

William Scoresby, Jr. (1789-1857) and the Open Polar Sea — Myth and Reality

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ABSTRACT. William Scoresby, Jr., whaler and eminent natural scientist, was denied a role in the British Government's renewal of polar exploration in 1818. Befriended by Sir Joseph Banks and a member of the most respected learned societies in Scotland, England and the Continent, Scoresby made detailed observations of ice conditions in the Arctic over a period of 17 years, aiding the government's decision to search for new polar routes. However, Scoresby and Sir John Barrow, Second Secretary of the Admiralty, the main organizer of arctic exploration, had opposing perceptions of the nature of the northern regions. Barrow, until the end of his life, believed the polar regions harbored a warm water sea, while Scoresby considered the theory a ludicrous chimera. This is believed to be the source of Barrow's illogical rejection of Scoresby. To support this thesis the author has contrasted Scoresby's two major works, *An Account of the Arctic Regions* and *Voyage to the Whale Fishery*, with Barrow's arctic writings, *A Chronological History of Voyages into the Arctic Regions* and *Voyage in the Arctic Regions from 1818 to the Present Time*, as well as looking at other literary visions of the Arctic contemporary to the period. Scoresby's ability as a mariner, his years of arctic experience, his scientific education at the University of Edinburgh, his meticulous records and acute and sensitive observations in both prose and drawing, all provide a sound basis for perceiving the Admiralty's autocratic rejection of Scoresby as a loss to arctic science in the 19th century. It also points up the underlying romantic vision of the northern regions in the mind of society at the time: a place harboring an earthly paradise. To Scoresby, the Arctic was nature's laboratory, not a "playground for the imagination" (Loomis, 1986:12).

Key words: William Scoresby, Jr., John Barrow, open polar sea, arctic exploration, perceptions of the Arctic

RÉSUMÉ. William Scoresby fils, pêcheur de baleine et spécialiste renommé des sciences naturelles, se vit refuser un rôle dans la reprise de l'exploration polaire du gouvernement britannique en 1818. Traité en ami par Sir Joseph Banks, et membre des sociétés savantes les plus respectées d'Écosse, d'Angleterre et d'Europe continentale, Scoresby avait fait des observations détaillées de la condition des glaces dans l'Arctique au cours d'une période de 17 ans, contribuant ainsi à la décision du gouvernement de rechercher de nouvelles routes polaires. Scoresby and Sir John Barrow, Deuxième secrétaire de l'Amirauté et principal organisateur de l'exploration arctique, avaient des vues tout à fait opposées sur la nature des régions nordiques. Jusqu'à la fin de sa vie, Barrow crut que les régions polaires abritaient une mer d'eau tempérée, alors que Scoresby considérait cette théorie comme absurde. On pense que ceci fut à l'origine du rejet illogique de Scoresby par Barrow. Afin d'appuyer sa thèse, l'auteur oppose deux oeuvres principales de Scoresby, *An Account of the Arctic Regions* et *Voyage to the Whale Fishery*, aux écrits de Barrow sur l'Arctique, *A Chronological History of Voyages into the Arctic Regions* et *Voyage in the Arctic Regions from 1818 to the Present Time*, et il examine aussi d'autres visions littéraires sur l'Arctique, contemporaines de cette époque. La compétence de Scoresby en tant que marin, ses années d'expérience dans l'Arctique, sa formation scientifique à l'Université d'Édimbourg, sa prose et ses dessins révélant sa sensibilité et montrant le soin de ses relevés ainsi que la précision de ses observations, fournissent tous une base solide pour percevoir son rejet autocratique par l'Amirauté comme une perte pour la science de l'Arctique au 19^e siècle. L'article fait aussi ressortir la vision romantique des régions nordiques présente dans l'esprit des gens de l'époque, soit un endroit abritant un paradis terrestre. Pour Scoresby, l'Arctique était le laboratoire de la nature, et non pas un «terrain de jeux pour l'imagination» (Loomis, 1986:12).

Mots clés: William Scoresby fils, John Barrow, mer polaire libre, exploration arctique, perceptions de l'Arctique

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INTRODUCTION

In 1818 the British Admiralty decided to renew exploration to the Arctic. This decision to resume " . . . the age-old quest for a Northwest Passage" (Lloyd, 1970:125) was strongly influenced by the advice of William Scoresby, Jr. Both a whaler and scientist, Scoresby had made detailed observations of northern waters over many years. In 1815 before the esteemed Wernerian Society at the University of Edinburgh, where he was a student, he presented a paper on changing ice patterns in the Arctic, and in 1817, through Sir Joseph Banks, President of the Royal Society, he brought this and more current information to the attention of the Admiralty (Stamp and Stamp, 1975). His experience as an arctic mariner and his scientific training at Edinburgh made him a valuable source for the nation's plans for arctic exploration. They also meant that Scoresby himself deeply hoped to participate in Britain's renewed search for new polar routes (Scoresby, Sr., 1917:5). This, however, was not to

be, and his career in Great Britain's long northern epic was played off center stage. Why the Royal Navy did not enlist the most experienced, informed polar scientist of the time as an official member of one of its many expeditions to the Arctic is the question central to this paper.

WHALER AND NATURAL SCIENTIST OF THE ARCTIC

Like his famous predecessor, the great explorer Captain James Cook, Scoresby was born in Yorkshire and sailed from the port of Whitby. He also shared Cook's hardheaded practical views of seafaring. The son and apprentice of a successful whaler, from the age of ten until 1823 he sailed the arctic waters for 17 summers. Appointed first mate by the age of 16, he was in command of his own ship at the age of 21. His father, recognizing that his son's marine observations were intellectually precocious, insisted on his furthering his studies at the University of Edinburgh. This was highly unusual for a whaler at the time. It

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was there that he came in contact with great scientists of the day: John Playfair, John Leslie and Robert Jameson, his particular mentor, who urged him to become an explorer (Stamp and Stamp, 1975:53). Admitted to the Wernerian Society by unanimous vote following the delivery of his first paper in 1809, he became a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1819 and the Royal Society of London in 1824 and a member of the Institute of France in 1827. His reputation was solidly based on the two-volume study *An Account of the Arctic Regions with a History and Description of the Northern Whale-Fishery* published in 1820 and *Voyage to the Northern Whale-Fishery* published in 1823. The first work is a compilation of records and observations, including information presented or published between 1807 and 1818; the second publication is a journal of his 1822 voyage. In these two books we find expressed a view of the Arctic diametrically opposed to that of the Admiralty.

