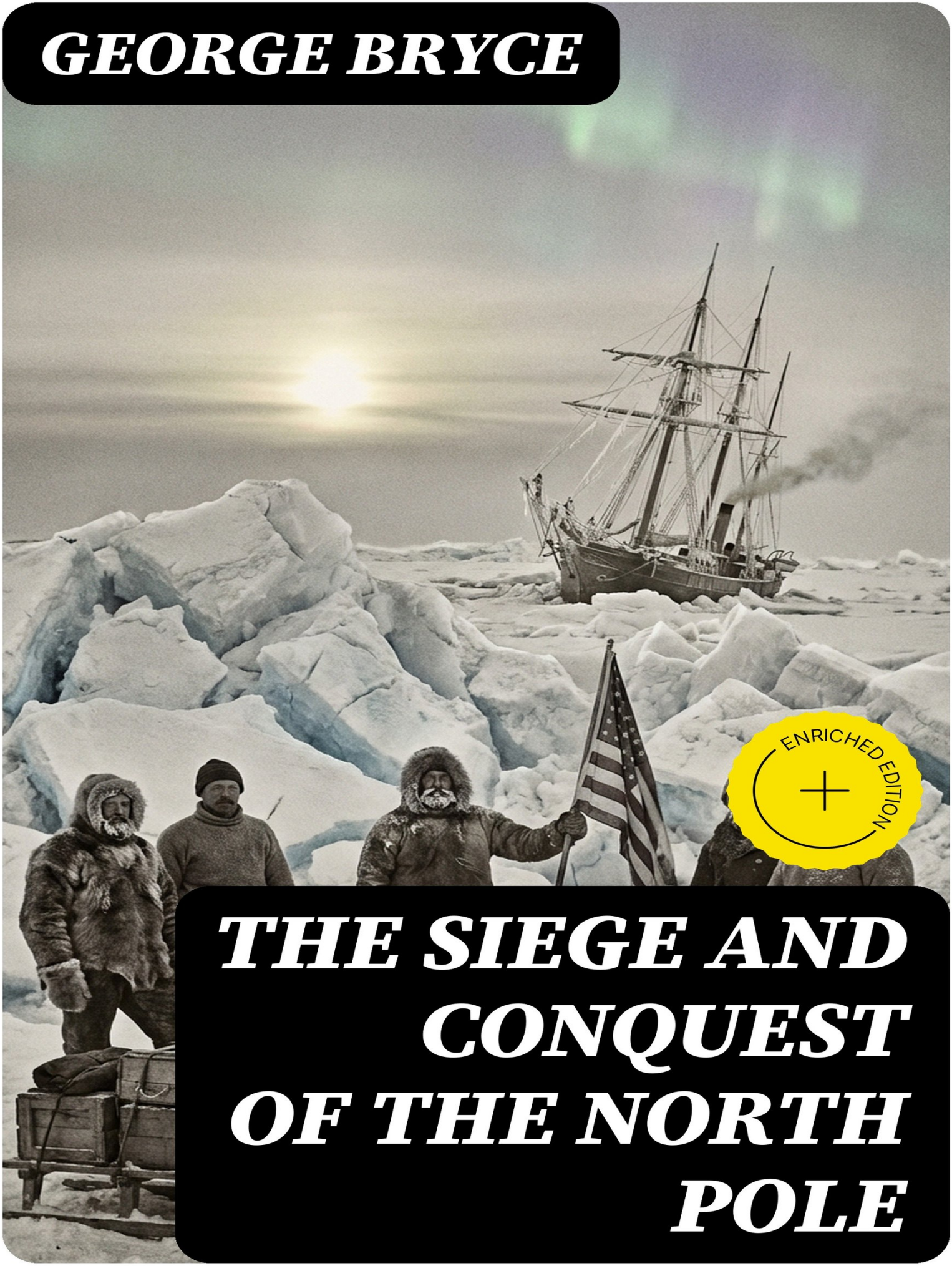
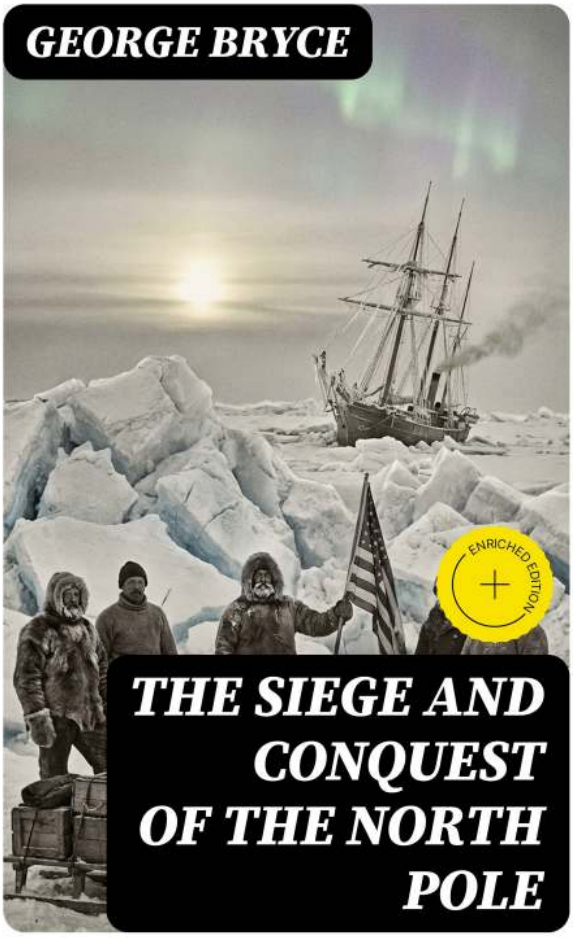
GEORGE BRYCE



THE SIEGE AND CONQUEST OF THE NORTH POLE


GEORGE BRYCE
ENRICHED EDITION
THE SIEGE AND CONQUEST OF THE NORTH POLE

George Bryce

The Siege and Conquest of the North Pole

Enriched edition.

