

DISCOVERING THE NORTH-WEST PASSAGE: THE FOUR-YEAR ARCTIC ODYSSEY OF H.M.S. *INVESTIGATOR* AND THE McCLURE EXPEDITION. By GLENN M. STEIN. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2015. ISBN 978-0-7864-7708-1. maps, b&w illus., appendices, notes, bib., index. Available from www.mcfarlandpub.com; order line: 800-253-2187. Softbound. US\$39.95.

Of all the explorers who sailed from Europe in search of the Northwest Passage, the least admirable was probably Robert McClure. He is remembered today because in 1855, the British government awarded him a knighthood and 10 000 pounds (today worth roughly \$1.3 million), with half going to his men for having become “the first to have passed by water from sea to sea.” By returning alive to England, they had provided “a living evidence of the existence of a North-west Passage” (p. 240).

Originally the reward had been offered, as author Glenn M. Stein notes, “for the first person who should complete the North-west Passage, by actually sailing with his ship from one ocean to the other” (p. 240). But the government, saddled with the expenses of the Crimean War, was desperate to staunch the spending on Arctic search expeditions. And so it recognized McClure’s tortured logic, turning a blind eye to the fact that, as Stein writes, “the Investigators had walked through portions of the route” (p. 240).

In *Discovering the North-West Passage*, author Stein details the difficult human story behind McClure’s dubious achievement. This is the definitive account of the last voyage of HMS *Investigator*—a tale of how a Machiavelian captain, obsessive and ruthless, turned his ship into a frozen hell of unjust floggings, imprisonments, starvation, scurvy, and even, for a few, miserable deaths.

Stein takes a scholarly, detached approach to this material, documenting the story, adding appendices, and leaving

readers to draw their own conclusions and make their own judgments. The facts are all here. In August 1850, arriving from the Pacific Ocean, McClure had sailed HMS *Investigator* into Arctic waters through Bering Strait. After passing the mouth of the Mackenzie River, he left the coast and struck north between Victoria Island and Banks Island into Prince of Wales Strait.

The eastern end of that strait was (and often still is) blocked year-round by pack ice moving slowly south from the permanent polar ice cap. Halted and forced to winter over at that location, McClure sledged to the northeast coast of Banks Island. Looking out across an ice-choked channel 65 miles (104.6 km) wide (now called McClure Strait), he saw Melville Island, which William Edward Parry had reached from the Atlantic in 1819. This viewing, he would later argue, constituted his discovery of the Northwest Passage.

The next spring, after trying and again failing to escape Prince of Wales Strait, McClure retraced his path, retreating southwest and then sailing north around Banks Island. At Mercy Bay on the northeast coast, his ship became trapped by the same perennial flow of pack ice.

In 1853, with his ship still beset and his starving men suffering dreadfully from scurvy, McClure conceived a sinister plan to rid himself of his 30 sickest crew members, who insisted on consuming their short rations of food. He proposed to send them south and east in two separate sledge parties, both radically undersupplied. He and the healthiest men would remain with the ship to await further developments.

In April of that year, when he was mere days from enacting this plan, a sailor from HMS *Resolute*, trapped 60 miles (96.5 km) away, chanced upon the *Investigator*. As a result, McClure and his men sledged and walked across the frozen pack to that ship, which had entered Arctic waters from the Atlantic.

Having abandoned his own vessel under protest, McClure later argued that sledging across the pack ice to HMS *Resolute*, and then continuing home in another ship, constituted completion of the Northwest Passage. This argument carried the day—though as late as 1969, while trying to become the first vessel to pound through McClure Strait, the American ice-breaker *Manhattan* was forced to proceed instead down Prince of Wales Strait before continuing westward.

Stein's exhaustive research turns up a multitude of little-known nuggets. The expedition's primary objective was to obtain intelligence about the lost expedition of Sir John Franklin. To that end, Stein tells us, "Foxes were captured alive in traps, fitted with special copper collars stamped with the positions of [ships and supply caches] and then released" (p. 21), as in a previous expedition led by James Clark Ross. The hope was that one of these foxes would be caught by Franklin's men.

This expedition, like others, was supplied with gilt metal "rescue buttons" with words pointing to key locations. These were to be given to Inuit in the hope that they might

wear them when and if they came across any men from the Franklin ships. Then there were hydrogen-filled balloons designed for periodic release, which carried messages on pieces of brightly colored paper.

In Stein's account, many individuals spring to life—among them, first lieutenant William Haswell, tormented by McClure; Alexander Armstrong, the discerning ship's doctor; and Johann Miertsching, interpreter and missionary. The book is enhanced by black-and-white illustrations, clearly reproduced—many of them not well known. An epilogue treats the finding in 2010, by Canadian archaeologists, of the wreck of the *Investigator* where she sank, about 8 m below the surface.

Again, the word here is exhaustive. Stein has given us no fewer than seven appendices: weights and measures, notes on sources, crew list, extracts from Admiralty orders, notable sled parties, notes on map features, and polar crumbs (creation of the Arctic Medal). This is not a book for newcomers to the history of Arctic exploration. It is geared to those with a serious interest and will reward that audience by relaying virtually all there is to know about the McClure expedition.

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