

A Short History of Polar Exploration

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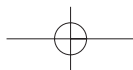
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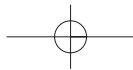
'Polar exploration is at once the cleanest and most isolated way of having a bad time which has been devised.'

Apsley Cherry-Garrard

'We led a strange, weird sort of life. A spice of danger, with much of beauty and a world of magnificence.'

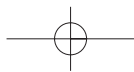
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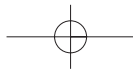
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Introduction

The Arctic and the Antarctic have been the settings for some of the most compelling dramas in the history of exploration. Some are very well known. Scott making his desperate bid to return to safety after being pre-empted at the South Pole by Amundsen and dying in a blizzard just eleven miles short of supplies at One Ton Depot. Sir John Franklin and the men with him disappearing into the Canadian Arctic in search of the Northwest Passage, never to be seen alive again. Shackleton undertaking an epic boat journey across the Antarctic seas to South Georgia in order to bring help to his men stranded on the uninhabited Elephant Island. Others, like Douglas Mawson's solo trek to his Antarctic home base after the death of his two companions or Greely's disastrous expedition in the Arctic which led to the deaths of most of its members and accusations of cannibalism levelled at the survivors, are less familiar.

This book attempts a brief survey of the larger story in which these dramatic incidents take their place. It contains a few introductory pages to the history of attempts to locate either a Northwest Passage or a Northeast Passage from the Atlantic to the Pacific in the centuries between the mariners of the Elizabethan Age and the navigators who were Captain Cook's contemporaries. It also includes the shortest of guides to the long-standing idea of *Terra Australis* and Cook's demonstration that no such continent, as it had been thought to exist – temperate and well-populated – could possibly lie in the waters of the Far South. However, most of it concentrates on the 140

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years between 1820 and 1960. At the beginning of this period, the Antarctic continent had only just been sighted for the first time and much of the geography of the Canadian and Russian Arctic remained a mystery. At the end of it, there were no more blanks on the maps at either end of the earth and scientists and even tourists were just as likely to be found there as explorers and adventurers. The first six chapters of *A Short History of Polar Exploration* tell the story of these 140 years. They are followed by a very short chapter on the poles in the last fifty years and one on the role the poles have played in literature and the arts for two centuries. The brief biographical dictionary of polar explorers provides a reference guide to the characters who created the dramas of Arctic and Antarctic exploration. The book ends with a bibliography which guides anyone who is interested to books that can reveal far more about polar history than I can hope to do in these pages. If this 'short history' arouses interest in what is an extraordinary story populated by extraordinary people, it will have done its job.

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Before 1800

For centuries men entered the North American Arctic not in the hopes of reaching the pole but in quest for what became a Holy Grail of maritime navigation – the Northwest Passage. Somewhere in the wastelands of ice and sea there was, they believed, a navigable route from Atlantic to Pacific. This Northwest Passage, if only it could be found, would open up a new avenue to the riches of Asia. In search of it, the early explorers of the Arctic endured terrible hardships and many of them lost their lives.

The very first expeditions were English. Martin Frobisher was the archetypal Elizabethan seadog – daring, independent and bloody-minded – and he was one of those captains who fought off the Spanish Armada in 1588. He was also an intrepid, if slightly deluded, explorer of the Canadian Arctic. In 1576, backed by the Muscovy Company of London merchants, he sailed north-west and eventually landed on what is now Baffin Island. After an assortment of misadventures, including the capture of some of his men by a group of native people, he returned home, carrying samples of a black rock which, Frobisher was firmly convinced, contained gold enough to justify the despatch of further expeditions. Investors, including the Queen, agreed with him and he led two further journeys to the region. He brought back close to 1500 tons of the mysterious ore but, despite all Frobisher's hopes for it, it proved almost entirely worthless.

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None the less, other English mariners followed in Frobisher's wake. Sir Humphrey Gilbert, who was Sir Walter Raleigh's half-brother and had written an influential treatise on 'a new passage to Cathay' in the 1570s, sailed for Newfoundland in 1583 and took possession of it for Elizabeth I. On his way back home, the ship on which he was sailing went down and all on board drowned. John Davis, like Gilbert a Devon man, undertook a series of voyages in the late 1580s to the strait west of Greenland which now bears his name. Perhaps most significantly, Henry Hudson made four journeys into Arctic waters from 1607 onwards, acting on behalf of companies of London merchants in search of a new commercial route. On the last of his voyages, in 1610, he entered the bay now named after him and he and his men were forced by the ice to winter on shore. In the spring of the following year, the captain was eager to explore his bay further but most of the sailors with him were less enthusiastic about the prospect. Cold, miserable and frightened, they just wanted to go home. They mutinied and forced Hudson, his son and a few loyal crewmen into a small boat which was then set adrift. The occupants of the small boat were never seen again. The mutineers returned to London where they admitted what they had done but put the blame on two ringleaders who had conveniently died on the voyage home. Some of the survivors were put on trial but acquitted.

Meanwhile other explorers from other nations were looking for a Northeast Passage that would take them across the top of Europe and down into the Pacific. In the 1590s, the Dutchman Willem Barents undertook three voyages to the Arctic Ocean. On the third of them, he and his men not only made the first indisputable sighting of the island of Spitsbergen but also became the first Western Europeans to survive a winter in the high Arctic. Others followed occasionally in their wake in the seventeenth century but it was not until the 1720s that the Danish-born Vitus Bering, serving in the Russian navy and approaching Arctic waters from the Pacific rather than the Baltic,

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sailed through the strait that now bears his name. On a second voyage in 1741, Bering made further important discoveries and sighted the southern coast of Alaska but the expedition, struck by illness and sailing in uncharted waters, was soon in trouble. In December 1741, Bering himself died on a remote island, now also named after him. The survivors of his expedition reached safety eight months later.

Hopes of finding a Northwest Passage had not died with Henry Hudson. A few years after he had met his fate, another English navigator, William Baffin, was despatched by London merchants in search of it. In 1616, sailing to the west of Greenland, he came upon the bay that now carries his name and charted it with exemplary thoroughness, naming straits that led off it Lancaster Sound, Jones Sound and Smith Sound after three of the men who had sent him. All three straits were to play a major role in future Arctic exploration. Fifteen years after Baffin's expedition, Luke Foxe, an experienced Yorkshire mariner, sailed north of Hudson Bay and entered the basin of water that is now called Foxe Basin. Ice-bound for most of the year, it none the less offered hopes of locating a Northwest Passage beyond Hudson Bay.

However, after Foxe's return, enthusiasm for exploration in the Far North dwindled. It was commerce rather than discovery which became the priority and the Hudson's Bay Company, founded in 1670, became the focus for fur trading in the vast region around the bay. It was to be another fifty years before anyone made any serious attempt to find a Northwest Passage and then it was to be a man who was very nearly an octogenarian. James Knight, born about 1640, had worked for the Hudson's Bay Company for decades when he began to look around for opportunities to verify rumours he had long heard about an easy and mineral-rich route through to the Pacific. In 1719, with two ships named the *Albany* and the *Discovery*, he set out to find it. Foreshadowing another, more famous expedition in the next century, he and his ships were never seen

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again. Debris from the ships was found and the remains of a camp on a remote island were located more than forty years later but the exact details of the fate of Knight and those with him remain a mystery.

Christopher Middleton was an English navigator who had worked as a ship's captain for the Hudson's Bay Company for many years. His interests in science and exploration were not shared by his employer unless they added to its profits and, in 1741, he took a commission in the Royal Navy in order to lead an Admiralty-sponsored expedition into the far north of Hudson Bay. After journeying to the edge of the Arctic Circle, Middleton found what seemed at first sight to be the entrance into a passage leading westwards and cheerfully named it Cape Hope. Unfortunately, it was no such thing and, after giving the stretch of water he had found the less cheerful name of Repulse Bay, he headed homewards. There he became embroiled in a bitter row with his major patron, the Anglo-Irish politician Arthur Dobbs. Middleton was now convinced that no Northwest Passage existed, at least not one with any outlet anywhere near where he had sailed in Hudson Bay. Dobbs thought that Middleton simply hadn't looked hard enough for it and decided to back another expedition which would be more thorough in its efforts. Led by William Moor, a cousin of Middleton who had sailed on the previous expedition and taken Dobbs's view of his relation's conscientiousness, this voyage was even less successful than its predecessor in finding any trace of what might be the body of water for which they were all searching.