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Jared Black

EAN 8596547058663

Edited and published by DigiCat, 2022

Table of Contents

The Siege and Conquest of the North Pole

Main Table of Contents

CHAPTER I
PARRY'S EXPEDITION OF 1827

Table of Contents

In April 1826, Captain William Edward Parry proposed to Viscount Melville, First Lord Commissioner of the Admiralty[1], "to attempt to reach the North Pole, by means of travelling with sledge-boats over the ice, or through any spaces of open water that might occur." The proposal was referred to the Royal Society, who strongly recommended its adoption; and an expedition having been equipped, Parry was appointed to the command of it.

Before making the proposal, Parry had given the subject careful consideration. He mentions that Captain Lutwidge, the associate of Captain Phipps in the expedition towards the North Pole in 1773, describes the ice north of Spitzbergen to the distance of ten or twelve leagues to have the appearance of "one continued plain of smooth unbroken ice, bounded only by the horizon." The testimony of Mr. Scoresby, Jun., "a close and intelligent observer of Nature in these regions," was also found to agree with that given by Lutwidge. "I once saw," says he, "a field that was so free from either fissure or hummock, that I imagine, had it been free from snow, a coach might have been driven many leagues over it in a direct line, without obstruction or danger." In addition to these, experienced whalers, whom Parry consulted as to the nature of the ice, agreed that it was highly favourable for the purpose of his expedition. An important factor in determining Parry to make the proposal was the fact that Franklin had drawn up a plan for making the attempt on the same lines.

For the journey over the ice, two boats were constructed having great flatness of floor, with the extreme breadth

carried well forward and aft, and possessing the utmost buoyancy, as well as capacity for stowage. Their length was 20 feet, and their extreme breadth 7 feet. The timbers were made of tough ash and hickory, 1 inch by half an inch square, and a foot apart, with a “half-timber” of smaller size between each two. On the outside of the frame thus formed was laid a covering of Mackintosh’s waterproof canvas[3], the outer part being coated with tar. Over this was placed a plank of fir, 3/16 of an inch thick; then a sheet of stout felt; and over all, an oak plank of the same thickness as the fir; the whole of these being firmly and closely secured to the timbers by iron screws applied from without. “On each side of the keel, and projecting considerably below it, was attached a strong ‘runner’ shod with smooth steel, in the manner of a sledge, upon which the boat entirely rested while upon the ice; and to afford some additional chance of making progress on hard and level fields, we also applied to each boat two wheels, of 5 feet diameter, and a small one abaft, having a swivel for steering by, like that of a Bath chair; but these, owing to the irregularities of the ice, did not prove of any service, and were subsequently relinquished. A ‘span’ of hide-rope was attached to the fore part of the runners, and to this were affixed two strong ropes of horse-hair, for dragging the boat; each individual being furnished with a broad leathern shoulder-belt, which could readily be fastened to or detached from the drag-ropes.” The boats weighed 1539 lb. and 1542 lb. respectively. Two officers and twelve men were selected for each boat’s crew. The provisions consisted of biscuit, sweetened cocoa-powder, and pemmican[2]. The process of making the latter consisted in drying large thin slices of the lean of the meat over the smoke of wood fires, then pounding it, and lastly mixing it with about an equal weight of its own fat. In this state it was quite ready for use, without further cooking.

The *Hecla*[4], which was to convey the expedition to the north coast of Spitzbergen, left the Thames on the 25th of March 1827. They arrived at Hammerfest on 18th April[1q]. Here they obtained a small quantity of venison and an abundance of good fish. They also purchased a set of snow-shoes, together with Lapland shoes (called “Kamooga”). They also took on board eight reindeer and a supply of moss. “The quantity of *clean* moss considered requisite for each deer per day is 4 pounds, but they will go five or six days without provender, and not suffer materially. As long as they can pick up snow as they go along, which they like to eat quite clean, they require no water; and ice is to them a comfortable bed.”

Hammerfest was left on 29th April, and on the 5th of May, in latitude 73° 30′, the first straggling mass of ice was met. After some delay in waiting for the ice to open, Hakluyt’s Headland was reached on 14th May. While preparations were being made to land a quantity of provisions here, a gale came on, and forced Parry to take shelter among the pack-ice, where he remained beset twenty-four days. Now began a search for a suitable harbour for the *Hecla*, but it was not till the 20th June that this was found in Treurenburg Bay. During this search Parry reached as far north as 81° 5′, and landed a small store of provisions on Walden Island, and another on an islet near Little Table Island.

Preparations were now made to leave the ship on the journey to the north. Parry writes: “As it was still necessary not to delay our return beyond the end of August, the time originally intended, I took with me only seventy-one days’ provisions; which, including the boats and every other article, made up a weight of 260 lb. per man; and as it appeared highly improbable, from what we had seen of the very rugged nature of the ice we should first have to encounter, that either the reindeer, the snow-shoes, or the wheels would prove of any service for some time to come, I

gave up the idea of taking them. We, however, constructed out of the snow-shoes four excellent sledges for dragging a part of our baggage over the ice, and these proved of invaluable service to us, while the rest of the things just mentioned would only have been an encumbrance."

