

William Edward Parry (1790-1855)



Photo courtesy of Ann Parry. Engraved by H. Adlard after the original portrait by George Richmond, 1842.

Edward Parry, British admiral and arctic explorer, was born on 19 December 1790, the son of a fashionable doctor at Bath. He joined the Navy in 1803, serving at the blockade of Brest and in the American War of 1812. He became an accomplished navigator and surveyor and published a little book on nautical astronomy. He was at home on half-pay when appointed second-in-command of John Ross's 1818 expedition to Davis Strait: he spent the best part of the next decade in the Arctic.

Through the influence of John Barrow, ships and men left idle by the end of the Napoleonic Wars were engaged to seek a commercially viable Northwest Passage — a quest already 300 years old. This first expedition in two small ships, *Isabella* and *Alexander*, was disappointing, for Ross returned home to report that Lancaster Sound was landlocked. Some of his officers disagreed, Barrow remained unconvinced, and in the following year Parry, still only a lieutenant, was given command of a further expedition with the same objective.

This expedition of 1819-20 set the pattern for arctic exploration for a generation. Parry, in the sturdy bomb-vessel *Hecla* with the smaller *Griper* as consort, sailed through Lancaster Sound and westward as far as 112°51'W, thus winning the £5000 prize offered by Parliament for the first ship to pass 110°W within the Arctic Circle. He wintered at Melville Island, hoping to continue westward in the new season, but he was frustrated by pack ice. This was the first time ships of the Royal Navy had wintered in the Arctic, although whalers had sometimes spent the winter trapped in the ice of Davis Strait, and Parry's meticulous care of his men ensured that all came through safely. The expedition returned home with a mass of scientific data and aroused great popular enthusiasm. John Franklin's first overland expedition was ancillary to Parry's voyage.

In Parry's three major arctic voyages, many problems of northern exploration — health, clothing, boredom in the long winter nights — were solved. Among other things, he experimented with tinned food, to which he erroneously attributed anti-scorbutic properties, with Mr. Mackintosh's waterproof canvas, and with Mr. Sylvester's patent stove, which warmed the ship throughout by means of flues. He taught the men to read and write, and he put on plays for their entertainment. Several of the midshipmen who sailed with Parry — notably James Clark Ross, Francis Crozier, and Edward Bird — later became famous explorers themselves, having learnt their skills in "Parry's School".

His so-called "second voyage" of 1821-23 via Hudson Strait, the most arduous of all, and his "third voyage" of 1824-25, again via Lancaster Sound, added much to the map of the Canadian Arctic, but were less successful in their prime object of "going west". The latter nearly ended in disaster when *Fury* was wrecked in Prince Regent Inlet; both crews immediately returned to England in *Hecla*. Parry's misfortune proved the salvation of John Ross's 1829 expedition, however, for Ross's party lived off the stores of the abandoned *Fury* after Ross had a similar mishap.

In 1827, Parry made one more arctic voyage, over the ice from Spitsbergen in an attempt to reach the North Pole. He failed, of course, but his "farthest north" (82°43'32"N) stood for nearly 50 years.

Incredible as it now seems, Parry had since 1823 concurrently held the post of Hydrographer of the Navy, nominally supervising the preparation of all Admiralty charts. He had been advanced to Post Captain in 1821, married Isabella Stanley in 1826, and was knighted in 1829. In that year, he accepted an offer to go to Australia as Commissioner of the Australian Agricultural Company, a joint stock company holding a million acres of land in New South Wales from the Crown. Setting the company's affairs in order proved an interesting but difficult and thankless task.

After his return from Australia, Parry successively held the posts of Comptroller of Steam Machinery, just at the time the Navy reluctantly turned to steam as an auxiliary source of power; Captain Superintendent of the Naval Hospital at Haslar; and, upon getting his flag in 1853, Lieutenant Governor of Greenwich Hospital for naval pensioners. He took a leading part in organizing a search for his old friend John Franklin, a massive search that, years after Parry's death in July 1855, ultimately revealed the pattern of islands in the Canadian Arctic and set at rest forever the question of a Northwest Passage. He was survived by his second wife, Catherine Hankinson, and by six of his 13 children.

Contemporaries speak of Sir Edward Parry as tall and strikingly handsome. He was a fervent, cheerful, evangelical Christian. Sir Clements Markham, in his book *The Lands of Silence*, called him "the beau ideal of an Arctic officer."

FURTHER READINGS

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- PARRY, WILLIAM EDWARD. 1821. *Journal of a Voyage for the Discovery of a North-West Passage, 1819-20*. London: John Murray. [The journals of Parry's subsequent voyages were also published by John Murray.]

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