Alister Hardy, in his introduction to the 1969 reprint of Scoresby's *An Account of the Arctic Regions*, describes the book as "a classic of whaling literature" and an "outstanding pioneer work on the science of the sea" (Scoresby, 1969:Intro.). His essay also tells us that the great authority on whales and whaling, the late Sidney Harmer, referred to it as "one of the most remarkable books in the English language" (Scoresby, 1969:Intro.). It is to Hardy ". . . the finest account of the Arctic whale fisheries ever written" (Scoresby, 1969:Intro.), praise further supported by the *Dictionary of National Biography*, which describes Scoresby's work as "the foundation stone of Arctic science" (1950:945).

His second book, *Journal of a Voyage to the Northern Whale Fishery*, describes Scoresby's independent survey of the east coast of Greenland both to look for fresher whaling grounds and to explore its coastline, a subject long of interest to both him and his father. The only detailed survey since Hudson's in 1607 was of definite scientific value (Wordie, 1927). Its most permanent contribution was the 90-mile penetration of Scoresbysund (named for his father), the longest fiord in the world.

Nothing he encountered in the Arctic escaped his scrutiny either in prose or in drawing. The drawings, including those used to illustrate his publications, reveal both a passion for factual description and a sensitivity to natural beauty. Coastal views, for instance, the most important mariner's guide next to navigation charts (Munday, 1976), are drawn as bold, solid silhouettes with a minimum of the picturesque attributes characteristic of many exploration journals (Fig. 1). They are nevertheless exquisitely rendered with sensitivity to the sublimity and beauty of the scene. In *View of the East Coast of the Island of Jan Mayen* (Fig. 2), a simple drawing of a dramatic landscape, groups of flying birds rather than clinical numbers are used as a landmark code. Polar ice, that unpredictable and dangerous substance of northern waters, is analyzed at length for its strange properties and mesmerizing suggestiveness. ". . . ponderous blocks," Scoresby describes the cold white icebergs, at times echoing the purity of classical sculpture, such as ". . . a colossal human figure, reclining in the position of the Theseus of the Elgin collection" (Scoresby, 1980:84). The reference to the collection now known as the Elgin Marbles compares nature's ice sculpture to the spectacular friezes and meotypes from the Parthenon obtained through the Turkish government by the Earl of Elgin while he was ambassador to Constantinople from 1799 to 1803. Brought to England and sold to the nation, they were on view in the British Museum by 1816. Reflecting further on the terrifying response and emotions of awe the

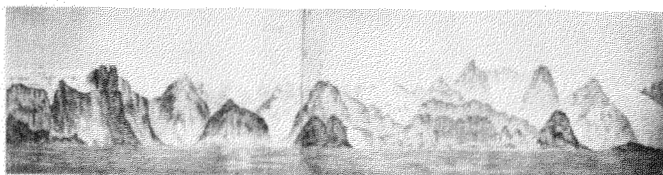


FIG. 1. William Scoresby's coastal view (watercolor in the collection of the Whitby Museum, Whitby, Yorkshire).

massive bodies of ice could elicit in the uninitiated, Scoresby wrote:

Of the inanimate productions of the Polar Seas, none perhaps excites so much interest and astonishment in a stranger, as the *ice* in its great abundance and variety. The stupendous masses, known by the name of *Ice-islands*, or *Icebergs*, . . . are calculated to strike the beholder with wonder. . . . [Scoresby, 1969:22.]

Or the prophetic warning, long lost in the wind to mariners of the doomed *Titanic*:

In the night, ice-bergs are readily distinguished, even at a distance, by their natural effulgence; and in foggy weather, by a peculiar blackness in the atmosphere, by which the danger to the navigator is diminished. As, however, they occur far from land, and often in unexpected situations, navigators crossing the Atlantic in the gloom of night, between the parallels of 50 and 60 latitude, or even farther to the south, require to be always on the watch for them . . . fatal accidents have occurred, by vessels getting involved among them in the night. . . . [Scoresby, 1969:25.]

Related in substance but the opposite in magnitude are Scoresby's drawings and observations of snow crystals (Figs. 3 and 4), an area of study that alone would have secured his place in the history of natural science. Not until modern technology and the photographic microscope were his images surpassed (Bentley and Humphreys, 1962). While an apprentice whaler with his father, Scoresby, with either a hand magnifying glass or a lens he devised out of ice and rounded by the warmth of his hands, meticulously measured and drew the symmetry and intricate patterns of hundreds of individual snowflakes. Though Scoresby's work on snowflakes was partly anticipated by 17th- and 18th-century science (McConnell, 1986:260), only Olaus Magnus, our first historian of the arctic regions, in 1555 had depicted in a rough wood block print a magnified image of an ice crystal (Bentley and Humphreys, 1962; Stamp and Stamp, 1975:36-37). But Scoresby's drawings are the first accurate visual descriptions. Later arctic scientists and explorers, such as Edward Belcher (1855[III]:298-306), added valuable information, but no one has ever rendered by hand these ice creations of infinite variety with more precision, sensitivity and skill. Like the stars, the celestial flowers of the heavens, the snow crystals are under Scoresby's hand the winter blossoms of the air. They call to mind the great art of the northern Renaissance — a Dürer — a passionate rendering of a blade of grass, or a garden flower painted by Van Eyck. They are also examples *par excellence* of the highest standards of natural science draftsmanship.

