

Scientia Canadensis

Canadian Journal of the History of Science, Technology and Medicine
Revue canadienne d'histoire des sciences, des techniques et de la médecine

Scientia
Canadensis

The Man Who Mapped the Arctic: The Intrepid Life of George Back, Franklin's Lieutenant. By Peter Steele. (Vancouver: Raincoast Books, 2003. xviii + 307 p., ill. ISBN 1-55192-648-2. \$39.95)

Trevor H. Levere

Volume 27, 2003

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/800462ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/800462ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

CSTHA/AHSTC

ISSN

0829-2507 (print)

1918-7750 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Levere, T. H. (2003). Review of [*The Man Who Mapped the Arctic: The Intrepid Life of George Back, Franklin's Lieutenant.* By Peter Steele. (Vancouver: Raincoast Books, 2003. xviii + 307 p., ill. ISBN 1-55192-648-2. \$39.95)]. *Scientia Canadensis*, 27, 101–104. <https://doi.org/10.7202/800462ar>

Tous droits réservés © Canadian Science and Technology Historical Association / Association pour l'histoire de la science et de la technologie au Canada, 2005

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

Érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

Science / Science

The Man Who Mapped the Arctic: The Intrepid Life of George Back, Franklin's Lieutenant. By Peter Steele. (Vancouver: Raincoast Books, 2003. xviii + 307 p., ill. ISBN 1-55192-648-2. \$39.95)

George Back was not one of the best-loved of nineteenth-century Arctic explorers, nor was he a significant contributor to the physical or life sciences. Even by the standards of his day, he was racist, xenophobic, and boastful; he was also tough and enterprising. Both his strengths and flaws are well brought out in this book. Back made important additions to geographical knowledge in the far North, and it was this which led to his election to the Royal Society of London in 1847. He shared this election with several other leaders of Arctic expeditions mounted by the Royal Navy in the nineteenth century. The status of geography as a science was recognized not only in the Royal Society, but also in the section devoted to the twin sciences of geology and geography in the British Association for the Advancement of Science. Certainly Back, who rose to the rank of Admiral, was in touch with men of science. He became a member of the Arctic Council, a Committee formed in the 1830s to advise the Admiralty; other members included the great hydrographer Francis Beaufort (not Bauforte, as it appears in Steele's caption to the Council's group portrait), John Richardson, an accomplished explorer and naturalist, and Edward Sabine, the principal architect of Britain's contribution to the international geomagnetic project inspired by Carl Friedrich Gauss and Alexander von Humboldt.

Steele's account makes good use of the published literature, and of selected journals and correspondence, although we have few of Back's personal letters. Those he wrote to his brother during expeditions are all the more valuable for their scarcity. They are also invitations to a headache, since they are twice cross-written, once at right angles and then again on the diagonal. Reading them needs real concentration, and good eyesight. Formal correspondence and journals are more legible, but inevitably are less revealing.

Back joined the navy as a ship's boy when just short of his eleventh birthday, at the height of the Napoleonic Wars. He was captured during a cutting out operation near San Sebastian, and after brief imprisonment was moved overland to the military prison at Verdun, near France's border with Belgium, and spent the next five years there. Steele makes good use of contemporary accounts (not just Back's) to paint a lively picture of these years, Back's cheerful relations with other prisoners, and with their gaolers and the townspeople. These pages could have

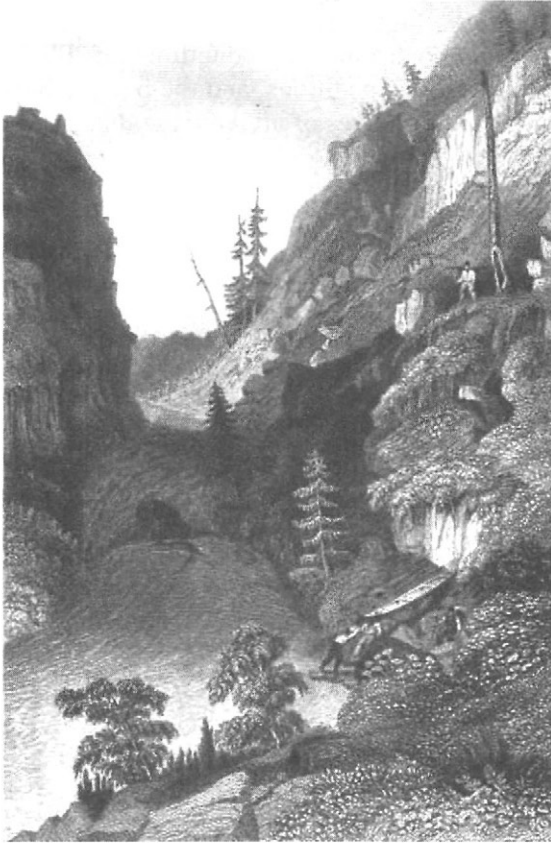
come straight from a novel by Patrick O'Brian, with their combination of historical detail and action.

