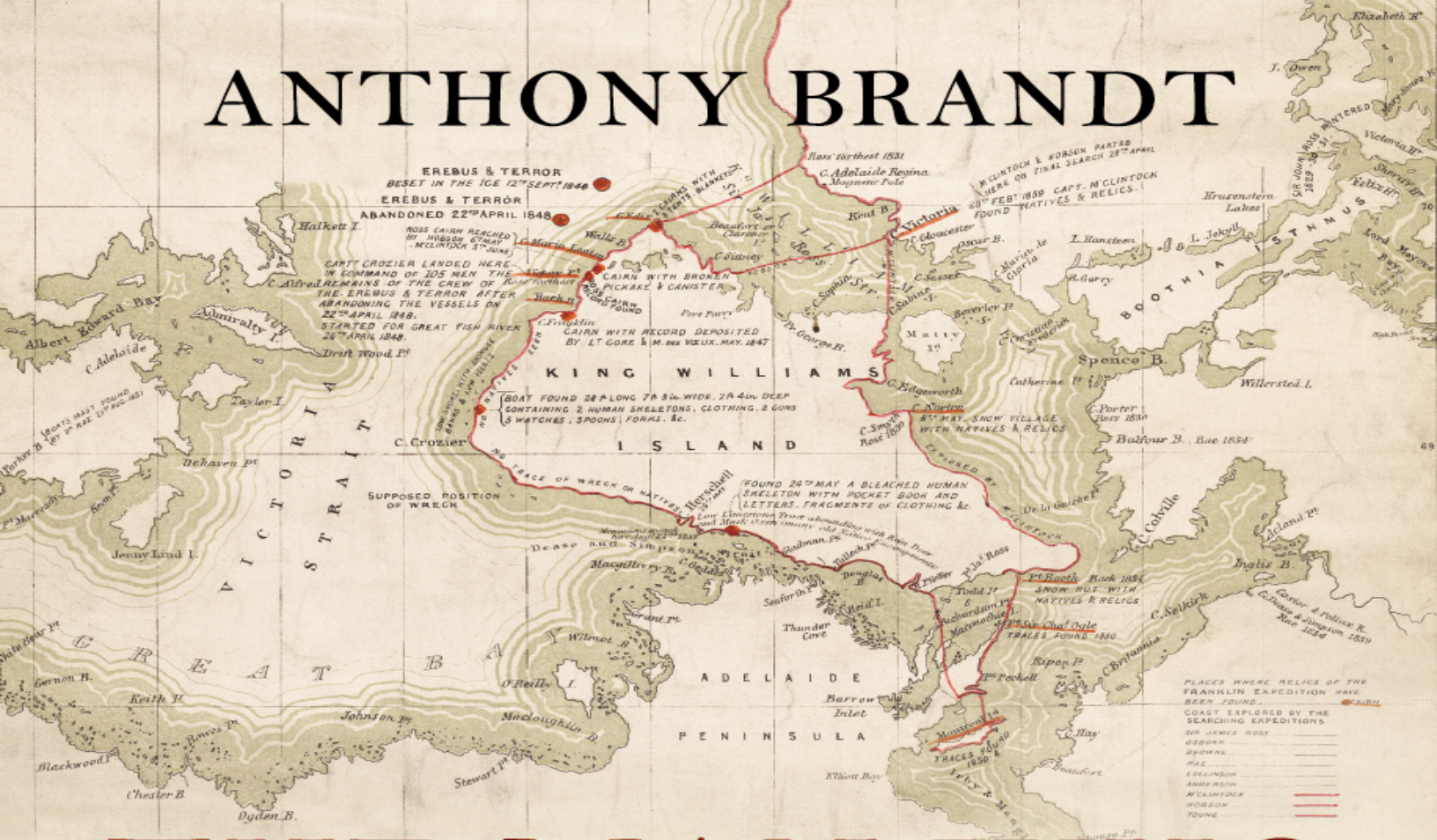
ANTHONY BRANDT

THE MAN WHO ATE HIS BOOTS

Sir John Franklin and the Tragic History of the Northwest Passage



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About the Book

Dozens of missions set out for the Arctic during the first half of the nineteenth century; all ended in failure and many in disaster, as men found themselves starving to death in the freezing wilderness, sometimes with nothing left to eat but their companions' remains. Anthony Brandt traces the complete history of this noble and foolhardy obsession, which originated during the sixteenth century, bringing vividly to life this record of courage and incompetence, privation and endurance, heroics and tragedy. Along the way he introduces us to an expansive cast of fascinating characters: seamen and landlubbers, scientists and politicians, sceptics and tireless believers.

The Man Who Ate His Boots is a rich and engaging work of narrative history – a multifaceted portrait of noble adventure and of imperialistic folly.

About the Author

Anthony Brandt is the author of two previous books, and the editor of the Adventure Classics series published by National Geographic Society Press. He is also the books editor at *National Geographic Adventure* magazine and was previously the book critic for *Men's Journal*. His work has appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly*, *GQ*, *Esquire* among many other magazines. He lives in Sag Harbor, New York.

