

Survival in the Arctic: How the Franklin Expedition Perished So Quickly While the Netsilik  
Have Survived There for Centuries

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Life in the Arctic during the 19<sup>th</sup> century demanded people do everything possible to survive in the harsh climate. Intimate knowledge of the land and understanding how quickly the conditions could change was vital for survival.<sup>1</sup> The Inuit in the area where the Franklin Expedition perished, the Netsilik, had built up this knowledge over generations, passing it down through oral histories so each new generation could survive off what past generations had learned.<sup>2</sup> When the Franklin Expedition embarked, most of the men did not have any experience in Arctic travel, and as a result the expedition was highly unprepared for what lay ahead. Instead of easily finding and crossing the Northwest Passage, the expedition's boats got stuck in (and eventually crushed by) the ice, forcing the remaining crew to abandon the ships.<sup>3</sup> Because they did not have the proper tools or resources for survival in such a harsh and unforgiving climate, all of the men on the Franklin Expedition ultimately perished, in one of the most barren parts of the Arctic.<sup>4</sup> So how is it that the Netsilik have survived in the Arctic for centuries, and the men of the Franklin Expedition perished so quickly? The main reason the Franklin Expedition did not survive was because they were unwilling to adopt Netsilik practices for survival, even though the Netsilik had lived and thrived in the Arctic for centuries without any outside influence. Because the men of the Franklin Expedition believed they were the superior race, they thought that they would not have to adopt Netsilik practices to survive and escape the Arctic. Their perceived superiority is what cost them their lives.

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<sup>1</sup> "Arctic Homeland," *Canadian Mysteries*, accessed October 5, 2020, [https://www.canadianmysteries.ca/sites/franklin/context/contextHomeland\\_en.htm](https://www.canadianmysteries.ca/sites/franklin/context/contextHomeland_en.htm).

<sup>2</sup> "Arctic Homeland."

<sup>3</sup> "Arviligjuarmiut Testimony on Franklin and Others [Reported by Knud Rasmussen] (1931)," *Canadian Mysteries*, accessed October 5, 2020, 27, [https://www.canadianmysteries.ca/sites/franklin/archive/text/ArviligjuarmiutRasmussen\\_en.htm](https://www.canadianmysteries.ca/sites/franklin/archive/text/ArviligjuarmiutRasmussen_en.htm).

<sup>4</sup> "John Rae to the Editor (1854 October 31)," *Canadian Mysteries*, accessed October 5, 2020, [https://www.canadianmysteries.ca/sites/franklin/archive/text/RaeLondonTimes\\_en.htm](https://www.canadianmysteries.ca/sites/franklin/archive/text/RaeLondonTimes_en.htm).

To understand how the Netsilik and other Inuit groups have survived in the Arctic for so long, it is important to look at their methods of survival and how they have adapted to the Arctic climate. Food is an obvious necessity needed to sustain life, and in order to have a constant food source the Netsilik learned which animals were most abundant in which seasons, and where they should travel to in order to harvest as many animals as possible. In winter, the Netsilik would hunt seal; in the spring and summer they would hunt caribou.<sup>5</sup> This demonstrates that the Netsilik knew which animals were more abundant in each season. As a result of this knowledge, fewer days would be spent hunting as they could focus on hunting the animals that would be found in abundance. By travelling to follow their food supplies, this shows that the Netsilik knew that they could not expect food to come to them in such a harsh climate.<sup>6</sup> Instead, they recognized that to have a steady food source, they would need to travel to find the areas where seal and caribou were most abundant. This knowledge was passed down from generation to generation, demonstrating that the Netsilik knew transferring this information was key to survival. By knowing where certain animals could be found and travelling to find them, the Netsilik ensured they would have a constant food source, which made it easier for them to survive in the Arctic.

