the events of 1846-52 is all that can be pulled out of the examination of the sites of the tragedy, the human remains and artifacts they have given up, and the two or three scraps of paper recovered from cairns. Close and meticulous analysis of the mass of Inuit testimony has allowed Woodman to flesh out the framework. The result is the most comprehensive, cohesive, and satisfying account of the matter to date.

One of Woodman's texts is Sherlock Holmes' comment: "When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth." Woodman does not claim to have discovered the truth; on the contrary, he clearly describes his work as speculative. What his reconstruction does, unlike any of its predecessors, is account for all the known facts. On this ground alone, it is a more attractive solution to the mystery than those that ignore or seek to minimize apparently contradictory information.

While Woodman's reconstruction is well-grounded speculative narrative, his approach to the problems of linguistic and inter-cultural understanding is practically and theoretically solid. Chapter 3, "The Witnesses", is an excellent discussion of Inuit folklore and verbal histories. It raises questions implicit in any use of oral sources: how authentic and reliable are they, and to what degree can

they be useful in reconstructing past events? All Inuit testimony was subjected to translation, and there are extensive grounds for suspicion. The European ethnographers who recorded information were not fluent Inuktitut speakers. Most were linguistically incompetent, no matter how they rated their skills. Inuktitut is a profoundly complex language, and extremely difficult to learn. In the opinion of Viljalmur Stefansson, who lived for five years where nothing but Inuktitut was spoken and became fluent enough to understand ordinary conversation only at the end of those five years, it would be easier for a European to learn Russian, Swedish, French, and Greek than to learn Inuktitut alone. The Franklin search ethnographers can, at best, have had only a faulty grasp of the simplest nouns and verbs.

The problem was no less serious when Inuit interpreters were used, which was most of the time. They had an equally inadequate understanding of English. The problem is doubly exemplified by Adam Beck's assessment of Carl Petersen, a Danish-speaking interpreter on one of the search expeditions. Beck, an Inuktitut-speaking Greenlander who made a career of interpreting for European whalers and explorers, was critical of Petersen's linguistic abilities. "Carl Petersen no speak Husky quick — not good Husky speak — small Husky speak!" (p. 53). If Adam Beck considered Petersen incompetent in the Inuit language, Beck could hardly claim fluency in English. Few Inuit could match Tookoolitoo, Charles Francis Hall's interpreter, whom he called "the best interpreter of Innu language into our vernacular that ever accompanied an Arctic expedition" (p. 54). Even so, he noted that she had difficulty with some dialects.

In Chapter 3 and at many other places in the text, Woodman shows his awareness of how cultural differences can colour and distort understanding. The worldview expressed in the Inuit language springs from a metaphysics completely different from that of Europeans. Few relevant ethnographers had even the most basic understanding of it.

Because he is not a professional academic Woodman does not attempt to frame a theoretical model for determining the authenticity and reliability of oral sources. What is much more valuable, he applies his implicit understandings to explicit material, and demonstrates by practical example how to test oral evidence for authenticity and reliability, reconcile apparent contradictions through linguistic and cultural analysis, and combine documentary and material evidence with oral testimony.

The question of the usefulness of oral testimony in reconstructing past events is also treated through example. After following Woodman through his analysis of the oral sources, finding and evaluating the clues they hold, and finally fitting them into the already-established framework implicit in the documentary and material evidence, one almost has to conclude that oral testimony is only truly useful when it supports or can be supported by externally known facts. The eyewitness accounts are too contradictory and confusing to stand alone. On their

own and taken at face value, they are nonsense. To be shaped into sense, they have to be understood in terms of the meanings they had for the informants, and they have to be fitted into the existing framework of specific situations — in this case the documents left by expedition members, the positions and conditions of bodies, debris, campsite remains, and abandoned artifacts. In doing so, Woodman demonstrates that oral evidence can be of incalculable value in solving historical problems.