By the 1760s it was clear that no Northwest Passage existed where the expeditions of the last few decades had been looking. 'I am certain and shure,' one senior employee of the Hudson's Bay Company wrote with a better grasp of geography than of conventional spelling, 'that there is no pasage into the Western Ocan in this Hudsons Bay.' One possibility, to which many optimists still clung, was that the entrance to the Passage was located further north than anyone had travelled. The other was

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that it would be easier to find a route from the Pacific to the Atlantic rather than vice versa. And, if anyone was going to be able to find such a route, it would surely be the man who was widely acclaimed as the greatest navigator of his day. Captain James Cook had already added enormously to the sum of human geographical knowledge in two voyages which had made him the first man to cross the Antarctic Circle and had more or less destroyed the credibility of old ideas about a temperate southern continent (*Terra Australis*), vast and well-populated, stretching across the bottom of the world. In July 1776, he was despatched on a third voyage which would, everybody at the Admiralty hoped, finally settle the question of the Northwest Passage. He was, according to his instructions, to head for the north Pacific, sail up the coast of north-west America to latitude 65° N and there 'to search for, and to explore, such rivers or inlets as may appear to be of a considerable extent, and pointing towards Hudsons or Baffins Bay'. With two ships, the *Resolution* under his own captaincy and the *Discovery*, commanded by Charles Clerke, Cook set out from Plymouth to fulfil these instructions.

After becoming the first Europeans to visit the Hawaiian islands at the beginning of 1778, Cook and his men sailed towards North America and began the job they had been given of mapping the coastline northwards. Over the next few months they made their way steadily up the coast to Alaska and the Bering Strait. Cook was keen to make headway through the Strait but the ships were turned back by ice several times. Eventually he retired to the Aleutian Islands where he made repairs to the *Resolution* and the *Discovery* and encountered some Russian fur traders. (The meeting was a frustrating one for both sides since the Russians spoke no English, Cook had no Russian speaker on his expedition and the limitations of sign language rapidly became apparent.) Once the ships were ready, he turned back south, intending to return to the region the following year. The voyage ended in tragedy when the

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Resolution and the *Discovery* returned to Hawaii in 1779. Feted initially by the islanders, Cook left to continue his voyage but was forced back by damage to his ship and met with a very different welcome. For reasons still not entirely understood, the Hawaiians were now hostile and, in a confrontation with Cook and his men, they killed the great navigator. Clerke took charge of the expedition and it returned, as planned, to the American Northwest but the new commander was a sick man. After a final attempt on the Bering Strait, he died of tuberculosis in a harbour on the Kamchatka Peninsula. It was left to John Gore, who had sailed with Cook on his first voyage, to take the thoroughly demoralised expedition back to Britain.

Just as he had scotched any ideas about *Terra Australis*, Cook seemed to have destroyed any hopes that a passage to Hudson Bay or Baffin Bay could be found in the American Northwest but there were still lingering doubts and empty spaces on the map on to which some imaginative geographers could still project their dreams. One final expedition was needed to show conclusively that such dreams did not match reality. In the 1790s, George Vancouver, who had been a midshipman on Cook's second and third expeditions, undertook a voyage of several years which mapped the north-west coastline of America so skilfully that the charts he created were still being used more than a century later. He found plenty of inlets, bays and harbours but no sign of any passage that might lead all the way through to Hudson Bay or Baffin Bay in the east. 'I trust the precision with which the survey of the coast of North West America has been carried into effect,' Vancouver wrote, 'will remove every doubt, and set aside every opinion of a north-west passage.' For the moment it did, and the distractions of the long war with France that had just begun meant that journeys of discovery were largely forgotten, but the longstanding idea of a route between the two oceans stubbornly refused to die.

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Ross, Parry and 'The Man Who Ate His Boots'

A new era in Arctic exploration dawned in the two decades after the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo as a whole series of British expeditions was despatched northwards. The driving force behind them was Sir John Barrow who held the position of Second Secretary to the Admiralty for nearly forty years in the first half of the nineteenth century. Barrow had sailed on a whaling ship to the Arctic as a teenager in 1780 and travelled in such distant lands as China (where he was a member of the first British diplomatic mission to the country) and South Africa. After Napoleon's defeat in 1815 and his subsequent exile to St Helena (a place of retirement for the Emperor reportedly first suggested by Barrow), peace came to Europe for a generation. Naval officers no longer had the opportunities offered by war to forge successful careers. Barrow saw an alternative arena in which they could shine. Through exploring the unknown regions of the world, they could win the kind of fame and glory that their predecessors had gained in battle. And few lands were quite as unknown as those in the Far North.

The first of Barrow's new expeditions left London in April 1818 under the command of John Ross, a career officer who had joined the Navy in 1786 when he was aged only nine. Much of Ross's recent experience had been in Baltic waters, which was as close as any naval officer of the time had been to the Arctic, and this may have influenced Barrow in his choice. It was a choice which he was to come to regret, although Ross was to go on to have one of the most extensive Arctic careers of the century.

Sailing with two ships, the *Isabella* and the *Alexander*, Ross was instructed to sail into Baffin Bay and look for an outlet which might open into the Northwest Passage. His expedition had its minor successes. He made first contact with a group of Inuit who had never before seen white men. Indeed, they believed themselves to be the only people in the world and were much

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astonished by the appearance of Ross's men. He mapped areas of Baffin Bay that had never been previously mapped. However, his main task was to search for a Northwest Passage and, in that, he failed comprehensively. For reasons that have never been adequately explained, he seemed curiously prepared to accept, on slender evidence, that there was no way through the straits that led off Baffin Bay. Smith Sound and Jones Sound he swiftly dismissed as bays from which there could be no further passage northwards. Lancaster Sound, the third of the straits discovered by William Baffin two centuries earlier, was seen as the likeliest location of a passage that would lead eventually to the Pacific. In September 1818, Ross sailed into it and noted land on the horizon. He was convinced that what he saw was a mountain range and that it blocked any further attempt to travel up Lancaster Sound. Others on board his ships were not so sure. Some thought that what he had seen was a mirage, of the kind all too likely to trouble explorers in the Far North, and that he should have pressed on to make certain of his observations. The controversy that ensued when Ross returned to England was to blight both his career and his relations with many other names now famous in polar exploration.

In the wake of this unsatisfactory voyage, Barrow, who was more angered by Ross's incuriosity than anyone, planned further voyages by both land and sea to explore the Canadian Arctic and search for a Northwest Passage. For reasons that are not entirely clear, John Franklin, a career naval officer, was picked to lead the land expedition. A brave, charming but not very inspiring man who had fought as a teenager at the Battle of Trafalgar, Franklin had already been in the Arctic as captain of one of two vessels under the overall command of David Buchan which had struggled to make headway through the pack ice north of Spitsbergen in the summer of 1818. Now he was given the task of travelling up the Coppermine River to the northern coast of Canada and charting the new territory he discovered. From the beginning, his expedition was a monument to bad planning and

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it ended in disaster. Franklin was given only a handful of English companions for his journey. (They included George Back and John Richardson, both of whom would have roles to play in more successful expeditions in the future.) The idea was that he would recruit men from the ranks of the *voyageurs* who worked for the big Canadian trading companies. With a motley collection of followers, Franklin headed off into the wilderness, unprepared, in the summer of 1821 and almost immediately hit difficulties. Food supplies had not been properly organised and the assumption that hunting for game en route would keep them well fed soon proved nonsensical. The party was starving even before it reached the Arctic coast and matters only got worse as they undertook a dismal retreat to civilisation. They were forced to subsist on little more than handfuls of lichen which they called *tripes de roche*. Indeed, on some occasions, even that failed them. As Franklin later noted laconically in his account of the expedition, 'There was no *tripes de roche* so we drank tea and ate some of our shoes for supper'. Meanwhile the *voyageurs*, when they had the strength, regularly threatened mutiny and Richardson shot one of their number whom he suspected (probably correctly) of cannibalism. Before the party eventually reached safety, with eleven out of its twenty men dead, the survivors had endured terrible sufferings which were largely the fault of the poorness of the original planning or the ineptness of its leader's decisions at times of crisis. None of this mattered when Franklin returned home. In newspapers and the popular mind, he was now identified as 'The Man Who Ate His Boots' and he was a hero. He was not finished with the Arctic nor was it finished with him.

