

Observations on The Inland Sea

There are more than 400 artefacts from the Franklin Expedition housed in the collection of the National Maritime Museum of Greenwich, and my favourite is the soup tin.

The Franklin expedition (1845-48) comprised two Royal Navy vessels, the HMS Terror and HMS Erebus, that set out to find a Northwest passage in the Canadian Arctic. Both ships were icebound within a year. All 129 crew members perished within three. It would be many more years before their fate was known and their story pieced together from the bodies, the ships' logs and artefacts recovered by search parties.

Other items from the Franklin Expedition enshrined in the Museum include a wooden clothes brush, a brass matchbox containing three dead matches and a piece of white wool, two left gloves, each with a small heart worked into the palm, and fragments of a porcelain teacup with a painted blue rim. But if any artefact could be said to be emblematic of the doomed journey of the Terror and Erebus, it is the soup tin.

Article AAA2275: An empty Goldner soup tin made of iron plate, tinned and soldered, the outside surface painted red. Part of the label with instructions for preparing the contents still remains. A circular hole has been made in the top with a hammer and chisel.¹

More than 8000 such cans were brought on the voyage, and each one was a liability from the outset. The lead soldering on the lids, hastily applied to meet departure schedules, dripped and dribbled into the tins, spoiling the contents and causing widespread poisoning. These poisoned food tins helped Royal Navy stoker, John Torrington, to his death, layering lead into his system and compounding his pneumonia. As the first casualty of the expedition, Torrington was given a proper burial in a coffin with his jaw bound and head cushioned on soft wood shavings. Others would not be so fortunate. Torrington was also the first body to be discovered, and he was immaculate, perfectly preserved by the permafrost. It is his startling yet somehow tender face, blue eyes half-hooded and lips stretched back, that emerges out of the paint in Kate's work.

Importantly, Kate is not interested in memorialising failed expeditions or the wild aspirations of dead white men, instead contriving her own narratives in slick paint on slippery copper. The works point to a chasm between explorers' ambitions and the harsh reality of failure, thereby calling into question the mythologising of such journeys.

What follows is an abridged catalogue of the 'Kurucz Artefacts' with observations on their potential import.

A white long-haired cat

The cat is called Angus and has mismatched eyes. He was brought along on the trip as company for little Sophie, whereupon it immediately became apparent that he was ill suited to the climate. The sun burned his face and made his eyes weep. Angus spent most of his time under a yellow plastic beach lounge, obsessively licking his paws and awaiting the day they would all pack up and go home.

A pink neon sign in cursive writing that reads 'What have you done?'

Lipstick on your collar. A broken mantelpiece ornament with a cricket ball lying on the ground nearby. A missing kitchen knife, located in a dump, wrapped in plastic and wiped clean, but still with traces of what is later identified as blood. A credit card cut in two,

¹ <https://collections.rmg.co.uk/collections/objects/2274.html>

tucked behind the couch. An envelope printed with the words 'Final Notice'. A surprise 40th birthday party. A red wine stain on a white rug. A sharp knock at the door at 2am.

A Paddle Boat with Umbrella

"Captain Jolleys Paddle Boats are a must for visitors or family outings. These boats are a laid back way to enjoy the River Torrens precinct and its spectacular wildlife and surrounds. Paddle boats can be hired near The Popeye landing at Elder Park, next to the Festival Theatre and the Rotunda. Hire is available on weekends and school holidays including public holidays, weather permitting. \$20 for 30 minutes for two people."²

A skeleton, prone

A life-size plastic skeleton was found by the pool after the party, and no one knows how it got there. No one admitted to bringing it, and no one remembers seeing anyone with it at any point throughout the night. It was as though it had arrived of its own volition and then simply expired at the edge of the pool, one bony arm tucked under its torso, the other stretching towards the water, so near and yet so far away.

A knitted balaclava with a knitted bee on top

"Look like Australia's most famous explorer", declares the knitting pattern. Follow the idiosyncratic seven stitch configuration in a palette of greys for your very own replica of an Australian icon: the Douglas Mawson balaclava. However, the knitter of this particular balaclava has taken liberties with the design, tailoring it to the artist's needs with personally symbolic colours and cheerful bee motif.³ The deviations in the pattern in turn suggest a deviation from the image of the historical explorer in the popular imagination.

Picture instead Kate in her bobble-bee balaclava cresting the ridge of a crater on Mars. She cuts a striking figure in the colourful handknitted beanie, managing somehow to seem completely congruous in that foreign landscape. Kate treads lightly, taking nothing and leaving only soft footprints. When she reaches the top she pauses, takes in her surroundings, then quietly turns around and disappears from view.

- Julia Robinson

² <https://southaustralia.com/products/adelaide/attraction/captain-jolleys-paddle-boats>

³ The balaclava was knitted by Julie Dunmall, Kate Kurucz's mother