These standards were established by the Royal Society through their directives to explorers traveling to faraway places and were first attained on Cook's and Banks's voyage to the South Pacific in 1768. As Smith (1969:2) verifies in his definitive study on the art of the Cook voyages, this was the first

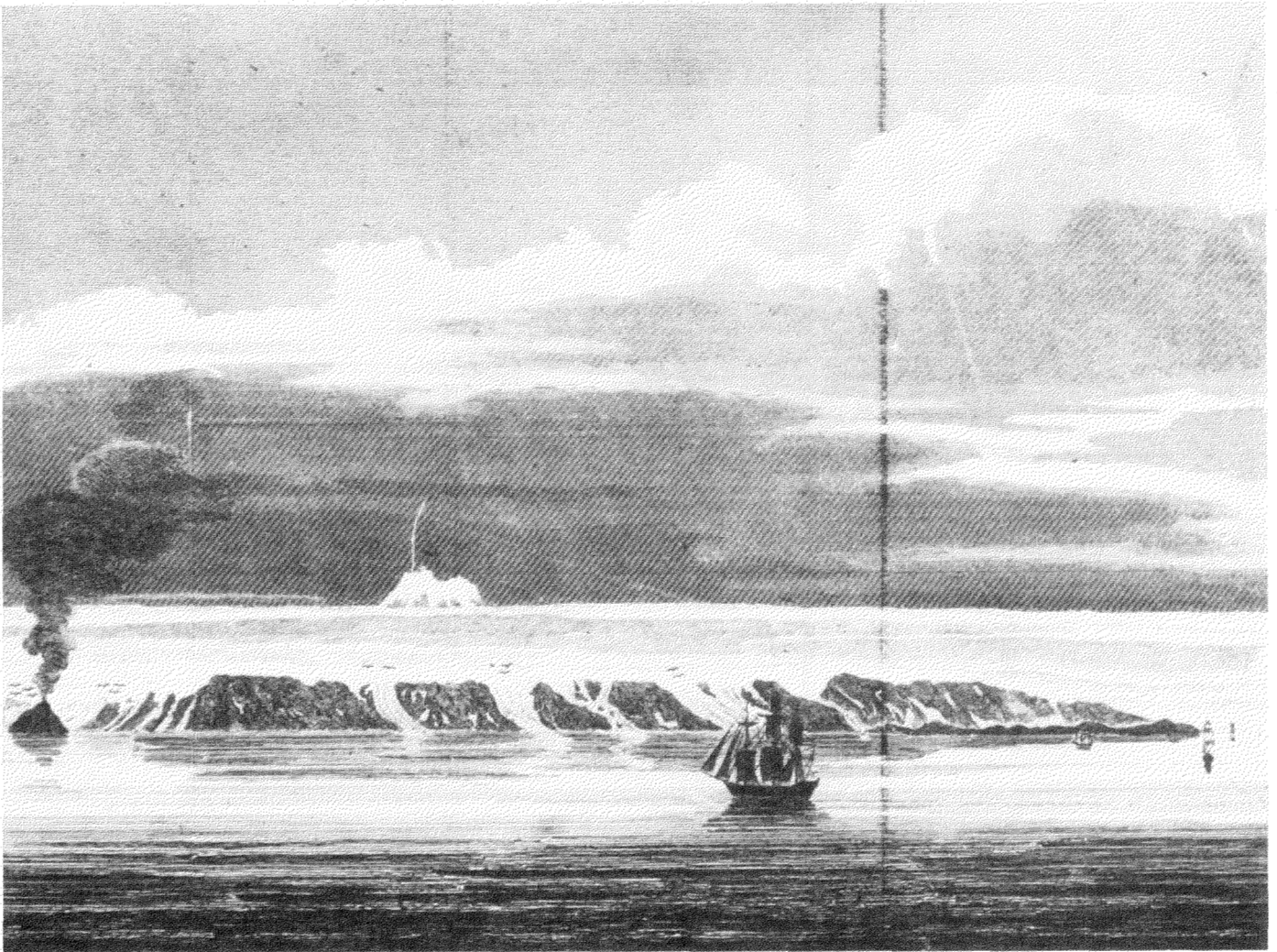


FIG. 2. William Scoresby's "View of the East Coast of the Island of Jan Mayen, in which Beerenberg appears above the region of the clouds. ~ The three Icebergs 1284 feet in height. ~ Eske Mounte, a volcanic Crater ~ Bird Island from whence smoke was seen to issue in May 1818. ~ Beerenberg 6870 feet in altitude bearing due West distant 10 miles." Reproduced in Scoresby, Jr., 1969:Vol. II, Plate V.

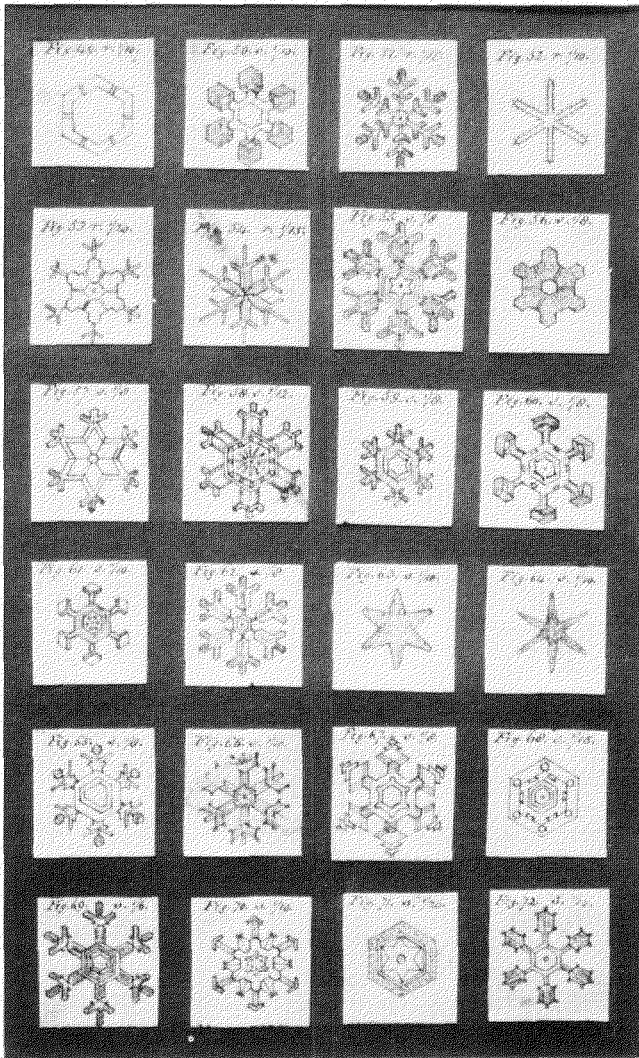
expedition to include a retinue of artists and scientists. In every sense Scoresby was the heir to this tradition. A devoted Anglican, who did not live to face the challenge of Darwin's *Origin of the Species* to biblical interpretations of creation, he had no difficulty accommodating his faith to his scientific discoveries, ". . . perceiving in all the phenomena of the universe the designs of a perfect intelligence . . ." (Gillespie, 1959:184). Thus his passion for studying natural phenomena found its fervor through a belief in a supernatural link. Of his snowflake studies he wrote:

Some of the general varieties in the figures of the crystals, may be referred to the temperature of the air; but the particular and endless modifications of similar classes of crystals, can only be referred to the will and pleasure of the Great First Cause, whose works, even the most minute and evanescent, and in regions the most remote from human observation, are altogether admirable. [Scoresby, 1969:426-427.]

