
Fools for Gold

Module 8 - Akshayuk Pass Expedition





TO THE NORTH

Ray and the team are well into the Akshayuk Pass now, making their way past towering walls of rock, and over terrain tilled by the great hand of glaciers. Would-be explorers, mining knowledge and experience, a gift rarely afforded to prior generations. A gift we are privileged to acknowledge, bequeathed by the wealth and technology of our day.

Indeed, explorers from an earlier age did not have the advantages afforded by our current technology. Global Positioning Systems (GPS) to keep one from getting lost, satellite phones to call for help, and airplanes to come to the rescue. Historically those who traveled to the Arctic were gone for years, and lost to communication until they returned. Many never returned.



Figure 1: Traditional snowshoe (author: katpatuka, wikimedia commons)

What drove people to explore the north: to risk their lives and expose themselves to profound privation? The exploration of the Arctic spans almost 450 years, and continues to this day. While early explorers were looking for spices from China, current exploration is focused on precious resources like oil, diamonds and gold. Caught in the mix has been the Inuit people, and the welfare of those who call the Arctic home has often been overlooked in the drive to explore.

GETTING THERE

The principal means of travel for early explorers was by boat; sailing ships to cross the ocean and freighter canoes to travel inland waterways. As time passed, new technologies were adopted that expanded both the range and speed of travel. Some of these technologies were learned from the local

people, like dog-teams or snowshoes, both of which allow far greater mobility and speed on snow and ice. Others means of transportation were a product of invention, like steam ships, snowmobiles, airplanes, and submarines. As a collective, these modes of transportation have made the Arctic far more accessible, and have had a profound effect on the way of life of the Inuit people.

Table 1: Means of transportation in Arctic Exploration

Year	Explorer	Means of Transportation	Details
1576	Martin Frobisher	Sailboat	First European to explore the Arctic and encounter the Inuit. Mined fool's gold in Frobisher Bay.
1770	Samuel Hearne	Foot	Over a period of 18 months Hearne walked from Churchill Manitoba to Bathurst inlet on the Arctic coast a trip of over 3000 kilometers as the crow flies.
1845	Sir John Franklin	Steam Ship	The Erebus and the Terror, the famous sailing ships taken on the ill-fated Franklin Expedition were each fitted with 20 horsepower steam engines, a first in Arctic exploration.
1845	John Rae	Snowshoes	Among Arctic explorers Rae was known for his prodigious stamina and skill with snowshoes. During one two month period he traveled 1,200 miles on snowshoes.
1871	Charles Francis Hall	Iceberg	The ill-fated Polaris expedition to the north pole ended when 19 crew members abandoned their ship, which was being crushed by ice, for a nearby iceberg. They lived on the iceberg for 6 months traveling 1500 kilometers before being spotted by a passing ship and rescued.
1903	Roald Amundsen	Dog Team	Amundsen learned how to run sled dogs during the winters he spent with the Netsilik Inuit during his journey through the Northwest Passage. He later used dog teams to travel to the South Pole.
1926	Umberto Nobile	Balloon	Nobile was the first person, along with Roald Amundsen to fly a balloon airship over the North Pole.
1926	Richard Byrd	Plane	Byrd is considered to be the first person to fly to the North Pole – although this is disputed.
2007	Russian Federation	Nuclear Submarine	In 2007 the Russian Federation planted a flag in the ocean floor at the North Pole using a nuclear submarine.

MARTIN FROBISHER

Martin Frobisher left England in his sailboat on June 15th 1576 with the intention of finding the Northwest Passage and delivering all the wealth of the Far East to his King and Country. Some two months later he entered the bay in Baffin Island that now bears his name, and thought he was in a strait that separated Asia from North America. He anchored off Kodlunarn Island 120 miles into the 'strait' and there encountered Baffin Island Inuit. Martin Frobisher was the first European to seek out a passage to the Orient through the Arctic, and this was the first documented encounter between the Inuit and foreign explorers.

