AMERICAN EXPLORATIONS  
IN  
THE ICE ZONES.  

CHAPTER I.  


The field of Arctic exploration includes a section of the earth's surface not strictly coincident with the Arctic circle of the geographers. Countries such as South Greenland, Labrador, or Alaska, in the western hemisphere, or the region around Lake Baikal in the eastern, though situated as low as the sixtieth, or even the fiftieth parallel of north latitude, have a decidedly Arctic climate, with its products; while others, as the coast of Norway, lying far nearer the Pole, but under specially favorable influences, enjoy in midwinter a remarkably mild temperature.  

Arctic exploration has of necessity employed itself both upon the stormy sea and upon the snow and ice-bound land. The great ocean surrounding the Pole drains the northern slopes of three continents, receiving the waters of an estimated area of more than four and a quarter millions of square miles, and its river systems exceed those of the West Atlantic coast. Within this great basin the Pole itself is, as yet, shut out from access by an investing zone of probably permanent ice; beyond this zone, theory still places an open sea.
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The undiscovered polar region is limited, at most points on the American and European sides, by about the eighty-second parallel; on the north of Asia the limit is as low as the seventy-fourth degree. To the inner basin there are but three possible ways of entrance: the estuaries of Hudson’s and Baffin Bays, north of America; the space between Greenland and Norway, north of Europe; and Behring’s Straits, between America and Eastern Russia.

The lands of the Arctic region are naturally divided into two well-marked zones,—the forests and the treeless wastes. In America the latter are the well-known “barrens,” or “barren grounds,” which yield a scanty subsistence to the suffering natives, and were traversed with so much hardship by Franklin and by those who sought for him by land in the explorations hereafter to be noted. In the eastern continent they bear the name of the “tundra,” often showing nothing more than boundless morasses or arid wastes, tracked by the feet of Siberian exiles and arctic explorers, including the perishing ones from the “Jeannette” and its survivors in their search for the lost. Over such scenes many weary sledge-journeys have been made, to the extent of more than a thousand miles each. A narrative of Arctic exploration leads, therefore, not only to the well-furnished ship, or even to her deck when housed for the winter storms, but to perilous journeys over tracks at times scarcely distinguishable by the most experienced; over ice-floes and fissures, requiring the scaling of the rough and dizzy crests of the bergs. The chief scene of Arctic exploration, however, is upon the tempestuous sea, with its closing nips, and, at times, equally dangerous and sudden openings on the seaman. The mysterious waters hold a fascination possessed by no other region, creating and keeping up an indescribable longing for adventure, in which daring spirits have found all that makes travel exciting.

The ice zones of the south present no such allurements. No continents there approach the ocean’s shore, while a glance at the world’s map shows, in the north, a preponderance of land, spreading out in such almost unbroken continuity as to tempt some to the theory that nearer the Pole the land masses are separated by
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a chain of islands only. This essential difference in the land surfaces accounts in part for the extreme difference in the summer temperatures of the two zones. The ice barrier of the south has been but once penetrated beyond the seventy-eighth degree. And while, even in Spitzbergen, vegetation ascends the mountain slopes to a height of

three thousand feet, in every land within or near the Antarctic circle the snow line descends to the water’s edge. Not even a moss or a lichen has been observed beyond south latitude 64° 12'. In Spitzbergen the thermometer has risen to 58½°, but during the summer months spent by Sir James Ross in the Antarctic, the temperature of the air never once exceeded 41° 5'. No hunters there, like the Eskimos, chase the seal or the walrus; no herdsmen, like the Lapps, follow the reindeer to the ocean’s edge; not a single land quadruped exists beyond 56°: all is one dreary, uninhabitable waste. In the north, coasts and valleys at equal distances from the equator are green with vegetation; in the south they are wastes of ice and snow.

