

Death in the Ice

by Göran R. Buckhorn

The Franklin Expedition Revealed

On 19 May 1845, 59-year-old Captain Sir John Franklin departed from Greenhithe, near London, as the commander of a two-ship expedition to find the much-sought-after Northwest Passage to Asia. By this time, the British had explored nearly all the oceans of the world, but had yet to find a sailing route from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific across the top of North America. Franklin and his 133-strong crew aboard HMS *Erebus* and HMS *Terror* left England under great acclaim. *Erebus* and *Terror* were two former bomb vessels, which had been converted for polar expeditions. In late July, after discharging five men at the Whale Fish Islands on Greenland's west coast, the vessels were sighted in Baffin Bay between Greenland and Baffin Island by some whaling ships. This was the last time the Franklin Expedition was seen by Europeans.

As we know from history, the expedition would fail; Franklin and his men would never be heard from again, at least not by their own countrymen. Starting in 1848, more than thirty expeditions were launched, at first to rescue the men, and in time to seek the answer as to what had happened to Franklin and his crew, but few signs were found, and none that could tell the whole story. Tantalizing clues, including graves, provisions, Inuit tales, and a handwritten note found at Victory Point—saying that Franklin had died in June 1847 and the crew had abandoned the vessels and was heading for Back's Great Fish River—told a grim story.

In September 2014, 167 years after the first search expeditions were sent to look for Franklin, divers from Parks Canada Agency's Underwater Archaeology Team found *Erebus* in shallow waters south of King William Island in the Canadian Arctic Archipelago. Two years later, *Terror* was located in Terror Bay, on the south coast of King William Island. The mystery of the Franklin Expedition started to unravel.

John Franklin was born in 1786 in Spilsby, Lincolnshire, and, like many of his



HMS Erebus in the Ice, 1846, by François Étienne Musin

brethren, showed an early interest in a career at sea. In March 1800, the teenager's father secured him an appointment on a Royal Navy vessel. Soon, the young Franklin saw action. He participated in critical battles in British history, including the Battle of Copenhagen in 1801 and the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805.

In 1819, Franklin led a Royal Navy overland expedition to North America to chart the north coast of Canada eastwards from the mouth of the Coppermine River and meet up with another seaborne expedi-

tion led by Sir William Parry coming from Lancaster Sound to the east. The Coppermine Expedition would end in catastrophe; Franklin lost almost half of his twenty-man crew to starvation, one was murdered, and then the murderer was killed. An inquiry included suggestions of cannibalism. At one point, the survivors attempted to eat their own leather boots, which gave Franklin the nickname the "Man Who Ate His Boots."

After Franklin returned to England, he married the poet Eleanor Porden in 1823. Less than a year later, she gave birth to a daughter. Eleanor suffered from health problems, and childbirth aggravated her symptoms of tuberculosis. She died in February 1825, a week after Franklin had set out on his second overland Northwest Passage expedition to follow the course of the Mackenzie River to the sea and explore the coast east and west from there. The expedition was successful, and Franklin returned home in September 1827. In November 1828, he married Jane Griffin, who had been a close friend of his late wife. King George IV knighted Franklin in 1829 in recognition of his Arctic exploration work. During the following years, Franklin was



Sir John Franklin (1786–1847)

presented with several awards by other countries and geographical societies.

In 1836, he left for Van Diemen's Land (now Tasmania) to serve as its lieutenant-governor, taking with him Jane and daughter Eleanora Isabella. The family lived there through his appointment, which concluded in 1844. On 7 February 1845, the Admiralty appointed Franklin commander of an expedition to find a Northwest Passage to Asia.

After leaving Greenhithe on 19 May 1845, *Erebus* and *Terror* stopped at Stromness in the Orkney Islands to pick up their last supplies. On July 12 the ships arrived at the Whale Fish Islands, Greenland. Here the crewmen mailed their last letters home, and five members of the expedition were sent home due to illness, dropping the size of the expedition team from 134 to 129. The expedition spent its first winter in the Arctic off Beechey Island, where three crewmembers died and were buried. In summer 1846, the ships headed south into Peel Sound, but they encountered thick and unrelenting ice northwest of King William Island; *Erebus* and *Terror* became trapped in that ice in September 1846. They remained there, the vessels slowly drifting with the ice, for more than nineteen months before the men finally decided to abandon the ships and trek over the ice to King William Island. By April 1848 when they deserted the ships, 25 crewmembers had perished, among them their commander, Sir John Franklin.



