

Three Puzzles from Early Nineteenth Century Arctic Exploration

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Trois questions liées à l'exploration marine britannique de l'arctique entre 1815 et 1820 sont examinées dans le contexte du rapport entre John Barrow, William Scoresby fils et Sir Joseph Banks. (1) le manque de réussite des voyages de pêche à la baleine face aux récompenses de découverte offertes par le Parlement était principalement dû au fait que les chasseurs à la baleine ont cru que les chances de succès ne pouvaient justifier la baisse de revenus à laquelle ils seraient soumis. (2) les considérations économiques et la fierté personnelle ont influencé la décision de Scoresby de ne pas se joindre aux expéditions de 1818; il a également cru que les objectifs seraient accessibles. (3) la baie Baffin n'était pas une mer ouverte vers le nord comme certains souhaitaient le croire.

It is generally recognized that the revival of British naval interest in arctic exploration after the Napoleonic Wars was due in large part to the influence of John Barrow, second secretary of the Admiralty from 1807 to 1845.¹ His interest in arctic affairs dated back to a whaling voyage to the Greenland Sea while he was still a teenager, but it was also encouraged and informed by his association with the President of the Royal Society, Sir Joseph Banks.² Banks, who had sailed with Cook, found in another Whitby sailor, William Scoresby, Junior “his most intelligent channel of information about the far north beyond the Arctic Circle.”³ The relationships between these three men are central to the present article, which poses, and offers answers to, three questions that

1 Fergus Fleming, *Barrow's Boys* (London: Granta, 1998); M.J. Ross, *Polar Pioneers: John Ross and James Clark Ross* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994).

2 In the otherwise rather tedious autobiography that Barrow wrote shortly before his death in 1848, he devoted twelve lively pages “entirely from memory” to this voyage from Liverpool in the *Peggy* about 1780. He learned much about “all the tactical parts of navigation; and the more I learned of it the more I liked it.” He observed, remembered and described the techniques of whale capture and blubber preservation, and he rowed in a whaleboat during one such capture. He did declare that “I confess my trip to the Spitzbergen seas was a disappointment” but that was because there was no opportunity for landing; whaling was the sole focus. (John Barrow, *An Autobiographical Memoir of Sir John Barrow* . . . , (London: John Murray, 1847), pp. vi, 18, 27.)

3 Harold B. Carter, *Sir Joseph Banks, 1743-1820* (London: British Museum (Natural History), 1988), p. 506.

were important as British naval exploration of the Arctic was revived during the years between Napoleon's final defeat in 1815 and Banks's death in 1820. The questions are:

(a) Why, with substantial monetary prizes on offer from the mid eighteenth century, did whalers make little or no attempt at polar and northwest or northeast passage exploration?

(b) Why was Scoresby rejected as the commander of an arctic exploring expedition, despite his enthusiasm, qualifications, and support from Banks?

(c) Why, by 1818, was the existence of Baffin Bay being doubted? ("Baffin's Bay, according to the relation of W. Baffin in 1616, but not now believed.")

Relevant to all of these questions is an article that Barrow wrote for the October 1817 issue of the London *Quarterly Review*.⁴ It was nominally a book review, but the book in question was summarily dismissed in a single paragraph ("there is literally nothing worth communicating to the public at large; nothing in the slightest degree connected with professional subjects") and the rest of the piece was devoted to "metal more attractive," i.e. the prospects for arctic exploration.

Whalers and arctic exploration

To some extent, the Royal Navy became involved in arctic exploration because incentives to civilian enterprises had met with little response. Back in 1744, Parliament had offered a prize of £20,000 to the owner of any British ship "as shall discover a Northwest Passage through Hudson's Streights to the Western and Southern Oceans of America."⁵ There were few takers, and by later in the century it had become clear that, if a northwest passage was to be found, it was unlikely to be via Hudson Strait.⁶

In 1776, therefore, Parliament tried again, this time offering the same reward for a passage by sea "between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, in any Direction or Parallel of the Northern Hemisphere to the Northward of the Fifty-second Degree of Northern Latitude."⁷ This wording opened the prize to a northeast as well as a northwest passage. The legislation offered a further option, aimed specifically at whaling ships:

4 Vol. 18, 35 (1817), pp. 199-223. Available online through the British Periodicals Online website. This issue was not in fact published until February 1818, and internal and external evidence suggests that Barrow's article was not completed until late in 1817 or early 1818. The article, following the Review's practice, was unsigned, but there is no doubt that it was one of nearly two hundred contributions that Barrow made to the Review during his lifetime.

5 18 Geo.II, c.17.

6 Probably the only response to the prize offer was the expedition in 1746-47 led by William Moor in the *Dobbs Galley* and Francis Smith in the *California*. See Glyndwr Williams' entries on Moor and Smith in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, III, pp. 471-2 and 594. In Williams' words, "Although the expedition had carried out some useful surveys, particularly in Chesterfield Inlet and the Wager . . . [t]he voyage had neither found a northwest passage nor proved conclusively that one did not exist."

7 The facsimile text of this Act, and of the similar Act of 1818, are online at <http://scaa.usask.ca/gallery/northern/content?pg=secondary&ap=&ln=en&css=> .

