

# Phantom Hills at Lancaster Sound

**mirage (noun)** / mi'ra:ʒ /

1. *an image, produced by very hot air, of something which seems to be far away but does not really exist*

2. *literary a hope or wish that has no chance of being achieved*

- Cambridge Dictionary

With the Napoleonic wars reaching an end, the British Royal Navy had swelled to unparalleled proportions during 12 years of war. It was faced with a dire employment problem. Ordinary seamen were simply thrown back onto the streets where they were once recruited. The influential officers, educated gentlemen, were not as easy to get rid of. Most ships were laid up and thousands of officers were left with nothing to do while collecting half-pay.

A new war was unlikely, so it was high time to find a new reason to get His Majesty's finest back onto the water. That reason was to be exploration, or, as John Barrow, Second Secretary to the Admiralty and in charge of the expeditions, wanted it, *'scarcely a corner of the world left unscrutinised'*.

The early 1800s seethed with romanticism across the vast British Empire. The public had an appetite for news of the unknown and of particular interest were accounts

of the white spots on the map. By its very nature, venturing into uncharted territory is hazardous and difficult to prepare for, not knowing who or what one will encounter. More often than not the expeditions were poorly or wrongly equipped, ending in starvation, shipwreck, navigational errors, murder or medical complications.

One of the white spots was the mythological Northwest Passage, the northern sea route that was believed to connect the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans. For more than 300 years, explorers had been scavenging the icy waters off Greenland without getting close to finding it. In 1816, also known as the Year Without a Summer, European summers were cold and in New England corn crops failed to ripen. At the same time, the Navy had received reports from whaling vessels in the Arctic of unprecedented amounts of drift ice.

This aroused speculation that the cause of the events might be massive melting of the Arctic ice. If the ice was indeed breaking up, it might be possible to sail through the sought-after passage. The man found fit for this task was to be Lieutenant John Ross.

Ross was the fifth son of reverend Andrew and Elizabeth Ross. He was born on the 24<sup>th</sup> of June 1777 and raised in the countryside in the south-west of Scotland. At only nine

years of age he joined the Royal Navy, as a first-class volunteer. With the outbreak of the war in 1803, Ross was posted to King George's warship the *Grampus*. By the time the war ended, 39-year-old John had spent 30 years at sea and risen to the rank of lieutenant. In December 1817, he received a letter that would open a new chapter in his naval career, a chapter of great ambition to be followed by a great scandal.

He had been selected by the Lordships of the Admiralty to command the expedition to prove the existence or non-existence of the Northwest Passage. Reading between the lines, it was evident that his chances for promotion would be greatly enhanced upon accepting.

By the end of the month Ross arrived in London where he inspected the two ships that were to accommodate him and his crew. He chose the largest ship for himself, the *Isabella*, *'as being the most proper ship for the senior officer'*.

On the 18<sup>th</sup> of April the *Isabella* and the *Alexander* sailed down the Thames, with Ross as captain and commander of the expedition. Second in command and aboard the *Alexander* was 25-year-old aspiring Lieutenant William Parry. Neither of them had Arctic sailing experience. Alongside the standard navigation equipment of sextants and compasses, 90 bibles were brought along. As were 20 rifles and 10 canons. This was truly a voyage into uncharted waters.

The first part of the journey was smooth sailing. The sailors were awed by their magnificent surroundings, clear weather, the vast amounts of exotic sea birds and the sun shining 24 hours a day. It was a

lighthearted period, and with rumours of a mild summer Captain Ross had every reason to be hopeful for a pleasant journey.

Upon stopping at a Danish factory at the entrance of Disco Bay in the middle of June, Ross was served a different story by the factory inspector, Mr. Flushe. He told Ross that in the eleven winters he had spent in the region, *'not one he said had been so severe or protracted as the last: the sea had frozen up in the beginning of December, where it was usually open until February, and Disco bay and harbour, which were generally navigable towards the end of March, still continued shut... He considered the attempt to get much farther to the north as hopeless'*. In order to survive the winter, the settlers had resorted to killing and eating their dogs. Captain Ross did not like what he was hearing. The report of the Danish resident was certainly in decided opposition to those of the people who had described the breaking up and dispersion of the polar ice.

In the thick morning fog they arrived at Hare Island, only to find a fleet of 45 whaling ships detained by the ice. A seaman climbed the crow's nest, but water was not in sight, either to the west or further north. The two ships were to be enclosed for days. While trapped in the ice, the quarterdeck was fitted with flags and benches for the weekly Sunday service. Surrounded by indefinite stretches of ice, Ross led the ceremony while the sailors read their prayers.

During the next days several dramatic events would unfold. The ships of the expedition suffered severe pressure from

the ice, lifting them several feet out of the water. This bloodcurdling event could easily have put an end to the expedition. The map of the region was littered with the names of men who had previously tried and failed to find the passage. While the ships were stranded, the unpredictable ice crushed one boat to pieces, killing a member of a whaling crew and seriously injuring another.