The graves on Beechey Island, where the first three Franklin Expedition members died; the fourth grave is from an 1850 expedition that had set out to find the Franklin crew.

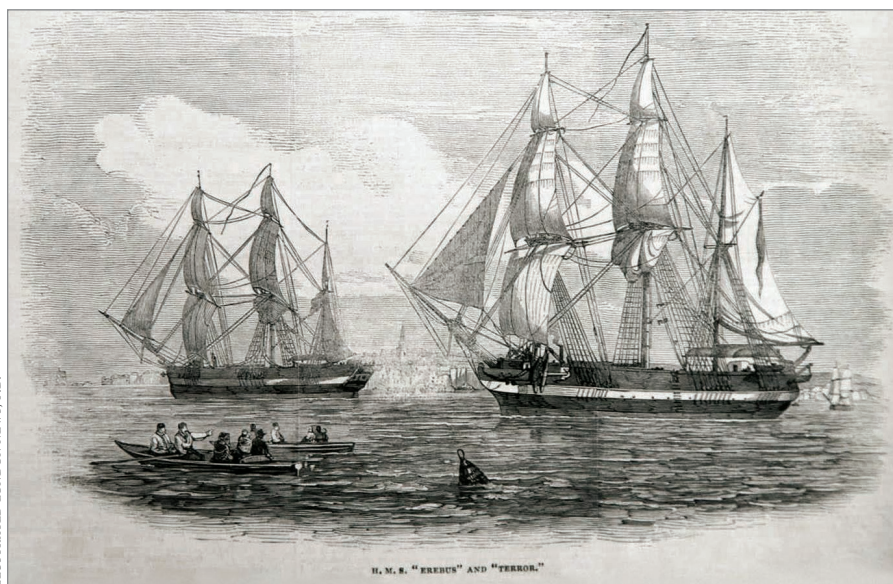
As the expedition had left with provisions for three years, it was not until the autumn of 1847 that the Admiralty acknowledged that the expedition was in trouble and organized search parties to find the men before they would run out of food. The first Royal Navy expedition left England in January 1848, and a second departed six months later. It took quite some time to hear back from the search parties. Franklin's wife, Lady Franklin, was troubled that more was not being done to find her husband. She wrote letters both to the president of the United States and the Czar of Russia, trying to persuade these countries to join the search. She also wrote to philanthropists and public figures, including the New England manufacturer Henry Grinnell, to engage them to help sway public opinion to support additional search parties.



Lady Jane Franklin (née Griffin; 1791–1875)

The search expeditions returned to England with disappointing news. Lady Franklin offered a large reward to whalers, and she also sponsored vessels at her own expense to help in the search for her husband and his men. She continued to lobby relentlessly for the British government to keep looking for the missing men. In January 1854, almost nine years after the Franklin Expedition had left England, the Admiralty announced that the men would be declared dead. The crew's wages were paid out to their relatives, but Lady Franklin refused to accept that her husband and his men were gone. In spring 1857, Lady

HMS Erebus and Terror, setting out from England for the Arctic; image published in the Illustrated London News, 24 May 1845.



ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS, P.D.

H. M. S. "EREBUS" AND "TERROR."

Franklin bought *Fox*, a 177-ton schooner-rigged steam yacht, and appointed a veteran Arctic commander, Royal Navy officer Captain Leopold McClintock, to mount a new search for her husband. Of McClintock's twenty-five-man crew, seventeen had participated in previous searches for the Franklin Expedition.

The summer of 1857 was a particularly bad year for ice, so the *Fox* expedition got off to a poor start, but over the next two years, McClintock and his men found vital clues about what had happened to Franklin and his crew. McClintock and his second-in-command, Lieutenant William Hobson, traveled via dog sledge and met groups of Inuit, who told them of white men from two ships who had perished. Some of the Inuit were in possession of items from the expedition, which McClintock purchased from them and brought back to England. Members of the *Fox* expedition also found a 28-foot ship's boat mounted on a sledge, with two skeletons, shotguns, books, and other equipment within. McClintock named the place where the boat was found "Erebus Bay."