And whereas the Ships employed both in the Spitzbergen Seas, and in Davis's Streights, have frequent Opportunities of approaching the North Pole, though they have not Time, during the Course of One Summer, to penetrate into the Pacific Ocean; And whereas such Approaches may greatly tend to the Discovery of a Communication between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, as well as be attended with many Advantages both to Commerce and Science...

Parliament created an additional prize of £5000, to the ship or ships "first approaching to within One Degree of the Northern Pole."⁸

These prizes were substantial sums. In terms of purchasing power, £5000 in 1776 was the equivalent of over £503,000 in the year 2002, i.e. close to a million Canadian dollars.⁹ Four times that was the reward for a northwest or northeast passage. There seemed to be no shortage of potential applicants. In 1776 there were 98 British ships engaged in whaling, mainly in the Greenland Sea. Two decades later, there were that many in the Greenland Sea alone, and fifty or more in Davis Strait.¹⁰

Although we know now that the whalers were justified when they ignored both these prizes, that was less obvious at the time. The Phipps naval expedition, heading eastwards around the north coast of Spitsbergen in 1773, had found an impenetrable barrier of ice from which it was lucky to escape, but whalers regularly found open water as far as 80°N to the west of Spitsbergen, and to similar latitudes in Baffin Bay. These latitudes were often attained after piercing other barriers of ice further south, so perhaps those further north might be narrow and passable as well? The possibility of an "open polar sea" was alive and well at the time: if there was no land near the pole, there seemed to be good arguments that there might also be little ice there.

The fact that Britain was at war with France more or less continuously from 1793 to 1815, and more briefly with the United States in the War of 1812, had little influence on the opportunities for exploration by merchant fleets. The Hudson's Bay Company continued to send its vessels westward; there was a substantial trade between Britain and Arkhangel'sk (Archangel), and the whaling fleets sailed to both Davis Strait and the Greenland Sea throughout the wars.

No doubt the main reason why the prizes attracted little or response from the whalers was the obvious one: better to go after a relatively dependable reward, in the form of bowhead whales, than to put resources of ships and men into an enterprise where there could be no guarantee, or even likelihood, of success. Owners, captains and (if they had any say in the matter) crews would probably all have taken the same view. Scoresby expressed the situation very clearly, in regard to the £5000 prize:

... though it has now been in force 43 years, it has never produced any discovery, nor even, perhaps, a single attempt. The reason is obvious. No one employed in the whale-fishery, who had the opportunity, would hazard his life, his property, and the success of the voyage, in seeking after a reward which he had every reason to believe was quite

8 16 Geo. III, c.6

9 Grahame Allen, *Inflation: the Value of the Pound 1750–2002*, London, House of Commons Library, www.parliament.uk/commons/lib/research/rp2003/rp03-082.pdf

10 Gordon, Jackson, *The British Whaling Trade* (1978; reprint, International Maritime Economic History Association: St. John's NL, 2005), Appendices 2 & 9.

