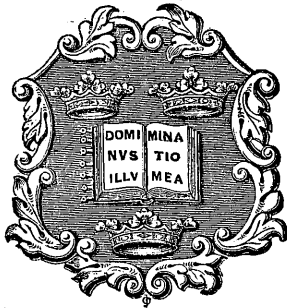


A POEM
UPON THE
LIFE AND CHARACTER
OF
SIR JOHN FRANKLIN,
With special reference to Time, Place, and
Discovery of his Death:

*RECITED IN THE SHELDONIAN THEATRE
MONDAY, JULY 2,
AT THE MEETING OF THE BRITISH ASSOCIATION FOR THE
ADVANCEMENT OF SCIENCE.*

BY
OWEN A. VIDAL,
TRINITY COLLEGE, OXFORD.



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ARGUMENT.

A TIME of peace after long wars.—English nautical energy finds a vent in voyages of discovery.—Sailing of the expedition under the command of Sir John Franklin.—Franklin's previous services.—The voyage.—They make the land—enter the Middle Ice—pass the North Water.—The first winter.—Aurora.—Cutting out.—Arctic storm.—Fast in the ice-stream.—Discovery of the North-west Passage.—Death and burial of Sir John.—The third winter.—They dream of orange-groves and palm-trees.—The march southward.—Changes at home.—Constancy of Lady Franklin. — M'Clintock's search. — Conclusion.

ERRATUM.

For motto after title read—

Πολλὰ δ' ὄ γ' ἐν πόντῳ πάθει ἄλγεα . . .

SIR JOHN FRANKLIN.

A POEM.

Πολλὰ δ' ὁ ἐν πόντῳ πάθεν ἄλγεα . . .

I.

THE sounds of war and strife were heard no more,
The ships lay rotting idly by the shore,
The cannon rusted on the fertile plain,
And warriors raised their warning voice in vain,
While despots marked each mighty hull decay,
And joyed to think of England's falling sway ;
That ne'er again her fleets should rule the wave,
Nor e'er her conq'ring arms be strong to save.
But though the mighty seamen all were dead
Who once her fleets to certain victory led,
That restless, danger-loving soul that springs,
By long descent, from ocean-roving kings,
(Though England's thoughts to peaceful gains were
turned,)

In many a manly bosom freshly burned.
Now, when no foe remains to fight or fly,
They long the stormy northern seas to try,
And win their way, through straits beset with ice,
Unto the western isles of paradise.

II.

The ships are manned, the time is come,
And tears dim many an eye,
And broken voices sadly breathe,
In accents low, " Good-bye."

They strive to bear up bravely,
 And bid them win a name ;
 But yet they hold them dearer,
 Far dearer than their fame.

But the last farewells are spoken
 By woman's quivering lips,
 The sails are bent, the yards across,
 All ready are the ships.

And Franklin holds the chief command,
 He stands beside the mast,
 A man who links together
 The present and the past.

III.

He fought beside the seamen,
 The heroes of our land,
 Whose names upon the splendid page
 Of England's hist'ry stand.

In boyhood's days he studied
 The ever-famous story
 Of England's deeds in days of yore,
 Her triumph and her glory.

How Hawkins, Drake, and Howard
 Of old had swept the main,
 And sent the proud Armada
 A shattered wreck to Spain ;

How bold Sir Richard Grenville ^a,
 Through a whole night and day,
 With one ship fought their fleet, and fell
 Like a lion brought to bay ;

How Blake upheld our honour
 In a dark and dangerous hour,
 And made both Moor and Dutchman own
 The weight of England's power.

Then often with the morning's gray ^b
 Began the desperate fight,
 And the parting guns flashed redly
 Through the darkness of the night.

For whether king or commons rule,
 Though loud the factions roar,
 It is the sailor's duty
 To guard Old England's shore.

IV.

These deeds he read ; then came the days
 When " Nelson and the Nile"
 Rang like a trumpet-blast throughout
 The homes of England's isle.