ALSO BY ANTHONY BRANDT

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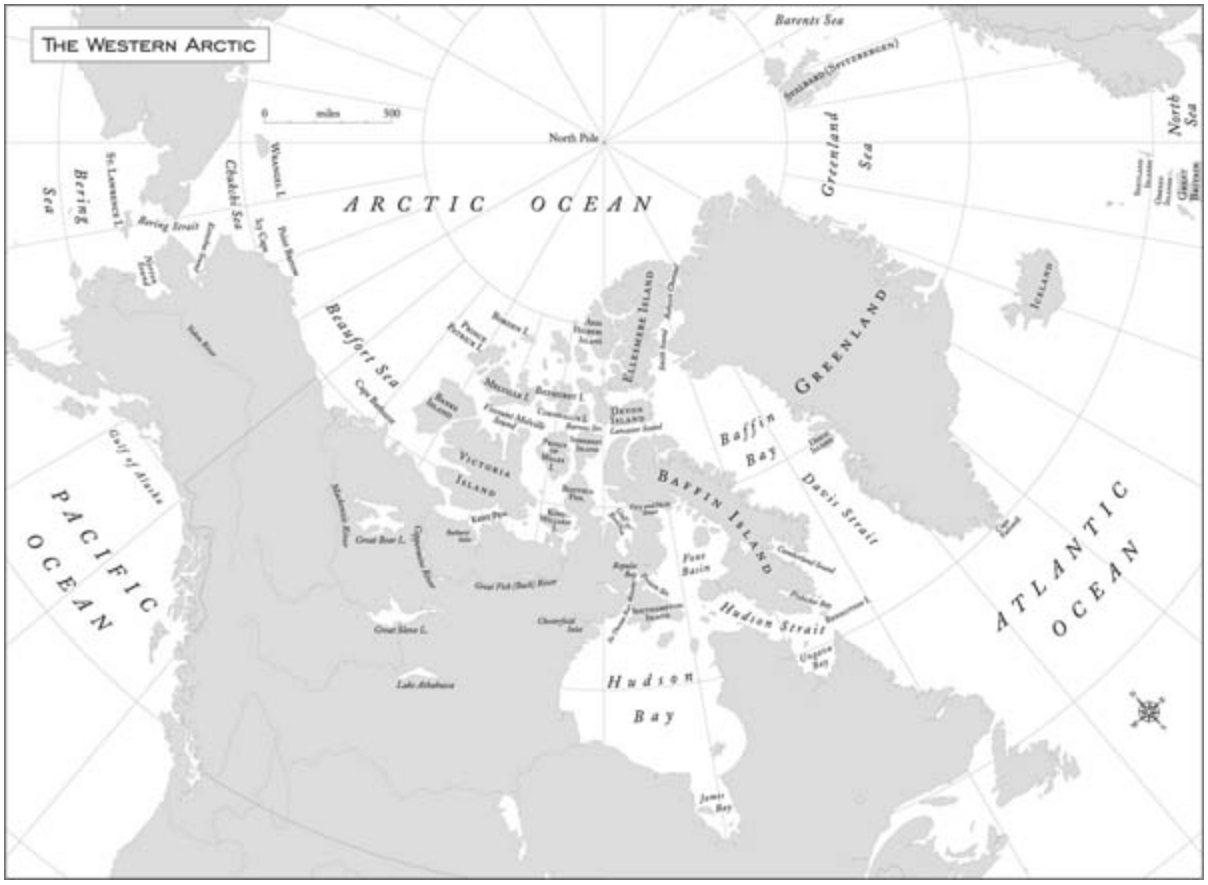
The South Pole: A Narrative


THE WESTERN ARCTIC
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North Pole
ARCTIC OCEAN
Barents Sea
Greenland Sea
North Sea
Bering Sea
Bering Strait
Chukchi Sea
Beaufort Sea
GREENLAND
ICELAND
Baffin Bay
Davis Strait
BAFFIN ISLAND
VICTORIA ISLAND
ELLESMERE ISLAND
DEVON ISLAND
PACIFIC OCEAN
ATLANTIC OCEAN
Hudson Strait
Hudson Bay
Foxe Basin
Gulf of Alaska
Great Bear L.
Great Slave L.
Lake Athabasca
James Bay

A Chronological List of Arctic Explorations, 1818–1880: The Explorers and Their Ships Who Went in Search of the Northwest Passage and of Sir John Franklin

1818 David Buchan, *Dorothea,* and John Franklin, *Trent*

To the seas north of Spitzbergen (now Svalbard) in search of a passage over the North Pole to the Pacific. Failed to find a route through the ice.

1818 John Ross, *Isabella,* and William Edward Parry, *Alexander*

To Davis Strait and Baffin Bay, in search of the presumed Northwest Passage over Canada to the Pacific. Rediscovered sites first discovered by Baffin two hundred years earlier; turned back from exploring Lancaster Sound.

1819–22 John Franklin, first Arctic land expedition

To northern Canada and the shores of the Arctic Ocean at the mouth of the Coppermine River, for the purpose of mapping the north coast of North America and in search of the Northwest Passage. Discovered Bathurst Inlet; stopped at Point Turnagain on the Kent Peninsula.

