

James Clark Ross (1800-1862)

James Ross took part in more arctic voyages than any other officer of the period. He is less celebrated than some because the only northern expedition he commanded — a fruitless search for John Franklin — was unjustly damaging to his reputation. He was, nevertheless, a trusted officer on all the W.E. Parry expeditions to the Arctic. Under John Ross, he discovered the North Magnetic Pole and helped transform the seagoing polar traveller into an amphibian by using the Eskimo sledge for long land journeys. He is remembered chiefly for his voyage to the Antarctic (1839-1843).

James Ross was the nephew of the explorer John Ross. The younger Ross was enrolled by his uncle in a search for the Northwest Passage with the ships *Isabella* and *Alexander*, the latter commanded by W.E. Parry. James Ross had a flair for science and was employed in recording the magnetic observations taken by Captain Sabine. In this capacity, he was later called upon to testify regarding his uncle's alleged misappropriation of Sabine's findings.

The Admiralty, dissatisfied with John Ross's report on Lancaster Sound, sent Parry to correct it. Parry chose James Ross as one of his officers on this and three successive arctic voyages. On this first (1819-20), Ross accompanied his chief through Lancaster Sound to Melville Island. On the second (1821-23), Parry entered Hudson Strait and discovered but failed to penetrate the ice-choked Fury and Hecla Strait. Ross and others, however, did learn the art of sledge travel from the Eskimos. The third voyage (1824-25) failed when the *Fury* was wrecked. Parry cached her stores — which would later save the lives of John and James Ross — at Fury Beach in Regent's Inlet. In 1827 Ross sailed on his fourth voyage with Parry. From Spitsbergen, they made for the North Pole with two boats that were convertible into sledges, but were turned back at 82°45'N.

On all these voyages Ross proved invaluable in the tasks of scientific research, especially geomagnetism. Hence, in 1829 when John Ross set out on his single-ship search for the passage, he chose his nephew James as second-in-command. Their ship, the *Victory*, was frozen in at the bottom of Regent's Inlet, where her crew remained for the years 1829-1832.

The important geographical discoveries of that expedition belong to James Ross, who made extensive use of the Eskimo sledge. In 1830 he crossed Boothia Isthmus and an arm of the sea to discover King William Land. He failed to realize that it was an island, being unable to distinguish between low-lying flat land and snow-covered frozen sea, a failure that may have contributed to the Franklin disaster 16 years later. Ross continued past Cape Felix and built a cairn at Point Victory to mark his "farthest"; in 1848 Franklin's crews abandoned their ice-bound ships within sight of that point. In 1831 James Ross assured himself of fame by arriving at the North Magnetic Pole, near the west shore of Boothia. In the following year, their ship still ice-bound, the men were reduced to the desperate expedient of escaping on foot and by boat. They tramped 200 miles to Fury Beach, repaired the boats found

there, and sailed to Lancaster Sound. But the sound was ice-bound, and after a weary vigil, the crew returned to Fury Beach for a fourth winter in the Arctic. In the summer of 1833 they were more fortunate and were carried back to England by a whaler.

Between 1839 and 1843 James Ross commanded the *Erebus* and *Terror* on a search for the South Magnetic Pole, which proved to be inland and inaccessible. But in the Ross ice-sheet he found a gate of entry into the new continent much used by later discoverers. On their return the two ships were fitted with auxiliary steam power for an attempt on the Northwest Passage. Ross declined the command, which was given to the aging John Franklin. Three years later, Ross took command of the *Enterprise* and *Investigator* to attempt to rescue the lost explorer.

