

Inuit Testimony of the 1845 Franklin Expedition

Discovery of an Abandoned Ship

Testimony by Qaqortingneg given to Knud Rasmussen, 1921

Two brothers were out hunting seal to the northwest of Qeqertaq (King William's Land). It was in the spring, at the time when the snow melts about the breathing holes of the seal. They caught sight of something far out on the ice; a great black mass of something, that could not be any animal they knew. They studied it and made out at last that it was a great ship. Running home at once, they told their fellows, and on the following day all went out to see. They saw no men about the ship; it was deserted; and they therefore decided to take from it all they could find for themselves. But none of them had ever before met with white men, and they had no knowledge as to the use of all the things they found.

One man, seeing a boat that hung out over the side of the ship, cried: "Here is a fine big trough that will do for meat! I will have this!" He had never seen a boat before, and did not know what it was. And he cut the ropes that held it up, and the boat crashed down endways on to the ice and was smashed.

They found guns, also, on the ship, and not knowing what was the right use of these things, they broke away the barrels and used the metal for harpoon heads. So ignorant were they indeed, in the matter of guns and belonging to guns, that on finding some percussion caps, such as were used in those days, they took them for tiny thimbles, and really believed that there were dwarfs among the white folk, little people who could use percussion caps for thimbles.

At first they were afraid to go down into the lower part of the ship, but after a while they grew bolder, and ventured also into the houses underneath. Here they found many dead men, lying in the sleeping places there; all dead. And at last they went down also into a great dark space in the middle of the ship. It was dark down there and they could

not see. But they soon found tools and set to work and cut a window in the side. But here those foolish ones, knowing nothing of the white men's things, cut a hole in the side of the ship below the water line, so that the water came pouring in, and the ship sank. It sank to the bottom with all the costly things; nearly all that they had found was lost again at once.

But in the same year, later on in the spring, three men were on their way from Qeqertaq to the southward, going to hunt caribou calves. And they found a boat with the dead bodies of six men. There were knives and guns in the boat, and much food also, so the men must have died of disease. [...]

And that is all I know about your white men who once came to our land, and perished; whom our fathers met but could not help to live.

Meeting with "Aglooka" on the Ice

Testimony by Tuk-ke-ta and Ow-wer given to Charles Francis Hall, May 1869

Tuk-ke-ta and Ow-wer now tell that they with Too-shoo-art-thar-u [*sic*] and Mong-er [...] were on the west shore of Kikituk [King William Island] with their families sealing, & this a long time ago. They were getting ready to move—the time in the morning & the sun high—when Tuk-ke-ta saw something in the distance on the smooth ice that looked white & thought it was a bear. The company had got all ready to start travelling on the land. Soon as Tuk-ke-ta saw this something white, he told his companions of it, when all waited, hoping it was a bear. As they watched, the white object grew larger, for it was coming down towards them. They saw the white thing moving along in the direction of the coast, turning in a kind of circling way just as the little bay turned. At length they began to see many black objects moving along with what they had first espied as white in the distance. The object that they 1st had seen as white proved to be a sail raised on the boat & as this got nearer saw this sail shake in the wind. On seeing what they did, the object grew plainer and they thought of white men and began to be afraid.

As the company of men (strangers) & what they were drawing got quite near, 2 men came on ahead of all & were walking on the ice & were getting near where the Innuits were standing looking out, which was on the land, the 2 men (Koblunas) came walking up to where they were. Too-shoo-art-thar-u and Ow-wer started to meet them, walking there on the ice. When they came to a crack in the ice, they stopped for the two white men to come up. Then the 2 white men came close to Ow-wer and Too-shoo-art-thar-u. One had a gun which he carried in his arms. The crack in the ice separated the meeting natives. The man that carried the gun stopped behind—a little back, while the other man came as close up to Ow-wer & Too-shoo-art-thar-u as the crack in the ice would allow him. The man that came up to the crack had nothing in his hands or on his shoulder. As he stopped, he cried out “C’hi-mo”. The first man that came up then spoke to the man a little behind, when he laid the gun down and came up at once along side the 1st man.

The 1st man then showed that he had an oo-loo when he stooped down beside the ice crack which divided the white men from the Innuits & began cutting the ice with a peculiar kind of circling motion with the oo-loo (Civilization mincing-knife or Inuit women’s knife). This peculiar motion now showed by Ow-wer with his oo-loo on the snow floor of the igloo. At the same time, or rather right after this man had made these “chippings” or “scratchings (as you call it) on the ice, he put his hand up to his mouth and lowered it all the way down his neck and breast, as if to say he wanted to get something to eat. Then the two white men moved along the one side, till they found a place where they could pass over to the 2 Innuits—Ow-wer & Too-shoo-art-thar-u. On the 2 Kabloonas (white men) getting to them, the 1st man, who was Aglooka spoke to them, saying, “Man-nik-too-me”, at the same time stroking 1st one & then the other down the breast, and also shook hands with each, repeating “Man-nik-too-me” several times. [...]

Aglooka pointed with his hand to the southward & eastward & at the same time repeating the word I-wil-ik. The Innuits could not understand whether he wanted them to show him the way there or that he was going there. He then made a motion to the northward & spoke the word oo-me-en, making them to understand there were 2 ships in

that direction; which had, as they supposed, been crushed in the ice. As Aglooka pointed to the N., drawing his hand & arm from that direction he slowly moved his body in a falling direction and all at once dropped his head side ways into his hand, at the same time making a kind of combination of whirring, buzzing & wind blowing noise. This the pantomimic representation of ships being crushed in the ice. [...]

Finding of a Lifeboat with Skeletons

Testimony by Tooktoocheer given to Lieutenant Frederick Schwatka, 1879

[Tooktoocheer] said she had never seen any of Franklin’s men alive, but saw six skeletons on the main-land and an adjacent island [...] [her son] Ogzeuckjeuwock took up the thread of the narrative here. In answer to a question which we asked his mother, he said he saw books at the boat place in a tin case, about two feet long and a foot square, which was fastened, and they broke it open. The case was full. Written and printed books were shown him, and he said they were like the printed ones. Among the books he found what was probably the needle of a compass or other magnetic instrument because he said when it touched any iron it stuck fast. The boat was right side up, and the tin case in the boat. Outside the boat he saw a number of skulls. He forgot how many, but said there were more than four. He also saw bones from legs and arms that appeared to have been sawed off. Inside the boat was a box filled with bones; the box was about the same size as the one with books in it. [...] In the boat he saw canvas and four sticks (a tent or sail), saw a number of watches, open-faced; a few were gold, but most were silver. They are all lost now. They were given to the children to play with, and have been broken up and lost. [...] His reason for thinking that they had been eating each other was because the bones were cut with a knife or saw. They found one big saw and one small one in the boat; also a large red tin case of smoking tobacco and some pipes. There was no cairn there. The bones are now covered up with sand and sea-weed, as they were lying just at high-water mark. Some of the books were taken home for the children to play with, and finally torn and lost. [...]