One of the many failed objectives of Franklin's catastrophic expedition was to rendezvous with the ships which the Admiralty had simultaneously despatched northwards under the command of William Parry, probably the most successful of Britain's Arctic explorers in this pre-Victorian era. Born in Bath in 1790, Parry had joined the Navy at the age of thirteen and gained

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his first experience of Arctic waters when he captained the *Alexander* in John Ross's 1818 expedition. Like most of the naval explorers under Barrow's patronage, he was not particularly enthralled by the Arctic. 'Hot or cold was all one to him,' he wrote later, referring to himself in the third person, 'Africa or the Pole.' He simply wanted the opportunities for advancement offered by the expeditions Barrow was promoting. The following year he was sent north for a second time with two ships, HMS *Hecla* and HMS *Griper*, and clear instructions to do what Ross had failed to do. He was to make his way through Lancaster Sound and journey west as far as he could. The hope, indeed almost the assumption, at the Admiralty was that he would thus find a passage to the Pacific, probably meeting up with Franklin's expedition en route. Although he did not come close to finding the elusive Northwest Passage, Parry did indeed do better than Ross. He proved that the impassable mountains the older explorer had supposedly seen were nothing of the kind and he sailed some considerable distance further west than the earlier expedition had done. However, his route was eventually blocked by ice and he and his men settled down to spend the winter on the south shore of Melville Island, an island he had just discovered and named after Viscount Melville, First Lord of the Admiralty. They were there for the best part of the next ten months, the ships frozen into the ice. When the men did manage to free the ships at the very end of July 1820, Parry was all for further attempts to sail westwards but it soon became clear that to do so was to risk being trapped in the ice's embrace for another year. He turned back towards Baffin Bay and from there sailed home to Britain.

Unlike Ross two years earlier, Parry was greeted with praise and acclamation. He may not have found the Passage but he had sailed further west in the Arctic than anyone else had done (winning a £5,000 prize offered by Parliament in the process) and he had successfully brought his party through an ice-bound winter with the loss of only one man, the victim of a previously

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existing lung complaint. He was the man of the moment and it was inevitable that he would be sent north again. He did not have long to wait. In April 1821, Parry set sail on his second Arctic expedition as commander. With two ships, HMS *Fury* and HMS *Hecla* (making another trip into the ice), he was again looking for a Northwest Passage but this time he was hoping to find it north of Hudson's Bay in Repulse Bay, visited and named by the navigator Christopher Middleton in the middle of the previous century. When this proved a dead end, Parry followed the coastline to the north-east, probing for an outlet or channel that would lead him back in the right direction – westwards. Openings were found but they led nowhere and, with the weather closing in, the men were driven to set up winter camp on an uninhabited island which they unimaginatively named Winter Island. As always on his expeditions, Parry worked hard to keep his men fully occupied through the long, dark and potentially soul-destroying winter months. Not only were their shipboard tasks carefully organised and planned but a theatre was established and Parry himself took one of the leading roles in an Arctic production of Sheridan's *The Rivals*.

When the sun returned and progress was again possible, the ships nudged ever further northwards, still looking for that opening to the west which, according to the Inuit with whom they had come into contact, definitely existed. They found a strait just south of Baffin Island which Parry named after his ships and which did indeed lead westwards. Unfortunately, it was completely ice-filled and impassable. Another winter beckoned and the ships retreated to the south to take shelter in a harbour they had visited earlier in the year. There were no stage shows this time but the men of the expedition fraternised extensively with the Inuit whom they seemed to view with a strange mixture of fascination and revulsion. 'These people may justly lay equal claim with ourselves to those common feelings of our nature,' Parry wrote, with more than a hint of surprise that this should be so, but he was appalled by their eating habits and

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by what he saw as their loose morals. It was not until July 1823 that the ice around the harbour melted sufficiently to free the ships. By this time, some of his men were suffering from scurvy and Parry was wondering whether or not another season's exploring was possible. When he visited Fury and Hecla Strait and saw that it was still frozen, he decided it was time to return to Britain. By the end of October, he was home, having been away for just over two years.

The captain of the *Hecla* on this second expedition led by Parry was George Francis Lyon, a favourite of John Barrow, who had previously attempted to make his mark in a journey to Timbuktu in Africa. That had been a disaster. Now, with Barrow's support, Lyon was given command in 1824 of the ominously named HMS *Griper* and sent out on his very own Arctic expedition. His aim was to sail into Hudson Bay and north to Repulse Bay again where he might be able to winter and then undertake an overland journey westwards. Everything went badly from the beginning. The *Griper* was a notoriously poor ship and caused endless problems. The weather that year was particularly bad and the ice in Hudson Bay was thicker and more widespread than expected. Buffeted by storms, Lyon could not carry out his plans. There even came a moment when he had to gather his crew together and advise them to prepare to meet their Maker 'as men resigned to their fate' but they somehow survived to limp back home to England with very little achieved. It was scarcely Lyon's fault but none the less he found himself no longer one of Barrow's favourites. He was never given any further opportunity to shine and he died eight years later, still only in his thirties.

At much the same time as his former subordinate was contemplating meeting his Maker in Hudson Bay, William Parry was suffering his own setbacks elsewhere in the Arctic. He had taken command of a third expedition, consisting of the two ships, HMS *Fury* and HMS *Hecla*, which sailed in May 1824. It headed for Prince Regent's Inlet which was at the west end of

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Baffin Island and in a region he had visited in 1819–20. Hope springing eternal in his breast, Parry had now decided that here lay the best means of achieving the Northwest Passage. 'There is no *known* opening which seems to present itself so favourably for this purpose as Prince Regent's Inlet,' he wrote. Unfortunately he had chosen to visit the area at a time when the weather was much worse and the ice much thicker than they had been on his earlier journey. After reaching Prince Regent's Inlet and wintering there, Parry swiftly found further progress with his two ships more or less impossible. Indeed the *Fury* was driven against the shore by an iceberg and so badly damaged that she had eventually to be abandoned. The expedition limped home and Parry found his reputation as a bold explorer at its lowest ebb. Even John Barrow, who was usually his greatest supporter, was disappointed. The search for a Northwest Passage was, he wrote, 'precisely where it was at the conclusion of his first voyage'. The stage was clear for somebody else to set foot on it.

Franklin, Parry and Ross All Return to the Ice

One man who had every possible reason to avoid further Arctic travelling, it might be thought, was John Franklin but, in 1825, 'the man who ate his boots' set off on another expedition into the wilderness. With George Back and John Richardson again under his command, he aimed to follow Canada's Mackenzie River to its mouth on the Arctic Ocean. After successfully reaching its goal, the party split into two. Franklin and Back headed west while Richardson made his way east. When they all reunited in the autumn of 1826, they had, between them, travelled thousands of miles and mapped more than 1500 miles of hitherto uncharted coastline. Although they did not know it until later, Franklin's group had come within 150 miles of meeting up with a boat from another expedition under the command of Frederick Beechey which had entered Arctic

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waters from the Bering Strait. The man whose previous journey had been such a catastrophe had very nearly been able to show that it was possible to enter the Arctic wilderness in the east and emerge in the west.

That same year, William Parry was looking to win back some of the glory he had mislaid when his expedition to Prince Regent's Inlet had proved so unsuccessful. He was busy formulating plans to reach the North Pole and the following May he arrived in Spitsbergen to put them into action. 'Few enterprises are so easily practicable,' he wrote with admirable optimism. Unfortunately, the improbable method of transport he had chosen to try for the pole was a combination of boats and reindeer. As might perhaps have been predicted, the idea failed to work and Parry's men were reduced to dragging the boats over the ice and snow themselves. It was back-breaking toil and it was soon clear that hopes of reaching the pole had been ludicrously optimistic. As they floundered onwards, hauling the ship's boats behind them, the men were suffering badly from hunger, exhaustion and snow-blindness. By 20 July, when Parry realised that the ice over which they were making their slow progress northwards was hindering them by drifting southwards as they went, it was obvious that they had to turn back. On 26 July, they reached 82° 45' N and then joined the ice floes in heading south. The scheme for reaching the pole had been ill-conceived and could have ended in tragedy but Parry had gone further north than anyone had done before. The record was to stand for nearly fifty years. The debacle might have ruined his reputation even further but somehow it emerged not only intact but, in some ways, enhanced. The public still seemed to think highly of him.

