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of the Northern Whale-Fishery: Volume 1

William Scoresby

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ACCOUNT
OF THE
ARCTIC REGIONS,
&c.



CHAPTER I.

REMARKS ON THE CELEBRATED QUESTION OF
THE EXISTENCE OF A SEA COMMUNICATION BE-
TWEEN THE ATLANTIC AND PACIFIC OCEANS,
BY THE NORTH; WITH AN ACCOUNT OF THE
PROGRESS OF DISCOVERY IN THE NORTHERN
REGIONS.

SECT. I.

*General Remarks indicating the Existence of a
Sea Communication between the Atlantic and
Pacific Oceans, by the North.*

PERHAPS there is no question connected with geo-
graphical science, which has been so long in agi-
tation, without being resolved, and so often re-
vived with the most sanguine expectations of suc-
cess, and then abandoned as hopeless,—as the

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question of the existence of a navigable communication between the European and the Chinese seas, by the north. The first attempts to reach China by sea, were made by steering along the coast of Africa towards the south, and the next by proceeding from the European shore in a westerly direction. The former, which first proved successful, was accomplished by Vasquez de Gama, a Portuguese, in the year 1497-8; and the latter was undertaken by the renowned navigator Columbus, in 1492. The notion of steering to India by the north-west, as the shortest way, was suggested about the middle, or latter end of the fifteenth century, by John Vaz Costa Cortereal, who performed a voyage to Newfoundland, about the year 1463-4*; or, according to a more general opinion, by John Cabot, the father of the celebrated Sebastian Cabot, who attempted the navigation in 1497, and perhaps also in 1494-5 †. The idea of a passage to India, by the North Pole, was suggested by Robert Thorne, merchant, of Bristol ‡, as early as the year 1527; and the opinion of a passage by the north-east, was proposed soon afterwards.

The universal interest which has been attached to this question of a sea communication between

* BARROW'S "Chronological History of Voyages into the Arctic Regions," p. 37.

† HARRIS'S *Voyages*, vol. ii. p. 191.

‡ PHIPPS' *Voyage towards the North Pole*, p. 1.

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the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, by the North, ever since it was first suggested about 330 or 350 years ago, is fully proved by the facts,—that the speculation has never but once been abandoned by the nations of Europe, for more than twenty-five years together,—and that there have been only three or four intervals of more than fifteen years, in which no expedition was sent out in search of one or other of the supposed passages, from the year 1500, down to the present time. And it is not a little surprising, that, after nearly a hundred different voyages have been undertaken, with the view of discovering the desired communication with the Indian Seas, all of which have failed, Britain should again revive and attempt the solution of this interesting problem.

It has been advanced as a maxim, that *what we wish to be true, we readily believe*;—a maxim which, however doubtful in general, has met with a full illustration in the northern voyages of discovery. A single trial is often sufficient for satisfying us as to the truth of a disputed point; but, in this instance, though nearly an hundred trials have been made, the problem is still considered as unresolved.

Several facts may be brought forward, on which arguments of no mean force may be founded, in support of the opinion of the existence of a sea communication by the north, between Europe and

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China. Among these arguments, I shall only mention the nature of the currents and tides,—the fact of an amazing body of ice being yearly dissolved in the Greenland sea, above what is there generated,—the common occurrence of drift wood, and some of it worm-eaten, in most parts of the Polar seas,—the nature of the northern termination of the continents of Europe and Asia, as well as that of America, as far as yet ascertained,—and the facts of whales having passed from the Greenland sea to the Sea of Tartary, and from remote regions in the north, to the sea of Greenland; all of which circumstances I conceive to be in favour of the existence of such a communication.

1. The prevailing current in the Spitzbergen sea, flows, we are well assured, during nine months of the year, if not all the year round, from the north-east towards the south-west. The velocity of this current may be from 5 to 20 miles per day, varying in different situations, but is most considerable near the coast of Old Greenland*. The current, on the other hand, in the middle of Behring's Strait, as observed by Lieutenant Kotzebue, sets strongly to the north-east, with a velocity, as he thought, of two miles and a half an hour, which is greater,

* As the proofs of this current will be brought forward under the division of the Hydrography of the Polar Seas, it is needless in this place to enter into particulars.

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however, by one-half, than the rate observed by Captain Cook*.

2. By the action of the south-westerly current, a vast quantity of ice is annually brought from the north and east, and conducted along the east shore of *Old Greenland*, as far as Cape Farewell, where such masses as still remain undissolved, are soon destroyed by the influence of the solar heat, and the force of the sea, to which they then become exposed from almost every quarter. This ice being entirely free from salt, and very compact, appears originally to have consisted of field ice, a kind which perhaps requires the action of frost for many years to bring it to the thickness which it assumes. The quantity of heavy ice, in surface, which is thus annually dissolved, may, at a rough calculation, be stated at about 20,000 square leagues, while the quantity annually generated in the regions accessible to the whalefishers, is probably not more than one-fourth of that area. As such, the ice, which is so inexhaustible, must require an immense surface of sea for its generation, perhaps the whole or greater part of the so-called "polar basin," the supply required for replacing what is dissolved in Behring's Strait, where the current sets towards the north, being probably of small moment. The current, in opposite parts of the northern hemisphere, being

* Barrow's *Voyages into the Arctic Regions*, p. 358.

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thus found to follow the same line of direction, indicates a communication between the two, across the Poles ; and the inexhaustible supply of ice, affording about 15,000 square leagues to be annually dissolved, above the quantity generated in the known parts of the Spitzbergen seas, supports the same conclusion.

