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978-1-108-04971-9 - The Royal Geographical Society and the Arctic Expedition of
1875-6: A Report
Clements Robert Markham
Excerpt
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THE ROYAL GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY
AND
THE ARCTIC EXPEDITION OF 1875-76.

I.

HISTORY OF THE EFFORTS TO OBTAIN A RENEWAL OF
ARCTIC RESEARCH.

WHEN, in 1865, the Council of the Royal Geographical Society undertook to advocate and promote the exploration of the unknown region round the Pole, it was fully understood that the great work could only be accomplished gradually, and that one expedition must follow another until all the knowledge attainable by human means, in this field of inquiry, had been obtained. One important step in advance has been made by the discoveries of the Arctic Expedition of 1875-6; and it now becomes necessary to take stock of our increased knowledge, and by its light to consider the next step in advance that should be advocated.

2. The duty of thus summing up the case, at the termination of the first effort, would have fallen upon our lamented Associate, Admiral Sherard Osborn, had he been spared to us. He it was who first raised the question in 1865, who perseveringly and ably kept it alive, who by his winning eloquence and well-deserved influence won adherents, and who at length secured the despatch of an expedition by the route which he had advocated for ten years. His efforts were crowned with complete success, in the very year that he died. The cause of Arctic discovery has sustained a loss which cannot be replaced. We can no longer be sustained by that help which never failed; yet the memory of Osborn's cheery voice, and hearty joyous smile, which won upon men's feelings nearly as much as his close reasoning and well-marshalled facts affected their judgments, will nerve us still to do battle in the same noble cause.

3. I have undertaken the duty thus left undone, partly as Secretary of the Geographical Society, which has made this cause its own, and partly as the constant assistant and adviser of Sherard Osborn

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from the day when he began to advocate the renewal of Arctic research in 1865, until the day of his death. We had been messmates during four years, we had served together in the same Arctic Expedition, and our friendship had stood the test of thirty years. When Osborn went to Bombay in March 1865, he entrusted all his notes and correspondence on the Arctic question to me, and he did so again on a later occasion. Together we discussed each point as it arose, every step that should be taken, and together we prepared the memoranda, drafts of letters, and reports which were adopted by the Council of the Geographical Society. So that the duty of discussing the question at the point it has now reached, which would have belonged to Osborn if he had been spared to us, does not unnaturally fall upon one who, in this matter, was his coadjutor and assistant.

4. It will be well, before marshalling our new knowledge, to recapitulate the history of our efforts to obtain a renewal of Arctic exploration, since their commencement in 1865.

5. In determining the policy to be pursued for securing the despatch of an Arctic Expedition, it was above all things necessary to ascertain the points which former Arctic experience had firmly established, and to formulate them, so as to have a firm stand-point from whence to start.

6. This experience bears upon the two main divisions of the subject, namely, the objects of Arctic exploration, and the means of securing those objects.

7. Formerly, and since 1775, the objects, or at least the main objects, of Arctic voyages had been to make the North-west Passage or to reach the North Pole. The last voyage for the former object left England in 1845, and for the latter in 1827. But the advance of knowledge had since proved that there could be no useful and tangible results either in making the North-west Passage or in reaching the North Pole. These objects had, therefore, to be finally discarded. It was quite clear that Arctic discovery would have no influential support from any of the learned Societies, without which success was impossible, if to reach the North Pole—an utterly useless quest—was its main object.

8. The objects of Arctic exploration, in these days, must be to secure useful scientific results; in geography by exploring the coast lines and ascertaining the conditions of land and sea within the unknown area; in geology by collections and by a careful examination of the land; in zoology and botany by observation and by collections; in physics by a complete series of observations extending over at least a year.

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9. Such being the scientific objects of Arctic exploration, they must be kept in mind when the rules for securing them, based upon long experience, are formulated. But there is another object which had great weight with Sherard Osborn. He specially dwelt upon the importance of encouraging a spirit of maritime enterprise, and of giving worthy employment to the navy in time of peace—a truly national object, and one which, as the result proved, had as much influence in forming the decision of statesmen as the scientific results.

