

(October 13, 1930)

The Western Arctic

By MAJOR L. T. BURWASH

THE PRESIDENT:—Gentlemen of the Canadian Club. This year we have had the privilege of having as our guest several very prominent Englishmen; it has been our privilege to extend a warm welcome to them and we have enjoyed listening to their remarks. Today we are to listen to a very distinguished man again, and I think we may be pardoned for having a little greater thrill today because our guest is a Canadian. In addition to that he is a Torontonian and a graduate of our own university of Toronto. Major Burwash has made a name for himself in an engineering sense and in exploration. I asked him how many times he had made trips up north and he said, "To be quite candid, I forget, but I think about fifteen." But he says his last trip was the most spectacular and probably the most interesting of his whole experience, and I know we look forward with a great deal of pleasure to his remarks today. He has chosen as his subject, "The Western Arctic," a land and a subject he knows very well. I have pleasure in introducing to you Major Burwash.

MAJOR BURWASH:—Mr. Chairman and gentlemen, I am sure I am rather overcome by the reception you have given me. The greater part of my life has been spent largely in the wilderness. To face an audience such as this is quite a novel experience to me. First I must thank the president and the members of the Canadian Club of Toronto for being kind enough to ask me to come here. As the president has said, Toronto I consider my home. I lived here over thirty years ago and unfortunately have not got back to renew my acquaintance with Toronto. So when the invitation to visit Toronto comes, I am very glad.

Now first as to why I am, what I am, why I go, where I go. I am a member of the civil service of Canada connected with the department of the Interior in the North West Territories and Yukon branch. I know all you gentlemen wonder where and why your money is spent by the Dominion Government, and some might think polar expeditions or Arctic research a more or less frivolous way of spending your money. Well, it is perhaps not very generally known but for many years, forty or more, the Canadian Government have been systematically working to extend their knowledge and the world's knowledge of the frontiers of Canada. I am simply a cog in the wheel. I am sent here, there and where it may be. Others go on their various routes and from the information which we bring back we hope that the world's knowledge and the knowledge of the government and any person who may so desire to inquire, may be extended as to our northern frontiers.

Now I came to you to speak especially concerning the western arctic. If you will bear with me just a moment I will try and quickly outline what we might call the pioneer, the western Arctic. Before that however I might say that for many years the ambitions of the world's greatest navigators was to find a shorter route from the European centers to the eastern coast of Asia. The first navigator to undertake this effort was Columbus. He left Europe to find a passage to the Indies. Unfortunately North America headed him off and he discovered America. About a century later a number of British navigators undertook the same mission. They knew of Columbus's and Cabot's discoveries and therefore thought they must go further north of the land on which Columbus and Cabot had landed. About 1600 Hudson, Parks and James and a number of others, whose names now make arctic history, undertook the northwest passage by going well to the north. They all made wonderful discoveries, opened up countries still unfortunately little known, but destined in the comparatively near future to come into prominence. Their efforts filled in a period of our Arctic history of nearly two hundred years.

In the early part of the nineteenth century it had become more or less manifest to those interested in the northwest

passage that more knowledge should be obtained of the northern coast, where the coast of America ended towards the north. It was then Sir John Franklin first came on the scene and, very wisely I think, his first two efforts were made overland. In 1821 he came into Hudson Bay, to Port Nelson, up the Nelson River, along the Saskatchewan, and along the old fur traders' route, and then due north and down the Mackenzie to the Arctic sea. A few years later he repeated his trip and instead of going down the Mackenzie went up the Yellow Knife River, down the Coppermine, into Coronation Gulf. Hudson, James, Fox and others came in this way, but none of them got east of the first large island you see on the map. Franklin came through Hudson straits, down to Fort Nelson, followed through to Lake Winnipeg, and across to the Athabaska river, turned north, and followed down to the Arctic sea at the mouth of the Mackenzie River. Later he took the more easterly course and came to Coronation Gulf. He established quite to his own satisfaction that the northern part of the American continent ended in approximately latitude 68° to 70°, depending on how far east or west you might be.

