



George Back, *Upper Fall, August, 1821* (Library and Archives Canada / C-141488)



Paul vanPeenen, *Wilberforce Falls, Hood River, August 4, 2002*.

**ARCTIC ARTIST
THE CHANGING NATURE OF GEORGE BACK'S
ARCTIC LAND EXPEDITIONS, 1819 - 1835**

by

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the art and writing of nineteenth-century British explorer George Back. It shows how Back's strong personality and artistic temperament resulted in a response to the nature of northern Canada that was far from conventional, even though he employed some of the aesthetic conventions of the picturesque and the sublime, popular at that time. It also discusses how Back's writing changed to a more conventional style as he rose in rank, contrasting his sketches, which did not strictly adhere to the rules governing picturesque landscape art. It also challenges some earlier criticisms of Back's work through the use of photographs taken on three separate expeditions to retrace Back's journeys and examines his work in the context of the landscape today. It will show how Back resisted the aesthetic conventions to produce artistic but accurate renditions of the northern landscape, setting him apart among northern explorers of his era.

Keywords: Arctic exploration; photography; picturesque aesthetic; canoeing; nineteenth century; George Back

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For my grandfather, Abraham, and my parents, Anneke and Adrian.

They had the courage to explore beyond the horizon.

And for Janice who has the courage to explore with me.

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*There is something exciting in the first start
even upon an ordinary journey.*

-George Back, June 7, 1834

ARCTIC ARTIST

The Changing Nature of George Back's Arctic Land Expeditions, 1819 - 1835

Introduction

The heat was stifling. Sunlight exploded off the ice. The distant land danced in a surreal mirage undulating in the haze. It was as if we had gone through the looking glass. The mindless plodding had put me in a trance. I looked up to check my bearing and saw John running, his sled jerking from side to side, his legs pumping high in the air. It was funny. But only for a moment as I almost instantly realized why he was running: the ice was collapsing. Fear and adrenalin pushed me into action but the sled was a dead weight attached to me. It was like running on a giant waterbed, liquid and solid at the same time yet unable to support my weight. I don't know how far we ran. Thirty or forty metres perhaps but we wasted no time getting to more solid ice.

There I was, lost in the wilderness of my own mind, hauling gear over a frozen Arctic lake as nature reminded me to pay heed. It was my first extended foray into the Barrens, a place that had beckoned me for a long time though circumstance had prevented me from answering the call until now.

The Barrens is an unfortunate misnomer, a term coined by eighteenth century explorer Samuel Hearne during his epic overland journey from Hudson's Bay to the mouth of the Coppermine River. The land is not barren at all. Nearly every square centimeter is covered with vegetation. Even the rocks are blanketed with lichens. Countless insects, birds and mammals make the Barrens their home and feed on each other in an endless cycle of life and death. It is truly one of the last great tracts of wilderness on earth and one can almost feel the land breathing as water pulses through giant arteries. I have never been in a place more alive than the tundra. Perhaps it's because life here is such a delicate affair, constantly teetering on the brink, giving a heightened sense of awareness. It was this heightened sense of awareness that I imagine George Back felt when he first travelled here. He was the reason for me trudging across that frozen lake with my travelling partner John Dunn as we retraced Back's route of 1834 from Fort Reliance on Great Slave Lake to the Arctic Ocean. Back's writing drew me north but, as a photographer, his sketches and paintings were the real attraction. I had to see this place. I had to feel it, touch it, see if it was real.

Even though our respective expeditions were separated by nearly two centuries, our mode of travel was the same. Like Back, we walked and paddled from Fort Reliance following the Lockhart River upstream. And like Back and his men, we dragged our gear and boat across the still frozen lakes of the Lockhart River even though it was the middle of June. The ice doesn't relinquish its grip on this country until well past the summer solstice. It took us sixteen days to travel the 280 kilometres between Fort Reliance and the headwaters of the Back River.

Back needed twenty but our canoe and gear weighed only a fraction of his outfit.

In his *Narrative of the Arctic Land Expedition to the Mouth of the Great Fish River*, Back wrote:

We had altogether twenty-seven bags of pemmican, weighing about eighty pounds each; two boxes of maccaroni [sic], some flour, a case of cocoa, and a two-gallon keg of rum: an adequate supply, if all good, for the three months of our operations. It does not become me to enlarge upon the difficulty and danger of transporting a weight, all things included, of near five thousand pounds over ice and rock, by a circuitous route of full two hundred miles.¹

After sixteen days of mostly dragging our canoe and gear on the ice we crossed the height of land from the Lockhart drainage to the Back River. We camped beside the river near where Back must have stood in 1834. I looked at his drawing of Sussex Lake (fig. 1) and found myself in it: with the sand hills in the foreground running to the left, an esker trailing off to the right, the river flowing by in the foreground and in the background was Sussex Lake with its distinctively shaped island. My photograph of Sussex Lake (fig. 2) is from a similar vantage point and shows the same esker, the river and the lake, with its island in the background. The spatial relationship between the various elements in both pictures is similar and there is no doubt that we captured the scene from a similar vantage point.

Back's image does have picturesque elements with the hills and esker acting as coulisses containing the scene and an animated element in the form of caribou swimming across the river, but as my photograph clearly shows, his image is an accurate representation of the source of the Back River. The flat,

treeless tundra did not offer Back the opportunity to use the conventions of the picturesque. He did not “correct” the landscape as demanded by William Gilpin, the prominent proponent of picturesque theory in the eighteenth century. Gilpin made it clear that in order to conform to the picturesque aesthetic, “correction” was justifiable, admitting in a letter to William Mason that “I am so attached to my Picturesque rules, that if nature goes wrong, I cannot help putting her right.”²

Sussex Lake is an important landmark. It is the start of the longest river entirely on the Barrenlands, and by resisting convention, Back showed the English reading public what the Barrens really looked like, and it was about as far removed from the idyllic English country side as one could have imagined. J. Russell Harper called Back “the most important Arctic topographer from the Canadian viewpoint.”³ The images still resonate with contemporary Arctic travellers as little has changed in nearly two centuries since Back first put pencil to paper on these northern rivers, and most of the scenes he sketched can be readily identified.

L. H. Neatby wrote of Back: “He observed the scenery with the attention of an artist who has nothing else on his mind, and described it with a vividness and precision that never cloys.”⁴ Countering that interpretation, in one of a series of papers published in 1984 and 1985, Ian MacLaren states that in Back’s work “accuracy is sacrificed, not achieved.”⁵ When Back’s original notes and sketchbooks from the 1819-1822 expedition were discovered in the early nineties, they were edited and compiled with other versions of Back’s journals by C. Stuart Houston in *Arctic Artist*.⁶ In the book, MacLaren contributed an

excellent commentary on the aesthetics of Back's writing and painting, however, nothing in his writing, including his earlier papers, indicates that he visited the sites that were the subject of Back's sketches. Because the Canadian north is still largely a landscape unchanged by humankind, the opportunity still exists to get a first-hand look at the scenes Back sketched in such detail. It was those sketches that compelled me to go north, seek out the locations and photograph them for comparison and analysis.

Rephotography is not a new concept. It has been done, either on purpose or unwittingly, ever since the camera was invented. For example, between 1977 and 1979, Mark Klett headed up the Rephotographic Survey Project, or RSP, in which over 120 nineteenth century photographs of the American West were re-photographed. In *Third Views, second sights* Klett explains his interest in "the ways old and new photographs imply the passage of time and in the often complex interpretations we make in order to compare similar but different pictures."⁷

Some of the challenges faced by Klett and his team were to find the exact locations and to overcome the shock that the places often did not look like the pictures because they instantly saw what was included in the photographs and what was left out. They also had to contend with a century of natural and man-made changes in the landscape which sometimes made it impossible to duplicate the original photographs, or made the rephotographs "aesthetically weak or of dull and ugly subjects."⁸

Unlike the self-imposed strict rules by the photographers of the RSP, my approach and methodology to photographing the scenes painted by George Back was done without first establishing exact procedures. This was mainly because I was photographing scenes that were sketched and painted instead of having been photographed, therefore, it would be almost impossible to exactly reproduce the images created nearly two centuries earlier. I also wanted to create images of the landscape that would reflect my own interpretation and feelings in relation to that landscape. However, the basic premise remains that a location first captured as an image, whether by painting or photography, can be located and reoccupied, and is critical to the study of that image and the changes that may or may not have occurred in that landscape. For me personally, it was a way to enter through a kind of vortex into the world of George Back. So little has changed in the northern landscape that finding the scenes painted by Back was not difficult. For me, those locations acted as time machines, creating a physical connection between us and allowing me to re-enter that landscape to see it in much the same way Back had seen it. Thus, I agree with Klett that “the vantage point became the bridge in a determined effort to see the landscape in the same way it had been seen before.”⁹

During three separate expeditions in 1999, 2001 and 2004, I retraced the routes travelled by Back with the aim to discover what motivated this nineteenth century artist. As well, I wished to see if Back’s drawings and paintings were accurate representations of the landscape, or if they were merely romanticized images designed to reinforce a British sense of identity in a unique environment

in which the landscape was the “Other” to be feared and, if possible, subdued. I also wanted to see if anything had changed in the many decades that had passed since the paintings were made. Just like Back and his companions had done, my partners and I travelled by canoe and on foot in a heuristic attempt to duplicate the experience, as much as that is possible with nearly two centuries of technological advancements between our respective quests. There was also a more sensible reason: it remains the only practical mode of travel in what Back called “an iron-ribbed country”¹⁰ following a track of rivers and lakes leading to the Arctic Ocean.

