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978-1-108-07340-0 - Letters Written During the Late Voyage of Discovery in the Western Arctic Sea

Anonymous

Excerpt

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LETTERS
WRITTEN DURING
 THE LATE
VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY,
 IN THE
Western Arctic Sea.

LETTER I.

DEAR BROTHER,

11th May, 1819.

AGREEABLY to my promise, I now begin my account of our proceedings and our observations, in the important expedition on which we have embarked. You were never at sea, but you showed always a particular taste for descriptions of voyages to distant or unknown, or little known parts of the world. The enterprise in which we are engaged will, certainly, if we have any success, carry us into scenes presenting objects of novelty at least, if not of importance and value. We may, I trust, if we do no more, satisfy ourselves, convince perhaps our countrymen at home, and navigators of all nations, that a practicable communication by sea, round the northern coasts of North America, is not to be attained. To ascertain even this point is an object of no small importance. It will abundantly justify the expense to the nation, and the dangers to the persons employed in the research.

As my letters, if ever they arrive in Marybone, (and when and how they are to be forwarded I know not,) will soon pass from your hands into those of many kind friends, equally strangers with yourself to sea affairs and sea language, I will endeavour to steer clear if possible of obscurity arising from such peculiarities. Being, however, formed on my regular Journal, nautical operations and incidents cannot always be expressed without nautical terms and phrases.

A sea-journal is the production of every day; but however important the occurrences and transactions of every day are to the seaman, to the landsman they often appear dull and uninteresting. You will not, therefore expect me to transmit to you details, in which you would feel little concern, and the value of which you could not often comprehend. With re-

VOYAGES. *Vol. V.*

B

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-07340-0 - Letters Written During the Late Voyage of Discovery in the Western Arctic Sea

Anonymous

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 *Letters written during the late Voyage of Discovery*

spect, however, to the time when, and the place where such and such incidents or operations occurred, I shall be careful to give you correct notices. For you must know that, although continually, in some sense, the sport of waves and winds, no human being leads a life so regular and methodical as the mariner.

The ships appointed for this expedition, to search for a north-west passage from the Atlantic ocean to the Pacific, are the *Hecla*, so named after the famous burning mountain in Iceland, in allusion to her destination as a bomb-vessel, to discharge inflamed substances on an enemy. She was built, I hear, in 1815; and by her peculiar shape and capaciousness, (nearly four hundred tons,) is well adapted to receive the large stock of necessaries of all kinds, for the ship's company, during a voyage of probably long duration. The other ship, the *Griper*, is a gun-brig, but materially improved by raising her, to enlarge her stowage. Still she has not enough of accommodation for all the stores, &c. requisite for the people on board; but must depend for some supplies on the *Hecla*. The whole ship's company of the *Hecla* consists of fifty-eight persons, officers, seamen, and marines; that of the *Griper* of thirty-six. Both vessels have received every additional strengthening which wood and iron can give them, particularly on the bows, to resist the shock in making their way through the ice. In the inside they are fitted up in the most comfortable manner, for all on board; and every article of clothing, food, medicines, &c., which can be foreseen to be requisite, has been plentifully supplied. Nor have such things been omitted as may serve to conciliate the natives of the countries we may visit. Nothing omitted, nothing in fact has been refused by the Lords of the Admiralty which was supposed, or suggested to be useful in promoting the safety, the health, and the comfort of all persons employed in the expedition. With the view of improving the nautical and geographical knowledge of those quarters of the globe through which we may pass, a very complete assortment of instruments of the best construction are put on board, together with every implement requisite for the accurate construction of charts and maps.

Both ships were ready to fall down the river from Deptford early in April; but they were detained by contrary winds till the beginning of this month, when the season seemed to be sufficiently advanced for our setting off. On Tuesday morning, therefore, the 4th inst., the *Hecla* was towed by a steam-vessel down to Northfleet, a little above Gravesend, and the *Griper* followed at night. Thus it has happened that the present expedition sails just a month later than the former, of 1818, in the ships *Isabella* and *Alexander*. The commander of the *Hecla*,

Cambridge University Press

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Anonymous

Excerpt

[More information](#)*in the Western Arctic Sea.*

3

and of the expedition, is Lieutenant William Edward Parry : the Griper is commanded by Lieutenant Matthew Liddon. The Admiralty having granted to all those officers, seamen, and marines, who should be employed in the expedition, double the ordinary pay of the Navy, the vessels were soon furnished with the full number of the best seamen. It is not a little encouraging also to observe that, with a few exceptions, every man who served in the former enterprise, has volunteered his services in the present.