^a This officer was killed in an attempt to force his way with one ship through the Spanish fleet. The action took place off the Azores in August, 1521. The Spaniards, according to Raleigh, lost four ships, two distinguished commanders, and nearly one thousand seamen and soldiers. See Raleigh's Works, published at the University Press, Oxford, vol. i. p. 143, &c.

^b The length of sea-fights at that period is remarkable.

And joyously he left his home,
 When England's fleets set forth,
 Led by the prince of seamen,
 To battle with the North ;

And followed Nelson's standard
 To victory or the grave,
 When he crushed the might of Denmark
 Upon the Baltic wave.

For years he roamed with Flinders
 Amid the unknown seas,
 Where rollers break on endless reefs
 Of branching coral-trees ;

And saw the memorable sight
 When brave Nathaniel Dance ^c,
 With fifteen English merchantmen,
 Beat off the fleet of France ;

And fought again by Nelson
 On that triumphant day
 When France and Spain drew out their fleets
 In terrible array,

To do and dare their utmost
 Against the brave and free,
 And strive to wrest from England
 The sceptre of the sea.

^c Franklin was passenger in a homeward-bound fleet of fifteen East-Indiamen commanded by this officer. They encountered, repulsed, and chased a French seventy-four, the famous Marengo, and three frigates, commanded by Admiral Linois, off Pulo Auor, on the 14th and 15th of February, 1804. See "Life of Sir John Franklin," by Captain Sherard Osborne, p. 11.

October's breeze blew softly ^d,
 To leeward lay the foe,
 With many hulls and tow'ring spars
 Slow surging to and fro.

Here flew the Gallic tricolor
 Above the ocean-plain,
 In massy fold of red and gold
 There waved the flag of Spain.

Our fleet swept on to battle,
 While like a burnished shield,
 Dark-rimmed with steel, around them shone
 The glittering ocean-field.

Each pyramid of canvas rose
 Into th' unclouded blue,
 From Nelson's main-top-gallant head
 The famous signal flew:

And Franklin saw that signal
 In the calm before the strife,
 And made that burning sentence
 The motto of his life.

Out spake the foe's three-deckers,
 Again and yet again,
 Their shot came crashing through, and strewed
 Our decks with dying men.

^d Franklin was signal midshipman on board the *Bellerophon*, 74, on the 21st of October, 1805, at Trafalgar. Admiral Collingwood, in the *Royal Sovereign*, commenced the action on the part of the British by firing a broad-side, double-shotted, into the *Santa Anna*, which disabled fourteen guns, and killed and wounded nearly four hundred men. See James' "Naval Hist."

But as a lion from the jungle
 Stalks towards the yelping pack,
 So Collingwood in silence
 Kept on his even track.

At length he gave the signal—
 Back started every gun,
 The white smoke curled to heaven,
 And blotted out the sun.

Then saw the rearward vessels
 The running line of flame,
 And with a shock that shook the ships
 The roar of battle came ;

And far across the ocean
 Out rang the battle-cry,
 And Nelson turned, and closed his glass,
 And brighter grew his eye ;

And he led his column onwards
 Into the storm of fight,
 And fell upon the shattered deck,
 And died ere it was night.

V.

By deeds like these was Franklin trained,
 In danger, storm, and strife ;
 And now again he sails to win
 The object of his life.

So sailed that famous Genoese,
 When his hair too was gray,
 And found a world, and soon a name
 That ne'er shall pass away.

The sailors man the capstan,
 And sharply clicks the pall^e,
 Shrill rings the boatswain's whistle
 As the snowy topsails fall ;

And heeling to the leeward,
 Away the vessels sweep,
 And women watch their lessening sails,
 And then go home to weep.

But with masts aslant and bending
 The voyagers sail from home,
 All dark before them lies the sea,
 Behind them flows the foam.

They reel in darkness onward
 Through all the starless night,
 While the tops of moving water-walls
 Against the sky gleam white ;

While the wind tears off the rising crests
 And hurls them far in spray,
 Through storm and shine, by day and night,
 They hold their ceaseless way ;

Until the Greenland mountains
 From out the wave arise,
 Gleaming in cones of silver-white
 Beneath dark-fringed skies.