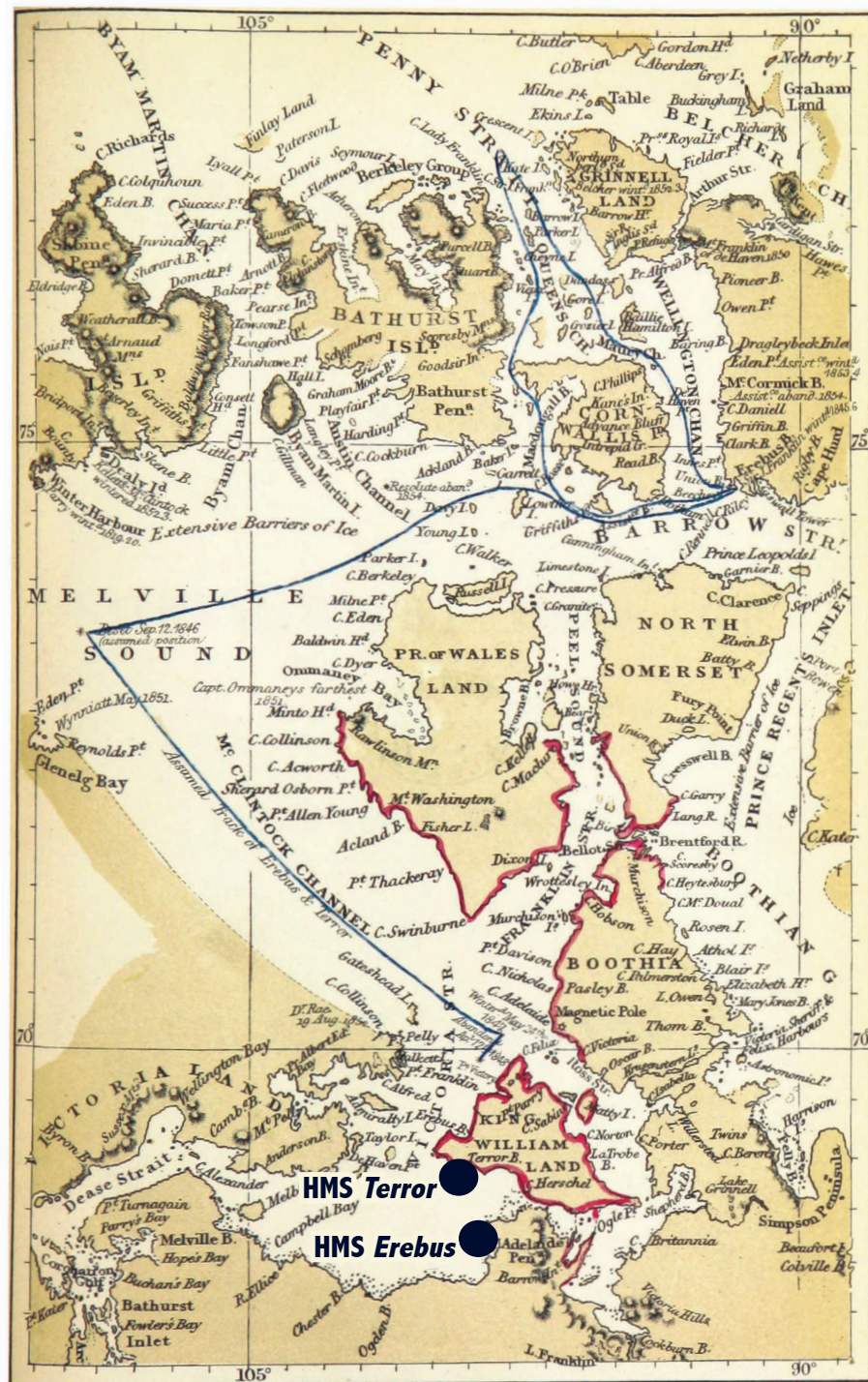
Hobson located a campsite with three tents, which had been deserted in haste at the northern tip of King William Island. He also found the most important discoveries: two cairns, piles of stacked stones, built by members of the Franklin Expedition in Back Bay and Victory Point on the island's west coast. At both landmarks were single-page pre-printed forms upon which handwritten messages had been added that outlined the expedition's progress to May 1847. The note left at Victory Point contained an additional message written in April 1848 that reported Franklin's death on 11 June 1847, and that the crew was heading south for "Backs Fish River" on the mainland.