He was released and returned to England in 1814, and promptly embarked as midshipman on board HMS *Akbar*, stationed at Halifax, Nova Scotia. He seems to have enjoyed a good deal of fighting and chasing. Once back in England, and having been refused immediate promotion, he volunteered for service on the abortive Arctic expedition led by John Ross and David Buchan; John Franklin was commander of HMS *Trent*, one of the expedition's ships. Ross, on his return, was put in command of his own expedition to try to find a Northwest Passage, in an expedition that failed. Ross saw mountains where there were none, and suffered a bad press for not pushing on into Lancaster Sound. This book echoes this criticism. But it is at least plausible that Ross saw a mirage of the kind that forms in warmer air over icy seas, sometimes known as a *fata morgana*. At any event, Back, as far as his career was concerned, was perhaps fortunate not to have sailed with John Ross.

Instead, he sailed again with Franklin, who clearly liked what he had seen on board HMS *Trent*. Arctic exploration was one way for naval officers to remain employed, with a chance of promotion, in the down-sizing of the Royal Navy that occurred after the fall of Napoleon. Back accompanied Franklin on his first overland Arctic expedition in 1819. Back's sketches of the expedition show a lively talent. His rivalry with Hood, the other midshipman on this expedition, for the favours of a Chipewyan girl called Greenstockings reveal another kind of talent. More significant were his travels first to expedite the arrival of supplies furnished by the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) and then, when the expedition was starving and on the brink of total failure, his courageous solo trip in search of help. He found a band of Chipewyans, who were able to save the lives of half the expedition. Steele describes Franklin as "excessively religious," but he was no more so than many of his contemporaries; Steele also comments on the failure of Franklin to provision his expedition in a land teeming with buffalo and caribou. The former were plentiful enough on the plains, but woodland buffalo were rare; and the migration of the caribou was hard to predict. Franklin was a naval commander, experienced on board ship, less competent on land, and at a loss in the Barrens, arousing scorn among employees of the HBC.

Steele shows how Back's peremptory demands of the HBC annoyed Governor Simpson. He also shows how the expedition was hampered by the fights between the HBC and the North West Company. John Richardson, the expedition's surgeon, is accurately portrayed as a man of learning and leadership, decisive and courageous.

Back accompanied Franklin and Richardson on their second overland Arctic expedition, this one more carefully planned, more successful in



Portage on Hoarfrost River by George Back, 1833.
(Source: Peter Steele, *The Man Who Mapped
the Arctic*, 212–213.)

geographical discovery, and extremely valuable for its contributions to the natural history of the prairies, the Shield, the barren lands, and the shores of the Arctic Ocean. Steele describes Franklin's requisition for stores as "utterly random"—a harsh judgment on an expedition that achieved most of its goals. Perhaps because this expedition was largely successful, it has until recently attracted less attention from historians than Franklin's failed first expedition and his second terminal disaster.

Back's Arctic service included a return to the Barrens, looking for John and James Clark Ross, who turned up well enough, after two winters in the ice. Back's journey included the mapping of the Great Fish River, subsequently renamed the Back River. This was a major achievement, needing all Back's qualities of toughness and determination, and it represented the zenith of his northern achievements.

Steele has written a highly readable narrative. The illustrations include numerous monochrome reproductions of Back's admirable sketches from his Arctic expeditions, and the book is handsomely produced. It belongs on the shelves of all Arctic enthusiasts.

Trevor H. Levere

Biographical Note: Trevor Levere teaches history of science at the University of Toronto. His current research projects are on Dr. Thomas Beddoes, English physician and scientific writer, and on chemical apparatus. He is the author and editor of thirteen books including *Science and the Canadian Arctic: A Century of Exploration 1818–1918* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993; paperback 2004). *Address:* Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science and Technology, 316 Victoria College, University of Toronto, 91 Charles Street West, Toronto (Ontario) M5S 1K7, Canada. *Email:* <trevor.levere@utoronto.ca>