Polar Record 40 (213): 135–141 (2004). Printed in the United Kingdom. DOI: 10.1017/S0032247403003267

The Arctic Council of 1851: fact or fancy?

W. Gillies Ross
Department of Geography, Bishop's University, Lennoxville, Quebec J1M 1Z7, Canada

Received March 2003

ABSTRACT. The Arctic Council has often been described as a formal advisory body established by the Admiralty to help direct the search for Sir John Franklin (1847–59), but no such organization existed. The source of the erroneous and misleading notion appears to be a well-known composite portrait painted by Stephen Pearce in 1851. Frequent repetition in publications on Arctic history has perpetuated the error, with imaginative embellishments.

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Introduction

Contradictory opinions have been expressed about the existence, nature, and role of the Arctic Council during the search for Sir John Franklin's expedition (1847–59). Some writers say it was a formal organization that met regularly to advise the Admiralty during the search for Franklin, others say that it was an informal group whose members never actually met together at one time, and several authorities categorically deny that the body ever existed. The root of the confusion appears to be the well-known oil painting by Stephen Pearce entitled 'The Arctic Council discussing a plan of search for Sir John Franklin' (Fig. 1).

Pearce's painting

Painted on a canvas approximately four by six feet in size, Pearce's group portrait was completed in July 1851, shown at Buckingham Palace, and exhibited throughout Britain. An engraved version by James Scott was published two years later by Henry Graves & Co (Ormond 1973: 549). The widespread exhibitions of the original and the substantial sales of its print edition made the image a familiar one in nineteenth-century Britain, and in recent times its striking composition and relevance to the Franklin search have led to its reproduction in many books on Arctic history and biography, for example, Friendly (1977), Lehane (1981), McGoogan (2001), Neatby (1958, 1970), Parry (1963), Ritchie (1967), Ross (1994), Savours (1999), and Willis (1971).

The painting depicts 10 distinguished-looking men, five of them in the full-dress uniforms of naval officers, and one in army uniform, gathered around a table on which maps and letters are laid out. Two men are seated and the rest are standing. The group includes some of the most experienced Arctic explorers of the period — Captain Sir George Back, Captain Frederick William Beechey, Captain Sir William Edward Parry, Captain Edward Joseph Bird, Dr Sir John Richardson, Captain Sir James Clark Ross, and Colonel Edward Sabine — as well as three men who contributed importantly to Arctic exploration and the search from their desks in London — Rear Admiral Sir Francis Beaufort, John Barrow Jr, and Captain William Alexander Baillie Hamilton. Hanging on the wall behind the group are portraits of Rear Admiral Sir John Franklin, Captain James Fitzjames, and Sir John Barrow Sr. Barrow had died three years before but Franklin and Fitzjames were thought to be alive somewhere in the Arctic. Unknown to their would-be rescuers, however, they had perished.

As John Barrow Jr had selected Pearce as the artist and commissioned the portrait (Ormond 1973: 549), there can scarcely be any doubt that he also determined who would be included and who would not. However, as Barrow was not vain enough to have himself painted in, one suspects that Lady Franklin insisted that he should be represented, and Hamilton as well. She was in close communication with both men, and greatly appreciated their dedication to the search for her husband.

Beaufort is the central figure in the painting, sitting at the table, pen in hand, and apparently listening to Richardson, who is pointing vigorously to a map on the table while addressing him. Behind them stands a group of five men. Hamilton is looking pensively at the map, perhaps considering Richardson's observation, while Bird, Barrow, and Sabine appear to be looking in the general direction of Richardson. Ross seems to have lost interest in the proceedings; he is gazing off into the distance. On the left of the picture Parry and Back are having a private tête-à-tête over a map, while on the extreme right Beechey, the only other seated figure, appears to be daydreaming, or perhaps wondering how long it will be before dinner is served at the club. 'Not only are the individual portraits rather wooden and stereotyped,' observed Ian Stone (1988: 58), 'but the grouping of the characters is artificial and ill contrived.'