There are a few errors so minor that they do not affect either the narrative or the interpretation, and one that is much more serious: the unfortunate perpetuation of the myth that the ethnonym “Eskimo” and its variants originated in an Ojibwa root word, *eskipot*, meaning “raw eaters”. Historical linguistic studies have shown this to be impossible. The word originally meant “snowshoe netter” in Montagnais (*assime*) and Ojibwa (*askime*) and was used to identify northern Algonquians. Fifteenth century Basque whalers, with their limited and faulty knowledge of aboriginal languages and peoples, applied the name indiscriminantly to the varied inhabitants of what are now parts of Newfoundland, Labrador, and arctic Quebec, including the Inuit, to whom the name finally stuck. Belief that “Eskimo” derives from “raw eater” results from a coincidental similarity of the words *eskipot* and *askime*.

Woodman describes his use of other ethnonyms, such as “native” and “white man”, as inexact and pejorative. I would agree that “native” could be inexact if taken out of context (and would add that it is not a “politically correct” word in the 1990s), but do not agree that either term is necessarily pejorative. As used by Woodman, the meaning is clear, precise, and always sympathetic.

Also on the credit side are the fine maps, an essential aid to understanding the text. They are well conceived and superbly executed — clean, uncluttered, and readable. I, for one, will return to them again and again; lecturers and teachers will find them useful adjuncts in conferences and classrooms, and writers will want to use them in published works. The cartographer, Woodman’s “sister Deborah” (p. xiv), deserves more credit than mere mention in the acknowledgements; her full name should appear as a caption on each map. The usefulness of the large scale local charts might be enhanced by including an inset that places the area in its larger geographical context.

Quoted excerpts are carefully edited so that the sometimes highly individualistic abbreviations and elliptical styles of explorers make sense to the uninitiated; Inuit and European place names are parenthetically cross-referenced in the text; and Inuktitut words are translated wherever they appear. Such careful editing eliminates the stops, starts, and confusions that too often obscure narrative and argument in works of this kind. Woodman’s handling of variant spellings is unobtrusive, efficient, and decidedly helpful to the reader. Five short appendices add to the usefulness and interest of the work. Among them, the list of Inuit place names is an addition to arctic reference literature that can be used in many

contexts besides the Franklin mystery, and the genealogical chart of principal witnesses in itself might serve as a base for further studies in Inuit history and historical anthropology.

To his great credit, Woodman shows considerable concern for his reader's comfort and ease. Like the rest of us, he finds notes a "hassle", often "galling", and sometimes "infuriating". He tries to minimize the "frustrating dilemma" for his readers by incorporating all substantive comments in the text, and compiling references in an endnote section, where the "general reader" may "blissfully ignore" them. Because his intended audience is the "general reader", it is a comfortable solution (p. xi). His concern for the reader's comfort is also apparent in the carefully constructed index; place-name, proper-name, and subject entries are comprehensive, easy to find, and adequately differentiated. The absence of concept entries merely reflects a conceptual thinness inherent in the material itself.

The bibliography is beautifully constructed and comprehensive, a welcome addition to arctic bibliography for general reader and scholar alike. Woodman's thoughtfulness for the reader is again obvious in his brief but incisive description of the accessing problems of the Smithsonian Institution's Hall Collection.

General readers and scholars alike will appreciate this book for its suggested solutions to some of the tantalizing riddles of the Franklin disappearance. As narrative it is beautifully written, maintains a rapid pace, and at every step serves to clarify events. The author handles his personae with sympathy and warm humanity, and successfully evokes the wonder and beauty of the arctic, as well as its terror. His characters, dead for a century and a half, are nevertheless alive and real in the pages of the book. It will quickly catch and hold the imagination of the general reader interested in the details of the Franklin mystery.

As a treatise on the methodologies of oral history, it will fascinate historians, anthropologists, and folklorists, among other professionals, for its exemplary nature.

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