The Investigator, under Commander Robert McClure, sailed from England in January 1850 – part of an expedition to the Arctic to search for Sir John Franklin and his party. After navigating the treacherous Straits of Magellan and stopping briefly at the Hawaiian Islands, the ship continued north along the coast of Alaska and into the Arctic. The ship and its crew spent the first winter frozen in on the east coast of Banks Island. It was only the first of four winters they were to spend in the Arctic.

Aboard the Investigator as interpreter was Johann August Miertsching, a Moravian Brothers missionary, fluent in the Eskimo tongue he had learned while serving in Labrador. His diary, now published for the first time, is a vivid account of those four years in the arctic ice – of the terrors, the hunger, the sickness, and the loneliness endured by the crew.

In the Introduction of the book, Frozen Ships, Neatby elaborates further stating, “It was now plain that a major catastrophe had overtaken Franklin’s crews, and the British government and wealthy individuals in Great Britain and the United States equipped expeditions to bring them relief. Here the saga of the Investigator begins. It was resolved to send in a larger and better-equipped expedition by way of Lancaster Sound, and as Franklin’s ships might have penetrated far to the west before meeting disaster, Ross’s two ships were hurriedly refitted to make the long voyage by way of Cape Horn, up the Pacific, and through Bering Strait, to search the Alaskan shore and the unknown seas of the Western Arctic. Captain Richard Collinson, a marine surveyor of distinction, took command of this expedition in the Enterprise. As second-in-command the Admiralty chose a very unlikely aspirant to fame, an Irish lieutenant, Robert John Le Mesurier McClure. Then forty-two, McClure had previously served in a subordinate rank on two polar voyages, but was otherwise undistinguished. He was promoted to the rank of commander, and took command of the Investigator. Through the co-operation of the Moravian Society, Johann August Miertsching, a brother of that order and a missionary to the Labrador Eskimos, was enlisted as interpreter; he joined the expedition at the last moment.

A pious evangelist, Miertsching is one of the quaintest and but no means the least heroic of the Canadian arctic travelers. Born in Saxony in 1817, and trained as a missionary of the Moravian Brotherhood, he spent the early years of his manhood at Ogkak on the Labrador coast where he learned the ways of the Eskimo flock and acquired great proficiency in their language. In 1849 he came home on furlough and was immediately enlisted by the British Admiralty to serve as interpreter on the expedition then setting out to make search for Sir John Franklin by way of Bering Strait. As there was no space on Captain Collinson’s Enterprise he was given a temporary berth on the second vessel, the
Investigator, and he remained one of her crew for the entire five years of that all but
disastrous cruise. His personal record of the voyage is a most valuable document,
furnishing as it does an outsider’s view and supplying details that contemporary
chroniclers either ignored or thought it prudent to suppress.”

Neatby’s Introduction continues as follows:

“The only part of this record that is a genuine diary is that relating to the tedious and
protracted home-coming (from April 1853 to November 1854); Miertsching’s original
diary was lost when the ship was abandoned. As neither inclination nor training disposed
him to organize his recollections into a regular history of the voyage, Miertsching drew
upon his memory, aided by his own penciled notes and the captain’s personal journal, to
reproduce as accurately as possible the missing portions of his diary (from January
20,1850, to April 15, 1853). No reader will doubt that he did so without success. He was
sensitive and, in an environment which he found strange and sometimes repulsive, he was
susceptible to vivid impressions which an excellent memory enabled him to retain. A
good deal of substance must have been lost, but the quaint, lively, and highly original
flavor of the rest is unimpaired. The Captain’s journal kept him informed as to dates, so
permitting him to preserve the diary form, but the style and quality are all his own.”