As Parry gathered renewed plaudits, John Ross was itching to return to the Arctic and redeem *his* reputation after the dispute over what he had or had not seen in Lancaster Sound ten years earlier. Unfortunately, John Barrow was so antagonistic towards Ross that there was no chance any

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expedition led by him would gain Admiralty approval. Ross went in search of a private sponsor and found him in Felix Booth, a man made wealthy through the sale of Booth's Gin. In May 1829, he left England with a handful of officers and a small crew on a ship with the auspicious name of *Victory*. (The *Victory* was equipped with the novelty of a steam engine, although the engine proved almost wholly unreliable and was eventually dumped.) By August, Ross and his men had sailed beyond the point where he had turned so controversially for home in 1818 and were making new discoveries which scattered the name of their sponsor across the Arctic landscape. The Gulf of Boothia and Boothia Felix (now Boothia Peninsula) were placed on their maps and in a harbour on the latter they prepared to overwinter.

James Clark Ross, nephew of John Ross, had sailed on all three of Parry's Arctic expeditions just as he had done on his uncle's prematurely aborted mission of 1818. His relationship with his uncle had become a tempestuous one and was to grow much worse in years to come. The two men had disagreed strongly and publicly on the existence or otherwise of the mountain range the older Ross had claimed to see in Lancaster Sound. None the less, John Ross had invited his nephew to accompany him as second in command. The younger Ross now became the most active member of the expedition, undertaking a series of sledging trips from the ship to explore Boothia Felix. On one of these, he discovered and named King William Island. During another, the following year, after a second winter in the ice, he became the first man to reach the North Magnetic Pole. Distinct from the Geographic North Pole, this is the point in the northern hemisphere towards which a compass needle points. It was a remote spot in a wilderness of snow and ice, and its position had altered and would alter over time because of magnetic changes in the Earth's core, but Ross proudly raised the Union Jack and, in his own words, 'took possession of the North Magnetic Pole and its adjoining territory in the name of Great Britain and William the Fourth.'

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The travels of the younger Ross were extending the list of achievements of his uncle's expedition but it began to look as if the *Victory* would never be released from the ice so that they could all go home and report them. It was August 1831 before the ice broke sufficiently for the ship to move. It travelled four miles and then was trapped again. Nothing the Rosses and their men did would free it. They had to face a third winter in the Arctic. John Ross had to consider the possibility that the ship would never get out. In the spring of 1832, he made the decision, always terrible for a captain, to abandon his ship. 'It was the first vessel that I have ever been obliged to abandon,' he later wrote sadly, 'after having served in thirty-six, during a period of forty-two years.' On 29 May 1832, he and his men left the *Victory* and made their way overland to Fury Beach where the remains of Parry's expedition of 1825 could still be found. They arrived there in July to find that some of the boats from the *Fury* were still seaworthy. Hopes of an escape rose but were dashed by the ice and the weather. The *Fury's* boats were launched but, like the *Victory* the previous year, were unable to travel more than a few miles. Ross's expedition was doomed to a fourth winter in the ice. It was only in August 1833, by which time the men were suffering badly from scurvy, frostbite and the effects of poor food, that the boats were finally freed and could make it into open water. When Ross was finally rescued by whaling ships, the rescuers refused to believe at first that he was who he claimed to be. He couldn't be Ross, he was told, because Ross was dead. The explorer was able to tell the whalers that they had been misinformed.

The whalers had reason enough to think that Ross and his men had perished. Plenty of other people back in England were of a similar opinion. If they had not died, it was argued, they were in dire need of help. With money raised partly by the Admiralty and partly by George Ross, brother to one of the missing men and father to another, George Back was despatched on an overland mission to find out what had

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happened to them. He was to journey to the more remote trading posts used by the fur companies and then head north to the region in which it was assumed that the missing expedition would be. By the time Back led his party into the wilderness in the spring of 1834, he knew that Ross and his men were safe. He could concentrate on exploration of the Great Fish River (now often known by his name) which flows into the Arctic Ocean and on attempts to chart the unknown coastline around its mouth. After success in negotiating the length of the river, reaching the ocean and sighting King William Island, he decided that discretion was the better part of valour and turned back. He was home in England in September 1835.

Promoted and praised for his efforts, Back was now in Barrow's and the Admiralty's good books. He was sent out on a second expedition to try to do what Lyon had failed to achieve a decade earlier – reach Repulse Bay at the very northern end of Hudson Bay and, from there, travel overland towards the river he had investigated two years before. There was now the added hope that he might discover more about Ross's Boothia Felix. Back's journey was, if anything, even more unsuccessful than Lyon's. As he sailed through Frozen Strait towards his first destination, his ship, HMS *Terror*, was caught by the ice and remained so for the next ten months. The *Terror* was frequently under threat of destruction and, at one point, was thrust 40 feet up a cliff by the relentless force of the surrounding ice. Somehow it survived and, once the ship was finally released from the ice's embrace, Back wasted no time in heading for home. He had had enough of the Arctic and never returned there.

The fur companies had been largely indifferent to the aims of the explorers, although they had provided (sometimes grudgingly) assistance to many of the expeditions despatched into the Canadian Arctic. Their prime interest was profit not the enlargement of geographical knowledge. Now, however, the Hudson's Bay Company sponsored its own expedition to map

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the coastline, filling in gaps left by Franklin and others. The expedition was under the nominal leadership of Peter Dease, a long-serving employee of the company who had won the trust of Franklin during the Englishman's travels in the wilderness. However, its most forceful and flamboyant member was Thomas Simpson, Dease's second in command, who gave himself most of the credit for the expedition's successes in the years 1836 to 1839. Simpson had announced plans for further explorations but these were brought to an abrupt end when he died under mysterious circumstances while travelling across Canada with the intention of taking a ship bound for London. Officially, Simpson was said to have murdered two of his companions and committed suicide. It seems an unlikely end for such an ambitious and self-confident man. Suspicions linger that he was himself a murder victim.

Franklin and the Search for his Expedition

By 1845, the mapping out of a Northwest Passage had very nearly been achieved. Thanks to the efforts of a platoon of explorers, there were only a few hundred miles of uncharted seas between the furthest east and the furthest west that ships had travelled in the Arctic. To John Barrow, now an octogenarian, it was essential that the final connection be made and be made by a British expedition. 'If the completion of the passage be left to be performed by some other power,' he wrote, 'England, by her neglect of it... would be laughed at by all the world.' It was time for one further expedition to forge the last link in the chain. Its leader would be Sir John Franklin. Franklin was now in his late fifties. The years since his last Arctic expedition had not been particularly successful ones for him. His period as Lieutenant Governor of Van Diemen's Land (now Tasmania) had been controversial and had ended in what was (essentially) the sack. He was eager for redemption and his ambitious second wife Jane even more so.

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He was not the first choice for commander of the new expedition. Barrow had approached Parry and James Ross but both had had enough of the Arctic. George Back was *persona non grata* at the Admiralty because of his difficult temperament. There were no other alternatives. Franklin it had to be. As his supporting officers he would have James Fitzjames, a protégé of Barrow in his thirties with no previous experience of polar travel, and Francis Crozier, who had served on Arctic expeditions with Parry as a young man and who had been James Clark Ross's second in command during his long Antarctic voyage. The two ships under Franklin's command, HMS *Erebus* and HMS *Terror*, had also seen service on Ross's Antarctic expedition and were considered able to deal with any possible conditions in the Arctic. When they sailed from England in May 1845, it was generally agreed by the Admiralty, the press and the public alike that the expedition was as well-equipped as any that had ever travelled northwards. Success in finally completing the Northwest Passage would surely be its reward. There were few dissenting voices, although Dr Richard King, an eccentric veteran of an expedition in the 1830s, made the memorable prediction that Franklin and his men were being sent to the Arctic to 'form the nucleus of an iceberg'. In a sense, King was right. After 26 July 1845, when two whaling ships came across *Erebus* and *Terror* in Baffin Bay, neither Franklin nor any of the 129 men with him were ever seen alive again.

For some time, the fact that there was no word from Franklin did not greatly trouble the naval authorities. It had been expected that he would be away for some time and that there would be long periods when he was out of contact with civilisation. John Ross, who had already expressed concerns about Franklin's fitness for command, offered to lead a private expedition to look for his old friend. His offer was roundly rejected. Only in 1848, three years after the expedition's departure, did the Admiralty decide that something was probably amiss and needed investigating. As if to compensate

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for previous inaction, three separate expeditions were now despatched to discover what they could about the lost ships and their crews. James Clark Ross made his final journey to the Arctic in charge of two ships, HMS *Investigator* and HMS *Enterprise*, but it became an ignominious failure with which to end his distinguished polar career. Another mission by sea, approaching from the Bering Strait, was led by Henry Kellett. It succeeded in charting some hitherto unmapped islands and coastline but failed to discover any signs of the missing men. John Richardson, who had travelled with Franklin on the disastrous expedition of 1819–22, was now in his sixties but he chose to join forces with a Scottish doctor named John Rae, who had worked for many years with the Hudson's Bay Company and was an experienced Arctic traveller. The two men headed overland for the wilderness regions where Franklin and his men might have been stranded. They could find no trace of them.