1819–20 William Edward Parry, *Hecla,* and Matthew Liddon, *Griper*

To Baffin Bay, Lancaster Sound, and the Canadian archipelago in search of the Northwest Passage. Sailed through Lancaster Sound and Barrow Strait, discovered Prince Regent Inlet, the Parry Islands, Melville Island, Banks Island.

1821–23 William Edward Parry, *Fury,* and George F. Lyon, *Hecla*

To upper Hudson Bay in search of the Northwest Passage. Explored Repulse Bay, Frozen Strait; discovered Fury and Hecla Strait.

1824–25 William Edward Parry, *Hecla,* and Henry Hoppner, *Fury*

To Prince Regent Inlet in the Canadian archipelago in search of the Northwest Passage. Made no new discoveries.

1824 George F. Lyon, *Griper*

To Repulse Bay, in the upper reaches of Hudson Bay, to send an exploring party overland to the Kent Peninsula on the northern Canadian coast. Beset in the ice in Sir Thomas Roe's Welcome; never reached Repulse Bay.

1825–27 John Franklin, second Arctic land expedition

Overland to upper Canada and, via the Mackenzie River system, to the mouth of the Mackenzie; from there proceeding westward along the coast of northern Canada toward Point Barrow (and eastward, under John Richardson, to the mouth of the Coppermine River). Got as far west as Return Reef.

1825–28 Frederick W. Beechey, *Blossom*

To Bering Strait, in support of Franklin and Parry, to await their arrival. Explored the west coast of Alaska from Icy Cape to Point Barrow.

1827 William Edward Parry, *Hecla*

To Spitzbergen, in an attempt to reach the North Pole. Failed.

1829–33 John Ross, *Victory*

Private expedition to Prince Regent Inlet in search of the Northwest Passage. Crossed Boothia Peninsula, discovered King William Island, wrongly thought it to be part of the mainland, explored its north shore to Cape Franklin, and discovered the North Magnetic Pole.

1833–35 George Back, Arctic land expedition

Down the Great Fish River in northern Canada to find and rescue the John Ross expedition, gone four years. Discovered and mapped the Great Fish River; reached Chantrey Inlet at the mouth of the river.

1836–37 George Back, *Terror*

Into Hudson Bay, to send explorers overland from Wager Inlet to Arctic Ocean coastline, to map the coastline from Fury and Hecla Strait to Point Turnagain. Beset in the ice; never reached Wager Inlet.

1837–39 Thomas Simpson and Peter Dease, Arctic land expedition

Hudson's Bay Company expedition to complete survey of Canada's north coast from Point Barrow to Boothia Peninsula. Reached Point Barrow on western leg, Castor and Pollux River on lower Boothia Peninsula on eastern leg. Crossed to the south coast of King William Island and Victoria Island. Discovered Simpson Strait.

1845–48 John Franklin, *Erebus,* and Francis R. M Crozier, *Terror*

To Lancaster Sound and the Canadian archipelago in search of the Northwest Passage. Ships sailed to Beechey Island at the mouth of Wellington Channel, wintered there in 1845–46, sailed north up Wellington Channel and south around Cornwallis Island to Peel Strait, down Peel Strait to Victoria Strait. Beset in the ice north of King William Island in September 1846; ships were abandoned in April 1848. Survivors trekked south toward Chantrey Inlet and Great Fish River. None lived. May have completed one leg of Northwest Passage.

1846–47 John Rae, land expedition

To Repulse Bay in northern Hudson Bay, overland to bottom of Prince Regent Inlet, then to west coast of Boothia Peninsula. Added to knowledge of coastline there.

1848–49 James Ross, *Enterprise,* and Edward Bird, *Investigator*

To Lancaster Sound and Barrow Strait in search of Franklin expedition. No trace found.

1848–52 Thomas Moore, *Plover*

To Bering Strait and Kotzebue Sound, in search of Franklin expedition. A supply ship, it did no exploring.

1848–50 John Richardson and John Rae

Overland expedition to north coast of Canada in search of John Franklin. No trace found.

1848–50 Henry Kellett, *Herald*

To Bering Strait and Kotzebue Sound, in search of Franklin expedition. For resupply of the *Plover.*

1849 Robert Shedden, *Nancy Dawson*

Private expedition to Bering Strait in search of Franklin expedition and to assist the *Herald.*

1849–51 William J. S. Pullen and W. H. Hooper

By small boat from Point Barrow east to Mackenzie River, in search of Franklin expedition. In two summers reached Cape Bathurst. Stopped by ice.

1849–50 James Saunders, *North Star*

Resupply ship for James Ross's attempt to search for Franklin expedition. Ice prevented ship from reaching Ross.

1850 Charles Forsyth, *Prince Albert*

Private expedition, financed by Jane Franklin, in search of Franklin survivors in Prince Regent Inlet. Stopped by ice.

1850–51 H. T. Austin, *Resolute;* Erasmus Ommanney, *Assistance;* John Cator, *Intrepid;* and Sherard Osborn, *Pioneer*

To Lancaster Sound and Barrow Strait in search of Franklin expedition. Discovered site on Beechey Island where Franklin spent first winter. Sledge parties discovered Prince of Wales Island, explored Bathurst Island and parts of Melville Island.