The *Hecla* was left on the 21st June, and Low Island was reached on the 22nd. One of the ship's cutters accompanied the two boats in order to carry part of the provisions which were to be landed on Low Island and on Walden Island. Open water for the boats was found until they reached latitude 81° 12′ 51″, which was now the highest that had ever been reached. Scoresby, in 1806, had reached 81° 12′ 42″, and with this exception no one had ever reached the 81st degree.

Parry now writes: "Our plan of travelling being nearly the same throughout this excursion, after we first entered upon the ice, I may at once give some account of our usual mode of proceeding. It was my intention to travel wholly at night, and to rest by day, there being, of course, constant daylight in these regions during the summer season. The advantages of this plan, which was occasionally deranged by circumstances, consisted first, in our avoiding the intense and oppressive glare from the snow during the time of the sun's greatest altitude, so as to prevent, in some degree, the painful inflammation in the eyes, called 'snow-blindness,' which is common in all snowy countries. We also thus enjoyed greater warmth during the hours of rest, and had a better chance of drying our clothes; besides which, no small advantage was derived from the snow being harder at night for travelling. The only disadvantage of this plan was, that the fogs were somewhat more frequent and more thick by night than by day, though even in this respect there was less difference than might have been supposed, the temperature during the twenty-four hours undergoing but little variation. This travelling by night and sleeping by day so completely inverted the natural order of things, that it

was difficult to persuade ourselves of the reality. Even the officers and myself, who were all furnished with pocket chronometers, could not always bear in mind at what part of the twenty-four hours we had arrived; and there were several of the men who declared, and I believe truly, that they never knew night from day during the whole excursion.

“When we rose in the evening, we commenced our day by prayers, after which we took off our fur sleeping-dresses, and put on those for travelling; the former being made of camblet, lined with racoon-skin, and the latter of strong blue box-cloth. We made a point of always putting on the same stockings and boots for travelling in, whether they had dried during the day or not; and I believe it was only in five or six instances, at the most, that they were not either still wet or hard-frozen. This, indeed, was of no consequence beyond the discomfort of first putting them on in this state, as they were sure to be thoroughly wet in a quarter of an hour after commencing our journey; while, on the other hand, it was of vital importance to keep dry things for sleeping in. Being ‘rigged’ for travelling, we breakfasted upon warm cocoa and biscuit, and after stowing the things in the boats and on the sledges, so as to secure them, as much as possible, from wet, we set off on our day’s journey, and usually travelled from five to five and a half hours, then stopped an hour to dine, and again travelled four, five, or even six hours, according to circumstances. After this we halted for the night, as we called it, though it was usually early in the morning, selecting the largest surface of ice we happened to be near, for hauling the boats on, in order to avoid the danger of its breaking up by coming in contact with other masses, and also to prevent drift as much as possible. The boats were placed close alongside each other, with their sterns to the wind, the snow or wet cleared out of them, and the sails, supported by the bamboo masts and three paddles, placed over them as awnings, an entrance being left at the bow. Every man then immediately put on dry

stockings and fur boots, after which we set about the necessary repairs of boats, sledges, or clothes; and, after serving the provisions for the succeeding day, we went to supper. Most of the officers and men then smoked their pipes, which served to dry the boats and awnings very much, and usually raised the temperature of our lodgings 10° or 15°. This part of the twenty-four hours was often a time, and the only one, of real enjoyment to us[2q]: the men told their stories and ‘fought all their battles o’er again,’ and the labours of the day, unsuccessful as they too often were, were forgotten. A regular watch was set during our resting-time, to look out for bears or for the ice breaking up round us, as well as to attend to the drying of the clothes, each man alternately taking this duty for one hour. We then concluded our day with prayers, and having put on our fur dresses, lay down to sleep with a degree of comfort, which perhaps few persons would imagine possible under such circumstances; our chief inconvenience being, that we were somewhat pinched for room, and therefore obliged to stow rather closer than was quite agreeable. The temperature, while we slept, was usually from 36° to 45°, according to the state of the external atmosphere; but on one or two occasions, in calm and warm weather, it rose as high as 60° to 66°, obliging us to throw off a part of our fur dress. After we had slept seven hours, the man appointed to boil the cocoa roused us, when it was ready, by the sound of a bugle, when we commenced our day in the manner before described.

“Our allowance of provisions for each man per day was as follows:—

“Biscuit, 10 oz.; pemmican, 9 oz.; sweetened cocoa-powder, 1 oz. to make 1 pint; rum, 1 gill; tobacco, 3 oz. per week.

“Our fuel consisted entirely of spirits of wine, of which 2 pints formed our daily allowance, the cocoa being cooked in an iron boiler over a shallow iron lamp, with seven wicks; a

simple apparatus, which answered our purpose remarkably well. We usually found 1 pint of spirits of wine sufficient for preparing our breakfast—that is, for heating 28 pints of water, though it always commenced from the temperature of 32°.”