Miertsching was enlisted to join the Collinson –McClure expedition because of his
fluency in the Eskimo language so that when they encountered these people in the Arctic
they could be questioned and hopefully provide information as to the fate of Sir John
Franklin and his men. He was supposed to be on Collinson’s ship the Enterprise but there
was no space initially and when the ships met in the Strait of Magellan it was raining
heavily so the transfer was put off until the ships met in the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii).
Collinson reached the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii) before McClure and in fact left Hawaii
four days before McClure arrived so Miertsching remained aboard the Investigator.
Captain McClure in an attempt to catch up took a shortcut through Segum pass in the
Aleutian Islands and as a result did in fact make it through the Bering Strait ahead of
Collinson. The Investigator then met up with two English ships, Captain Moore’s Plover
and Captain Kellet’s Herald in the Kotzebue Sound area. Although Captain Kellet had
advised waiting a few days, Captain McClure decided to continue sailing eastward along
the Alaskan coast as he believed Collinson’s ship the Enterprise was faster and might still
be ahead of him. However, the Investigator did arrive in the Arctic waters first, and so
whenever Eskimo encampments were sighted, Captain McClure accompanied by
Miertsching and other crew members, would go ashore in small boats to meet with them.
Because of Miertsching’s ability to converse with the Eskimo people, his diary provides
most interesting detailed accounts of the lives of these Arctic people.

The first encounter with the Eskimos cited in Miertsching’s diary was on August 8, 1850
just after the Investigator rounded Point Barrow, Alaska. Miertsching and six seamen
went ashore to meet with them and although their dialect was different from those of
Labrador, Miertsching was able to communicate with them quite well. Later the Eskimos
came aboard the ship and did some trading with the crew as they had dealt with Russian
traders and other foreigners previously. In one instance, Miertsching reports that the
Eskimos wished to trade one fish for one plug of tobacco but as the fish were small he decided to divide the plug and offer smaller pieces which prompted the Eskimos to do the same, carving a tiny fish into four parts.

The Investigator continued eastward along the Alaskan coast and on August 11, 1850 more Eskimos were sighted just east of the mouth of the Coleville River. Captain McClure and Miertsching and other ship’s officers went ashore but this time because these people had never seen white men before, they received a hostile reception. The Eskimos had their knives drawn, spears and bows at the ready and began shooting arrows at the foreigners. Soon however they became so friendly and childishly delighted that they began exchanging greetings with the visitors by rubbing noses, often two to three times. Their headman (chief) was named Attua who had three wives and thirteen children. These people knew nothing of Franklin’s ships. Miertsching apparently did attempt to teach these people about God, the Creator of all things but had to admit it would require a much longer time, than their brief visit afforded.

The next morning on August 12, 1850, at 8:00 a.m., four umiaks full of Eskimos approached the Investigator and were finally enticed to come aboard. They offered game and fine skins for trade. Miertsching reports, “These Eskimos seemed to be highly accomplished thieves; they stole wherever they could; even from our pockets knives, handkerchiefs, and telescopes were stolen. Mr. Ford, our carpenter, detected in the seal-skin boat a small ice-anchor and the iron crank belonging to the windlass; on the latter sat a woman in order to hide it. I scolded her and called her “thief”; she retorted that she was no thief – her husband, not she, had taken it into the boat. These people were required to leave the ship at once without receiving any gifts.”

By August 22, 1850 the Investigator arrived at a small archipelago off the mouth of the Mackenzie River. Captain McClure wished to send letters and dispatches to the Hudson’s Bay post of Fort Good Hope to the south on the Mackenzie River but because of strong winds and shoaling waters was unable to find a suitable place to land. The ship then continued eastward and on August 24, 1850 arrived at the Tuktoyaktuk Peninsula. The sailors looking shoreward spotted Eskimos and possibly a man in European dress so the Investigator dropped anchor and the Captain, Meirtsching, the ship’s doctor and six seamen went ashore. Miertsching described this visit as follows:

“At 12 noon we quitted the ship – the captain, Dr. Armstrong, and I, with six seamen in a boat- and pulled for land: we saw only a few Eskimos, and these received us in no friendly manner as we disembarked; they faced us with spears, long knives, and drawn bows. Every attempt to approach the savages in friendly fashion was unsuccessful; but the captain was determined not to go back ashore without questioning them; finally after several unavailing endeavours I managed to get within ten paces of these hostile folk, and spoke to them in a friendly tone; and finally they began to listen and ceased their horrible shrieking and howling. They bade us go away and pointed to the ship which was just then in motion. I picked up a few arrows, bore them in my hand (I was without weapons) and, approaching, gave them back; again they grew very excited, so that I thought it best to draw from my pocket a pistol loaded with blank shot and fire it in the
air; this device helped; they grew somewhat quieter and began to listen to me, trembling the while all over and with white foam on their lips; and finally they were persuaded to lay down their weapons; and the captain and the rest came forward, also without weapons, and at last we were good friends. They invited us to their fine new-built wooden homes, and gave us fowl, fish, and reindeer skins in exchange for knives, saws, etc. Their friendship was even warmer than that, already recorded, of Attua. Old Kairoluak (chief of this region) especially enjoyed himself. This man had a fine house and two tents; everywhere was order and cleanliness, such as I had never seen among Eskimos; great heaps of reindeer, bear, fox, and wolverine skins, were ready for bargaining purposes. These people have never seen Europeans before and have no traffic with the Hudson’s Bay traders on the Mackenzie River, but dispose of their wares westwards where they do business with Attua. Old Kairoluak’s son had recently had the misfortune to break the bone of his leg a little above the ankle, and now lay helpless and in great pain. The doctor examined him, but our stay was too short for anything to be done; and probably in a few weeks this fine young Eskimo would no longer be alive. If the Eskimos see no prospect of the speedy cure or improvement of an invalid they quickly give up hope altogether, and when the family moves to another region they leave the sick one in a lonely place where no Eskimo dogs come, set a little food by him, and thenceforth think of him no more. On a little sandhill we saw a pecuilar wooden monument, and asked what it was. The people told us that strangers (tujormints or kaimaraijets) had come to this place without a boat, and had built a house of driftwood on the cape, and lived there; in time all fowl, seal, and reindeer had disappeared, and they must have been starving; then all but one of these strangers disappeared and the last – when the Eskimos came seeking the game which had vanished – was found dead on the ground, and Kaioluak had buried him there. I could not ascertain the date of this occurrence. Probably it is an old legend derived from some fight with the Indians. I would gladly have talked longer with the Eskimos about this story and more important matters, and to tell them something of a God, their Creator and Preserver, but suddenly the captain shouted, “The ship is aground!” and bade us to hurry to the boat.

Captain McClure was determined to find the cape where the Eskimos had said the strangers (tujormints) had built a house. On August 25, 1850, as the ship arrived at Point Warren, the captain, Miertsching, and Dr. Armstrong went ashore and landed where the Eskimos indicated the strangers supposedly dwelt but only discovered the ruins of Eskimo dwellings with no evidence to suggest that Europeans had ever lived there. Further east along the coast another trip ashore was made but only recently abandoned Eskimo tenting grounds and caches of winter provisions were found. By August 30, 1850 the Investigator was nearing Cape Bathurst when two men on shore with a few dogs were spotted. Miertsching’s diary entry for that date follows:

“This was an opportunity for the captain to send a letter to a Hudson’s Bay station and thus forward news of us to England. We manned two boats and, taking an assortment of gifts for the Eskimos, set out for the land. There we met only two Eskimo women, Kunatsiak and Renalik, who told us that all the men were at Nuvoksua hunting whales. They said that they were not far off, and offered to guide us, an offer which the captain accepted. He ordered the boat to follow us along the shore, and we went with the two
women by land along the beach. On the way they told us that recently Europeans had
been there with three boats and remained in their land for two days; (Footnote:
Richardson and Rae on the first amphibian Franklin searching expedition) they showed
us various trifles which they had received as gifts; they placed a special value on fingers-
rings and glass beads as mementoes. After an hour we arrived at two Eskimo houses, the
homes of these two women. And in answer to the question as to how far we must yet go
to meet their men who were whale-fishing they said, “twice as far as we had already
gone”. As it was already late in the afternoon the captain decided to return to the ship and
visit the Eskimos in the following morning. The women were given useful gifts, and gave
us fish in exchange for a copper kettle. The captain bought a bear skin also. In the water
were two nets made of pergak(woven reindeer sinew). We went to the ship.

