

James Anderson (1812-1867)



Photo courtesy of Mrs. Goodfellow, a descendant.

Canada's northern frontier, far from being a "wild west", was a region where Indians and the Hudson's Bay Company dealt with each other to their mutual advantage. James Anderson, better known as an arctic explorer, was one of the men who made the orderly system work.

A career on the frontier of the British empire came naturally to a young man with his family connections. General Outram was a famous warrior in India. Another cousin stood his battalion at attention on the sinking *Birkenhead* so that women and children could be saved. In 1831, James left Britain as an apprentice with the Hudson's Bay Company. For 20 years he served with energy, judgement, and business acumen in the James Bay, Lake Superior, and Athabasca areas. Then-Governor George Simpson entrusted him with the remote and valuable Mackenzie District. He improved profits by better book-keeping and retrenchment on the upper Yukon basin. His preference was to open trade directly with the Inuit via the Anderson River north of Fort Good Hope.

Suddenly, in 1855, he was ordered to take part in the search for John Franklin's expedition. The Admiralty had wearied of the expensive probing of the arctic islands, but Dr. Rae of the Hudson's Bay Company had reported finding relics while surveying Boothia peninsula. Inuit had told him of white men perishing on an island west of a great river. This was obviously the river down which Captain Back and Dr. King had taken a York Boat in 1834. Now the British government asked the Company to use the same route to check out Rae's report. Simpson had confidence that Anderson would see the matter through without creating new disasters.

Anderson's second-in-command, James Green Stewart, despite his Yukon reputation, proved to be of little use on the expedition. For instance, he allowed inferior bark to be used in the construction of the special, shortened North Canoes. However, the actual crews that Simpson had ordered to assemble at Fort Resolution were the pick of the service and included three Caughnawaga steersmen. Unfortunately, Rae's Inuit interpreter could not be found in time.

Because he could not carry enough supplies to overwinter, Anderson had to accomplish his mission in the short interval between breakup and the onset of the next winter. On Indian advice to bypass frozen lakes, he chose a new, more direct mountain portage route from Great Slave Lake. Solid ice on Lake Aylmer put him 12 days behind the schedule of Captain Back, whose carefully mapped route he joined at that point. The Back River lies wholly beyond the tree line and has 83 rapids. At the last rapids, Anderson interviewed Inuit fishermen. Two of the crew understood some Inuktitut, but the lack of a real interpreter was vexing. The Inuit had hearsay evidence of the Franklin disaster and were using some European materials. On July 31, only two days later than Back, Anderson entered Chantrey Inlet. It was choked with wind-driven floes, and the fragile canoes could not operate as icebreakers. When the men managed to reach Montreal Island, they began finding wood and metal fragments along the shore and in Inuit caches. One chip bore the name "Mr. Stanley" of the *Erebus*.

Using an inflatable rubber raft, three men pushed on to

Maconochie Island. Many years later, one voyageur claimed he had sighted the masts of a ship stuck in the ice far to the north but had said nothing because he had feared any further delay in returning to the safety of the tree line. Probably he had not really seen a ship, but there was another tantalizing might-have-been. Anderson, with a true instinct, wanted to search Cape Richardson but was prevented by a "millstream" of jagged ice. Had he done so, he would have encountered, a scant eight kilometres to the west in a *cul-de-sac* later known as Starvation Cove, the last encampment of the Franklin expedition. Instead, he packed up the raft in the canoes, which had been repaired and regummed, and gave the order to return.

Not until 1962 was the whole Back River canoed and kayaked again. Many regard it as an ultimate challenge due to its remoteness and exposed terrain. At a mid-August date when modern canoeists are anxiously scanning the skies for their pick-up plane, Anderson's men had to paddle, line, and portage their way up the Back, across the height of land, and through windy lakes, over 1500 kilometres to Fort Resolution. In the weakened canoes, they risked death in the icy waters.

Anderson's official report was brief and restrained. He had found no papers or bodies and could merely confirm Rae's statement that the disaster had occurred somewhere northwest of the Back. Nonetheless, Simpson warmly thanked him, his fellow officers gave him a silver cup, and the British government awarded him the Polar medal and £400. Dr. King, however, was upset that Anderson had not specifically checked his 1834 cache on Montreal Island. Lady Franklin financed another sea-and-sledging expedition under M'Clintock, which found the message at Victory Point. But this was far beyond the range of canoes in 1855.

Anderson's health had been undermined by the trip. After three more years as chief factor in the Mackenzie District, he asked to be transferred. At Mingan on the St. Lawrence, he straightened out the account books and entertained the governor-general with salmon fishing. He finally retired, as a country squire, to Ontario, where his children were entering the professions.

James Anderson's service to the Company was exemplary, and he narrowly missed fame at Starvation Cove. Altogether, he was a fine frontiersman — Canadian style.

FURTHER READINGS

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