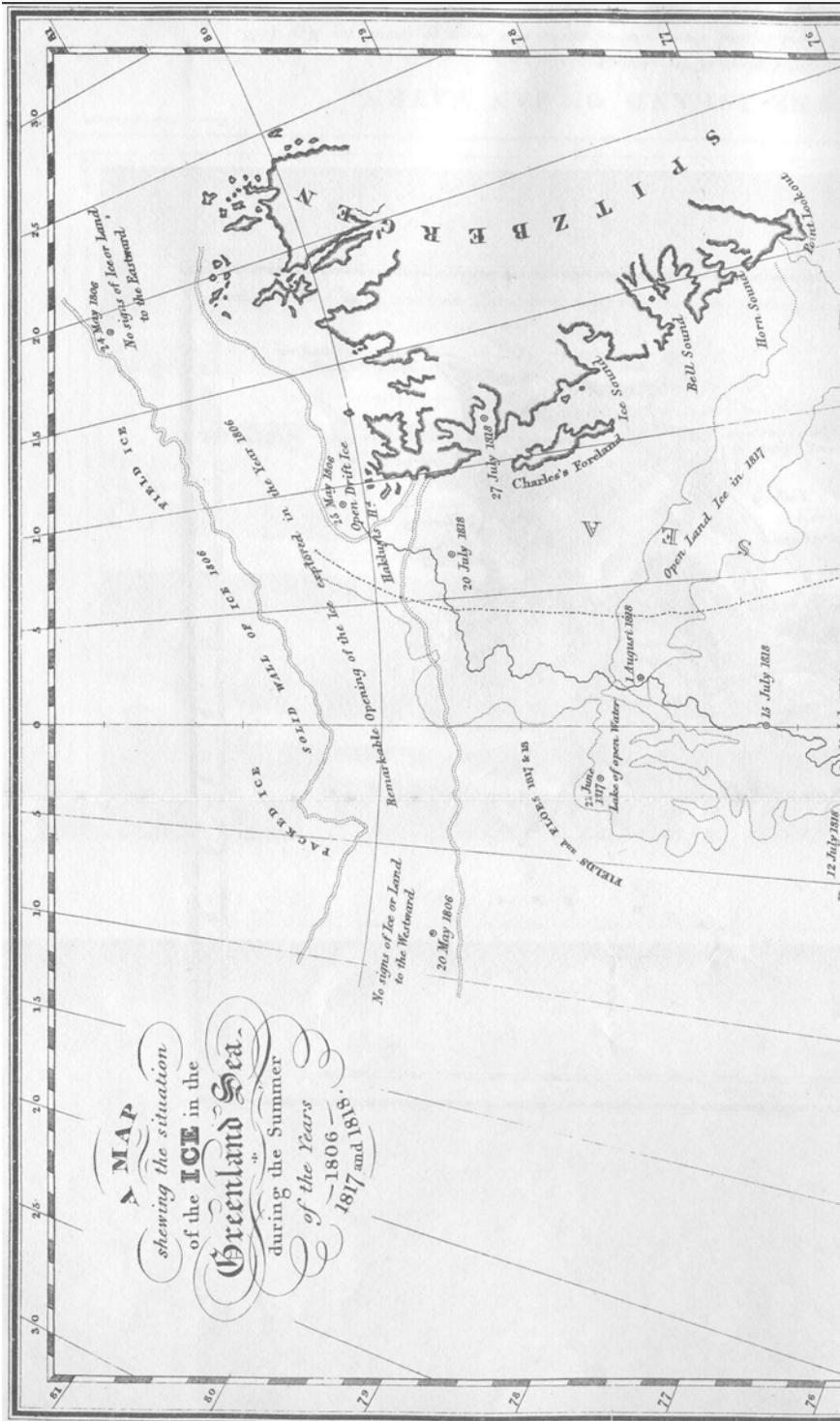


Fig. 1: Farthest north in the Greenland Sea, 81°30'N, 24 May 1806, 24 May 1806, north of Spitsbergen. Detail from Plate VII in William Scoresby, junior, An account of the Arctic Regions, vol. 2, 1820.

beyond his reach; especially as he well knew, that although he should sail to within a few miles of the extent, . . . and there be interrupted by some insurmountable obstacle, yet he could have no claim on the reward.¹¹



Fig 2: Farthest north, west of Greenland. HMS Alert beset in ice in Robeson Channel, a short distance south of her farthest north and winter quarters 1875-76 at Floeberg Beach, 82°35'N. From a photograph in George S. Nares, *Narrative of a Voyage to the Polar Sea*, vol. 2, 1878. Built in 1856, Alert was later loaned to Canada, and continued in service until 1894.

At the end of his article in the *Quarterly Review*, Barrow recognized this problem:

[W]e cannot help thinking, that the problem of a north-west passage and the approach to the pole would have been solved long ago if the Act of the 16th Geo. III. . . had been differently framed, or so far amended as, by a graduated scale, to proportion the reward to the distance discovered; as many whaling vessels, when unsuccessful in the fishery, would then be induced to make the attempt, for the chance of earning a small reward,

11 William Scoresby, *An Account of the Arctic Regions* (1820; repr., Newton Abbott: Newton & Charles, 1969), vol. I, p. 50. Earlier, Sir Joseph Banks had asked Scoresby why whalers had not responded to the eighteenth century incentives. Scoresby responded in November 1817, writing that “1st Few of the commanders of Greenland ships have either a taste for discovery or sufficient nautical knowledge for effecting them. 2nd The expenses of a fishing ship are so considerable that no owner considers himself justifiable in sinking these expenses and foregoing the advantages which may reasonably be expected from the fishing, to pursue objects of discovery in contemplation of a reward, the conditions of which are not known to be even possible.” Quoted in Tom and Cordelia Stamp, *William Scoresby, Arctic Scientist* (Whitby: Caedmon of Whitby, [1976?]), p. 67. Scoresby also suggested that the expenses of an attempt on either the northwest or northeast passage “would swallow up at least half of the premium offered.”

which they are now deterred from doing, as, in the case of failure, after whatever risk, they would be entitled to nothing.¹²

When, shortly after the appearance of Barrow's comments, the rules for the prizes were revised again, provision was made in the legislation "for the Encouragement of Persons who may attempt the said Passage, or approach to the *Northern Pole*, but not wholly accomplish the same . . . to direct and establish proportionate Rewards to be paid to such Person as aforesaid who shall first have accomplished certain Proportions of the said Passage or Approach."¹³

The "certain proportions" were established in March 1819: the first ship to reach 83°N would win £1000; 85°: £2000; 87°: £3000; and 88°: £4000.¹⁴ Although Scoresby thought that "the expectation of reaching the Pole by sea must be altogether chimerical," he did recognize that because the proportions began "with a latitude with which there may be at least a hope of attaining, there will be no doubt of attempts being made to penetrate to the farthest navigable point, and of that extreme accessible point being soon ascertained."¹⁵ 83°N., however, proved to be beyond the reach of any ship in the nineteenth century. Scoresby's father had reached 81°30' with his son in the Greenland Sea in 1806; Captain George Nares took the *Alert* through Smith Sound to Floeberg Beach (82°25') on the north coast of Ellesmere Island in 1875; these proved to be the "extreme accessible" points.