Joined to his study of the microscopic world of crystallography was his absorption with the lights of the North. Mirages, auroras, the rainbows, parhelia, atmospheric halos, the glory: these were of lifelong fascination to Scoresby, and he incorpo-

rated his written observations, measurements and drawings into his books. With the aurora borealis, for instance, he observed, quite rightly, that though not visible in the arctic summer, the northern lights were still present in the atmosphere. Further, they are linked to the magnetic field. Yet it is only in the last few years that this connection has been firmly established. Modern scientists only now know precisely through ground-based observations and information acquired by rockets and artificial satellites that the aurora borealis interacts with the magnetic fields surrounding the earth and the high-velocity winds of electrically charged particles from the sun (Akasodu, 1986; Scoresby, 1969:415-418).

Among the various "baffling lights" (Walker, 1986:2) of the arctic sky, refraction is probably the cause of the most bewilderment, a phenomenon that has inspired fanciful poetic description in ships' logs and explorers' journals since the first mariners' records. It has also caused blinding mistakes. A mirage or refraction of light can create under certain conditions illusive forms appearing above and below the horizon line. Its phantasmagoric effects have inspired poetic description rivaling Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* (Montgomery, 1985:175-194). Even



FIGS. 3 and 4. William Scoresby's snow crystals (ink drawings in the collection of the Whitby Museum, Whitby, Yorkshire), reproduced in Scoresby, 1969:Vol. II, Plates VIII, IX, X, XI, 1820.

its modern name, *Fata Morgana* (Italian for Fairy Morgan), which refers to an ode to King Arthur's sister and her power of creating castles in the air, is a reference to magic (Fraser and Mach, 1986:29). Devoting over 20 pages to the study of his observations on refraction and including several drawings of its appearance (Fig. 5), Scoresby, a man suspicious of poetic hyperbole, could not resist the occasional comment on its sublime attributes:

The general telescope appearance . . . under the influence of unequal refraction, is frequently that of an extensive ancient city, abounding with the ruins of castles, obelisks, churches, and monuments. . . . The whole exhibition is frequently a grand and interesting phantasmagoria . . . perhaps, alternately a castle, a cathedral . . . an obelisk . . . [or] a single arch of the most magnificent appearance. [Scoresby, 1980:166.]

He was, as Lopez (1986:145) has written, "as brilliant and keen-eyed an observer that ever went to sea." It would seem Scoresby possessed every quality needed for a successful exploration of the vast unknown polar regions. He was the man with the hands-on experience. He was the man with the correct scientific training and sensibilities. He was also the man who

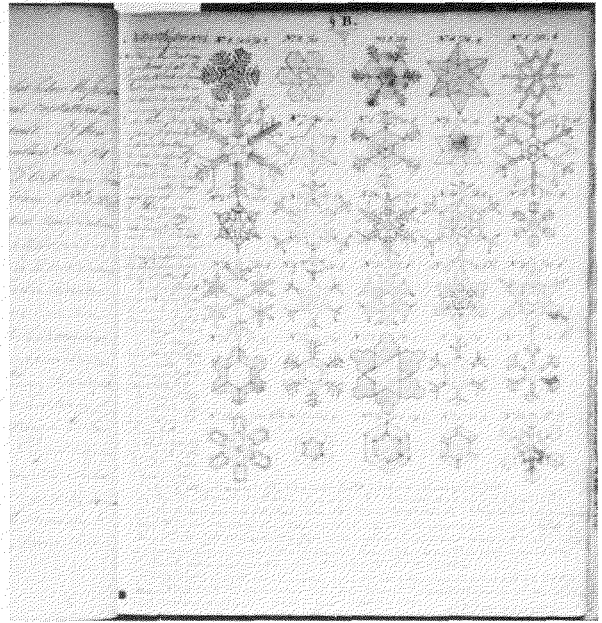


FIG. 4.

had the immediate experience and also the youth to see a project to completion. He not only had advanced experience of the North but he had proved his ability to organize and compile his observations and thereby perceive a course of action based on concrete information. He had presented his ideas to the best scientific minds of the time before audiences of the most respected learned societies in Scotland, Britain and the Continent. He had been enthusiastically acclaimed by his peers. He had been raised in the very air of his great predecessor James Cook, and he had been befriended by Joseph Banks, whose own exploring experience included Labrador and Iceland. But Banks was old and at the end of his brilliant career, and it was John Barrow, Second Secretary of the Admiralty, the major promoter for the renewal of arctic exploration, who held the power to utilize this brilliant fund of knowledge for his pet project or to reject it. Rejection was his choice.

A key to his reasons can be found in Scoresby's introductory chapter to his first book (1820), which is partly a compilation of

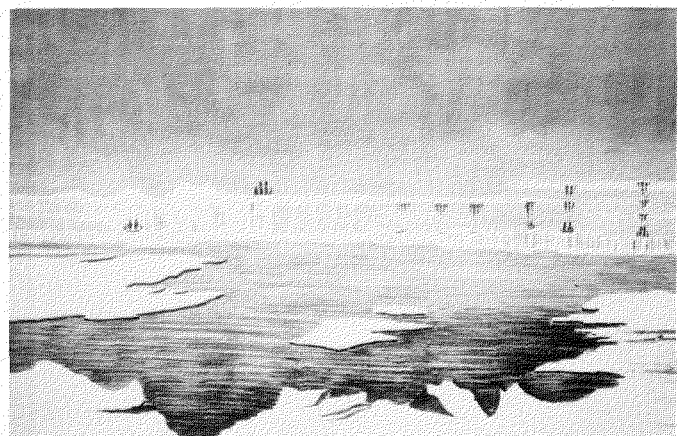


FIG. 5. William Scoresby's *Optical Phenomena of Unequal Refraction* (watercolor in the collection of the Whitby Museum, Whitby, Yorkshire), reproduced in Scoresby, 1980:Plate V.

his previous papers. The two-volume work begins with a detailed summary of the early attempts to find "sea communication between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans" by a Northwest Passage or via the even thornier subject, an open, ice-free route over the North Pole. Based on the experience of his voyage with his father in 1806 above Spitsbergen and their attainment of 81°30'42", the highest latitude ever reached until Parry's 82°43'32" in 1827, Scoresby had already stated in his paper to the Wernerian Society in 1814 and again to the Admiralty in 1817 that he believed the North Pole was solidly surrounded by ice. In his book he presented a cautious questioning of the belief in an open sea through a condensation of observed facts. In short, he pointed out that ". . . as the quantity of ice dissolved every summer near Spitzbergen, by the action of the sun only, is very small when compared with the quantity that is there generated, — can it be imagined, that the whole quantity generated at the Pole during the year should be dissolved by the power of the sun in the course of two or three summer months?" and ". . . where the mean annual temperature is probably as low as 10 . . . can it then be supposed . . . that the sea is not full of ice" (Scoresby, 1969:49). Scoresby's was a vision of the polar regions that Barrow never accepted, and to the end of his life Barrow believed in a warm-water sea beyond the polar ice (Stamp and Stamp, 1975:52).