1850–51 William Penny, *Lady Franklin,* and Alexander Stewart, *Sophia*

To Lancaster Sound and Barrow Strait in search of Franklin expedition. Sledge parties explored in Wellington Channel, discovered various islands.

1850–51 John Ross, *Felix,* and yacht *Mary*

To Lancaster Sound and Barrow Strait in search of Franklin expedition. Helped with search of Beechey Island.

1850–51 Edwin De Haven, *Advance,* and Samuel Griffin, *Rescue*

American expedition to Lancaster Sound and Barrow Strait in search of Franklin expedition. Helped search Beechey Island. Beset in ice in September; drifted with the ice in Baffin Bay throughout winter.

1850–51 John Rae, Victoria Island

To Victoria Island by dog sledge, then small boat, in search of Franklin expedition. Explored southern coast of Victoria Island and determined it was one piece of land, not two.

1850–54 Robert McClure, *Investigator*

To Bering Strait, past Point Barrow, into straits off northern Canada, in search of Franklin expedition. Discovered Prince of Wales Strait

between Banks Island and Victoria Island. Sailed around Banks Island to west and north. Discovered one of the Northwest Passages and traversed it walking on the ice.

1850–55 Richard Collinson, *Enterprise*

To Bering Strait, past Point Barrow, into straits off northern Canada in search of Franklin expedition. Separated from McClure. With sledging parties covered areas previously explored by McClure and Rae.

1851–52 William Kennedy, *Prince Albert*

Private expedition, financed by Jane Franklin, in search of John Franklin. To Prince Regent Inlet and across North Somerset Island by sledge, to Peel Sound, to Prince of Wales Island, then north to Cape Walker. Discovered Bellot Strait separating North Somerset from Boothia Peninsula.

1852 Edward Inglefield, *Isabel*

Private expedition, financed by Jane Franklin, in search of John Franklin. To Baffin Bay and Jones Sound. Penetrated Smith Sound and mapped coastline there.

1852–54 Edward Belcher, *Assistance;* Sherard Osborn, *Pioneer;* Henry Kellett, *Resolute;* Francis L. McClintock, *Intrepid*

To Lancaster Sound and Barrow Strait in search of Franklin expedition. Belcher and Osborn to Wellington Channel area; Kellett and McClintock to Melville Island. Sledge parties traced unknown coasts of islands in and above Wellington Channel to Melville Island. McClintock discovered Eglinton and Prince Patrick Islands west of Melville Island. Rescued McClure and crew from Bay of Mercy on Banks Island. Ships abandoned.

1852–54 William J. S. Pullen, *North Star*

Depot ship for Belcher expedition (above), in search of Franklin expedition. Based at Beechey Island.

1853–54 John Rae

Overland to Boothia Peninsula, to complete survey of Boothia west coast. Discovered fate of Franklin expedition.

1855 James Anderson

Hudson's Bay Company expedition down Great Fish River, to search for Franklin relics and records.

1857–59 Francis L. McClintock, *Fox*

Private expedition, financed by Jane Franklin, to search for Franklin relics and records. To Prince Regent Inlet; sledge parties to King William Island.

1864–69 Charles Francis Hall

Private expedition to Repulse Bay and King William Island in search of Franklin survivors, relics, and records.

1878–80 Lieutenant Frederick Schwatka

American Geographical Society expedition overland to King William Island in search of Franklin relics and records.

To Lorraine

THE MAN WHO ATE HIS BOOTS

The Tragic History of the Search for the Northwest Passage

Anthony Brandt

JONATHAN CAPE
LONDON

INTRODUCTION

When Lieutenant Edward Parry of the Royal Navy climbed a small hill on what he believed to be the southwest corner of Melville Island in the summer of 1820, he gazed out upon an apparently endless sea of ice stretching west to the horizon. The same ice filled up the strait between Melville Island and land he could just make out in what sailors called the offing, far away, to the south, perhaps fifty miles distant. It was August, yet there was no trace of a lane of open water anywhere within sight. The surface of the ice was as hummocky and ridged as the wrinkled surface of a glacier, while the floes close to shore were as thick as a four-story building is tall. If this was the Northwest Passage, he could plainly see, it would never be navigable. Ice that thick, that old, that hard could not possibly melt in the brief Arctic summer, and no ship could penetrate it.

In the summer of 2007, for the first time in history, this particular route through the Canadian archipelago, the complex maze of islands lying north of the North American continent and east of the Mackenzie River delta, opened to ship traffic. The following summer it opened again. All that ice was gone. Thanks to global warming it is beginning to seem likely that the Northwest Passage will open for longer and longer periods each year, until, perhaps by the end of this century, ice will have vanished from the world

altogether and the ancient dream of a Northwest Passage will have been, unexpectedly and inadvertently, realized.

The potentially apocalyptic consequences of such an event are too well known to need comment: drowned islands, drowned seacoasts, massive storms, cycles of flood and drought, the reconfiguration of the world's ocean currents, and accelerated species loss. In the immediate time frame, however, there are advantages to global warming, and the opening of the Northwest Passage is one of them. By ship, via the Panama Canal, the distance from New York to Tokyo is 11,300 miles. Via the Northwest Passage it is nearly 3,000 miles shorter. The savings to European shipping would be comparable. And it isn't only a question of shipping costs. If there turns out to be enough oil and natural gas in the Arctic to justify large-scale extraction, it will be much cheaper, and perhaps ecologically safer, to take it out by tanker than by laying pipe across the Arctic tundra.