In his *Quarterly Review* article, Barrow identified one other reason why whalers had been little concerned with exploration. He drew attention to the oath that both owners and masters were required to swear before each voyage to the collector of customs in each home port, that "the master and ship's company shall proceed and use their utmost endeavours to take whales, or other large creatures, living in the seas, and *on no other design or view of profit.*" Under this oath, the encouragement meant to be given by the legislature is a complete nullity; and the attempt of the master of a whaler to avail himself of it must be made at the hazard of his ears."¹⁶ This requirement was presumably intended to ensure that the government subsidy ("bounty") paid in respect of each British whaling voyage was not diverted to other objectives; owners may well have supported such oaths for similar reasons, though Scoresby objected to them on moral grounds.¹⁷ It

12 *Quarterly Review*, p. 223. Barrow may have become aware of the problem through seeing Scoresby's letter to Banks.

13 58 Geo. III, c.20.

14 Quoted by Scoresby (*Account*, I, p.53) from the *London Gazette*, 23 March 1819. Similar rewards were established for progress towards a northwest passage, but not, apparently, for a northeast passage. By then, the failure of both the Phipps expedition of 1773 and that of the *Dorothea* and *Trent* in 1818 to achieve significant progress east of Spitsbergen may have suggested that new efforts in that direction were unlikely to succeed.

15 Scoresby, *Account*, I, p.53.

16 *Quarterly Review*, p. 223. Emphasis presumably added by Barrow. The phrase "at the hazard of his ears" probably implies embarrassment – ears blushing or burning – as the false oath is taken.

17 "The oaths required to be taken before the officers of Customs, while they are extremely painful to conscientious persons, are, perhaps, productive of no real benefit to the revenue. . . .

is significant, however, that the problem that Barrow identified was addressed by an Act of Parliament (58 Geo. III, c.15) in March 1818, only a few weeks after his article appeared. Pursuit of the rewards offered by Parliament, including the determination of longitude at sea as well as arctic exploration, were specifically permitted to whaling vessels by the Act.

Two conclusions seem justified by this review. The first is that John Barrow was clearly the guiding spirit behind the legislation in 1818, and the regulations that followed, setting out the rewards for achieving specific latitudes. Second, the evidence clearly refutes the suggestion that has sometimes been made that Barrow wanted to preserve arctic exploration for the Royal Navy, excluding whaling and other commercial interests.

Barrow, Scoresby, and leadership of the 1818 voyages of exploration

The preceding topic, though important, is not contentious. This is not true of the second question. When maritime arctic exploring expeditions were being planned in the second decade of the nineteenth century, why was Scoresby not appointed to lead such a venture? He was a whaling captain with more than a dozen annual voyages to arctic waters; he was also a careful and admired field scientist with published papers and the confidence of men like Joseph Banks and Robert Jameson. He was known to be eager to lead such exploration, and had put forward proposals on the form that it should take.

To Tom and Cordelia Stamp, Scoresby's biographers, and to others such as Constance Martin of the Arctic Institute of North America, the answer was to be found in Barrow's character. In the eyes of the Stamps, "Barrow was a mean-spirited sycophant who had wormed his way upward by devious means and he was determined not to give way to anyone, least of all a whaling captain."¹⁸ Martin was more generous, but also pointed to Barrow's personality as the key:

Why was Barrow so short-sighted? Was it a personality conflict, Scoresby's lack of a Royal Navy commission or his lowly status as a whaler? All explanations are inadequate given the evidence, the complexity of the arctic project and the intelligence of Barrow. Non-commissioned participants, it is true, were not sought in Britain's official search for the Northwest Passage, but a few key figures might have been included, precedents well established on Cook's voyages. Instead the evidence points to deeper psychological reasons.¹⁹

many oaths administered at a custom-house, are so worded that it is impossible to attest to the truth of the whole of the points, without applying a construction to the spirit of the oath, which does not appear in the letter. Hence, it becomes a practice, almost indispensable, not to swear to the simple meaning of the words that are read, but to such a construction of them as the individual to whom they are presented may believe them capable. . . the act of swearing to the truth of what you know nothing of, becomes occasionally necessary for the transaction of business." *Account*, II, pp. 517-18.

18 Stamp & Stamp, p. 67. This is not the image of Barrow portrayed in Lloyd's biography.

19 Constance Martin, "William Scoresby, Jr. (1789-1857) and the Open Polar Sea - Myth and Reality," *Arctic* 41, 1 (1988), pp. 39-47, at p. 47.



Fig 3: William Scoresby junior, from an engraving some time after 1819, when he was aged 30. From the original in Whitby Museum.