Clothing designed specifically for an Arctic climate was another key aspect of survival for the Netsilik. Their clothing was designed with the harsh environment in mind so that exposure to the elements, which was often deadly, was limited. This was done by selecting skins from primarily caribou and seals as their skins were warm, insulated, and did not trap moisture.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Dana Thacher, "Salvaging on the Coast of Erebus Bay, King William Island: An Analysis of Inuit Interaction with Material from the Franklin Expedition," *Arctic*. 71, 4: (December 2018), 443, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26567072>.

<sup>6</sup> John Douglas Belshaw, *Canadian History: Pre-Confederation*, Victoria: BCCampus, 2015, 276.

<sup>7</sup> Betty Issenman, "Inuit Skin Clothing: Construction and Motifs." *Études/Inuit/Studies*. 9, 2: (1985), 101, 103, 104, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42869524>.

By selecting the skins from these animals, the Netsilik knew they would be warm and provide protection from the weather because both the caribou and seal had evolved to survive in the Arctic. This allowed the Netsilik to use resources that were readily available to them so they would not have to search for material to make clothing, since they were already hunting caribou and seal for their meat. Because these animals' skins did not trap moisture, it also ensured that the wearer would stay dry and their clothing would not freeze. It was also vital that the clothing be warm and not let any cold air in or body heat out, so clothing was tailored to each individual.<sup>8</sup> In doing this, the Netsilik recognized that clothing could not be made the same for everyone because everyone's build is different. By tailoring clothing to each person, they were able to give everyone the best protection possible against the elements, ensuring that they would stay as warm as possible and not be affected by the cold climate too greatly. This ensured that each person had the best chance of survival.

Lastly, another key aspect of Netsilik clothing was that the back and front of the jackets, which were longer so that when people sat down, no skin would be exposed.<sup>9</sup> Once again, this ensured exposure to the elements was limited. This was likely important when seal hunting, as hunters may have had to wait at a seal breathing hole for hours, so if their jackets did not provide adequate protection, it would have been easy for frostbite and hypothermia to set in quickly, and potentially kill. Because of the harsh conditions in the Arctic, the Netsilik were able to recognize which animals offered the best protection and how to sew skins together to protect everyone in the best way possible. This contributed to how they have survived in the Arctic for hundreds of years, as they were able to ensure that their population would not decline due to prolonged exposure to the elements.

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<sup>8</sup> Issenman, "Inuit Skin Clothing," 103

<sup>9</sup> Issenman, "Inuit Skin Clothing," 105

Netsilik survival also depended on a strong knowledge of the land. This allowed them to know where animals would be in abundance during certain seasons, so they could travel to harvest them. The Netsilik would read the weather patterns announcing the change of seasons to move to spring and summer caribou migration grounds in advance of the caribou's arrival; this allowed them to hunt the largest herd possible.<sup>10</sup> By knowing where the caribou would migrate when the weather got warmer, the Netsilik ensured their survival because they were able to predict the arrival of herds. They could then set up their summer camp in an area that would hopefully provide them with enough caribou meat to sustain everyone. This method of hunting also ensured that the Netsilik would not have to expend too much energy tracking the caribou because they set up their camps in the areas the caribou naturally traveled to for food. Generational knowledge was essential for hunting in this fashion because it allowed the Netsilik to place themselves in an area where animals would come to them each year.

Reading ice patterns was also important to Netsilik survival so that they did not settle in an area that was likely to be disrupted by ice break up or freezing.<sup>11</sup> By being able to read ice patterns, they knew which areas of the land would be the safest to build a camp on so they would not choose an area too close to water where the ice could be prone to shifting. By doing this, the Netsilik ensured that a sudden change in the weather that could cause the ice to shift would not flood their camp or cause damage to their supplies. Because so much of the Arctic was covered in ice, being able to read ice patterns was also important for travel so that the Netsilik did not

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<sup>10</sup> "A Comparative Look at Inuit Lifestyle," *Learn Alberta*, last modified October 15, 2006, accessed November 11, 2020, <http://www.learnalberta.ca/content/ssognc/inuitLifestyle/index.html#:~:text=For%20generations%20the%20Inuit%20people,search%20of%20meat%20and%20fish.&text=For%20most%20of%20the%20year%20the%20Arctic%20was%20a%20frozen%20land>.