The apparent lack of interest displayed by some of the men, and the curious cross-fire of their stares, is a result of Pearce's method. As it was not feasible to assemble 10 men and paint them all at once, he executed individual studies of at least six of them in his London studio and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032247403003267 Published online by Cambridge University Press



Fig. 1. "The Arctic Council discussing a plan of search for Sir John Franklin," by Stephen Pearce, 1851. The men are (from left to right): Back, Parry, Bird, James Ross, Beaufort (seated), Barrow, Sabine, Hamilton, Richardson, and Beechey (seated).

later copied them onto the large canvas. He may have painted two men (Back and Bird) directly onto the final canvas, and for Parry and Richardson he had to travel to Haslar Hospital near Portsmouth, and paint them onto small portable canvases to be united with their colleagues later (Pearce 1903).

The framed paintings of Franklin and Barrow hanging on the wall (and probably that of Fitzjames as well) resemble authentic portraits that existed at the time. A few years later, when Pearce's painting was exhibited at the Royal Academy, *The Illustrated London News* (14 May 1853: 379) observed that the men were around a table 'at the Admiralty,' but this is unlikely. The room in the painting has no distinguishing characteristics; it is simply a 'generalized interior' (Ormond (1973: 549). Certainly it bears no resemblance to the Board Room at the Admiralty, a photograph of which appears in Rodger (1979).

In the sense that the men never posed together for the artist, Pearce's painting is a deception. He made no secret of his method, however, and explained it candidly in his autobiography (Pearce 1903). At that time no one would have objected to his uniting individual portraits on one canvas. According to Stone (1988: 58), such composite pictures, or group portraits, 'enjoyed a considerable vogue as an art form in Victorian England.' One such image depicted more than 300 members of the House of Commons, and Pearce himself painted one that included about 60 equestrian portraits on a 10-foot canvas (Lee 1912: 88). The same technique was later used in photography.

Viewers must be careful not to take such images too literally. Like digital photographs today, they can be misleading. Those who know Benjamin West's famous painting of James Wolfe's death on the Plains of Abraham will recall that he included in the scene (at a price, of course) some individuals who had been far away at the time. West's painting was not meant to be an accurate depiction of the death scene but rather 'a symbol of the alleged greatness of the British empire and the aristocratic officers who led its armies' (Lord 1974: 59).

Pearce's painting was also essentially symbolic. Barrow's purpose in commissioning it was 'to commemorate the various search efforts' (Ormond (1973: 549). W.R. O'Byrne, who wrote a descriptive note for the published print of the painting, called the work 'a picture containing authentic portraits of the great Arctic Officers now among us, who have all won their laurels on the icy field, and many of whom have shared with Franklin the hardships and perils of his former voyages.' (To be exact, only seven of the men in the picture had served on Arctic expeditions, and only three had accompanied Franklin). Like Pearce, O'Byrne stated that the group was 'discussing the measures best to be adopted for the recovery of their absent brother officers and friends'

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(Anonymous 1852: 386). But he made no mention of the term Arctic Council.

In support of the Arctic Council

References during the search period

In late October 1851 the author John Shillinglaw was 'struck with an idea' that he felt obliged to bring to the attention of the Admiralty. The idea was that messages from Franklin were probably buried within the stone circles that had been discovered at Cape Riley, Devon Island, during the searches of 1850. 'I feel it my duty to venture to lay it before you,' he wrote, 'that, in case you may think it worthy of notice, it may be referred to the Arctic Council now sitting' (Great Britain 1852: XVI, 131). Three months later, when Dr Robert McCormick submitted a plan of search to the Admiralty, he noted 'that the Arctic Council have recommended that the future search shall be exclusively confined to the Wellington Channel' (Great Britain 1852: XVII, 139). A week later (28 January 1852) McCormick was in the office of John Barrow Jr at the Admiralty on Whitehall, following several days of fruitlessly promoting his new plan. Also present was Commander Rochfort Maguire, soon to leave for Alaska to assume command of HMS *Plover*. After listening to McCormick complain about the Admiralty's apparent apathy towards his proposal, Maguire told him, 'Could you point out the *very spot* where you could put your hand upon Franklin they would not listen to it at the Admiralty, everything being left to the Arctic Council' (McCormick 1884: II, 318).