For Martin, the answer was to be found in the debate on whether, if there was a substantial sea area between 80°N and the pole, that sea was covered with permanent pack ice or whether it was seasonally navigable. As we have already seen, the latter possibility was inherently recognized in the 1776 legislation that offered a prize for a ship that reached beyond 89°N. The case for an “open polar sea” has been discussed elsewhere; suffice it to say here that in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries there appeared to be reasonable arguments on both sides.²⁰ Indeed, as late as the middle of the twentieth century, the evidence of open water existing throughout the winter in lower latitudes seemed strong, even though it was known by then that the central polar basin was a permanent pack. For example, until air photography disproved the notion, it was confidently believed that much of Hudson Bay remained ice-free year round, and “It is . . . generally recognized that there is always an ice-free area in the North Water off Smith and Lancaster Sounds. Even in the worst ice years, sailing ships . . . could always count on open water in this area.”²¹

John Barrow was one of the proponents of an open polar sea; William Scoresby was skeptical. In Martin’s opinion “[t]his is believed to be the source of Barrow’s illogical rejection of Scoresby.”²² It is argued here, however, that the facts do not support this conclusion, and that there is no need to postulate “deeper psychological reasons” to explain why Scoresby was not invited to lead one of the voyages of exploration. Because many writers have tended to accept that Barrow behaved unfairly towards Scoresby, and because Scoresby’s own ambitions and objectives in regard to arctic exploration have been relatively neglected, a reappraisal seems necessary and overdue.

During his annual whaling voyage in 1817, Scoresby was surprised to find far less ice in the Greenland Sea than in any previous year since he first sailed with his father in 1800 at the age of ten. His comments to the press on his return were noticed by Banks, who asked for more details. Scoresby sent these in a letter to Banks dated 2 October 1817, and much of this information appeared later in Barrow’s *Quarterly Journal* article (p. 202):

[W]e have the direct testimony of Mr. Scoresby the younger, a very intelligent navigator of the Greenland seas, for the disappearance of an immense quantity of arctic ice. In a letter to Sir Joseph Banks, he says, “I observed on my last voyage (1817) about two thousand square leagues (18,000 square miles) of the surface of the Greenland seas, included between the parallels of 74° and 80°, perfectly void of ice, all of which has disappeared within the last two years.” And he further states, that though on former voyages he had very rarely been able to penetrate the ice between the latitudes of 76° and 80°, so far to the west as the meridian of Greenwich, “on his last voyage he twice reached the longitude of 10° west”; that in the parallel of 74°, he approached the coast of Old Greenland; that there was little ice near the land; and adding “that there could be no doubt but he might have reached the shore had he a justifiable motive for navigating an unknown sea at so late a season of the year.”

20 John K. Wright, “The Open Polar Sea,” *Geographical Review* 43, 3 (1953), pp. 338-65.

21 F. Kenneth Hare and Margaret R. Montgomery, “Ice, Open Water, and Winter Climate in the Eastern Arctic of North America, Part II,” *Arctic*, 2, 2 (1949), p. 152.

22 Martin, p. 39.

In the same letter, Scoresby had expressed his own interest in exploration:

I do conceive there is sufficient interest attached to these remote regions to induce Government to fit out an expedition, were it properly represented. . .

I should have much satisfaction in attempting an enterprise of this kind, namely to examine and survey the islands of East Greenland or Spitzbergen, especially the eastern part, which has not been visited [for] many years past; and to ascertain, for the benefit of the whalers, whether the whales resort thither; to endeavour to reach the shore of West Greenland, determine its position, prove its insularity, and ascertain the fate of the Icelandic colony together with making researches . . . relative to the north-east and north-west passages, &c. for the performance of which objects, I could point out a method by which the enterprise could be conducted with little, or possibly no expense to the nation. This would be accomplished by combining the two objects of discovery and fishing.²³

The formal suggestion that the British government should resume arctic exploration was made in a letter from Banks, as president of the Royal Society, to the First Lord of the Admiralty dated 20 November 1817. As with most such letters, it seems reasonable to assume that Banks already knew that it would receive a favourable reception, and very probably Barrow had already begun the necessary planning and organization of the expeditions.²⁴

It is clear, from Scoresby's writings, particularly his unpublished autobiography among the Scoresby Papers in Whitby, that he believed his letter to Banks had initiated the plans for the exploring expeditions of 1818. He also had reason to believe that his proposal "to combine the object of the whale fishery with that of Discovery" was, late in 1817, receiving serious consideration in the capital.

That was not however the case. The main reason why the Admiralty and the British government were willing to undertake such exploration was because of the vital need to provide useful employment for the Royal Navy in the years following the final defeat of Napoleon. It is easy to forget how vast was the transformation that took place within a very few years. In 1812 there were 131,087 men serving in the 543 ships in commission, of which 98 were line of battle ships. By 1817 the comparable figure had

23 Quoted in Scoresby-Jackson, *The Life of William Scoresby . . .* (London: Nelson, 1861), p. 126. Emphasis as in Scoresby-Jackson. By "East Greenland," Scoresby meant Spitsbergen; similarly "West Greenland" meant what we would now term the east coast of Greenland. Although both the Norse colonies of centuries earlier, the "Western Settlement" and the "Eastern Settlement," had been on the west coast of Greenland, the notion that the latter was on the east coast, and its fate undetermined because of the difficulty of access, persisted into the nineteenth century. "Fishing" was the normal term for whaling.