Back produced many sketches and paintings of varying quality and expressiveness during his three expeditions, but for the purposes of this paper I will discuss only some of the works from his 1821 and 1834 expeditions, journeys that I retraced in 1999 and 2001. I will show how Back matured and how his writing style became more conventional as he rose in rank but that, at the same time, he had trouble adhering to convention in his sketches and paintings. In the first expedition Back was a lower-rank officer under John Franklin’s command and under pressure to prove himself. If he did not perform well his career would stall. Back’s 1821 journals are candid in their observations and it is clear they were more of a personal document than one destined for publication. However, when Franklin’s journals covering a large portion of the expedition were lost, Back’s journal, and those of the other officers, were used by Franklin to write his narrative.¹¹

Back's status had changed little by 1825 when Franklin undertook his second land expedition. Initially, Back was not even selected by Franklin despite having saved his life in 1821. In letters to the admiralty prior to the expedition, Franklin made it clear that Lieutenant John Bushnan was his choice for surveyor but Bushnan's untimely death left a vacancy that was filled at the last minute by Back despite Franklin's attempts to convince the admiralty to give the posting to a younger, less experienced officer.¹² Franklin's reluctance to select Back was perhaps due to his own insecurity. Franklin had been in charge of the first expedition and it had been a disaster. To add insult to injury, Franklin had been upstaged by his junior officer who was responsible for saving the lives of the remaining members of the expedition. Franklin likely did not want to put himself in the same position.

By 1833, Back's status had changed considerably. He was now in command of his own expedition, and his journals would be published as a narrative and likely become a best seller. He would have a certain amount of control over the appearance of that narrative, including which illustrations would accompany the text. He relied entirely on his own artistic prowess to produce both words and pictures. It is clear from reading the 1834 journal that Back had matured as an individual, and that he was more inclined to use the aesthetics of the Grand Tour traveller because his British middle and upper class audience would have expected it.

At this time, I must confess that during my expeditions, especially in 2001 when I travelled solo for two months, the difficulty of travelling on the Barrens

was sometimes so overwhelming that getting through it was the only thing I was capable of. At such times the camera and notebook remained safely stowed. Even though my experiences pale in comparison to Back's, I speculate that he probably also had days when putting pencil to paper seemed an impossible task best left for another day. I had no trouble imagining him sitting on a rocky hillside trying to sketch a scene whilst fending off hordes of mosquitoes and black flies. He probably did what he could and fled to the safety of a tent to complete his work.¹³

During my travels it became clear to me that Back was a true artist, not merely a maker of topographical drawings. I agree with Houston that Back was a sensitive and keen observer whose "reflections on the land ... go far beyond the strict requirements of his assignments."¹⁴ Back's primary job as a midshipman was to make astronomical observations for calculating latitude and longitude needed to make a map of the expedition's route. Because of Back's skill as a sketch artist, however, his orders from the admiralty were to make "drawings of the land, of the Natives, and of the various objects of Natural History that may occur."¹⁵ These "drawings" formed the visual record of the expedition, complementing the written account. They also served as a vehicle to put a British stamp on the lands through which the party travelled.

The Early Years

The 1834 expedition was Back's third journey to Canada's Arctic. How did he get there? Like so many young men at the beginning of the nineteenth century, George Back was enlisted in the navy by his father in 1808. He was not yet twelve years old. Britain's navy had a voracious appetite for manpower as it struggled to confine Napoleon's armies, which were marching roughshod across Europe gobbling up one country after another. But the French found their match in Britain's navy, which blockaded many of the European ports eventually contributing to Napoleon's downfall.¹⁶

When young Back was entered on the books of HMS *Arethusa* under the command of Captain Sir Robert Mends, the navy counted more than 120,000 men in its ranks, nearly a ten-fold increase in manpower since the wars with France had begun in 1793. Back's father paid a navy agent to secure a posting for his young son, a common practice for middle class parents hoping to give their sons a better life at sea and possibly a life-long career. From those humble beginnings as a king's letter boy Back would eventually rise to the rank of admiral in what would be a career filled with adventure.

It did not take long for Back to see action. Within six months of entering the navy, Back and some of his shipmates were involved in a raiding party on the north coast of Spain when they were captured by French soldiers. Barely twelve years old, Back was now a prisoner of Napoleon and he would remain so for the next five years.

For months Back and his fellow prisoners were marched across France eventually ending up at Verdun near the border with Belgium and Luxembourg. There Back spent his teenage years growing up in prison. His navy training continued under the tutelage of officers and fellow prisoners who taught mathematics, seamanship and navigation. He also became fluent in French and proficient at drawing, skills that would serve him well during his later expeditions in the Canadian Arctic.

By the time Back was returned to England in 1814 the wars with France were nearing an end and the navy had drastically reduced its numbers. Nevertheless, Back received his first commission as midshipman aboard HMS *Akbar* which sailed for Halifax, Nova Scotia, to participate in the blockade of North America in the Anglo-American war. During the next four years, Back devoted himself to studying and he continued drawing and painting as he prepared himself to become an officer.

The Arctic Expeditions

In 1818, Back was selected to join an expedition to find a Northwest Passage to the Orient. He fell under the command of Lieutenant John Franklin aboard HMS *Trent* which, along with HMS *Dorothea* under Captain David Buchan, was being outfitted to sail north between Spitsbergen and Greenland to find a passage to the Bering Strait. The expedition reached a record latitude of 82°34'N. before being halted by ice off the coast of Spitsbergen. Back's conduct

and skill as an artist during the failed expedition were noted favourably by Franklin who recommended him to the admiralty for the first overland expedition to explore the north coast of America from the mouth of the Coppermine River. Under Franklin's command, Back was joined by another midshipman, Robert Hood, as well as Doctor John Richardson, a naval surgeon. Together with Franklin, the young officers were responsible for documenting the expedition's progress in words and pictures as well as compiling data for a map and the natural history and geology of the area they would travel through. Midshipman Hood was also a skilled artist but only a few of his sketches and paintings survive today.

The expedition sailed from England in September, 1819, marking the beginning of what would become a sixteen-year period of arduous travel, adventure, and heroics for Back. It would also forever intertwine his life with that of his superior officer, Franklin, a relationship marked by mutual respect as well as disdain and disagreement. At the end of this first expedition, Franklin would have Back to thank for his life. Nearly three decades later, Back, as part of the Arctic Council, would help direct the search for what had turned out to be Franklin's final expedition which met disaster somewhere off the coast of King William Island. It is a search that continues today.

Back would prove himself to be an individual of remarkable character and stamina on many occasions during the three Arctic Land Expeditions, and he left a legacy of journals filled with insightful commentary and accurate depictions of what was largely an uncharted tract of North America. Previous to 1821, only two

other European explorers had stood on the northern coast of the continent: Samuel Hearne in 1771 at the mouth of the Coppermine River, and Alexander Mackenzie in 1789 at the mouth of the Mackenzie River. Back's reportage helped fill in the blanks on the map and provided some of the first images of the northern landscape. His skilful drawings and watercolour paintings were not mere records for the files of the admiralty, nor were they simply illustrations for the published narratives that were in high demand by a burgeoning middle class back home in England. They were accurate, artistic representations of important landmarks in the story of Canada's exploration by European colonizers.

The Coppermine River

There are several scenes from the 1821 expedition that stand out for their artistic expression, as well as their importance as depictions of landmarks, which is why I have chosen to take a closer look at them. In 2001, 180 years after John Franklin's first expedition in which a young George Back served as a midshipman, I embarked on a solo expedition following the route of 1821 from the site of Fort Enterprise on Winter Lake, 300 kilometres north of Yellowknife, to the Hood River in Bathurst Inlet, a journey of 1,000 kilometres.¹⁷

During the flight north from Yellowknife, anxiety overwhelmed me and I threw up into one of those ubiquitous white bags found on most airplanes. As I looked for a place to stash it, my destination came into view. Winter Lake was an expanse of ice that had only just begun to melt but there was enough open water

to safely land the float plane. Within minutes my gear and canoe were unloaded and I watched the plane disappear south into the vast blue sky. As I stood on the beach with packs and bags piled up beside my yellow canoe the oppressive silence enveloped me and I questioned my sanity in deciding to travel solo for two months, something I had never done before. So many things could go wrong: I could swamp in a rapid and lose my gear, or worse, drown; I could break a limb or be attacked by a bear. With these scenarios playing themselves out in my head I climbed a hill to have a look around. On top, overlooking the lake, I found a small grave and I promised myself to be careful and continue my journey as long as I felt safe. With that foremost in my mind I set off for Point Lake and the Coppermine River. I wondered what reservations Back had when he set out on his journey with Franklin. His journal does not indicate he had any but he does describe the scene as the party set off down Point Lake:

The scene was interesting and novel – a lake bounded on each side with high and almost perpendicular rocks, whose green summits were capped with large stones – and whose vallies [sic] displayed at certain distances a few solitary clumps of pines – claimed the first attention – whilst the continued ranges of receding blue hills – which the eye lost ultimately in the grey dimness of the atmosphere... our own cavalcade possessed the centre, and what with the total innovation of transporting canoes in such a manner – the singular appearance of the men and sledges – the positions and dress of the officers as well as the deep contrast between the perpetual silence of the place, and the animation of the party – afforded a most perfect view of a voyage of discovery.¹⁸

The accompanying water colour sketch, *Setting out on Point Lake* (fig. 3), matches Back's word picture. At first glance, and according to MacLaren, the image adheres to the conventions of the picturesque. Topographic landscape artists like Back were taught at the Royal Naval Academy to make their

representations *picturesque*, literally meaning “like a picture.”¹⁹ Landscape painting was a well established pastime for the British traveller by the nineteenth century. The way of seeing a landscape, and committing it to paper or canvas, was informed by theories of the sublime and the picturesque. Both were ways of seeing nature. William Gilpin was perhaps the most well known purveyor of picturesque theory as set out in his *Three essays: On Picturesque Beauty; On Picturesque Travel; and On Sketching Landscape* (1792). Gilpin argued that picturesque scenes included aspects of both the *sublime* and the *beautiful* as theorized by Edmund Burke, who in his *Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) argued that “the sublime ... signified that which awes or terrifies, and the beautiful that which charms and pleases”.²⁰ Conventional beautiful landscapes were all about harmony and balance between man and nature, whereas sublime landscapes represented untamed nature, vastness and chaos. Gilpin’s theory of the picturesque aesthetic was a system of classifying elements in a landscape to help decide whether or not it was worth painting. It included aspects of both the sublime and the beautiful. Gilpin wrote:

[So] that we may examine picturesque objects with more ease, it may be useful to class them into the sublime, and the beautiful; tho, [sic] in fact, this distinction is rather inaccurate. Sublimity alone cannot make an object picturesque. However grand the mountain, or the rock may be, it has no claim to this epithet, unless it's [sic] form, it's colour or it's accompaniments have some degree of beauty. Nothing can be more sublime, than the ocean: but wholly unaccompanied, it has little of the picturesque. When we talk therefore of the sublime object, we also understand, it is also beautiful: and we call it sublime, or beautiful, only as the idea of sublimity, or simple beauty prevail.²¹

However, as Susan Glickman explains in *The Picturesque and the Sublime: A Poetics of the Canadian Landscape*, that while these theories were being more narrowly defined during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by the likes of Burke, Gilpin, Uvedale Price, Richard Payne Knight and others, picturesque “began to be used as a third term to sit beside the other two and mediate between them.”²² Or, as MacLaren explains in his *Commentary on the Aesthetics of Back’s Writing and Painting*: “By the second decade of the nineteenth century, picturesque had long been in use as both a noun and an adjective...but unsurprisingly its widespread use precluded a clear definition.”²³ Because there were such wide ranging interpretations of both the picturesque and the sublime, MacLaren explains, there were wide discrepancies between how theorists viewed landscapes and the practices of tourists and landscape painters because tastes were constantly evolving and changing. In other words, just because theorists had a certain understanding of landscape aesthetics did not necessarily mean that the practicing public understood it in the same way.²⁴ For somebody like Back, who, by all accounts, had no formal artistic training, it was likely he lacked a clear understanding of the picturesque aesthetic.

Despite the wide-ranging definitions of the picturesque, travellers understood “that the essence of the picturesque was something that reminded them of the sort of landscape that characterizes the English Home Counties.”²⁵ In other words, it was a small-scale topography, lacking huge land-forms and endless vistas, and it is neatly divided into foreground, usually elevated, and a sunken middle ground that blends into a background that enclosed the

landscape. Foliage usually closed off the sides, while the foreground was often animated by animals or people looking into the landscape, thereby giving the viewer an entry point into the scene which helped achieve the picturesque's main ideological theory of the idea that "all of nature, various as it was, existed harmoniously with man and came under human control."²⁶

With that in mind, looking at Back's Point Lake sketch (fig. 3), the scene lacks the overtly heightened vantage point often found in picturesque scenes. Perhaps the large flat expanse of Point Lake did not lend itself to that particular view in Back's eyes, even though the shore at Keskarrah Bay, the location of Back's painting as shown in my photograph (fig. 4), is steep and could have easily afforded him a view from on high. Back's image certainly can be interpreted as having a romantic quality, as indeed many images of people setting out on a long journey can be interpreted as romantic.

Back's painting, in my opinion, truthfully depicts the party setting out on a quest in the vast, treeless and challenging landscape that is the Canadian Arctic. It is an image far removed from Britain's pastoral "Home Counties." When I look at the painting, I recognize the vast landscape of Point Lake enclosed by the hills in the background and the east and west sides of the lake. MacLaren notes that "this enclosing of a 'scene' is one hallmark of the picturesque, since it permits the traveller to define a wilderness as a discrete landscape."²⁷ MacLaren argues that this technique effectively reduces the vast wilderness and presents it on a more moderate scale, implying that Back "improved" on nature by moving its features around to accommodate aesthetic conventions. But I do not think Back

exaggerated or altered the view of the landscape to make it more pleasing to the eye. As can be seen in my photograph, the hills really do close off the sides and background because they are there.

In the painting there is certainly no harmony implied between man and nature. My experience of dragging my canoe and supplies on Point Lake in early summer was a difficult and dangerous one as ice repeatedly broke away under my weight. Twice I fell through the shattering ice and was lucky to only get wet and somewhat terrified.²⁸ Back's scene drives home the reality of this kind of journey: long days of hard work while being constantly in danger of falling through the ice, constant harassment from mosquitoes, and in Back's day, the constant need to top up the ever-dwindling food supply.

In Back's painting, the dark clouds are perhaps symbolic of the difficulties already encountered by the party, and may also be providing a sense of foreboding as the explorers set out into the unknown. They serve as a compositional counterbalance to the expanse of white ice. Compositionally, the image is well executed with the dog teams and canoes occupying the middle ground, while the boulder in the left foreground, partly obscuring the view, provides additional compositional balance and makes me think Back sat on a rock and sketched the scene as it unfolded before him. The painting is rich in details. It shows the large number of the party, the various sledges used to transport the supplies and canoes, the different styles of clothing worn by officers carrying guns and small bags, and the voyageurs who are doing the heavy hauling. There is even smoke coming from the pipe of one of the men reposing

on a loaded sledge, as well as packs on the dogs hitched to another sledge. It is no wonder that this painting, which presents a novel and interesting scene, was included in Franklin's narrative. Back's attention to detail in this painting, as in others, are a clue to his visual acuity. Not much escaped him and he was able to translate what he saw into both pictures and words.

Rocky Defile

The seemingly [sic] diminutiveness of the river – the foaming rapidity of the current – which was formed into large rolling waves – the overhanging craggy rocks – the danger of the canoes in running it – the adjacent towering hill and the distant view of the Copper Mountains – formed a most imposing scene which may be equaled but seldom surpassed.²⁹

Back's *Rocky Defile Rapids* (fig. 5) is the first known depiction of this magnificent canyon on the Coppermine River. It is the first in a series of canyons that travellers must negotiate either by paddling through the dangerous rapids, or by portaging around them. It represents a dramatic change in the landscape and was therefore an obvious choice for the subject of a sketch for Back as much as it is an obvious choice for photographers today. It is also a dangerous spot where people have drowned in recent years. A memorial cairn and plaque remind passing travellers of the dangers.

Back described the rapid as “the most extraordinary one we had yet seen”³⁰ but he sticks to the facts and does not launch into an overtly picturesque word picture of the scene, as he did for some others. MacLaren calls the passage “spirited and enthralling...one that almost surpasses the bounds of the

picturesque.”³¹ It is, in fact, sublime because, as MacLaren correctly observes, the descent of the rapid put the expedition “beyond the bounds of their harmonious control of nature.”³²

Back’s painting of the canyon is not only an exquisite rendition of this spectacular scene, it is also accurate. It shows the canoes traversing the rapids, providing scale to the scene, and it depicts the colour of the rock and the sparse tree growth with the Copper Mountains in the background. At first glance the viewer might think that the painting was created from an impossible vantage point hovering somewhere above the river, but this is not the case. The vantage point from where Back most likely sketched this scene is on a high bank on the east side of the river just south of the canyon.

Trying to duplicate Back’s painting with a photograph was difficult because the perspective changes with different lenses. Short focal-length, or wide-angle, lenses will flatten out a scene, while telephoto lenses will compress it. Our eyes will see a scene like this and form a picture in our mind bringing all the elements together in a similar fashion to Back’s depiction of the scene which is akin to a long-lens view. However, a camera lens has a fixed field of view and this presents a problem for the rephotographing of a scene that was previously painted. In Back’s painting the scene appears compressed thereby giving height to the cliffs and bringing the mountains in the background closer. In reality, the Copper Mountains – now called Coppermine Mountains – are about 30 kilometres north of Rocky Defile but clearly visible because they are much higher than the surrounding landscape.

I took many photographs of the scene trying to create an image matching the one created by Back 180 years before. Because the eye automatically adjusts to distant scenes, a painter could draw the scene as Back did with the mountains seeming to loom close by. Photographers are technologically challenged to do this because using a longer lens to bring the mountains closer would eliminate the edges of a scene. I therefore chose a medium telephoto lens that would neither compress nor flatten the scene too much. In the first photograph (fig. 6), the scene is clearly the same as Back's painting. The main difference being that it was taken from a slightly higher vantage point which was necessary to include the Coppermine Mountains in the background and to get above the trees that now occupy the lower slope.

My second photograph (fig. 7) of Rocky Defile was taken from a slightly lower vantage point along the same slope. It comes closer to the view painted by Back but, because of the trees in the foreground, part of the canyon's entrance is obscured. It is very likely those trees were not there in Back's time as the climate has moderated over the last century resulting in higher tree growth, as well as a northward expansion of the tree line. The view excludes the Coppermine Mountains because of the limitations of the angle of view of the lens I used. A wider-angle lens would have included them but it would also have flattened out the scene as to make the mountains look smaller and farther away than they really are.

Back's painting has a human element in the form of the two canoes passing through the canyon. The canoes provide the scale of the canyon

correctly and draw the viewer into the painting to direct the eye to the far canyon wall illuminated by sunlight as the near canyon wall on the right looms in the shadow, a possible threat to the small canoes, and a sublime element within the picture. The lack of foreground creates a feeling that this is not nature existing harmoniously with humankind and it certainly does not convey any kind of human control, both elements of the picturesque aesthetic often used, according to MacLaren, to “reassure the travelling Britons of their identity as representatives of their age and culture.”³³ Back does not comment on running the rapids in the canyon but one must remember that the voyageurs paddling the expedition’s canoes were professionals with many thousands of kilometers of experience under their sashes. Back may also have walked over the portage after making a sketch of the scene. Having paddled through Rocky Defile after first portaging some of my gear to lighten the canoe, I can attest that it was a hair-raising experience, bordering on the terrifying, and one I would likely not repeat. The idea of humankind’s perceived power over nature fell by the wayside for this explorer a long time ago. Travelling in nature, or wilderness, is a constant negotiation in which my existence is a rather insignificant presence. Back’s painting illustrates this point very well.