They set off on their first journey over the ice on 24th June. Instead of the fine level floes they expected, they found the ice consisting of pieces of small extent and very rugged, obliging them to make three journeys, and sometimes four, with the boats and baggage, and to launch several times across narrow pools of water. They experienced a great amount of rain, and had sometimes to wade through water from 2 to 5 inches deep upon the ice. It was rarely that they met with a surface sufficiently level and hard to drag all their loads at one journey. Deep soft snow was frequently met with, and proved a difficult obstacle to overcome. At other times their way lay across small loose pieces of ice, and the boats had to be made to serve the purpose of a bridge between the pieces. After a laborious day’s work, they frequently found that they had not progressed more than 2 miles. It had been calculated that they could travel 20 miles per day over level ice. They found the Lapland shoes, or Kamoogas, good for walking in when the snow was dry, but when it was wet they found Esquimaux[5] boots much superior. On the 5th of July they had reached latitude 81° 45′ 15″, and on sounding with 400 fathoms of line failed to reach the bottom. A like result was met in latitude 82° 17′ 10″, which was reached on 13th July. About this date they found that they were being drifted considerably to the south—sometimes 1 or 2 miles per day. The glare of the sun was often very oppressive: the best preservative was found to be spectacles having the glass of a bluish-green colour, and with side-screens to them. On the 20th July they reached 82° 36′ 52″, less than 5 miles to the northward of their position on the 17th, although they calculated they certainly had travelled 12 miles. On the

25th July, Parry wrote: “So small was the ice now around us, that we were obliged to halt for the night at 2 a.m., being upon the only piece in sight, in any direction, on which we could venture to trust the boats while we rested. Such was the ice in the latitude of 82¾°!”

At noon on the 26th they found the latitude 82° 40′ 23″, and calculated that since midnight on the 22nd they had lost no less than 13½ miles by drift. At this time Parry writes: “It had, for some time past, been too evident that the nature of the ice with which we had to contend was such, and its drift to the southward, especially with a northerly wind, so great, as to put beyond our reach anything but a very moderate share of success in travelling to the northward. Still, however, we had been anxious to reach the highest latitude which our means would allow, and, with this view, although our whole object had long become unattainable, had pushed on to the northward for thirty-five days, or until half our resources were expended, and the middle of our season arrived. For the last few days, the 83rd parallel was the limit to which we had ventured to extend our hopes; but even this expectation had become considerably weakened since the setting in of the last northerly wind, which continued to drive us to the southward, during the necessary hours of rest, nearly as much as we could gain by eleven or twelve hours of daily labour. Had our success been at all proportionate to our exertions, it was my full intention to have proceeded a few days beyond the middle of the period for which we were provided, trusting to the resources we expected to find at Table Island. But this was so far from being the case, that I could not but consider it as incurring useless fatigue to the officers and men, and unnecessary wear and tear for the boats, to persevere any longer in the attempt. I determined, therefore, on giving the people one entire day’s rest, which they very much needed, and time to wash and mend their clothes, while the officers were occupied in making all the

observations which might be interesting in this latitude; and then to set out on our return on the following day.”

The bottom was found here with 500 fathoms of line. At the extreme point of the journey the distance from the *Hecla* was 172 miles. To accomplish this distance, Parry reckoned they travelled 292 miles, of which about 100 were performed by water previous to entering the ice. But as they travelled by far the greater part of the distance on the ice three, and not unfrequently five times over, the total distance estimated was 580 geographical, or 668 statute miles, being nearly sufficient to have reached the Pole in a direct line.

Returning south, open water was reached in latitude 81° 34′, about 50 miles north of Table Island. The party had been forty-eight days on the ice. During this journey several seals and bears were killed, and these assisted very much both for meat and fuel. The islet at Table Island was reached on the 12th of August, and it was found that bears had devoured all the bread, amounting to 100 lb., left there. To this islet Parry applied the name of Lieutenant Ross. The *Hecla* was reached on 21st August, after an absence of sixty-one days, and the total distance travelled was estimated at 1127 miles. Parry writes: “Considering our constant exposure to wet, cold, and fatigue, our stockings having generally been drenched in snow-water for twelve hours out of every twenty-four, I had great reason to be thankful for the excellent health in which, upon the whole, we reached the ship. There is no doubt that we had all become, in a certain degree, gradually weaker for some time past; but only three men of our party now required medical care, two of them with badly swelled legs and general debility, and the other from a bruise; but even these three returned to their duty in a short time.”

The *Hecla* left Treurenburg Bay on 28th August, rounded Hakluyt’s Headland on the 30th, and arrived at Shetland on

17th September. Here Parry left the ship, and proceeded to London *via* Inverness.

Having finished his narrative of this attempt to reach the North Pole, Parry makes the following observations:—

“That the object is of still more difficult attainment than was before supposed, even by those persons who were the best qualified to judge of it, will, I believe, appear evident from a perusal of the foregoing pages; nor can I, after much consideration and some experience of the various difficulties which belong to it, recommend any material improvement in the plan lately adopted. Among the various schemes suggested for this purpose, it has been proposed to set out from Spitzbergen, and to make a rapid journey to the northward, with sledges, or sledge-boats, drawn wholly by dogs or reindeer; but, however feasible this plan may at first sight appear, I cannot say that our late experience of the nature of the ice which they would probably have to encounter, has been at all favourable to it. It would, of course, be a matter of extreme imprudence to set out on this enterprise without the means of crossing—not merely narrow pools and lanes—but more extensive spaces of open water, such as we met with between the margin of the ice and the Spitzbergen shores; and I do not conceive that any boat sufficiently large to be efficient and safe for this purpose, could possibly be managed upon the ice, were the power employed to give it motion dependent on dogs or reindeer. On the contrary, it was a frequent subject of remark among the officers, that reason was a qualification scarcely less indispensable than strength and activity, in travelling over such a road; daily instances occurring of our having to pass over difficult places, which no other animal than man could have been easily prevailed upon to attempt. Indeed, the constant necessity of launching and hauling up the boats (which operations we had frequently to perform eight or ten, and on one occasion, seventeen times in the same day) would alone render it inexpedient, in my opinion,

to depend chiefly upon other animals; for it would certainly require more time and labour to get them into and out of the boats, than their services in the intervals, or their flesh ultimately used as food, would be worth; especially when it is considered how large a weight of provender must be carried for their own subsistence.