The ship laid at anchor that night and in the morning of August 31, 1850, the captain,
Armstrong and Miertsching with eight seamen took a boat and headed to shore to the
place where they had left the two women the day before. They then sailed for 10 miles
along the coast to the headland which the women had pointed out was the resting place of
their men. When they reached the cape there were no Eskimos to be seen so they
proceeded another 5 miles along the coast and still no sign of Eskimos. The captain grew
impatient but was persuaded to sail a little farther and soon they encountered a deep inlet
along the coastline in which the water was so shallow that the sailors had to get out and
drag the boat along. They were about ready to give up when Miertsching using his
telecope spotted through the veiled mist some humps on the flat cape which he first took
for a herd of reindeer. Suddenly the mist disappeared and they were able to count thirty
tents and nine winter huts and further down the beach there were thirteen umiaks and a
multitude of kayaks. Miertsching’s diary entry continues as follows:

“Across a low, narrow sandspit – isthmus – we could see the sea and were now assured
that we had arrived at Cape Bathurst. We had barely got out of our boat when a swarm of
Eskimos came pouring down towards us with long spears, knives, harpoons, and bows
ready drawn; they let fly several arrows and set up a hideous outcry. The women were
following behind them with more weapons. In his desire to avoid unpleasantness the
captain kept asking, “What is to be done? What is to be done?” I handed the captain my
gun. Securely fastened my Eskimo frock, and ran as fast as I could towards them; which
causd their ranks a – to me – most disagreeable disturbance. I drew my pistol from my
pocket, discharged it in the air before their eyes, and shouted to them to throw down their
weapons. But they only shouted all the louder: “Shuitok, shuitok, Kalauroktuta.” I took
my stand before them with my pistol in my hand, unloaded – but the Eskimos did not
know that, being unaware that one must load a fire-arm before discharging it – and told
them that we were friends, brought gifts, and intended to do them no harm whatever;
whereupon they became more quiet and peaceful; the captain came forward to join me,
and finally, after much debate and giving of pledges, they laid down their weapons, but
left their knives within easy reach on the ground. I marked a line on the snow between
them and us which no one was to cross, and this also impressed them. They became more
friendly, and finally all fear vanished and they brought wives, children, and sucklings,
and laid their little ones in our arms that we might observe them more closely. These
Eskimos exchange wares with the Locheaux or Hare Indians, who dwell inland, also in a
state of heathendom; whose speech the Eskimos understand, and who carry their goods to
Fort Good Hope on the Mackenzie River. After the captain had ended his business –
which consisted of asking the Eskimos questions – and was convinced that these people
knew nothing of Sir John Franklin and his unlucky crews, he handed to the Eskimo
Kenalualik the letters directed to the Hudson’s Bay station, along with gifts for himself;
the man promised to do his best to attend to it. While the captain was studying the
features of the country I took advantage of my freedom and entertained myself with these
poor, wild simple folk; they listened gladly to me, and asked many questions, helping me
with signs when their words and expressions were unknown to me. These people also
know nothing of a Divine Being on high, and have apparently never thought that the sun,
moon, rocks, and water were created by anyone, and were much astonished when I told
them of a great, good Spirit, Who can do whatsoever He wills, and to Whom nothing is
impossible – that He dwells above the sun, moon, and stars and watches all that we do,
that this Spirit has created everything, including the first men, etc., at which they stared at
me in amazement, and frequently cried out in wonder. They accepted all that I told them,
but in connection with the stars old Kenalualik thus informed me: Above us is a great
blue chest, the Sun’s house; in daytime and through the long arctic summer the sun is not
in his house, but when he goes there it becomes dark, but there are clean-cut little holes
through which he can view the water and the land, and these are the stars. These Eskimos
also have their own peculiar conception of life after death. It is that there are two lands,
one good, and one not good. In the good dwells a good spirit who looks after the wild
animals, that they do not disappear from the land. In the bad dwells also a spirit who is
bad and always does men harm. When an Eskimo dies, if he has in life clothed the
widows and orphans and given them food, he comes into the good land where the sun
shines always and there is never rain, ice, or strong wind, but always warm weather and
countless seal, reindeer, etc., and these are not wild or shy; one can catch them with one’s
hands. He, on the contrary, who has not had a good character in his life, comes to the bad
land which is the complete opposite of the good land. While I was carrying on this, to me,
most interesting conversation with these Eskimos whom I was beginning to love, the
captain came and summoned me to the boat. I rose and was about to go, but my grey-
headed friend, Kenalualik, held me back; he said that I should wait and tell them more,
and should live with them. I replied that I could not do this, but must go with the ship to
seek our friends who were lost in the ice; at which he offered me a sledge and dogs, with
which I could go to the ship over the ice when the next moon disappeared and the sea ice
was frozen; but till then I should remain with him; to which I replied that the ship might
go far, and I would be unable to find it; at which he repeated his former offers, and added
thereto a tent, so that I was to have sledge, dogs, and tent. I told him firmly that my
angajuga( commander, captain) was telling me to come and that I must follow and obey.
But he began once more to repeat his promises and set before me his daughter with the
words “takka unna” (take her). In the meantime the captain came to fetch me, and he took
us both by the arm and conducted us to the boat where we distributed gifts and re-
embarked. To my old friend Kenalualik and his daughter – a girl of very lovely
appearance, some sixteen years old – I gave double gifts, and the latter many needles,
because these are of especial value. An Eskimo woman was caught making off with our
boat compass. I also missed my pocket-handkerchief but recovered it from an Eskimo
who bore a genuinely thievish appearance. To escape from the throng which was pressing
upon us we took to the boat and left these poor folk lining the beach and wishing us a thousand aksusijy (farewells). Fifteen kayaks and Eskimos in their umiaks accompanied us to the ship where the sailors delighted them with many gifts – many were dressed from head to foot in European garb. As it was beginning to grow foggy they returned joyously to their families in their new clothes. The dialect of these people is somewhat different from that of other Eskimos along this coast; they understood me very well; but to me, especially at first, it was difficult to understand them – they were almost unintelligible. A number of them have brown hair and blue eyes; (Footnote: Stefansson’s “blond Eskimos”. This type had previously been noted by Sir John Franklin in 1821) their clothes, made skillfully out of the best skins, set off well the figures of these small but well-proportioned people. They call Cape Bathurst Nuvoak, the first or nearest island Akkunek, the next Tuppelesoak; the water between the cape and the first island they name koruk. The dogs of these people are if the same breed as in Labrador.

