

George Strong Nares (1831-1915)



Photo courtesy of the National Maritime Museum, London.

George Strong Nares, born in 1831, was the son of a naval officer and himself joined the Royal Navy at the age of 14. From 1848 to 1851 he sailed in H.M.S. *Havannah* in Australian waters. On his return, while waiting at the Admiralty in the hope of employment, he met G.H. Richards, who had been with them on the homeward voyage after taking part in the *Acheron's* survey of New Zealand. Richards promised to recommend him for the forthcoming expedition to search for John Franklin and his men. In 1852 Nares sailed for the Arctic in the *Resolute*, under Captain Henry Kellett.

The *Resolute* and the *Intrepid* wintered off Melville Island, and Nares took part in sledge journeys searching unavailingly for traces of the missing ships. Instead they found a message that led to the rescue of McClure and the crew of the *Investigator*, frozen in off Banks Island after passing through the Bering Strait.

Back at home, having been promoted to lieutenant, Nares went on a gunnery course prior to sailing for the Crimea. He was still hoping that the Admiralty would send out another Franklin search expedition so that he could return to the North, not, however, because of the lure of the Arctic, which he described as a "wretched place," but because in a generally peaceful age it offered a chance for promotion. Instead he was selected to assist in setting up training ships for boys and in 1863 took command of the *Boscawen*. His textbook, *Seamanship*, was reprinted many times.

The turning point in Nares's career came in 1865 when he was given command of H.M.S. *Salamander* on the coast of Queensland, work which involved surveying reef-infested waters. This led in 1868 to the command of the survey ship *Newport* in the Mediterranean. Nares was promoted to captain for work in conjunction with the opening of the Suez Canal and in 1871 commissioned to H.M.S. *Shearwater* for service in the Red Sea.

On the outward voyage they carried out studies of water movements in the Strait of Gibraltar for W.B. Carpenter, an eminent biologist, who believed that density differences between water masses played an important part in generating ocean currents. His ideas led to the voyage of H.M.S. *Challenger*, 1872-1876, the first major expedition for the scientific study of the deep oceans. Nares was appointed to command it, but after only two years he was recalled to lead a new arctic expedition.

The British Arctic Expedition of 1875-1876, in H.M. Ships *Alert* and *Discovery*, was inspired by the recurring myth of an open polar sea. They attempted to reach the North Pole by sailing into the Arctic Ocean via Smith Sound, separating Greenland from Ellesmere Island. This proved impossible, but the *Alert* succeeded in reaching Floeberg Beach, in 82°N, on the northeast tip of Ellesmere Island. The following spring, sledging parties set out to explore the nearby lands and to attempt to reach the North Pole over the ice. Disaster struck when an outbreak of scurvy led to several deaths. Scurvy's cause was still not understood, but it had ceased to be a serious problem in the Royal Navy following the introduction of

lemon juice as a preventive in the early 1800s. Unfortunately, less effective lime juice had later been substituted, and in arctic conditions, with little fresh food available, this did not provide sufficient vitamin C. The expedition was forced to withdraw, having achieved a farthest north of 83°20'N.

In the enquiry that followed, Nares was blamed for the outbreak through not ensuring that lime juice was carried on the sledges. It had sometimes been omitted because of the difficulties in storing and administering it at sub-zero temperatures. Some people thought that this was unfair, for scurvy had also broken out in the ships, where some of the victims had never stopped taking lime juice. It was unfortunate for Nares, as the Arctic had appeared healthy compared with the diseases awaiting mariners elsewhere. In the 1850s he had foreseen how future expeditions could be made less arduous by using dogs to replace backpacking or man-hauled sledges, but the snow and ice conditions encountered by the 1875-1876 expedition were very different from those experienced farther south in the Canadian Arctic Archipelago. Their old-fashioned heavy equipment did not help, and dogs were of little use. However, their achievement and the seamanship on which it relied were recognised when Nares was given a knighthood on his return.

Nares spent a further season surveying with the *Alert* in the Magellan Strait, before moving to a post in the Harbour Department at the Board of Trade. He retired in 1896 and died in 1915. He had been elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1875. His wife, Mary Grant, whom he had married in 1858, died in 1905. Two sons entered the Navy, and one, John Dodd Nares, became Assistant Hydrographer.

Nares was the antithesis of the romantic explorer. He did not seek adventure for its own sake, either for himself or for those under him. Exploration for him was a job, which he performed meticulously, but he perhaps suffered from belonging to an organization that by its nature was poorly fitted to respond to the peculiar challenges of travel in an arctic environment and was trapped by a lack of imaginative comprehension that he partly shared.

FURTHER READINGS

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