Kayakers paddle by the light of the midnight sun in Eclipse Sound off the coast of Bylot Island in Sirmilik National Park.

OUR POLAR PAST

The footprints of human history have made deep and lasting imprints in Canada's Arctic. *by Ken McGoogan*

MIKE BEEDELL

"I THINK THE FUTURE OF THE NORTH LIES IN SOMETHING MUCH MORE PERMANENT THAN PLUNDER. I THINK IT LIES IN THE PRESENCE OF THE LAND, LARGELY UNTOUCHED, AND ITS HISTORY."

— PIERRE BERTON, 1973

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Above: Sir William Edward Parry led three expeditions in search of the Northwest Passage in the early part of the nineteenth century.

During the summer of 1853, while traipsing across the Arctic tundra, searching for the lost expedition of Sir John Franklin, British explorer Leopold McClintock came upon what looked like a fresh set of cart tracks. Stunned, he bent to examine them. Careful study revealed that the tracks were not fresh at all. In fact, they had been made thirty-three years before by another Arctic explorer — Sir William Edward Parry.

Again, consider the famous photographs of the three Franklin-Expedition sailors whose bodies were exhumed from their graves on Beechey Island in the 1980s. Their haunting faces stare out at us little changed from when they were buried in the 1840s.

The Arctic has a way of preserving the past, of freezing it into the permafrost. Yet even the Arctic needs help keeping history alive. For this reason, as well as for maintaining animal habitats and the natural world, Parks Canada has been creating national parks throughout the Far North, even though relatively few people will visit them in the near future.

The Arctic parks include places like Quttinirpaaq National Park, located on Ellesmere Island, seven hundred kilometres south of the North Pole. Variable ice and weather conditions make getting there difficult. About 150 people make it to the park annually. Quttinirpaaq is accessible mainly by air from Resolute, nine hundred kilometres to the south, although ice-breaking cruise ships have in recent years called in for brief visits. The big attraction is Fort Conger, built in 1881 by explorer Adolphus Greeley, and visited three times by Robert Peary during his turn-of-the-twentieth-century attempts to reach the North Pole.

Aulavik on Banks Island, which is rich in archaeological sites dating back 3,500 years to the pre-Dorset era, is only marginally easier to reach. But here we find evidence of the Arctic's earliest human habitation. One pre-Dorset site, near Shoran Lake, dates back to 1500 BC and includes rings of stones that once held down the edges of dwelling tents. Flint scrapers, bone harpoon heads, and needles have been found nearby.

MIKE BEEDELL

Such sites cry out for protection and preservation.

That job falls to people like Ifan Thomas, superintendent for Parks Canada's Western Arctic Field Unit based in Inuvik. His staff of about forty full-time and seasonal workers covers three national parks — Tuktut Nogait, Ivvavik, and Aulavik, plus Saoyú-ʔehdacho National Historic Site and Pingo Canadian Landmark.

Parks staff monitor sites of historic and cultural significance and make sure all visitors are aware of them.

"Every person that visits our parks in the Western Arctic gets a personal orientation," says Thomas. "They are informed about the cultural sites, they are informed about their importance, they are cautioned about what are the appropriate practices to engage in while they are travelling in the parks. We endeavour to make certain everyone is aware of the need to keep these sites undisturbed, but we also want them to learn about the sites and experience them. For our visitors, the cultural landscape is as fascinating and captivating as the natural landscape."

Parks Canada also carries out significant archaeological surveys in the Arctic. In the summer of 2010, the agency led an expedition that made a significant discovery, locating the HMS *Investigator*, a British Royal

The people who visit range from experienced northern travellers to adventurous tourists.

Navy vessel in search of the Northwest Passage that was abandoned in Mercy Bay off Banks Island in 1853. Onshore, the team also uncovered three gravesites of crewmen who had died of scurvy. And they found new artifacts at an ancient Thule site, including whalebones used as roof supports for dwellings.

Interestingly, a large supply cache left on the shore of Mercy Bay by the crew of the *Investigator* became a source of wealth to Inuit that is remembered to this day, says Thomas.

"People in Sachs Harbour, they know the story of people, over the course of a number of decades, going to the site of the *Investigator* cache to salvage the materials from the site that were valuable to them — the metal nails and softwood, things they wouldn't otherwise be able to find."

CANADIAN PRESS

Unlike most national parks in southern Canada, the Arctic parks came out of land claims agreements and are co-managed with local indigenous communities, who continue to hunt and fish on the land.

The northern parks are inaccessible by road and expensive to get to. The people who visit them range from experienced northern travellers to adventurous tourists who rely on skilled guides.

Mike Beedell is one of these guides. He probably knows the Arctic as a whole as well as any person alive. As a wilderness guide with Adventure Canada, an outdoor educator, and a prizewinning photographer, Beedell has been rambling around Canada's North for more than three decades, savouring both its natural beauty and its history.

As a university student in 1977, Beedell canoed down the Coppermine River to the Arctic coast, tracing the route pioneered by explorers Samuel Hearne, John Franklin, and George Back.