Mieoutsching notes that by September 1, 1850 they had returned to the ship and sailed around to the other side of Cape Bathurst. His diary continues, “Then fifteen Eskimos in kayaks and two boats full of men and women came to the ship and looked all over the upper deck; no one was permitted below. Some of them had made our acquaintance the day before, and were familiar and void of fear as if they saw us in their homes and not on shipboard; they were especially friendly to me, brought me various gifts, and followed me even into my cabin. The captain took an Eskimo into his cabin and offered him a glass of wine, which he tasted, but would not drink. We tested them with every drink on board; but nothing would these people taste except water, which they drank in great quantities. With food it was the same: they rejected everything except for fat pork. An Eskimo told me that the day before yesterday strange Europeans in two boats had been there, and set up tent on land, and had shot a polar bear on the ice near by; they gave an exact description of the boats with their masts, of men in their various clothing, of their stature, and told me that the captain of the boats, a stout man, would pace up and down the beach; each time he walked twenty paces and turned about. The captain gave this man a gift in return for this information, which he found much to his liking; but now, instead of the day before yesterday, he placed the incident two years ago, referring to Dr. Richardson, who led a boat expedition from the Mackenzie to the Coppermine River. A woman, who carried her little child in her hood, said that she also had seen Europeans, but that was three summers ago: these had boats of wood and skin with masts, and had given the Eskimos knives, needles, beads, etc.; for confirmation she called another Eskimo woman, who also was carrying a little child on her back; she confirmed the story, and while doing so drew her child out of the hood and displayed it – a child of charming appearance with curly hair. It was the captain’s opinion that these women were dreaming up stories to obtain a reward. We had other proofs that we were entertaining impostors: a poorly clad Eskimo came in his kayak, mounted to the deck, and stood there shivering all over; a sailor took him below and clothed him in woollen undergarments with his own fur clothing over them; and soon the same man was standing aft in his own ragged clothes and trembling with cold in every limb. The captain, coming on deck just then, took pity on the poor wretch, led him to his cabin, and told his steward to provide him with good warm underclothing, at which he rejoiced greatly. Later this same man was observed in his old get-up and playing the same act; the underclothing given him was
found in his kayak: he had taken it off and hidden it. A woman told me that recently she
had been collecting mussels and (edible) sea-grass along the shore; her only child was
playing with pebbles a short distance away; she heard him scream and ran to him and –
what horror! – a polar bear was dragging the child off in his jaws, gripping it pitilessly
with his fangs; he swam off to a piece of ice, and the poor bereaved mother saw how the
savage beast tore and devoured her beloved and only child. She wept bitterly as she told
this story. I told her that a Great Spirit dwells above the stars, that He sees all that we do,
and created the first men; and from his lofty dwelling-place watches what every man
does, and knows all our thoughts, etc. I told her how she should live, what she should do
and not do, and comforted her with the assurance that if she followed these words she
would see her child again and dwell with him in a heavenly land where there is no sorrow
or weeping etc. Why has the Lord banished these folk here where no missionary can
reach them? This is the question which so often forces itself upon me. All on the ship had
now received handsome gifts, and as on account of shoal water we were going into the
ice, our friends left us and went home rejoicing.”