The spread of the northern lands points us, as has been said, chiefly
to the causes of this difference. The plains of Siberia and of Northern America, warmed by the summer’s sun, become centres of radiating heat; but the Antarctic lands, of small extent, isolated in the midst of frigid waters, and chilled by the cold sea-winds, act as constant refrigerators. In the north, icebergs are found in a few mountainous countries only; upon Antarctic lands they are more continuous, tower much higher, and their vast fragments perpetually maintain the low temperatures of the sea, detached bergs having been met with as near the equator as the mouth of the La Plata. In the latter regions no traces of warm currents have been observed beyond the fifty-fifth degree of south latitude; but in the north the well known gulf stream carries its powerful influence as far as Norway, Spitzbergen, and Nova Zembla, thus making the northern zone, by comparison, an attractive scene of exploration and adventure.*

Arctic exploration may be said to have had at first but one purpose: to reach the Pole, and cross it from continent to continent; and this, indeed, has been the chief element in the polar problem for the last three and a half centuries. It is the purpose of this volume to refer briefly to the events giving rise to this problem, to the persistent efforts for its solution, and to the beneficial results secured by these seemingly useless labors. The Pole has not been reached, and may not be, and the short, navigable route is demonstrably impracticable. But the incidental results of exploration have far more than compensated for every expenditure of thought and money, for all of exposure and disappointment. For lessons in patience, self-sacrifice, and heroic endurance, few clearer examples can be drawn from the world’s history than those to be found in the baffled attempts to reach the Pole. And yet the world has learned from these, that Providence, which shapes the destinies of men and nations, ordains that while men may fail to

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* The remarkable phenomenon of the great difference between the two zones is accounted for by the meteorologist, Mr. Croll, on the ground that, in long lapses of time, their climates alternate, through the change in the eccentricity of the earth’s orbit, in combination with the precession of the equinoxes. In both regions extensive fossil remains prove that a tropical or semi-tropical climate formerly existed. Our age is that of excess of cold in the Antarctic zone.
attain their first and perhaps less valuable aims, a larger reward often awaits their unrelinquished efforts.

The problem of the Pole and the northern passage had its birth at the great era of the discovery of America and of the new way to the Indies by the Cape of Good Hope; discoveries which snatched maritime commerce from its old seat in the Mediterranean and gave to the Spaniards and the Portuguese its almost exclusive control. These nations claimed not only the newly-discovered countries, but the right to the exclusive navigation of the ocean between them; and as the attempt by any other nation to enter those seas involved a war with either, or both, Spanish and Portuguese, the northern maritime nations began seriously to think of some shorter passages to the Indies which would give them commercial superiority. For the East, as the region of barbaric pearl and gold, ever loomed up before the mind as the land of unimagined riches, and a readier passage to it, as a feat of daring but of sure renown.

England led the way. “Having then no anticipation of becoming the sovereign of Hindostan, she hoped for a peaceful intercourse by a nearer avenue to southern Asia.” Of this the old navigator, Sebastian Cabot, said, “When the news was brought that Don Christoval Colon had discovered the coasts of India, by his fame and report, there increaseth in my heart a great flame of desire to attempt some notable thing; and understanding by reason of the sphere (globe) that if I should sail by way of the northwest I should by a shorter tract come into India, I thereupon caused the king to be advertised of my device.” At the later date of 1569, Martin Frobisher, “being persuaded of a new and nearer passage to Cataya (Cathay) than by Capo d’buona Speranza, which the Portugalles yearly use, began first with himselfe to devise, and then with his friends to conferre, and layde a playne platte unto them, that that voyage was not only possible by the northwest, but also, as he could prove, easie to be performed.” It was “the only thing left undone in the world whereby a notable mind might be made famous and fortunate.”

The voyages of the Cabots established the well-known right of England to the possession of the North American coast, securing for
the coming generations their great home of freedom, while French
exploration under Verrazani and Cartier secured a like claim for
France on the regions north of the St. Lawrence,—a claim afterward
happily absorbed under the domain of English law. A quarter of a
century after Cabot’s day, three attempts for the passage of the north-
west having been tried in vain, a northeast course to Asia was sought
by the fleet of Willoughby and Chancellor, which was to reach Cathay
by doubling the northern promontory of Lapland. The admiral’s fate
was tragical. In his hoped-for shelter in a Lapland harbor he was
found dead in his cabin, and his ship’s company “dead in various parts
of the vessel, alone or in groups.” But his second officer, Chancellor,
first for the English, entered the harbor of Archangel. It was “the
discovery of Russia,” or as a Spanish writer says, “a discovery of New
Indies,—the commencement of maritime commerce between England
and Russia, then one of the oldest and least mixed nations in Europe,
but which was awakening from a long lethargy to emerge into political
distinction.”

