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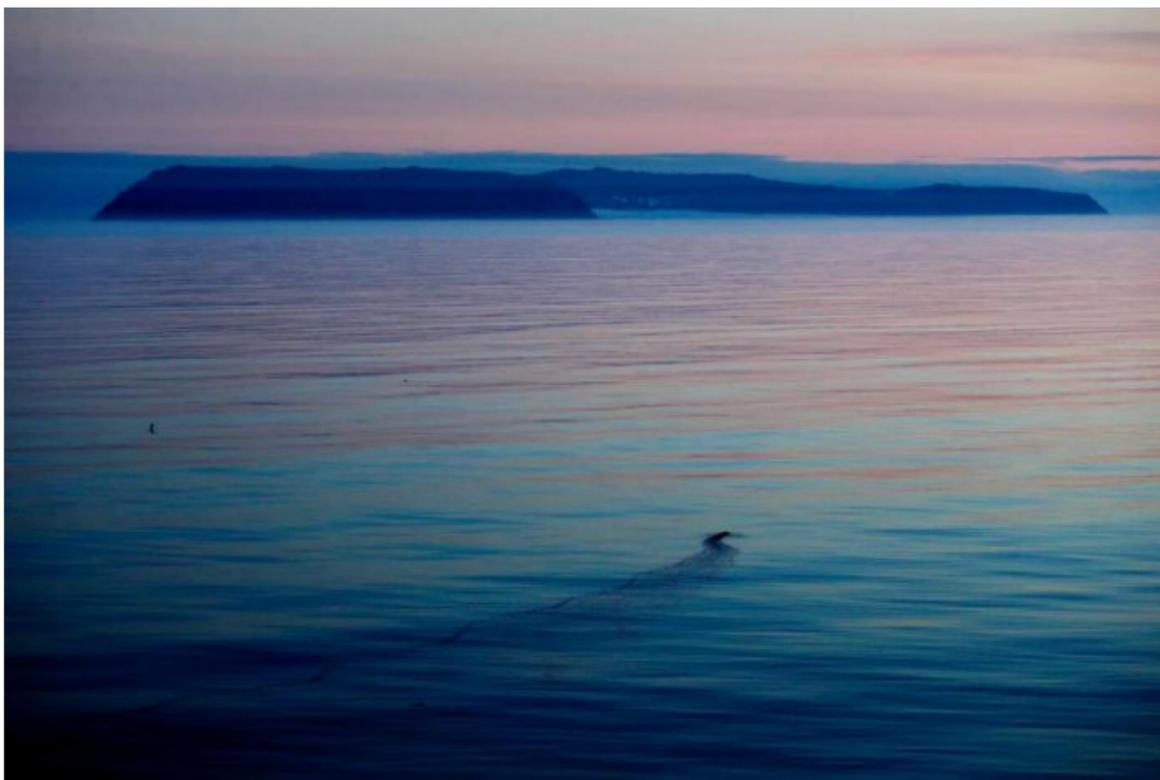
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# The race to lay claim on the Bering Strait Arctic ice retreats



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Photograph: David Goldman/AP

I could not keep my eyes off the graves, could not stop staring at them even as I walked away, turning repeatedly to look over my shoulder at them as I slogged my way across the gravel-strewn shore of [Beechey Island](#) until they disappeared from view.

It was profoundly saddening to contemplate their presence on a low-lying, windswept outpost of the Canadian Arctic, to

imagine the fear and loneliness those buried here must have felt as they faced death in the harshest of conditions, thousands of miles and a world removed from their homes. And yet, they were the lucky ones, the first casualties of an expedition that vanished 173 years ago while searching for the fabled Northwest Passage between Atlantic and Pacific, whose remaining members met their doom after their ships became frozen in never-yielding sea ice, who perished one by one waiting for a summer that never came.

Not until 1906 was the Northwest Passage eventually transited by ship; the feat would not be repeated for nearly 40 years. Since then, as Arctic sea ice has rapidly dwindled, almost 300 transits have been made of the Passage, the bulk of them since 2007; 24 took place in 2019. On this day, I arrived courtesy of that most modern of intrusions into remote areas: a passenger ship called the Ocean Endeavour, chartered by a company called Adventure Canada. What was once the graveyard of Victorian explorers is now a destination for any sufficiently adventurous and well-financed tourist.