The opening of the Passage, in fact, has energized a dormant political conflict over both the extraction of resources from the Arctic Ocean seafloor and the shipping lanes themselves. Canada claims the islands of its archipelago as its own but lacks the means and the will to occupy them and maintain its claim; nevertheless it regards the straits and channels that divide the islands as internal waterways with the same status as rivers and streams. The United States, Great Britain, and other countries have always disagreed with this position, insisting that the Northwest Passage is an international waterway free to all, like the oceans. To make its point, the United States sent a Coast Guard icebreaker through the Passage in 1985, before global warming had become an issue, without asking permission from the Canadian government. Canada responded by announcing its intention to build more icebreakers of its own and to enhance security in the Far

North, plans that it subsequently abandoned because of the expense. The issue remains unresolved.

Ownership of the seafloor in the Beaufort Sea north of Alaska and the Canadian Northwest Territories has also been in question; with the advent of global warming the question has become more acute. In 2003 the United States tried to auction off drilling rights to an area believed to hold major natural gas reserves that Canada also claims. Energy companies backed off, not wanting to become involved in the dispute. In 2004 the Canadian military conducted exercises on Baffin Island designed to familiarize itself with Arctic conditions. Canada does not, however, maintain permanent bases in the archipelago and has no way to stop nuclear-powered submarines from operating under the Arctic ice, and no stations to detect their passage. In 2007 the increasingly assertive Russians used a submersible to plant their flag on the bottom of the Arctic Ocean at the North Pole. The Danes for their part are claiming rights to oil and gas reserves in the narrow channel that divides Greenland, which is a Danish dependency, from Ellesmere Island, where the Canadians have nailed bronze plaques claiming sovereignty to the bare rocks.

These developments no doubt would have amazed Lieutenant Parry. The industrialization of Europe and the United States that would set global warming in motion was certainly well under way by 1820, but England was still primarily a rural nation. Ships were made of wood, and the age of sail was not yet over. The first passenger railways were a decade in the future; in 1820 railways were used to transport coal and ore. Steam engines had only just begun to appear in a few coastal ferries. It would have been difficult, if not impossible, for Parry to imagine massive icebreakers hundreds of feet long weighing thousands of tons plowing through the frozen waters he surveyed. For Parry, the Northwest Passage was a geographic puzzle to

be solved, and his mission was basically scientific. He spent much of his time his first winter in the Arctic measuring temperature, barometric pressure, and compass variations; recording the appearance and frequency of the aurora borealis; collecting specimens of rocks, plants, and animals; and making maps. There were dreamers—there are always dreamers—but few sensible people had any hope that the Northwest Passage might become a commercially viable route to the Pacific. One of those dreamers, to be sure, happened to be the second secretary of the Admiralty, and it was he who had engineered this voyage, and would engineer many more. But for Parry, staring in wonder over this alabaster sea, in awe of what he was looking at and mindful of his own growing experience of sea ice, the idea that it all might one day melt away like so much ice cream would have been incomprehensible. Throughout his lifetime, and the lifetime of the second secretary, during the half-century or so the search for the Northwest Passage engaged British ambitions and thrilled the British public, the ice never melted. It remained intractable, impenetrable, and, for those who challenged it, a kind of fate.

It was a tragic fate in the end. We use the word *tragic* carelessly these days to describe any sort of disaster that kills people, from the space shuttle *Challenger* exploding in the sky to Hurricane Katrina devastating New Orleans. In its original Greek sense, however, the word refers not to straightforward natural disasters but to tragic drama, in which it was hubris, an all-too-human arrogance and pride, that triggered a particular calamity. Historical events are tragic in a looser sense; history is messy, it lacks the tight construction of classic drama, and things can go wrong in a thousand ways that have no connection to human motivation or human action. The study of ice cores in the Canadian archipelago has revealed that the years from 1810 to 1860, during which the British pursued the quest

for the Northwest Passage that is the subject of this book, had summers that were the coldest on record, four full degrees below the seven-hundred-year average, and the ice melt during those summers was consequently the lowest. No one could have predicted such an eventuality.

Yet instances of hubris in history abound and the consequences are often fatal. In the case of the quest for the Northwest Passage, a nation pursued an enterprise that met with repeated and often deadly failure over a period not just of years but of centuries, persisting in tempting fate until fatality became inevitable. And fate arrived in the form of sea ice. For generations, as we shall see, men deluded themselves into believing that sea ice did not exist, or that if it did, it occurred only in shallow water, in the vicinity of land, while in the open oceans it could not form because of the action of the waves. Some scientists even theorized that salt water could not freeze at all. The seeds of tragedy are to be found in just such delusions, coming in this case from the minds of men with no experience in the ice, men who had never watched a harbor freeze over or felt the terror of ice floes a mile or two across and ten feet thick bearing down on them in Baffin Bay or the whale-rich waters around Svalbard. In the half-century after the end of the Napoleonic Wars, this tragic folly came to its climax when the British tried to force the Northwest Passage once and for all, no matter what. They believed it their peculiar destiny to do so, to triumph over the ice and add this exclamation point to the great victories at Trafalgar and Waterloo, underlining in the process British command of the world’s oceans. In the end two lavishly equipped ships and 129 men fell victim to the ice. Their deaths were ugly, a scene of horror out of a Gothic novel or Dante’s *Inferno*. There was no trace of dignity in the record left by their bones, which had been broken open by the last survivors for their marrow.

