The discoveries of the *Erebus* and *Terror*

On King William Island, Inuit used to say that if you found a white man’s grave, you’d never find it a second time – because it had ghosts around it (Eber, 2008, 134).

On 9 September 2014, Parks Canada announced that the multi-agency Franklin search expedition it was leading that year had located a well-preserved shipwreck, later identified as the *Erebus*. This discovery of Franklin’s own ship made headlines across the world and gave Prime Minister Harper an opportunity to showcase a key success in his northern vision to national and international audiences. Given the political and cultural capital invested in the searches, it was no surprise that government spokespeople weren’t shy in tethering the ship to a geopolitical narrative about Canada’s place in the Arctic. In promoting the find, Harper drew direct analogies between the British Arctic explorers of the nineteenth century and the ‘heroes’ of 2014 who had located the *Erebus* and participated in Canada’s assertion of Arctic sovereignty. Harper, his wife Laureen, an aide named Jeremy Hunt, and over two hundred other members or friends of the expedition even received the ‘Erebus Medal’, specially commissioned by the Royal Canadian Geographical Society to commemorate the discovery (the Harpers were made Honorary Fellows of the RCGS in 2013).

The euphoria surrounding the event allowed Harper, Parks Canada and the RCGS to flood the media with a particular set of assumptions about Arctic exploration (as heroic mapping) and the role of Inuit communities in its commemoration (as trusted informants). However, despite the location of the *Erebus*, the ghostliness of this National Historic Site was not exorcised in the flash of underwater cameras and press
conferences. Rather, enlisted in a story of Canadian nationalism, Franklin’s reappeared ship was made to act out a role in disappearing other stories that were much less comfortable for the expeditioners of 2014.

In this book I have highlighted the roles of ghosts and dreams in some of the narratives, experiences and images associated with the Northwest Passage quests of the nineteenth century. Throughout I have been keen to complicate the figure of the British explorer, to stress the utter strangeness of men navigating, mapping and overwintering in the Arctic. I have discussed the spectre of women and shown how the idea of a female presence in the Arctic revealed the intimate and emotional forces that travelled between the Arctic and Britain during the Victorian period. This strategy of questioning accepted ideas of what exploration was, and of holding up a cultural-historical mirror to explorers, would probably have made as little sense to Franklin in 1845 as it would to Harper in 2014. This is because both believed they were involved in disinterested projects of mapping out *terrae incognitae*. There was little awareness in the press releases of 2014 that the practices of exploration should be analysed – that they were linked to colonialism, gender discrimination and historical injustice, or that they were part of the long history of anthropogenic climate change. There was no feeling of how odd it was for the voices of Victorian expeditioners to ring out in pidgin Inuktitut:

We are in search of two English ships / Which have been five years in the ice / Have you heard anything of such ships? / Make it known among all the Eskimós or Innuít / That the Queen of England will give a large reward / To any of the Innuít who will bring news of them / Should you meet any white men / Treat them kindly, and you shall be rewarded (*Eskimaux and English Vocabulary, for the Use of the Arctic Expedition*, 1850, 105).

Rather, Harper’s version of Franklin harked back to the tragic hero model that dominated Canadian culture before cultural and political ties with Britain loosened in the mid-twentieth century. In this model, the Euro-American mapping of the Arctic was normal and heroic, not strange and complicated, and the cultural impact of explorers on indigenous peoples almost totally ignored. Although revisionist and postcolonial writers have deployed the ‘bumbling imperialist’ image of Franklin since the 1970s (see Cavell, 2007), Harper used an older and uncritical version of Franklin because he needed an historical story (minus allusions to
cannibalism and disaster) that prefaced the kind of tradition he wanted to invent for Canada:

As I’ve said before, Sir John’s exploration and discovery of parts of Canada’s North are an important part of our history and have contributed to Canada becoming the wonderful country we enjoy today. The search for the fabled Northwest Passage is something that Canadians have celebrated in stories and songs for generations — it’s even the subject of the Stan Rogers song that we consider our ‘unofficial national anthem’ — because that story is the story of Canada. Just look at the list of explorers who tried even before Sir John: Cabot, Frobisher, Davis, Cartier, Hudson, La Salle, Cook, Vancouver, MacKenzie. These are the giants of our history, and the story of the search for the Northwest Passage is essentially the history of Canada’s North. The Franklin expedition is part of that broader story — the most tragic, and most mysterious part, to be sure. For almost 200 years Canadians — not just Canadians, people around the world — have wondered what happened to the Franklin expedition. Now that we’ve found the first of the two ships we can begin unlocking the mystery of what happened to them (qtd. in Geiger 2014).

Finding Franklin here contributes to settling the nation – even at the cost of silencing other, unsettling, voices and stories.