Then there was a considerable lapse of time before another effort was made. In the early 1840's, '42, '43, and '44, another expedition was projected, this time by sea. Eventually the command of the expedition was turned over to Franklin, who had made these trips and had knowledge of the northern coast, and he was given two ships, the *Erebus* and the *Terror*, and sailed from England in the early summer of 1845 in an endeavor to find a northwest passage. He reached a point in North Baffin Bay where he spoke a whaler. There he found nine of his crew were not in good enough physical condition to proceed and they were put aboard the whaler and returned to England. He started with one hundred and thirty-four men on his two ships. The nine who went back were the only nine who were heard of after leaving England. He proceeded westward and in due course, in 1846-1847, the English public began to wonder what had happened to the expedition. They were then overdue.

So the first of a large number of relief expeditions was

sent out. Several years were spent without a trace of the party being found. About 1850 one of the expeditions discovered a winter camp where Sir John Franklin and his party had spent the first winter, '45 and '46, in the south-western corner of North Devon Island. There they found unmistakable evidences of former occupation. A cache of supplies had been left should they have to return and more definitely still the graves of three of the party with grave stones were discovered, and so it was established beyond question that at that place Franklin had spent the winter of '45-'46. There was another blank lasting several years. The British Admiralty offered a reward of ten thousand pounds to any person who might bring sure information of the Franklin party to them.

Many expeditions followed, but no news was found. In 1852 or 1853, Dr. Rae, an employee of the Hudson Bay Co. left Port Nelson, (you all know where Nelson is because it is on the railway map now), and following up the west coast of Hudson Bay he crossed into Pelee Bay. There Dr. Rae found jewelry, silver plate and other things, that without question had come from the Franklin expedition. Upon inquiry from the natives he learned that they all came from the west and established rather conclusively that the Franklin party had more or less come to grief in the vicinity of King William Island. He returned to England with the relics and the evidence he had found and was awarded the prize of ten thousand pounds for the first authentic information as to the fate of the Franklin party. He returned to England, I think, in 1855.

In 1855 Lady Franklin, the wife of Sir John, who had never entirely given up hope of at least rescuing some of the members of the expedition, equipped a small expedition in an auxiliary yacht named the *Fox*, which was sent out under Capt. McClintock, with Lieutenant Hudson second in command. In 1858 they came through Baffin Bay and came down the eastern side of Boothia peninsula. They attempted to get through Charlotte strait and failed to do so. It was filled with ice. So they waited on the eastern side. Incidentally I might say this point is the most northerly point of the continent of North America. McClintock

spent the winter on the eastern side of that peninsula and during the early spring of 1859 they started three parties by dogs to further examine the country of the west. One sledge went over to Prince of Wales Island. They accumulated important knowledge but found no traces of Franklin. McClintock and Hudson turned south, first having gone to the Bellot* strait, and come down past the magnetic pole and across to King William Island. McClintock held more to the south than Hudson and went down the eastern side of King William Island, across the south, up the western side, and around the magnetic pole. Hudson went around the northern end and down the western side.

It was the good fortune of Hudson to find the one and only written record left by the Franklin expedition. At a cape, now known as Lady Jane Franklin Cape, he found a cairn in which was a written record in a sealed container. This record was found in 1859. Upon perusal it was found it had first been placed on the shore by the party in 1847. In the main body of the record it was stated that the two ships had been beset in the ice in mid-September, 1846, at a point six leagues northwest of Victory Point. The record had been taken out of its container in 1848 and on the margin a note made to the effect that during June of the preceding year, 1847, Sir John had died. At this point, on the 11th of April, 1848, the officers and men still living on the two ships were abandoning their ships and starting on a long trek down the westward coast of King William Island, also across the southern coast, down this bay to a river, from which point they hoped to follow the river up to its source and over to Great Slave Lake, which was at that time the northern frontier of civilization. And from that time nothing at all definite has ever been heard of the party. Hudson, as I say, was fortunate in finding that record.

McClintock coming around the western coast of King William Island picked up a note from Hudson telling him what he had found. He found no new written evidence. However, when McClintock was following the eastern coast

*Named after Lieut. Bellot of the French navy, who lost his life in the search for Sir John Franklin.

of King William Island, he found two Eskimeaux camps, one just west of the north end of Melville Island, the other further south. Both of these camps he found to be well stocked with wood from an outside source, and many other items pertaining to the Franklin expedition. Both McClintock and Hudson saw on the Western Coast at Erebus Bay a ship's boat mounted on a sled which had been abandoned. In the boat they found two skeletons of men who had evidently sat there and died.