“In case of employing reindeer, which, from their strength, docility, and hardy habits, appear the best suited to this kind of travelling, there would be an evident advantage in setting out much earlier in the year than we did; perhaps about the end of April, when the ice is less broken up, and the snow much harder upon its surface, than at a more advanced part of the season. But this, it must be recollected, would involve the necessity of passing the previous winter on the northern coast of Spitzbergen, which, even under favourable circumstances, would probably tend to weaken in some degree the energies of the men; while, on the other hand, it would be next to impossible to procure there a supply of provender for a number of tame reindeer, sufficient even to keep them alive, much less in tolerable condition, during a whole winter. In addition to this, it may be observed, that any party setting out earlier must be provided with a much greater weight of warm clothing, in order to guard against the severity of the cold, and also with an increased proportion of fuel for procuring water by the melting of snow, there being no fresh water upon the ice, in these latitudes, before the month of June.”

Parry’s attempt to reach the Pole, hauling heavy boats over the ice, brings into prominence the determination and daring of English sailors. Parry’s record of 82° 45′ remained unbroken forty-eight years, when a new record was again made by English sailors in an exactly similar way to that of Parry, but in a different region.

The next expedition of importance after Parry’s was that of Sir John Franklin in search of the North-West Passage, and

does not strictly come within the scope of this book. Although the many expeditions which were sent out in search of Franklin and his men were the means of tracing a great extent of coast-line among the islands which lie to the north of America, only one had any special bearing on the struggle for the Pole. This was the one commanded by Dr. Kane, and will be treated in the next chapter.

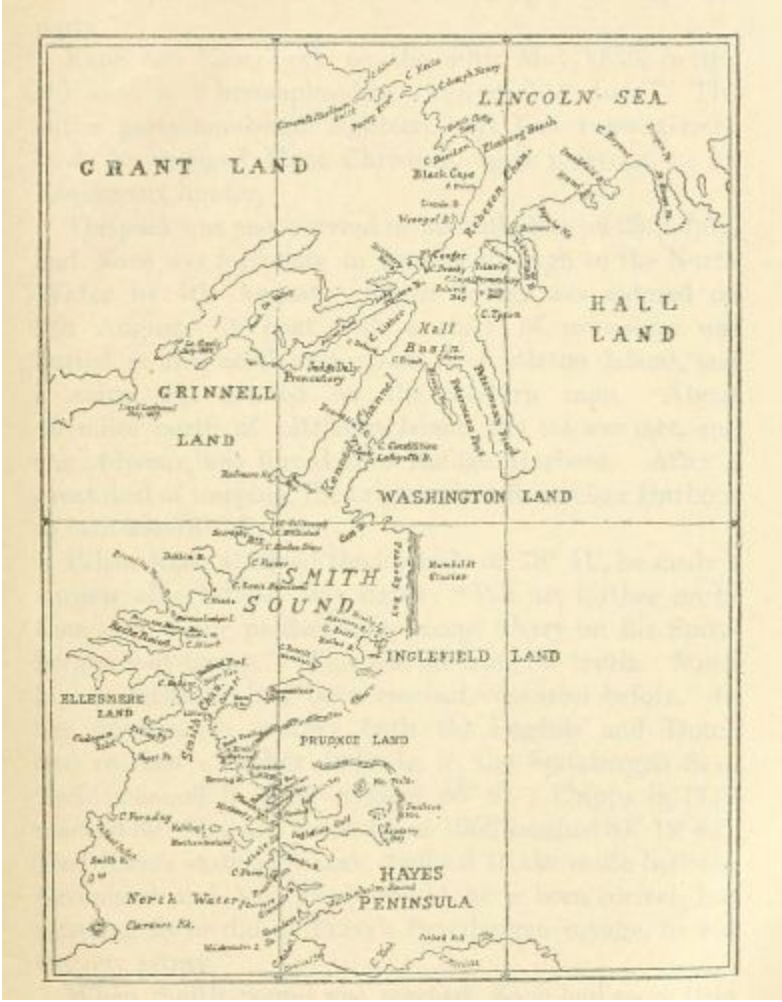


CHART OF SMITH SOUND AND KENNEDY CHANNEL.

CHAPTER II

KANE'S EXPEDITION (1853, '54, '55)

Table of Contents

In December 1852, Dr. Kane received orders from the Secretary of the U.S. Navy to conduct an expedition to the Arctic seas in search of Sir John Franklin. Dr. Kane's plan of search was based upon the probable extension of the land-masses of Greenland to the Far North—a fact at that time not verified by travel, but sustained by the analogies of physical geography. As inducements in favour of his scheme, he mentioned—

"(1) *Terra firma* as the basis of our operations, obviating the capricious character of ice-travel.

"(2) A due northern line, which, throwing aside the influences of terrestrial radiation, would lead soonest to the open sea, should such exist.

"(3) The benefit of the fan-like abutment of land, on the north face of Greenland, to check the ice in the course of its southern or equatorial drift, thus obviating the great drawback of Parry in his attempt to reach the Pole by the Spitzbergen Sea.

"(4) Animal life to sustain travelling parties.

"(5) The co-operation of the Esquimaux; settlements of these people having been found as high as Whale Sound, and probably extending still farther along the coast.

"We were to pass up Baffin's Bay, therefore, to its most northern attainable point; and thence, pressing on toward the Pole as far as boats or sledges could carry us, examine the coast-lines for vestiges of the lost party."

Kane left New York on the 30th May 1853, in the *Advance*, a "hermaphrodite brig of 144 tons." The entire party numbered eighteen. At Fiskernaes, Greenland, he engaged Hans Christian, aged nineteen, as an Esquimaux hunter.