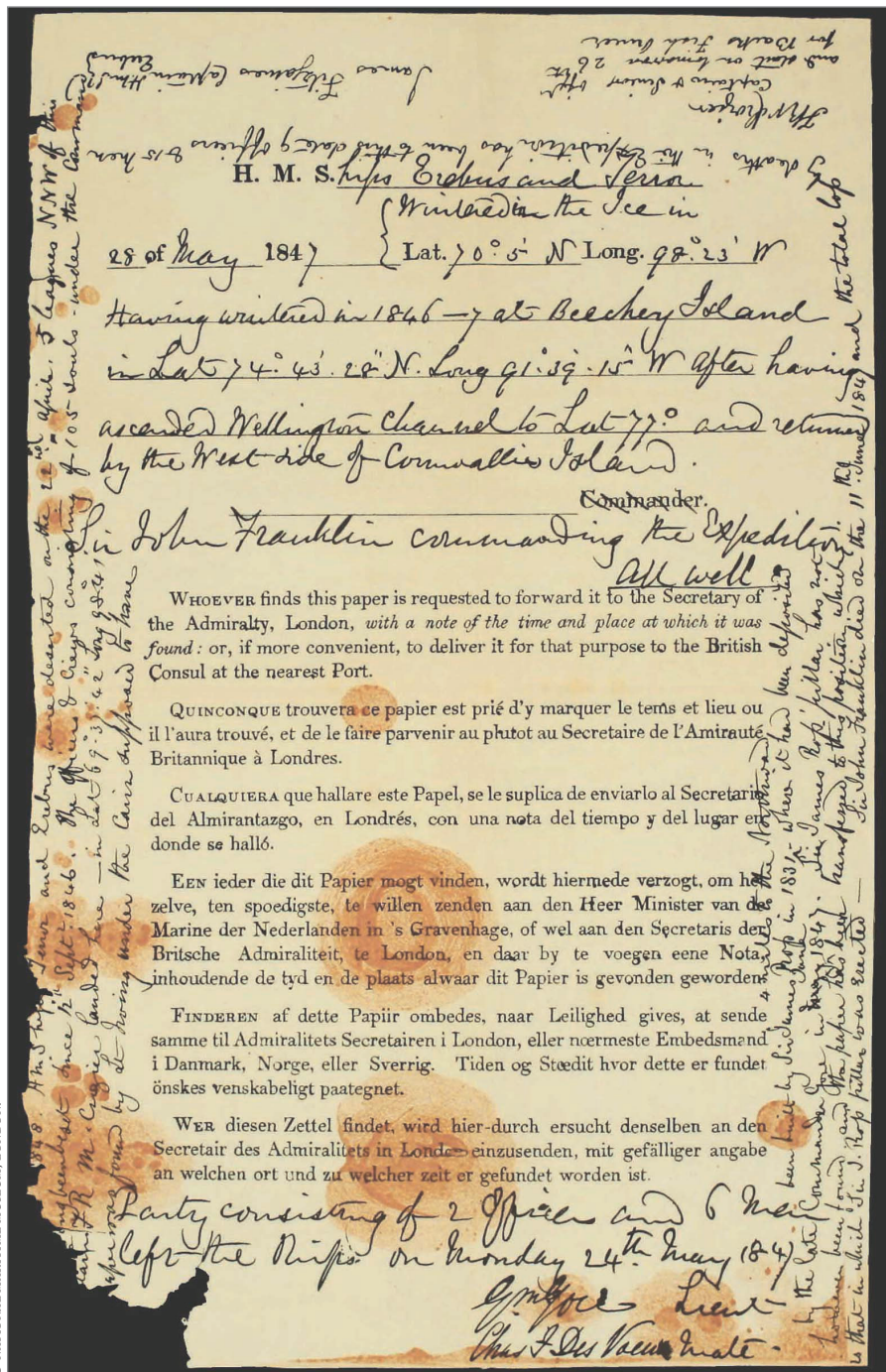
The *Fox* arrived back in London in September 1859 carrying items from

the Franklin Expedition, or "relics," as McClintock called them. While the nation mourned the loss of Sir John and the deceased among his crew, it celebrated their heroism. McClintock received a knighthood and published a book about his expedition, *The Voyage of the "Fox" in the Arctic Seas: A Narrative of the Discovery of the Fate of Sir John Franklin and His Companions*. London, 1859. It was reprinted numerous times.

The search for *Erebus* and *Terror* did not end with McClintock's return to England. Other explorers went out to hunt for answers during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, returning with more Inuit accounts of what had happened to Franklin's crew. On his second expedition in the region in 1869, the American Charles Francis Hall came across a man named In-nook-poo-zhee-jook, who told him about sick and starving white men on King

1860 map showing in red the areas where Capt. Leopold McClintock, RN, located items associated with the Franklin Expedition. (Published in *The North-West Passage, and the Plans for the Search for Sir John Franklin*, by John Brown, F.R.G.S.) The approximate locations of the wreck sites have been added. HMS *Erebus* was located first, in 2014. HMS *Terror* was found in 2016.