Breaking free from the ice was a laborious task, a tiresome exercise in sawing ice, tacking, warping and towing the ships along. After several hours of hard work, the ice would often start drifting, closing the ships in again, rendering an entire day's effort meaningless.

The next weeks were to go by this way. By early July a channel through the ice was finally found, and the *Isabella* and the *Alexander* were back on track.

On board the *Isabella* was interpreter John Sacheuse, an English-speaking native of Greenland who had fled his native country in a canoe and boarded and concealed himself on a British whaling ship. He had agreed to serve as interpreter on the expedition on one condition: that he was not to be left in his own country.

With hopes of trading meat, dogs and sledges from the native Inuits, Ross had brought along 150 butcher's knives, axes, 350 yards of flannel, beads, swords, gin, pistols and 40 umbrellas.

Wearing his navy blue uniform with gold piping and his cocked hat, Ross greeted the natives and invited them aboard: *'We soon became intimate with our visitors and invited them into the cabin, where they were treated with coffee and biscuit, and their portraits taken.'*

While the *Alexander's* cook played his violin, the Inuits danced Scottish folk dances with the sailors. The crew took a liking to the *'Eskimaux women'*, in particular a young daughter of a Danish resident, described by the Captain as *'by far the best looking of the group'*.

Sacheuse, the interpreter, escorted the Inuits home. The next morning, captain Ross was surprised to find that Sacheuse had not returned. A boat was sent for him, and at the foot of a mountain the search party found him with a broken collarbone caused by a violent recoil from overloading his gun, or in his own words, *'plenty powder, plenty kill'*.

The expedition was now in its fourth month, and progress was slow and tiresome. A typical day of sailing would be spent moving back and forth in the ice, striving in vain to find a way onwards. Long periods of thick fog made it cumbersome to navigate, without the aid of lunar observations or landmarks.

Upon slowly embarking further north, Captain Ross noted a spectacular sighting in his journal, a case of unequal refraction, also known as a mirage: *'A remarkable appearance of unequal refraction was observed here in the ships near us, and also in those at a distance. Those within two or three miles seemed to be extended to a monstrous height; while those at double the distance appeared to be drawn out in a horizontal direction, even to flatness, upon the water.'*

Cold air hovering above the icy water, combined with 24 hours of sunshine heating the air, made ideal conditions for mirages. They would cause icebergs to change shape, disappear and elongate.

They also caused objects in the far distance to appear closer than they actually were.

Proceeding north, the crew was surprised when they spotted several men on the ice, shouting at the ships. Captain Ross assumed that they were shipwrecked sailors.

As Sacheuse approached these short and corpulent men, it was evident that they were natives. Only separated from them by a narrow canal in the ice, the most fearless of them advanced to the edge and pulled out a knife from his boot, shouting, 'Go away! I can kill you!' Sacheuse threw some strings of beads and a checked shirt across the canal, but this was of no interest to these natives. He then threw a knife which they approached with caution and picked up.

From this point on, the meeting took a friendly turn and Sacheuse bridged the canal with a teak plank so that the Inuits could walk across. Pointing to the south, Sacheuse said that he came from a distant country. The natives were flabbergasted: *'that cannot be, there is nothing but ice there'*.

It turned out that the tribe had never before seen other Inuits, let alone British naval officers. As far as they knew, they were the only people in the world. In his journal the Scottish captain referred to them as *'Arctic Highlanders'*, describing them as *'filthy in the extreme... covered with oil and dirt'*. Upon seeing etchings of their portraits in Ross's published journal a reviewer agreed laconically, *'these Northern Esquimaux, judging from their portraits, are more ugly than their southern neighbours'*.

Upon leaving, the crew gave their guests articles of clothing, biscuits, and

the teak plank that had been used to cross the canal. From a distance they watched them throw away the biscuits and split the plank into small pieces, dividing it among the party.

By August, John Ross finally entered Baffin Bay, waters that no other European had sailed since William Baffin's voyage in 1616. Here Captain Ross christened unmapped mountains and islands, naming them after his superiors, colleagues, friends and family. Lieutenant Parry made a note of this in his diary: *'There is always something pleasing in the idea of landing in a country where no European foot has ever trodden before.'*

In mid-August, the Captain wrote of a second encounter with a mirage. Officers and seamen had spotted land ahead that was later proven to be 260 kilometres away.

On the evening of the 24th of August, the sun set for the first time after 78 days of midnight sun, a telltale sign of the unbearable Arctic winter approaching.

While the cold rain was pouring down, Captain Ross finally reached Lancaster Sound. This was where the opening to the passage was believed most likely to be found.

In the wee hours of the 31<sup>st</sup> of August, Ross and his crew sailed into the sound. Excited sailors climbed the masthead and the crow's nest in hope of spotting a passage. The ship's astronomer and scientist, Edward Sabine, was standing on the deck of the *Alexander*: *'... every officer and man, on the instant, as it were, made up his mind that this must be the North-West Passage: the width of the opening, the extraordinary depth of water, the increased*

*temperature, and the surrounding sea and strait so perfectly free from ice... I firmly believe every creature on board anticipated the pleasure of writing an overland dispatch to his friends, either from the eastern or the western shores of the Pacific.'*

At sundown they had still not been able to get a clear view of the centre of the sound due to thick fog. At midnight a wind blew up at *Isabella's* position and Captain Ross set sail towards the centre of the inlet, leaving Parry and the *Alexander* behind.

