

# The NORTH WEST PASSAGE: Where Ice defeats HOPE.

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Von Manfred Ertel



When Captain Sir John Franklin set sail from London on May 19 1845, there was great confidence all round of finding the last part of a navigable shortcut from the North Atlantic to the Arctic Ocean - the legendary and mythical North West Passage.

The economic interests of the British in finding a fast northerly route for their ships to Asia were large, and so also were their endeavours. The British Admiralty therefore entrusted the 59-year-old Franklin, the most experienced Arctic adventurer of the time, with the task, and placed "HMS Terror" and "HMS Erebus", the most ice-capable ships of their time, under his command. How and why the mission failed, however, is not clear to this day. The fact is that all 134 men - crew, sailors, doctors and officers - remained blocked by ice. In dramatic circumstances, they gave their lives, leaving the enigma that persists still today: the North West Passage.



A good 170 years later, only comparatively few ships have managed to navigate the North West Passage, and in 2009 it included two cruise ships for the first time. The "MS Fram" wants to belong to that group. The flagship of "Hurtigruten" (the cruise company) has been tested on numerous trips in Antarctica and the Arctic, and now it intended for the first time in its history to navigate the North West Passage, "in the footsteps of the great explorers - Westbound".

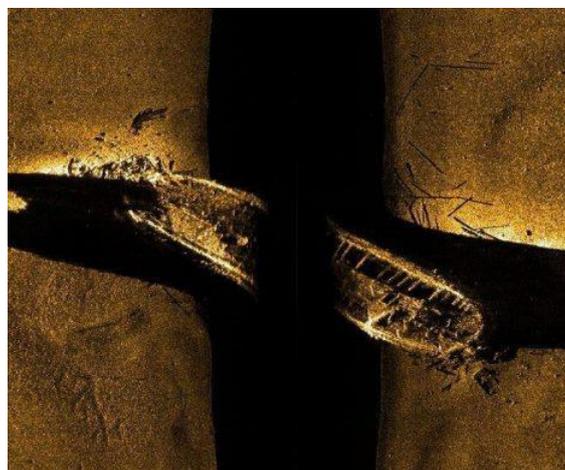
"Even today, only a few ships could navigate in the wake of Franklin, Ross, Parry or Amundsen through this region", the advertisements for this adventure proclaimed. That is why 226 passengers from about a dozen countries on board the "Fram" had paid a whopping five-digit sum for the privilege.



Above all, the secrets of British Rear Admiral Franklin had electrified them. Only a bare handwritten note, discovered in a cairn by a search team in May 1859 on the west coast of King William Island, gave some insight into the fate of Franklin: in April 1848, the surviving "105 souls" had abandoned their ships, which were stuck in the pack ice, to somehow escape on foot. The path led to an icy death. Franklin had already died a year earlier, on June 11, 1847. The wreckage of "HMS Terror" was only discovered in 2016 at a depth of 24 meters on the seabed of the southern tip of King Williams Island; two years earlier, "HMS Erebus" had been found a little further south on a peninsula.

These were the tracks that the "Fram" expedition now wanted to follow, starting from Greenland via Baffin Bay to the entrance to the Canadian Arctic archipelago - always staying close to the historical course: West through Lancaster Sound to Beechey Island, where the first dead from Franklin's crew lie in three graves; then South through Prince Regent Inlet, past the former trading post of Fort Ross, to Gjøa Haven; here, the Norwegian Roald Amundsen wintered for two years, before, in 1906, he became the first man to sail the Northwest Passage; past the wreck of the historic "HMS Terror" off the coast of King Williams Island, where Franklin's men fought for their lives; and finally, the expedition was supposed to end in Cambridge Bay, a small administrative centre in the west.

**So much for the plan....**



It is Day 6 when the "Fram", having left Greenland, arrives in Lancaster Sound, when it soon becomes clear : the Westerly course only exists on a chart. The way ahead is dense, blocked by huge ice masses. Alternative channels are not available; there is no getting through. "Nature is nature," says Arctic expert Karin Strand, the expedition leader on the "Fram", "we can only hope for better weather". Hope at sea, particularly in the Arctic, is a bad guide. "On this expedition the elements set the tone: weather, wind and ice", that is what was said in the travel brochures. But none of the expeditioners had imagined that it would be like this. Even in front of the sounds, the channels and the inlets to the south, where early explorers were sometimes able to pass the ice barriers, now thick impasses of impenetrable ice were piling up. And this did not happen only yesterday ! Not a single ship has succeeded in getting through to Cambridge Bay this Arctic summer, irrespective of climate change. That was already well known - just not by the passengers !



Gjøa Haven is barricaded behind thick ice sheets; all access channels are as firmly closed as a cork in a bottle. In front of Beechey Island, masses of sea ice tower up to form a virtually impenetrable barrier. Two cruise ships had taken advantage of a short-lived opening, and have been sitting for days in Prince Regent Inlet, stuck fast in the ice, waiting for help from a Canadian icebreaker. The "*Canada Adventure*", a comparable ship, had to be freed several times from the ice, reports the crew. And an upgraded former Russian research ship has apparently gone aground and is also stuck fast.



"*These waters are new to all of us,*" says Captain Ole Johan Andreassen, who says otherwise very little. His plea sounds almost pitiful: "*But we cannot do anything*". Expedition leader Strand exudes confidence: "*We have not given up hope*". She stands in front of ice charts with loud red and orange areas that mark areas of impassable ice. Weather stations have been warning of the unusual ice conditions for weeks. "*Oh, this ice*", she groans, and says "*it is like gazing into a crystal ball*". There is talk of Plan B and then C, with completely new destinations and departure airports, and even jokingly of an alternative Plan D: "*We overwinter! Franklin sends his regards*". Everyone laughs. But the light-hearted atmosphere does not last long. Triviality gives way to tension; the captain is lost for words.



What other solutions are there, if the tracks of the great explorers in which we follow vanish in the ice so soon ? Grise Fiord, which is probably the northernmost settlement with nearly 130 Inuit residents, is a moving proof of how people and inhospitable nature can be united in a common purpose, and can be proud and happy at the same time. Croker's Bay with its glaciers and fresh traces of polar bears is of sublime beauty, which, as a European city dweller, one regards with great humility. And the polar bear in the sun stays fortunately at a safe distance.

But where are the historical traces of Franklin and Co.? None whatsoever.



Hopes are dwindling amongst the passengers, just as 170 years ago did optimism in the hand-picked crew of Franklin. The return airport from Cambridge Bay is not accessible, the alternative airport, Resolute Bay, is ice bound. The ship bobs up and down between ice floes, a few seals and walruses provide distraction for a while, but it is a temporary game. Well, at least an airlift from a gravel surfaced air-strip in Point Inlet at the entrance to Lancaster Sounds can be arranged. Small prop-aircraft will have to fly all the passengers out. That will take hours. But on the other hand, it is not so bad as it was for the explorers who either had to spend the winter in the ice, or never even came back.



The new passengers for the return passage from East to West will be flown to Baffin Island instead of Cambridge Bay, an East / West Passage by air ! Instead of following in the footsteps of Franklin, it will a short trip along the coast and then off to Greenland. And the next tour in 2019 is already fully booked !

The moral of the story ? There are forces of nature which cannot be tamed today, not even by a well-oiled tourism industry with glossy promises. "*We cannot do anything,*" says the captain as he says goodbye. Nature is and remains nature - an expensive experience.

**About THE AUTHOR:**



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