The pack was encountered in Melville Bay on 28th July, and Kane was fortunate in passing through to the North Water by 4th August. Smith Sound was entered on 7th August. A boat with a stock of provisions was buried at the north-east point of Littleton Island, and a cairn was erected on the western cape. About 40 miles north of Littleton Island the ice was met, and the *Advance* was forced into Refuge Harbour. After a great deal of warping, the brig reached Rensselaer Harbour in latitude 78° 37′.

When Kane attained the latitude of 78° 41′, he made a curious observation. He states: “We are farther north than any of our predecessors, except Parry on his Spitzbergen foot-tramp.” This was far from the truth. Much higher latitudes had been reached centuries before. In the seventeenth century both the English and Dutch had reached a higher latitude in the Spitzbergen Sea: Tschitschagoff in 1765 reached 80° 21′; Phipps in 1773 reached 80° 37′; and Scoresby in 1806 reached 81° 12′ 42″. Had Kane’s statement been confined to the route between Greenland and America, it would have been correct, but referring as he did to Parry’s Spitzbergen voyage, he was entirely astray.

When Smith Sound was reached, Kane had more than fifty dogs, but many of them soon died. Preparations for the winter were made without delay: a storehouse was formed on a small island in the harbour; an observatory was built on another island; and a deck-house was made to protect the *Advance*.

Arrangements were then made to form provision-dépôts along the Greenland coast for the purpose of northern exploration. The first dépôt party left on the 20th of September, and returned on the 15th of October. On the 25th of September this party reached Cape Russell, where the first cache of pemmican, together with some bread and alcohol for fuel, was made. A second cache was made at Cape Bonsall, about 30 miles to the north-east of the first

dépôt. They reached their highest latitude, 79° 50′, on 6th October. A third cache was placed on a low island near the Humboldt Glacier.

A sunless winter of one hundred and forty days now closed upon them. The influence of the long, intense darkness was found most depressing. Most of the dogs died during this winter from convulsions. The temperature went down to as low as 68° F. below zero during February. The dreadful scurvy made its appearance, and by the middle of March only two members of the party were free of it. The supplies of the expedition were found to be altogether inadequate, both as regard provisions and fuel. On the 19th of March 1854, the first spring party left the brig, with the object of forming more dépôts. The temperature was about 40° F. below zero. On 31st March three of this party made their appearance at the brig unexpectedly. Kane graphically describes the incident: “They were swollen and haggard, and hardly able to speak. Their story was a fearful one. They had left their companions in the ice, risking their own lives to bring us the news: Brooks, Baker, Wilson, and Pierre were all lying frozen and disabled. Where? They could not tell: somewhere in among the hummocks to the north and east: it was drifting heavily round them when they parted. Irish Tom had stayed by to feed and care for the others; but the chances were sorely against them. It was in vain to question them further. They had evidently travelled a great distance, for they were sinking with fatigue and hunger, and could hardly be rallied enough to tell us the direction in which they had come. My first impulse was to move on the instant with an unencumbered party: a rescue, to be effective or even hopeful, could not be too prompt. What pressed on my mind most was, where the sufferers were to be looked for among the drifts. Ohlsen seemed to have his faculties rather more at command than his associates, and I thought that he might assist us as a guide; but he was sinking with exhaustion, and if he went with us we must carry him. There

was not a moment to be lost. While some were still busy with the newcomers and getting ready a hasty meal, others were rigging out the ‘Little Willie’ with a buffalo-cover, a small tent, and a package of pemmican; and, as soon as we could hurry through our arrangements, Ohlsen was strapped on in a fur bag, his legs wrapped in dog-skins and eider-down, and we were off upon the ice. Our party consisted of nine men and myself. We carried only the clothes on our backs. The thermometer stood at −46°, 78 degrees below the freezing-point. A well-known peculiar tower of ice, called by the men the ‘Pinnacly Berg,’ served as our first landmark: other icebergs of colossal size, which stretched in long beaded lines across the bay, helped to guide us afterward; and it was not until we had travelled for sixteen hours that we began to lose our way. We knew that our lost companions must be somewhere in the area before us, within a radius of 40 miles. Mr. Ohlsen, who had been for fifty hours without rest, fell asleep as soon as we began to move, and awoke now with unequivocal signs of mental disturbance. It became evident that he had lost the bearing of the icebergs, which in form and colour endlessly repeated themselves; and the uniformity of the vast field of snow utterly forbade the hope of local landmarks.

“Pushing ahead of the party, and clambering over some rugged ice-piles, I came to a long level floe, which I thought might probably have attracted the eyes of weary men in circumstances like our own. It was a light conjecture; but it was enough to turn the scale, for there was no other to balance it. I gave orders to abandon the sledge, and disperse in search of footmarks. We raised our tent, placed our pemmican in cache, except a small allowance for each man to carry on his person; and poor Ohlsen, now just able to keep his legs, was liberated from his bag. The thermometer had fallen by this time to −49.3°, and the wind was setting in sharply from the north-west. It was out of the question to halt: it required brisk exercise to keep us

from freezing. I could not even melt ice for water; and, at these temperatures, any resort to snow for the purpose of allaying thirst was followed by bloody lips and tongue: it burnt like caustic.