^e The capstan-pall, or paul, is a small piece of iron working on a notched wheel, which prevents the recoil of the machine.

The fog is dense around them,
 Yet still they onward grope,
 And sight the crimson-coloured crest
 Of Sanderson-his-Hope^f.

It fades into the fog-bank,
 They near the ice's verge,
 And 'mid the uproar of the gale
 They listen for the surge.

But what is that long white streak ahead,
 Stretched in a gleaming line?
 Ay, well they know that fearful sight,
 For ever thus, in deepest night,
 The deadly breakers shine.

Swift through the startled vessel
 Resounds the word of dread,
 That makes the bravest hold his breath,—
 "Ho, breakers there ahead."

Now far to starboard and to port
 Are seen, amid the gloom,
 The forms of bergs, that through the mist
 With ghostly radiance loom.

"Down with the helm,"—the ship obeys^g,
 A mighty surge of water
 With ebon breast and fiery crest
 Comes rolling on her quarter.

^f A lofty headland on the coast of Greenland, partially covered with crimson lichen. It received its name from affording a hope of effecting the North-west passage. See "Life of Sir John Franklin," p. 32.

^g See "Letters from High Latitudes."

From binnacle to cathead^h,
 On sweeps the arching wave,
 And for a moment all on board
 Seem sinking to the grave.

But firmly stands the helmsman,
 And firm he holds the wheel,
 And the ready ship, obedient,
 Flies round upon her keel,

And shakes the mass from off her,
 And flaps each thund'ring sail,
 And rushes off to seaward,
 Right through the roaring gale.

So with slant wing the eagle
 Wheels on the driving squall,
 And far behind him idly
 Whistles the marksman's ball.

VI.

The roaring gale has fallen,
 The day begins to break,
 Again unto the westward
 Their onward course they take.

Up goes the eager pilot,
 A grim old man and gray,
 Whose arm has made full many a whale
 Spout forth the crimson spray.

^h The binnacle stands near the helmsman, and carries the compass. The cathead is a short strong piece of timber projecting over the bow, to which the anchor is hauled.

Long looks he to the westward,
 Long looks with levelled glass,
 If he may see an opening
 Through which the ships may pass.

But far to left and far to right
 Extends the moving wall,
 And glittering bright in summer-light
 The fragments rise and fall ;

And all along the barrier,
 Throughout the livelong day,
 The wine-dark hills of ocean roll
 And break in snowy spray ;

And to and fro the ice-fields rock,
 And crash with ceaseless sound,
 While o'er the tossing tumult
 The sea-gulls wheel around.

“ A lead,” he cries ; “ Up with the helm ⁱ :”
 The wake is curved astern ;
 She turns, as o'er the Norland fens
 Slow wheels a wide-winged heron ;

And rolling deeply to and fro,
 Right on before the breeze,
 With staysails shivering in the wind,
 Sweeps o'er the ridgè seas,

And slowly mounts the last long hill
 That rises from the deep,
 And hangs a moment on the crest,
 And rushes down the steep ;

ⁱ See “ Life of Franklin,” p. 19.

And dashes on the op'ning,
 Amid the seamen's cheers,
 As the fiery war-horse rushes
 Upon the serried spears.

Down goes the ice before them,
 The mainsail they unbrail,
 And urge her onward with the force
 Of every swelling sail.

Behind them lies the darkness^j,
 The air is clear around,
 They wind through long blue water-lanes
 And many an ice-clad sound ;

By many a cliff of crystal
 That gleams in blue and gold,
 By many a granite foreland
 Named after men of old ;

On through the broad north water^k,
 That glances fair and free,
 Where glittering bergs like gems are set
 Upon the purple sea ;

Into the tracts of ice-fields
 Where seldom comes a sail,
 And fearless of the harpoon
 All careless basks the whale.