The discovery of the Erebus came after years of public controversy about the cost and aims of the searches. The 2012 searches by Parks Canada were particularly attacked by online commentators as red herrings, designed to distract people from the travails of the government. Some of the most cutting criticisms of Harper’s prioritisation of the Franklin searches – in the midst of what was a period of economic austerity – came in the letters and comments sections of newspaper articles and op-eds about the quest: why was the government wasting money in the Arctic when jobs were being lost elsewhere? Why was the Franklin search being prioritised over women’s refuges, social programmes for indigenous communities, and scientific research? Why should we be looking for dead British explorers? Why was the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation – a state-sponsored corporation – paid by Parks Canada to cover its searches? Strangest of all, why was Parks Canada facing job cuts and reduced budgets nationally, but was feted and bankrolled for its particular endeavours around King William Island? Or, as one commentator put it: ‘Cash for sunken junk. Great. And if they find them,
more cash to resurrect them, more cash to find a home for them, more cash to look after them. The Inuit don’t care about a failed white mans [sic] expedition, in fact, neither do white men’ (‘Monkeewerks’ qtd. in Baluja, 2012).

By the time the sixth expedition commenced in 2014 some of the commentary focused on the government’s refusal to establish an inquiry to investigate the circumstances behind the murder and disappearance of over 1000 aboriginal women since 1980. Even after the discovery of the Erebus, angry letter-writers contrasted Harper’s obsession with a Victorian mystery with an apparent lack of curiosity about a contemporary one (‘Solving the Franklin Expedition Mystery’, The Star, 2014). Meanwhile, the archaeologist Patricia Sutherland, whose work focuses on evidence of Norse presence on Baffin Island around 1000 AD, believes she was dismissed from her position in the Canadian Museum of Civilization (now re-branded as the Museum of Canadian History) because her research and views were out of step with the government’s view of Arctic history. In contrast to the rich pre-Columbian histories of the Arctic, the Franklin expedition reflects, Sutherland noted, ‘the government’s interest in sovereignty, the military, and Canada’s historical ties to Britain’ (‘A Crucible That May Change the Way we See Canada’s North’, CBC Radio).

If cannibalism, disaster and climate change are other obvious themes downplayed in the story of the Franklin expedition advanced by Harper and Parks Canada, two themes that were drawn out were Canada’s technological power over the North and the value of Inuit oral records. In a speech to the Royal Canadian Geographical Society in March 2015, Harper drew lines of connection between Franklin as a heroic seeker of knowledge, and the team of researchers, hydrographers, archaeologists, pilots and for-profit companies that assisted in the location of the Erebus. Indeed Harper highlighted this public–private aspect of the expedition as a metaphor for modern Canada. The modern Franklin searches always had the secondary aims of mapping the sea bed and testing the Royal Canadian Navy’s ability to operate in the Arctic. The technology used in the searches (autonomous underwater vehicles) are a means by which Canada gains wider knowledge and power in the North, and this makes the Franklin story relevant to contemporary geopolitics. Add to this the fact that Shell Canada was a part of the Parks Canada team that located the Erebus, and it is clear that Franklin’s reappearance is also linked to long-term interests in exploiting the Arctic’s oil and gas reserves. Finally, questions have been raised about the role and perspective that the RCGS has taken in publicising and interpreting the Erebus alongside Harper (Murphy, 2015).
The _Erebus_ was found west of the Adelaide Peninsula in a region named Utjulik or Ootgoolik ['place of bearded seals'], precisely the area where Inuit witnesses told McClintock and Hall they saw and visited an immobile ship before it sunk (Woodman, 1991, 248–61). At press conferences Harper and Parks Canada therefore paid tribute to Inuit oral records from the King William Island region – both the testimony collected by the early Franklin searchers, and the information and artefacts collected by researchers like David Woodman and Louie Kamookak more recently. Yet this was a superficial positioning of Inuit testimony as accurate knowledge in order to suit a dominant narrative – in this case geographic information, the most amenable to western modes of conceptualising space. Traditional Geographic Knowledge, as one might call it, appears to be the only kind of indigenous knowledge that has been officially ratified by the locations of the _Erebus_ and _Terror_. With these successes, oral history has been ‘modernised’, local Inuit are recognised as being part of one of Canada’s great creation myths, and a story is produced that is consistent with state interests (see Irlbacher-Fox, 2009, 112).

Yet the spectres of the Franklin expedition continue to disturb any settlement of the mystery. Elders in Nunavut still tell stories of Inuit who fear the ghosts of Franklin expeditioners; some are linked to horror at their cannibalism and desperate situation, other stories are linked to the shamanic curse said to have been placed on King William Island (Watson, 2017, 227). Indeed, feelings of ghostliness played a role in the discovery of _Terror_ in 2016. A crew-member of one of the vessels searching for Crozier’s ship that year, Sammy Kogvik, told the director of operations that years previously, when he was hunting near Terror Bay off King William Island, he had seen what looked like a mast sticking out of the sea ice. After posing for some photographs with the mast, Kogvik returned home only to find the camera had fallen out of his pocket: remembering the ghost stories told about the Franklin expedition, he felt this was a bad omen and didn’t report the find at the time. However, years later Kogvik’s tip proved crucial as the search vessel made a detour and located the _Terror_ in excellent condition on the sea floor (Watson, 2016).

