VOYAGE

TO

HUDSON’S BAY.

ON Wednesday, June the 24th, about four o’clock in the afternoon, we got under way, having on-board the Earl of Selkirk, Mr. Everard of Sligo, and a few other gentlemen who had dined with us. At first it was our intention not to proceed to sea that night, but merely to get clear of Sligo Bay, which cannot at all times be easily accomplished. About six o’clock, however, the captain came down to inform Lord Selkirk, that it was his wish to proceed to sea immediately; and Lord Selkirk and company took their leave.

Their “lessening boat” had scarcely disappeared, when, leaning over the quarter-deck, I was insensibly led to the contemplation of the grand and sublime scenery with which I was, for the first time in my life, surrounded. On one side I beheld the vast and widely-extended body of waters, over which the moon was just beginning to throw a diffused and silvery light; on the other appeared my native land, like a dusky streak stretched along the verge of the horizon. Its thin and misty form had somewhat the appearance of a dense vapour, which had been precipitated by the chill cool air of evening.

The solemnity and stillness of this calm repose of nature was only interrupted by the soft splash of the light wave against the head and sides of the vessel, and occasionally by the slow and solemn voice of the captain giving his commands to the helmsman.

From this train of reflections I was, however, soon disturbed by the voice of the steward, who came upon deck to announce that supper was on the table. I immediately went down to the cabin, where I found Mr. and Mrs. M’Clain, from the Isle of Mull; Mr. Keveny, Mr. Johnson, and the rest of the cabin-passengers. After partaking of a very elegant and well-dressed supper, we continued chatting until twelve o’clock: “that hour o’ night’s black arch the keystone,” when we all agreed to retire, or, as it is technically termed, to turn in. In a short time, without much solicitation, we were visited by that sweet refreshing power which rarely visits sorrow, and when it doth, it is a comforter.

During the first week, the occurrences of our voyage were Voyages and Travels, No. 8. Vol. II.
like the generality of sea-affairs, too trivial to become interesting, and too unvaried to afford amusement. The wind continued fair, and the weather extremely fine, so that on an average we made about 150 miles each day.

Thursday, July the 24. Early in the morning, we observed a strange sail, which the captain at first apprehended might be an enemy; but, on nearer approach, he discovered her to be the King George, one of the Hudson's Bay company's ships, commanded by Captain Turner; a short time after, we observed another vessel, which we found to be the Eddystone, the property of the same company, commanded by Captain Ramsay. At nine o'clock, A.M. they continued to bear down upon us in full sail. About ten we spoke the King George; and, shortly after, the Eddystone, lat. as observed, 57° 48' N.; we continued in company for a couple of hours. Our vessel, however, being much better adapted for quick sailing, we, in a short time, left them completely behind.

Sunday, July the 12th. Weather very thick and hazy, accompanied with constant drizzling rain. Wind continues fair. The air feels very cold, owing, as the captain suspects, to our being near ice. About half past one, the man at the helm said he saw land. Owing to the very unfavourable state of the weather, we remained for a considerable time in suspense. The captain does not think that this can possibly be the case. At length, however, from its very striking appearance, he was induced to send for his telescope; is still rather doubtful; if land, he thinks, it must be Cape Farewell,* in which case we are 200 miles behind where we supposed ourselves to be. In the end, it appeared to be merely what the seamen call a Cape Fly-away.

About two o'clock the captain, having got an interval of fine weather, set about making an observation, which satisfied him that we were then past the entrance to Davis's Straits. About four o'clock we saw a young whale.

Monday, July the 13th. The weather continues thick and hazy, with much rain, but little wind; helm lashed. Air still feels very cold, especially on going aloft.

About nine o'clock, P.M., two men were stationed at the bow of the vessel, that immediate notice might be given of the appearance of ice. The captain, before going to bed, gave orders that ice-anchors, boat-hooks, &c. should be got in readiness. Twelve o'clock, P.M., wind increased, going about

---

* Cape Farewell, the southern extremity of Greenland, is situated in lat. 59° 38' N., and long. 42° W.
three knots; took in sail. About one we lay to. About half-past one, P. M., we saw ice for the first time; it appeared* in the form of large detached masses. Several pieces struck the vessel, and with so much violence as to awaken almost every person on board. Four o’clock: the ice continues to come in immense large flecks; the pieces are larger, but not quite so numerous. Owing to the very unfavourable state of the weather, we could get no opportunity for making an observation; the captain, however, suspects that we are about the entrance to Hudson’s Straits.