The voyages of Davis (1585–86), on the third of which, when in
lat. 75°, he was “in a great sea free from ice, neither was there any
ice toward the north, but a sea free, large, and very salt and blue, and
of unsearchable depth,” added nothing to the discovery of the passage
beyond the renewed conviction of that day that the way toward the
north was without impediment. The same remark may be applied to
the voyages of Barentz and Hudson and Baffin; the two last being made
in the first quarter of the century following. Yet the experiences of
the sturdy navigators on the northern Asiatic coast, and the opening
up on the north of America of the great inland sea and of the estuaries,
Smith’s, Lancaster, and Whale Sounds, were further inducements for
prosecuting the search.

Outside of the direct object named, large beneficial results were
secured. The whale fisheries became the great object for which several
nations competed; and the charts of Baffin and the voyages of Hudson
led the way to this for the Dutch, and afterward for the English mer-
chant. But from this date little of Arctic exploration for the North-
west passage was entered upon for a century.
The enterprise first attracted royal attention in the third quarter of the eighteenth century; George III., at the instance of the Royal Society of the Admiralty, sending out on expedition under Captain Phipps and toward the regions north of Spitzbergen. In his "Journal of a Voyage to the North Pole," the captain entered the sea "during a summer affording the fullest examination; but the wall of ice between latitudes 80° and 81° showed for more than twenty degrees not the smallest appearance of any opening." In this expedition, Nelson, then but fifteen years of age, exhibited a bravery and cool courage prophetic of his subsequent career.

Three years later, in July, 1776, Captain Cook sailed for the South Sea to make discoveries in the Pacific, and to return to England, as he hoped, by Behring's Strait. For, although the route to India by the Cape and the monopoly of commerce once enjoyed by Spain and Portugal had long before fallen into English hands, the northern passage was still sought, as promising a shorter and less expensive route; and an act was passed by parliament offering £20,000 to any vessel which should make the passage from continent to continent in either direction. Cook's ships were wholly unfitted to contend with northern ice. He discovered the Sandwich Islands and explored Behring's Strait, but was speedily driven back by the ice after reaching Icy Cape. From this date Arctic exploration, with the exception of the discoveries of Mackenzie and Hearne by land, the laudable efforts of the American colonists, and the attempts of the Russians to double their northern coasts, was again nearly suspended.

It is to the credit of the provinces of Virginia and Pennsylvania, and possibly of Rhode Island and of Massachusetts at a still earlier date, that the enterprise was not forgotten. The first note of these efforts here given does not belong to the region of authentic history, but is referred to as exhibiting indications of at least a more than probable knowledge of and sympathy with the object. The expeditions of the middle of the eighteenth century show that the colonies, even in their disjointed and feeble state, and in advance of the royal countenance of the undertaking, contributed their full share to it. It will be remembered that the London Company, as early as 1607,
instructed the Virginia colonists to seek a communication with the South Sea, and the famous Captain John Smith was taken prisoner in his ascent of the Chickahominy for that object. It was clearly the purpose of the colonists to find a water route to Asia if possible.

In the letter which follows these notices, the odd reference to “the parson” may perhaps be accounted for by remembering the old antagonisms between the Quaker and the officers of the Church of England.

EARLY AMERICAN VOYAGES.

I. A Voyage Reported to have been Made from Boston in 1639. — Ellis, in his “Voyage of the Dobbs and California” says:—

“A Mr. Groiseleiz, an inhabitant of Canada, a bold and enterprising man, and one who had travelled much in those parts, reached the coasts of Hudson’s Bay from the French settlements. On his return he prevailed on his countrymen to fit out a bark for perfecting the discovery by sea; which being done, and he, landing on the coast, was amazed to find that some of his company had discovered an English settlement near Port Nelson. On his arrival there he found a party who told him they were part of a ship’s crew from Boston; that they were set on shore to look for a place where the ship might winter.”

To this statement, which is a condensation of Ellis’ narrative, he adds in substance,—

“It is impossible to say whether this was the ship in De Fonte’s account; but if it was, or if we should be wrong in this conjecture, it will still remain an incontestible proof that some attempts were made from Boston, when they were laid aside and forgot at London and Bristol.”