Hearne, who travelled with a group of Dene people in the 1770s, was the first to chart the Coppermine. Franklin

Above:
Jeff MacInnis and Mike Beedell journey through the Northwest Passage at Aston Bay off the west coast of Somerset Island in a small catamaran in 1987.

Left:
English explorer Sir John Franklin. The lower part of the image, circa 1848, depicts the opening of a cairn containing relics of Franklin's doomed Northwest Passage expedition.

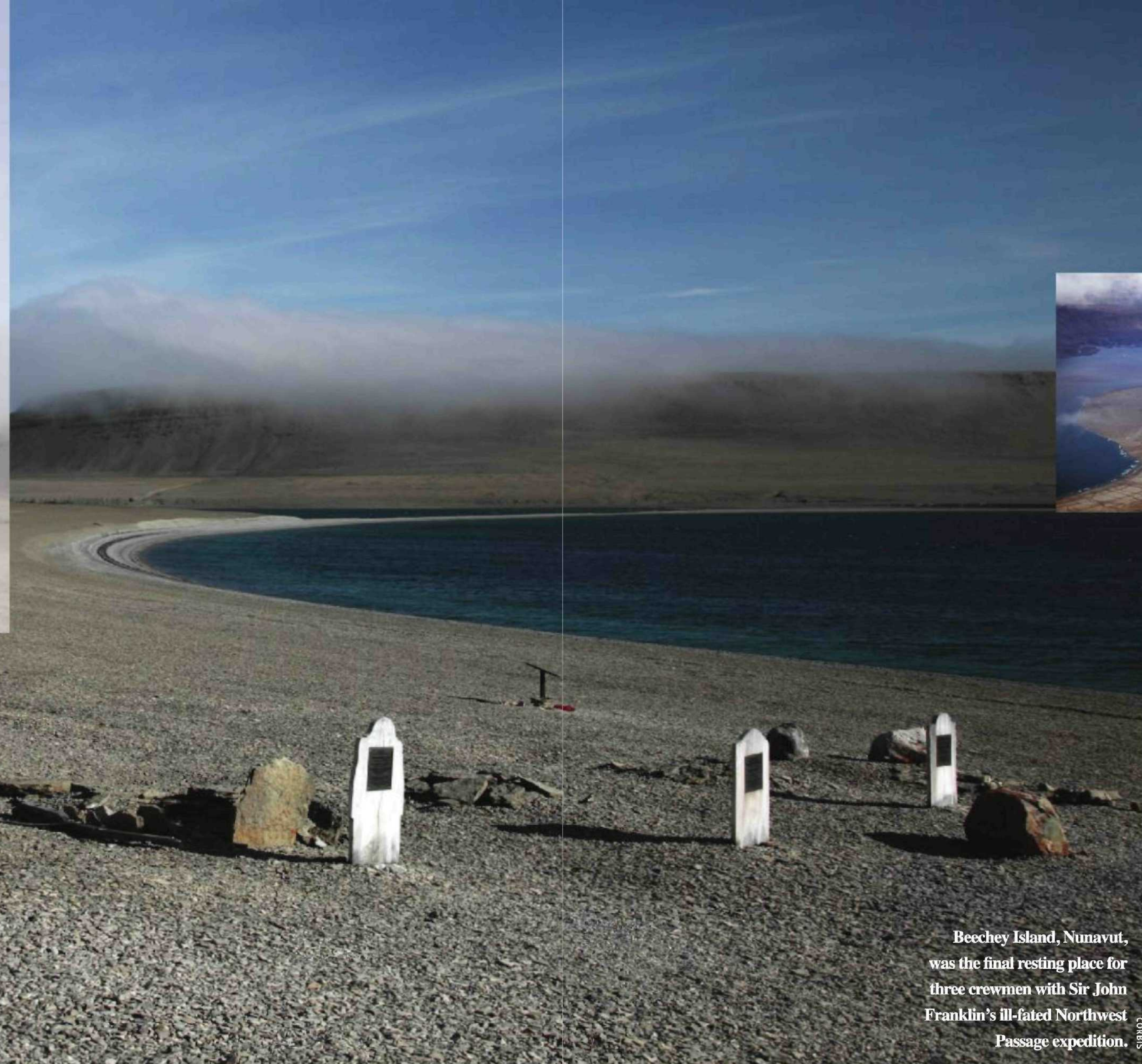
What makes a National Historic Site?

Every person, place, or thing has a history. But only some make it into the history books. And a very few get singled out for special treatment.

It's the job of the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, in close collaboration with Parks Canada, to identify what is historically significant enough for federal commemoration. Every year the board considers about two hundred candidates and provides advice and recommendations to the minister of the environment. National significance is a deciding factor. Uniqueness, rarity, or being first are not, in themselves, enough to make it onto the list.

Many forts and battlefields were recognized shortly after the board was formed in 1919. More recently, the board has been paying closer attention to the history of Aboriginal peoples, women, and ethnocultural communities. Most nominations come from the Canadian public.