10. We now come to the means whereby the unknown Polar area is to be penetrated, and the desired success to be secured. The first great lesson taught by two centuries of experience is that no extensive and useful exploring work can be calculated upon by merely entering the drifting pack; and that effective progress can be made only by following a coast line. The second Arctic canon is that, to secure efficient work, at least one winter must be faced in a position beyond any point hitherto reached. This is essential in order to obtain series of observations of any value. The third rule is that mere navigation in a ship cannot secure the results desired from Arctic exploration, and that it must be supplemented by sledge travelling. The exploration of 50 miles of coast by a sledge party is worth more to science than the discovery of 500 miles of sea or coast by a ship. In the former case the land is accurately mapped, and its fauna, flora, geology, and physical features are ascertained. In the latter a coast is seen and its outline shown by a dotted line on a chart, and that is all. The two methods will not bear comparison.

11. The experience of centuries of Arctic research has thus resulted in the establishment of three canons, which form unerring guides to us who inherit that experience:

1. Navigate along a coast line, and avoid the drifting pack.
2. It is necessary to pass at least one winter at a point beyond any hitherto reached.
3. The ships must be looked upon merely as the base of operations, and sledges as the main instruments for discovery and exploration.

12. With the objects of Arctic research, and the means of securing those objects thus distinctly formulated; the next point was to decide by which route leading to the unknown area round the North Pole, those essential conditions could best be found. In the first place, there must be coast lines leading into the unknown space both for navigation and for sledge travelling. In the second place, there must be a prospect of finding suitable winter quarters beyond the threshold of the hitherto discovered region. At that

time, Smith Sound, and the east coast of Greenland, alone met such conditions. Of these two, Smith Sound offered two coast lines for exploration instead of one; its navigation was believed to be less difficult, and to offer a better chance of securing winter quarters beyond the threshold of the unknown region, and finally the means of retreat, in case of disaster, were better by that route. The Smith Sound route was consequently the best by which to commence the discovery of the vast unknown area.

13. This was the train of reasoning by which we arrived at the conclusion, that to secure the true objects of Arctic discovery, and to make a successful commencement of the examination of the unknown area, the first expedition should proceed by the route of Smith Sound.

14. On the 23rd of January, 1865, after all these points had been most carefully investigated and considered, Sherard Osborn read his first paper at a memorable meeting of the Geographical Society, on the exploration of the North Polar Region. His proposal was that two steamers should be despatched to Smith Sound, that one should winter near Cape Isabella, and that the other should press up the western shore as far as possible. In the following spring, sledge operations were to be directed over the unknown area. Osborn also enumerated the valuable results to be secured from Arctic exploration.

15. In the long and interesting discussion which followed the reading of the paper, the views of Sherard Osborn received cordial support from Sir Roderick Murchison, General Sabine, Captain R. V. Hamilton, Captain Inglefield, and Dr. Donnet. They were opposed by Captain Richards, the hydrographer.

16. But in March 1865, Osborn was obliged to go to Bombay, leaving the cause in my less experienced hands, and an opposition commenced, the text of which was two letters from Dr. Petermann. On April 10th, 1865, I read a paper at a meeting of the Geographical Society on the best route for North Polar exploration, in which I added some fresh arguments in support of Osborn's views. But Dr. Petermann's letters were also read, and, almost single-handed (supported only by Sir George Back and Admiral Collinson), I had to defend the position against a number of Dr. Petermann's English supporters. These letters, which proved to be a disastrous apple of discord, might now be advantageously forgotten, if they had not been quite recently upheld, by Admiral Richards, as models of wisdom and logical reasoning.* This makes

* In the discussion after the reading of Sir George Nares's Paper, on March 26, 1877.

it desirable that a refutation of each point in the two letters should be submitted.