^j "The ships sail from the black mists and fog-laden atmosphere common to open water in the Arctic regions, into the bright skies, smooth lanes, and mirror-like pools generally found amongst the pack in the summer season."—*Life of Franklin*, p. 38.

^k "Again they pass from the northern edge of the pack into open sea, where icebergs are strewn plentifully."—*Id.* p. 41.

For far ahead before them
 There lie the Ocean-gates,
 And onward, onward is the word,—
 “ Hurrah for Behring’s Straits !”

VII.

And so they steerèd onwards,
 Till ice-fields barred their way,
 Then sought a sheltered haven
 To wait returning day.

Then often, when the north-winds
 Had almost ceased to blow,
 And the quivering starlight glittered
 Over the wastes of snow,

There shone, afar to the eastward,
 A broad white gleam of light,
 As though the moon were rising ¹
 In splendour on the night.

¹ “ There was an intense brightness in the east, like that caused by a rising moon. A broad belt of light stretched directly across the sky from east to west. There was also a great brightness in the south. A few streamers were rising in the N.W., but the north was almost dark. Here and there patches of white light were moving like clouds, leaving dark purple spots in which the stars were shining. Afterwards it assumed a totally different appearance. It was like a vast umbrella. Nearly over-head, but shifting continually, was a spot of dark purple sky. From this, long streamers of light shot up and down with wonderful rapidity. In two spots, east and west, but high up in the sky, were masses of dull red light, but the streamers were perfectly white. The light above changed its form incessantly. Now it was like a huge pair of wings, now like the clouds called by sailors ‘ mares’ tails.’ At length, after oscillating with excessive rapidity for a few minutes, it suddenly disappeared.”—*Extract from Private Journal. Canada West.*

Broader it grew, and higher,
 And higher still it came,
 Until the sky was spanned across
 With an arch of purest flame ;
 And then around the pole-star
 There shone a fiery crown,
 And an awful form of fitful sheen
 Scattered bright lightnings down.
 Between, in ceaseless surges,
 Bright waves of glowing white
 Rolled upwards to the zenith,
 Along the arch of night ;
 Until o'er all the heaven
 A flood of light was spread,
 Save here and there aloft in air
 A mass of murky red.
 Upon the snow were seen in lines
 The shadows of the spars,
 Then downward rushed the darkness,
 Out shone the trembling stars.

VIII.

But now the golden summer comes
 O'er many a rushing river,
 Through thousand miles of forest-land,
 Where myriad pine-leaves quiver.
 The south wind blows, it rends the ice,
 In comes the dark-blue sea ;
 They ply the axe, they ply the saw,
 And now the ships are free.

But fiercely blows the tempest,
 The ice-fields rend and rive,
 And scudding fast, 'mid clouds of spray,
 The reeling icebergs drive.

With topsails reefed, and trysails set
 Unto the tempest's force,
 With patient skill they wind about,
 And strive to lay their course.

All dark, and black, and broken,
 Around them roars the deep,
 And dark gray mist and tossing spray
 Along its surface sweep ;

And shrilly sings the sea-wind
 Over the roughened waves,
 And they hear the surges booming
 Deep in the icy caves.

But westward still they urge their way,
 Toward the Ocean-gates,
 And onward, onward is the word,—
 “ Hurrah for Behring's Straits !”

IX.

Another winter hath passed away,
 The ships are prisoned fast,
 And never a lane of water
 Is seen from off the mast ;

But shattered blocks in masses
 One on another lie,
 And a bright cold blink for ever
 Rims all the leaden sky.

And when the tempest rages
 They feel the Ocean's throe,
 And see the water welling^m
 Full sixty feet below.

To southward lies Cape Herschel,
 Black, desolate, and bare ;
 Dark phantom-islands now and thenⁿ
 Float in the misty air.

Now o'er those barren headlands,
 Red in the midnight flush,
 Men are straining their eager eyes
 To catch the tide-wave's rush ;

To see if yon dark water
 Flow from the western main,
 If indeed there be a strait,
 And their toil be not in vain.