From that time until 1861 apparently no effort was made towards getting any further evidence but in 1861 Capt. Hall, an American army officer took it on himself as a matter of personal interest to go in and make an investigation, from '61 to '63. He came by the Atlantic, in through Hudson strait, to the northwestern corner of Hudson Bay, where he made his base for three years and went into the thing most thoroughly. He questioned individuals far and wide and travelled up near the end of Melville peninsula, and there he got what possibly was a clue to the fate of the last survivors. There were two natives there who were more or less known to Capt. Crozier second in command of the Franklin expedition. From them he found they had seen tracks and in the distance the white men themselves in the early 50's. They had never spoken to them, because natives then and even yet are very chary of approaching the white man, and the white man must do all the approaching or they will stay away. They had seen what we are quite sure were evidences of white men having been on the northwestern peninsula in the early fifties. Hall continued his studies from Committee Bay and finally in 1865 worked his way as far as the southeastern corner of King William Island. He was depending more on the native stories. He found natives who gave him a story, not only one but several stories, of white men having wandered in the early fifties on the Isthmus of Boothia, which could only be remnants of the Franklin expedition. Hall also found a cairn here and one on the eastern end of Hudson's Peninsula, both manifestly built by white men and both marked by long narrow stones which evidently were intended to indicate the direction of the march of the people who had built the cairn.

McClintock found a similar cairn on the east coast of King William Island, marked the same way. In that cairn there was a white man's knife blade, left by design or accident. Hall did not get to the western side of King William Island where he might have found many evidences. He was forced to return.

The next person was Lieut. Swatka, an American army officer, who followed the same route, but coming directly through King William Island, traversed the southern side and up the western side to the northern bay. He found many evidences of the Franklin expedition but no written records. He corroborated practically all the findings of McClintock, the party which had preceded him by twenty years, including the boat sled mounted on a boat. He also buried many of the skeletons he found and brought back to civilization I think the body of Lieut. Irving now buried I think in Greenwich.

The next man to visit that area was Amundsen, who had such an unfortunate end not many years since. He spent two years there as far as I have been able to find in his books, making no special effort to look into any evidence concerning the Franklin party. He was followed by Asmussen, who spent more or less all his life in the north, and in 1922, '23, and '24 made a sled trip from here across this country right around northern Canada and through to Nome, Alaska. He went over much of the Franklin ground. He found some minor relics on Starvation Cove, and he also collected a number of bones and reburied them. Swatka and Hall both came back with authentic native stories of a boat having been frozen in the eastern end of Queen Maud sea, directly south of where the boats were in the ice. Natives said it had been in the ice. They had seen tracks of several men, one dead man. They went on the boats to see what they could gather and pick up and piled many things on deck. As they got deeper in the boat they found it was dark. They could not see. So they got an idea they would cut a hole to let the light in but they cut it under water and the ship sank taking their plunder with them.

I was the next to visit the area. In 1925 I went up the Mackenzie River, across along the northern coast of Can-

strait, between the peninsula and King William Island, and made my winter home at that point. Within a few days after my advent there and a few days spent getting the camp in shape, the snow and the winter came, and as my program called for me continuing my trip by dog-sled through to the east, to Hudson Bay, I saw nothing of that country on that trip during the summer time. However, in mixing with the natives and asking all the questions I could think of I found from four or five different sources that they had a story of a wrecked ship, in quite a different area from the one reported by Hall and Swatka. The one reported to me was off the northeast crossing of King William Island. I brought that story back and a few relics. As a matter of fact it was not considered an important part of my trip to go into the Franklin relics investigation at that time.