Today, there are 956 National Historic Sites, 648 persons of national historic significance, and 417 events of national historic significance. Of the 956 sites, 167 are administered by Parks Canada. The rest are owned or administered by a wide range of individuals, organizations, and other levels of government.



Beechey Island, Nunavut, was the final resting place for three crewmen with Sir John Franklin's ill-fated Northwest Passage expedition.

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paddled down the same river in 1821. Harsh, unfamiliar conditions, plus his failure to follow the advice of the Native peoples, resulted in his losing eleven of his twenty-one men. Franklin himself almost starved to death, so that he later became known as "the man who ate his boots."

Beedell's 1970s expedition was, of course, far better equipped than its long-ago predecessors; yet the party felt a certain kinship with the earlier explorers.

"We had Franklin's journal from 1821," Beedell recalls. "We camped where he camped and got a real sense of his experience."

Adds Beedell: "That journey changed my life." Within a decade, he was beating his way through the Northwest Passage from west to east in a small catamaran skippered by Jeff McInnis. The journey took three summers and involved flying in and out at the end of each travel season.

In centuries past, flying south for the winter was not an option. Venturing into the Arctic meant losing contact with the outside world. Ships froze into the ice and their crews settled in for long, dark, and bitterly cold winters with meagre rations, waiting for the spring melt to free them from their polar prisons.

During the centuries-long search for a Northwest Passage, even a successful expedition would probably lose a few men to cold, scurvy, and accident. A disastrous one, like the 1845 Franklin debacle that took as many as 129 men to their deaths, would disappear off the face of the earth.

Traces of history, such as the graves of the three Franklin crew members on Beechey Island, are scattered throughout the Arctic. And today, many areas of historic interest can be visited from the comfort of an expeditionary cruise ship. In Victoria Strait, where explorer John Rae tried to beat his way through "bergy bits" in a small boat, we today sail easily through open waters. In Baffin Bay, where Elisha Kent Kane attached his ship to an iceberg so massive that it pulled him north against the surface current, we today encounter no ice whatsoever.

Visitors might stumble onto the wreck of an old whaling ship — Hudson Bay, the Mackenzie Delta, and Cumberland Sound were busy whaling grounds during the nineteenth century.

Given that visiting the Arctic is today out of reach for many, it is worth remembering that in 1885, when Banff National Park was created, visiting meant travelling by train and on horseback, and few had the resources to do this. Now, as then, creative planning can sometimes overcome an empty wallet. For instance, Auyuittuq National Park can be surprisingly accessible.

"From Ottawa," Beedell says, "you can fly to Pangnirtung [thirty kilometres from the park] for the same number of points as to Vancouver. Best deal in the world. You leave home and a few hours later you're out walking around on a glacier."

Author Ken McGoogan has written four books about the search for the Northwest Passage and is a frequent contributor to *Canada's History*.

Northern newcomers

These northern national parks all came into being within the past twenty-five years. All of them have a rich historical legacy.

PARKS CANADA

Quttinirpaaq, Northern Ellesmere Island (1986): Quttinirpaaq (khoot-tee-neelk–paahk) means "the highest" in Inuktitut. A land of Arctic deserts and ice caps, this is Canada's most northerly national park. It includes Fort Conger, established in 1881 as a polar research station.

Vuntut, Northern Yukon (1995): Vuntut (voon-toot) means "among the lakes" in the Gwitchen language. The remains of seven caribou fences — where the animals were trapped and snared or speared — are found within the park. The fences sometimes extend for several kilometres.

PARKS CANADA

Tuktut Nogait, Northwest Territories (1996): Tuktut Nogait (took-toot-Noo-guy-t) means "young caribou" in Inuvialuktun. Evidence of human habitation may date to AD 1200. Archaeological sites include tent rings, caches, caribou drive lanes, meat drying areas, and hunting blinds.

Wapusk, Northern Manitoba (1996): Wapusk (waa-pusk) means "white bear" in Cree and includes one of the world's largest polar bear denning areas. It's located between two National Historic Sites — Prince of Wales Fort in Churchill and York Factory — both seventeenth-century HBC forts.

Sirmilik, Northern Baffin Island (2001): Sirmilik (seer-mee-leek) means "place of glaciers" in Inuktitut. Human history here dates back at least five thousand years. Archaeological sites are found at Button Point on Bylot Island bird sanctuary.

PARKS CANADA

Ukkusiksalik, Southern Nunavut (2003): Ukkusiksalik (oooo-koo-SIK-sa-lik) means "where there is material for the stone pot" in Inuktitut — referring to soapstone found here. The HBC kept a trading post here from 1925 to 1947. Tent rings, food caches, and fox traps are among the archaeological remains.

Torngat Mountains, Labrador (2008): Torngat (tawrn-gat) means "place of spirits" in Inuktitut. Some of its archaeological sites date back almost seven thousand years. Chert, a glass-like material, was quarried from here for thousands of years and traded as far south as Maine.