On Thursday the 6th we received on board, from the arsenal of Woolwich, our ordnance stores ; and on Friday the powder. To obviate as much as might be done the effects of the iron guns on the quarter-deck, upon the compass, they have been removed, and their place supplied by brass.

Saturday 8th.—Worked down to the Nore off Sheerness and received on board the various instruments for making observations for astronomical, nautical, geographical, and meteorological purposes. Several of the officers have also carried out instruments of their own property. As far therefore as those indispensable assistants can be procured, our expedition promises all reasonable success.

Monday 10th.—The seamen and marines have received the wages due to them since they entered, with an advance of three months' pay ; that they may provide various articles of clothing, and other necessaries for the voyage, agreeably to a list furnished by the officers on board. Some bullocks, beer, and the proper stock of water being brought off, all was ready for getting under weigh. This operation took place this morning at ten o'clock, and before sun-set we had got out of the difficult passes between the banks in the mouth of the Thames.

Of my feelings on this occasion, then, it will be just as easy for you to form, as for me to convey any exact idea. This is not the first time of my leaving England on a long voyage ; but such is the nature of the present expedition, such are its purposes, such the accidents to which we must be prepared to expose ourselves, that it is impossible for me to suppress certain apprehensions and forebodings, to which I have hitherto been a stranger.— But as the French say *le vin est tiré il faut le boire*. Duty, respect and affection to all at home, and be assured.

&c. &c.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-07340-0 - Letters Written During the Late Voyage of Discovery in the Western Arctic Sea

Anonymous

Excerpt

[More information](#)4 *Letters written during the late Voyage of Discovery*

LETTER II.

MY DEAR BROTHER,

*At sea, Wednesday,
26th May, 1819.*

You received, I hope, my long epistle of the 11th, which, by good fortune, was sent on shore from Yarmouth roads, by a boat belonging to H. M.'s ship Wye, on Saturday the 15th. Since then we have lost sight of every part and appendage of the British isles; and I now write to you from the great Atlantic ocean, from a spot due south from the centre of Iceland, and due west from the centre of Scotland. If you will turn up your Atlas to such a position at the intersection of the meridian of $20^{\circ} 45'$ west from Greenwich, and the parallel of $57^{\circ} 3'$ North Latitude, you will then be able to give my mother and Mary some idea of the spot where, in imagination, I am as busy in conversing with you all as if I were seated beside you.

My last letter closed at the commencement of our voyage, since which we have been constantly under weigh, with the exception of short interruptions on the coast of Norfolk, in Yarmouth roads. The narrow passages between the sand banks and the land, and between one another, afford the only shelter for shipping in easterly winds to be found on the English coast of the German ocean. For that reason these passes are much resorted to; but for the same reason shipwrecks are there by no means rare. The Yarmouth boatmen are however of great service to the people on board, by their courage and skill in rescuing them from the wrecks. Just such an account as this you have heard me give of the advantages and dangers of the Godwin Sands and the Downs, and of the boatmen of Deal.

Before we arrived off Yarmouth we discovered that the Griper was in general no match for the Hecla in sailing, excepting on a wind; it became necessary, therefore, on several occasions, for the Hecla either to take her in tow, or to lie to, to wait for her getting up.

The voyage properly began at noon on Tuesday the 11th, when we left the river, and commenced our experiments and observations on the state of the weather and on the temperature of the air and the sea. On that day the thermometer in the shade stood at sixty-two degrees; the temperature of the surface of the sea was 57 degrees, and the barometer was at 30.19 inches. Early on the morning of Friday the 14th, while turning up to the northward, the wind being contrary and the sea rough, the Hecla touched on the east end of Sheringham shoal, occasioned by the

Cambridge University Press

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Anonymous

Excerpt

[More information](#)*in the Western Arctic Sea.*

5

pilot carrying the ship too far to the westward. But the alarm was soon over, and no bad consequences followed from the accident.