(left) It was not until 1859 that the famous Victory Point note, which contains the only firsthand account of the desertion of the ships, was found. This record revealed key information, including the news of Sir John Franklin's death. Details from the note dated 25 April 1848 (written sideways on each side of the paper): "HM. ships Terror and Erebus were deserted on the 22d April, 5 leagues NNW of this, having been beset since 12th September 1846. The officers and crews, consisting of 105 souls, under the command of Captain F. R. M. Crozier, landed here in Lat. 69° 37' 42" Long 98° 41' ... Sir John Franklin died on the 11th June, 1847; and the total loss by deaths in the expedition has been to this date 9 officers and 15 men."

William Island. He talked about two ships and how one of them sank and the other one was abandoned. He could even draw a sketch of where the ship went down, in the vicinity of where the wreck of *Erebus* would be found in 2014.

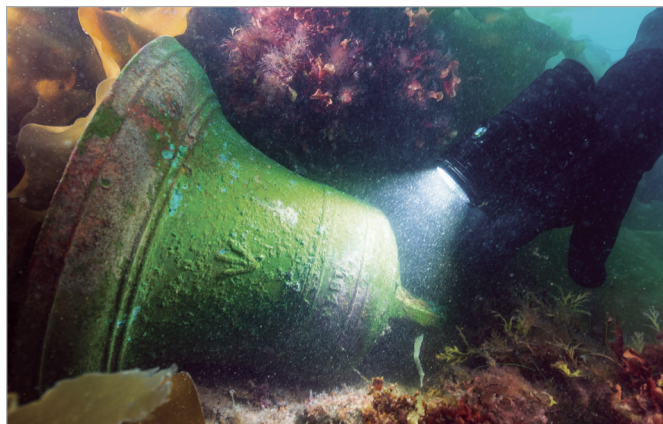
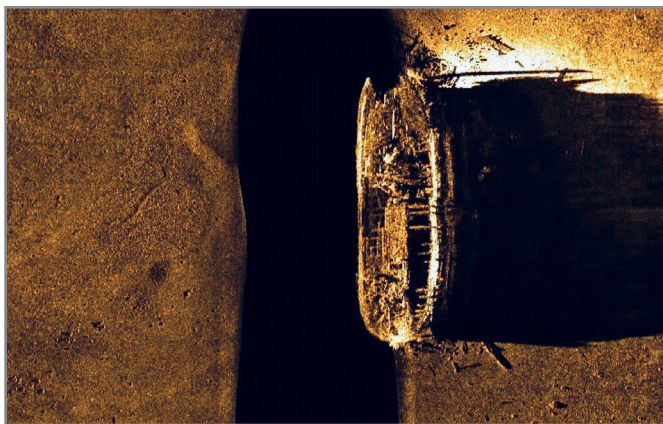
In 1992, the remains of *Erebus* and *Terror* were designated as National Historic Sites of Canada, though no one knew where they were at that time, but in 2008, Parks Canada renewed the search for Franklin's vessels. The team relied on Inuit traditional knowledge, from conversations with the Inuit by search expeditions in the nineteenth century and more recent interviews, to narrow their search area. In September 2014, while conducting a sonar survey in Wilmot and Crampton Bay off the Adelaide Peninsula, maritime archaeologists located *Erebus* on the seafloor, broken up but with individual components and artifacts relatively well preserved in the frigid water. Almost two years later to the day, *Terror* was located in Terror Bay, off the southern coast of King William Island. *Terror* was found in deeper water than *Erebus* and the ship itself is in pristine condition.

An exhibition at the Canadian Museum of History in Gatineau, Canada, about the Franklin Expedition was already in the planning stages before *Erebus* was found. "The discovery of *Erebus* in 2014 and *Terror* in 2016 brought a 170-year search into the 21st century, just in time for the exhibition. Major pieces of the puzzle were finally found, and although

(right) Inuit Wooden Model of a European Ship. This carving depicts a type of multi-decked sailing ship common during the 1500s and 1600s. The style of the figure's hat is similar to those worn by European sailors during the same period. The carving was collected from an archaeological site in Amadjuak Bay, on the southern coast of Baffin Island. Inuit oral histories, passed from generation to generation, proved critical to the success of the 21st-century expeditions to find the shipwrecks.