MYTH, LEGEND AND THE ADMIRALTY

With the defeat of Napoleon in 1815, the Royal Navy needed a project to occupy its idle ships and men. Since Elizabethan times exploration in times of peace had brought glory and new lands under Britain's control. Still beckoning in the 19th century was the possibility of a Northwest Passage as ". . . almost the only interesting discovery that remains" (Barrow, 1818:365). No longer envisioned as a trade route to the Orient, it still remained important to England as a political, strategic and scientific area of geographic knowledge and a matter of national prestige, ". . . an object peculiarly British" (Barrow, 1818:364). It also haunted the imagination with its mysteries. Was there a channel through islands, inlets and sounds encased in ice, or was there a hidden open space harboring a warm and living sea? Like perceptions of a physical heaven and hell, images of the Arctic's geographic form vacillated between two extremes: the one, a labyrinth to challenge and test the soul or damn it for all eternity; the other, a disclosure of a peaceful celestial place where trial and privation were unknown. If, therefore, the latter existed in the form of an "open polar sea," as many believed, its configuration could be as Barrow (1846:19) wrote, a "360 circle . . . with . . . an extent of coast which no other detached sea in the world can boast of." Its discovery would indeed make England supreme ruler of the seas and the moral leader of the world. Quoting Francis Bacon, Barrow wrote (1846:20): "Knowledge is Power."

To the contemporary observer, the concept of an ice-free sea in the polar regions seems absurd, armed as we are with the irrefutable evidence that none exists. Barrow was not, however, an eccentric in his beliefs, for the theory of an open polar sea was respected for centuries. It remained so well into the late 19th century, providing the hope to some during the long search for Franklin that ". . . his ships [were] sailing round and round in a mythical Polar Sea searching for an exit" (Lloyd, 1970:193). One can see in Mercator's famous map of 1636 a visual rendition of the vision (Fig. 6). This configuration of the

four mythical rivers of the earth finding their source in an open sea capping the globe appears frequently on late-16th- and 17th-century maps.

The fact is that, as Scoresby well knew, ice patterns are not constant, and over the centuries observation of open water or impenetrable ice varied. Tales from returning sailors were reinforced by geographical theories presenting such ideas as the closeness of the sun at the Pole and its presence six months of the year (White, 1856) or the recording of warmer water in higher latitudes than those farther south, a possible indicator of a milder climate in the North (Barrow, 1818:371). These ideas and others inspired hope that the seemingly forbidden Arctic might also harbor a mild place or even a heavenly abode, . . . a golden secret world.

Long before Scoresby, however, 18th-century seamen had warned against the armchair explorer directing maritime ventures with their abstract musings. Bougainville, Cook's French rival and contemporary, who at one point contemplated a north polar voyage (Savours, 1984:403), realized "Geography is a science of facts — no man in his study can draw up a system without the risk of making the greatest mistakes, which are often corrected only at the expense of the navigator at sea" (Williams, 1966:154-155).

Yet, the lessons of these brilliant explorers did little to destroy the dream of an open polar sea. In 1770, Daines Barrington proposed to the Royal Society a journey northward in search of an open polar sea. Backed by Joseph Banks and headed by his old friend Constantine Phipps in 1773, this has been called "the first purely geographical Arctic expedition . . . in intention, a purely scientific mission . . ." (Savours, 1984:405). Attaining a slightly higher latitude, 80°36'N, than Hudson's expedition at 80°23'N in 1607, but less than Scoresby's of 1806, it is today applauded for its "enquiring scientific spirit" (Savours, 1984:423), though a voyage "after a chimera" (Savours, 1984:403). Still, hope persisted into the next century of a habitable world beyond the icy rim.

Given the vitality of this theory, it is not surprising that in 1817 Beaufoy's edition of Barrington's hypothesis was read by Barrow, whose importance in the Admiralty, as already mentioned, was instrumental in the choice of projects. Even stronger evidence of its power over the English imagination is found in the prose of *Frankenstein* (Shelley, 1984), published only a year later. The story about the scientist, Frankenstein, who creates a monster fated to wander forever across the unbounded empty polar space, begins with the narrator, Robert Walton, a fictitious polar scientist, musing about the Arctic and the dreams of scientists and visionaries for new knowledge and a place in the sun:

I try in vain to be persuaded that the pole is the seat of frost and desolation; it ever presents itself to my imagination as the region of beauty and delight. There . . . the sun is forever visible; its broad disk just skirting the horizon, and diffusing a perpetual splendor . . . there snow and frost are banished and sailing over a calm sea, we may be wafted to a land surpassing in wonders and in beauty every region hitherto discovered on the habitable globe. . . . [Shelley, 1984:11.]

