

## **Robert McClure**

### **Essay prepared for The Encyclopedia of the Arctic**

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Lt. Robert McClure commanded the *Investigator*, which sailed from England in 1850 in search of the missing Franklin expedition. The *Investigator* entered the Canadian archipelago from the Pacific Ocean and nearly circumnavigated Banks Island before getting iced in on the north side of the island. With his crew of 66 near death from scurvy and starvation, McClure was rescued in 1853 by a search party from a British Naval squadron that had entered the archipelago from the Atlantic. McClure abandoned ship and sailed home with his rescuers in 1854. But because they were the first to travel from one ocean to the other through the Canadian archipelago, McClure and his crew were credited upon their arrival in England as having first traveled a Northwest Passage.

Robert John Le Mesurier McClure had spent 26 years in the Navy and served on two prior arctic expeditions, but the *Investigator* was his first arctic command. He was a mercurial leader, savagely wielding control over his crew and prone to fits of fury, yet able to rally his men at the darkest moments. He was also ambitious. The *Investigator* was assigned to accompany Captain Richard Collinson in the *Enterprise*. Through a combination of faulty communication and deception, however, McClure effectively established independent command of his own expedition.

It happened when Collinson left their supply stop at Hawaii before McClure arrived there. Worried that Collinson would replace the *Investigator* with the *Plover*, a supply ship assigned to assist the expedition, McClure rushed out of Hawaii determined to catch up. Then he did better than that. Knowing that Collinson would circle around the Aleutian Islands on his way to a rendezvous point near Bering Strait, McClure decided to cut straight through the Islands, a risky route that required navigating through shallow and uncharted shoals. Succeeding, McClure reached Bering Strait days ahead of Collinson.

The *Investigator* encountered yet another Naval ship, the *Herald*, commanded by Henry Kellett. McClure disingenuously professed to Kellett that he was *behind* the

*Enterprise* and needed to proceed to catch up. This deception fooled no one, but in the wake of subsequent events McClure was not held to account for it.

Proceeding alone north and east of Alaska, McClure discovered and sailed up the Prince of Wales Strait between Banks and Victoria Islands. He came within 60 miles of the western reach of Viscount Melville Sound, waters that William Edmund Parry had reached from the Atlantic in 1819. But although he could see a Northwest Passage through these waters, ice prevented McClure from completing the passage himself.

At one point the ice took hold of his ship, forcing it south back down the Strait and threatening to crush it. The ice pressure snapped nine-inch hawsers and tore away six ice anchors. The crew thought all was lost and, ignoring all calls to discipline, broke into the ship's supply of liquor. Then the storm suddenly stopped and the ship was saved.

Ice still blocked the northern outlet of the Prince of Wales Strait, so in 1851 McClure retraced his path and sailed clockwise around Banks Island. Only a narrow lane of water separated the ice pack to McClure's left from the cliffs of Banks Island to his right. On August 20 another furious storm hit and McClure again prepared to abandon ship. And once again the storm abated. Apparently rattled and convinced that a Higher Power was safeguarding his ship, McClure took refuge in an indentation on the north side of Banks Island that he named Mercy Bay.

Mercy Bay, however, turned out to be an ice trap from which the *Investigator* could not escape. In 1852, facing the prospect of a third arctic winter, McClure was forced to reduce the crew's rations. Signs of scurvy and starvation appeared. The men had lost approximately 35 pounds apiece, and many complained that they were so hungry they could not sleep. Unlike many other expedition leaders, McClure had not prepared a series of diversions for his men during the long arctic night, so much of the time the crew was idle. Adding to tensions, two men went mad and at times howled all night.

In the spring of 1853, with the *Investigator* still iced in at Mercy Bay, McClure announced a plan. Two parties consisting of the weakest men would be sent -- one east and the other south -- in search of civilization and rescue. The 20 strongest crewmembers, including McClure, would stay with the ship. The plan was a thinly-disguised death sentence for the weakest two-thirds of the crew, who were in no shape to survive the sledge journeys that McClure proposed.

And then McClure got lucky again. Days before implementing his plan, the *Investigator*'s crew was rescued by a sledge party from the *Resolute* led by Lt. Bedford Pim. The *Resolute* was one of several British Naval vessels anchored in the vicinity of Beechey Island and Lancaster Sounded that were looking for Franklin, McClure, and Collinson. An earlier search party had found a note that McClure had left on Melville Island, directing Pim to Mercy Bay.

Once rescued, McClure sought again to claim the prize to the Northwest Passage. In addition to the fame and prestige, the British government had offered £10,000 to the first person or crew to complete the Passage. By coincidence, the captain of the *Resolute* was Henry Kellett, the same captain to whom, in 1850 near Bering Strait, McClure had argued disingenuously that he needed to proceed into the arctic to catch up to Collinson aboard the *Enterprise*. Now, aboard the *Resolute*, McClure labored to minimize the desperate situation he and his crew were in. If Kellett would only take some of McClure's most disabled men, he claimed, he could free the *Investigator* from the ice and complete the Northwest Passage. But this time Kellett did not let himself be fooled. McClure's men were total wrecks, some blind, some lame, and all suffering from scurvy. Four were dead. Kellett ordered the *Investigator* abandoned and all of McClure's surviving crew distributed among the ships in Belcher's fleet. Forced to winter a fourth time in the arctic, McClure and most of his crew arrived in England in 1854.

McClure arrived back in England a hero. He published a highly sanitized version of his journal, and the British government – seeking a way to bring closure to the costly and disastrous search for Franklin – granted the £10,000 Northwest Passage prize to McClure and his crew. The ice-choked stretch of water north of Banks Island is now named McClure Strait. McClure never again ventured north, and died in 1873 after reaching the rank of Vice-Admiral.

*Further reading:*

Berton, Pierre. *The Arctic Grail: The Quest for the Northwest Passage and the North Pole, 1818-1909*. New York: Penguin Books, 1988.

Fleming, Fergus. *Barrow's Boys: The Original Extreme Adventurers*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1998.

McClure, Robert L.M. *The Discovery of the North-West Passage by HMS 'Investigator', Capt. R. M'Clure, 1850, 1851, 1852, 1853, 1854*. Edited by Commander Sherard Osborn, but the logs and journals of Capt. Robert Le M. M'Clure. London: 1856.

*Brief biography:*

Sir Robert John Le Mesurier McClure was born on 28 January 1807 in Wexford, Ireland. His mother, Jane, was daughter of the Archdeacon Elgee, rector of Wexford; and his father, Robert, who was a captain in the 89<sup>th</sup> regiment, died five months before his birth. McClure was educated at Eton and Sandhurst, and entered the British Navy in 1824 and served as mate of the *Terror* on the 1836-7 George Back expedition, and as first lieutenant of the *Investigator* on the 1848 James Clark Ross expedition. He was Commander of the *Investigator*, junior to Richard Collinson of the *Enterprise*, on the Franklin search expedition that left Plymouth in 1850. McClure was knighted upon his return in 1854, and also promoted to Captain, with the commission backdated to 18 December 1850. After service in Asia, McClure returned to England in 1861 and was promoted to rear admiral on 20 March 1867, and to vice-admiral on 29 May 1873. McClure's journals were published in 1856 as "The Discovery of the North-West Passage by HMS 'Investigator', Capt. R. M'Clure, 1850, 1851, 1852, 1853, 1854. Edited by Commander Sherard Osborn, but the logs and journals of Capt. Robert Le M. M'Clure." McClure married Constance Ada in 1869, and died in London on 17 October 1873.