A few years later Rear Admiral Sir John Ross, bitter because the Admiralty had refused to appoint him commander of a search expedition, complained that he had been excluded from the Admiralty's 'Arctic Council' (Ross 1855: 57). About the same time, another disappointed explorer, Dr Richard King, expressed a similar grudge because his offers to serve had also been rejected and his ideas on Franklin's location ignored. The Admiralty, he wrote, 'manifestly the most inefficient of all the Government Boards, were determined to go wrong; and, goaded by outward pressure . . . called into existence an Arctic Council to give a colouring to their own acts and deeds . . . ' (King 1855: 87). King again referred to the Arctic Council when he wrote to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty on 21 January and 21 April 1856 (Great Britain 1856: 32; 85). In these letters he complained that after he had submitted a proposal on 18 February 1850 to carry out a search by way of the Great Fish (Back) River, the Lords Commissioners, 'acting on the advice of the recently appointed Arctic Council,' had ignored his plan. He named four of the Council members — Back, Beechey, Richardson, and James Ross.

Were Shillinglaw, McCormick, Maguire, Ross, and King, the only ones to use the term 'Arctic Council' during the search period? The author has not noticed it in Admiralty records, naval histories, or contemporary books by Arctic explorers (other than those by Ross and King), but the literature is voluminous, and occasional scattered references could easily be overlooked.

References in recent publications

In contrast to the mid-nineteenth century, the Arctic Council has been mentioned often during the last half-century or so in publications relating to Arctic exploration and the search for Franklin. A short article in this journal, presumably by its editor or staff, marked the centenary of the alleged formation of the Arctic Council. It declared that the planning of Franklin search expeditions had been 'placed in the hands of the "Arctic Council," appointed by the Admiralty and comprising the most prominent "Arcticists" of the period' (Anonymous 1952).

Several years later Neatby (1958: opposite 117) referred to the Arctic Council 'planning the search,' and Wright (1959: 115) mentioned 'the Admiralty's committee of advisers — the newly created Arctic Council.' Neatby (1970: 103) reaffirmed that the Arctic Council comprised the 10 men shown in Pearce's painting, and Willis (1971: 56) described the men in Pearce's painting as 'the group set up to determine the fate of the Franklin expedition, planning the search.' Lehane (1981: 138), Bockstoce 1988: I, 40), Levere (1993: 239), and McGoogan (2001: 85) made similar comments. Holland (1980: 4) warned that the Arctic *Council* should not be confused with the Arctic *Committee* that met in November 1851 to assess the expeditions of Austin and Penny. (Neither should it be confused with the Arctic committees that existed within the Royal Geographical Society and the Royal Society (Markham 1873: 335), or, of course, the Arctic Council that today considers issues affecting the eight countries of the circumpolar Arctic).

Most of the writers above felt that that the Admiralty had established the Council and appointed its members. This information did not originate with Pearce, but may have been derived from the statements in the books by Ross and King in the 1850s. Another significant detail was added by Ritchie (1967: 258), who, after stating that the Arctic Council planned many expeditions, declared that Beaufort was the Council's chairman. Beaufort's biographer, Alfred Friendly (1977: 307), concurred with this opinion; after mentioning 'a group of Arctic authorities that ultimately became institutionalized in the Arctic Council,' he noted that Beaufort was its chairman, and went on to say that the Council was so influential that it was responsible for getting Belcher appointed as commander of the last Admiralty search expedition of 1852–54.

Despite these contributions, however, the image of the Arctic Council remained rather vague until Fergus Fleming added a wealth of extraordinary details in his book *Barrow's boys* (1999). In a chapter entitled 'The Arctic Council,' he stated that:

1. the Arctic Council was 'born in the mid-1830s as an advisory group to filter proposals for attempts on the North-West Passage;'
2. it was also called the 'Arctic Committee;'

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032247403003267 Published online by Cambridge University Press

3. Sir John Franklin, once a member, had been replaced by Hamilton;
4. John Barrow Sr, the former 'leader' of the Council (who died in 1848), had been succeeded by his son, who 'stepped into his father's shoes as coordinator;'
5. Lady Franklin was 'one of the most influential members;'
6. 'late at night, the Arctic Council gathered at her home, working out new and propitious routes for Franklin's salvation;'
7. the Council opposed Dr King's search proposal;
8. it used the Franklin search 'as an excuse for a covert attempt on the North Pole,' initiating 'a global trend that would last for half a century. In later years, when a man said he was going to look for Franklin — whose legend was perpetuated for the purpose — it was understood that he was trying for the North Pole' (Fleming 1999: 381–382, 390).

