

# THE NORDIC IMPRINT IN THE CANADIAN ARCTIC

By John Bechtel, Freelance Writer

Since many place names of the North American Arctic may not be well known to the general reader, your enjoyment of this article will be enhanced by referring to the maps. Here are some fun facts which may help you to follow the story:

Greenland is the largest island in the world. It has a population of 56,000 but is bigger in size than Mexico that has a population of 122 million. Greenland has about the same population as Minot, North Dakota, where this magazine is published, and they have been known to share similarities in weather. Greenland has semi-autonomy under the crown of Denmark. It is not a part of Canada.

The Arctic Archipelago is the large group of Arctic islands north of the Canadian mainland. There are more than 36,500 of these islands of varying sizes, including Victoria Island and Ellesmere Island, both among the ten largest islands in the world. The archipelago is 1500 miles wide at its base, and stretches 1200 miles from the mainland of Canada to the most northern tip of Ellesmere Island.

The Northwest Passage is the long sought-after navigable water route through these mostly barren islands as a short cut from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Arctic ice blocking the waterways has almost always made this passage incredibly dangerous if not impossible.

Hudson Bay is the huge bay in the subarctic region south of the Arctic Circle west of Labrador, north of Quebec, and east of Nunavut, the newest and largest of the Canadian provinces. It drains six Canadian

provinces and parts of the states of North and South Dakota, Minnesota and Montana. It is the second largest bay in the world, and connects with both the Arctic Ocean and the Atlantic. If the Hudson Bay were a landmass instead of body of water, it would be about the size of Iran.

If the province of Nunavut were a country, it would be 15th in size, worldwide. It is also the most desolate and least populous political national subdivision in the world.

Most searches for the Northwest Passage began by proceeding northward on the western side of Greenland, between Greenland and Baffin Island to the Parry Channel which went due west to the Beaufort Sea, and separated the Queen Elizabeth Islands to the north from Victoria Island and Banks Island to the south.

Once in the Beaufort Sea, ice was the only obstacle on the way to Alaska's Prudhoe Bay and Point Barrow on the north shore. Successful explorers followed the bend south through the Chukchi Sea, and then through the Bering Strait. Depending on their final destination, they followed the west coast of Alaska southward to Nome (home of the Nome Gold Rush) and farther south and east to Kodiak Island or Dutch Harbor in the Aleutian Islands.

There are a number of variations of this Northwest Passage, including beginning in Alaska and working your way through the archipelago to Greenland in the east. Going either way, much depends on ice conditions, which can fluctuate by the day and even the hour.

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BACKGROUND PHOTO: WWW.NSIDC.ORG

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**F**or hundreds of years the Northwest Passage was the stuff of legend, passionately believed but never verified. Incredibly, the story begins with a family of adventurers and merchants, the greatest of which was Marco Polo, the godfather of travel writing as we know it today. Marco's overland trip on the ancient Silk Road took him from Venice to Beijing, China, then known as Cathay. His trip there, his stay, and his return took a total of 26 years, from 1271 to 1295 CE.

He was both a man of his time, and ahead of his time. He was able to comprehend and marvel at cultures totally alien to his own, as he traveled thousands of miles through countries that are known today as Georgia, Iran,



MAP: WWW.IDMARK.COM  
**Marco Polo's historic route from Italy to China-1271-1295 CE.**

Afghanistan, Mongolia, China, Indonesia, India, and many others; across uncharted deserts, dangerous mountain passes, extreme weather, hostile locals, and wild animals.

He became a trusted confidant of Kublai Khan, who hosted and

protected him.

His travelogue on the Silk Road became the most authoritative and influential such document ever. And as translations of it spread, it made nascent and developing European monarchs hunger for similar wealth and power as he described at the court of Kublai Khan. They wanted to see it, verify and emulate it, experience their spices and other treasures, and bring them home. And they were in a hurry. Twenty-six years was too long. They wondered if they could get to Cathay and the Far East by going in the opposite direction; by going west. Every European monarch who had an empire or who lusted for one, got in on the act. The search was on for a Northwest Passage. As they turned their attention westward, they may have discovered, to their surprise, that they were not the first Europeans to have done so.

### Why the Norse got there first

The first known Europeans in North America were Norse seafarers who first settled Iceland, which—in time, became a useful stepping stone to further westward exploration. Some of them made it to what is today Newfoundland. Eric Asvaldsson (the Red), was banished from Iceland for killing a couple men, and he explored the southwestern corner of Greenland, planning a colony of his own. Not one to quibble over details, he called it Greenland to entice recruits from back home, arguably the first instance of misleading real estate advertising in North America.

This was about 1000 C.E., long before Marco Polo. The northern European region that these Norse had previously called home was enjoying unusually warm weather that encouraged exploration to distant shores. They were farmers looking for land, not a passage to the riches of the Far East, something they knew nothing about.