Rocky Defile truly was, and still is, the wilderness. Back’s description of the scene leaves the reader feeling like this was a place that inspired majesty. It also inspired a wonderful painting that Franklin mysteriously failed to include in his narrative. Of all the canyons on the Coppermine River, Rocky Defile is the most impressive. It is not only the first canyon to stop travellers, but its walls are

higher than the others, with perhaps Escape Rapids further downstream being the only exception.

Bloody Fall

The place where our tents were pitched – commanded a very beautiful view of the river – which was bounded on each side by lofty hills of clay and sand...The fall filled the centre – whilst the bustling scene of tents – and armed men and the humiliating one of human bones – and fragments – occupied the foreground.³⁴

There are two images of Bloody Fall, named by Samuel Hearne for the massacre of a group of Inuit by his Indian guides in 1771.³⁵ The first is the published engraving in Franklin's Narrative (fig. 8). The second is a painting found in one of Back's original sketch books from the expedition entitled *A Part of Massacre Rapid* (fig. 9), which depicts the middle section of Bloody Fall. It is difficult to gauge why Back made the latter as it is a scene of little importance compared to the image published in Franklin's narrative. Both images are remarkably accurate depictions of what is an important historical site.

Photographs, taken by me 180 years after Back made his sketches, reveal that not much has changed, and that Back did not "correct" what he saw there. My photograph of the middle part of Bloody Fall (fig. 10) clearly shows the rock-strewn beach in the foreground with the cliff faces on both sides of the canyon, the turbulent river flowing between them and the sandy cliffs downstream. Back's *Massacre Rapid* is one of several sketches that appear in his journals that were not included in Franklin's narrative, perhaps because, in Franklin's eyes, the images did not adhere closely enough to the picturesque aesthetic, nor were they

of any importance in the context of the expedition. They were painted for reasons that can only be speculated upon. They are all scenes of natural beauty which likely impressed Back. Rocky Defile and Bloody Fall, especially, are both places of immense power where the river narrows dramatically as it is forced through canyons. The sound at Bloody Fall is akin to that of a jet taking off as the water blasts down the rapids. Both places had an impact on me and I can't help but conclude that Back and his companions must have been equally impressed.

Just downstream, however, where the river spills out of the canyon, is a very important site for the expedition, which is exactly why the image was included in Franklin's narrative. The scene, described by Franklin as "taken by Mr. Hood but finished by Mr. Back,"³⁶ shows a lush meadow with skulls and bones in the foreground. The expedition's camp is situated in the sunken middle ground at left, leading the eye down the meandering river to the background, which is closed off by steep sandy banks. The original sketch, however, seems to have been lost.³⁷

Back arrived at Bloody Fall fifty years, almost to the day, after the massacre described by Hearne and found that "the havoc that was there made was but too clearly verified – from the fractured skulls – and whitened bones of those poor sufferers – which yet remained visible."³⁸ It is a claim corroborated by John Richardson in his journal.³⁹ Back goes on: "The island on which one of them got [killed] was pointed out to us – and certainly answered [Hearne's] description as did also many other parts [of the scene]."⁴⁰

Denis St. Onge, in an article in *Canadian Geographic* refutes this claim as “a product of [Back’s] imagination. Arctic ground squirrels and other animals would have disposed of the bones many years before the arrival of the Franklin expedition; moreover, the slaughter actually took place about a kilometre away from where Back has located it.”⁴¹ What to believe? It is possible remnants of the slain Inuit from Hearne’s day remained at or near the site of the massacre at Bloody Fall, as sketched by Back. The other possibility is that they were the bones of more recently deceased Inuit who were buried there, however, if that was the case, why would they show, according to Franklin, “marks of violence”⁴² in the form of fractures. It was common practice to “bury” people by covering them with rocks since the rocky terrain and permafrost made the digging of any kind of a hole impossible. Despite St. Onge’s claim that the skulls in the picture were “artistic licence,” he did find that Back produced a faithful representation of Bloody Fall and its surroundings, and that Back “may have felt that here he could not improve on Nature.”⁴³

MacLaren’s opinion of the picture is that Back commemorated “in picturesque convention the sublime site of the massacre,”⁴⁴ showing the tranquil camp overlooking the river below Bloody Fall. MacLaren calls the picture’s avoidance of a sublime rendition awkward because “the viewer of [Back’s] picture cannot easily proceed from the foreground, down into the middle ground on the right-hand side, where the shore and the water appear to occupy the same level ... compounded by the presence of an oversized canoe, which seems to raise

the level of the water in the middle ground and, thereby, of minimizing the height of the falls ... thus violating picturesque convention."⁴⁵

A discussion on the problems with perspective follows, but first the aesthetic confusion of the picture must be addressed. MacLaren opines that the picture did not receive sublime treatment from Back because Franklin would not have allowed any kind of apprehension to be expressed in his Narrative, especially since they were about to embark on the ocean. Back's use of the skulls and bones are, according to MacLaren, a conventionally picturesque ruins motif, "an historical emblem investing the landscape with temporal depth."⁴⁶ The bones in the picture confirm Hearne's account, as well as Franklin's description of finding the bones and skulls "which bore the marks of violence."⁴⁷ If the picturesque placement of the encampment on the bluff overlooking the scene is aesthetically confusing, it could be because Back was only twenty-four years old and his understanding of picturesque aesthetics was likely still evolving. And given the confusion surrounding the understanding of the aesthetic in the early nineteenth century, according to MacLaren and others, it is perhaps to be expected that Back produced a picture that was aesthetically confusing. We must also be mindful of the fact that the object of the discussion is an engraving, not an original sketch. Perhaps Edward Finden, the engraver, may have created his own interpretation of the scene under the direction of Franklin and the narrative's publisher, depicting elements that did not appear in the original sketch.⁴⁸ Until the original sketch surfaces, a proper comparison cannot be made.

To shed some light on the problem with perspective in Back's picture of Bloody Fall, it must be understood that the portion of Bloody Fall represented in both Back's engraving and in my photograph, only show the outflow of the canyon. The actual *fall* in the river is achieved further upstream in the canyon and is not visible in either image. Incorrectly named so by Hearne, Bloody Fall is not a true fall at all, but rather a combination of two ledges separated by a short section of relatively calm water. St. Onge, who also visited and photographed the site, correctly observed that the name often leads to confusion because it suggests the canyon contains a waterfall, when, in fact, it merely contains a series of dangerous rapids causing the river to drop only about three metres in the approximately 500-metre-long canyon. This is perhaps why Back called it *Massacre Rapid*, which is a more accurate description of the physical attributes of the river. In my opinion, aesthetic confusion and bones aside, my photograph (fig. 11) clearly demonstrates that Edward Finden's engraving of Back's Bloody Fall is an accurate representation of an important historical site in the Canadian north.

The Arctic Ocean

Back's painting of the Union Jack flying over the tent at the mouth of the Coppermine River on the shore of the Arctic Ocean (fig. 12) served as a symbol of the far reaching power of the British Crown. It reinforced Britain's sovereign claim over those lands, and the British reading public most certainly identified with such a symbol, which is undoubtedly why the sketch was included in

Franklin's narrative. But the scene is more than that. Hearne had stood here fifty years before when he "took possession of the coast, on behalf of the Hudson's Bay Company."⁴⁹ The only visual record was Hearne's crude map of the area. Now, with Back's accurate rendition of the location, Britons had a better idea of the nature of the northern coast of the continent at the mouth of the Coppermine. Because of Hearne's earlier expedition, Franklin and his men were not exactly exploring *terra incognita*, but what lay beyond the horizon most certainly was. Whether they realized it or not, the expedition was now inside the Northwest Passage, the aim of its quest, and from here on new lands and waterways would be explored by the Europeans.

Back's journal reflects the anticipation and fear of what lay ahead, but instead of owning up to that fear himself, he attributes it to the Canadian voyageurs, who "began to have some apprehensions of starving and drowning."⁵⁰ The sea was foreign territory and fraught with danger for *les Canadiens*, but Back, a sailor in His Majesty's Navy, would probably have looked forward to hoisting sail and setting out to sea, even if it was in a fragile birch bark canoe, which they had no way of repairing, except for minor damage. Back does, however, realize their precarious position, as their "stock of provisions was barely sufficient for three weeks."⁵¹ It would prove not to be enough as nearly two months later the expedition stumbled back to Fort Enterprise, losing eleven men along the way.⁵²

At first glance, Back's painting of the mouth of the Coppermine seems a tranquil one of the expedition pausing after a difficult journey down the river. In

classic picturesque fashion, the two figures to the left of the tent are seen to be gazing out over the sea, symbolic of the anticipation of what lay ahead in the next chapter of the expedition. In contrast, the shading in the sketch helps to reinforce a feeling of foreboding that is reflected in Back's writing, and I wonder if he consciously chose the time of day – midnight – on July 19, 1821, to make it. The light orange wash on the horizon and the low angle of the light indicate the sun had not set, confirming Hearne's observation of July 17, 1771, that "in those high latitudes, and at this season of the year, the Sun is always at a good height above the horizon, so that we had not only day-light, but sun-shine the whole night."⁵³ I can also attest to this with my photograph (fig. 13) of the same scene taken at midnight on July 19, 2001.

MacLaren states that "Back's view picturesquely corrects the prospect at the river mouth"⁵⁴ by apparently reducing the number of islands in his sketch and pushing the ice further off shore than it really was. MacLaren draws this conclusion by quoting a letter written by Dr. John Richardson on July 18, 1821, in which he states that the islands about the mouth of the river are numerous and that they do not yet know if they are in a deep inlet or at the sea coast proper.⁵⁵ Richardson continues to describe a narrow passage of open water as the sea ice is pushed close to shore. To be fair, MacLaren wrote this prior to the discovery of Back's original journals and sketches, therefore, his comments were based on the engraving published in Franklin's narrative and, as MacLaren writes in a later commentary, there are often many discrepancies between original sketches and published engravings.⁵⁶

Back confirms what he has painted on that day in his journal entry of July 19, 1821, that “[t]he ice had been driven a long way off shore during the night,”⁵⁷ contradicting Richardson’s claim of the previous day. Despite the ice-free passage, Back writes that the expedition “could not proceed with the canoes – during the day – there was heavy rain and thunder with strong gales.”⁵⁸ But the following day, on July 20, nature obliged as the ice remained off shore, just as it did when I arrived at the mouth of the Coppermine River 180 years later. As with Back and the voyageurs, it was a scene of nervous anticipation for me as I was unsure of paddling east along the coast. It is not a great place for a small canoe, especially when ice is thrown into the mix.