17. Dr. Petermann's letters were written to advocate the Spitzbergen route for Polar exploration, that is, the despatch of vessels to the open pack, away from the land, to the north of the Spitzbergen group. In his first letter he assigns eight reasons for his preference for this route. The first is that the voyage from England to the North Pole is shorter by Spitzbergen; a matter which might be important to a company wishing to establish a line of packets between the two points, but which has no bearing on the question of exploration. The second is that the Spitzbergen sea forms the widest entrance to the unknown region. This is one of the strongest objections to the route, for the navigation must be conducted in a drifting pack away from land. The third allegation is that the Spitzbergen sea is more free from ice than any other part of the Arctic Regions. This statement is directly opposed to the evidence of every navigator who has ever reached the edge of the pack on those meridians. They have all, without a single exception, found an impenetrable barrier of ice between Greenland and Spitzbergen, and to the north of that group. The fourth is that the drift ice to the north of Spitzbergen offers just as much or as little impediment to navigation as the ice in Baffin's Bay. When it is remembered that no vessel has ever penetrated through the ice-fields north of Spitzbergen, notwithstanding numerous attempts, while a fleet of whalers has annually got through the Baffin's Bay ice since 1817, an idea may be formed of the value of this assertion. The fifth argument is that the sea north of Spitzbergen will never be entirely frozen over, not even in winter, nor covered with solid ice fit for sledge travelling. This is really the strongest objection to the Spitzbergen route, for the constant movement of the ice away from land will make it impossible to winter in it, and most dangerous to enter it at all. The sixth assertion is that from Sir Edward Parry's farthest point a navigable sea was extending, far away to the north; and that old Dutch skippers vowed they had sailed to 88° N., and beyond the Pole itself. The statement respecting Parry is the very reverse of the real fact. That officer, at his extreme point, found the ice thicker and the floes more extensive than any he had previously met with; and there was a strong yellow ice-blink always overspreading the northern horizon, showing that the Polar pack still stretched away to the northward. The argument derived from the old Dutch skippers may safely be left to shift for itself. The seventh point is, that the Polar region north of Spitz-

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bergen consists of sea and not land. This is a mere assumption ; but, if correct, it is the very reason that the Spitzbergen route is the worst that could be selected. The eighth argument is that Parry's expedition occupied six months, a circumstance which can only have weight with those who prefer a hasty and perfunctory cruise to deliberate and careful exploration.

18. So much for the first letter. The second letter contains the following argument. Dr. Petermann urges that there will be no difficulty in boring through the Polar ice-fields north of 80°, because Sir James Ross got through an extensive pack in the Antarctic Regions in latitude 62°, after it had drifted and become loose for many hundreds of miles over a boundless ocean. The fallacy of this comparison was shown by Admiral Collinson * at the time. Finally, Dr. Petermann asks for any reason, however slight, why it would not be as easy to sail from Spitzbergen to the Pole and back as to go up Baffin's Bay to the entrance of Smith Sound. The reason is clear enough, and is well known to all Arctic navigators. North of Spitzbergen any vessel pushing into the ice is at the mercy of the drifting floes and fields. In Baffin's Bay there is land ice, along which a vessel can make progress while the pack drifts past. The consequence is, that while a fleet of whalers passes up Baffin's Bay every year, no vessel has ever penetrated through the pack north of Spitzbergen.

19. Such were Dr. Petermann's arguments. They had the effect of delaying the resumption of Arctic research by the English for ten years. For they were adopted by Admirals Belcher, Richards, Ommanney, and Inglefield ; unanimity among Arctic authorities was thus destroyed, and, in Osborn's absence, success was obviously hopeless. I, nevertheless, prepared drafts of letters to other scientific Societies, and a most encouraging reply was received from the Linnæan. I also drew up a letter to the First Lord of the Admiralty, which was signed by Sir Roderick Murchison, and the Duke of Somerset received a deputation. His Grace, however, naturally said that as Arctic authorities differed as to the route, the Admiralty could not decide that question ; and that it would be better to wait for the result of the Swedish Expedition, which was then about to be sent to Spitzbergen.

20. It only remained to watch for another favourable opportunity of re-opening the question. But Sherard Osborn, on his return from India in 1866, did not relax his efforts. Every endeavour was made to interest the general public in Arctic work, and, under Osborn's inspiration, I wrote an article in the 'Quarterly Review'

* 'R. G. S. Proceedings,' ix. p. 118.

for July 1865, and several reviews and articles on the subject between 1866 and 1871. Papers were also prepared and read at the annual meetings of the British Association in 1865 and 1866.