The Arctic is warming, and its sea ice is melting, prompting fevered dreams of ever-easier access, and a renewed jockeying among Arctic nations for status, profit and ownership.

Journeying through the Passage over the best part of three weeks in September yielded the expected fruits of an Arctic journey. A passing ice floe hosted a polar bear seemingly just minutes removed from killing a seal, the victim's blood leaving a crimson trail on the ice. A diversion into a bay revealed first a polar bear feasting on a beached beluga carcass, then another bear on an opposite cliff and then two more, and finally an abundance of harp seals and seabirds thrashing through the water as they feasted on a banquet of Arctic cod. We stepped on the low-lying beach of the tiny Jenny Lind Island, randomly named after a Swedish opera singer, and squinted through binoculars at musk oxen in the

distance. We passed through the narrow confines of the Bellot Strait, its eponymous co-discoverer a French explorer who was blown off the ice and to his death in the freezing water below, the cliffs on its southern side marking the northernmost point of mainland North America.

We encountered less than a handful of other ships: a Canadian coastguard icebreaker – which, a few weeks earlier, had deployed to help the Ocean Endeavour through some stubborn summer ice – and a pair of other passenger vessels. There was nothing, at any point in the journey, to suggest that this barely trafficked waterway might be at the heart of an international dispute, let alone the subject of multiple studies into its viability as a commercial shipping route.

But covetous eyes gaze upon the Northwest Passage, more so as Arctic ice retreats; establishing authority over the Passage proffers the prospect of establishing control over access, and there is no consensus as to where that authority lies.

As far as Canada is concerned, there is no controversy over the matter. Citing among other things legal precedent and historic use – particularly a millennium or so of use by Inuit – Ottawa considers the Northwest Passage to be its internal waters. The United States, brandishing a different legal case and echoing its longstanding position on such matters elsewhere, counters that it is an international strait, [“an area of high seas that connects two bodies of water which is open for peaceful use by a vessel from any state”](#).

The dispute did not really flare up until the SS Manhattan, a US-flagged oil tanker, transited the Passage (with some difficulty) [from east to west and back again in 1969](#), carrying a symbolic barrel of Prudhoe Bay oil on the return trip, accompanied by a US Coast Guard icebreaker, without seeking authorization. Ultimately, the two countries negotiated an Agreement on Arctic Cooperation, in which they effectively agreed to disagree on the matter. But as Arctic ice melts, so too does the veneer of friendly

differences.

The US secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, [argued](#) in a fiery speech to the Arctic Council in May that “Arctic sea lanes could become the 21st-century Suez and Panama Canals”, and [dismissed Canada’s claims](#) to the passage as “illegitimate”. Of late, China – increasingly interested in the possibilities of Arctic shipping lanes and a [relatively recently minted observer](#) to the Arctic Council – has weighed in, last year publishing [an official Arctic policy](#) that, among other positions, gently echoed the American stance on the matter of access to polar passageways.

That such disagreements are articulated at all is testament to the promise that the Northwest Passage is perceived to offer. That promise is perhaps best encapsulated in numbers: numbers such as 15,700 (the distance in kilometers from Yokohama to Rotterdam via the Passage) and 7,600 (the number of kilometers shorter that route would be relative to the Panama Canal), numbers that to some conjure a vision of the Northwest Passage providing a bustling corridor between Pacific and Atlantic and finally fulfilling a destiny centuries in the making.

Queen Elizabeth is said to have waved from her palace window as Martin Frobisher set out on his first expedition to find the Passage in 1576, such was the import attached to establishing a trade route to the Pacific. But the history of the search for the Northwest Passage is a catalogue of incremental successes interspersed with misery and misfortune.

In 1611, having mapped the river and the bay that are now named after him, Henry Hudson’s attempts to probe farther west into the ice and the unknown ended with his crew mutinying and sending him overboard in a lifeboat, never to be seen again. Eight years later, Jens Munk and his band of 65 men made it as far as Hudson Bay, and spent the winter near the mouth of Churchill River; racked by cold, scurvy and probably trichinosis from eating insufficiently cooked polar

bear meat, none but Munk and two others survived to see the following spring.