That year I crossed from the Mackenzie. That was the first intimation of a second ship north east of King William Island. The next year I spent on different work on the eastern coast, but in 1928 I made the same trip as in 1925, down the Mackenzie, followed the coast line, crossed to King William Island, and again spent the winter there. That year I was much more interested in magnetic observations than I was in the Franklin expedition. As a matter of fact it was scarcely possible I could remain long in that area that year to do any satisfactory work in connection with looking for relics, so I spent my time on the east corner of King William Island. From there I made three trips north to the area of the Magnetic pole. The first two trips conditions were such that observations were unsatisfactory. I had intended to continue my route through to the eastern side of Hudson Bay, but just then the mining-boom broke in Coronation Gulf area, and I received instructions to return to the Coppermine and make preliminary investigation of what might be seen there. I left Joy Haven on the 17th of June. On the first of August I got to the mouth of the Coppermine river, having been delayed a few weeks by the breakups. In fact I travelled I think until the 18th of June and it was four weeks before I could resume trips.

Under modern conditions I left the Coppermine, the western end of the same trip, at 9 o'clock in the morning and having stopped for lunch and a drink I was at Joy Haven at six o'clock that night. That is the contrast: a trip that took months, now takes one day.

In May of 1929 I got tangled up with the McAlpine flight. I made all my arrangements to go east to the Hudson Bay schooner "Fort James", which had come in from the Atlantic side. I had visited this schooner three or four times and made arrangements with them to join them and go back this year. If I had been able to do that, I should have had the satisfaction of making the northwest passage by water. In August of that year I took boat to Cambridge Bay. The "Fort James" was supposed to come as far as this bay before returning to the east. But I got a wireless letter to the effect that the "Fort James" found it impossible to get through Queen Maud sea and they were returning east. That was on September 11.

Fortunately we had a wireless receiving and sending plant and we had heard of the difficulties of the McAlpine party. So, as I could see no immediate prospect of getting back for another year, I decided to go where I knew the hunt for the McAlpine party would start. I did that and stayed some weeks leaving, I think, on the 14th of November. There were some few people there. Later there were four aeroplanes and fifteen or sixteen people to help in the search. My stunt was to be the cook. However, I did make a few flights over part of the area but, as I say, my big job was cooking.

I got an opportunity to get outside and dropped in at Winnipeg in the fall of 1929. During the winter of 1929-30 the government had been advised of some documents which emanated from a very old prospector who had died some years previously at Nome, Alaska, and which stated this old man had in his youth been a sailor on a whaling ship working into Hudson Bay. While he was there Capt. Hall had been there and employed four men from various sailing ships to help him. He had been one of these men. He worked with Hall for some considerable time, and became

more or less interested in this Franklin search. At one period, I think it was 1863, Hall had gone on a long trip and had detailed these several white men to various duties while he was away. During his absence, the story we got was that this one man had met a native who had come across from King William Island and seen the finish of the Franklin party and from this native he had secured information which corroborated much of the known history of the Franklin party; also to the effect that Franklin himself had been brought ashore and buried in a tomb of rocks and sand, and that at this point there were certain records of the party buried. While some of it did not fit into the known history, the government thought it would be altogether too bad, if anyone else should forestall the government in investigating it, so I was detailed to go and look over the ground during the summer.

So last June I left Ottawa, went to Edmonton, north to the end of the river, and by boat to Fort Norman. At that point I was met by a 'plane and we flew to Great Bear Lake and north to the mouth of the Coppermine River and Coronation Gulf. Now this last summer there has been a good deal of prospecting activity in that area. The activities have met with very considerable encouragement. If this country proves to be anything like as good as it is indicated on first showing, we have a piece of Canada well worth paying attention to up there. I spent a month working in the mineralized areas, and at the end of that time another 'plane came back and picked me up and we started on the second and third phase of last summer's trip.

This 'plane took me to Joy Haven, to the magnetic pole in the north of King William Island. We landed at Victory Point and made our search for evidence of the supposedly buried document. The story placed the position of the grave and the records in it at Victory Point. We made an extensive and minute search of this area and I am sorry to say we found the story was apparently without foundation. There is no evidence in that area to support any story of that sort. However, we went down the route of the Franklin expedition. One record was found and the old camps and many other evidences of Franklin occupation. We found