The midnight sun gleams from the north,
 Still anxiously they gaze,
 While waveless beach and mountain
 Glow in the golden haze.

But see, the ice is stirring,
 Bright flash the shattered blocks
 As they rise upon each other,
 And crush against the rocks ;

^m "This polar ice has been found to draw as much as 60 or 80 feet of water."—*Life of Franklin*, p. 62.

ⁿ Alluding to the refraction.

And broader grows the water,
 The ice-fields whirl around,
 The wave-worn inlets of the floes
 Are filled with spray and sound.

X.

Back to the prison'd vessels
 They have borne the glorious news;
 Loud bursts the shout of triumph
 From those worn and weary crews.

But lo! 'tis hushed, for sorrow
 Is on the hearts of all,
 Like a dark storm-cloud veiling
 The heavens with one black pall;

For in his narrow cabin
 Low is their leader lying,
 Watching the sunlight's bars that fall
 Fiery-red on the oaken wall,
 For he knows that he is dying.

Yet at that sound there cometh
 A dream of days gone by,
 When first upon the Baltic
 He heard the battle-cry;

And so before him passes
 The mem'ry of his life,
 With all its anxious watchings,
 And all its fiery strife,—

Till there comes another vision,
 A gabled house, a tree,
 Standing alone upon a plain
 Down-trending towards the sea ;

And when the sweeping north-wind strains
 Its branches old and hoar,
 There comes a sound of surges
 Breaking with hollow roar.

Thus he lay in silence,
 Till backward turned the tide,
 And the ice asunder yawned and crashed,
 And then in peace he died.

XI.

His seamen spread the seaman's pall^o
 The flag of England o'er him,
 And sadly to the silent grave
 In mournful march they bore him.

They clove the chasm 'mid the ice,
 For never earth was there,
 And gazing on its depths they stood
 With heads down-bent and bare.

“ We give his body to the deep ^p, ”—
 Slowly the words were read,
 As the parted waters met and plashed,
 And closed above his head.

^o At the burial of seamen in the Royal Navy the Union Jack is used as a pall.

^p Form of Prayer to be used at the Burial of the Dead at Sea.

A moment the circling eddies whirled,
 Then froze—for ever still,
 Till, rending plain and hill,
 The voice of the Lord shall shake the world,
 And the sea shall yield her dead.

XII.

The men with hope deferred are worn¹,
 The sun, the light of life, is gone,
 The night around is dark and deep,
 They see strange sights amid their sleep,
 For in their dreams they seem to rove
 Through a never-ending orange-grove,
 A land of flowers and trees of spice,
 A glowing land of paradise,
 Where never comes the wintry breath,
 Nor ever strikes the icy death ;
 Where summer suns unceasing glow,
 Unfading flowers for ever blow,
 Unfettered streams 'mid aisles of trees
 Go murmuring down to open seas,
 Where spring the bamboo's feathery sheaves,
 Where shine the glossy plantain-leaves,
 And all is rest, deep rest,—so calm,
 That moveless hangs the lofty palm.
 Then with a hideous crashing sound
 Beneath them gapes the reeling ground,
 Around them yawns a chasm wide,
 And catching vainly at the side,

¹ The tendency of men to dream of tropical scenes during the long Arctic winters is noticed by all polar voyagers.

Into the dark abyss they glide,
 And waking hear the ceaseless sound
 Of ice that roars and grinds around.
 So wears away the three months' night,
 And back again returns the light.

XIII.

They are marching down to the southward,
 From the land of snow and storm,
 For the home of the deer and salmon,
 Where skies are bright and warm :

They are marching down to the southward
 With staggering steps and slow,
 While the wind against their faces
 Whirls on the driving snow :

They are marching down to the southward,
 Towards the dim pale sun,
 While on the frozen earth beneath
 The men fall one by one.

A ceaseless sound rang in their ears,
 A sound of English chimes,
 A phantom fragrance hovered round
 From England's flow'ring limes ;

Till the weary march was ended,
 And they reach the river's side,
 And gazing still towards the south
 The last man dropped and died.