Yet tragedy can be the scene of heroism as well as arrogance and folly. Men suffered and died in the Arctic in a great cause, to open an entire region of the globe to science and human traffic, however unreal it was at the time to envision sailing through water frozen to a depth of forty feet. Should they have stayed home and waited for global warming? No easy answer suggests itself. To behave nobly and heroically in an obviously hopeless cause is a kind of folly, but it can also constitute a kind of greatness. Despite the wrongheadedness of the enterprise, an air of transcendence arises from their sufferings. It was in vain that they died, but their deaths raised them up, as it were, and made them emblems of whatever it is in human beings that can seem sublime.

…

John Franklin, known after his disastrous journey along the north coast of Canada as “the man who ate his boots,” was just such a hero. Short and tending to corpulence, he was almost excessively pious—but it was a pious age—and so kind that he would not swat mosquitoes but blew them off his skin, telling the astonished Yellow Knife Indians who saw him do this that these pestiferous insects, which in their swarms could blot out the sun on the Arctic tundra, drain a caribou dry, and drive a man insane, had as much right to live as he did. This exaggerated kindness is part of his legend, along with his courage, his sufferings, his persistence, and the mystery of his disappearance in the icy wastes of the North. Within sixty years of his death one short and three full-length biographies appeared. As recently as 2002 there was another. He became a model for the chivalric revival of the mid to late nineteenth century in England. He seemed to embody the chivalric virtues at their best; he was a gentleman and a gentle man, pious and pure but at the same time brave and indomitable. This book

is not a biography of Franklin, but he is its natural focus, because it was he, not Parry, who became the central, the emblematic figure in the quest for the Northwest Passage in the nineteenth century. He was present at the beginning in 1818 and again at the end, when he commanded the last expedition the British sent on this quest in 1845. It was the long, exhaustive search for this expedition that ultimately mapped most of the Arctic and finally solved the riddle of the Northwest Passage.

He was in most respects perfectly ordinary, not in the least heroic in the standard sense of the word, not the swashbuckling naval officer of boys' adventure stories or a moody grand Byronic hero. It is hard to imagine him brandishing a sword. He was socially shy and uneasy at large parties, and being treated as a hero made him extremely uncomfortable. It is his bronze statue, nevertheless, that stands in Waterloo Place in London, honoring not only him but all the men who died with him in the unforgiving Arctic ice; and it is his monument with its portrait bust that is embedded in the wall in Westminster Abbey, with its neat little epitaph by Tennyson:

NOT HERE! THE WHITE NORTH HATH THY BONES, AND THOU,
HEROIC SAILOR SOUL,
ART PASSING ON THY HAPPIER VOYAGE NOW
TOWARDS NO EARTHLY POLE.

Had Franklin been capable of irony he might have smiled, not at the words but at the fact that Tennyson wrote them. Tennyson had married one of Franklin's many nieces, and Franklin had met him once and hadn't approved of him. The young, tall, long-haired poet had sprawled across no fewer than three chairs after dinner and lit a pipe in the presence of the ladies. Franklin was nothing if not proper. But it was precisely the fact that he

was not capable of irony that made him such a perfect candidate for heroism. The making of heroes is one way of transcending the ubiquitous irony of history; it is what demonstrates that we are a great people after all, that our hopes and dreams are not foolish and futile, that we can rise above defeat. The hubris was Britain's, not Franklin's. He sailed for the Northwest Passage to redeem a somewhat damaged reputation and to cap his long career with a triumph. But by his death he suffered a sea change. Kind, avuncular, overweight, and too old to be leading an expedition into the Arctic, his death and the death of his companions transformed him from a well-known Arctic explorer into an avatar of British greatness. He actually died before the tragic denouement of that final voyage. No matter. As the leader of the expedition, it was he who was declared to be the discoverer of the Northwest Passage, he was the one to whom the statues were erected. It was Franklin who gave the story its tragic dimension and the nation its catharsis: he, and the tireless work on behalf of his memory of his extraordinary wife, Jane.

But if Franklin was not in fact the great man his wife, and a grieving nation, made him out to be, the personal nobility of the enterprise he was engaged upon is undeniable. Great Britain's Arctic explorers sailed eagerly into the bitter seas of the far North, testing themselves against the deadliest climate in the world, in the service of something they believed in. The conclusion was tragic, but tragedy gives depth and meaning to death. Where would mankind be if it did not take risks? If it were not proud? The story that follows is replete with folly, official and otherwise, but the story as a whole is stirring. Things may have ended very badly indeed, yet it is impossible not to feel that the monuments and memorials were deserved.