Tuesday, July the 14th. Weather still continues thick and hazy; almost a complete calm; helm lashed. The horizon is covered with numerous flecks of ice; on some of them we observed a great quantity of sand and gravel. Some of these masses had a greenish, while others had an azure tint; they appeared to be moving with considerable velocity.

About five o’clock in the afternoon we saw the first island of ice; the haze of the atmosphere, along with a light drizzling rain, prevented us, however, from seeing either its summit or circumference distinctly. Plate II. will afford a tolerable correct idea of its appearance; it was taken by Mr. Holmes, an ingenious young gentleman, who was on his way out to join Lord Selkirk’s party on Red River. This enormous mass appeared quite stationary; at least, I could not observe that it had the slightest motion.

Friday, July the 17th. About six o’clock in the morning the captain came down to inform us that he had seen land; is uncertain, however, where we are, not having had any opportunity of making an observation for some days. Is inclined to think, however, that it is Resolution Island.*

About nine o’clock we got within a short distance of it; it had a most cheerless, dreary appearance, being for the most

* In clear weather a curious appearance, to which seamen have given the name of the Ice-blink, is observed on approaching the ices. It consists of a lucid streak spread along that part of the atmosphere which is next the horizon. It is evidently occasioned by the reflection of the rays of light which fall on the surface of the ice into the superincumbent air. Not unfrequently they afford a beautiful map or picture of the ice for a considerable distance, resembling, in this way, the curious atmospheric phenomenon to which naturalists have given the name of the Mirage. Field-ice, Mr. Scurcesby informs us, affords the most lucid blink, accompanied with a tinge of yellow; that of pack is more peculiarly white, and of bay ice greyish. The land, from its snowy covering, likewise occasions a blink, which is yellowish, and not unlike that produced by the ice of fields.

† Resolution Island is situated on the N. side of the entrance into Hudson’s Straits; it is considered to be about sixty miles in circumference, N. lat. 61° 40’ W. long. 63°.
part covered with frost and snow, with, here and there, patches of dark black peat. Not a single shrub enlivened this barren desolate spot. Here every thing wore a solitary, sad, and dismal aspect. The hoarse murmuring of the waves, which ever and anon renewed their assaults on the huge masses of dark-grey rock that opposed them, gave it, I thought, a still more despondent look.

Ten o’clock. After bearing away from the land, we again got in amongst straggling ice.

After dinner, this day, Mr. Johnson came down to the cabin in great agitation to inform us that we were bearing fast down on an immense mountain of ice.* A solemn pause ensued on hearing this very alarming piece of intelligence. In a short time, however, we were all upon deck; and here the appearance of our situation was awful in the extreme; the shouting of the men, the rumbling of the cordage, the tremendous mountain of ice, on which we every moment expected to be dashed to pieces, contributed to render this scene the most terrific that could well be imagined. The captain did all he could to get the ship about, but without effect, owing to her having missed stays. We were not more than ten yards from it, when fortunately a light breeze springing up, the sails filled, and in a short time we were completely clear of this frightful mass. Plate III. affords a very correct representation of it.

The whole of this day was truly unpleasant; the weather continued thick and hazy; indeed, the fog was at times so dense that we could hardly see ten yards from the ship, in consequence of which we were frequently just in contact with fields of ice without being at all aware of it. Friday night

* The British Packet, Lady Hobart, ran against one of these floating islands, higher than the mast-head, and of great extent, in June, 1803, and foundered; the crew and passengers saved themselves with great difficulty in two boats. The American ship Neptune perished likewise in the same manner, with a great part of the people in her. Captain Cotes, of the Hudson’s-Bay Company’s service, lost two ships in a similar way; one of them by running against a piece of ice in the night, off Cape Farewell, in consequence of which the ship foundered; the other in Hudson’s Straits, where two large fields of ice were driven together with great force; the ship being between them, was so much damaged that she sank as soon as the ice departed. Mr. Ellis tells us, that one of the Hudson’s-Bay Company’s ships was caught in a similar way, while on her way from York-Fort to Churchill; upon the two pieces meeting, she was raised quite out of the water, and left dry upon one of them; but she receiving no damage by that strange accident, when the ice opened, the people launched her, and proceeded on their voyage.—See Ellis’s Voyage to Hudson’s Bay, p. 67.
Cambridge University Press
978-1-108-07150-5 - A Voyage to Hudson’s Bay During the Summer of 1812: Containing a Particular Account of the Icebergs and Other Phenomena which Present Themselves in those Regions; Also, a Description of the Esquimeaux and North American Indians
Thomas M’Keevor
Excerpt
More information
it continued to blow very fresh; constantly tacking between land and ice. Ship got several very severe knocks; so severe, indeed, that a considerable quantity of copper has been torn from her bottom.