Commander Back

In Peter Steel’s excellent biography, *The Man Who Mapped the Arctic*, Back is described as languishing as a Commander on half-pay while in “Italy to improve himself in the arts.”⁵⁹ He was in fact on a tour of the European continent, typical of people with means in the nineteenth century. Back’s introductory chapter to his narrative describes how he heard of the missing Arctic expedition of Captain John Ross. It describes in detail Back’s hasty journey back to England to volunteer for a much grander tour by offering his services for a rescue mission to find Ross and his crew aboard HMS *Victory*. Ross had set sail for the Arctic in 1829 to find the Northwest Passage and had not been heard from since. Back’s plan was to find the headwaters of the Thlew-ee-choh-dezeth, or Great Fish River, now known as the Back River, a river he had been told about by “Black

Meat, an old Indian warrior, whom [he] had known in 1820.”⁶⁰ Back’s orders, once he had found the river somewhere northeast of Great Slave Lake, were to descend that river to the Arctic Ocean and find Ross and his crew.⁶¹

As documented in his Narrative, Back assembled the goods for the expedition during the winter of 1832, and in February, 1833, sailed to New York. From there he travelled to Montreal embarking in canoes following the by now familiar voyageur route into the Athabasca country. Recruiting additional men for the expedition along the way, Back arrived at Fort Resolution on the south shore of Great Slave Lake in early August. From there he headed east on the lake, the world’s tenth largest, and built Fort Reliance on the shore of Charlton Bay at the mouth of the Lockhart River.⁶²

In the fall of 1833, while the fort was being built for the expedition’s winter quarters, Back, with Indian guide Maufelly, explored the area northeast of Fort Reliance in search of the headwaters of the Great Fish River. They found the source of what appeared to be a river heading in a northerly direction and Back named it Sussex Lake. The men spent a cold winter at Fort Reliance and in the spring, just before departing for the Great Fish River, Back received a letter from England that Ross had been rescued and that he should now make exploration his primary goal. His orders were to descend the Great Fish River to the ocean, and map the coast from there west to Point Turnagain, the most eastern point reached during the 1821 expedition.⁶³

Reading Back’s narrative, it quickly becomes apparent that he had indeed improved himself in the arts and had matured a great deal since his first

expedition under Franklin more than a dozen years before. In *The Grandest Tour*, MacLaren characterizes Back as being “at his aesthetic apex, capable...of amassing a record of his experiences that was at once functional and aesthetic.”⁶⁴ It is true that Back’s Narrative is steeped in the conventions of the Picturesque and the Sublime; however, his visual record of the expedition shows that he had trouble adhering to those conventions. This expedition was Back’s first command and the need for him to succeed was paramount if he were to advance his career. With two land expeditions already behind him, he was now an experienced northern traveller having covered more ground in North America than almost any other British explorer until that time.⁶⁵ Back was intimately familiar with the dangers ahead. His preparation was meticulous as he left nothing to chance and at every opportunity, as described in his narrative, Back tried to gain local knowledge because the information he had regarding the Great Fish River was more than a decade old.

Throughout his narrative, Back resorts to comparing scenes he encounters to more familiar landscapes, a convention of the picturesque traveller. While on Beechey Lake, Back described the landscape as having a more mountainous and imposing appearance, continuing rugged and desolate, as “many parts bore a close resemblance to the lava round Vesuvius,”⁶⁶ a place he had recently visited while in Italy. A few days later, as the party descends a difficult section of river, Back finds the landscape more pleasing to his artistic eye: “A loud roar of rushing water, heard for the distance of about a mile, had prepared us for a long line of rapids, which now appeared breaking their furious

way through mounds and ranges of precipitous sand-hills of the most fantastic outline. Some of them resembled part of old ruins or turrets, and would have offered pleasing subject for sketching.”⁶⁷ As the expedition arrives at the confluence with “a magnificent river, as broad as the Thames at Westminster,”⁶⁸ he names it after his friend George Baillie. Ten days later, as the undulating, prairie landscape became more hilly, Back saw “a picturesque and commanding mountain, with steep sloping sides...inaccessible to the foot of man. It was by far the most conspicuous eminence we had seen...[and] took me in imagination to Auld Reekie.”⁶⁹

These references to familiar places are perfectly understandable as the landscape along the Back River is mostly flat and completely without trees making it difficult for some one schooled in the aesthetics of the picturesque to see anything worthy of one’s pencil. Without familiar landmarks, which help one estimate distance and size, one can easily be fooled. What at first looks like a range of high mountains twenty or thirty kilometres away is in reality a low rocky ridge only a couple of kilometers distant. Geese slowly waddling along in the distance can be confused with a herd of grazing musk oxen. On many occasions during my expedition in 1999 I became the victim of this kind of visual trickery and I imagine Back and his men fell into the same visual trap.

Back repeatedly creates word pictures in the picturesque aesthetic:

The scarcity of animals in the neighbourhood created no little doubt in the minds of the hunters as to the best route to be taken on their return with Mr. McLeod to the Fort; and they had half decided on going a day’s journey to the north to kill musk oxen, when the fog clearing away discovered the branching antlers of twenty reindeer

spread over the summits of the adjacent hills. To see and pursue was the work of a moment, and in a few minutes not an active hunter remained in the encampment. It was a beautiful and interesting sight; for the sun shone out, and lighting up some parts cast others into deeper shade; the white ice reflected millions of dazzling rays; the rapid leapt and chafed in little ripples, which melted away into the unruffled surface of the slumbering lake; abrupt and craggy rocks frowned on the right; and, on the left, the brown landscape receded until it was lost in the distant blue mountains. The foreground was filled up with the ochre-coloured lodges of the Indians, contrasting with our own pale tents; and to the whole scene animation was given by the graceful motions of the unstartled deer, and the treacherous crawling of the wary hunters.⁷⁰

Sadly, there is no sketch that accompanies Back's description of the scene. He frames the picture with "craggy rocks" on the right and the "brown landscape" receding on the left into "distant blue mountains." The foreground is dotted with the "ochre-coloured lodges of the Indians" in contrast with the expedition's "pale tents." The leaping rapid and the white ice illuminated by "millions of dazzling rays" meander through the middle ground leading the eye to the focus of the picture of the "wary hunters" stalking the "unstartled deer." The passage clearly demonstrates that Back has gained a greater understanding of picturesque aesthetic theory by the way he lays out the scene with the coulisses in the form of craggy rocks and a receding middle ground into the distant hills that close off the scene's background. The picture is animated not only by the leaping rapid but also by the "unstartled deer". The Indians' lodges and the expedition's tents in the foreground serve as elements for the viewer to enter the scene. The time Back spent in Italy improving himself in the arts had obviously paid off.

Aylmer Lake

Despite Back's obvious mastery of the picturesque, there are exceptions in his narrative. There is a sketch of the expedition toiling along the ice of Aylmer Lake, dated June 25 (fig. 14). The sketch shows Back himself in his top hat standing beside a tired or dejected member of the expedition seated on a sledge loaded with cooking implements alongside a crevasse in the ice. In the distance the other members of the party are dragging their sledges and the boat along the rotten ice while dark storm clouds cover the sky overhead.

Back writes that the "Indians [travelling with the expedition], always timorous, kept close along the land, and fixed us constantly amongst the bad and unsafe ice, which now resembled spikes from two to three inches long... The party with the boat very wisely kept farther out, and had consequently better ice, the surface of which was like a bed of madrepores, except that the upper edges were considerably sharper."⁷¹ Given the dramatic subject matter, Back refrains from painting an overtly sublime word-picture of the scene. Perhaps his sketch is a compilation of experiences the men had while dragging their sledges over the ice of the big lakes on the Lockhart River, but I am inclined to believe it is the true representation of something Back saw that day. The resulting engraving, *Crossing Lake Aylmer* (fig. 15), represents Back's drawing accurately.

Drawing on my own experiences when, in June 1999, my travelling partner, John Dunn, and I dragged our canoe and a makeshift sledge for two weeks along those same lakes, we encountered many pressure ridges and rotten

ice. My photograph of Aylmer Lake (fig. 16) shows a pressure ridge stretching across the Lake confirming that indeed such things did, and still do, happen. Back did not embellish the scene, nor did he “improve” on nature as was sometimes demanded by the picturesque aesthetic. Neither did Back come up with a sublime response to the landscape he and his crew were traversing. Had he followed those aesthetic principles he might have drawn blocks of ice sticking up high into the air dwarfing the humans as they tried to save themselves from imminent peril, and he could have accompanied the sketch with a word picture echoing the dangers encountered on the rotten ice. Instead, Back’s sketch and narrative depict what was just another day trudging across the frozen white wasteland of the Canadian tundra. By ignoring aesthetic principles, Back comes up with a novel and interesting scene which is included in his Narrative. His artistic sensibility pushed him beyond the conventional and he created a more meaningful response to the landscape, a response that leans more towards reportage of the kind that today is made with a camera.