The Investigator left Cape Bathurst and continued to sail eastward along the coast until
they spotted smoke rising from the hills just past the mouth of the Horton River. On Sept.
5, 1850 they went ashore to examine this phenomenon and discovered the smoke was
emanating from fissures in the ground and was accompanied by a very strong sulfurous
smell. There was no flame but the ground was so hot it scorched the soles of their shoes.
Today we know that these smoking hills are caused by burning underground coal seams.

The next day after sailing past Cape Parry, the Investigator headed north and by Sept. 7,
1850 had reached Nelson Head on the south coast of Banks Island. The captain and some
of his crew went ashore, planted the English flag and took possession this new land in the
name of Queen Victoria. They then sailed up the Prince of Wales Strait between Banks
and Victoria Islands passed the Princess Royal Islands and by the end of September
became locked fast in the ice.

While the ship was frozen fast in the ice, Captain McClure and some of his crew
members explored the surrounding area using sledges. On October 26, 1850 they reached
the end of the Prince of Wales Strait in which the Investigator was frozen and observed
that this strait opened into Barrow Strait (Viscount Melville Sound). Since 30 years
earlier, Parry sailing westward from England through Barrow Strait had reached as far
west as Melville Island, McClure realized that he had in fact discovered the long sought
after Northwest Passage.

The Investigator remained locked in the ice during the long winter darkness and the crew
remained onboard or stayed very close to the ship. When spring arrived and the hours of
daylight had greatly increased, the Captain and his officers and crew were out with sledge
parties exploring the surrounding area once again. On May 29, 1850 Lieutenant Haswell
and his crew returned from a round trip journey of forty-one days south to Wollaston
Land (Victoria Island) and reported that they had found Eskimos living there in five tents.
Miertsching’s diary entry for that date reads as follows: “The natives received them in
friendly fashion, but unfortunately they could communicate only through signs. As these
Eskimos were encamped only a hundred miles from the ship on a newly discovered land, and were also newly discovered Eskimos, the captain resolved to pay them a visit in which I should accompany him, in order to learn from these people how the land lies, especially the coast to the south-east of here. After brief consideration and a discussion of the journey with me, he ordered a sledge, six men, and rations for twelve days to be made ready. In the evening at 6 p.m. we quitted the ship to the sound of three cheers.”

