

Joseph Elzéar Bernier (1852-1934)

Born on the 1st of January 1852 in the town of L'Islet on the south shore of the St. Lawrence River about 80 km below Quebec City, Joseph Elzéar Bernier belonged to the fading era of wooden ships and iron men.

His father and grandfather were sea captains and shipbuilders. He attended school in L'Islet until he was 14 and then went to sea. Three years later he became master of his vessel. After a hundred voyages to many ports he came ashore to accept the unlikely position of governor of the Quebec jail.

This fitted into Bernier's scheme, for it gave him time to read and to study. Since 1872 he had been fascinated by arctic exploration, so now he absorbed all of the published accounts of British, American, Danish, and Norwegian expeditions. In 1898 he gave a lecture before the Quebec Geographical Society expounding on both how he might reach the North Pole by ship and dog-team and how he might sail through the Northwest Passage. This created a stir. He resigned from the jail and started campaigning.

In 1902 he called on Prime Minister Sir Wilfrid Laurier and won his support. It would be a great triumph for Canada to have a Canadian be the first to stand at the North Pole and to sail through the Northwest Passage. Laurier asked Parliament for an appropriation of \$100,000 to build a ship for the task. Meanwhile, Bernier lectured across Canada to gain public support and financial backing.

What appeared to be a key to the realization of his dreams in 1904 was the availability of a stoutly built 650-ton sailing ship with an auxiliary steam engine. This was the *Gauss*, named for a German astronomer and magnetician, built in Kiel in 1901 for a two-year Antarctic expedition that had been successfully completed. Bernier purchased her for the Canadian government at a bargain price of \$75,000 and sailed her to Quebec, where she was renamed *Arctic*.

But, alas, the government had surprising and disappointing plans for Bernier. Instead of heading his own expedition to the North Pole, he was to serve only as master of the *Arctic* for a

year-long patrol of the Northwest Mounted Police into Hudson Bay to control foreign traders and whalers. However, this interlude gave Bernier experience in arctic travel and living, standing him in good stead for the future. His ship performed well, so he was now ready for whatever northern responsibilities he could assume.

With abundant self-confidence and, at last, full command of the *Arctic* and his own expeditions, in 1906 he began a series of extensive voyages (1906-1907, 1908-1909, 1910-1911) to various islands in the Canadian Eastern Arctic. He found no new land. He simply patrolled islands already charted, at least superficially. He gathered records left by his predecessors of the 19th century, depositing new records and setting up cairns and monuments of his own. He raised the flag everywhere, claiming all the islands for Canada. Detractors in those days considered this a work of supererogation, for Great Britain had ceded all of the islands above the mainland to Canada in 1880. But in future years Bernier's markers may have helped reinforce Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic.

On his 1908-1909 expedition Bernier took the *Arctic* through half the length of M'Clure Strait. It was invitingly open and he might have realized his dream of sailing through the Northwest Passage, which Roald Amundsen had already done with a much smaller vessel by a more southerly route in 1903-1906, but Bernier lacked authorization to proceed and reluctantly turned back. On his next voyage he had the authorization, but this time M'Clure Strait was ice-choked.

Then Dr. Frederick A. Cook and Rear Admiral Robert E. Peary both claimed that they had reached the North Pole in 1908 and 1909 respectively, so that was gone for Bernier, although he discounted both claims.