21. At last Sherard Osborn decided that the time had arrived for a formal renewal of his proposal; and at a meeting of the Geographical Society on April 22nd, 1872, he read his second paper on the exploration of the North Polar area. The great point now was to secure unanimity among Arctic authorities, before approaching the Government on the subject: and the paper was mainly intended to review the work of Swedes, Germans, and Austrians in the Spitzbergen direction since 1865; and to show that the theory maintained in Dr. Petermann's letters was in opposition to the practical experience of recent explorers. Those explorers had spoken with no uncertain voice. For instance, M. Nordenskiöld said that "the field of drift ice to the north of Spitzbergen consists of ice so closely packed together that even a boat cannot force its way between the pieces, still less a vessel, though propelled by steam. All experience seems to prove that the Polar basin, when not covered with compact unbroken ice, is filled with closely-packed unnavigable drift in which, during certain very favourable years, some large apertures may be found, which apertures, however, do not extend very far to the north." Osborn quoted Nordenskiöld, Koldewey, and Payer as practical men; and again urged the adoption of the route by Smith Sound. On this occasion Sir Henry Rawlinson, then President of the Geographical Society, advocated the resumption of Arctic discovery, and ever afterwards not only co-operated with Osborn, but took a leading and active part in furthering the cause. Dr. Hooker and Dr. Carpenter dwelt upon the valuable scientific results of Arctic research. Sir George Back again warmly supported Osborn's views; and Admiral Richards, who had at the former meeting opposed the movement, now gave in his adhesion to it.

22. I then drafted a Report for the adoption of a Committee appointed by the Council of the Geographical Society to consider the best means of bringing the subject before the Government: consisting of Sir George Back, Admiral Collinson, Admiral Ommanney, Admiral Richards, Sir Leopold McClintock, Captain Sherard Osborn, Dr. Rae, Mr. Findlay, and myself.

23. In this Report the three canons of Arctic exploration were repeated, the various scientific results were enumerated in detail, and all mention of reaching the North Pole as an object, was purposely excluded. The Smith Sound route was recommended as

the best for exploring new coast-lines, and thus increasing geographical knowledge. The Report was unanimously adopted by all the members of the Committee, and also by the Council of the Society, on the 29th of April, 1872.

24. In July 1872 I began the work of editing the 'Geographical Magazine,' and my first number opened with an article by Sherard Osborn, on the renewal of Arctic discovery. In the same number I commenced the publication of the 'Threshold of the Unknown Region,' which was continued monthly until March 1873, and published as a separate volume in July 1873. The plan of this work had been conceived, and the greater part was written in 1865, but it was not then published. The second edition rapidly followed the first, the third edition appeared in January 1875, and the fourth in December 1875. The success of this little work proved the great change in public opinion which had taken place since 1865. A healthy interest in the glorious achievements of the Arctic worthies of former days was taking the place of sneering indifference, and Englishmen were once more becoming alive to the importance of maritime enterprise.

25. In August 1872 a paper on the renewal of Arctic research, by Sherard Osborn, was read at the meeting of the British Association at Brighton.

26. On December 16th, 1872, Sir Henry Rawlinson and Sherard Osborn, accompanied by Dr. Hooker and a large deputation, had an interview with Mr. Lowe and Mr. Goschen, to urge the importance of despatching an Arctic Expedition; and the whole matter was fully explained both by Sir Henry and by Osborn. But the reply was unsatisfactory.

27. Official doubts were, however, on the eve of being overcome. All classes of the people, thanks to Osborn's exertions, were beginning to unite with men of science in the desire that the tradition of Arctic discovery should be preserved and handed down to posterity; and that Englishmen should not abandon that career of noble adventure which has done so much to form the national character, and to give our country the rank she still maintains. The interest, once very keenly felt in such enterprises, was rapidly being revived.

28. The year 1873 was one of much activity. On the 10th of February I read a paper, at a meeting of our Society, on recent discoveries east of Spitzbergen and on attempts to reach the Pole on the Spitzbergen meridians, in which it was shown that the best route for the objects which the Society had in view, was by Smith Sound. On that occasion Sir Henry Rawlinson declared that the

Society would recommend and promote the despatch of an expedition by way of Smith Sound, because by that route the widest extent of coast line would be discovered and explored, and the most important scientific results obtained.