24 The letter is no. 132 in Neil Chambers, *The Letters of Sir Joseph Banks* (London: Imperial College Press, c. 2000), pp. 334-35. Ross (*Polar Pioneers*, p. 29) claimed that this letter was drafted by Barrow. The First Lord (Robert Dundas, Lord Melville) replied on 12 December, with details of the proposed expeditions. That reply was presumably also drafted by Barrow.

fallen to 13 ships of the line and 22,944 men.²⁵ Even these dramatic figures understate the problem facing the Admiralty. As Fleming has written:

The ships were laid up “in ordinary” and the seamen were simply thrown back onto the streets from which they had often been press-ganged in the first place. The officers, however, were a different matter. They were career men, they had political clout, and they could not be dismissed so easily. In fact, their numbers increased until the navy, reduced to a rump of some 23,000 men from a peak of more than 130,000, had one officer for every four men.. But 90 per cent of these officers had nothing to do. . . Thirty years on, the navy was still feeling the effects of the Napoleonic Wars. . . In 1846, of 1,151 officers, only 172 were in full employment.²⁶



Fig 4: William Romaine Govett's sketch of Sir John Ross, RN, on half-pay and crouched over his fireplace in the early 1840s, encapsulates the situation of most naval officers in the decades after 1815. nla.pic-an4699598, National Library of Australia.

²⁵ Lloyd, *Mr Barrow of the Admiralty*, p. 91.

²⁶ Fleming, *Barrow's Boys*, pp. 1-2.

It was against this background that Barrow was able to set objectives for two naval voyages of exploration that would, he was sure, prove the existence of an “open polar sea.” These objectives were very different from those offered by Scoresby, who had restricted his proposals to the latitudes where the ice had disappeared, i.e. between 74° and 80°N. Instead, Barrow declared in the *Quarterly Review* essay (p. 220):

[O]ne . . . is to proceed northerly into the polar basin, and to endeavour, by passing close to the pole, to make a direct course to Behring’s Strait; the other is to push through Davis’s Strait for the north-east coast of America; and, if successful in discovering and doubling the [north-eastern extremity of America], to proceed to the westward, with the view of passing Behring’s Strait.

Back in Whitby, Scoresby knew little or nothing of these plans when, in early December 1817, his father, then in London, “was advised to send for me, with a view of my being employed in this interesting service.” It was the way in which Scoresby discovered that it was not his own proposals that were being promoted that caused his biographers and others to see in Barrow a personal contempt for a mere whaling captain. As Scoresby recounted the occasion in his autobiography:

I left Whitby on the 11th of December and proceeded immediately to London, and the day or two after my arrival had an interview with Sir Joseph Banks and Mr Barrow. I found Mr Barrow was particularly anxious that my Father or I, or both of us should go in the proposed expeditions; yet to my surprise he evaded conversation on the subject, and generally avoided me in the room, until provoked by his conduct I watched an opportunity, and put the question plainly to him – Was it desired that I should have an employment in either of the expeditions; and if so, what situation it was that I might expect? He answered shortly & indirectly that if I wished to go on the Discovery I must call the next day at the Navy Board and give in my proposals, and then [turning?] sharply round he left the room. More than ever annoyed by this ambiguity, and general mystery that there seemed to be respecting this matter I determined to ask an explanation of Sir Joseph Banks, of whose candour and good will I had no doubt.

M.J. Ross has written, “Barrow’s curt treatment of Scoresby was inexcusable.”²⁷ Barrow could certainly have handled the situation better, but consider the circumstances. The occasion was one of Sir Joseph Banks’ *conversazioni* at his London home, as much a social as a scientific gathering. Barrow was probably well aware that Scoresby had arrived in London hoping, and perhaps even expecting, to be offered the command of an exploring expedition on very different lines from what was going forward. Barrow was, in modern jargon, “ambushed” by Scoresby, before the latter had talked to Banks who, with Scoresby, Senior, was mainly responsible for the summons to London. After Barrow’s embarrassed departure, Scoresby then talked to Banks:

The first interval that I perceived him to be disengaged, I stepped up to him . . . and put the same question to him that I had done with so little satisfaction to Mr Barrow. The substance of his answer was that they much wished, (himself & the admiralty I presumed) I should embark in one of the expeditions, but he was very sorry to say that all

²⁷ Ross, *Polar Pioneers*, p. 30.

his endeavours to obtain me a command in one of them had failed, as the admiralty, having taken up the matter, could not employ any but their own officers as leading men. But it was hoped I might be disposed to go as a Master (namely a pilot!) having the charge of my own ship and crew; subject to the direction . . . of the naval Captain. The worthy president thus in as delicate a manner as he could conveyed to me the information I wished, & repeatedly & I doubt not with perfect sincerity, expressed his dissatisfaction with the arrangements. He stated moreover that he believed the commanding officers of the four proposed ships were already appointed or at least fixed upon.

I was greatly disappointed with the result of this interview from which it clearly appeared that I had undertaken a journey to London for nothing, and had been called up in such a way that I could have no claim for my expenses.