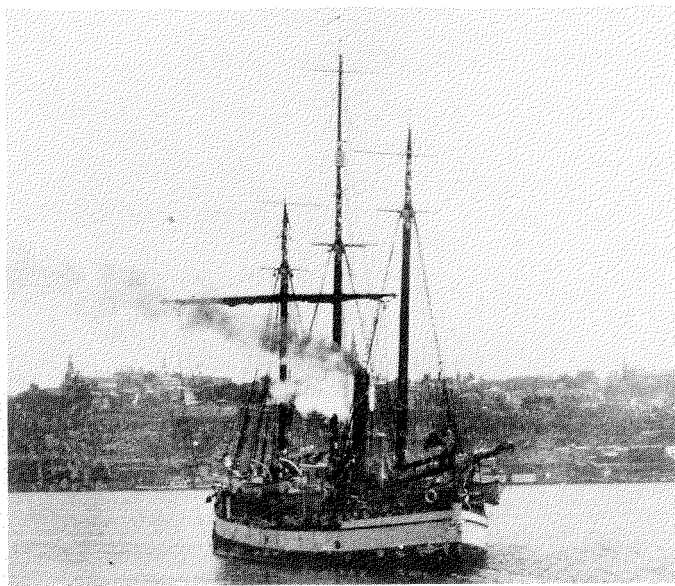
All during her ownership by the Canadian government, the *Arctic* was popularly thought of as Bernier's, but a decade elapsed when he had nothing to do with her. In 1912, when he had left the service of the government to engage in a private gold-hunting and fur-trading venture around Pond Inlet, Baffin Island, with a smaller vessel of his own, the *Arctic* was taken by another master on a four-month government scientific cruise to Hudson Bay. Subsequently, until after World War I, she was unromantically used as a floating lighthouse on the lower reaches of the St. Lawrence River.

In 1922 the *Arctic* was refurbished for the first of a series of annual government expeditions to the Eastern Arctic Archipelago. Bernier, who had found no Baffin gold and was now 70 years old, was glad to be placed in charge of his old ship again.

The tasks of the expeditions were to maintain sovereignty among the arctic islands (showing the flag, as it were), establish new posts of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and reprovision and rotate the men at existing ones, see to the health and welfare of the resident Inuit, and conduct scientific investigations.

The ship's loading and departure point was at King's Wharf, Quebec City. Bernier, bald and rosy-cheeked, with a white mustache, was below medium height, broad-shouldered and overweight, but still fit and eager. He stood proudly on the bridge conversing in French or English with well-wishers and giving orders to his French-Canadian officers and men.

The 1922 voyage was highlighted by the establishing of a Royal Canadian Mounted Police detachment at Craig Harbour



The C.G.S. *Arctic* in 1924. Photograph by O.S. Finnie.



Photograph by Roy Tash.

on the south coast of Ellesmere Island. The 1923 voyage was carried out successfully. But that of 1924 nearly ended in disaster. The *Arctic*, northward bound, was struck by a fierce storm off the coast of Labrador and would have foundered had it not been for the desperate efforts of all hands in jettisoning deck cargo and manning hand pumps and bucket lines. After nearly a week the storm subsided and the battered vessel continued on her way.

A supply depot was placed as far north as Cape Sabine, Ellesmere Island, for the support of patrols from Craig Harbour, 240 km to the south, and a new police detachment was set up at Dundas Harbour, Devon Island.

On her 1925 voyage the *Arctic* spent a fortnight trapped in ice off Cumberland Sound, Baffin Island, but managed to get as far north as Cape Sabine to restock the R.C.M.P. depot there. Despite repeated mishaps and breakdowns she completed her rounds, with stops at outposts and settlements on Ellesmere, Devon, and Baffin islands. After more than three months, bruised and leaking, the *Arctic* docked at Québec City.

With no regard for her worth as a historical relic, the *Arctic* was condemned and sold for \$9,000 to the Hudson's Bay Company, which dismantled her. Her stripped hull, too tough to be broken up, was towed across the river to a sandbar near the Levis shore and abandoned there within sight of Bernier's home, as though to taunt him. Today, all that remains of the

Arctic is her bell, which is displayed at the Bernier Maritime Museum in L'Islet.

In 1927 Bernier commanded two tugs towing a dredge and steel scow from Halifax to the Hudson Bay port of Churchill. That same year he was granted a government pension of \$2,400 annually, plus a medal, rewarding him for what he had done to strengthen Canada's title to arctic islands whose potential value was still beyond anyone's dreams — except perhaps his own.

On December 26, 1934, at the age of 82, Joseph Elzéar Bernier died. Despite having been thwarted in his early ambition of going to the North Pole or through the Northwest Passage, he had earned a niche in the history of Canadian arctic exploration.

FURTHER READINGS

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Richard S. Finnie
 28 Eucalyptus Road
 Belvedere, California 94920
 U.S.A.