3. The origin of the considerable quantity of drift wood, found in almost every part of the Greenland sea, is traced to some country beyond the Pole, and may be brought forward in aid of the opinion of the existence of a sea communication between the Atlantic and Pacific ; which argument receives additional strength from the circumstance of some of the drift-wood being worm-eaten. This last fact, I first observed on the shores of the Island of Jan Mayen, where I landed in August 1817, and confirmed it by more particular observation, when at Spitzbergen the year following. Having no axe with me when I observed the worm-eaten wood, and having no means of bringing it away, I could not ascertain whether the holes observed in the timber, were the work of a *Ptinus* or a *Pholas*. In either case, however, as it is not known that these animals ever pierce wood in the arctic countries, it is presumed that the worm-eaten drift-wood is derived from a trans-polar region.

Numerous facts of this nature might be adduced, all of which support the same conclusion. In the

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Danish settlement at Disco, is a mahogany table made out of a plank which was drifted thither by the current, and is now in the possession of the governor. A tree of logwood was also picked up not far from the same place. Another log of mahogany was picked up at sea by Admiral Lowenorn, in 1786, when on his voyage attempting the re-discovery of Old Greenland. This piece of wood, which was so large that they were obliged to saw it in two before they could get it on board, they found within sight of the coast of Greenland, in latitude $65^{\circ} 11'$, longitude $35^{\circ} 8'$ west of Paris. It was much perforated by worms, which circumstance the Admiral conceived might assist in giving it sufficient buoyancy to swim in the water*.

These logs of wood, the produce of the Isthmus which connects North and South America, could only reach the places where they were severally found, by floating up the west coast of America, towards the north, through Behring's Strait, and so along the northern face of Asia or America, or across the Northern Pole. Had they come by the way of the Gulf of Mexico, they might have floated to the banks of Newfoundland, by the action of the Gulf Stream, and been carried from thence to any part of the western shore of Europe; but they could not possibly have passed northward from Newfound-

* Quarterly Review, No. 36. p. 445.

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land into Davis' Straits, or to the east coast of Greenland, in direct opposition to a current which perpetually flows towards the south-west*.

4. The northern faces of the continents of Europe and Asia, as well as of that of America, so far as yet known, are such, as renders it difficult, even to imagine such a position for the unascertained regions, as to cut off the communication between the frozen sea, near the meridian of London, and that in the opposite part of the northern hemisphere, near Behring's Strait.

5. And, another argument which goes still farther to support the opinion of the existence of the communication in question, is the fact of whales which have been harpooned in the Greenland seas, having been found in the Pacific Ocean; and whales with stone lances sticking in their fat, (a kind of weapon used by no nation now known,) having been caught both in the sea of Spitzbergen, and in Davis' Strait. The following are some of the authorities for this fact, which, of all other arguments yet offered in favour of a trans-polar passage, seems to me to be the most satisfactory.

A Dutch East India captain, of the name of Jacob Cool, of Sardam, who had been several times at Greenland, and was of course well acquainted with the nature of the apparatus used in the whale

* Quarterly Review, No. 36. p. 445

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fishery, was informed by the Fischal Zeeman of India, that in the sea of Tartary there was a whale taken, in the back of which was sticking a Dutch harpoon, marked with the letters W. B. This curious circumstance was communicated to Peter Jansz Vischer, probably a Greenland whaler, who discovered that the harpoon in question had belonged to William Bastiaanz, Admiral of the Dutch Greenland fleet, and had been struck into the whale in the Spitzbergen sea*.

Muller refers to a similar circumstance when recording the first discovery by sea, of the peninsula of Kamtchatka by the Russians, in the year 1716. The crew of the discovery vessel having wintered on the western coast of Kamtchatka, he informs us, that during their stay there, "the sea cast upon the shore a whale that had in its body a harpoon of European workmanship, marked with Roman letters †." Another account of the same nature, given by Hendrick Hamel, in his "Unfortunate Voyage of the yacht Sparwer, in the year 1653," and published in the "Recueil des Voyages," corroborates the testimony of Muller. Hamel, in his narrative of the loss of this vessel on the Island of Quel-paert, observes, that "in the sea to the north-east

* Beschryving der Walvisvangst, vol. ii. p. 38.

† MULLER'S *Voyages from Asia to America*; Jeffrey's Translation, p. 42.

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of Korea, they take every year a great number of whales, in some of which are found harpoons (or striking-irons) of the French and Dutch, who practise the whale-fishery at the extremities of Europe; whence we infer (he continues) that there is surely a passage between Korea and Japan, which communicates to the Strait of Waigatz*,” separating Nova Zembla from the Continent of Europe.

Other circumstances can be adduced to the same effect. The master of the Volunteer whaler of Whitby, when near the coast of Spitzbergen, July 19. 1813, shewed me part of a lance which had been taken out of the fat of a whale killed by his crew a few weeks before. It was formed of a hard grey stone, of a flinty appearance, about three inches long, two broad, and two-tenths thick. Two holes were pierced in one end of it, by which, it appeared the stock or handle had been secured. It was completely embedded in the blubber, and the wound was quite healed. A small white scar on the skin of the whale, alone marked the place where the lance had entered. In the year 1812, the crew of a Hull fisher (the Aurora) met with a whale in the same region having a harpoon made of bone, sticking in its back; and a few years ago a lance of stone, somewhat like the one above mentioned, fixed to a piece of bone, forming a socket for the stock, was like-

* Quarterly Review, No. xxxv. p. 217.