Within a couple of years, the Arctic was, in the words of the historian Fergus Fleming, 'crawling with rescue missions'. The major difficulty that they all had was that, given the nature of his original orders, they could not be sure what route Franklin had taken. In addition, they could not be certain that seas that were open in the years he had entered them would necessarily be still open a few years later. Factor in the sheer size of the Arctic wilderness and it becomes clear that the rescuers were looking for a tiny needle in a vast and frozen haystack.

They were, however, converging on this huge expanse of land and sea and ice from all directions. Some were sailing west from Baffin Bay. In August 1850, Erasmus Ommanney, captaining one of the ships in an expedition led by Captain Horatio Austin, made the first discovery to shed any light whatsoever on what had happened to Franklin after his encounter with the whaling ships in July 1845. On Beechey Island, named after an officer on Parry's first expedition, Ommanney came across clear indications that it had been the site of Franklin's first winter encampment.

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He also found the graves of three of Franklin's men who had died and been buried on the island.

Others were sailing east from the Bering Strait. Richard Collinson in HMS *Enterprise* and Robert McClure in HMS *Investigator* left England in January 1850 with instructions to sail up the Pacific coast of the Americas and into the Arctic on a joint expedition. The two ships became separated off Chile and, from that moment onwards, acted (in effect) as two independent expeditions. McClure sailed through the Bering Strait and promptly got into difficulties. Collinson followed a year later and did little better. By now, the Admiralty was in the position of sending out rescue missions to rescue the rescue missions. In 1852, Edward Belcher was despatched to look for Franklin but he was also told to find out, if he could, what had happened to Collinson and McClure from whom nothing at that time had been heard. The latter had led an expedition bedevilled by desertion, insubordination among the officers and near-starvation. McClure was forced to abandon *Investigator* in the spring of 1853 and was lucky to be rescued by a sledging party from Belcher's expedition which took him back to their ship. In effect, he and his crew became the first men to complete the Northwest Passage. McClure had done it by sailing into the Arctic Ocean via the Bering Strait, losing his ship and being rescued by another ship which had entered from the Atlantic. It was not really the stuff of which heroic tales of derring-do could be told. It was to be another half-century before anyone was finally to achieve the Passage, this time from Atlantic to Pacific, on board one ship. On board one of the ships in Belcher's small fleet, McClure was still not safe. They were all forced to spend another winter in the ice and then Belcher retreated back home. His expedition was not a success. He had failed to find Franklin; he had decided to abandon most of the ships under his command, a decision that meant he faced a court martial when he got back to Britain; and, although his men had chanced upon McClure, he had no idea what had happened to Collinson. In

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fact, Collinson had spent long periods of time sailing around the Arctic Ocean, just missing contact with McClure, and had then gone back the way he had come through the Bering Strait. He was safe but he too had learned little or nothing about Franklin.

It was the independently-minded John Rae who eventually found some evidence of what had happened to the men of the *Erebus* and *Terror*. The Scottish doctor had continued to make journeys into the remote regions of the Canadian Arctic where the Franklin expedition might have ended. In March 1854, he met Inuit who told him tales of a party of about 30 or 40 white men who had died of starvation several winters earlier. Other Inuit sold him silver forks and spoons which were identified as the property of officers on the two ships. Rae's mistake, when he returned to England, was to report something else that the Inuit had told him. They had said that the remains of the dead white men showed signs that the last survivors had resorted to cannibalism in a desperate bid to stay alive. Rae was overwhelmed by a tidal wave of revulsion and disbelief from public and press when he passed on this information. Charles Dickens, a man almost unhealthily obsessed by Franklin's fate, led the way. Dismissing the reports Rae had gathered from the Inuit as 'the vague babble of savages', Dickens argued that it was completely unthinkable that the lost explorers would have resorted to what he called 'the last resource'. 'The noble conduct and example of such men,' he wrote in his weekly magazine *Household Words*, 'and of their own great leader himself, under similar endurances, belies it, and outweighs by the weight of the whole universe the chatter of a gross handful of uncivilised people, with domesticity of blood and blubber.' What the Inuit had seen, according to Dickens, were probably bodies torn and mutilated by passing polar bears.

As far as the Admiralty was concerned, the sorry saga of the Franklin expedition was over. Its members were clearly all dead and they had been officially declared as such even before John Rae arrived in Britain with his unsavoury stories of starvation and

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cannibalism. Lady Jane Franklin, however, was now even more determined to learn exactly what had happened to her husband. In July 1857, Francis McClintock sailed from Aberdeen in command of an expedition the formidable widow had sponsored herself. In the Arctic, he found himself in the midst of a period of unusually bad weather which restricted his search attempts but he and his men did make a series of wide-ranging sledging trips in the next two years which did eventually find new evidence of what had happened. They met with Inuit who told stories that matched the ones Rae had heard of white men starving to death in the region. Like Rae, they were offered artefacts by the Inuit which had come from Franklin's men. On 6 May 1859, a metal cylinder was found which contained a two-part note written by members of the expedition. The first part, dated 28 May 1847, said in as many words that all was then well but the second part, dated 25 April 1848 and signed by Crozier and Fitzjames, told a very different story. It reported that Franklin had died on 11 June 1847 and that nine other officers and fifteen men had also lost their lives. The ships had been abandoned in the ice a few days earlier and the remaining men were heading for 'Back's Fish River' the following day. The Great Fish River, first explored by George Back in 1834, might possibly have taken them towards settlements run by the fur companies, although it is odd that Crozier chose not to head in a direction where rescue ships might find them. In fact, they were embarked on the long trek which would eventually lead to all their deaths. McClintock's party found further confirmation of their predecessors' tragic fate when they came across some of their possessions scattered across the icy landscape and one of the ship's boats, with two skeletons in its bow.

In total nearly twenty separate expeditions were sent out to discover what had happened to the men of the *Erebus* and the *Terror*. McClintock's party, in particular, came across enough evidence for a rough map of the Franklin expedition's travels to be drawn up and for extravagant, wish-fulfilling claims that it had

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found the Northwest Passage to be made. (Franklin's monument in Westminster Abbey bears the inscription, 'The beloved chief of the gallant crews who perished with him in completing the discovery of the Northwest Passage'.) In fact, it had done no such thing. With a cruel irony, Franklin's greatest contribution to exploration of the Far North may well have been his disappearance. In searching for the missing expedition, other explorers not only mapped out vast areas of the wilderness. Some of them turned their attention to a new Arctic goal – the North Pole.

More Disasters Amidst the Ice: Kane, Hall, George DeLong and the American Invasion

It was not just the British who were searching for Franklin. The Americans too had begun to get in on the act. One of the most persistent and flamboyant of the American explorers was Elisha Kent Kane, scion of an upper-crust family from Philadelphia, who served as the chief medical officer on an 1850–51 expedition which had visited the site of Franklin's last camp at much the same time as Erasmus Ommanney. After returning to the USA, Kane embarked on a series of lectures on his experiences in the North, becoming in the process a famous figure who could attract financial backing for another expedition. The shipping merchant Henry Grinnell, who had sponsored the first American expedition, was prepared to put money behind a new one led by Kane. Grinnell was one of thousands fascinated by Franklin's fate and this new expedition was ostensibly intended to track down the whereabouts of the missing Englishman and his companions, whether they were alive or, as now seemed almost certain, dead. In fact, Kane had other aims firmly in mind as well.

Like many others, including the recently deceased godfather of British Arctic exploration Sir John Barrow, he was a believer in the theory of an Open Polar Sea. Push onwards through the fearsome ice, men speculated, and you would break out into

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clear water. The way to the pole would be revealed and it would be across open sea. Kane paid lip service to the idea of finding out about Franklin but his real interest was in sailing as far north as he could up Smith Sound in search of the Open Polar Sea. His expedition turned out to be a catalogue of disasters. After wintering further north than anyone had previously done, his men were not in prime physical condition. Indeed, some were probably suffering from scurvy. A sledging trip in March 1854 turned into a desperate rescue mission during which the rescuers were reduced to as bad a state as those they were trying to rescue. Everybody involved, including Kane himself, suffered a kind of temporary insanity as they struggled through the ice and snow back to their ship. 'I know all my companions were frantic,' one of the men later wrote, 'for they laughed immoderately, gibbered, uttered the most frightful imprecations, mimicked the screams and groans of the invalids, howled like wild beasts, and in short exhibited a scene of insane fury which I have never seen equalled in a lunatic asylum.' Back on board, the surgeon was forced to amputate toes and even, in the case of one man, an entire foot ruined by frostbite. Several of Kane's men died. The troubles of the survivors had only just begun.