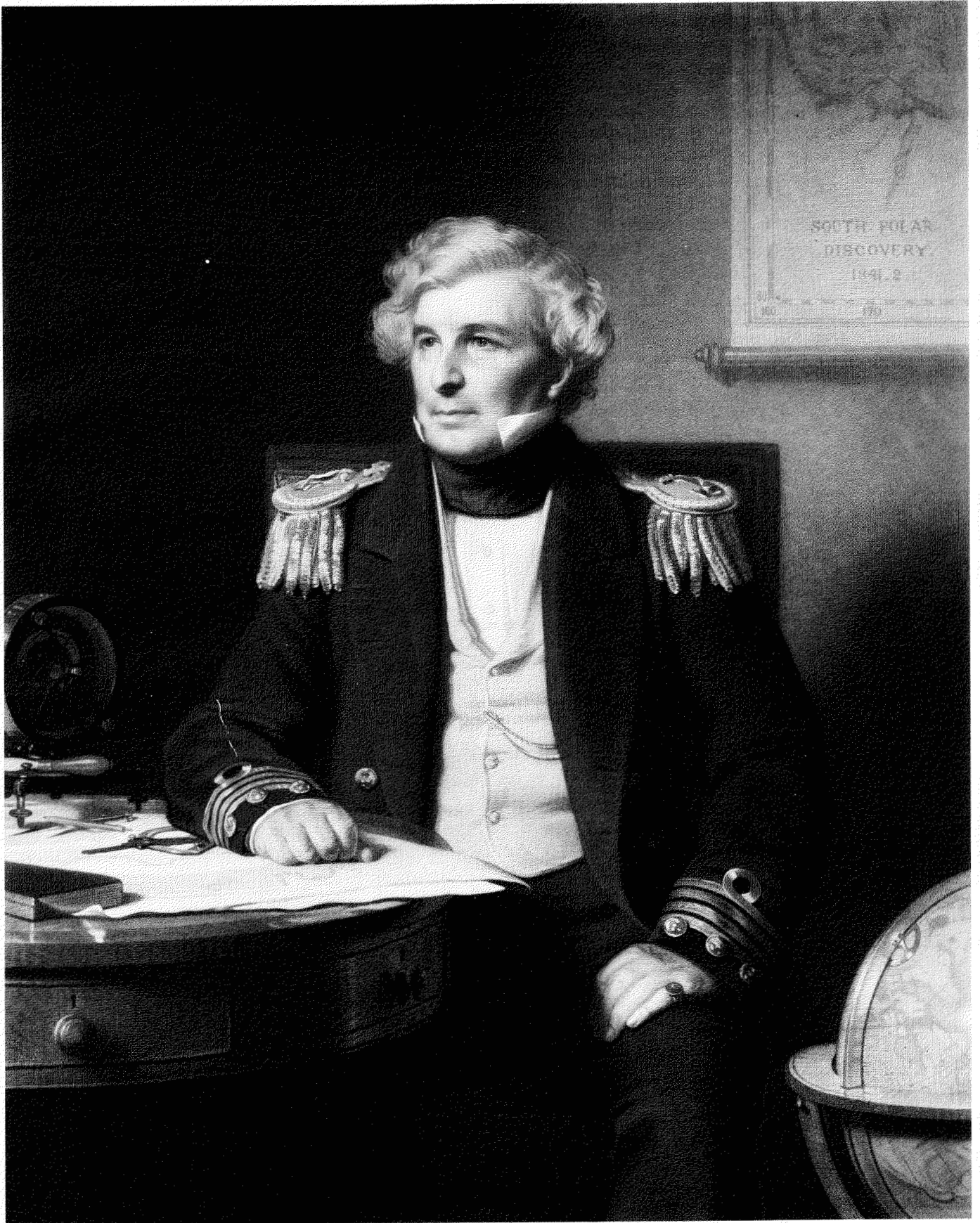
With a touch of inspiration, Ross enlisted as junior lieutenant Leopold McClintock, nearly 30 and without polar experience. The ships were frozen in at Port Leopold on Somerset Island. Ross, in poor health that winter, fell short of Parry in his care for the crew, and when he and McClintock sledged into Peel Sound, the party broke down from insufficient rations. This excursion prompted McClintock to make the improvements in sledging practice that permitted him to make land journeys of unprecedented length. In all, seven members of the expedition died from scurvy and over-exertion, and when the ships finally freed themselves from the ice and returned to England, Ross was given a shabby reception, whereas chance and weather were chiefly to blame.

James Ross is less known than some of his polar contemporaries. Five of his six arctic voyages were made in a subordinate rank. His only published book concerns his Antarctic journey. Unlike his uncle, Ross was not given to self-advertisement or to wrangling with his critics. His services to Canadian geography are many, however, and not the least is his employment in the arctic service of the man destined to unravel the Franklin mystery, Leopold McClintock.

FURTHER READINGS

- PARRY, WILLIAM EDWARD. 1819. *Journal of a Voyage for the Discovery of a North-West Passage, 1819-20*. London: John Murray.
 ROSS, JOHN. 1819. *A Voyage of Discovery*. London: John Murray.
 ———. 1835. *Narrative of a Second Voyage in Search of a North-West Passage*. London: A.W. Webster.

L.H. Neatby
 1610 - 1223 Temperance Street
 Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada
 S7N 0P2



Sir James Clark Ross, mezzotint by A. Scott after Stephen Pearce. From Arctic Institute collection (UC 170137).