Although the initial interaction was peaceful, prior to his departure Frobisher abducted an Inuit man, and with some black rock he had collected from the island returned to England and presented his prizes to the financiers who had funded the trip. The unfortunate Inuit captive soon died, but the rocks proved a wondrous bounty when an assayer declared that they contained a rich quantity of gold ore. A second voyage was quickly struck, and Frobisher returned the following summer with a larger ship and crew to mine more of the precious stone. Tensions arose with the local people, there was a battle with three Inuit being killed and once more Frobisher took some captives, two women and a child, and returned them once more as prizes to England. It was only after Frobisher returned from a third expedition the following summer – with fifteen ships, the single largest Arctic Expedition ever mounted before or after – that it was established that the special rock contained no gold at all. It was fool's gold.

Did You Know?

Although the first documented encounter between the Inuit and foreign explorers was the visit of Martin Frobisher, it is known that the Vikings traveled to the Northern waters centuries before, and there is some evidence that early Chinese seafarers may also have visited the region.

THE PASSAGE REALIZED



With Frobisher in financial ruins and the lure of gold gone, once again the focus turned to finding the Northwest Passage. John Davis sailed from England on May 7 1586 on the first of two voyages aimed at discovering the Northwest Passage. On the first trip he had bloody encounters with Inuit in southern Greenland. Like his predecessor Frobisher, he also took an Inuk captive and returned with him to England. It was on his

second voyage in 1587 that Davis became the first recorded white man to enter Cumberland Sound and sail past the present day location of Pangnirtung. Davis recorded



Figure 2: The Northwest Passage. The white signifies areas of year round sea ice (courtesy NASA).

seeing many signs of human activity, but no people.

William Baffin followed Davis by about thirty years and in his pursuit of the Northwest Passage traveled much of the northern aspect of the great Island that now bears his name, and passed the present day location of Qikiqtarjuaq. Thus by the early 17th century the waters that border the Akshayuk Pass had been mapped by Europeans.

Video Link:

The mystery of the Franklin Expedition.

[Part 1](#) [Part 2](#)
[Part 3](#) [Part 4](#)
[Part 5](#) [Part 6](#)

Over the next three hundred years countless expeditions set out to find the Northwest Passage, but without success. Perhaps the most renowned of these voyages was that of Sir John Franklin, who famously vanished and perished with all his men, spawning centuries of speculation about what exactly led to the failure of the expedition.

It was not until 1906 that Roald Amundsen in the sloop Gjoa finally navigated the fabled Northwest Passage. It had taken European explorers 330 years to navigate the Northwest Passage, and when Amundsen finally charted the waters the Oriental Spice trade was a thing of the past.

SEEKING RICHES

There has been continued exploration in the Arctic since Amundsen's fabled voyage, but this has been less about discovering a route than about discovering mineral resources.

Any story about the Arctic is not complete without addressing the role that economics has played and continues to play in the fate of the region. It has long been recognized that the vast and remote domain of the Arctic harbours huge riches in natural resources; natural gas, oil, diamonds, wildlife, to name but a few of the economic opportunities offered by the land. Although the early European explorers did not seek out the Arctic for its inherent riches, they did seek it out for an economic purpose: to find the Northwest Passage to the Orient and the wealth of the Spice Trade. Current exploration continues to focus on the capacity of the arctic to generate wealth.

Consider the two i2P Akshayuk Pass Expedition youth ambassadors that hail from northern Canada. Thomsen D'Hont is from Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, a city established 75 years ago after the discovery of a rich vein of gold in the area. Most of the gold has been extracted but the discovery of diamonds in the region has provided continued prosperity. In

the community of Baker Lake, just 'down the road' from Kathleen Merritt's hometown of Rankin Inlet, Nunavut, they have recently discovered gold, and a mine is soon ready to open there. The prosperity of both territories is firmly tied to their natural resources.

