

Of Maps and Men: In Pursuit of a Northwest Passage

Introduction

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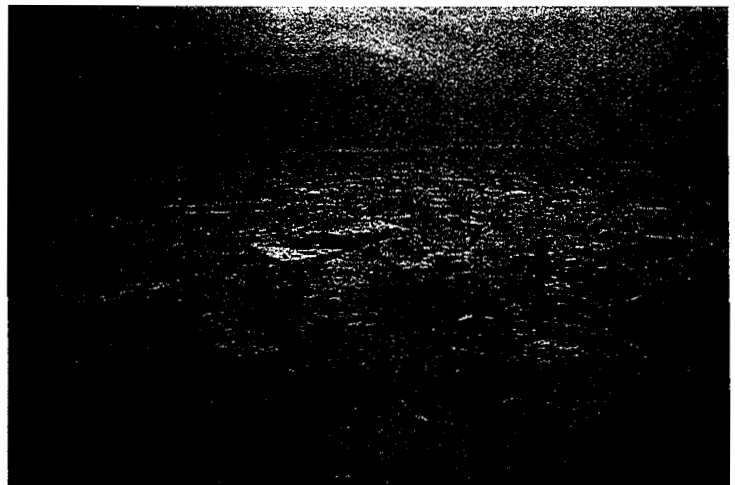
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Whenever the pious English whaling captain and arctic natural philosopher William Scoresby Jr. surveyed the circumambient ice from the bridge of his stout ship *Resolution*, he made certain to mistrust his eyes. More than a decade of annual cruises to the pack-ice edge of the polar cap in search of fat *Balaena mysticetus* had taught him to treat the world north of 70 degrees as a theater of deceptions, a place where the numbed sensorium might have to ride out Miltonic fantasies. For instance, roaming off the frigid rocks of Spitsbergen on the sixteenth of July 1814, Scoresby squinted at a desolate coastline which refused to lie still, as an uninhabited land should:

Presently, the scene was changed; the mountains along the whole coast, assumed the most fantastic forms; the appearance of castles with lofty spires, towers and battlements, would, in a few minutes, be converted into a vast arch or romantic bridge. These varied and sometimes beautiful metamorphoses, naturally suggested the reality of fairy descriptions; for the air was perfectly transparent, the contrast of snow and rocks was quite distinct, even in the substance of the most uncommon phantasms, though examined with a powerful telescope, and every object seemed to possess every possible stability.¹

Such apparitions demanded a mind that anchored itself in dispassionate metrical observations, a cool spirit prepared to collapse pixie palaces into the laws of atmospheric refraction: Treating the incident under the heading “Atmospherology,” Scoresby explained that this strange phenomenon (known to sailors as “looming”) had to be the product of peculiar conditions in the cold Arctic air. Though his telescope could not dispel the illusion, Scoresby could deploy his other instruments to get a “fix” on a swirling geography: He used his sextant to measure how high the apparitions exceeded the natural dimensions of the coast (four minutes of altitude), recorded the barometric pressure and temperature, and carefully determined his exact coordinates of latitude and longitude, nailing the bobbing ship to a stable point on his chart, even as the very hills danced in plain view.

If looming captured the funhouse recalcitrance of polar environments—their resistance to the niceties of human navigation and cartographic representation—another Arctic apparition offered a providential consolation: When the angle of the low sun struck just right, a boat facing another endless labyrinth of drift ice, bergs, sludge, and floes could suddenly be graced with the nautical equivalent of the pillars of smoke and fire that guided the Israelites in the desert:



Ice conditions in Victoria Strait (August 2003)

The *ice-blink* consists in a stratum of a lucid whiteness, which appears over ice in that part of the atmosphere adjoining the horizon . . . Hence, when the ice-blink occurs under the most favorable circumstances, it affords to the eye a beautiful and perfect map of the ice, twenty or thirty miles beyond the limit of direct vision . . .²

¹ Scoresby, *An Account of the Arctic Regions* (London: Constable, 1820), vol. 1, p. 386.

² *Ibid.*, p. 300.

The experienced navigator, plotting his route, could read this heavenly map for fine details, distinguishing the thickness and quality of the different ice patches ahead, how they were moving, and whether land lay beneath them. An animated cartography of motile coastlines swimming on eddies far beyond the horizon—all this projected into the sky like a celestial vision; there could be no denying it, the Arctic was a very curious place to get around.