CANADIAN MUSEUM OF HISTORY



COURTESY PARKS CANADA, PHOTO BY THIERRY BOYER



SIDE-SCAN AND UNDERWATER IMAGES COURTESY PARKS CANADA

many questions remain, we can end the show in a perfect way—featuring the ongoing archaeological work, which may reveal what went wrong on the expedition,” said Karen Ryan, the exhibition’s curator. The exhibition is now traveling across Canada, the United Kingdom, and the US.

In December 2018, Mystic Seaport Museum in Mystic, Connecticut, opened *Death in the Ice: The Mystery of the Franklin Expedition* about the disastrous voyage and the 167-year-old search to find it. Developed by the Canadian Museum of History in partnership with the Parks Canada Agency and the National Maritime Museum (London), and in collaboration with the Government of Nunavut and the Inuit Heritage Trust, the exhibition is attracting enthusiastic audiences everywhere it travels. The exhibition will be displayed at Mystic Seaport Museum through 28 April 2019.

Death in the Ice displays more than 200 artifacts and is organized in seven zones that cover the expedition itself, the backstory of 400 years of international efforts to chart a Northwest Passage, life at sea and in the Arctic aboard the two ships, and a look at what specifically led to the men’s deaths based on forensic evidence and a medical description of the effects on the

(top left) Side-scan sonar image of the remains of HMS Erebus on the seafloor, 2014.

(top right) The ship’s bell was the first artifact recovered from HMS Erebus. It is marked with “1845,” the year the Franklin Expedition departed Britain.

(left) Marc-André Bernier, Parks Canada’s manager of underwater archaeology, sets a marine biology sampling quadrat on the port side hull of HMS Erebus in 2016.

human body of nutrient deprivation, toxic substances (like lead), exposure to prolonged periods of cold, and the breakdown of the human spirit. Important to this saga was how the tragedy and great mystery captured the imagination of the British people, both at the time and over the decades and centuries that followed. Finally, the exhibition shares the exciting story of how the *Erebus* and *Terror* were found, and includes the sonar image of *Erebus* as she appeared to underwater archaeologists on the day of her discovery and an underwater video of Parks Canada maritime archaeologist Ryan Harris giving a tour of the shipwreck site.

Death in the Ice showcases items from Franklin's crew after they had abandoned *Erebus* and *Terror*, which were brought back to London by the *Fox* expedition, including a portable cooking stove, musket balls, the two shotguns found in the boat at "Erebus Bay," snow goggles, a water flask, tobacco pipe fragments, the important Victory Point note, and much more. There are also tools and other artifacts used by the Inuit, whose encounters with the men from the Franklin Expedition provided firsthand knowledge of their fate. Artifacts recovered from *Erebus* have been conserved and are on display, including the ship's bell, dinner plates, a portion of the ship's wheel, a sword hilt, a leather boot, and more.

Weaving throughout the entire path of the exhibit are Inuit artifacts and recordings of oral histories, "the key that unlocked the expedition's fate," said Ms. Ryan. While modern technology and advanced archaeological methods gave the team the tools they needed to conduct a thorough scientific survey, without Inuit input, it is unlikely they would have been able to make the discovery. According to Canadian researcher and explorer David C. Woodman, an expert on the Franklin Expedition and the history of the quest to find it, "The search would have been wholly impractical since we wouldn't know where to look, and we never would have found the ship. No one would have bothered to look, because the area was just so large. ⚓

Parks Canada maritime archaeologists prepare to dive in the frigid Arctic waters during the 2018 field season, with the research vessel David Thompson waiting in the distance.



PARKS CANADA

The state of preservation in the cold Arctic waters is remarkable. (above) A section of the ship's wheel was found on the seafloor, approximately 30 meters from HMS Erebus. (below) Belaying pins recovered from Erebus in 2015. Identical pins were found, still in place on HMS Terror's rail, in 2016. These items are among the 200-plus artifacts in the exhibition.

Göran R Buckhorn is editor of *Mystic Seaport Museum Magazine*. You can catch the exhibition at *Mystic Seaport Museum* through 28 April 2019 (www.mysticseaport.org). After that, it will be traveling to the *Anchorage Museum* in Alaska, where it will be on display from 7 June through 20 September 2019 (www.anchagemuseum.org). *Mystic Seaport Museum* is located at 75 Greenmanville Ave., Mystic, Connecticut. You can learn more about the Parks Canada ongoing research and field work on the Franklin Expedition and its shipwrecks at www.pc.gc.ca/en/culture/franklin.



DEIRDRE O'REGAN



PARKS CANADA