<sup>11</sup> Eric Alden Smith, "Approaches to Inuit Socioecology." *Études/Inuit/Studies*. 8, 1: (1984), 67, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42869401>.

move over ice that might break. By learning how to read ice patterns, the Netsilik ensured their survival in a land that was covered in ice, showing how their knowledge of land was essential to living in the Arctic.

Community and family structure were also an important aspect of the Netsilik way of life, and key for survival in the Arctic. Families and communities relied on each other heavily because they knew that in such a harsh and unforgiving climate, working as a group was better than trying to survive as an individual. In Netsilik society everyone would share resources equally and the strengths of each individual were used to benefit the group.<sup>12</sup> This demonstrates that the Netsilik knew that in such a harsh climate where resources were hard to come by, it was important that everyone in the group prosper and that one family unit did not benefit too greatly over another. After a hunt, it was important that everyone got a portion of the meat from the animal, and not just the successful hunter and their family. While everyone may not always get enough food, this method ensured that everyone had something to eat. Sharing resources also showed the importance of community in Netsilik culture, and that everyone was equal and deserved equal opportunity. Playing to the strengths of everyone in the community benefited the group at large, as they could help each other to ensure that everyone had what they needed. For example, where one person was better at hunting caribou, another was better at butchering it, and another was better at stitching hides together to make clothes. The Netsilik benefited from working as a group because they could each get what they needed by relying on the skills of others. This gave everyone the best chance of survival as individuals would not have to expend their energy and resources doing a task they were not very good at. Instead, individuals could focus their attention on what they did well. In an Arctic climate that was unforgiving and often

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<sup>12</sup> "A Comparative Look at Inuit Lifestyle."

tested people, the Netsilik ensured their continued survival by creating strong group bonds and relying on the skills of others.

Most notably, Netsilik survival in the Arctic was ensured for centuries because of the transfer of knowledge from generation to generation. Without this transfer, knowledge would have been lost between generations and each subsequent generation would have to figure out how to survive on their own. However, Netsilik oral history allowed for knowledge about tools and skills necessary for survival in the Arctic to be transferred between generations.<sup>13</sup> In doing this, older generations were able to pass their knowledge to younger ones so that valuable knowledge about survival was not lost over time. In such a harsh climate, it was vital that knowledge that had enabled the Netsilik to survive for centuries be passed down because it ensured that future generations would see the same prosperity. By passing this information down through oral history, valuable resources would not be used by trying to write it down. Written information could also be easily lost. Oral histories, however, stood the test of time better, as they could be told to younger generations so they would not be forgotten. As a result, knowledge that had been used for centuries to ensure Netsilik survival could continue to be used by the current population. Using oral histories to transfer knowledge was vital to survival in the Arctic so that only a limited amount of information about survival would be lost between generations.

In examining the mystery of the Franklin Expedition, it is important to understand that the expedition was outfitted with technology from Europe, which made it harder for them to adapt to the Arctic climate. Their boats and sleds were large and heavy which made travel harder

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<sup>13</sup> Willem C.E. Rasing, "The Transformation and Transfer of Inuit Knowledge," In *Traditions, Traps and Trends: Transfer of Knowledge in Arctic Regions*, edited by Jarich Oosten and Barbra Helen Miller, Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2018, 4, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/rdc/reader.action?docID=4891130&ppg=5>.

