Beaufort Gyre Exploration Project: Northeast Passage

Farthest North (1850s-1870s)

Although the aim of Kane's 1853-1855 expedition was to search for Franklin, there is suspicion that he had a greater interest in finding a route to the North Pole. He ended up surveying a narrow channel between Greenland and Ellsmere Island. The ship's surgeon from Kane's expedition, Isaac Israel Hayes, launched another expedition to the Pole by the same route in 1860, but added few new discoveries. Charles Francis Hall also took the Kane Basin approach in 1871, but after easily passing through Kane Basin and Kennedy Channel and on the very edge of the Arctic Ocean, Hall fell suddenly ill and died.

The theory of an 'Open Polar Sea' was revived in the 1850s by the eminent German geographer August Petermann. Petermann rejected the Kane Basin approach, leading to the German North Polar Expeditions in 1868 and 1869 along northeast Greenland, which were led by Karl Koldewey. Later, Petersen organized Austro-Hungarian (because Germany was at war with France) expeditions in the northern Barents Sea, which were led by Karl Weyprecht and Julius von Payer, and discovered the Franz Josef Land archipelago in 1873.

Sherard Osborn was the impetus for the British Arctic Expedition from 1875 to 1876. It was led by George Strong Nares, and attained the highest latitude for a ship, reaching the very shores of the Arctic Ocean at 82°28'N. A polar sledge party led by Albert Hastings Markham proceeded farther north manhauling sledges across the pack ice, but fell well short of the Pole.

References:

Berton, P., The Arctic Grail: The Quest for the Northwest Passage and the North Pole, 1818-1909, Viking Penguin, New York, 672 pp., 1988.

Holland, C., ed., Farthest North: The Quest for the North Pole, Carroll & Graf Publishers, New York, 311 pp., 1994.

The Opening of the Northeast Passage (1878-1879)

Backed by the king of Sweden and two businessmen, Nils Nordenskjöld took the Vega from Göteborg, along the coast of Siberia, and despite the ice packs, got to 180° longitude by early September. Frozen in for the winter, Nordenskjöld waited and bartered with the local Chukchi people. The following July, the Vega was freed from the ice, and continued to Yokohama, Japan. Nordenskjöld was decorated and received allocations from around the world for this achievement. When the Vega reached Stockholm on April 24, King Oscar declared it a national holiday.

Reference:

Imbert, B., North Pole, South Pole: Journeys to the Ends of the Earth, Harry N. Abrams, Publishers, New York, 192 pp., 1992.

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