At four in the morning the fog cleared. The officer on watch immediately sent to wake the captain. By the time he had put his clothes on, the fog had already started closing in again, but in spite of the poor visibility Ross spotted what appeared to be mountains at the end of the bay: *'The land which I then saw was a high ridge of mountains, extending directly across the bottom of the inlet. This chain appeared extremely high in the centre, and those towards the north had, at times, the appearance of islands, being insulated by the fog at their bases.'*

Ross made a hastily prepared sketch of the coast and its mountains from a distance of 45 kilometres. The weather was constantly shifting between cloudy and clear and the fog made it difficult to make exact observations.

Later, while Captain Ross was enjoying his dinner, the officer of the watch rushed back into the Captain's quarters as the fog was starting to clear. As the only officer, Ross rushed on deck. But he saw no passage: *'It completely cleared for about ten minutes, when I distinctly saw the land round the bottom of the bay, forming a chain of mountains connected with those which*

*extended along the north and south sides.'*

Ross had seen enough, marking the mountains that occupied the centre as *'coast actually seen'* on his map. He named the mountains Croker's Mountains, after his superior John Wilson Croker, the Secretary to the British Admiralty.

At a distance of 45 kilometres from the western end of the bay, in foggy weather and against the wishes of his junior officers, Ross decided to turn back, rather than sailing closer to land to explore further. Since the *Parry* and the *Alexander* was located an additional 15 kilometres away from the Captain's ship and 60 kilometres from the western end of the bay, Ross did not find it worthwhile detaining Parry's ship for his opinion regarding further exploration of the bay.

Upon later questioning, Ross stated that as the commander of the expedition it would be absurd if he was to ask his inferior officers for advice he was perfectly capable of giving himself, stating that *'the wise policy of the Government has properly judged that one opinion alone should rule'*. Upon leaving the sound, Ross was blissfully unaware of the scandal that awaited him.

Back in London, Ross gave full account of the expedition to the Lordships of the Admiralty. But the controversy of Lancaster Sound had begun to leak out: on the way home, Lieutenant Parry had written to his family about not ascertaining the passage, at the same time assuring them that he knew *'it is in existence, and not very hard to find'*.

Ross's conclusion that Lancaster Sound was a closed bay without any exit passage was to be a fruitful source of dispute and

scandal. Critics of the expedition claimed that Ross had neither proven nor disproven anything, and that his conclusions were mere assertions lacking the facts to back them up.

Among the many controversies surrounding the events at Lancaster Sound was a remark that Ross could not have been able to spot land from the ship's position 45 kilometres from the western end of the bay. According to the map, the two extreme corners of the bay were 80 kilometres apart. If the Captain's claim of a coherent mountain range was to be believed, one also had to believe that he was able to make an exact observation of land at a distance of 80 kilometres from a low quarterdeck in hazy weather.

The Captain's '*extraordinary powers of vision*' were ridiculed by his critics, of whom there were plenty. They all posed the same question: why did he not look harder? This would haunt him for the rest of his life, and it would torment Arctic historians for decades to come.

The publication of the Captain's journal made the dispute between Ross and his subordinate officers a public affair. The controversy discredited Ross in the eyes of his superiors at the Admiralty. The Second Secretary, John Barrow, who was responsible for sending him on the mission, even anonymously published a 49-page article that set out to discredit and ridicule Ross's expedition, deeming it a '*total failure*'.

In the article he ridiculed Ross for his '*habitual inaccuracy and a looseness of description*' and concluded that Ross '*knows no more, in fact, than he might have known by staying at home*'.

Barrow would never forgive Ross but he was not willing to admit publicly that he had selected a supposedly unfit captain for the task. So instead of discharging Ross, he promoted him. This effectively put an end to public debate of Barrow's alleged distrust of Ross. Besides, it could have proven a difficult task to reprimand Ross officially. What court would accept the charge that he had failed to discover a sea passage that might not exist?

Less than a month after Ross's return, a second voyage to Lancaster Sound was planned. The purpose was to wipe out any doubts and uncertainties left from the previous expedition. Ross wrote a letter to his superiors offering his services, as the only captain with experience in the waters. But they did not want him anywhere near this venture. Instead, Ross's second in command, Parry, was appointed captain, keeping the officers and sailors from the first expedition, apart from those who had sided with Ross in the dispute.

The following year, the second expedition sailed straight through Croker's Mountains. They were no more than a simple mirage, misinterpreted by Captain Ross. The powerful and famously unpleasant John Wilson Croker did not appreciate having a fictional mountain ridge named after him. The Royal Navy never again employed Ross actively.

Ten years later, Ross finally admitted to having drawn hasty conclusions. He wrote with curious regret on what use there was in exploring an area where '*the only satisfaction that can ever be derived would be, that there is, on a piece of paper, a black line instead of a blank?*'