According to Fleming the Arctic Council was a 'nebulous' body, whose members 'came and went, according to circumstances,' although it had a core of about eight men.

Regrettably, the writers who claim that an Arctic Council existed during the Franklin search did not reveal their sources, making it difficult to assess the authenticity of their statements.

A different view

Some writers have contradicted the point of view of those cited above. Prominent among these are descendants of two of the men shown in Pearce's portrait. Ann Parry (a great-great-grand-daughter of William Edward Parry) wrote, 'The picture of the Arctic Council' by Samuel [sic] Pearce . . . gives the assembly an air of permanence which it never possessed. It met seldom and never with the same members: the picture, of considerable historic interest, is in fact a composite portrait of all those old Arctic hands whom the Admiralty at various times consulted in the search for Franklin' (Parry 1963: 222). Similar sentiments were expressed by M.J. Ross (a great-grandson of James Clark Ross), who declared, 'The so-called council never met in formal session' (Ross 1994: 1).

In accord with these opinions, Wallace (1980: 123) referred to 'what has popularly been called the Arctic Council, which did not meet as one but was, rather, a number of eminent "Arctics" who were asked to advise in the search.' Similarly, Berton (1988: 331, 338) wrote about the 'the so-called Arctic Council of polar experts,' which 'never met as a body,' and Stone (1988: 56) declared, 'as is well known, the group portrayed never actually met as such.' Latta (2001: 64–65) described an 'exclusive, tight-knit group of worthies . . . known unofficially as the Arctic Council,' which 'acted as the official advisors to the Admiralty.'

In 1967 an exhibition was held at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa to mark the centennial of Canada's Confederation. Among almost 300 images illustrating 'The European contribution to the iconography of Canadian History' were three of Pearce's paintings, including 'The Arctic Council.' According to its description in the exhibition's catalogue (Strong 1967: 223), 'It is a mythical scene as no such body as the Arctic Council existed.' This opinion had probably originated with Richard Ormond, whose help in researching Victorian portraits when the exhibition was being designed at the National Portrait Gallery in London was acknowledged in the catalogue's preface.

Several years later Ormond compiled *Early Victorian portraits*, a catalogue of the National Portrait Gallery (where Pearce's polar portraits are stored). In it he wrote the following authoritative denial of the existence of an Arctic Council:

> This portrait does not depict an actual meeting, nor an official body, despite its full title, 'The Arctic Council Discussing a Plan of Search for Sir John Franklin'. It represents 10 of the distinguished sailors and explorers on whom the Admiralty called for advice, when fears for Franklin's safety were first expressed in 1847. However, they did not constitute an official body, nor did they collectively organize the early search expeditions, though the reports which they submitted led directly to the expeditions organized by Ross and Richardson in 1848. The Admiralty continued to rely on the advice of these experts, which apparently was tendered individually.

In fact, there is little correspondence between the men who initially advised the Admiralty in 1847 and the men shown in Pearce's portrait four years later. In January 1847, prior to the expeditions of Richardson and James Ross, the Admiralty requested the opinion of Parry, and asked him to consult Richardson, Ross, and Sabine (Brown 1858: 51–58). Replies were subsequently received from these four men — not 10 as Ormond states. As for Ormond's statement that 'the Admiralty continued to rely on the advice of these experts,' it should be pointed out that three of the men shown in the painting were actually employed at the Admiralty (Beaufort was Hydrographer; Hamilton was Second Secretary, and Barrow was in charge of the records office). Of the seven men who were outside the Admiralty, Bird and Ross were not often consulted. The ones who were most frequently asked for their opinions were Back, Beechey, Parry, Richardson, and Sabine. However, Ormond's main point — that Pearce's painting shows neither an official body nor an actual meeting — appears to be correct.

