



INSTITUTE FOR NORTHERN STUDIES FONDUS, UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN ARCHIVES

» In a drawing by explorer George Back, a band of British adventurers bunk down in the wintry north woods.

The hungriest holiday

During a grim yuletide on Great Slave Lake, a team of starving explorers yearn for the gift of survival

BY JENNIFER KINGSLEY

It was Christmas day, 1833, and darkness pressed against the moose-skin windows of Fort Reliance. Inside, George Back and his men prepared for supper, though there wasn't much to eat. The temperature outside was near -60C; within the fort, where the log walls were chinked with frozen clay and sand, it wasn't much hotter. The fireplaces couldn't warm the hungry explorers and starving Dene who waited for the holiday meal. For Back's men, Christmas dinner was a reduced ration of pemmican. Some of the children got a spoonful or two. For the others, it was nothing but a mouthful of their own caribou-hide clothing. While Back and his men swapped memories of balmy England, some of the local people cried out in their suffering. Here on the eastern end of Great Slave Lake, the land was enveloped in famine.

Back in February of that year, George Back, then 36 years old, had left England to command his first mission to the Canadian Arctic. The short, stocky explorer had been north twice before, both times under Sir John Franklin, but this time he was in charge. His objective was to reach the

Arctic coast by a river known as the Thlew-ee-choh, or Great Fish. Today, that river is called the Back, but at the time the mighty Barrenlands waterway was only a rumour. Back intended to find it, descend it and then search the coastline for a missing British expedition. Captain John Ross, along with his nephew, James, and 22 men, had not been heard from in four years.

Back hired several men in England, including Richard King, a naturalist and surgeon, who would be his second in command. He picked up the rest of his crew, including Alexander McLeod, the expedition assistant, en route from New York to Great Slave Lake. He reached Great Slave in August and directed McLeod to find a wintering site and begin building Fort Reliance. Meanwhile, Back pressed on in search of the source of the mysterious Thlew-ee-choh. Though summer was nearing its end, the weather remained unusually warm – and that's where the problems began.

On August 22, McLeod and four men arrived at the bay where they would spend the winter. They began work atop a bank of

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gravel and sand; an abundance of mosses and shrubs surrounded the building site. Back said it was “more like a park than part of an American forest.” The men started on three buildings out of squared logs, clay-mud mortar and wooden shingles. Each room had a fireplace with a granite chimney. Fort Reliance was taking shape.

Meanwhile, to the east, Back, along with his Dene guide, Maufelly, and a small party of men continued toward the Thlew-ee-choh. The warm weather subjected everyone to late-season torment by biting flies, which made their faces bleed. Wrote Back, “There is certainly no form of wretchedness ... at once so great and so humiliating, as the torture inflicted by these puny blood-suckers.”

By August 29, Back's team was drinking grog out on the tundra and celebrating their “discovery” of the headwaters. Planning to return there in the spring to begin their descent toward the Arctic Coast, they now turned back and headed toward Great Slave Lake to spend the winter.

The warm weather sped their return, but when hungry hunters started arriving, they realized that the warm spell was also changing the migration patterns of the caribou. The herds hadn't moved south to the treeline, nor were they following their normal routes. Back wrote: “To this unusual mildness of the season may be ascribed the unparalleled sufferings of the Indians, who, emaciated and worn out by fatigue, continued to pour in upon us from the barren lands, where, contrary to their habits, the deer [caribou] still remained, keeping at too great a distance to be followed.”

It was normal for forts and trading posts to become hubs for local hunters, but the scene at Fort Reliance that year was different. People needed help. Back had winter provisions, but he'd planned to trade for more food. This strategy was common, though it had proved disastrous for past expeditions. Most British officers had no idea how to fish or hunt, and their trading plans were sure to fail in the midst of a widespread famine.

Elders, hunters, mothers and children showed up hoping for scraps of pemmican. Instead, they were lucky to receive “a handful of mouldy pounded meat, which had been originally reserved for our dogs.” Some nights, Dene families would stand at the elbows of Back's men while they ate, watching each spoonful go into their mouths. Back sent his crew far afield to fish and hunt. He discharged a few paddlers and voyageurs to return south. And in the case of some of the native hunters, he reduced their portions so drastically they were forced to leave in search of food.

The relationship between Back, his subordinate crew and the local people was complicated. Back criticized and mistrusted the Dene, but he also relied on them completely to find the river he sought. While he did give out some of his food, especially to children, he couldn't, and didn't, feed everyone. Some natives starved that winter, though Back's men all survived. Back felt he needed to save his large supply of pemmican for the following summer's river trip. Yet by Christmas he had already used half of it.

The holidays that year were a grim scene. During the black night of December 25, starving families lingered by Fort Reliance's central fireplace. Some roasted pieces of their caribou garments, sucking and gnawing them. Women and children moaned. King, the surgeon, attended to those he could, but had little aid to offer. George Back sat quietly at the table. He wrote that “happiness on such occasions depends entirely on the mood and temper of the individuals.” He and King considered opening their special tin of food, given to them by a woman in New York, but decided to wait until McLeod returned from a hunting trip. Instead, they dined on a small dish of pemmican, swapping stories about roast beef, plum pudding and friends back home. With Back's determined cheer, which buoyed the others in his party, they managed to squeeze some Christmas joy from their macabre situation. Afterwards, Back, an accomplished artist, moved closer to the fire with his paint set. But even indoors, his brush froze stiff. His hands were too cracked to paint anyway.

On February 9, Alexander McLeod returned with a hunting party and toboggans loaded with meat. Between his efforts and the sporadic success of other hunters, a trickle of food kept Fort Reliance going until spring. In April, news reached the fort that Ross and his party had been rescued by a whaling ship and brought home to England. Still, on June 7, 1834, Back and his crew headed for the Thlew-ee-choh. With nine men and a 30-foot York boat, they travelled down and back up the river that summer. They overwintered at Fort Reliance again, then returned to England after an absence of two and a half years.

The British Admiralty promoted and decorated Back upon his homecoming. After one more tour in command, he retired from exploration at the age of 42, the same year Queen Victoria knighted him. By then, his health had deteriorated, and no wonder. He had been on expeditions, almost continuously, for 24 years. Christmas at Fort Reliance was one of many frozen, hungry nights he had spent in the wilds of the North. 