

Ship frozen in ice, crew gets out alive

Brian Payton. *The Ice Passage: A True Story of Ambition, Disaster and Endurance in the Arctic Wilderness*. Toronto: Doubleday, 2009.

Review by Jim Prentice

The Arctic wilderness is one of the strongest yet most mysterious elements of Canada's national identity. We take pride in our self-image as inhabitants of "the True North strong and free" and embrace — albeit from a safe distance — the starkness and splendour of the country's extreme northern reaches.

Although relatively few Canadians have actually ventured there, issues of national sovereignty and security, climate change and conservation are increasingly casting new attention on the Arctic. Policy that is designed to shape the future, however, must have firm footing in the past. And anyone with an interest in this emerging policy area — and in a fascinating if harsh chapter of Canadian history — should read *The Ice Passage*.

Canadians are by no means the only ones to be captivated by the Arctic, and in fact, the quest for the Northwest Passage in the mid-19th century was never really a Canadian enterprise. It was uniquely British in both its scale and its spirit, and we have inherited this legacy — just as we have inherited the territory itself.

In the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, the British navy reduced its need for sailors to 19,000 from 140,000. That created a "vacuum of purpose" for men, ships and suppliers, sparking an increased interest in such potentially lucrative adventures as the quest for the Northwest Passage from England to the Orient.

Hardship, deprivation and suffering were the norm for these early, often ill-prepared explorations. The best

known of the many Arctic disasters was, of course, the disappearance of Sir John Franklin, his two ships and 128 men during his third expedition in 1845.

In the aftermath of that haunting tragedy, 23 other expeditions embarked on voyages of rescue, often requiring rescue themselves.

The Ice Passage is about one such bungled mission of mercy: HMS *Investigator* became a horror for 58 British seamen after their captain cemented their ship into polar ice for not one but two consecutive winters. Payton's book, the first to seriously examine the documentary records of the voyage between 1850 and 1853, vividly recounts their suffering during those two winters.

The driving force behind the expedition was an Irish captain, Robert McClure, whose arrogance and greed greatly contributed to the disaster. His lack of integrity was further compounded following his eventual rescue by attempts to evade responsibility for the failed mission and to claim a £10,000 prize for the discovery of the Northwest Passage.

If the book has a flaw, it is that Payton doesn't sufficiently examine the motivation, failings and complex personality of McClure. He emerges in the closing chapters as a supremely unlikable person, but there is inadequate analysis of his character and his role during the long, ice-impacted winters.

In the end, *The Ice Passage* is about human spirit in the face of unimaginable suffering.

The *Investigator* and its crew survived the winters of 1850-51 and 1852-53 trapped in the ice off Banks Island. The

harrowing chronicle of that second winter, based on detailed records and journals, is especially difficult to read.

Scurvy had set in and most of the provisions had rotted. Even 140 years later it is difficult to read of deprivation on this level. Payton describes how two emaciated crew members shot a caribou, rushed to the dying animal and pressed their lips to the wound, sucking the warm nutrient-rich blood into their own bodies, as the animal bled to death. Then, ripping open its stomach, they sat alone on the ice and devoured a steaming mass of partially digested forage.

The book has an ending that can only be described as "happy" in the manner of all 19th-century polar excursions, in that almost everyone gets the hell out of there alive.

The crew was rescued by an exploratory party from HMS *Resolute* and HMS *Intrepid* in the spring of 1853. They were ultimately forced to abandon HMS *Investigator* and retreated to HMS *Resolute*. After enduring yet another winter in 1853-54, they finally returned to England on HMS *Northstar*.

This is a book that will heighten your respect for the cruel history of the Canadian Arctic. It will also provide context for both the practical and policy challenges posed by our vast North.

That said, it is a book best read if you are warm and comfortable. When you are finished, you will want nothing more than to put another log on the fire, and stay warm — very warm.

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