Although they provide good copy, ghost stories of the Franklin expedition are difficult to integrate into a narrative of tragic heroism. Well-known stories and memories of _qallunaat_ seen wandering with human meat, in strange clothing, with dry, bleeding, black mouths, and assumed to be spirits of some kind, will of course disturb Harper’s discourse because they do not fit into the normalised narrative surrounding the discoveries of the ships: explorers cannot be thought of as seaborne
strangers, aliens who do not speak the local language. The arrival of the Erebus to Utjulik was not a scene of ‘first contact’ between the British and the Inuit – nor is there any evidence here of brutality, disease exchange, or any of the other immediate horrors of the colonial encounter – but this ship did herald an utter transformation in the lives of Inuit when the Franklin expeditioners were followed by more explorers, traders, settlers, missionaries, policemen and representatives of the Canadian state. The removal of strangeness from sonar images of British shipwrecks resting on the Arctic seabed means that the colonial and neo-colonial histories that form part of the Franklin expedition, then and now, are laundered out of official discussions, and the kind of legacy issues brought up by the likes of Vollmann and Atwood in their fiction are not heard in mainstream commentary.

As of 2017, there has been little in-depth discussion about what the location of the ships might mean for Inuit communities along the Northwest Passage route today, still living with the social upheaval caused by sedentarisation after the 1940s. Certainly there has been nothing to compare with John Walker’s documentary film on John Rae and the Franklin expedition – Passage (2008) – which flitted back and forth between the past and present in a jarring but exhilarating format. Walker saw his film-making practice as being rooted in oral traditions and had an affinity with Rae’s approach to local sources of information (Varga 2012, 79). In Passage Walker filmed a remarkable encounter in the Admiralty Board Room in London between the Nunavut politician, Tagak Curley, and Ernie Coleman, a retired naval officer and Franklin searcher. In the scene Curley opposes the idea that Franklin ‘discovered’ the Northwest Passage, as the statue commemorating him at Waterloo Place in London suggests. ‘A dead man cannot find something, it just could not happen, so I am absolutely amazed. Incredible’, he says. Curley goes on to defend the honour and honesty of Rae and his Inuit informants who reported tales of cannibalism among the expeditioners. Using Dickens’s Household Words articles as a source, Coleman upholds the heroism of Franklin and his men, denies that cannibalism took place, and advances the theory that the expeditioners were massacred by the Inuit. Curley is appalled by this opinion but receives no apology for it from Coleman, apparently representing the perspective of the British Empire in an unreconstructed way. The climax to the film comes later when Curley meets Gerald Dickens, the great-great grandson of Charles Dickens. As they both stand among the actors who are playing the roles of Rae, Jane Franklin and other Franklin era figures, Gerald Dickens apologises for the hurt caused by his great-great grandfather’s racist comments on Inuit testimony, a
cathartic moment that suggests that the Franklin expedition is made up of many different stories spread over time – some of them traumatic and unsettling, but all of them ultimately symbolic.

For Walker, the actors and the other participants in Passage, history is not simply past time – it is rather a living thing still capable of wounding. The Franklin ships might be fetish objects to some, but to others they are symbols of particular mindsets or repositories of memories and bodies. Perhaps most disturbing from a British perspective, the ships were material resources which, when dismantled, actually made a positive impact on local lives. After all, throughout the 1850s the Erebus, just like earlier wrecks, was repeatedly visited and looted by local Inuit for its useful wood, glass and iron. As the Erebus and Terror become multi-year archaeological sites and have curators, politicians, lawyers, experts and twenty-first-century digital technology unleashed upon them, it is crucial that discussions of the Franklin era are not impoverished by political narratives that reduce its significance to that of a series of retrospective sovereignty missions inherited from Britain. The mystery of what happened to the expeditioners will not come down to maps and claim-staking.

The image of the Victorian explorer that Harper and others rely on in their ‘idea of the north’ is made up of complex constructions, repressions and fantasies. Harper’s genealogy of explorers leading up to Franklin is as just as mythic as the Iglulingmiut creation myth of how Paarri came to visit them in 1821. The Franklin expeditioners were also qallunaat and, just like them, the Inuit were not passive bystanders, actors on a stage or recording devices while things happened around them. The Erebus was a Royal Navy bomb vessel, but it was also a ‘white-man’s umiak’ (qtd. in Woodman, 1991, 11). In this book I have argued that British Arctic exploration was made up of a multiplicity of stories that speak about encounters, emotions, dreams and the relationship between the space and the ‘geo-spectral’ – between people and things appearing, disappearing and then reappearing. I hope these stories inspire a shift in scale, with non-explorers made part of the history of exploration, and inspire a shift in sequentiality, as historical time is recognised as being ‘out of joint’. This encounter with the history of exploration has allowed me to understand the power of the spectral anew. The past does not simply vanish – it hangs around in landscapes, bodies, dreams and stories. It is ongoing, like an unexploded mine. This should not be forgotten.