Spurning the idea of embarking in a subordinate capacity, on a service that I had good reason to apprehend I was better capable of, from my experience in the icy seas, that (*sic*) any lieutenant or Captain of the Royal Navy could possibly be, I declined the proposed arrangement suggested by Mr Barrow and neither appeared at the Navy Board, nor made any further enquiries on the subject.²⁸

Scoresby was understandably disappointed, but he had expected too much. Once the decision had been taken to give the task of exploration to an under-employed Royal Navy, there was no prospect of him being given a command.²⁹ Instead the Admiralty wished him to sail on one of the expeditions – presumably the one via the Greenland Sea – as a master. Although Scoresby summarily dismissed that suggestion, James Cook's biographer has emphasized the responsibility of the position:

trained by hard experience and his own ability; the chief professional on board though not the highest ranking one, the man who never ceased to retain control . . . of the ship's navigation. He was subject of course to the orders from the captain, who got his orders from an admiral or the Admiralty; but it would be an unwise captain who ignored, or overrode, his subordinate's particular expertness.³⁰

From the Admiralty's standpoint, what was being offered to Scoresby or his father was a responsible position in an expedition to latitudes where they were recognized to have the expertise and experience. Probably neither John Barrow nor the Admiralty was surprised when Scoresby declined the idea – as the latter recognized, it would almost

28 Autobiography. The Navy Board was and is concerned with the day-to-day administration of the Royal Navy. Until it was merged with the Admiralty in 1831, it was a separate institution.

29 William Dampier in 1699 and Edmond Halley a year earlier had been given command of Royal Navy ships though not members of that service, but by the mid-eighteenth century these precedents were resisted, so that it was not the Royal Society's nominee, Alexander Dalrymple, who commanded the *Endeavour* on her voyage to the Pacific, but Lt. James Cook, R.N. I am grateful to Glyndwr Williams for drawing my attention to these precedents.

30 J.C. Beaglehole, *The Life of Captain James Cook* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1974), p. 26. It was as a master that James Cook was appointed to command the *Endeavour*, and Beaglehole suggested that it was neither necessary nor inevitable for the Admiralty to commission him as a lieutenant a month later (*ibid.*, p. 134).

certainly involve considerable financial loss to him – but it was a genuine compliment to his ability, and in no way an attempt by Barrow to diminish him.³¹

One could go further: even if the impossible were to happen, and Scoresby had been offered the command of the Greenland Sea expedition, his knowledge and integrity would surely have prevented him from adopting the objectives set out by the Admiralty. To sail to 80°N was for him a routine matter; to go much beyond that latitude in that region he was convinced was impossible, and to accept such a command would have guaranteed that he would fail. As he wrote to Banks from Shetland on 17 April 1818, “as to reaching the *Pole*, I confess myself sceptical. From what I have observed, I imagine probabilities are against their penetrating beyond 82° or 83°, and I readily allow I shall be *much* surprised if they should pass the eighty-fourth degree of latitude.”³²

Baffin Bay: a problem of geography or semantics?

In 1818, long after the author’s death in 1800, there appeared in London a new edition of a 1775 book by Daines Barrington entitled *Probability of reaching the North Pole discussed*.³³ The 1818 version, which had been revised by another fellow of the Royal Society, Colonel Beaufoy, contained a map that had not been in the earlier editions. The map’s main interest nowadays is that it showed “Baffin’s Bay” north of Davis Strait, but added, beneath the name, the words “[a]ccording to the relation of W. Baffin in 1616, but not now believed.”

One can understand the lack of belief. What Baffin had claimed was that, “in the good shipp called the Discoverare, being of the burthen of 55 tonn or theare aboute” and a ship’s company of only seventeen men, he had reached a latitude of 78°N, as well as discovering and naming “Sir Thomas Smith’s Sound” that appeared to extend even further north.³⁴ It could have sounded highly improbable two centuries later. When I used to teach polar exploration at London University in the 1960s, I suggested that it might be comparable to someone who claimed to have climbed Mount Everest during the Jacobite rebellion of 1745.

But Baffin had done what he claimed, and this was conclusively proved in that same year, as the map that doubted his claims appeared. Ross and Parry were at that time

31 In 1824 Scoresby mentioned that during the previous eleven years whaling had brought him an average income of £800 per annum (Scoresby-Jackson, *Life*, p. 221). This was an order of magnitude more than he could have anticipated as a master on a naval expedition.

32 Quoted in Scoresby-Jackson, *Life*, p. 129.

33 The title changed between editions. When originally published in London by Heydinger in 1775, it was as *The Probability of Reaching the North Pole Discussed*. This version was reprinted in facsimile in 1987 by Ye Galleon Press, Fairfield WA. A selection of Barrington’s writings published by White and Nichols in 1781 entitled *Miscellanies* included the same material but with the more cautious title *The Possibility of Approaching the North Pole Discussed*. The version published in London by Allman in 1818, and in the same year by Eastburn in New York, carried the title *The Possibility of Approaching the North Pole Asserted*.