the cairns that had been demolished, stone caches where things had been cached, but nothing else. The natives had evidently cleaned those up pretty completely. We made our landing in Fresh Water Lake. We came out to the west and found a most promising cairn. It had manifestly been undisturbed and we had great hopes of it. I took it down stone by stone and when we came to the ground level we found for some reason the cairn had been built on a square of naval broadcloth and we thought something should be on top or beneath it. So we gathered the cloth and dug down a considerable distance and got no evidence from there at all. We rebuilt the cairn so it would be there to mark the spot. Close to the coast line we found unmistakable evidences of an old Franklin camp. At that point the relics consisted entirely of what you might think might be left. We found pieces of linen which was used at that time, which, having been frozen in the snow or ice had left a piece of tent nine inches high, that evidently had been supported by ropes still in position, up to an inch in diameter. And there were many other scraps which had been evidently discarded at this point. We found small barrel staves, likely from small kegs containing provisions. And we found a blade of a knife badly rusted and lying just as it had dropped and, most interesting perhaps of all, a piece of Welsh coal showing the party still had coal for fuel and had brought it from the ships. But we found no records and as far as the Franklin party was concerned our results were largely negligible. I think we more or less disproved the story of records, and that was about all. The search taught the world nothing it did not already know.

I was going to give you a new theory of the finish of the Franklin party. I went through what these various explorers had found. They found a record and a boat and cairns laid far to the east of King William Island. And Hall on his trip learned that white men had been seen on the north end of the peninsula in the early fifties. He also learned about some white men seen on the Isthmus of Boothia. There was a boat found with two men aboard on the eastern end of Queen Maud Sea. There are evidences of a boat being found elsewhere, but during this last trip and the

year before I met natives who were the first to find that wreck in the northeast corner of King William Island. One of them also told me that on the land directly opposite, when they were young men—they were then quite old—they had found things they didn't understand, white man's food, found in the ice. From their description some of it was identified as flour and they thought it was white man's snow and threw it up in the air to see the wind blow it away. Pemmican biscuits, and things they couldn't name. This cache, on the northeastern corner of King William Island, had never been revisited after the persons who placed it here had left. So we have this cache and the ship in the northeast corner. We have a wreck with evidence of people having gone ashore at the southwest corner of King William Island. You have the boat. They all report that boat pointing north, which meant it was not coming from Victory Point opposite which the boats were frozen in. It was returning.

So the theory that looks quite possible to me is this, that when the Franklin party left the ships they left in the hope of being able to follow down the western coast of King William Island. We know by the number of graves many had died before they had gone a great distance. At least forty were dead before they got as far as Starvation Cove, where some thirty skeletons were found. My theory is, when they found they were weakening so quickly and that they had no hope of reaching civilization by the route they selected, the stronger among them decided to return to the ships, try to break them out of the ice, and come around and try to relieve the others, if they were fortunate enough to get out with their ships. If that theory is accurate, there was a skeleton crew at least for each ship to be remanned. They broke the ships out. One ship appears to have come down to where it was again beset by the ice, and where eventually it was sunk by the Eskimeaux cutting a hole to let in the light. The other appears to have tried the northern passage and there appears to have gone aground on a reef, likely at the head of a northwestern gale, and was badly broken. It would appear, from the type of cache which the Eskimeaux report, that the crew

made an effort to get ashore enough supplies to see them ahead for a short time at least. It would appear they got twenty-two cases ashore and in all probability went back for further supplies and were either lost during the crossing or failed to come back again. That cache was never touched after being placed there. But Hall reports that four men were here. He got that story from the natives. No doubt they came in ahead of a northwest gale. The natives also said they left to go to the white man's land and we find a series of cairns here and there, with stones indicating the line of march. And Hall also secured a story of white men having been seen on the northeastern side of Melville peninsula. That is the theory, that they possibly remanned their ships, and one tried the eastern and one the western side. The eastern one came across in Sir James Ross strait; the western froze in again and eventually sunk in the eastern end of Queen Maud Sea, and I think myself that in all probability the books and records lie at the bottom with these ships.

THE PRESIDENT:—Major Burwash, may I extend to you the very hearty thanks of the members of the Canadian Club for your most interesting and instructive address. Major Burwash has asked me to tell you that if any of you are interested in additional details and information if you would be good enough to write the Yukon Branch of the Department of the Interior sending your name and address they would be delighted to send publications.