Captain McClure and his party finally reached the Eskimo encampment by June 2, 1851. Miertsching’s diary entries for that date continues: “At 6 p.m. we were again ready for the road, and started on our way lively and in good humor hoping to reach the Eskimos in the morning. The captain and I followed the snowless shoreline, the sledge following us at a short distance on the ice. We had put some ten miles behind us when to our joy we discovered before us five tents standing on a small hill; we came nearer and saw a handful of men standing by them. I was in joyous excitement at the prospect of soon seeing Eskimos, and could scarcely wait until I could speak with them. We drew ever nearer wondering whether these people would understand me and I them. The Eskimos stood near their tents, and when we were near enough I shouted to them that we were visiting them as friends and bringing rare gifts. They stood as if petrified and with a heavy heart I drew near and took it as already certain that they did not understand my words, because they uttered no sound; then they raised a universal cry: “Sivoravogut! erksidlarpogut!” (“We are afraid!”) These were the first words which I heard from these folk and to my no small joy I also understood them. These poor folk made no gesture of resistance to our approach – indeed they had no weapons at hand; but they were full of fear and anxiety; never yet had they seen a stranger, and they took us as supernatural beings. By many words and a few gifts useful to them they were brought into a somewhat more tranquil state of mind; they understood me and I them very well; and because I wore Eskimo clothing they readily accepted me as an ordinary being, and gave full proof of that by feeling my arms, features, and hair, etc. Their language, nature, features, dress, and tools, etc. and, as it seemed also their character, are just the same as in Labrador. Their harpoons, knives, hatchets, arrow-points, sewing-needles, etc. are all of good copper which they obtain pure from Eskimos dwelling farther east in exchange for seal-oil, walrus tusks, etc. The women tattoo their faces; also they have long tails to their jackets, as in Labrador; while on the contrary the Eskimo women of the American coast wear their coats with the broad, short hinder part as in Greenland. The dress of the Eskimo male I have found one and the same as in Labrador. Unlike the Eskimos of Cape Bathurst these people have not pierced the under lip for bright stones, which apparently have the same purpose as the pierced ear-lobe in Europe, from which stones, glass, metal, etc., are hung. These very poor, simple folk, not yet corrupted by civilized man, have disfigured neither their ears nor their under lips. Yet the women here seem not entirely pleased with the work of their Creator, for they try many blue and red lines and figures to make perfect what the Creator, in their opinion, has neglected.