Further sledging expeditions led to more suffering. The expedition was now plagued by dissension and desertion as Kane's leadership qualities were severely questioned. As it became increasingly clear that the expedition faced another winter in the Arctic, this time with inadequate provisions, Kane set off with several companions in the direction of Beechey Island, hoping to meet up with men from Belcher's expedition and beg supplies from them, but he was soon forced to return. Winter now approached and Kane's men were so divided amongst themselves that they split into two groups. One group opted to stay on the ship, the *Advance*, with Kane; the other chose to leave in the hope of reaching safety at the small Greenland settlement of Upernavik. Under the leadership of Isaac Israel Hayes, the ship's surgeon, the latter party set off at

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the end of August but were soon in difficulties. Unable to make it as far as the nearest outposts of civilisation and forced to build a makeshift hut to shelter them from the worsening winter weather, Hayes and the men with him eventually decided to cut their losses and return to the *Advance*. Unsurprisingly, their journey turned out to be a nightmare and, by the time they set foot on board the ship again in early December, they were lucky still to be alive.

Together with the companions they had rejoined, they still had to wait for the winter ice to melt sufficiently to allow the *Advance* to reach open water. Although the two groups had come together again, they were anything but united. Squabbling and paranoia poisoned the atmosphere on board the ship. One man deserted and made it to an Inuit village but was brought back by Kane at gunpoint. By May 1855, it was obvious both that the *Advance* was not going to be freed from the ice in the near future and that the men could not possibly survive another winter in the Arctic. The only hope for Kane's men was to abandon the ship and, dragging its smaller boats behind them, make for open water to the south. It took them a month to do so and then they were embarked on an epic journey towards settlements further south. They eventually reached safety in August. The expedition had been a nightmare but its leader drew some consolation from all the troubles. Kane was convinced that two of his men, travelling on one of the poorly planned sledging trips in the spring of 1854, had glimpsed the Open Polar Sea in which he had always believed. A few years later another expedition, led by Isaac Israel Hayes, who was returning to the Arctic despite the horrors he had experienced there, also sailed up Smith Sound and seemed to confirm its existence.

By that time Kane was dead. He passed away in 1857, still only in his late thirties, but his adventures had inspired others. His books had been bestsellers and his lecture tours sell-out successes. He had become a famous man and a catalyst for a new-found interest in the Arctic among many of his countrymen.

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One of the many armchair travellers who read Kane's published journals was Charles Francis Hall. While most of Kane's readers contented themselves with merely dreaming of emulating his exploits, Hall became obsessed with the Arctic and convinced that he was destined for greatness there. He was not an experienced explorer nor was he, like so many others who had ventured into the Arctic, a naval officer. He was a pious, God-fearing printer and newspaper owner from Cincinnati and, when he set sail from New Bedford, Massachusetts in 1860 on his first Arctic expedition, it was also the first time he had ever been to sea. On his arrival in Greenland, however, he was ecstatic. 'Thank God I am at last on Arctic land where I have so long wished to be,' he wrote. 'Greenland's mountains I greet you!' After charting hundreds of miles of coastline and picking up information from the Inuit not only (he believed) on Franklin's expedition but also on Martin Frobisher's visit nearly three centuries earlier, Hall returned home delighted by his experiences and determined to return to the Arctic again.

No sooner was he back in the USA than he was planning a second expedition but, with the country plunged into civil war, it was almost impossible to raise funds for it. It was not until 1864 that Hall was able to scrape together enough cash to head for the Arctic again. This time he was to spend nearly five years away, first heading towards Repulse Bay and then travelling to King William Island, an island first explored by John Ross in 1830 which (although Hall did not know it) had been the scene of some of the worst suffering for Franklin's men two decades earlier. Hall gathered further oral testimony from the Inuit about the fate of the *Erebus* and *Terror* expedition but he was also beginning to dream of something more than just following in the footsteps of other explorers. 'Give me the means,' he wrote, 'and I will not only discover the North Pole, but survey all the land I might find between Kane's farthest and it, and have my whole soul in the work.'

In many ways, Hall was an open-minded explorer. His attitude

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to the Inuit (he was just about the only explorer of his times to give them the name they called themselves) was often enlightened and intelligent. Calling them 'a kind-hearted, hospitable and well-disposed race of beings', he was more prepared than most of his contemporaries to acknowledge that Western explorers had something to learn from the indigenous peoples. However, he was also muddle-headed, occasionally cantankerous and a poor leader of men. All these faults were to emerge, with disastrous consequences, in his third expedition.

By the time he embarked on it, Hall could be considered an extremely experienced polar explorer and he was able to persuade the US government to sponsor him. With his ship, the *Polaris*, he set sail from New York in June 1871 and his main aim was to make the first concerted effort to reach the North Pole since William Parry had dreamed of travelling there by reindeer power in 1827. Unfortunately, Hall's last expedition proved fatal for him and was filled with dangers for the men under his command. By the time the *Polaris* reached Greenland, dissent and insubordination, bordering on outright mutiny, were causing problems. Hall had fallen out with the scientists he had brought with him and the ship's boilers had been subjected to sabotage. As it sailed northwards, further disputes arose between Hall and his officers about just how far the ship should be taken. (It eventually reached $82^{\circ} 29'$, the farthest north achieved for a ship up to that date.) In early September, the expedition set up its winter camp in a harbour on the northern coast of Greenland but the troubles had only just begun. Hall fell seriously ill and, on 8 November, he died. His sickness and death were (and remain) slightly mysterious. There have even been suggestions that he was murdered. Nearly a hundred years later, his body was disinterred and discovered to contain significant traces of arsenic. However, whatever the reasons for his death, it plunged the expedition into further trouble, not helped by the heavy drinking and incipient paranoia of several of those officers now left to carry out its main mission. Seven months after Hall had

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been buried, a small party was sent out towards the pole but it was recalled almost as soon as it had left. The *Polaris* turned southwards but was caught in the ice. One night in October, as it seemed to be threatened with destruction, a half-hearted attempt to abandon the ship ended in some of the expedition members stranded on a large ice floe. The *Polaris*, with just over a dozen men still aboard, disappeared into the night. After enduring another winter in the ice, they were rescued the following July. Meanwhile their former companions, with few supplies and limited opportunities to hunt for seal, drifted on the ice which became their home for the next six months. After suffering extremes of hunger, cold and fear, they were eventually rescued by a sealing ship in April 1873.

With the Admiralty in London still licking the wounds inflicted on its reputation by the Franklin expedition and no longer interested in the Far North, the Arctic was in danger of becoming exclusively a territory in which Americans endured, suffered and enjoyed the occasional moment of triumph. However, the late 1860s saw two minor and mostly unsuccessful expeditions despatched from north Germany under the leadership of a naval captain named Carl Koldewey. And in 1872, a new nation unexpectedly (and rather improbably) entered the annals of polar exploration. The Austro-Hungarian North Pole expedition was the brainchild of Julius von Payer, a military officer who had travelled on Koldewey's second voyage, and Karl Weyprecht, a navy lieutenant with a long-standing interest in the Arctic. Payer and Weyprecht sailed from Norway and, within a month, their ship was firmly stuck in the pack ice. Drifting at the whims of the Arctic weather, they discovered new territory, a desolate archipelago which they named after the Austro-Hungarian emperor, Franz Josef, before being forced to abandon ship and make a desperate bid to escape the ice by sledge and boat. They succeeded in reaching the Russian mainland and returning home to tell their story.

