

THE MAN WHO ATE HIS BOOTS, THE TRAGIC HISTORY OF THE SEARCH FOR THE NORTH-WEST PASSAGE. Anthony Brandt. 2011. London: Jonathan Cape, illustrated, hardback. ISBN: 9780224082310. £20.00

This book opens with the alarming prospect of a future war to be fought between the United States and Canada over mineral rights in the high Arctic. The American author quickly admits that his country's claim to any political control over the disputed region would be negligible because British sailors, looking for Franklin in the years between 1848 and 1860, acquired it all for what is now Canada. Sadly, such hypothetical musings are one of the best aspects of this slightly unnecessary addition to the Franklin literature. In his overview of the searches for the passage and for Franklin, Brandt is following in the narrative tradition of Pierre Berton's *Arctic grail* and Ann Savours' *Search for the northwest passage*, with nothing new to add. Although his bibliography lists primary sources, no original documents have actually been consulted, everything in that list being merely published journals and memoirs. The author admits that he did not consult the manuscript sources available at the Scott Polar Research Institute nor Admiralty Records in the Public Record Office in London, nor other English [sic] manuscript depositories. To add that level of density to the book would have threatened to overwhelm the general reader, for whom the book was written (page 397).

On the plus side, however, Brandt's account is mostly accurate, quite elegantly written and certainly readable. He gets off to a shaky start by launching into Sir John Barrow (undoubtedly influenced by Fergus Fleming's *Barrow's boys*, before suddenly going back to the Elizabethan explorers, as if he had just discovered Savours and therefore felt obliged to sketch in that earlier story for his general reader. Yet he does have a reasonable grasp of early 19th century British society and politics, for example explaining correctly the significant influence of contemporary journals like the *Quarterly Review*. There remains a slight underlying sense of what will those crazy Britishers do next which is mildly amusing to the non-American reader. More startling is Brandt's ignorance of his main setting, the great country a few hundred miles north of his desk in New York. He does not realise that Canada has only existed as a unified political entity since 1867, and that even then Labrador and Newfoundland remained separate until 1949. Calling a chapter dealing with the 19th century Northwest Territories 'O Canada' seems facetious at best, and might even be offensive to many proud Canadians.

Brandt does not particularly make Sir John Franklin into either a hero, a villain or a fool. He may not be aware of the fact that the 2005 children's version of Martyn Beardsley's *Deadly winter* a biography of their subject was also subtitled *The man who ate his own boots*. It is more significant and disturbing that the adjective tragic appears in Brandt's own subtitle (which is different on the dust jacket, on which Sir John Franklin is mentioned, from the title page where he is not), as well as frequently in the text. Apart from Graham Gore and James Fitzjames, only two other officers in the 1845 expedition are named (Paymaster Charles Osmer and Mate Charles Des Voeux), and both of their names are then misspelt! Osmar and Des Voeus respectively). These, and the primary sources solecism, are inexcusable, though the original publisher

Knopf, rather than the author, may in all three cases be to blame. What is glaringly missing from Brandt's version of Franklin is any proper analysis of his evangelical Christianity, surely one of the most significant aspects of his character and motivation? Definitely the most significant to Franklin himself. One wonders if the author feared offending Franklin's modern religious equivalents, now so influential in 21st century America? Even if that was not Brandt's real reason, but he simply has no personal interest in religion, it still must be tackled in any serious study of Franklin. He also misses a trick by underrating both Dr John Richardson and the Copper Indian chief Akaitcho, the heroes of Franklin's first (1819–1822) overland expedition.

To do Brandt some credit, he does not have any particular axes to grind about either lead poisoning or cannibalism. On the other hand, he simply goes along with Beattie's and Geiger's mistaken belief that the men exhumed on Beechey Island had unusually high levels of lead in their bodies for early Victorians, and just accepts Rae's sensationalist account of the contents of the kettles which, of course, he had not actually seen. Brandt's worst mistake in his final analysis, comes right at the end (page 387) when he attacks Richard Cyriax because he never once mentioned cannibalism in his book. That is to entirely miss the point of Cyriax's crucial 1939 work which gives the detailed logistical description and explanation of Royal Navy motives that Brandt and his readers needed before the Franklin of his book sailed, not in any final summing up. Jane, Lady Franklin is referred to throughout as 'Lady Jane'; this is wrong, she was not the daughter of an earl. The Suez Canal did not open until 1869 and it certainly took more than three weeks to sail from England to India in the 1850s. Nor would the Royal (or any) Navy tolerate being referred to on more than one occasion as military. The general reader, for whom the book was written should be perfectly happy with it since, once the author gets into his stride, the whole history is given and there is a good balance between readability and scholarship; at least in the sense that he has looked at many secondary sources, digested them and presented his analysis clearly. It is a shame that for such a price there are no colour plates or even glossy monochrome picture pages (which popular American publishers seem to have long ago ceased) and the maps, apart from some Victorian ones reproduced too small, are very basic. The whole work would, however, be far more worthwhile had the author abandoned the comforts of New York and travelled, if not to the Arctic itself, at least as far as the wilds of McGill, Scott Polar, Greenwich and Kew. just to meet the people who look after the real documentary evidence and to see historic papers, real ink and handwriting would have added a far deeper understanding. (Ralph Lloyd-Jones, Arnold Library, Front Street, Nottingham NG5 7EE)

References

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