The author queried several individuals knowledgeable about Arctic history and Admiralty records. Ian Stone (14 October 2002), a frequent contributor to this journal, remarked that he had failed to find any records of an Arctic Council at the Public Record Office or at the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts web site. Guy Grannum (10 October 2002), in the Research and Editorial Services Department of the Public Record Office, confirmed that no such records exist there. Ann Savours (10 October 2002), author of many well-researched

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032247403003267 Published online by Cambridge University Press

works on British Arctic exploration, replied, 'I don't believe there was an Arctic Council formally constituted for the search for Franklin.' Andrew Lambert (28 October 2002), Laughton Professor of Naval History at King's College, London, expressed a similar opinion: 'I don't think any formal Council of the Arctic was set up by the Admiralty.' Douglas Wamsley (12 October 2002), an avid student of polar history, replied, 'there were experts who provided advice from time to time but not as a formal body.' And Barry Gough (25 November 2002), an authority on British naval history in the North Pacific, wrote, 'There was no Arctic Council of the Admiralty, or of the RN for that matter. How this concept was ever foisted on an unsuspecting public I'll never know. Pearce is to blame.'

Discussion

If there was no such thing as an Arctic Council, how can one explain the statements of Shillinglaw, McCormick, Maguire, Ross, and King, which specifically mention it during the 1850s, when it was alleged to have existed?

It is clear that both Shillinglaw and McCormick were really referring to the Arctic *Committee*, but mistakenly called it the Arctic *Council*. The Arctic Committee was the body of five naval officers who came together in the autumn of 1851 to evaluate the 1850–51 search expeditions of Austin and Penny (Holland 1980). Shillinglaw's remark on 21 October 1851 that the group was 'now sitting' was slightly premature, as the Committee was not officially appointed by the Admiralty until the next day, and did not begin its deliberations until 24 October, but probably he was misled by advance news about its formation. The Arctic Committee adjourned on 17 November, and submitted its report on 20 November. One of its principal recommendations, as McCormick noted, was that a major expedition should be sent up Wellington Channel (Great Britain 1851).

Maguire's remark is more difficult to explain, but it is significant that the only record of it was provided by McCormick, who had himself mistakenly used the term Arctic Council, and as he did not report the conversation until three decades had passed, he could easily have erred in recalling the precise wording. If Maguire really did use the term it is likely that (a) like Shillinglaw and McCormick he really meant the Arctic Committee (although it had already been dissolved), or (b) he believed in the existence of the Arctic Council as portrayed by Pearce.

Shillinglaw and McCormick were really referring to the Arctic Committee but used the wrong name. However, Ross and King clearly did *not* have the Committee in mind. The statements in their books occurred four years after it had met, deliberated, and disbanded. Furthermore, Ross himself had testified before that body on 27 October 1851, and had been among the half-dozen Arctic experts who submitted written answers to questions that it posed about future searches. He would have been perfectly familiar with the mandate of the Arctic Committee, its membership, and its date of termination. As for King's letters to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty in 1856, in which he stated that the Admiralty had sent his search proposal of 18 February 1850 to the Arctic Council, there is no possibility that he really meant the Arctic Committee because that body was not formed until nine months later. When Ross and King used the term Arctic Council they were obviously referring to some other group, but what group was it? Three possibilities should be considered:

1. On 17 January 1849 a group of Arctic authorities (Back, Beaufort, Beechey, Belcher, Parry, Sabine, and the ex-whaling captain William Scoresby) had held a meeting and had submitted a 'joint opinion' to the Admiralty concerning searching strategy. Ross and King may have been under the erroneous impression that these men comprised a continuing advisory body. The 'Joint Opinion of Officers, &c. interested in the welfare of the Arctic expeditions,' which was published in the Arctic Blue Books (Great Britain 1849), was signed only by Beaufort, which suggests that he had acted as *ad hoc* secretary and had probably composed the letter. (This may have been the evidence that led Ritchie and Friendly to assume that he was secretary of the Arctic Council). But in the submission to the Admiralty Beaufort did not call the group a committee, identify himself as its secretary, indicate that the group had met before or intended to meet again, or use the term Arctic Council.
2. Ross and King may have used 'Arctic Council' as a general term for the various polar experts consulted by the Admiralty from time to time. The Franklin search was directed by the Board of Admiralty, which consisted of six Lords Commissioners and a First and Second Secretary (Sainty 1975), working in close association with the Hydrographer, but as none of them had ever seen Arctic service, they frequently sought the advice of men who had first-hand knowledge of ice navigation, wintering, and travelling over snow with man-hauled sledges. Their choice of consultants depended on the nature of the matter at hand and who was available at the time. It is conceivable that the name Arctic Council had attained a degree of popular usage in this general sense, possibly before Pearce's painting but more probably after its creation, exhibition, and publication as a print. Richardson's biographer R.E. Johnson (1976: 659–660) supported this view: 'On Arctic matters the Admiralty often turned to its experienced Arctic officers, including Richardson, Francis Beaufort, Beechey, Back, Parry, Edward Joseph Bird, and James Clark Ross. Although never formally organized as such, the group came to be known as the "Arctic Committee" or the "Arctic Council" because of their consultative