At last, after nearly twenty years of pretending that the Arctic

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was no longer of interest to them, the British were now stirred into action. In September 1875, a Royal Navy expedition under the command of Captain George Nares set sail from Portsmouth. Taking his ships, HMS *Alert* and HMS *Discovery* (not to be confused with the ship on Scott's first Antarctic expedition) through Smith Sound and northwards into the strait that now bears his name, Nares spent one winter amidst the ice but decided against a second and sailed home in the summer of 1876. The most notable achievement of the expedition was a sledging trip led not by Nares himself but by Albert Markham, whose cousin Clements was later to be Captain Scott's mentor and an influential advocate of Antarctic exploration as President of the Royal Geographical Society. Markham's ultimate aim when he set off in the spring of 1876 was the pole itself but it soon became clear that this would not be attainable. To his surprise, since he thought all necessary precautions had been taken to prevent it, his men began to fall sick with scurvy. By the beginning of May 1876, significant numbers of them were barely able to walk let alone haul the sledges. On 12 May, when they reached the latitude of 83° 20', Markham planted a Union Jack in the ice and they turned back towards the ship. Just over a month later they were once again on board the *Alert* but, of the fifteen-man team, one had died and only three could walk on to the ship. The others had to be carried on to it. They had reached the farthest north any human being had ever stood but they had paid a heavy price in getting there.

Despite the tragedies associated with the names of Kane and Hall, there were still plenty of Americans clamouring to win their reputations in the Far North. The most notable of these was a US naval officer called George Washington DeLong. Unfortunately, all he would succeed in doing was to add his own name to the growing list of men who had lost their lives in pursuit of Arctic dreams. With the backing of the New York newspaper proprietor James Gordon Bennett Jr, who had earlier despatched HM Stanley to Africa in search of the missing Dr

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Livingstone, DeLong set sail from San Francisco on 8 July 1879. His ultimate aim was to reach the North Pole via the Bering Strait. Sadly his ship, the USS *Jeannette*, once it had reached the Arctic, rapidly became stuck in the pack ice. The *Jeannette*, with DeLong and his men on board, drifted north-west for nearly two years until, crushed by the ice, it began to break up. The explorers were forced to haul three smaller boats across the ice to open water and launch them in the direction of the Siberian mainland. One boat, with Lieutenant Charles Chipp and seven other men aboard, was never seen again. Another, commanded by the Chief Engineer George Melville, made it to the delta of the River Lena and those on it were eventually rescued and returned to the US. The fate of DeLong himself and those with him was not discovered until more than a year later when Melville, showing conspicuous bravery, returned to the region where he had nearly lost his life. He found the bodies of DeLong and his men in a snow-covered campsite close to the banks of the Lena. They had all died of cold and starvation.

By the 1880s, explorers and scientists worldwide were beginning to realise that international co-operation was required to push forward the boundaries of knowledge in the polar regions. The German scientist Georg von Neumayer and Austrian Karl Weyprecht, one of the leaders of the Austro-Hungarian expedition of 1872–74, were in the forefront of the campaign to co-ordinate activities. Weyprecht died in 1881 but their work reached fruition that same year with the institution of the First International Polar Year. Twelve nations, including Britain, the USA, Norway and Russia, signed up to participate and fifteen expeditions were organised, most of them in the Arctic, to establish research stations. It was the beginning of modern scientific investigation of the polar regions but the International Polar Year (which, confusingly, is often described as lasting from 1881 to 1884) was marked by tragedy. The American contribution to the international efforts, sometimes known as the Lady Franklin Bay expedition, was led by Adolphus

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Greely, an army officer who had no previous experience in the Arctic but had served with bravery and distinction as a young man in the Civil War. Greely set up camp well north of the Arctic Circle at a site he called Fort Conger. A small sledging party led by one of his officers, James B Lockwood, achieved a farthest north of 83° 24', beating Markham's record by a scant few miles, but the expedition was otherwise disastrous. Attempts to supply Fort Conger failed miserably and Greely abandoned it in August 1883. He headed south to a place where he believed ships would have deposited food and fuel. They hadn't and Greely's men were forced to spend the winter there in terrible circumstances. By the time rescuers did reach them in 1884, nineteen of his twenty-five men had died (one of them had been shot by Greely for mutiny) and the survivors had had to resort to cannibalising the corpses of their dead colleagues in order to stay alive.

Farthest North: Nansen and the Fram

Meanwhile in the Russian Arctic, some long-cherished goals were finally being achieved. Unlike the Northwest Passage, which might have simply been a geographical chimera, the Northeast Passage undoubtedly existed. By the middle of the nineteenth century, there could be no argument that it was possible to sail across the top of Russia from the Atlantic to the Pacific. It was just that it was extraordinarily difficult and nobody had done it. This was about to change. Adolf Erik Nordenskjöld was a Finnish-Swedish nobleman, exiled from the Grand Duchy of Finland (then under Russian rule) for his political activities, who had taken part in a series of small-scale Arctic expeditions in the 1860s and early 1870s. In the summer of 1878, he set sail in his ship the *Vega* and passed Cape Chelyuskin, the northernmost point of the Russian mainland, in August. The following month, the *Vega* was frozen into the ice near the Bering Strait. Concerns grew back in Europe that the expedition

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might be in trouble. (Ironically, one of the subsidiary objectives of George DeLong was to offer assistance to Nordenskjöld. As it turned out, DeLong was far more in need of help than the man he was thinking he might have to rescue.) However, Nordenskjöld and his men simply waited out the long Arctic winter and then navigated their way to Port Clarence in Alaska in July 1879.

With the Northeast Passage completed, it remained for someone to make an equivalent journey in the Canadian Arctic or travel successfully to the pole. It was now time for one of the greatest and most widely gifted of all Arctic explorers to step on to the stage. Fridtjof Nansen was originally a scientist. If he had never chosen to travel north, he might still be remembered, if not so widely, for his research into the central nervous system. He was born on a country estate north of Oslo, then known as Christiania, in 1861 and grew up as a great enthusiast for the Norwegian national sports of skiing and skating. At the same time that he was studying zoology at the Royal Frederick University in Christiania, he was also making his mark as a winter sportsman. He held world records in distance skating and became national cross-country skiing champion for the first of eleven times in 1880. However, as he continued his academic work and his sporting activities, his mind was turning towards Arctic exploration and discovery. In 1888, together with a party which included Otto Sverdrup, destined to become a close colleague and the leader of several expeditions of his own in the Arctic, Nansen made the first crossing of Greenland from east to west.

This was a substantial achievement in itself but the Norwegian adventurer now had more ambitious plans in mind. He had devised a daring and original method of travel which he believed would enable him to reach the North Pole. He would use the natural drift of the ice floes to take him there. A ship, suitably strengthened against the ice, would enter the pack in the seas off Siberia. It would be trapped and the ocean current beneath,

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flowing from east to west, would take it towards Greenland via the pole. Soon, Nansen had his ship which he called the *Fram*, Norwegian for 'Forward'. He had his crew which included Otto Sverdrup as his second in command. In July 1893, he set out from Norway towards Novaya Zemlya and then aimed to follow the Siberian coastline eastwards until he could pick up the drift west and (most importantly) north which he hoped would get him to the pole. Unfortunately, it didn't. Progress was painfully slow and by November 1894 it was clear that Nansen's original plan was not going to work. He announced another one to his crew but a further four months were to pass before this could be put into action. Finally, in March 1895, together with one companion named Hjalmar Johansen, he left the ship and set off for the pole with sledges, dogs and skis.

They made good progress at first but soon the natural phenomenon which Nansen had originally hoped would work in his favour on board the *Fram* began to work against them. The ice was beginning to drift southwards as they struggled to make their way northwards. In effect, for every two steps they took forward, the moving pack ice ensured that they also took one back. At this rate, Nansen's calculations suggested that they would not have enough food to get to the pole and back. They would have to retreat. The final camp before the two men turned southwards was at $86^{\circ} 13'$. They had travelled nearly three degrees of latitude further north than the sledging party in Greely's ill-fated expedition but it was no good. The North Pole remained unattainable. Once they were heading away from the pole, new difficulties arose. Their chronometers, needed for working out longitude and the direction in which safety lay, both stopped working. The ice was becoming slushier and making travel more difficult. In August 1895, they reached land which they assumed was Franz Josef Land but, without the essentials for navigation, they could not be sure. The weather was becoming bad and they were soon forced to set up a winter camp. They were able to hunt and food was no longer a problem

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but they had to endure months of waiting before they could resume their trek back to civilisation. In May 1896, they left their winter camp and started their journey again. On 17 June, the two men were hunched over their meagre morning meal when Nansen claimed that he could hear dogs barking. Johansen said it was impossible but his leader insisted. He set off to investigate and some time later spotted the figure of a man against the snow. The figure approached, looked him up and down and said, 'Aren't you Nansen?' The man was Frederick Jackson, an English explorer who was mapping the many uncharted areas of Franz Josef Land. It was an extraordinarily fortuitous meeting but, without it, Nansen and Johansen might well have died and news of their extraordinary attempt on the pole would never have reached the outside world.