It is common, you know, for land folks to charge us seamen with not being over attentive to our religious duties. It ought to be considered, however, that winds and waves know no distinction of days and times. The operations on ship-board must, of necessity, be performed at all hours, and it is not surprising, that by habit the sailor should become less regular in his devotions than persons on land, whose time is wholly at their own disposal. To show you, however, that the charge against us is not always well founded, you must know, that on Sunday the 16th, divine service was performed on board both ships, and attended by every officer and man who could be spared from the indispensable duties on deck.

Monday the 17th, being off the coast of Yorkshire, distant from twelve to fourteen miles, we discharged our pilot from the Thames. He carried back with him a number of letters, among which, were a few lines from me, just to say that we were then all well. In the afternoon of Tuesday the 18th, we had a distant view of the mountains beyond Aberdeen, on the north coast of Scotland; and, on the following afternoon; we came in sight of Fair Island, situated between the Orkney and the Shetland isles. Since Sunday morning the wind has been favourable, and the weather pleasant. Several flocks of divers, a bird frequently seen in Davis's Strait and in Baffin's Bay, have come near us; also that kind, called by seamen the puffin. The people caught a number of excellent cod and coal-fish off Fair Island.

On *Thursday* the 20th, we were detained by calms; but, in the evening, the wind springing up, carried us round the north point of the Orkney isles, distant from two to three miles. From what I have learned on board, the appearance of these islands may be considered as a sort of intermediate step between the favoured land which we have left, and the dreary regions to which we are bound. In the morning we passed a Danish whaler, on her voyage to Davis's Strait; but she steered a course more to the northward than we did. In the morning of *Friday* the 21st, we lost sight of the Orkneys, and, in the evening, we descried Rona and Bara, two small islands, the former inhabited, situated a little to the northward of the parallel of 59°, and the most northern of the western islands of Scotland. In the neighbourhood of these isles we saw vast numbers of sea-fowl of different kinds, which resort thither and to other remote islands in that quarter, situated in the open sea, where proper food is found in abundance. I mentioned that the Danish ship kept a course to the northward of us: but we steered according to the opinion of the most

Cambridge University Press

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Anonymous

Excerpt

[More information](#)6 *Letters written during the late Voyage of Discovery*

skilful captains in the whale trade, who cross the Atlantic in or a little to the southward of lat. 58°.

Saturday 22d.—You have occasionally read in the newspapers of sealed bottles being met with at sea, or driven ashore in several parts, containing notes of the time and place of their being thrown into the sea. One was thrown overboard to day from the *Hecla*, in which was a paper, containing a request, in various languages, that whoever should find it would transmit it to the Admiralty, in London, mentioning where and when it was found. This is done every day that the ships are under weigh. The principal object of this custom is, that, by comparing the times and places of the throwing out and the picking up of the bottles, if found at sea, or immediately after they are driven ashore, a calculation may be made of the direction and the motion of the currents of the water by which the bottles have been conveyed along. A bottle of this kind, I am informed, was found on the north-west coast of Ireland, which had been thrown overboard in the former voyage to Baffin's Bay. It had been ten months in the sea, and must have been carried by the currents upwards of a thousand miles in that time. The chance of conveying, by the same means, to all concerned, intelligence of the state of a ship, is, of itself, sufficient to engage those on board to its adoption.

Monday 24th.—This day we came in sight of Rockall, a single mass of rock springing up in the midst of the ocean, about fifty leagues, that is, one hundred and fifty marine or geographical miles, equal to a hundred and seventy-two English miles from the nearest land, the western isles of Scotland. It is situated in north latitude 57° 39 $\frac{1}{2}$, and west longitude 13° 31 from Greenwich. Imagine to yourself the perfection to which instruments for the use of seamen must be now brought, when the position of an object so diminutive can be ascertained with such accuracy, that they can navigate the surrounding seas without fear of running against Rockall at any hour, day or night. At a distance it might, from its shape or colour, be mistaken for a ship under sail. When we had got about thirty miles west from Rockall, we found the depth of water to be only one hundred and forty fathoms. The temperature of the air, in the evening, was 50°, while that of the sea, at the surface, was 49° $\frac{1}{2}$, and, at the bottom 47° $\frac{3}{4}$.

Before we left England I had, as you know, taken some pains to collect the most authentic notices relative to the history of the regions we were destined to explore. The result of my inquiries I had no time to communicate to you; but, having employed some spare time in committing it to paper since we have been at sea, it shall be the subject of my next letter.

Adieu,

Your, &c. &c.

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Anonymous

Excerpt

[More information](#)*in the Western Arctic Sea.*

7

LETTER III.