No one knew this better than the parade of explorers whose expeditions are represented in this exhibition of Arctic cartography, which traces the history of efforts to find a northern sea route from the Atlantic to the Pacific, a coveted “back route” to that vast ocean of teeming markets and precious goods that preoccupied Europeans (in changing ways) throughout the modern period. From the sixteenth-century voyages of Frobisher and Davis to the Victorian dramas of Franklin and McClure, the frozen archipelago between what has come to be called the “Beaufort Sea” (north of Alaska) and the western coast of Greenland swallowed ships, men, and their ambition to pass over the Americas and sail to China. At the same time, the region served as the stage for a set of remarkable cross-cultural encounters, encounters with durable legacies for explorers themselves and for the Inuit peoples who called this forbidding zone their home.



Ice breaking in fog, Prince Regent Inlet (August 2003)

The many differences remains a worthy meditative exercise, particularly in a gallery of maps illustrating the history of exploration. After all, the pleasure afforded by such a gallery is precisely the “bird’s eye view” that affords of geographical progress, of the unfolding of the territory, of the landforms and sea lanes materializing out of the nebulae of cartographic whitespace or coalescing into their proper shapes out of the unstable tracings of imagination and desire. The seductions of such a sequence can easily cause us to forget that lines on paper are not sightlines, that explorers do not travel on foolscap, that a winking smudge in the clouds can be more important to negotiating the unknown than all of the atlases of Arrowsmith.

Explorers seldom forgot. But they were, of course, responsible for making the maps that would make it easy for others to do so. This makes explorers’ maps particularly interesting documents, since they are the product of an intimate, immediate, and tactile experience of places, even as they function to eliminate the contingencies and particularities of exactly such an experience. In places (certain topographic locations, certain points on actual maps) this tension leaves marks: route lines, ribs, dotted intimations, cairns, annotated dates, even hasty graves. Keep an eye out for such details on the maps shown here.

At the poles in particular, as Scoresby’s remarks make clear, cartography was a peculiarly sketchy business. Putting aside the often-brutal conditions and the toll they took on instruments and observers alike, putting aside the tricks of tongue and eye in the dead-frozen air, there was still always the deeper problem that this was a land of ice (thick ice and thin, glacial ice and drifting howlers, plates and slurries and pancakes of ice), and ice—unlike good, solid earth or a nice, rocky coast—melts away, floats away, stacks up where it hasn’t last year, and generally makes a mess of the whole business of making maps, which are, after all, snapshots of places at a given moment (a limitation that generally doesn’t matter much when one is tracing the firm contours of *terra firma*). So exasperating was this kind of swirling “landscape” that the American antarctic explorer, Charles Wilkes, pressing the edge of the ice shelves of the southern continent in 1840, even

experimented with making his officers “survey” the water to produce continuously changing charts of his ship’s position with respect to drifting icebergs. The effort was exhausting, and not successful.

Of the roster of northbound hopefuls and their fates John Delaney writes at greater length in the pages that follow, and since he tells his story with maps—those powerful and often beautiful devices by which the furtive, slovenly, and mercurial world is made to stand at our attention—we do well to begin here by reminding ourselves of Captain Scoresby’s view over Arctic ice, a view rocked by swell, guided by blinks, teased by looming, a view, in sum, deeply unlike that afforded by the sculpted geometry of the elegant maps in this exhibition.

Whether they eyed the horizon line or sat in the library of the Royal Geographical Society, those who sought the Northwest Passage drew and used maps, and the public who followed the craze for polar exploring in the nineteenth century traced the fates of their heroes on cartographic inserts in the daily papers. John Delaney’s selection from the holdings of Firestone Library provides an excellent opportunity to think about how these very different maps came into being, the diverse arguments they made, and the many uses to which they were put.

Like good maps they lie still on the page. But if we squint at them with an active eye, they can blink and loom—like that white world they depict.

That maps (for all the persuasive power of the plain portrait they offer) are emphatically not what places actually look like is perhaps terribly obvious. But the careful enumeration of

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The Smoking Hills, near Cape Bathurst in Amundsen Gulf (August 2003)

—D.G.B.