Echoing Shelley's literary dreams, Barrow made the pursuit of "a passage near the pole" a reality by defending the project, convincingly presenting reasons for past failures and exhorting what must be done. Barrow's (1818:371, 374, 378-379) scientific articulation of his vision of a utopian sea was buttressed by his argument for the renewal of arctic exploration:

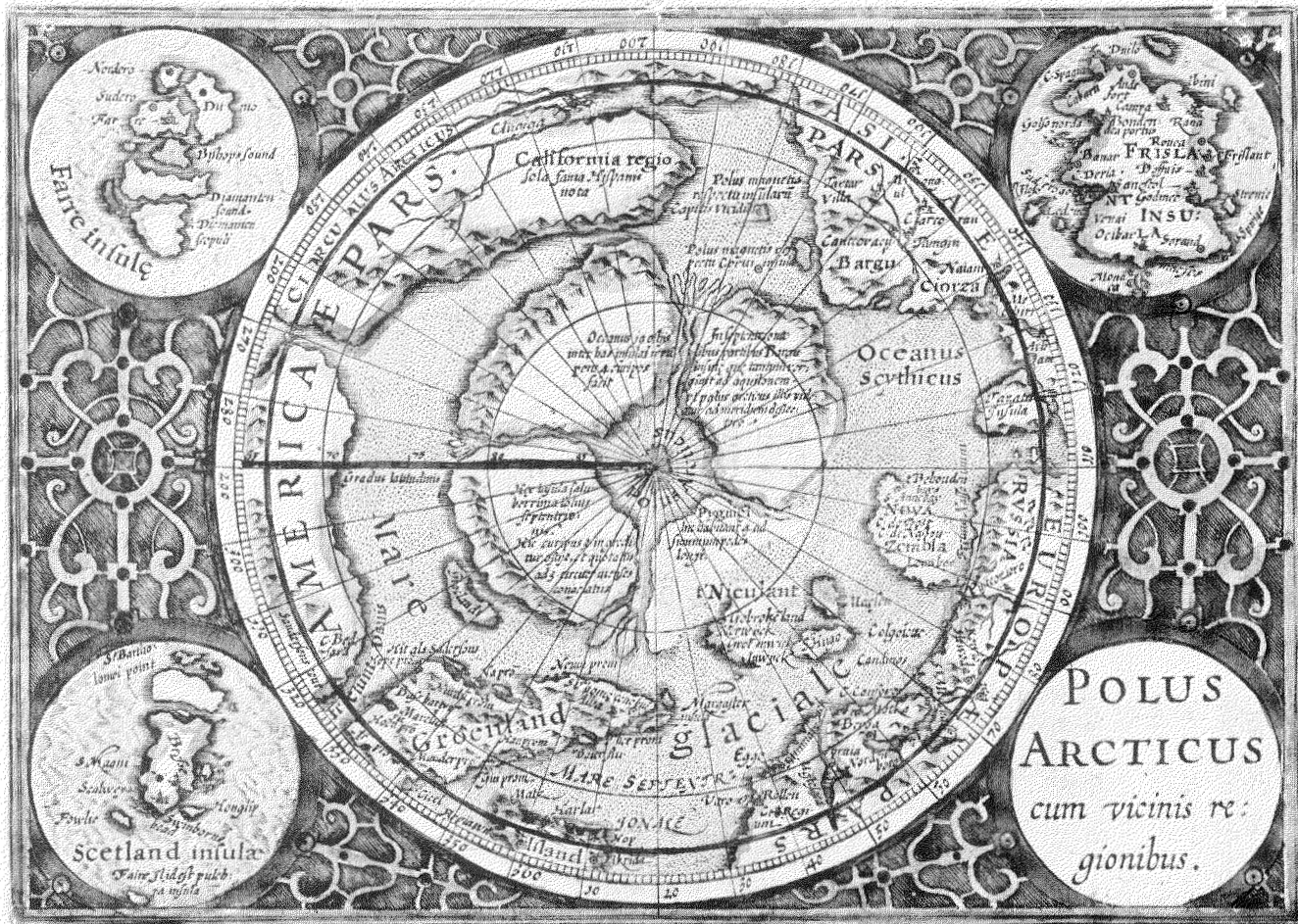


FIG. 6. J. Hondius & G. Mercator's *Polus Arcticus*, 1635, in the collection of the National Archives of Canada.

That the north pole may be approached by sea, has been an opinion entertained both by experienced navigators and by men eminent for their learning and science; . . . and if the polar sea be navigable to the height of 84° [No voyage higher than 81° had been confirmed, according to Scoresby] there seems to be no other physical obstruction, than the intervention of land, to the practical navigation of that sea to the north pole itself. If therefore the great polar basin should be free of land, the probability is, that it will also be free of ice. . . . Of the enterprise itself; it may be truly characterized as one of the most liberal and disinterested that was ever undertaken, and every way worthy of a great, a prosperous and an enlightened nation; having for its primary object that of the advancement of science, for its own sake, without any selfish or interested views.

To Scoresby the idea "that the North Pole may be approached by sea" was ludicrous (Scoresby, 1818:328). He did not, however, rule out the possibility of an expedition reaching the Pole, not by ships, but by dogs, reindeer or sledges aided by sails:

. . . the expectation of reaching the Pole by sea, must be altogether chimerical. . . . I yet imagine, notwithstanding the objections which have been urged against the scheme, that it would by no means be impossible to reach the Pole by travelling across the ice from Spitzbergen. . . . With favorable winds, great advantage might be derived from sails set upon sledges; which sails, when the travellers were at rest, would serve for the erection of tents. [Scoresby, 1969:54-55.]

An early watercolor now hanging in the Whitby Museum depicts his ingenious solution of a sailing sledge (Fig. 7): a means used for ice travel more frequently 30 years later when the search for Franklin and his crew compelled the Royal Navy seamen to leave their ships. Conceivably more to the point, not until the 20th century, when Peary and Cook ran their race to the Pole, was Scoresby's insight as to the nature of the area fully heeded and proved right. Scoresby's approach to exploration was Baconian. His observations in 1814 of warmer, more open waters were not to him indications of the existence of an open sea allowing a passage to the Pole over water. They were rather observations of relatively better conditions, without the leap to a fanciful theory of a hidden oasis. Like Bougainville before him, Scoresby warned against theoretical musings about the nature of the polar regions. In his writings he said: ". . . 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" (Scoresby, 1969:3), a comment no doubt irritating to those who disagreed with his methodical, hard-headed approach.

Perhaps Barrow in his 1818 book promoting the renewal of arctic exploration thought of Scoresby when he expressed a ". . . slyly aimed side blow against . . . his opponents" (Blackwood's *Edinburgh Magazine*, 1818:188). Drawing on the early explorer Richard Chancellor's account, he quotes: ". . . he held on to his course towards that unknown part of the



FIG. 7. William Scoresby's sledge and sail (oil painting in the collection of the Whitby Museum, Whitby, Yorkshire).

world, and sailed so farre that hee came at last to the place where hee found no night at all, but a continual light and brightness of the sunne shining clearly upon the huge and mighty sea'' (Blackwood's . . . , 1818:188-189).