It is just this tension, finally, between the nobility and the folly of the enterprise that makes the story so rich and has inspired so many efforts to tell it. And now we have its

climactic irony, the melting of the Northwest Passage. It was plain early on in the search for the Passage that it would never be of any practical use. Now it is. Global warming has given the search a whole new context and its history one more twist. In the scramble for seafloor and rights-of-way in the Arctic that is already beginning, Canada is counting on the Franklin expedition's presumed discovery of the Passage in 1848 to establish ownership, and every summer now Parks Canada is sending underwater archaeology teams into the area of the Canadian archipelago where Franklin's ships disappeared in the hope of finding their remains. So far they have come up with some pieces of copper sheeting. The muse of history must be smiling. She has become relevant again, in a way no one could have expected.

I

A National Obsession

You cannot contest the inestimable benefit which I shall confer on all mankind to the last generation, by discovering a passage near the pole to those countries, to reach which at present so many months are requisite.

—Captain Walton to his sister in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or the Modern Prometheus*

CHAPTER ONE

The Croker Mountains

THE FOUR SHIPS cast off one by one from their moorings in the new canal connecting the maze of Royal Navy docks at Deptford, just below London, with the Thames, and moved toward the river and the beginning of their journeys. It was mid-morning, April 4, 1818, and a crowd had gathered to cheer them on. With the tide on the ebb, however, two of the ships, the *Trent* and the *Alexander*, did not reach the canal gates before they closed and were forced to lay over one more night. This gave still more "parties of ladies and gentlemen," as Alexander Fisher, assistant surgeon on the *Alexander*, described them, a chance to come aboard to wish them well and say good-bye.

Parties of ladies and gentlemen had in fact been visiting the four ships for weeks, sending their visiting cards below to the officers, asking to be led on a tour. Lieutenant John Franklin wrote his sister, "It would be quite impossible for me to convey to you the amazing interest our little squadron has excited. Deptford has been covered with carriages and the ships with visitors every day since they were in a state to be seen." Franklin had as a result been introduced to a great many people, "some of them persons of considerable rank and all men of scientific eminence." The Duke of Clarence, King George III's youngest son and later King William IV, who had served his own apprenticeship in the Royal Navy, paid an official visit to

see them off. We do not know if he met them then, but among the people who visited the ships were the two women who would later become Franklin's first and second wives. The expedition had aroused a great deal of excitement in England. The visitors "all appeared," Alexander Fisher remarked, "to be as much interested in the success of our undertaking, as we could possibly be ourselves; but, *by way of comfort*," he added, "they frequently expressed their concern for our safety in such a hazardous enterprise."

Hazardous indeed. All four ships were on their way to the Arctic.

They were not heading, however, to the same region. The *Dorothea* and the *Trent*, under the overall command of Captain David Buchan, R.N., with Lieutenant Franklin in command of the latter, the smaller of the two ships, were bound to Svalbard, then called Spitzbergen, an archipelago lying a few hundred miles to the east of Greenland about fifteen degrees north of the Arctic Circle. Their mission was to test the theory, widely credited at the time, that the Arctic Ocean was in fact not frozen except around its edges. Within its tonsure of ice it was an open sea and it ought to be possible, if the theory were correct, to penetrate this frozen rim and sail to the Pacific over the top of the earth, right across the North Pole, cutting thousands of miles off the usual routes around Cape Horn and the Cape of Good Hope.

The other two ships, the *Isabella* and the *Alexander*, had orders to sail to Baffin Bay to search for the entrance to the Northwest Passage. If they found it they were to go on through the Passage, wintering over if necessary in some sheltered spot on the northern coast of Canada, then proceed to the Hawaiian Islands. They had supplies on board for twenty-eight "lunar months" (a little over two years), enough canvas to cover the decks with a tent if winter caught them in the ice, plenty of warm clothing, a

surgeon and his assistant on each ship. They also carried trade goods for the natives that included, among the brass kettles, 350 yards of red, yellow, and blue flannels, butcher's knives, scissors, two hundred mirrors, cutlasses, thread, snuff, gin, and brandy in abundance, no fewer than forty umbrellas.

One native was already aboard, an Inuit from southern Greenland, John Sacheuse, who had been saved by an English whaling ship in a storm, come to live in England, learned the language, and converted to Christianity. Sacheuse had volunteered to join the expedition because the southern Greenland Inuit believed that a lost tribe of Inuit lived in the far north of Greenland, an area no ship had approached since William Baffin, who had sailed around the perimeter of the bay named after him two hundred years earlier. Sacheuse said that he hoped to find them and convert them to Christianity.

Of the first expedition, under Buchan, there is not much to say. The Admiralty, the Royal Navy's administrative arm, normally required commanders to publish accounts of exploring expeditions, but this one had little worth recording, and no account of it appeared until 1843. Like the expedition to Baffin Bay, it was prompted by the fact that in the summer of 1817 the seas around eastern Greenland had unexpectedly cleared of ice. Under normal circumstances it was impossible to sail close enough to the eastern shores of Greenland above seventy-five degrees north latitude even to see land. These conditions had prevailed for four centuries. During all that time some eighteen thousand square miles of ice had barred all access to the east coast of Greenland from its southern tip all the way to the top of the island, the edge of this ice shelf describing a great arc stretching north by east, trending away from Greenland toward the coast of Spitzbergen. This ice was old, thick, and impenetrable. Nobody had landed on

the eastern coast of Greenland since the Middle Ages. There were rumors that Danish colonists had settled there then. Nobody knew, if that were true, whether their descendants had survived.

