

## Robert J.L. McClure (1807-1873)

Robert John LeMesurier McClure was born of Anglo-Irish gentry in 1807. He joined the Navy at the advanced age of 16 and for many years missed promotion. In 1836-1837 he was mate on George Back's *Terror* cruise in Hudson Bay and came back well initiated in the dangers of pack ice. He was immediately promoted lieutenant and given service on the Canadian Great Lakes at that time of political disturbance. After years of obscurity, he was made first lieutenant of the *Enterprise*, in which James Ross was leading the first Franklin rescue expedition. McClure gained no credit on this almost abortive cruise, as ill health barred him from major sledge journeys, and when Ross was disabled, Second Lieutenant McClintock was given temporary charge of the ship. These frustrations are some excuse for the unscrupulous greed with which he was later to grasp at a monopoly of honour and success. On his return to England, McClure was made commander and appointed to the *Investigator*, which was to second Captain Richard Collinson of the *Enterprise* in a voyage by way of South America and Bering Strait to search the western Arctic.

The two ships sailed 20 January 1850 and at once encountered foul weather and loss of time in keeping company. Collinson gave orders to sail independently to a rendezvous off Alaska. McClure became obsessed with the fear that in his speedier vessels his chief would arrive first at the rendezvous, take the lookout ship there stationed with him into the ice, and leave his junior to a passive role in Bering Strait. In fact, Collinson waited and saw his consort tugged through Magellan Strait. In the storms of the South Pacific, the ships parted for the last time. McClure arrived in Honolulu on 1 July to find that the *Enterprise* had taken supplies and sailed the previous day.

Collinson had intended to reach the Arctic by making a wide sweep around the Aleutians; McClure now resolved to halve the distance by striking straight through the uncharted and fog-bound island chain. He surmounted the dangers — found to be real enough — and contacted the lookout *Plover* weeks ahead of his commodore's ship. For a moment he was his own master, for in giving him orders Collinson had not contemplated this early arrival of the sluggish *Investigator*. Disregarding the advice of his superior, Captain Kellett, who was cruising in those waters but who refrained from giving a positive order, McClure plunged straightway into the Arctic. He saw the opportunity of being beforehand in the rescue and, not improbably, of completing the still undiscovered Northwest Passage. By good fortune he carried with him two industrious diarists — his surgeon, Alexander Armstrong, and J.A. Miertsching, a Moravian missionary enlisted as Eskimo interpreter — as well as the gifted water-colour artist Lieutenant S.G. Cresswell.

Confined near the shore by the pack and calling at Eskimo camps, McClure sailed past the Mackenzie River hundreds of miles to the east until at Cape Parry he was shouldered north by ice and made the lucky discovery of Prince of Wales Strait, separating Victoria and Banks islands and the last link in the passage sought. Ascending this almost to its outlet, he was caught by gale and tide and swept back to the narrows of the strait, where the ship was almost wrecked in the churning pack. When it froze solid, McClure took a sledge crew to its northern outlet on Parry's Viscount Melville Sound and linked their joint discoveries into one continuous Northwest Passage.

In the spring, sledge parties mapped much of the shore of Banks and Victoria islands without finding a trace of Franklin's lost crews. Weeks failed to get the ship into the dense pack of Viscount Melville Sound. The proper course was then to return with his valuable report by the way he had come, but McClure, obsessed with the glory of navigating the passage, attempted the circuit of Banks Island to enter the sound from the west. Off the island's northwest angle, a coast "without parallel for the dangers of its navigation," the ship was pinned to the shore by ice for three weeks and almost hurled on the beach by a gale that left her crew speechless and trembling. Released, she made an adventurous run down the northeast shore, was almost wrecked on a sandbar, and took refuge in the Bay of God's Mercy on 24 September 1851. In the spring McClure crossed the sound and cached his report on the Melville Island shore.

That report was instrumental to their survival. After caching the message, they were ice-imprisoned in the same bay for a second winter. Supplies were nearing exhaustion; on half-rations for more than a year, many men grew shrunken, haggard, and tottering. McClure's desperate scheme of detaching them for a foot journey to the continent was averted by the arrival of Lieutenant Pim with word that two rescue vessels awaited them on Melville Island. Their commander, Captain Kellett, ordered the *Investigator* to be abandoned. Her men trekked across the sound, some carried on sledges all enfeebled. Early on the return voyage, the luckless fellows were frozen in at Barrow Strait for a fourth winter and reached England on 1 October 1854, after an absence of four years and nine months, having traversed the passage on three different ships, with two intermediate tramps over frozen seas.

Despite an unofficial statement that the Admiralty were displeased at irresponsibility that had almost caused a second Franklin disaster, McClure was knighted and a House of Commons committee convened to consider a generous reward for the discovery of the passage and the propriety of granting a portion of the bounty to the rescue ships of Kellett. With ingratitude and gross lack of candour, McClure testified that he could have saved his crew without Kellett's aid and secured



Portrait from National Portrait Gallery, London.

the entire bounty of £10 000 for his own ship. He was later employed on the China station and died in 1873 a vice-admiral.

An estimate may be formed from his own conduct and the statements of Armstrong and Miertsching. Of his courage, overabundant enterprise, and fortitude in crisis there is no doubt. He was selfish, greedy of fame, and reserved and aloof with naval subordinates, but the civilian Miertsching found him hospitable and sympathetic. Apart from merit, his amazing cruise makes him absolutely unique. He has added an imperishable chapter to the history of Canadian exploration, and in varied adventure and intensity of frequent peril, McClure has matched the fabled voyagers of antiquity.

#### FURTHER READINGS

- ARMSTRONG, ALEXANDER, M.D. 1857. *A Personal Narrative of the Discovery of the North-West Passage*. London: Hurst & Blackett.
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