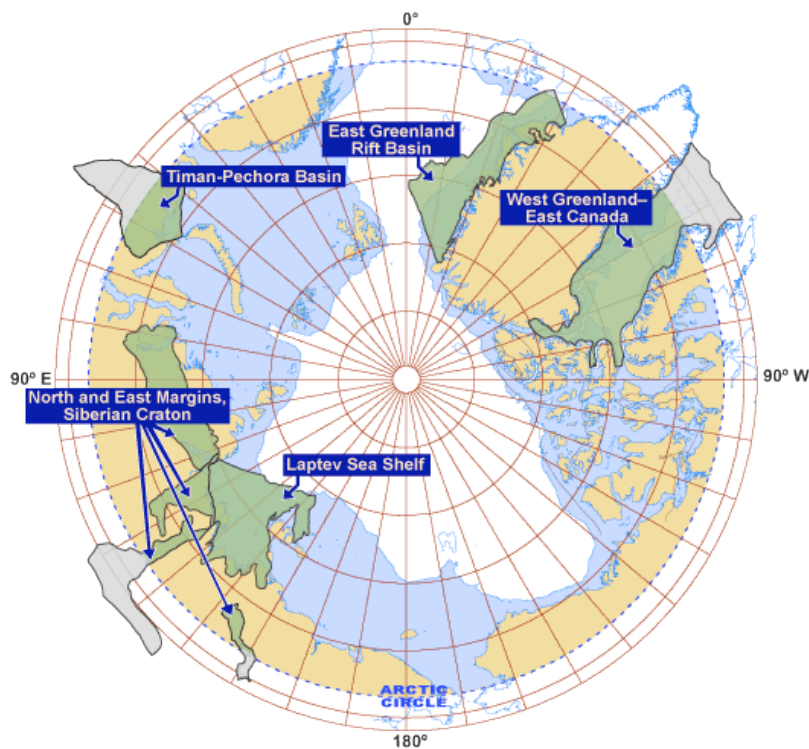


Figure 3: Areas (in green) of presumed Arctic oil and gas reserves that have yet to be exploited. Note that the ocean surrounding the Cumberland Peninsula and the Akshayuk Pass (East Canada) is thought to be rich in oil and gas reserves (courtesy United States Federal Government).

This is not likely to change soon. Consider that the two territories that Thomsen and Kathleen come from have the following combined reserves:

- 1,929,000,000 (trillion) barrels of crude oil;

- 31,400,000,000 (trillion) cubic feet of natural gas.

Given that the total population of the Northwest Territories and Nunavut is 74,000 people, by any measure this is indeed a remarkable amount of energy resources for such a small population.

But history has shown that explorers 'from away' will often seek what resources are there to be taken. Whether it is Martin Frobisher seeking gold or spices and taking local people captive, or modern explorers seeking oil and gas, questions of ownership, autonomy and preservation of the land and culture must be carefully considered.

Profile: Minik Wallace

Book: 'Give Me My Father's Body' by Ken Harper

Perhaps the most tragic story of Inuit abduction is that of Minik Wallace. Minik was a Greenlandic Inuk who was taken to New York City by the American explorer Robert Peary in 1897 at the age of 10. He was taken with his Father and four other Inuit on Peary's ship to New York City, with the promise by Peary that he would return them home in a year laden with the riches of America. What happened was quite the opposite. Peary forgot about them after handing them over to the American Museum of Natural History where they became a 'living display' that visitors to the museum could observe. Lacking natural immunity to common infections, all but Minik soon died and he was left, an orphaned Inuk child from Greenland alone in New York City. The skeletons of those that died, including his father were then put on display in the Museum of Natural History.

Minik spent 12 years in the United States before being repatriated to his home in Greenland at the age of twenty-two. He died in the great Spanish Influenza outbreak of 1918 at the Age of 31, on a return visit to New York.

A final suggestion:

Stories of northern exploration are laden with fascinating personalities, remarkable feats of survival, mystery and intrigue, and horrific and tragic death. If you are a fan of adventure, dipping into the extensive literature on Arctic exploration will provide boundless entertainment.