“It was indispensable, then, that we should move on, looking out for traces as we went. Yet when the men were ordered to spread themselves, so as to multiply the chances, though they all obeyed heartily, some painful impress of solitary danger, or perhaps it may have been the varying configuration of the ice-field, kept them closing up continually into a single group. The strange manner in which some of us were affected I now attribute as much to shattered nerves as to the direct influence of the cold. Men like McGary and Bonsall, who had stood out our severest marches, were seized with trembling-fits and short breath; and, in spite of all my efforts to keep up an example of sound bearing, I fainted twice on the snow.

“We had been nearly eighteen hours out without water or food, when a new hope cheered us. I think it was Hans, our Esquimaux hunter, who thought he saw a broad sledge-track. The drift had nearly effaced it, and we were some of us doubtful at first whether it was not one of those accidental rifts which the gales make in the surface-snow. But, as we traced on to the deep snow among the hummocks, we were led to footsteps; and, following these with religious care, we at last came in sight of a small American flag fluttering from a hummock, and lower down a little Masonic banner hanging from a tent-pole hardly above the drift. It was the camp of our disabled comrades: we reached it after an unbroken march of twenty-one hours. The little tent was nearly covered. I was not among the first to come up; but, when I reached the tent-curtain, the men were standing in silent file on each side of it. With more kindness and delicacy of feeling than is often supposed to belong to sailors, but which is almost characteristic, they intimated their wish that I should go in alone. As I crawled

in, and, coming upon the darkness, heard before me the burst of welcome gladness that came from the four poor fellows stretched on their backs, and then for the first time the cheer outside, my weakness and my gratitude together almost overcame me. ‘They had expected me: they were sure I would come!’

“We were now fifteen souls; the thermometer 75° below the freezing-point; and our sole accommodation a tent barely able to contain eight persons: more than half our party were obliged to keep from freezing by walking outside while the others slept. We could not halt long. Each of us took a turn of two hours sleep; and we prepared for our homeward march.

“We took with us nothing but the tent, furs to protect the rescued party, and food for a journey of fifty hours. Everything else was abandoned. Two large buffalo-bags, each made of four skins, were doubled up, so as to form a sort of sack, lined on each side by fur, closed at the bottom, but opened at the top. This was laid on the sledge; the tent, smoothly folded, serving as a floor. The sick, with their limbs sewed up carefully in reindeer-skins, were placed upon the bed of buffalo-robes, in a half-reclining posture; other skins and blanket-bags were thrown above them; and the whole litter was lashed together so as to allow but a single opening opposite the mouth for breathing.

“This necessary work cost us a great deal of time and effort; but it was essential to the lives of the sufferers. It took us no less than four hours to strip and refresh them, and then to embale them in the manner I have described. Few of us escaped without frost-bitten fingers: the thermometer was at 55.6° below zero, and a slight wind added to the severity of the cold.

“It was completed at last, however: all hands stood around; and, after repeating a short prayer, we set out on our retreat. It was fortunate indeed that we were not inexperienced in sledging over the ice. A great part of our

track lay among a succession of hummocks; some of them extending in long lines, 15 and 20 feet high, and so uniformly steep that we had to turn them by a considerable deviation from our direct course; others that we forced our way through, far above our heads in height, lying in parallel ridges, with the space between too narrow for the sledge to be lowered into it safely, and yet not wide enough for the runners to cross without the aid of ropes to stay them. These spaces, too, were generally choked with light snow, hiding the openings between the ice-fragments. They were fearful traps to disengage a limb from, for every man knew that a fracture or a sprain even would cost him his life. Besides all this, the sledge was top-heavy with its load: the maimed men could not bear to be lashed down tight enough to secure them against falling off. Notwithstanding our caution in rejecting every superfluous burden, the weight, including bags and tent, was 1100 pounds.

“And yet our march for the first six hours was very cheering. We made by vigorous pulls and lifts nearly a mile an hour, and reached the new floes before we were absolutely weary. Our sledge sustained the trial admirably. Ohlsen, restored by hope, walked steadily at the leading belt of the sledge-lines; and I began to feel certain of reaching our half-way station of the day before, where we had left our tent. But we were still 9 miles from it, when, almost without premonition, we all became aware of an alarming failure of our energies.

“I was, of course, familiar with the benumbed and almost lethargic sensation of extreme cold; and once, when exposed for some hours in the midwinter of Baffin’s Bay, I had experienced symptoms which I compared to the diffused paralysis of the electro-galvanic shock. But I had treated the *sleepy comfort* of freezing as something like the embellishment of romance. I had evidence now to the contrary.

“Bonsall and Morton, two of our stoutest men, came to me, begging permission to sleep: ‘they were not cold: the wind did not enter them now: a little sleep was all they wanted.’ Presently Hans was found nearly stiff under a drift; and Thomas, bolt upright, had his eyes closed, and could hardly articulate. At last, John Blake threw himself on the snow, and refused to rise. They did not complain of feeling cold; but it was in vain that I wrestled, boxed, ran, argued, jeered, or reprimanded: an immediate halt could not be avoided.

“We pitched our tent with much difficulty. Our hands were too powerless to strike a fire; we were obliged to do without water or food. Even the spirits (whisky) had frozen at the men’s feet, under all the coverings. We put Bonsall, Ohlsen, Thomas, and Hans, with the other sick men, well inside the tent, and crowded in as many others as we could. Then, leaving the party in charge of Mr. McGary, with orders to come on after four hours’ rest, I pushed ahead with William Godfrey, who volunteered to be my companion. My aim was to reach the half-way tent, and thaw some ice and pemmican before the others arrived.