These poor Eskimos of Prince Albert Land were much astonished to learn that there were other lands inhabited by human beings; for they supposed that they were the only men; a great land to the south which they see in clear weather they call Nunavaksnaraluk; probably this is the continental shore. In winter they dwell in great snow houses, and in
summer in tents of sealskin; for tent-poles they use the tusks of the narwhal. (Footnote: The narwhal does not occur in this area; perhaps some form of whale-bone is intended.) Through the summer, probably from May to October, they move their families and tents along the coast from place to place. I could not learn whether they have their winter quarters at one and the same place every year. After these people had gained confidence and we had satisfied their curiosity by answering many wondering questions, we laid a large fold of paper on a great outstretched sealskin. On this I indicated the position of the ship, the coast, and our route as far as their tents; and requested them now, after much explanation, most trying patience, to trace the coast from there on to the limit of their accurate knowledge. After about an hour the sketch was finished, and the men as well as by the women who knew the coast it was declared good and perfectly correct. The shorelines indicated reached as far as Point Parry on Victoria Island; also the two longest known islands of Sutton and Liston in Dolphin and Union Strait were marked quite correctly; according to their assertion, many Eskimos dwell on the coast to the south and southeast, and this they confirmed by naming the capes and the families living there. The captain and the sailors examined the country round about and the tents while I occupied myself with the Eskimos who remained near me. These people know nothing of a universal Creator. They have the same theory of the stars as the Cape Bathurst Eskimos: namely, that while they rest at night the sun looks down on the earth through little openings. Of a life after death they have the same idea as the Eskimos of the mainland shore, of Greenland and Hudson Strait: that there are two different lands – a good and a bad. These people know also by tradition of a high mountain on the land where long ago their ancestors of this cape dwelt in tents during the time of the great flood. It grieved me to part after so short a time from these simple folk who were so dear to me, and I asked the captain – when he had already given the command to start on the homeward journey - that in this fine weather he would prolong his stay for half a day. He would have been willing to do so, but could not consent because of the ailing Hewlett, whose feet were growing worse and more painful, so that he sat on the sledge in stockings and had to be carried in and out of the tent. I distributed the gifts which we had brought, which consisted of red and blue flannel, knives, saws, needles, beads, and various other trifles; especially fascinating to them was the small looking-glass. These people could not comprehend the idea of a gift, and when I gave something away the recipient would ask what was its value and would offer all sorts of articles home-made out of copper, as equivalent. As we were taking our departure from these kindly folk and were already on the move, the captain was so grieved at leaving these loving people helpless in this frightful region of ice that he could not refrain from tears; he took off his thick red shawl and wound it around the neck of a young Eskimo women who was standing near by with a child on her back. She was much startled at this and said that she had nothing to give in return; then she drew her little child from her good and, in great distress and still covering it with kisses, offered it to the captain as payment for the shawl, which she had not ventured to touch; only after I had declared to her clearly and emphatically that it was a gift, she looked at the captain in a very friendly manner and laughed, delighted that she could keep her child. With her curiosity aroused she began to inquire what sort of animals had these red skins, by skins meaning the shawl, for these people are familiar only with clothing of skins and are quite unacquainted with cloth and similar materials; our canvas tent, our woven garments, handkerchiefs, paper, etc., they supposed to be skins of
different animals; to explain all this to them clearly and in language which they could understand – for this the time was too short.

Most of the Eskimos whom we have hitherto met have been, in some instances, greedy and childish; but here, on the contrary, we did not detect it: these people seemed to be honesty itself. As we were starting on our way back, three Eskimo men appeared, returning from a reindeer hunt; they told us that inland there were numerous herds of tuktuk and uningmak (reindeer and musk-oxen) to be found, but so timid and wild that one could not get near them. These Eskimos hunt wild animals with bow and arrow and with throwing-spears.

McClure and his party returned safely to their ship the Investigator and because none of the sledge parties sent out that summer had found any trace of Franklin and his men, the crew made ready to set sail as soon as the ship became free from the ice. By the middle of August the Investigator tried to move northward through the ice floes but discovered the Prince of Wales Strait was still blocked solidly by ice, so the captain turned the ship around and sailed southward. The Investigator then rounded the south end of Banks Island and then sailed northward along the west coast of the island before heading eastward along the north shore. The forward progress along the north coast of Banks Island was very slow and extremely hazardous because of the heavy ice-pack and drifting floes. On September 24, 1851 the Investigator was pushed by the ice into a sheltered bay about mid way along the north coast which McClure named the Bay of God’s Mercy or Mercy Bay as it is now known. The ship soon became frozen in and the captain and crew of the Investigator were to spend the next two winters at this site until rescued by Lieutenant Pim of Captain Kellet’s ship the Resolute in April 1853. During the time spent at Mercy Bay from 1851 to 1853, exploration of the surrounding area continued. This resulted in the discovery of several sites of Eskimo ruins or caches, indicating that these coasts were once inhabited but no living Eskimos were encountered.

McClure and his crew abandoned the Investigator at Mercy Bay in 1853 but were to spend another winter in the Arctic before finally reaching England in October 1854. As to what happened to Miertsching after his return to England Neatby reports: “His later history is rather pathetic. When his furlough expired the rulers of his Order, with the perversity that executives sometimes display, sent him, not back to his beloved Eskimos, but to South Africa, to practice among the Hottentots the habits and dialect learned in Labrador. After many years’ service in this uncongenial field, he retired to his native Saxony where he died, worn out, before the age of sixty. But the family connection with Canada was preserved; his daughter married a Labrador missionary; there a grandson was born, and today descendants of the old pioneer are living in the country whose frontiers a century ago he helped to extend.”