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0032247403003267 Published online by Cambridge University Press

value.' (Johnson's mistake of believing the Arctic Committee and Arctic Council to be one and the same may have prompted Holland to warn against confusing the two.) But if Ross and King were employing the term Arctic Council in this general sense, in accord with popular usage, one would expect to see it more frequently in contemporary literature, and so far no evidence of a wider occurrence has come to light.

3. It is also possible that Ross and King saw Pearce's painting of the 'Arctic Council' in 1851 and understood wrongly from its title that it depicted an authentic, permanent, advisory group. One might object that Arctic veterans such as these would have known whether the body existed or not, but at the Admiralty Ross and King were regarded as nuisances, and both had been more or less ostracized from official circles. Excluded from the halls of power and kept partly in the dark regarding the real state of affairs, they might have accepted Pearce's 'information' at face value. It is abundantly clear that this is exactly what the two men did, because when Ross complained that he had not been invited to be part of the Arctic Council he listed its members — the same 10 men that Pearce had depicted in his painting (Ross 1855: 57). And when King declared that an inefficient Admiralty had 'called into existence an Arctic Council to give a colouring to their own acts and deeds' he too named as members the same 10 individuals portrayed by Pearce (King 1855: 87).

Conclusion

The evidence leads to the conclusion that no formal advisory body called the Arctic Council existed during the Franklin search, either within the Admiralty or outside it. The term was almost certainly invented by Pearce as a convenient title for his painting, and it is possible that it achieved some level of popular use in the 1850s to denote either the 10 men in the painting (who, in fact, had no official relationship) or simply the various Arctic experts consulted by the Admiralty from time to time.

Pearce's group portrait was more a symbolic work of art than a representational one. Like West's painting of Wolfe's death it was meant as a tribute to British heroism and achievement. The battlefield, to be sure, was very different — ice-bound waterways among the Arctic islands replaced the Plains of Abraham — but the message was the same. Gallant fellows, fighting bravely against a powerful foe, had accomplished great deeds, and men who had acquitted themselves with honour amid the Arctic ice floes were now embarking on a great humanitarian undertaking — a search for their missing colleagues. Many writers have assumed that Pearce's portrait was a true depiction of an actual group rather than the symbolic picture envisaged by Barrow.

Several Arctic explorers and at least one writer used the term Arctic Council in the 1850s. Some (such as Shillinglaw, McCormick, and possibly Maguire) were really referring to the Arctic Committee of 1851 but got its name wrong. Others (such as Ross and King) had been deceived by Pearce's famous painting and title.

In recent decades misleading statements about the nature and role of the non-existent Arctic Council have been surprisingly common, sometimes embellished to an astonishing degree. The seemingly authoritative *Polar Record* paper (Anonymous 1952), which celebrated the alleged centenary of the Council's birth, provided the non-existent body with false identity papers that were deceptively convincing. Ultimately, however, most statements in support of the existence of an Arctic Council owe their origin, directly or indirectly, to Pearce's painting. Like so many erroneous 'facts' about Arctic history that have arisen out of insufficient research into primary sources, each repetition in a widely read book or article has helped to entrench the misconception. It is time to lay the century-and-a-half-old myth of the Arctic Council to rest.

Acknowledgements

For opinions on the Arctic Council I wish to thank Barry Gough (Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Ontario), Guy Grannum (Public Record Office, London), Andrew Lambert (King's College, London), Ann Savours (Kent), Ian Stone (Isle of Man), and Douglas Wamsley (New Jersey, USA). The anonymous reviewers of the manuscript made valuable suggestions, and Dr Beau Riffenburgh (Cambridge) and Douglas Wamsley helpfully provided extracts from documents not available to me.

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