Victoria Headland

This then may be considered as the mouth of the Thlew-ee-choh, which, after a violent and tortuous course of five hundred and thirty geographical miles, running through an iron-ribbed country without a single tree on the whole line of its banks, expanding into fine large lakes with clear horizons, most embarrassing to the navigator, and broken into falls, cascades, and rapids, to the number of no less than eighty-three in the whole, pours its waters into the Polar Sea in latitude 67° 11’ 00” N., and longitude 94° 30’ 0’ W.⁷²

At the mouth of the river, Back again shuns convention. His drawing of Victoria Headland (fig. 17) shows the boat approaching the river's mouth with sand banks along the right shore and a beach on the left. In the background is the headland for which the sketch is named. Back's description matches the drawing: "...it was while treading our way between some sand-banks, with a strong current, that we first caught site of a majestic headland."⁷³

Again, Back does not "correct" the scene. His drawing matches the description in the Narrative, complete with the waves around the boat caused by "[t]he rush of the current, opposed by a fresh breeze, and possibly by the tide."⁷⁴ The engraving (fig. 18) published in the Narrative received a somewhat sublime treatment, with dark storm clouds looming on the horizon adjacent to the dark form of Victoria Headland. The crew was forced to shore by the big waves as "the laden boat was unable to resist them [the waves], and shipped a great deal of water."⁷⁵ The engraving thus remains true to the original sketch and is an accurate representation of Back's experience at the mouth of the river.

Ogle Point

A week later, on August 8, with the expedition hampered by ice, Back worries he will not be able to fulfil his expedition's second goal of mapping the coast to Point Turnagain, the farthest point east reached in 1821. He knows from his experience in 1821 that a march across the Barrens back to Fort Reliance is out of the question. They need the boat if there is to be any hope of returning

before the onset of winter. When the ice suddenly clears, the boat is launched and Back writes that “after a delightful sail, we overtook our enemy the drift ice.”⁷⁶ But they only reach as far as Ogle Point which is the subject of a rather mundane sketch by Back (fig. 19). It depicts the low lying land with masses of broken drift ice off shore. In the sky is written “Thunder Storm” and below it something that might read “very dark here” and below that the word “ice.” However, the resulting engraving, *Thunder Storm near Point Ogle* (fig. 20), created by Edward Finden and published in Back’s narrative, has sublime qualities. It shows members of the expedition with the tent and the boat on the beach. These animated elements do not appear in the original sketch. They were added, pointing to the “corrections” made by the engraver.⁷⁷ However, as the author of the Narrative, Back would likely have worked closely with Finden and the publishers of his narrative and may have directed Finden to add the elements missing from his sketch. The accompanying description reflects Back’s disappointment as he compares the landscape to a desert:

Upon landing, I directed my steps to a hillock of sand ten feet high, about two and a half miles from the beach, and in going was forcibly struck with the desert-like character of the place. It was one irregular plain of sand and stones; and had it not been for a rill of water, the meandering of which relieved the monotony of the sterile scene, one might have fancied one’s self in one of the parched plains of the East, rather than on the shores of the Arctic Sea.⁷⁸

Back’s comparison of the land around Ogle Point to a desert is an obvious one as the low lying land is mostly sand with very little plant growth and no lakes or rivers running through it. The nearest source of fresh water is nearly twenty kilometres south of Ogle Point. My photograph of Ogle Point (fig. 21) is equally

sublime. As luck would have it, a storm blew in creating the interplay of the beams of sunlight piercing through the dark clouds, much like what Back's sketch and Finden's subsequent engraving show. The desolate nature of the landscape does lend itself to a sublime interpretation and the storm clouds help to reinforce that idea. Gilpin wrote: "Nothing can be more sublime than the ocean: but wholly unaccompanied, it has little of the picturesque."⁷⁹ By adding the animated elements to Back's sketch of the bleak landscape of Ogle Point and the Arctic Ocean, the engraving meets the aesthetic conventions Back's reading public would have expected. The "improvement" of the scene accomplishes two things: it provides scale, and it matches the sketch to the accompanying description in the text, as it is clear from the narrative that the expedition landed and made camp. Regardless of the treatment the sketch received from the engraver, Back's image faithfully portrays Ogle Point.

Parry Falls

There are no known finished paintings of any of the scenes from Back's sketch book of this journey. If he made any, they have yet to surface. The only known watercolour sketches from this expedition were made after Back returned from the coast during the spring of 1835 when he visited Parry Falls on the Lockhart River near Fort Reliance. None of these were included in his narrative.⁸⁰ In the scope of this paper it is worth commenting on those sketches as they were criticized by MacLaren, both as sketches and in their description, as Back attempting "to out-sublime the Sublime in its accumulation of superlatives."⁸¹

MacLaren is correct in his assertion that Back had no reason for visiting Parry Falls other than an aesthetic one. However, it might be added that Back, spending yet another long, dreary winter at the Fort, may have visited the falls simply to help pass the time, and what better way to do that, as an artist, than an outing to create some art. He describes it as follows:

The road to it, which I then traversed in snow shoes, was fatiguing in the extreme, and scarcely less dangerous; for, to say nothing of the steep ascents, fissures in the rocks, and deep snow in the valleys, we had sometimes to creep along the narrow shelves of precipices slippery with the frozen mist that fell on them. But it was a sight which well repaid any risk. My first impression was of a strong resemblance to an iceberg in Smeerenberg Harbour, Spitzbergen. The whole face of the rocks forming the chasm was entirely coated with blue, green, and white ice, in thousands of pendent icicles: and there were, moreover, caverns, fissures, and overhanging ledges in all imaginable varieties of form, so curious and beautiful as to surpass any thing of which I had ever heard or read. The immediate approaches were extremely hazardous, nor could we obtain a perfect view of the lower fall, in consequence of the projection of the western cliffs. At the lowest position which we were able to attain, we were still more than a hundred feet above the level of the bed of the river beneath; and this, instead of being narrow enough to step across, as it had seemed from the opposite heights, was found to be at least two hundred feet wide. The colour of the water varied from a very light to a very dark green; and the spray, which spread a dimness above, was thrown up in clouds of light grey. Niagara, Wilberforce's Falls in Hood's River, the fall of Kakabikka near Lake Superior, the Swiss or Italian falls, – although they may each 'charm the eye with dread,' are not to be compared to this for splendour of effect. It was the most imposing spectacle I had ever witnessed; and, as its berg-like appearance brought to mind associations of another scene, I bestowed upon it the name of our celebrated navigator, Sir Edward Parry, and called it Parry's Falls.⁸²

Back had first come across the falls in late September, 1834, while returning to Fort Reliance from his expedition. He notes in his narrative that because at that time "it was impossible to see the main fall from the [eastern]

side,⁸³ he decided to visit the falls again the following spring. MacLaren correctly identifies all the sublime elements in the word picture and the fact that Back, like a good landscape tourist, strictly adheres to the conventions of the sublime aesthetic. However, I disagree with MacLaren's suggestion "that Back may have employed some correction of the landscape for the purpose of sublime description."⁸⁴ I hiked along the Lockhart River and photographed Parry Falls on June 10, 1999, (fig. 22) at the start of my expedition retracing Back's route, and found them difficult and dangerous to approach from above on the east side of the river, and impossible to approach from below. In winter, with the lower river frozen over, Back would have been able to cross over to the west side and could have approached the falls from a lower vantage point, which he evidently did. I believe that in winter, with snow covering the land and layers of ice coating the rocks and cliffs as a result of the freezing spray, the approach would be even more hazardous. Given the geographical features of the falls, Back's description might be sublime but in my opinion he did not employ Gilpin's "correction" of the landscape in order to adhere to the picturesque aesthetic.

Conclusion

Back had trouble adhering to convention both in his art and as an officer in search of fame and career advancement. In the introduction to Back's narrative of the 1834 expedition, William C. Wonders characterizes Back as "ambitious."⁸⁵ MacLaren concurs that Back's drive and passion "was reflected by his achievements [and] it also emerged in his writing and painting in an intriguingly

broad range of expressiveness.”⁸⁶ Having traversed the same terrain as Back and endured some of the difficulty of travelling in the north, I have been able to look at his work from within the landscape that was the subject of his sketches. In a sense, Northrop Frye was onto something when he wrote that “to enter Canada is a matter of being silently swallowed by an alien continent.”⁸⁷ In my experience, nowhere is this more true than beyond the tree line on the Barrens of northern Canada. The scale of the landscape is unimaginable. There are no roads, no trees and only a few scattered settlements. The impact of human activity remains minimal. It is a landscape so alien to us urban dwellers that many visitors are left with a profound experience for which there is no equal. In order to relate to what explorers like Back went through, it must be experienced first-hand.

I believe that it was Back’s drive, passion and dedication that helped him produce a body of work that often transcends the picturesque and shows the vision of an artist, not merely a topographer in His Majesty’s service. I also believe that Back’s lack of formal art training left him free to express himself artistically without being bound by a strict aesthetic. Back’s drive, dedication and physical stamina also enabled him to carry out amazing feats of endurance when most of the other members of the 1821 expedition floundered. A prime example of his physical and mental strength was a journey on snow shoes from Fort Enterprise to Fort Chipewyan and back in the winter of 1820-21, an excursion of 1,700 kilometres.⁸⁸ Back again showed his drive and strength during the disastrous return journey from Bathurst Inlet to Fort Enterprise a few months later in October, 1821, when the starving men stumbled across the Barrens with

winter rapidly approaching. Back and three voyageurs went ahead and found the Yellowknife Indians, saving the nine remaining men from certain death by starvation. Help came too late for the eleven men who had already perished, among them Back's fellow midshipman, Robert Hood. As Commander, Franklin had failed miserably and was lucky to still be alive, largely thanks to the dedication of his unconventional and temperamental young midshipman, who risked his own life repeatedly for the benefit of his superior officer and the other members of the expedition.⁸⁹

Reading Back's narrative of the 1834 expedition down the Great Fish River, it is clear that the same passion and dedication that drove him on the two earlier expeditions with Franklin was still evident, yet it was now seasoned with experience and maturity. As Commander, Back was able to persuade his crew to carry on in extremely adverse conditions. His ability to communicate effectively with lower ranks, including natives and French-Canadian voyageurs, enabled him to gain a certain amount of trust and loyalty from his charges, even if it garnered disdain from other officers and his superiors. Back's unconventional style is evident in his narrative as he prepared his crew for the difficult return journey to Fort Reliance, when he observed that:

It may perhaps appear to some persons that to persuade those whom I might have commanded was a gratuitous and unnecessary trouble; but it should be borne in mind that, in services not purely military, the party is not, and cannot be, brought under strict habits of discipline. ... It is necessary that they should feel a confidence in and attachment to their leader, not paying a mere sulky obedience to his orders; and what they do will thus be done heartily and with good will, not as the cold fulfilment of a contract.⁹⁰

Looking at the volume and quality of work produced during Arctic land expeditions, Back stands out among explorers of that era for his candid observations and his artistic renditions of the northern landscape. However, like all of us, he was a product of his time and the British aesthetics of the picturesque and the sublime are evident in his journals and his sketches but Back departed from those aesthetic conventions enough to set himself apart. MacLaren keenly observed that Back would have had trouble finding landscapes to sketch in the treeless Canadian tundra as it does not lend itself to the picturesque eye. Back's strong and somewhat unconventional personality drove him to push beyond the boundaries of what was expected of him by his navy superiors. He resisted convention on many occasions which sometimes resulted in clashes with his superiors, especially with Franklin. This same unconventional approach also resulted in the creation of images that accurately portray the northern landscape, which has changed little in nearly two centuries since Back's expeditions, providing a valuable opportunity to examine his work in the context of the landscape today.

