

Edward Belcher (1799-1877)

Prominent in the important but routine survey work undertaken by the British Navy around the globe after the Napoleonic wars, a spectacular failure as an arctic explorer, and most unpopular officer in the fleet, Sir Edward Belcher remains today in relative, perhaps deserved, obscurity.

Descended from a prominent New England family, Belcher was born in Nova Scotia in 1799, entered the Royal Navy in 1812, and after service in the Mediterranean was made lieutenant in 1818. From 1826 to 1828 he was assistant surveyor under Captain William Beechey on the voyage of H.M.S. *Blossom* to Bering Strait, with the aim, nearly achieved, of connecting with Franklin's explorations.

Made commander in 1829, Belcher was employed on the west and north coasts of Africa, and then on the home survey, principally in the Irish Sea. His *Treatise on Nautical Surveying* (1835) was a standard reference for many years.

In February 1837, he replaced the ailing Captain Beechey on a survey of the Pacific Coast. Taking command at Panama of H.M.S. *Sulphur* and *Starling*, he sailed to the Sandwich (Hawaiian) Islands, thence to Prince William Sound and along the south coasts of Russian America (Alaska), and from there south to San Francisco and again to waters off Central America. In 1839 he retraced the same route. During the two voyages he surveyed many ports and islands, fixed the position of Mount St. Elias, and made the first scientific survey of Nootka Sound, settling questions outstanding since the voyages of Cook and Vancouver. However, these achievements were marred by Belcher's consistent "bad temper, caprice, and malice", which made him detested by his officers and men. Ordered home by way of the Far East, Belcher returned to England in July 1842, where he was knighted and published his *Narrative of a Voyage Round the World*.

In 1852, in spite of his poor reputation as a commander and his lack of experience handling vessels in ice, Belcher was placed in charge of the largest in the series of expeditions which the British government sent out to seek Sir John Franklin. Five ships were given him for the task: the *Assistance* (Belcher, and Commander G.N. Richards), the steam tender *Pioneer* (Osborn), the *Resolute* (Kellett), the *Intrepid* (M'Clintock), and the *North Star* (Pullen).

Leaving the *North Star* at Beechey Island as a base, Belcher sent the *Resolute* and the *Intrepid* westward to Melville Island, while he took the *Assistance* and *Pioneer* northward up to Wellington Channel. As it turned out, they were too far north to find traces of Franklin, but Belcher and Osborn discovered Belcher Channel, explored the north coast of Bathurst Island, and Belcher himself discovered and visited North Cornwall Island. Belcher and Osborn spent the winter of 1852-1853 in Northumberland Sound, while the *Resolute* and the *Intrepid*, under Kellett, wintered at Melville Island. In the course of long sledge

expeditions, Kellett and his men completed the exploration of Melville and Prince Patrick islands, and found and rescued the men of a previous expedition on the *Investigator* (McClure), locked in the ice of Mercy Bay.

In the summer of 1853, both divisions failed to extricate themselves, so had to spend a second winter in the ice. By the summer of 1854, Belcher had had enough. Convinced of the impossibility of getting free, unwilling to risk yet a third winter, he disregarded the protests of his subordinates, and ordered the four ships to be abandoned. He and his men made it to the base vessel *North Star*, and in August set out on the return voyage to England.

Court-martialled, Belcher was able to prove that he had acted within his orders. Eager though his men were to chance getting out some of the ships, there was no certainty that this would have occurred. The party would have been threatened by food shortage during another winter, and the Admiralty might have had to organize yet another rescue operation. He was cleared, but his sword was handed back to him in silence. Although he hastened into print with a new book, *The Last of the Arctic Voyages*, largely an attempt to justify his decision, he was thereafter looked upon throughout the navy as incompetent, "the very worst man who could have been chosen for the task."

There was a unique postscript to the affair, justifying Belcher's detractors. H.M.S. *Resolute* started to move. Carried southward by the ice, she broke free, and drifted 1200 miles out to Davis Strait, where she was picked up, unscathed, in September 1855 by Captain Buddington of the American whaler *George Henry*. On the prompting of American friends of Lady Franklin, Congress voted \$40,000 for purchase of the vessel, re-equipped her for arctic service, and offered her to the British Admiralty as a gift, in the hope that she would be sent out in a final search for Franklin. The vessel was accepted, but was never recommissioned.

Nor was Belcher ever employed again, although through seniority he rose in rank until he was made admiral, in 1872. He passed his remaining years in literary and scientific amusements, and died on 18 March 1877.

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Portrait courtesy of National Portrait Gallery, London

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