That Barrow's vision of the Arctic was not in accord with Scoresby's is clear. Yet it was Scoresby's observations and scientific scholarship that provided the evidence for the government's renewal of polar exploration. His paper compiled after his 1814 voyage was the first detailed scientific description of polar ice (Stamp and Stamp, 1975:52). After its presentation to the Wernerian Society, his mentor Jameson wrote Scoresby of its warm reception by ". . . Naval people about Edin' and the Captains of the diff' ships of war present, also Profs Playfair, Leslie Dr. Thomson etc . . ." (Stamp and Stamp, 1975:54). That Scoresby's findings remained under his name is evident in Jameson's comment that Scoresby's plan to explore the polar regions was "considered as most luminously and satisfactorily explained & it was suggested that the Society as a public body should apply to Government for their support and countenance to whoever should undertake the proposed expedition. Nothing, however, will be done until you return, as you of course must be the person best qualified to judge of the best way of setting the

whole a-going'' (Stamp and Stamp, 1975:54). Yet only once at the end of his career in his retrospective of the arctic voyages did Barrow acknowledge Scoresby, in a minor way, as an early advisor on the polar project (Barrow, 1846:14).

Barrow's control of the arctic project stemmed from his own interest in exploration. Founder of the Royal Geographic Society, he had travelled widely early in his career: as a young man to the Greenland seas on a whaler and, at the beginning of his government career, to China as a member of the British embassy. This was followed by an assignment to South Africa. As Second Secretary of the Admiralty for 40 years, he perceived exploration in time of peace as an honorable and useful occupation, a means of ". . . completing those details of geographical and hydrographical science of which the grand outlines have been boldly and broadly sketched by Cook, Vancouver and Flinders . . ." (Lloyd, 1970:112). His commitment in directing public interest to the arctic project was clearly demonstrated by his writings: a history of northern exploration published in 1818, numerous articles for the *Quarterly Review* and a summary of the voyages published the year of his retirement in 1846.

Whether Barrow's and Scoresby's opposing visions of the Arctic's make-up colored Barrow's appointments to the first expedition or not is speculation, but unlike Cook's or Phipps's voyages, which included a retinue of professional artists and scientists, mainly Navy men with little or no experience in High Arctic waters were selected. The exceptions to this were whalers engaged as pilots. That Barrow intended to offer Scoresby a position as a pilot seems to have been a possibility (Stamp, 1975:68), a role, however, limiting and insulting to the distinguished scientific contribution of his observations. Nevertheless, for whatever reasons, the exclusion of Scoresby helped to assure Barrow's personal vision of the polar regions.

It was assured but far from proved. The 1818 voyage to Spitsbergen attempting to sail over the Pole returned without exceeding Scoresby's 81°. John Ross, captain of the northwest branch of the expedition, voyaged into Lancaster Sound, only to be stopped by what he perceived as a range of hills. So convincing to Ross was the phantom illusion of an enclosed bay that he recorded the view in a drawing and named the hills Croker Mountains (Fig. 8). Questioning Ross's perception, William Parry, his second in command and a friend of Barrow's

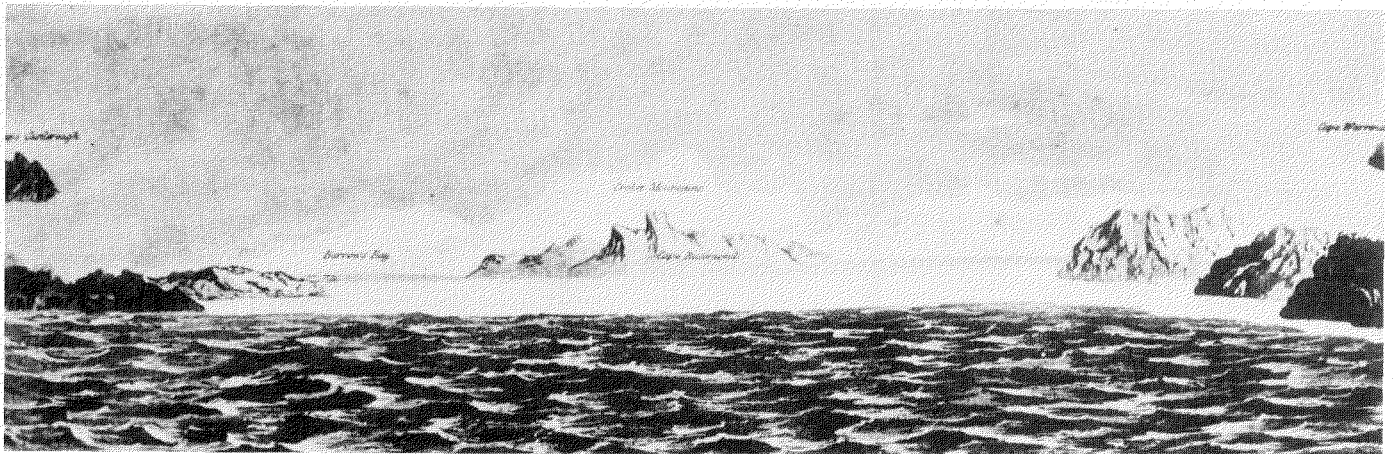


FIG. 8. John Ross's *Croker's Mountain* (sketch from the expedition of 1818), reproduced in Dodge, 1973.

(Jones, 1985:268), was appointed leader to the follow-up voyage of 1819. Sailing as far as Melville Island, this was the most successful arctic journey ever attempted in the 19th century. The convincing mirage unfortunately witnessed by Ross was very likely the result of atmospheric refraction of light, common in the northern regions and well known to Scoresby, a phenomenon Scoresby discussed at length in his writings. In defense of his mistake, Ross pointed out that he had hoped to have more experienced assistants accompanying him, for "I alone who had the whole responsibility was doomed to be the sufferer" (Ross, 1835:x). While standing his ground, he let it be known that it was Scoresby's years of observation of northern waters that had led to the Admiralty's renewal of a search for a passage in the first place. Ross wrote: "I would certainly have employed Mr. Scoresby" (Scoresby, Sr., 1917:4), for he would have accepted a position had he been offered "any job suitable to a gentleman" (Ross, 1835:x). "This [Ross] was prevented from doing as all officers selected and even the ships, inadequately and unfit for service were purchased and nearly ready before Ross was assigned to the command" (Scoresby, Sr., 1917:5).