For men by flood and field must fall,
 (Though women mourn and weep,)
 That England's name for ever first
 May down the ages sweep.

XIV.

Twice in flowering April
 Have burst the budding leaves,
 Thrice hath the slanting sunlight
 Reddened the golden sheaves.

There are pale, pale faces in English homes,—
 They watch the western sun,
 And tremble at the winter winds,
 And start at the signal gun.

Long shall they watch, and long shall weep,
 And walk by the moaning shore,
 For Franklin lies in the polar deep,
 His ships return no more.

But still they hope, till hope itself
 Grows dim and fades away,
 As fades a gleam of sunlight
 On a dark December day.

For year on year hath rolled away,
 Ship after ship hath sailed,
 And men have toiled with heart and soul,
 But each and all have failed.

And now the sky is overcast
 With rolling clouds of war,
 And England pours her sons to fight,
 As in the days of yore.

With trumpet-blast the columns march
 Adown the shouting streets,
 'Mid boom of guns and cheers of men
 Forth sail the succouring fleets :

And now the tidings of defeat
 Some homeward vessel brings,
 And now the name of Havelock
 Throughout the island rings ;

Till men amid the uproar
 Forget the long-lost crew ;
 But yet, though all around despair,
 One heart remaineth true.

XV.

A ship is on the shadowy sea,
 Close-hauled^r, and steering away for home,
 Over the rolling ocean-hills,
 Wind-roughen'd into lines of foam.

The slanting canvas tugs and strains,
 The dark wave breaks around her head,
 And far around her sharp black hull
 White sheets of hissing foam are spread.

^r i.e. In shore-going language, sailing almost against the wind.

She hath cruised for years in Arctic seas,
 And battled in the rolling pack ^s,
 Where cliffs of ice around her rose,
 And met and shivered in her track ;

And twice hath tried in vain to pass
 The granite-walled ocean-gates ^t,
 Where double tides in eddies meet,
 And whirl ice-isles athwart the straits.

Her crew have roamed o'er waveless shores,
 And ridgèd lines of mossless stone,
 And storm-worn headlands, mouldering slow—
 Untouched by sea—through frost alone.

“ They died,” the Esquimaux had said,—
 “ ’Twas many, many winters back ;
 “ We saw them march, we saw them fall,
 “ Man after man upon the track.”

“ Yet some may live,” they said, and searched,
 Till fire-spots shone before their eyes,—
 A cold pale circle moved the sun,
 Low down athwart the leaden skies.

A skeleton was on the beach,
 Its fleshless head towards the south ;
 So fell the seaman years ago,
 As he toiled to reach the river's mouth.

^s See *McClintock*.

^t Bellot Strait. See *McClintock*.

And all along the ground were strewn
 The instruments of seaman's art,
 And gifts that came from loving ones,
 When it was known they were to part.

Beneath a pile of lichenèd stones,
 Part buried in the frozen sand,
 They found a record, half-effaced,
 And written by a numbèd hand.

It told the day when Franklin died,
 And how, when spring had scarce begun,
 They left their ice-locked ships and marched
 Towards the slow-returning sun.

And this was all,—the mystery
 Was solv'd, the doubt, the hope, were o'er,
 They knew those crews had left their bones
 To bleach along the wintry shore.

XVI.

Thus fell a hundred heroes, but their name shall
 never die,
 And his and hers entwined, in a glorious wreath
 shall lie ;
 Telling of deeds of daring, of courage and of skill ;
 Telling of woman's love and faith, and the strength of
 woman's will.

For while in England's homesteads are women such
as she,
While sailors such as he was, shall guard the narrow sea,
Though half the teeming world in arms our sea-girt
cliffs assail,
Yet few shall be the ships that e'er go back to tell
the tale ;
For the reddened foam of the shot-lashed sea shall whirl
o'er their wrecks with a roar,
And the red-cross flag from the peak shall fly victorious
as of yore ^u !

^u i.e. The mizen-peak, at which national colours are usually hoisted.

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