MY DEAR BROTHER, *At Sea, 30th May, 1819.*

I NOW send to you, as I promised, some heads relative to the early state of these northern regions, among which you will find several things which will be new to you, and which may furnish subjects for conversation in the happy circle in ——— street. Chronology and geography are described as the two eyes of history : both shall therefore be kept open in what I have to state.

About A.D. 500, according to the Icelandic historians, some Irish monks, whether by accident or by design, arrived in Iceland ; wafted over the northern ocean in fourteen days, in their coracles, or wicker boats, covered with hides. Books in the ancient Irish language, bells, &c. were found in the island, on the arrival of the earliest settlers from Norway.

A.D. 890.—Harold Harfagur, the first king of all Norway, having conquered all his rivals, or usurped the chief power, compelled many bodies of the people to quit their native land. Resorting to their ships, they formed settlements in the most remote parts of the North. Of those colonies, the most distinguished was established in Iceland, which had been accidentally visited in 861, and occupied in 878. This colony, if we except those of the ancient Greeks, is the only colony in the world, prior to the comparatively late settlements of Europeans in America, of which a regular account has been preserved from its commencement to the present time.

Towards the beginning of the tenth century, the Icelanders established a colony in Greenland, which increased and prospered for nearly four hundred years. Then the intercourse between that region and the rest of the world was interrupted, by the increasing severity of the climate, and the unfortunate colonists were no more heard of. Navigators of the present age, who depend on the assistance of the compass and quadrant ; who are furnished with arithmetical and mathematical tables, calculated with the greatest nicety ; must be astonished at the daring spirit of these adventurous sons of the Northern Seas, who were unquestionably destitute of those aids.

It is related by an Icelandic historian, that when Flok, a famous Norwegian navigator, was preparing to set out from the isles of Hialtland, now called Zetland or Shetland, on the north of Scotland, on a voyage to Iceland, then named Gardarsholm, he took on board as guides, *some crows, because the mariner's com-*

Cambridge University Press

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Anonymous

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 *Letters written during the late Voyage of Discovery*

pass was not at that time in use. When he thought he had made a good part of his voyage, Flok threw up in the air one of his crows, which seeing land astern, or behind, flew back to it. Concluding the land he had left to be the nearest in sight (but perhaps he mistook the Feroe for the Shetland Isles on this occasion) he held on his course for some time, and then sent off another crow, which seeing land a-head, or before the ship, drove forward towards it. Following his sagacious guide, Flok arrived at the east end of Iceland. Such were the simple means employed in those days by the intrepid men of the North, to keep their reckoning, and steer their course over the ocean. A similar mode is said to have been practised by the people of Ceylon in early times: but what a difference between the gentle waters of India, and the tempestuous billows of the North Atlantic!

In the close of the 9th century, our renowned king Alfred was perhaps the first Briton to enlarge the science of geography. From Ohther and Wulfstan he received ample information respecting the Baltic sea and the Northern extremities of Europe. But the knowledge collected by Alfred seems to have been lost; for even in the 16th century, Norway, Greenland, and Newfoundland, (or the land of cod-fish) are described as forming one continued country. And it was not till 1553, that Chancellor traced out the northern passage to Russia, of which he has always been described as the original discoverer. It is nevertheless certain that Ohther the Norwegian sailed round the North cape of Lapland and made his way into the White Sea of Archangel, then called Quen Sea, of which the modern name is only a translation. From Ohther, Alfred learned that the northern people caught whales and seals, and also what he calls horse-whales. Of the skins were made ropes, and the teeth of the latter animals were highly valued. From this account the horse-whale seems to have been the animal now called the walrus, or sea-horse, whose tusks are ivory. The whales are stated to be in length forty-eight or fifty Norwegian ells, or from seventy-two to seventy-five feet. So numerous were they on the coast of Norway, that Ohther, with the help of five men, was able, we are told, to kill sixty in two or three days.