It was in such inauspicious footsteps that Sir John Franklin, and the 128 officers and men of HMS Erebus and Terror, followed as they sailed out of the River Thames on 19 May 1845 on the most ambitious and extensively equipped expedition to the Passage yet. Whaling ships spied them in upper Baffin Bay, just east of the entrance to the Passage, on 26 July; and shortly thereafter the expedition vanished without trace.

Subsequent searches turned up clues: the graves on Beechey Island, where the ships spent the winter of 1845-86; a note indicating that by 22 April 1848, the ships had been trapped in ice for over 18 months, Franklin and 23 others had died, and the remaining crew was setting out south across land in search of safety; Inuit stories of starving white men who had died, one by one, in the snow.

In 2008, the then Canadian prime minister, Stephen Harper, launched a major effort to find the wrecks of the Erebus and Terror. The goal of the search was not, wrote author Paul Watson in his book *Ice Ghosts: The Epic Hunt for the Lost Franklin Expedition*, purely historical or archeological; rather it was “part of his strategy to mold public opinion”, with the Northwest Passage a powerful tool for “stirring Canadian nationalism in the twenty-first century”. Harper’s intent, Watson asserted, was to shore up support for a muscular assertion of Arctic sovereignty, laying claim “over a vast stretch of the Arctic seabed, straight up to the North Pole”.

As the ice retreats, revealing a potentially resource-rich seabed below, Canada is not alone in its designs on the broader Arctic. In 2007, a Russian submarine [planted a rust-proof titanium flag](#) on the seabed at the North Pole, and in October of this year, Russia’s ministry of defense [proclaimed that it had collected enough evidence](#) to support its claims to much of the Arctic Ocean.

Meanwhile, [Denmark has laid down its own metaphorical](#)

marker, based on a claim that a large area up to and beyond the North Pole is connected to the continental shelf of Greenland – which, of course, the Trump administration earlier this year expressed a desire to buy. (That US interest recently prompted the Danish defense intelligence service to declare the island the country's number one national security priority, ahead of terrorism and cybercrime).

Russia actually supports Canada's position on the Northwest Passage because it considers itself to have similar dominion over the Northeast Passage, which the country refers to as the Northern Sea Route and which stretches above Russia's northern coast, from the Bering Strait to the Barents Sea. With a strong assist from Russian investment in ports and infrastructure, the Northern Sea Route is already proving commercially viable: it is estimated that 29m tons of shipments will pass through its waters this year, a 40% increase on 2018; Vladimir Putin has set a target of 80m tons of goods a year by 2024.

And while the 800 or so vessels that transit all or part of the NSR annually is hardly enough to threaten the approximately 15,000 that transit the Panama Canal each year, it is far ahead of the Northwest Passage.

The Northwest Passage remains relatively narrow and relatively shallow, and even in a warming world its twisting straits remain vulnerable to blockage from the sea ice that breaks up and sweeps down from the Arctic Ocean. The Northern Sea Route, in contrast, has no winding narrows with which to contend; there is essentially only the Russian coast to the south and the Arctic Ocean and its retreating sea ice to the north, and its waters are considerably deeper.





A side-scan sonar image of a ship the HMS Erebus vessel. Photograph: Parks Canada/AP

For all the hype about its potential, for all the lives that have been lost and the ships that have been wrecked attempting to map its contours, for all the butting of diplomatic heads, it may well be not the Northwest Passage, but the Northern Sea Route that ultimately provides the Arctic pathway which so many have for so long desired.

Harper's Northwest Passage initiative did have some success. In 2014, searchers found the wreck of HMS Erebus; three years later, they also found the almost perfectly preserved wreck of HMS Terror.

Two years after that, I and others from the Ocean Endeavour stood on a barge and watched as underwater archeologists explored the nooks and crannies of, and retrieved artifacts from, the Erebus wreck below us. We were the first visitors to the wreck site, and the personal nature of some freshly retrieved artifacts was jarring. I looked at the shoe that one archeologist tenderly tended to and wondered who might have worn it, and how and when he died. What would he have thought of the notion that, almost 200 years after he set sail, the Northwest Passage would still exercise the thoughts of so many? Would he even recognize it? Certainly, on this day, with ice nowhere to be seen, it would have seemed very different from the horrible place in which he had been trapped, and in which his ship had sunk.

I tried to imagine his hopes and aspirations, and the life he had lived on board, as I peered over the side of the barge and pictured the Erebus in its final resting place, in the dark, turbid waters beneath my feet.