34 Quoted from Markham, Clements R., ed., *The Voyages of William Baffin, 1612-1622* (1881; repr.; n.p.: Elibron Classics, Adamant Media, 2001), p. 111. The quotation is from the preamble to the voyage in 1615, but the Discovery was used again in 1616.

exploring the same area for the Royal Navy in the *Isabella* and *Alexander*, and Ross later wrote that:

In re-discovering Baffin's Bay I have derived great additional pleasure from the reflection that I have placed in a fair light before the Public the merits of a worthy and able navigator, whose fate, like that of many others, it has not only been to have lost, by a combination of untoward circumstances, the opportunity of acquiring during his life-time the fame he deserved; but, could he have lived to this period, to have seen his discoveries expunged from the records of geography, and the bay with which his name is so fairly associated, treated as a phantom of the imagination.³⁵

It all seems very clear and straightforward: Baffin had claimed to have reached and named Smith Sound, in latitude 78°N in a tiny ship in the early seventeenth century, but by the early nineteenth century this seemed unbelievable, until Ross and Parry vindicated Baffin's account. I suggest, however, that such an interpretation is incorrect; what was doubted or disbelieved was not the extent of Baffin's voyage, but his claim that the sea area he explored was a bay: Baffin Bay. Here again we come back to the question of an open polar sea, with Barrington, Beaufoy and Barrow all supporting this idea. What all of these wished to believe was that Baffin Bay was not a bay but a sea, and a sea open to the northward. The idea was expressed very clearly by Barrow. He saw the 1818 voyages as "a fair opportunity . . . to examine the sea usually named Baffin's Bay on the charts.' Several circumstances may be adduced in support of the opinion that Greenland is either an island or an archipelago of islands, in which case Baffin's Bay must be expunged from the charts."³⁶

These circumstances included evidence of a "perpetual current setting down from the northward, along the eastern coast of America" (the



Fig 5: Captain Ross in happier days. From woodcut circa 1840, engraver unknown, Thomas Crowell, 1923. Courtesy Archives and Collections Society.

³⁵ Ross, John, *A Voyage of Discovery . . . In His Majesty's Ships Isabella and Alexander . . .*, (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme & Brown, 1819), vol. I, pp. viii-ix. Online facsimile at <http://books.google.com/>

³⁶ *Quarterly Review*, p. 211.



Fig 6: In this detail from a map in Barrow's *Quarterly Review* article, Davis Strait is envisaged as a broad channel extending northward into the arctic basin and a supposed open polar sea. There is no mention of Baffin Bay.

article in the *Quarterly Review*, it is the land enclosing Baffin Bay that is omitted, not the sea area: the latter is shown as a very broad marine area extending into the polar basin.

We need therefore to look again at what Ross wrote after his 1818 voyage. What he and Parry were re-discovering on their 1818 voyage was not the sea area of Baffin Bay but the land that framed the area. Ross was explicit on the matter. On 20 August 1818, in what he recorded as $76^{\circ}46\frac{1}{4}'N$ $75^{\circ}21\frac{3}{4}'W$, he wrote that: "Lieutenant Robertson and other

Labrador Current) and the amount of driftwood contained in that current, which Barrow believed must have originated in Asia or America, carried into the central polar basin, and then expelled southward into Davis Strait. "It is fair, therefore, to conclude that there must exist a free and open passage between this basin and Davis's Strait. The fact of several vessels having been as high as Baffin without observing the least appearance of land removes alldoubt as to the non-existence of the bay, as drawn on the charts."³⁷ In the map that Beaufoy added to the 1818 edition of Barrington, and in the map on a polar projection that Barrington included in his



Fig 7: Instead of a broad channel, Ross's map of his 1818 voyage clearly depicts a bay. Smith Sound, named by Baffin, appears here only as a narrow break in the coastline. Detail from the map in John Ross, *A Voyage of Discovery*, vol. 2, 1819.

³⁷ *Quarterly Review*, p. 212. The emphasis on "bay" is in the original. There is yet another place in this article where Barrow denies the reality of the bay: "It is well known that in the sea of Baffin (gratuitously called a bay) the compass is affected." (p. 203).

officers, were stationed at the mast-head to look out for the direction of the coast; and they made their reports that they were satisfied they had seen the land completely round this bay at different times, as did also the officers of the *Alexander*, who were at the mast-head of that ship at the same time.”³⁸ Ross did not deny the possible existence of Smith Sound, but made it clear that there was no broad opening to the north that Barrow had envisaged:

. . . it appears perfectly certain that the land is here continuous, and that there is no opening at the northernmost part of Baffin’s Bay . . . Even if it be imagined that some narrow Strait may exist through these mountains, it is evident, that it must forever be unnavigable, and that there is not even a chance of ascertaining its existence, since all approach to the bottoms of these bays is prevented by the ice which fills them to so great a depth, and appears never to have moved from its station.³⁹

Ross was wrong about the access to and navigability of Smith Sound, as he was later in the voyage when he concluded that Baffin’s Lancaster Sound was also a bay. Nevertheless he and his colleagues had confirmed that Baffin was essentially correct in recognizing that the sea area which bears his name is a bay. And that was what the early nineteenth century disbelief had been about, not about whether Baffin had indeed explored as far as he claimed.

38 Ross, vol. I, p. 212.

39 Ross, vol. I, p. 214.

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