FIGURES



Figure 1: L. Haghe, engraver, after George Back, *Sussex Lake, Source of the Thlew-e-cho-dezeth* (Library and Archives Canada / C-097301) engraving.



Figure 2: Paul vanPeenen, *Sussex Lake, Headwaters of the Back River*, June 24, 1999; photograph.



Figure 3: George Back, *Expedition Passing Through Point Lake on the Ice*, June 25, 1821 (Library and Archives Canada / C-141493) watercolour.



Figure 4: Paul vanPeenen, *Keskarrah Bay, Point Lake*, June 24, 2001; photograph.



Figure 5: George Back, *Rocky defile Rapid – and a distant view of the Copper Mountains*, July 9, 1821 (Library and Archives Canada / C-141478) watercolour.



Figure 6: Paul vanPeenen, *Rocky Defile Rapid*, July 11, 2001; photograph.



Figure 7: Paul vanPeenen, *Rocky Defile Rapid*, July 11, 2001; photograph.



Figure 8: Edward Finden, engraver, after George Back, *Bloody Fall*, July 17, 1821 (Library and Archives Canada / 1992-547-6) engraving.



Figure 9: George Back, *A part of Massacre Rapids*, July 17, 1821 (Library and Archives Canada / C-141484) watercolour.



Figure 10: Paul vanPeenen, *Bloody Fall, middle part*, July 18, 2001; photograph.



Figure 11: Paul vanPeenen, *Bloody Fall, outflow*, July 18, 2001; photograph.



Figure 12: George Back, *Mouth of the Copper-Mine River – July 19th 1821 – Midnight* (Library and Archives Canada / C-141492) watercolour.

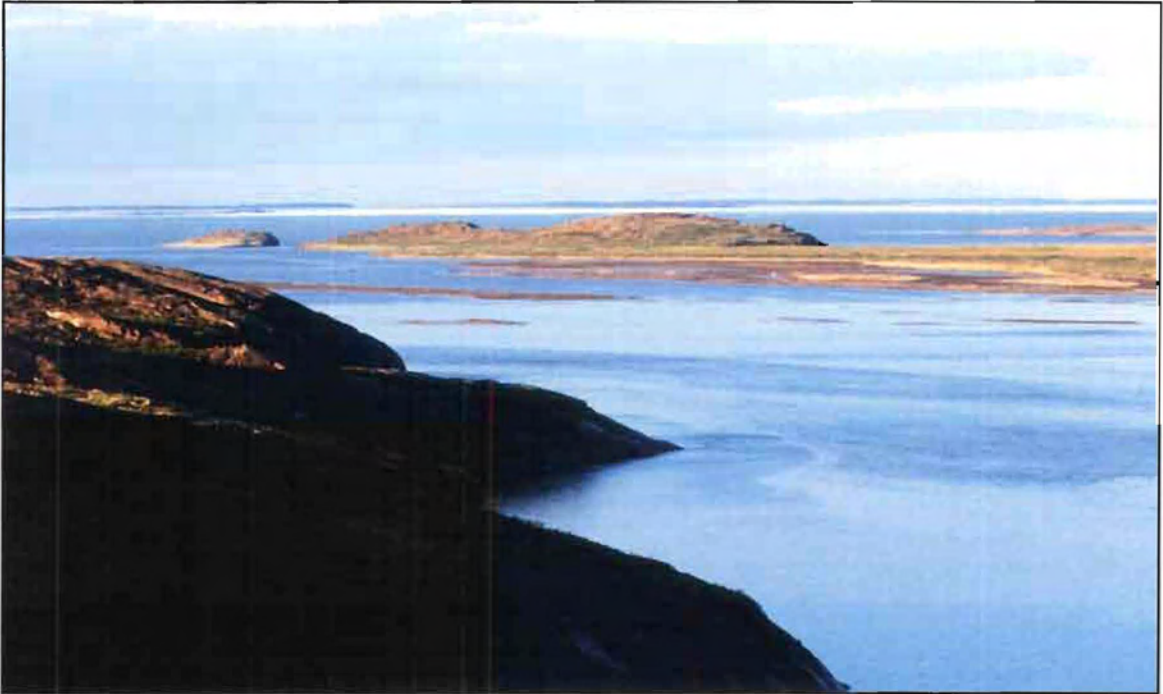


Figure 13: Paul vanPeenen, *Mouth of the Coppermine, Midnight*, July 19, 2001; photograph.



Figure 14: George Back, *Travelling on the Ice, Aylmer Lake*; June 25, 1834 (Library and Archives Canada / C-93090) pencil drawing.

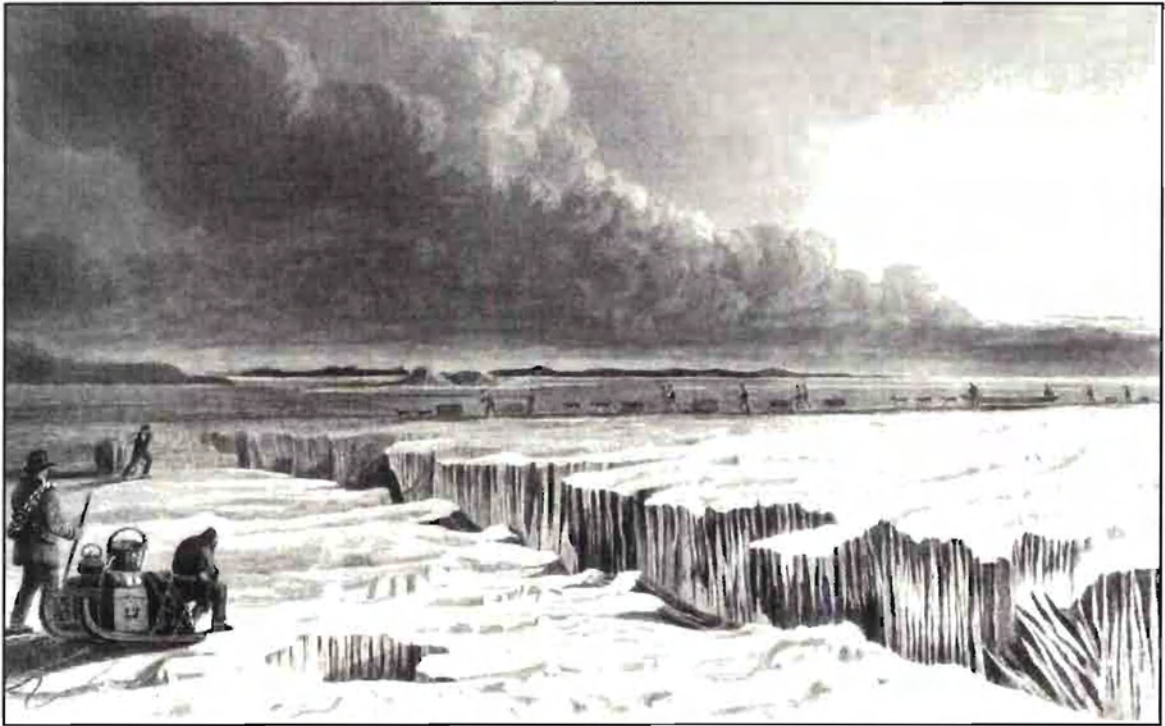


Figure 15: Edward Finden, engraver, after George Back, *Crossing Lake Aylmer(3 a.m.)* (Library and Archives Canada / 2842190) engraving.



Figure 16: Paul vanPeenen, *Aylmer Lake Pressure Ridge*, June 23, 1999; photograph.



Figure 17: George Back, *Victoria Headland, Mouth of the Back River, Chantrey Inlet*, July 29, 1834 (Library and Archives Canada / C-93096) pencil drawing.



Figure 18: L. Haghe, engraver, after George Back, *Victoria Headland, Mouth of the Back River*, July 29, 1834 (Library and Archives Canada / 2842191) engraving.



Figure 19: George Back, *Thunder Storm near Ogle Point, August 8, 1834* (Library and Archives Canada / C-93097) pencil drawing.



Figure 20: Edward Finden, engraver, after George Back, *Thunder Storm near Point Ogle* (George Back Fonds, Library and Archives Canada / 2842194) engraving.



Figure 21: Paul vanPeenen, *Thunderstorm at Ogle Point*, August 16, 1999; photograph.



Figure 22: Paul vanPeenen, *Parry Falls, Lockhart River*, June 10, 1999; photograph.