Then in the summer of 1817 the whalers who hunted in the seas around Spitzbergen noticed that this ice had simply vanished. Pack ice still lay above Spitzbergen but to the west and south of it, along the Greenland coast, it was gone. William Scoresby, Jr., who regularly hunted whales in these waters but was as much a scientist as a whaler, made the fact of the ice's disappearance known through the newspapers. Sir Joseph Banks, the longtime president of the Royal Society, England's premier scientific organization, promptly wrote him and asked for details. Banks and Scoresby already knew each other. Banks made it a point to know everyone in Great Britain with serious scientific interests. Scoresby's father, a whaler himself, had once given Lady Banks polar bear skins, which she used in the winter, Banks told Scoresby, "to her great comfort." Scoresby replied that the ice had indeed broken up and drifted away to oblivion, that he had been able to sail along the east coast of Greenland and could have landed, and that this had never happened before in the memory of anyone living. Banks forwarded Scoresby's letter to John Barrow, the second secretary of the Admiralty, and suggested that this could be the time to pursue exploration in the Arctic. With ice conditions having changed so radically off east Greenland, it stood to reason that the ice above Spitzbergen had also thinned out, even the ice elsewhere in the Far North. The rim of ice, if that was all it was, that had protected the high Arctic from the eyes of humankind through all of previous history might be penetrable. This then could be the moment when explorers, *English* explorers, finally discovered that great foggy shortcut to the Orient, the Northwest Passage, or perhaps even reached the North Pole. The *Dorothea* and the *Trent*,

like the *Isabella* and the *Alexander*, had provisions for two years, but if the polar seas were indeed open, neither expedition would need them. Hawaii might lie only a couple of months away. There umbrellas might come in handy as trade goods after all.

Of course no one had actually seen this polar sea or knew for certain that it existed. All that blank space at the top of the globe could very well be solid land. Greenland might extend all the way to the northern coast of Asia, as some mapmakers speculated. There was evidence for a northern water route of some kind between the Atlantic and the Pacific, but it was not decisive. A whaler had found a sawn mahogany plank near Disco Island, which lies off the west coast of Greenland; huge mahogany tree trunks had also been found. Mahogany is tropical in origin and these pieces of wood might, speculation ran at the time, have been borne up the west coast of North America through Bering Strait and across the top of the continent through unknown straits—through the Northwest Passage—to Greenland. This drift of ten thousand miles would have required ocean currents that followed that particular route. A current was known to run north through Bering Strait. Another ran south down Baffin Bay, taking the ice with it every summer. (The iceberg that sank the *Titanic* in 1912 was carried south from Baffin Bay on this current.) Conceivably these two currents were one and the same.

Whales also seemed to know the way across the top of North America. Whalers talked of finding harpoons in the native Greenland style in the bodies of whales caught in the Pacific Ocean, and vice versa: “Whales with stone lances sticking in their fat, (a kind of weapon used by no nation now known),” wrote Scoresby, had been found in the bodies of whales killed off Spitzbergen and in Davis Strait. But what route the whales used was anybody’s guess. Above eighty degrees of north latitude, everything was white space on the map of the earth. In other parts of the Arctic

the geography well below eighty degrees was equally mysterious. Samuel Hearne and Alexander Mackenzie, exploring in northern Canada for the fur companies, had reached the mouths of the Coppermine and Mackenzie Rivers in 1771 and 1789, respectively—both rivers empty into the Arctic Ocean—and found open sea, but their accounts were not entirely clear about exactly how much of this sea they had seen, and no other white man had ever been to the coast of northern Canada in any other part of the continent.

As for Baffin Bay, no one had been to its northern reaches since William Baffin himself in 1616, and his maps had vanished when Samuel Purchas, who first printed Baffin's account of the voyage, decided he could not afford to print the maps and stored them away, to be forever lost. So there was nothing to go on but Baffin's verbal description of what he saw and his latitude readings. The whalers operating in Davis Strait, south of Baffin Bay, never sailed north of about seventy-one degrees north latitude. The head of Baffin Bay lies 550 miles to the north of that. A few geographers doubted that Baffin Island existed, doubted indeed that Baffin had even sailed where he claimed he had sailed. And if Baffin Island did exist, no one knew what waited for the first explorers who might find a passage through it.

Not that the speculative geographers of the time didn't have ideas about what the Arctic contained. In some Renaissance maps the North Pole turns up as an actual protuberance (the Inuit, when it was explained to them what the North Pole was, came to call it the Big Nail), a great pyramid or mountain of iron, the iron explaining why magnets point north. Other early maps showed a Strait of Anián north of North America, sometimes through it, that connected the Atlantic and the Pacific. The idea for this strait seems to have come from the writings of Marco Polo; it first appeared on an influential map drawn in 1566.