and slower.<sup>14</sup> Because travel was not very fast for the Franklin Expedition, it meant they could not travel as far to search for the resources they needed to survive, such as food. In looking at the Netsilik and their methods of survival, we know that travel was essential, because they knew they could not expect food to come to them. However, because of European inexperience in the Arctic, the men of the Franklin Expedition did not know this. As a result, they likely thought their large boats and sleds would not impact them too greatly because they thought food would be in abundance. It is also important to note that the Franklin Expedition travelled with destination in mind instead of survival.<sup>15</sup> Because of their focus on finding the Northwest Passage, the Franklin Expedition likely did not pay attention to where resources could be found easily. As a result, they travelled in areas where there were no resources. Travelling with destination in mind also relates back to the negative impacts that their boats and sleds had, as it made their travel slower and consequently, it took them longer to get to their destination, decreasing their chance of survival the longer they spent in the Arctic.

Because the Franklin Expedition did not know how harsh the Arctic climate was, they were also unprepared to stay there for an extended period. When the expedition embarked, they were sent with enough provisions to last three years, which was believed to be more than enough to ensure their survival.<sup>16</sup> They were also sent with this amount of food and other materials so they would not have to leave their boats.<sup>17</sup> This shows the lack of understanding that the British had about the Arctic climate and how unforgiving it could be. It also shows they felt that finding the Northwest Passage would be an easy thing to do, and they were over-preparing by sending

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<sup>14</sup> "Contact Zone," *Canadian Mysteries*, accessed October 5, 2020, [https://www.canadianmysteries.ca/sites/franklin/context/contextContact\\_en.htm](https://www.canadianmysteries.ca/sites/franklin/context/contextContact_en.htm).

<sup>15</sup> Belshaw, *Canadian History: Pre-Confederation*, 276.

<sup>16</sup> "Contact Zone."

<sup>17</sup> "Contact Zone."

the Franklin Expedition with enough supplies to last for three years. The British also felt this surplus of supplies would mean the men would not have to leave the boats, even if conditions were not as expected and they were trapped in the Arctic for a longer period. As we know, this was not the case and the men were forced to abandon their ships when their provisions ran out.<sup>18</sup> This is one of the factors that led the remaining men of the expedition to perish, as they were unprepared for survival in the Arctic, where resources were not readily available and quick travel was essential for survival.

After the men of the Franklin Expedition were forced to abandon their boats, they did encounter some of the Netsilik in the area. However, evidence suggests that the Netsilik and Franklin's men only met when the men were on the brink of death and trying to escape the Arctic.<sup>19</sup> While the Netsilik did try to help them by offering them seal meat and soup, Franklin's men refused their help, even though they were likely starving.<sup>20</sup> This demonstrates that even in the face of death, the men of the Franklin Expedition believed they were the superior race and they did not need the help of the Netsilik, even though their methods of survival had allowed them to thrive in the Arctic for centuries. Even if they had encountered the Netsilik sooner, it is not likely that Franklin's men would have taken their help then, as even in the direst of situations they did not want it. Because the men of the Franklin Expedition were tied to their ways of life and felt they were superior, it prevented them from recognizing that they needed help if they were going to survive long enough to escape the Arctic. Because they had no resources, they would have needed to accept food from the Netsilik to have enough energy to leave. However,

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<sup>18</sup> "Arviligjuarmiut Testimony on Franklin and Others [Reported by Knud Rasmussen] (1931)," 27.

<sup>19</sup> Tristan Hopper, "'They're not human': How 19<sup>th</sup>-century Inuit coped with a real-life invasion of the 'walking dead'", *National Post*, October 27, 2016, accessed November 8, 2020, <https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/theyre-not-human-how-19th-century-inuit-coped-with-a-real-life-invasion-of-the-walking-dead>.

<sup>20</sup> Hopper, "'They're not human': How 19<sup>th</sup>-century Inuit coped with a real-life invasion of the 'walking dead'".

because of their perceived superiority, Franklin's men continued to believe until their deaths that they would be able to escape the Arctic without any outside help, even though they likely perished because they felt this way.