“The floe was of level ice, and the walking excellent. I cannot tell how long it took us to make the 9 miles; for we were in a strange sort of stupor, and had little apprehension of time. It was probably about four hours. We kept ourselves awake by imposing on each other a continued articulation of words; they must have been incoherent enough. I recall these hours as among the most wretched I have ever gone through: we were neither of us in our right senses, and retained a very confused recollection of what preceded our arrival at the tent. We both of us, however, remember a bear, who walked leisurely before us and tore up as he went a jumper that Mr. McGary had improvidently thrown off the day before. He tore it into shreds and rolled it into a ball, but never offered to interfere with our progress. I remember this, and with it a confused sentiment that our tent and

sent ahead on 9th October to seek relief for the stranded party.

31 A ptarmigan is an Arctic ground-dwelling bird in the grouse family, commonly hunted for food in polar regions.

32 Ah Sam is named in the record as a member of De Long’s party who outlived several companions; historically he is identified among the expedition’s surviving attendants.

33 Proteus was the steamer selected to carry Greely’s party to Lady Franklin Bay, described in the text as a barkentine-rigged steam vessel equipped for ice navigation.

34 ‘Ultima Thule’ is a classical phrase meaning the most distant known place; explorers used it to denote the farthest north or most remote point reached.

35 A named bay or anchorage in the high Arctic used by the expedition as a local hunting area near their camp; in nineteenth-century Arctic accounts it commonly refers to a harbour visited on nearby islands or coasts.

36 Arctic game birds of the grouse family (genus Lagopus) that change plumage seasonally and were commonly hunted for food by polar expeditions.

37 Also called little auks (Alle alle), small seabirds of the North Atlantic and Arctic that form large colonies and were used as an emergency food source by polar parties.

38 A headland on the eastern side of the Arctic region (near Smith Sound/Ellesmere Island) that served as the site of Greely’s camp and the focal point for his retreat and rescue attempts.

39 Mentioned here in connection with a prior trip that weakened a party member; the text likely refers to a ship or place encountered on earlier journeys, but the passage does not give further identifying details.

40 The purple saxifrage, a small Arctic flowering plant (Saxifraga oppositifolia) edible in emergencies and often eaten by starving polar travellers as fresh greens.

41 An island off the northwest coast of Greenland repeatedly used in nineteenth-century rescue planning where relief parties were expected to leave stores or await survivors.

42 The Norwegian polar ship specially designed for Fridtjof Nansen’s expedition (built to withstand ice pressure) and used in the 1893–96 drift voyage across the Arctic Ocean.

43 Axel Heiberg (1848–1932) was a Norwegian businessman and patron who helped finance Arctic exploration, and several Arctic features (e.g., Axel Heiberg Island) are named after him.

44 The Ringnes Brothers were Norwegian brewery owners (the Ringnes family) who acted as private patrons of polar expeditions, providing financial support and supplies for voyages like Sverdrup’s.

45 Egedesminde is the historical Danish name for a settlement on the west coast of Greenland (now called Aasiaat), which functioned as a port and trading post used by Arctic expeditions.

46 Robert E. Peary was an American Arctic explorer active in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, known for numerous Arctic expeditions and his later claim to have reached the North Pole.

47 This refers to the site associated with Adolphus Greely’s 1881–84 Lady Franklin Bay Expedition, a US Arctic relief disaster in which several members of Greely’s party suffered starvation and many perished.

48 Crocker Land was a purported Arctic island reported in early 20th-century exploration accounts (famously by Peary in 1906) that later expeditions were unable to confirm and which is generally regarded as a mistaken sighting or mirage.

49 Bradley Land is the name given to another supposed Arctic land reported in early exploration narratives; like Crocker Land, subsequent surveys failed to verify its existence and its status remained controversial.

50 The Duke of the Abruzzi (Luigi Amedeo, 1873–1933) was an Italian prince, mountaineer and explorer who led the 1899 Polar Star expedition to Franz-Josef Land and organized significant Arctic and alpine expeditions.

51 The Primus system refers to the Primus pressurized kerosene stove (a commercially made portable stove introduced in the 1890s) widely used on polar expeditions for cooking and melting snow.

52 A historical Danish name for a settlement on Disko (Disko Bay) in western Greenland; in modern Greenlandic it is Qeqertarsuaq and the name 'Godhavn' appears frequently in 19th-century Arctic accounts.

53 A commercially produced concentrated meat extract (marketed in the 19th century as Liebig's Extract of Meat) used like bouillon or a protein supplement in Victorian-era cooking and expedition provisions.

54 A 19th-century spelling of a term (often seen as pibloktoq) used in Arctic literature to denote a sudden, poorly understood malady; in this account it refers to an outbreak affecting sled dogs, though historical uses of the word have varied and medical causes were not well established then.

55 An American philanthropist and financier of scientific and exploratory work who helped organize and fund Arctic efforts; he is historically associated with supporting Peary and the formation of the Peary Arctic Club.

56 A wooden Arctic research/post base on northern Ellesmere Island established during the 1881–84 Lady Franklin Bay Expedition (Adolphus Greely); later expeditions, including Peary's, used it as a shelter and supply point.

57 A British newspaper proprietor (later Viscount Northcliffe) who in the late 19th century sponsored and provided ships or support for polar exploration, here noted for offering the ship Windward to Peary.

58 A cape at the northern coast of Greenland long cited (since the late 19th century) as one of the northernmost points of land in the Arctic; named for American philanthropist Morris K. Jesup. Exact claims about it being the absolute northernmost point of mainland Greenland vary by source and measurement.

59 A shaggy Arctic bovine species (Ovibos moschatus) hunted by polar parties for meat, hides, and fat; 19th–early 20th-century expeditions commonly killed musk-oxen to supply dog-teams and to supplement provisions. Populations are circumpolar but localized, so numbers taken varied by region and season.