WILLIAM SCORESBY AND SIR JOHN BARROW: A DIFFICULT CONNECTION

Perhaps Scoresby, a plain Yorkshire man, young and intellectually precocious, lacked the tact needed to handle a powerful bureaucrat like Barrow. He could not perceive that the Second Secretary of the Admiralty was not a man to be told about the Arctic. As a result his relationship with the government remained one of frustration. A curt note from Barrow to the Royal Society in reply to Scoresby's request to borrow a chronometer and azimuth compass for his independent survey of the Greenland coast in 1822 tells the story:

I have shown Mr. Scoresby's letter to Lord Melville, but he observed merely that we have no authority to dispose of His Majesty's property to private ships and I believe the Board of Longitude has as little. Mr. Scoresby must therefore do the best he can with his private means. [Stamp and Stamp, 1975:90.]

Given Scoresby's proven stature as a marine scientist and the fact that since the founding of the Royal Society seamen on far voyages were encouraged and directed to contribute to the common fund of geographical knowledge by recording their findings and submitting them to the government upon their return (Smith, 1969:40), this rejection appears petty indeed.

A permanent distaste for the Navy must have been easily reinforced by such clashes with the Admiralty, a distaste and distrust already deep in his Yorkshire psyche. An earlier personal experience on a volunteer assignment to the Royal Navy and horror stories heard in his childhood of press gangs wandering the streets of Whitby and forcing young returning whalers against their will into Naval service were familiar to Scoresby (Stamp and Stamp, 1975:22-31). This was a practice still prevalent in peacetime, while Scoresby was a whaler (Stamp, 1985:196). Late in his life he met Elizabeth Gaskell, the popular Victorian novelist biographer of Charlotte Brontë, and probably shared these tales (Stamp and Stamp, 1975:215). Her book *Sylvia's Lovers* was about the whaling men of Monkshaven (a pseudonym for Whitby), whose heroic lives were not destroyed by sailing the arctic seas but by the Royal Navy's ruthless, cold-blooded authority (Gaskell, 1986).

Notwithstanding his lack of support from the Admiralty, Scoresby managed with limited instruments to complete his

survey of Greenland's shoreline between 69° and 75°, becoming the "first to lay down the coast with any pretence at accuracy" (Wordie, 1927:225). His lack of equipment and less than ideal ice conditions did, however, result in some unavoidable mistakes. Ice conditions, for instance, prevented a complete penetration of Scoresbysund, leaving Scoresby with the belief that it was possibly a continuous passage into Davis Strait rather than a deep fiord, a theory that geographers now discount, though Greenland is known to resemble an ice-filled bowl depressing the ground surface 1200 feet below sea level (National Geographic Atlas, 1975:171). Further, fog conditions led to the rendering of coastal views that, though accurate to the eye, later proved to have some wrongly identified capes. These later surveys proved Scoresby's capes to be mountains set back from the coastline. Nevertheless the survey, the only one since Hudson's in 1607, was of definite scientific value. The following summer the government appointed Clavering to conduct its own survey of the coast, omitting Scoresby's records from its official chart. Not until a Cambridge expedition in 1926 were they restored (Wordie: 1927:225).

CONCLUSION

Scoresby's survey of the Greenland coast was his penultimate voyage to the Arctic. His last was in 1823. Domestic tragedy, the death of his first wife and the economic reality of a diminishing number of whales in the Greenland sea (Holland, 1970:25) aided his decision. Excluded from the Royal Navy's arctic quest and a devout Christian, Scoresby turned to a new vocation in the Anglican ministry. After taking a degree in theology at Christ's College, Cambridge, he was ordained in 1839. Presiding over a parish, he turned to the social issues of a pastor. Natural science, however, remained a major interest. During his lifetime his voluminous writings included 91 publications appearing in theological, literary and scientific journals. His final work, *Journal of a Voyage to Australia for Magnetic Research*, was published posthumously in 1859.

Scoresby's research continued to be scientifically interesting, yet the melancholy knowledge remains that a man of brilliance was cut off from a major contribution to arctic exploration history. This fact is not only obvious to us, but was realized by his contemporaries. Ross through his own personal experience recognized the loss, while John Leslie, the eminent University of Edinburgh scientist, observed: "It was exceeding to be regretted that any jealousies or official punctilios should have prevented the government from entrusting the principal command of the Polar Expeditions to him [Scoresby, Jr.], who not only proposed it originally, but whose talents and science, joined to his activity, perseverance and enthusiasm, afforded assuredly the best promise of its ultimate success (Scoresby, Sr., 1917:5).

The Franklin expedition of 1845 was the watershed of Britain's arctic epic. It was also the last official voyage with Barrow as Second Secretary of the Admiralty. Barrow died in 1848, three years after Franklin's departure and before the strands of that long tragedy unraveled. In 1850 the Arctic Committee sought Scoresby's counsel, and he along with arctic explorers around the world contributed their analysis of Franklin's possible whereabouts. Lady Jane Franklin sought his advice as early as 1848. Her deep respect for his knowledge is reflected in her comment that "He was always my hero" (Stamp and Stamp, 1975:210).

Why was Barrow so short-sighted? Was it a personality conflict, Scoresby's lack of a Royal Navy commission or his lowly status as a whaler? All explanations are inadequate given the evidence, the complexity of the arctic project and the intelligence of Barrow. Non-commissioned participants, it is true, were not sought in Britain's official search for the Northwest Passage, but a few key figures might have been included, precedents well established on Cook's voyages. Instead the evidence points to deeper psychological reasons.

Barrow and Scoresby shared a passionate interest in completing the arctic map. They shared a fervor for the haunting qualities of the quest. What they did not share, however, was the vision of the geographical make-up of the arctic regions and the existence of an open polar sea. To Scoresby there was no evidence whatsoever to support the theory. Fully on the side of Scoresby were his years of observation and scientific scholarship. To Barrow the mirage would not disappear.

History is full of what might have been, but this story does present another possible scenario to Britain's long search for a polar route. Myth and legend mixed with politics, it would seem, played as strong a role in government decisions as in the fanciful fiction of Mary Shelley or Elizabeth Gaskell. Theories ingrained by centuries of stories by returning mariners or armchair explorers became official plans. But to Scoresby, arctic exploration was not a search for ". . . the huge and mighty sea" (Barrow, 1818:189), but rather an opportunity to study in nature's laboratory, a place where nothing was known until experienced and recorded.

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