In the last year of the tenth century, or in the first year of the eleventh, the adventurous spirit of the Icelanders carried them to a distant country, situated to the south-west of Greenland. There, in the shortest day, the sun was for eight hours above the horizon. Here, then, is a question for you to solve; for you are astronomer enough to do it. You will find that this happens about the parallel of 49 degrees of north latitude. The country being much wooded, was, therefore, named Merkland; but grapes having been discovered growing spontaneously in it,

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Anonymous

Excerpt

[More information](#)*in the Western Arctic Sea.*

9

the name was changed to Winland. The rivers abounded with fish, particularly with salmon. It was not until their third voyage to this country that the Icelanders met with any original inhabitants, who appeared a diminutive race. They had boats covered with hides, and used bows and arrows in battle. After a contest the natives were reconciled to the Icelanders and traded with them, exchanging furs for other articles of utility or fancy. Several vessels from Iceland for this *new-found-land* carried thither families to form a permanent settlement, which it would appear subsisted for above a century for a bishop went thither from the colony in Greenland, in the year 1121. Of this settlement no certain accounts, nor of its connexion with Iceland, are afterwards discovered in history. If it be true, as has been reported, that in the interior of Newfoundland a tribe exists, different from the Americans called Esquimaux, they may, perhaps, be the descendants of the Icelanders. That they should however retain any tradition of their original story, or any vestige of the Icelandic tongue, in their state of barbarism, cannot well be expected.

The discoverer of Winland is said to have been Biorn, the son of Heriolf, and the first ship purposely fitted out for the new country from Iceland was commanded by Lief, the son of Erick.

About 1360, Nicolas of Lynne, an English friar, and a good astronomer, is said to have made a voyage to the northern polar regions, and to have repeated the voyage for five times afterwards. Of his discoveries he presented an account to Edward III. but of the truth of the story we may be allowed to doubt. About the same period, according to the account of the voyage of the Venetian Zeno, as explained by Forster, some fishermen of Orkney were driven by stress of weather to an island in the west, called Estotiland. The inhabitants traded with those of Greenland, and to what we now call America. They were ignorant of the compass, but soon learned its use from the Orkneymen. This island may perhaps have been the Winland of the Icelanders, or the Newfoundland of later times.

If these incidents be really true, it will be evident that the new world, the northern part of it at least, was visited by European navigators, long prior to the voyage of the illustrious Colon, or Columbus, in 1492. Nothing derogatory from his well-earned fame can however hence be inferred; for his discoveries were the fruit of long and profound scientific research.

Best wishes at home, &c. &c.

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Anonymous

Excerpt

[More information](#)10 *Letters written during the late Voyage of Discovery*

LETTER IV

DEAR BROTHER, *At Sea, 23d June, 1819.*

MY last journal-letter brought down our proceedings to the 26th of last month, since which day the weather has been variable, but my health and spirits have been invariably good. It is Dr. Johnson, I think, who speaks of a worthy gentleman who, from an early point of life, kept a regular record of the state and changes of the weather. At the age of threescore and ten or so, the result of his observations was, that the weather was changeable. This notable discovery might satisfy the person who, in cold, wet, or boisterous seasons, could resort to his warm room and comfortable fire : but for people in our situation and our profession, something more determinate is not only desirable but absolutely necessary, to enable us to prepare and provide against whatever change in the atmosphere may occur. The bad sailing of the Griper when before the wind, precisely the time when we ought to push forward as much as possible, is a most unfortunate quality ; which her good sailing upon a wind will not, I fear, be sufficient to compensate. When the wind is quite fair, therefore, the Hecla must either take her in tow, or lie to for her, from time to time, till she make up with her consort. How much this circumstance, and in such a voyage too, mortifies the companies of both ships, it is impossible for you as a landsman to imagine.

The most remarkable occurrences, since my letter of the 26th past, are the unexpected discovery of land on Tuesday the 15th of this month, at a great distance to the northward, and the falling in with floating ice for the first time yesterday. When land was observed we were on the meridian of west longitude $42^{\circ} 57'$, which is that of Cape Farewell, the southernmost point of the Greenland coast. But as that cape lies in north latitude $59^{\circ} 37\frac{1}{2}'$, and we were in $57^{\circ} 26'$, our distance coinciding with the difference of latitude was about $2^{\circ} 12'$ or 132 miles, or 44 leagues. Here, squire, is another opportunity for applying your skill in calculation. The eye of the observer being raised twenty feet above the surface of the sea, and the summit of Cape Farewell being visible in the horizon at the distance of 132 nautical, not English miles, what must be the height of the mountains at the Cape ; all regard to the refraction of light and the irregular curvature of the earth being laid out of the computation ?

The ice we met with yesterday is what, in the language of Greenland fishers, is called stream ice, or a number of loose