29. The goal was now in view. A few more well-conceived efforts, and success was secured. Osborn found that the objection to which official and other persons most obstinately clung was based on the supposed dangers and difficulties of ice navigation. He, therefore, came to the conclusion that nothing would tend more to dispel this objection than some practical proof or trial, and that it was desirable that a naval officer should proceed to the Arctic Regions in a whaler, and return with a full report of all he had seen and experienced. He selected for this service Commander A. H. Markham, who had been a volunteer since the question was first raised in 1865; and who now made a cruise with Captain Adams in the whaler 'Arctic' from May to August 1873. The publication of his narrative in 1874, 'A Whaling Cruise in Baffin's Bay and the Gulf of Boothia, with an Introduction by Rear-Admiral Sherard Osborn, C.B.,' the second edition of which appeared in 1875, was another means of exciting public interest in Arctic work.

30. In the spring of 1873, a joint Committee of the Royal and Royal Geographical Societies was appointed to prepare an exhaustive Memorandum on the scientific results to be derived from Arctic exploration, and on the reasons why such researches can best be accomplished by a naval expedition despatched under Government auspices. The Committee was composed of the same members as sat on the Arctic Committee of 1872 for the Geographical Society, and of Dr. Hooker, Mr. Busk, Mr. Prestwich, Dr. Carpenter, Dr. Allman, Mr. Evans, General Strachey, and Mr. Fergusson for the Royal Society. In this Memorandum, dated June 1873, which was widely distributed, the scientific results were fully discussed in a series of paragraphs furnished by Dr. Hooker, Professor Allman, Mr. Prestwich, General Strachey, and Professor Newton; while the arguments derived from former experience and general policy were by Sherard Osborn. With these materials I drew up the Memorandum, which was unanimously adopted by the Joint Committee, and also by our Council. In this manifesto, as in that of 1872, the object was declared to be the exploration of as large an area as possible of the unknown region; while all allusion to attaining the highest northern latitude possible, or reaching the Pole, was again purposely omitted.

31. In August 1873 I read a paper on the importance of Arctic exploration, at the meeting of the British Association at Bradford;

and in the following October I contributed an article on the same subject to the 'Contemporary Review.'

32. The year 1874 was destined to see the complete success of the efforts of Sherard Osborn and those who had worked with him for the previous ten years. The Society, which had approved and encouraged these efforts, thus has the honour of having initiated, steadily and perseveringly advocated, and finally of having secured the adoption of a measure of great importance for the advancement of geographical knowledge.

33. On the 1st of August, 1874, Sir Henry Rawlinson and Admiral Sherard Osborn, accompanied by Dr. Hooker, had a very satisfactory interview with Mr. Disraeli, and on the 17th of November the Prime Minister addressed a letter to Sir Henry Rawlinson announcing that Her Majesty's Government had determined to lose no time in organizing a suitable expedition; the two objects being the exploration of the region round the North Pole, and the encouragement of maritime enterprise.

34. The further measures connected with the equipment, and the instructions, then passed into the hands of the Admiralty. Two vessels were selected and prepared for ice navigation, and officers and men were appointed between November 1874 and February 1875.

35. It is important that the objects of the Geographical Society, and the rules based on experience which guided us in our recommendations, should be kept in mind. The Council, in all its memoranda, discarded the attainment of the highest possible northern latitude and an attempt to reach the North Pole as useful objects. Such aims, by themselves, were considered to be devoid of interest as of utility. Our objects were to explore the largest area possible of the unknown region, from a fixed base of operations, in order to secure useful scientific results. The Council, also, since 1872, by the unanimous advice of its Arctic Committees, discarded the Spitzbergen route, including an attempt to push into the Polar pack away from the land. The course advocated was to navigate along a coast line, to include the passing of at least one Arctic winter in the scheme, and to look to sledge travelling as the main instrument of discovery and exploration. Consequently the Smith Sound route was, for the attainment of the above objects in accordance with these rules, the best that could be selected.

36. Such were the views of the Royal Geographical Society, of the Royal Society, and also of Her Majesty's Government as expressed in Mr. Disraeli's letter to Sir Henry Rawlinson. But the Admiralty thought fit to look upon them as secondary, and to make the