On his return to Norway, Nansen decided that he had had enough of exploration. He devoted his genius to other activities and was a leading figure in the campaign and negotiations which led to Norway separating from Sweden and once again emerging as an independent, sovereign state. In the aftermath of the First World War, he became the League of Nations' High Commissioner for Refugees and he was awarded the 1922 Nobel Peace Prize for his work. Nansen himself may not have ventured into the high North again but his innovations in polar travel, his epic journey with Johansen and his example continued to be enormously influential on future generations of explorers both in the Arctic and the Antarctic.

Swedes and Italians: Salomon Andrée and the Duke of Abruzzi

There were other men who advocated new methods of travelling across the Arctic landscape, although not always with the knowledge and insight of Nansen. One of these men was Salomon Andrée, a Swedish engineer who worked for his country's patent office. Andrée was an enthusiast for ballooning

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and he saw no reason why balloonists might not travel to the North Pole. He set about raising funds for a voyage by hydrogen balloon which would, he hoped, take him from the Svalbard archipelago across the top of the world. The idea was greeted eagerly in Sweden. Support came from national scientific bodies and financial aid from prominent Swedes such as Alfred Nobel, the inventor of dynamite. Together with Nils Strindberg, a photographer and second cousin of the playwright August Strindberg, and the engineer Knut Frænkel, Andrée set off in his balloon on 11 July 1897. The three men were not seen again for more than thirty years. Only in 1930 were their bodies found and the story of their expedition told. The primitive steering mechanism for the balloon had failed from the beginning (two out of the three ropes of which it consisted had been lost on take-off) and Andrée and his companions had been forced on to the pack ice after less than three days in the air. Hauling sledges that they had stored on the balloon, they set off for a supply depot which had already been established in case of misadventure. They never made it. They reached solid land on a small island in the north-east of the Svalbard archipelago but they were all suffering from diarrhoea and swelling of the limbs (probably caused by trichinosis, a disease they may have contracted from eating worm-infected polar bear meat) and they died within days of landing. The first attempt to reach the pole by balloon had been a disaster from start to finish.

Prince Luigi Amedeo Giuseppe Maria Ferdinando Francesco of Savoy-Aosta, Duke of the Abruzzi, was the most socially distinguished individual to venture into the region before Prince Harry made his Arctic trek in 2011. He was born in Madrid in 1873. At the time of his birth his father happened to be King of Spain (although he abdicated when his younger son was less than a month old) but the Duke was first and foremost a member of the Italian royal family. He was a grandson of Victor Emmanuel II, the first king to rule a united Italy. At the time of Abruzzi's Arctic expedition, his uncle Umberto I was the Italian

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king. A veteran of mountaineering expeditions in the Alps and Alaska, the Duke turned his attention to the North Pole in 1899. In a ship named the *Stella Polare*, he and his carefully chosen companions headed for the northernmost point of Franz Josef Land. The idea was to winter there and then the duke would lead a smaller party pole-wards.

Unfortunately, winter conditions were bad. Frostbite attacked many of the men, including Abruzzi. Two of the ducal fingers had to be removed. Any thoughts he may have had about leading the proposed polar journey himself had to be abandoned and command passed to his comrade, Umberto Cagni. Cagni headed northwards from Franz Josef Land on 11 March 1900 with ten men and more than a hundred dogs to haul the sledges loaded with supplies. The idea was for two support teams of three men to turn back at given points, leaving Cagni and three companions to make it as far as the pole. The plan worked insofar as the support teams headed back to the *Stella Polare* as intended (although one of them vanished without trace en route and its fate is still unknown) but trouble was soon brewing. The weather was against them and they were unable to travel the distances they needed to do in order to keep to the tight timetable they had organised. Food was also running low and it soon became clear that the pole was beyond their grasp. On 25 April, Cagni and his men reached $86^{\circ} 34'$, the northernmost point then achieved and some twenty miles further than Nansen and Johansen had travelled in 1895. The Italians planted a flag and turned for home. At first the going was deceptively easy but within a few weeks their journey turned into a desperate race for survival. The ice was beginning to melt and it was also drifting in the very direction they did not want to go. As they marched eastwards towards the *Stella Polare* on the shore of Franz Josef Land, the ice was perversely determined to carry them westwards to their doom. It was not until the end of June, with supplies and fuel running low, that they finally managed to get back to the ship.

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Roald Amundsen Finally Does It

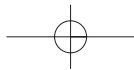
For centuries British and American expeditions had been searching for a Northwest Passage in the hope that it would provide a new and commercially rewarding means of getting from the Atlantic to the Pacific and vice versa. Hundreds of men had lost their lives in the search. Robert McClure had made the journey from west to east in the 1850s but he had done it partly by ship, partly by sledge and partly in the company of those who had come from the east to rescue him. His journey was scarcely the stuff of which legend was made. By the end of the nineteenth century, it was clear that there were passages that could be traced through the maze of islands, inlets and straits that made up the Canadian Arctic but no one had yet traversed it in one expedition and one ship. It was left to a Norwegian to perform this last heroic deed and, as had been increasingly clear throughout most of the century, the Passage proved to have no commercial value whatsoever.

The Norwegian was Roald Amundsen. He was born in 1872 in Borge, a small village near the city of Frederikstad in south-eastern Norway. He came from a family of shipowners and sea captains but, to please his mother, he trained to become a doctor. Only when she died did he give up his medical studies and go to sea. From boyhood, Amundsen had been fascinated by tales of polar exploration (the mystery surrounding the Franklin expedition was a particular favourite) and his ambition was always to travel in the Arctic. Nansen's crossing of Greenland, which took place when Amundsen was in his teens, was another spur to achievement. However, the first major polar expedition in which he participated was one to the South rather than the North. Between 1897 and 1899, he was first mate of the *Belgica*, the ship under the captaincy of Adrien de Gerlache which was the first to spend an entire, sunless winter in the Antarctic.

On his return to Norway, Amundsen began to plan his

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expedition to navigate the Northwest Passage. He consulted Nansen, already the elder statesman of Arctic exploration, and gained the benefits of both his advice and his blessing on the project. He found his ship – a 47-ton fishing vessel named the *Gjoa* – and he recruited six companions to share the rigours of the journey with him. Finances were trickier. In June 1903, with creditors threatening to take possession of his ship, he left Oslo and sailed for Baffin Bay. Taking a route through a landscape that was dominated by physical features named after the explorers who had gone before him (Parry Channel, James Ross Strait, Rae Strait), Amundsen reached King William Island in September. He sailed into a harbour that is now home to a small settlement named Gjoa Haven after his ship and stayed there for nearly two years. Only in the summer of 1905 did the *Gjoa* resume its journey. It reached Cambridge Bay where James Collinson, sailing from the Bering Strait, had wintered in 1852–53. The Northwest Passage from east to west had been completed but, with another winter approaching, Amundsen now needed to get word of his achievement to the outside world. He left his ship to winter again amidst the ice and made his way overland for 800 miles to the nearest telegraph station. From there he wired the news back to Europe. After five hundred years of trying, the Northwest Passage had finally been achieved.



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Eighteenth-Century Voyages South: Cook and others

In the middle of the eighteenth century, many people still believed in the possible existence of *Terra Australis*, the great continent which geographers since classical times had suggested must lie in southern latitudes to balance the land masses in the North. Previous centuries had seen explorers such as the Dutchman Abel Tasman go in search of this half-fabled land which was thought to be temperate in its climate, rich in its vegetation and, like the Americas, home to unknown peoples. Indeed, when Tasman reached what we now know was New Zealand in December 1642, he assumed it was part of a much larger continent which stretched across the southern seas. Just over a hundred years later, the reality or otherwise of *Terra Australis* was still a matter of debate and a number of expeditions, largely French and British, were despatched to look for it. Philip Carteret, Samuel Wallis and Louis de Bougainville all succeeded in circumnavigating the world (and the latter had a flower, the Bougainvillea, named after him) but none found any sign of a great southern continent. The Breton naval officer Yves-Joseph de Kerguelen-Trémarec sailed far enough south to discover the Kerguelen Islands, to which he lent half of his impressive surname. He believed at first that he might have stumbled upon the land for which his king, Louis XV, had instructed him to look but they turned out to be nothing more than a desolate, rocky archipelago.