Notes

1. Captain George Back, *Narrative of the Arctic Land Expedition to the Mouth of the Great Fish River, Along the Shores of the Arctic Ocean, in the Years 1833, 1834, and 1835* (Edmonton: M. G. Hurtig Ltd., 1970), 305.
2. Ian S. MacLaren, "The Aesthetic Mapping of Nature in the Second Franklin Expedition," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 20, no. 1 (Spring, 1985): 48. MacLaren quotes William Gilpin from a letter to William Mason, 12 February, 1794, cited in Carl Paul Barbier, *William Gilpin: His Drawings, Teaching, and Theory of the Picturesque* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963), 72.
3. J. Russell Harper, *Painting in Canada A History* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1966), 163.
4. Leslie H. Neatby, "Mr. Back of the Expedition," *The Beaver* summer 1963, 17.
5. MacLaren, "The Grandest Tour: The Aesthetics of Landscape in Sir George Back's Explorations of the Eastern Arctic 1833-1837," *English Studies in Canada* X, no. 4 (December, 1984): 436-456.
6. George Back, *Arctic Artist: The Journal and Paintings of George Back, Midshipman with Franklin, 1819-1822*, ed. C. Stuart Houston, comm., Ian S. MacLaren (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994).
7. Mark Klett, project director, *Third views, second sights: a rephotographic survey of the American West* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press in association with the Center for American Places, 2004), 2.
8. *Ibid.*, 9.
9. *Ibid.*, 13.

10. Back, *Narrative*, 390.
11. Houston, *Arctic Artist*, xx, 172
12. Houston, *Arctic Artist*, xxi. The letter is published in full in Richard C. Davis, *Sir John Franklin's Journals and Correspondence: The Second Arctic Land Expedition, 1825-1827* (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1998).
13. MacLaren, *Arctic Artist*, 297. There are colour codes opposite the watercolours in Back's sketchbooks. In his commentary, MacLaren speculates that the colour codes served as an "*aide-mémoire*," suggesting that Back did not always paint *in situ*. He also speculates on techniques used by Back in applying and mixing colours.
14. Houston, *Arctic Artist*, xiii.
15. Davis, *Sir John Franklin's Journals and Correspondence: The First Arctic Land Expedition, 1819-1822* (Toronto: Champlain Society, 1995), 287.
16. The biographical details of Back's early navy career are found in Clive A. Holland, *Dictionary of Canadian Biography 10, 1871-1880* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), 26-29. Peter Steele, *The Man Who Mapped the Arctic* (Vancouver: Raincoast Books, 2003).
17. For an article on the expedition, see Paul vanPeenen, "A Conversation with the Land," *Kanawa*, Spring 2003, 32-37.
18. Back, *Arctic Artist*, 129.
19. John E. Crowley, "'Taken on the Spot': The Visual Appropriation of New France for the Global British Landscape," *Canadian Historical Review* 86, no. 1 (2005): 4-5. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed October 6, 2008).

20. Quoted in Susan Glickman, *The Picturesque and the Sublime: A Poetics of the Canadian Landscape* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998), 9-10.
21. Quoted in Glickman, *The Picturesque and the Sublime*, 10, from William Gilpin, *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty; On Picturesque Travel; and On Sketching Landscape: To Which Is Added A Poem, On Landscape Painting* (2nd ed. 1794), 42-43.
22. Glickman, *The Picturesque and the Sublime*, 10.
23. MacLaren, *Arctic Artist*, 287.
24. MacLaren, *Arctic Artist*, 287-288. For more on picturesque aesthetics, see Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology: The English Tradition, 1740-1860* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986); Jack Little, "West Coast Picturesque: Class, Gender, and Race in a British Colonial Landscape, 1858-71," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 41, no. 2 (2007): 5-41; MacLaren, "The Influence of Eighteenth-Century British Landscape Aesthetics on Narrative and Pictorial Responses to the British North American North and West 1769- 1872." PhD, University of Western Ontario, 1983: 1-100; Kim J. Michasiw, "Nine Revisionist Theses on the Picturesque," *Representations*, no. 38 (Spring, 1992): 76-100.
25. MacLaren, *Arctic Artist*, 288.
26. Ibid.
27. MacLaren, *Arctic Artist*, 370, note 41.
28. vanPeenen, "A Conversation," 32-37.

29. Back, *Arctic Artist*, 136.
30. Ibid.
31. MacLaren, *Arctic Artist*, 290.
32. Ibid.
33. MacLaren, "Retaining Captaincy of the Soul: Response to Nature in the First Franklin Expedition," *Essays in Canadian Writing*, 28 (1984): 60.
34. Back, *Arctic Artist*, 142.
35. Samuel Hearne, *A Journey from Prince of Wales's Fort, in Hudson's Bay, to the Northern Ocean Undertaken by Order of the Hudson's Bay Company for the Discovery of Copper Mines, a North West Passage, &c. in the Years 1769, 1770, 1771 & 1772* (London, 1795), 152-156.
36. John Franklin, *Narrative of a Journey to the Shores of the Polar Sea in the years 1819, 20, 21 and 22* (London: J. Murray, 1823; repr., Edmonton, M. G. Hurtig), 350.
37. Houston, *To the Arctic by Canoe 1819-1821: The Journal and Paintings of Robert Hood Midshipman with Franklin* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1974), xxxiv. Hood's journal covers the period of May 23, 1819, to September 15, 1820. From that date onwards, until the day of his death on October 20, 1821, there are no further journals by Hood known to be in existence. If the original sketch from July 15, 1821, was, as stated by Franklin, begun by Hood and finished by Back (see note 33), it may have remained in one of Hood's journals that appear not to have survived, however, it survived long enough for the engraving to have been made by Edward Finden for the publication in Franklin's narrative.

38. Back, *Arctic Artist*, 141-142.
39. Houston, *Arctic Ordeal: the Journal of John Richardson, Surgeon-Naturalist with Franklin, 1820-1822* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1984), 77.
40. Back, *Arctic Artist*, 142. It is not clear why Back refers to an "island" because Hearne does not make any reference to the massacre taking place on an island. He writes that "five tents of Esquimaux [sic] were on the west side of the river." See Hearne, *Journey*, 148. This places them on the site at Bloody Fall where Back situated the bones and skulls and the expedition's encampment on the west side of the river.
41. Denis St. Onge, "The Coppermine River: Art and Reality," *Canadian Geographic*, November 1982, 31. See note 40 regarding the location.
42. Franklin, *Narrative*, 350.
43. St. Onge, "The Coppermine River," 31.
44. MacLaren, "Retaining Captaincy of the Soul," 79.
45. MacLaren, "Retaining Captaincy of the Soul," 80.
46. *Ibid.*
47. Franklin, *Narrative*, 350.
48. For commentary on discrepancies between original sketches and engravings, see MacLaren, *Arctic Artist*, note 71, 378-380.

49. Hearne, *A Journey*, 164.
50. Back, *Arctic Artist*, 146.
51. Back, *Arctic Artist*, 147.
52. For details on the return to Fort Enterprise: Back, *Arctic Artist*, 163-194; Franklin, *Narrative*, 391-490; Richardson, *Arctic Ordeal*, 123-169.
53. Hearne, *A Journey*, 163.
54. MacLaren, "Retaining Captaincy of the Soul," see note 20, 91-92.
55. Quoted in MacLaren, "Retaining Captaincy of the Soul," 91, from Rev, John McIlraith, *Life of Sir John Richardson, C.B., LL.D., F.R.S. Lond., Hon. F.R.S. Edin., Inspector of Naval Hospitals and Fleets; etc.* (London: Longmans, Green, 1868), 73-74.
56. See note 48.
57. Back, *Arctic Artist*, 146.
58. Back, *Arctic Artist*, 147.
59. Quoted without reference by William C. Wonders in the Introduction to Back, *Great Fish River*, xx; see also: Steele, *The Man Who Mapped the Arctic*, 211.
60. Back, *Narrative*, 87.

61. Ibid., 1-26.

62. Ibid., 27-112.

63. Ibid. Sir Charles Ogle's letter, outlining Back's instructions, is quoted in full on pp. 18-20. The description of finding the headwaters of the Back River is described in detail in chapter IV, pp. 113-143.

64. MacLaren, "The Grandest Tour," 436.

65. Ibid.

66. Back, *Narrative*, 328.

67. Ibid., 332.

68. Ibid., 334.

69. Ibid., 369-370. "Auld Reekie" is a nickname for Edinburgh, Scotland. Back is referring to Mount Meadowbank on the east shore of the Back River, just downstream from the confluence with the Meadowbank River.

70. Ibid., 307-308.

71. Ibid., 292.

72. Ibid., 390.

73. Ibid., 389.

74. *Ibid.*, 390.

75. *Ibid.*, 390-391.

76. *Ibid.*, 408.

77. See note 45.

78. Back, *Narrative*, 408.

79. Gilpin, *Three Essays*, 43.

80. One of these watercolours entitled *Lower View of Parry Falls near Fort Reliance, 1835* (National Archives of Canada / C-37573) is the frontispiece in David F. Pelly, *Expedition, An Arctic Journey Through History on George Back's River* (Toronto: Betelgeuse Books, 1981).

81. MacLaren, "The Grandest Tour," 444.

82. Back, *Narrative*, 451-453.

83. Back, *Narrative*, 451.

84. MacLaren, "The Grandest Tour," 456, note 17.

85. Back, *Narrative*, xxiv.

86. MacLaren, *Arctic Artist*, 279.

87. Northrop Frye, "Conclusion to A Literary History of Canada," reprinted in *Unholy States: Theorizing English-Canadian Postcolonialism*, ed. Cynthia Sugars (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2004), 11.
88. For details of the winter journey from Fort Enterprise to Fort Chipewyan, see Back, *Arctic Artist*, 93-116.
89. For details of Back's actions, see: Back, *Arctic Artist*, 163-194; Franklin, *Narrative*, 477-490; Richardson, *Arctic Ordeal*, 123-169.
90. Back, *Narrative*, 338.

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