Saturday, July the 18th. Weather continues squally, with dense fog. Still tacking about between land and ice. Uncertain of our situation, the captain not being able to make any observation. Also uncertain of our course, in consequence of the extraordinary variation of the compass.* The ship became so leaky this day, in consequence of the injuries received from the ice, that we were obliged to keep the pumps constantly at work.

Sunday, July 19th. Weather much improved; occasional sun-shine. About twelve, the captain was enabled to make an observation; found that we were in latitude 61° 26'. We were now quite satisfied that the land in view was Resolution Island.

Four o'clock. Haze and mist completely dispersed; steady sun-shine. Wind much more moderate; patches of fine blue sky here and there present themselves. It is inconceivable with what joy we beheld the first gleam of sun-shine; its cheering beams appeared to diffuse cheerfulness and goodwill amongst us all. About six, we were completely surrounded with ice; the wind, however, became so moderate, that we ran no risk by venturing in amongst it. Several icebergs in view. Just as we had done dinner this day, the steward came into the cabin with word that the King George and Eddystone, the two vessels already mentioned, were in sight. Nothing could possibly have afforded us greater gratification than this intelligence. We all immediately went upon deck, when, to our very great surprise, we saw the George about thirty yards from us. The Eddystone, owing to the ice, could not get quite so near. In a short time, the George got so close that we were able to get on board by

* The exact cause of this extraordinary variation is, I believe, not well ascertained. The most generally received opinion, however, is, that which attributes it to the influence of some enormous mass of metallic matter contained in the bowels of the earth. By the early navigators, this phenomenon was ascribed to the cold air situated between the needle and the point of its attraction. Ellis asserts, that when the compasses were brought into a warm room, they recovered their proper action and direction; i.e. when brought down to the cabin it pointed with much greater accuracy. I may remark, that we found the same effect produced by bringing the boxes down to the cabin. Perhaps, in this case, the cold acted by congealing the moisture contained in the air which surrounded the needle, and in this way presented a mechanical obstruction to its motion.—The subject is curious.
McKeevor’s Voyage to Hudson’s Bay.

merely crossing a single flake of ice. Here we spent a very pleasant evening. After taking tea and other refreshments, a dance was proposed. The Scotch piper was instantly summoned upon deck, and I was much amused at the haughty air with which this rawboned athletic highlander strutted up and down, his plaiden pendant streaming in the air, while the pitoche sent forth its shrill-inspiring peal through the adjacent hills and vallies. After some preparatory arrangements, the whole party, consisting of about eight couple, were in brisk and rapid motion.

When the dance was ended, our musician, after some introductory screams and flourishes, commenced the famous battle song. For my part, I could discover nothing in this favourite production of the Celtic muse, but a confused collection of harsh and dissonant sounds. On the faces of our Caledonian friends, however, it appeared to operate like magic: their hard and rigid features began to relax, the eye began to sparkle, and the whole visage to assume a gay and animated appearance, mixed, I thought, with some little portion of lofty unbending pride, which shewed itself particularly by a complacent smile that played about the angle of the mouth. About twelve o’clock we sat down to a very elegant supper, and soon forgot the perilous, I might say, the awful situation, in which we were placed. We resolved on strewing with flowers “the moments as they rolled,” and gave ourselves up for some hours to gaiety and mirth.

The storm without might rain and rustle,
Tam did na mind the storm a whistle.

About two o’clock we parted; the moon had just emerged from amidst a mass of dark black clouds, and poured her full tide of effulgence on the surrounding scenery, giving it an appearance, to borrow the words of a favourite, though unknown author, as if a covering of the thinnest silver gauze had been thrown over it. The canopy of heaven had a clear and sparkling appearance, while the horizon was on all sides thickly studded with ice-islands, whose clustering peaks appeared to penetrate the airy clouds.

Silence accompanied: for beast and bird,
They to their icy couch, these to their nests Were sunk.

But to attempt describing the grandeur of a moonlight-scene in the ice would be vain indeed. No language (at least that I could select) would afford adequate means of description. The richest proves but poor in the attempt; and all the pos-