Even though Franklin's men had refused to eat the food provided to them, when they departed the Netsilik camp, they were sent with three seals.<sup>21</sup> Several months later when the Netsilik discovered the bodies of the men they had met, they discovered that they had died without eating the seals.<sup>22</sup> Once again, the perceived superiority of Franklin's men is what ultimately led to their deaths, as they were unwilling to adopt any of the Netsilik ways of life, even if it meant they would have had a better chance of survival. The Netsilik had sacrificed food that would have helped their families, and instead recognized the greater need of Franklin's men. However, the men chose not to eat the meat because it was foreign and unusual to them, even though it may have helped them survive long enough to make it out of the Arctic. At the very least, it could have prevented their deaths for slightly longer. Even on the verge of death, and with food that could have helped them survive and gain energy to continue their travels, the men of the Franklin Expedition chose almost certain death over adopting Netsilik practices. Their unwillingness to adopt some Netsilik ways of life is ultimately what lead to their deaths.

Lastly, it is important to examine the interaction of the Netsilik and other European explorers who came after the Franklin Expedition to discover what had happened to them. After meeting the Franklin Expedition, those stories became a part of the Netsilik oral history. As a result, they were able to tell the European explorers that came after where the boats were and where the men had perished.<sup>23</sup> This demonstrates that the Netsilik knew about the Franklin

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<sup>21</sup> Hopper, "‘They’re not human’: How 19<sup>th</sup>-century Inuit coped with a real-life invasion of the ‘walking dead’".

<sup>22</sup> Hopper, "‘They’re not human’: How 19<sup>th</sup>-century Inuit coped with a real-life invasion of the ‘walking dead’".

<sup>23</sup> Douglas R. Stenton, Robert W. Park, "History, Oral History and Archeology: Reinterpreting the ‘Boat Places’ of Erebus Bay," *Arctic*. 70, 2: (June 2017), 205, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26379762>.

Expedition and had met some of the men when they were still alive. It also demonstrates the value of Netsilik and other Inuit oral histories, as they contain valuable, and often accurate, information even after the people who experienced an event firsthand have died. However, for many years the Europeans did not believe the Netsilik when they told them where the boats were, even though the Netsilik repeatedly insisted that they knew where the boats and other artifacts could be found.<sup>24</sup> Once again, this shows that Europeans felt that their technology was superior, and they would be able to find the remnants of the Franklin Expedition without any outside help. Despite Netsilik insistence about where the boats could be found, Europeans chose not to listen to them. This also shows that they believed Netsilik oral histories held no value and would not help with finding the boats. However, if they had put their perceived superiority aside and listened to the Netsilik, the boats, and subsequently the fate, of the Franklin Expedition could likely have been found a lot sooner.

Ultimately, the men on the Franklin Expedition believed their way of life and practices were superior, which is what led to their downfall. The Netsilik had developed many practices to ensure their survival over the centuries they had thrived in the Arctic. These practices included knowing which animals were abundant in which seasons, travelling to find food, making clothing that would limit exposure to the elements, and living in tight-knit family groups. Passing down these strategies of survival to younger generations through oral histories was also key to how the Netsilik have survived in the Arctic for centuries. The Franklin Expedition failed because their boats and sleds were not meant for travelling quickly, and they went to the Arctic with all the provisions they thought they would need, so they never prepared to leave the boats.

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<sup>24</sup> Russell Potter, "After 165 years, Inuit knowledge leads to Franklin's wrecks," *Nunatsiaq News*, April 3, 2019, accessed November 8, 2020, <https://nunatsiaq.com/stories/article/after-165-years-inuit-knowledge-leads-to-franklins-wrecks/>.

Because Franklin's men saw the Netsilik as the inferior race, they refused their help, even though they were on the brink of almost certain death. Taking these factors into consideration, the mystery of how the Netsilik had survived in the Arctic for centuries and Franklin's men perished so quickly can be solved -- the perceived superiority that the men on the expedition had is what ultimately led to their quick downfall.

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