De Fonte was the Spanish admiral spoken of by Thomas Jefferys in his “Great Probability of the Northwest Passage, 1768” as having been sent out to intercept the reported voyage of the ship from Boston, as a violation of Spanish right at the time when Spain enjoyed the exclusive route to the Indies. Snow, in his “History of Boston,” treats the story of the admiral as a myth. The voyage was probably for trading purposes.
BENJAMIN FRANKLIN’S EXPEDITION.

II. A trace of a better authenticated expedition is found in the “Gentlemen’s Magazine,” London, Nov. 1772, which says: —

“By a letter from James Wilder, captain of the Diligence, fitted out in Virginia by subscription, with a view to the discovery of the long-sought Northwest passage, it appears by the course of the tides there is a passage, but that it is seldom or never open, and he believes impassable. He sailed as high as 69° 11’, and discovered a large bay.” To this voyage the “American Quarterly Review” of 1828, as well as Scoresby in his “Account of the Arctic Regions,” and Maepherson in his “Annals of Commerce,” Vol. III., refers at some length.

III. AN EARLIER AND ALSO UNDISPUTED ACCOUNT. — The narrative of most interest is that of the effort made under the auspices of Dr. Franklin, whose letter below notes it: —

PHILADELPHIA, Feb. 28, 1753.

... “I believe I have not before told you that I have provided a subscription here of £1500 to fit out a vessel in search of a Northwest passage. She sails in a few days, and is called the Argo, commanded by Mr. Swaine, who was in the last expedition in the California, and author of a Journal of that voyage in two volumes. We think the attempt laudable, whatever may be the success. If she fails, 'magnis tamen excidit ausis.' With great esteem,

Benj. Franklin.”

Mr. Cadwalader Colden, N.Y.

Of this voyage the “Pennsylvania Gazette,” “printed for Benjamin Franklin, postmaster, and D. Hall,” November 15, 1753, says: —

“Sunday last arrived here the schooner Argo, Capt. Charles Swaine, who sailed from this port last spring, on the discovery of a Northwest passage. She fell in with ice off Cape Farewell; left the eastern ice and fell in with the western ice, in lat. 58°, and cruised to the northward to lat. 63°, to clear it, but could not; it then extending to the eastward. On her return to the southward, she met with two Danish ships bound to Ball river and Disco, up Davis Straits, who had been in the ice fourteen days off Farewell, and had then stood to westward and assured the commander that the ice was fast to the shore all above
Hudson’s Straits to the distance of forty degrees out: and that there had not been such a severe winter as the last these twenty-four years that they had used that trade; they had been nine weeks from Copenhagen. The Argo, finding she could not get round the ice, pressed through it and got into the strait’s mouth the 26th of June, and made the Island Resolution, but was forced out by vast quantities of driving ice, and got into a clear sea the first of July. On the 14th, cruising the ice for an opening to get in again, she met 4 sail of Hudson’s Bay ships endeavoring to get in, and continued with them till the 19th, when they parted in thick weather, in lat. 62° and a half, which weather continued until the 7th of August. The Hudson Bay men supposed themselves 40 leagues from the western land.

“The Argo ran down the ice from 63° to 57° 30’, and after repeated attempts to enter the straits in vain, as the season for discovery on the western side of the Bay was over, she went on the Labrador coast, and discovered it perfectly from 56° to 55°, finding no less than six inlets, to the heads of all of which they went, and of which we hear they have made a very good chart, and have a better account of the country, its soil, produce, etc., than has hitherto been published.

“The captain says ‘t is much like Norway, and that there is no communication with Hudson’s Bay through Labrador where one has heretofore imagined, a high ridge of mountains running north and south, about fifty leagues within the coast. In one of the harbors they found a deserted wooden house, with a brick chimney, which had been built by some English, as appeared by sundry things they left behind: and afterwards in another harbor they met with Captain Goff in a Snow (a three-masted vessel, the third mast abaft the mainmast, carrying a trysail) from London, who informed them that the same Snow had been there last year, and landed some of the Moravian Brethren, who had built that house; but the natives, having decoyed the then captain of the Snow and five or six of his hands in their boat round a point of land at a distance from the Snow, under pretense of trade, and carried them all off (they having gone imprudently without arms), the Snow after waiting sixteen days without hearing of them, went home and was obliged to take away the Morav-