At their peak, Norse settlements in Greenland had a combined population of 3,000 to 5,000. Archeologists have confirmed remains of at least 400

farms. These Norse people accepted the sovereignty of Norway, and they traded with the Inuits, whom they called Skraelings. The seal furs and walrus ivory found attractive prices back in the home countries, and the trans-Atlantic shipping brought supplies to the Norse colonies vital to their survival and culture.

Today there is an uninhabited Skraeling Island in the Arctic Archipelago, about 1½ miles long and 1 mile wide, and its chief claim to fame is a large and successful archaeological site providing proof that the Vikings traded with the Inuits in a relationship that was not always tranquil.



**"Summer in the Greenland coast" circa 1000, by artist Jens Erik Carl Rasmussen.**

### Climate change changes everything

Fate intervened in two unanticipated ways that changed the course of that little bit of history.

First, there was climate change. What is referred to as the "Little Ice Age" came to the Far North, including Greenland. As the temperature dropped, navigable waters vital to shipping and trade with the homeland countries became clogged with ice where little or none was known before. It became increasingly difficult to maintain and feed herds of cattle, the traditional occupation of Norse farmers.

Secondly, the Black Plague was sweeping through Europe, and as shipping died, essential supplies and tools from home were no longer available to the colonists, and interest in Greenland ivory was being replaced by cheaper ivory from Africa. Life got a lot harder. The Norse colonists could abandon farming and adapt to an Inuit lifestyle and means of survival, but there were limits to how far they wanted to assimilate without losing their cultural identity. Or they could go home. Farm land in the home countries was becoming available as previous owners died of the Plague, and perhaps this tipped the scales in favor of leaving. Within 500 years of its founding, 'Little Europe' disappeared shortly before the next wave of Europeans began. Each of the newcomers suffered from the same conceit; that they were the first to arrive—completely unaware that a previous European civilization had already come and gone.

### The North American continent disappoints again

In the late fifteenth century, Spain sent Christopher Columbus to find a way to the East Indies by going west, and John Cabot planted the English flag on what he thought was Asia and promptly claimed whatever it was to now belong to the Crown. No one knows for sure, but he had probably landed on what is today the Canadian provinces of Newfoundland or Nova



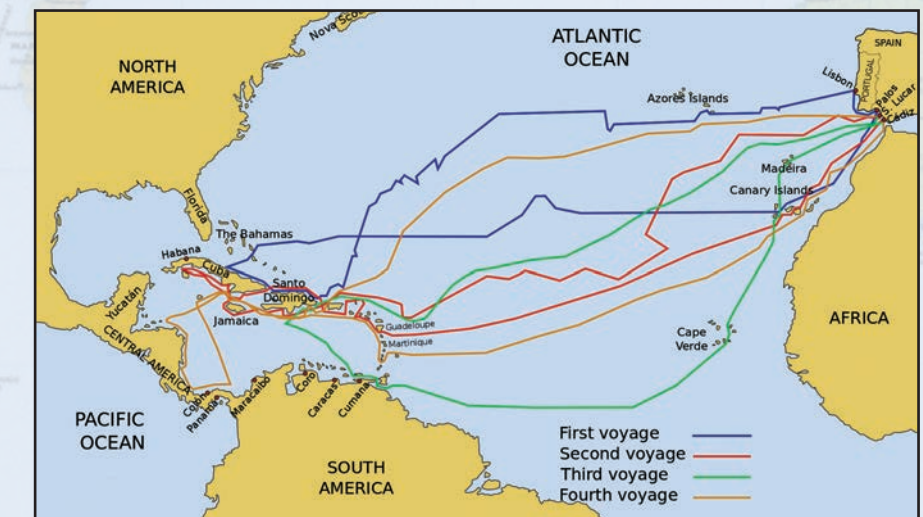
**Christopher Columbus, by artist Sebastiano del Piombo (1485-1547).**

Scotia. Once they figured out that they had bumped into a minor obstacle between their home countries and their intended destination—namely the North American continent—the rush was really on to get over it or through it, in order to get to where they thought the wealth really was—in the Far East.

Compared to Marco Polo's travel reports from the East Indies, the North American continent had little to offer; a lot of wilderness and uncivilized indigenous people who ran around half naked. The term "northwest passage" was coined in 1587 by a geographer named Richard Hakluyt who thought there had to be a passage "to go to Cathay and the East Indies."

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**Below: The four trips of Christopher Columbus to America, based on a map in Lisbon, Portugal, circa 1490.**



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Sir Martin Frobisher portrait (1577), by artist Cornelis Ketel (1548-1616).

### The rush is on!

The next two hundred years saw a steady stream of explorers and adventurers poking around the east coast of North America, looking for a way to connect through to the other side on the Pacific Ocean. You may be familiar with some of the names, if for no other reason than many locations in North America carry their names to this day: Martin Frobisher, privateer for the Crown and pirate by avocation, led three expeditions looking for the Northwest Passage and kept landing in eastern Canada, near Resolution Island and Frobisher Bay. (What a coincidence!) He lugged 1500 tons of gold ore back to England, only to discover it was iron pyrite (fool's gold), but no matter, he made up for it with profits sinking French ships. He was knighted by the Crown for his troubles.

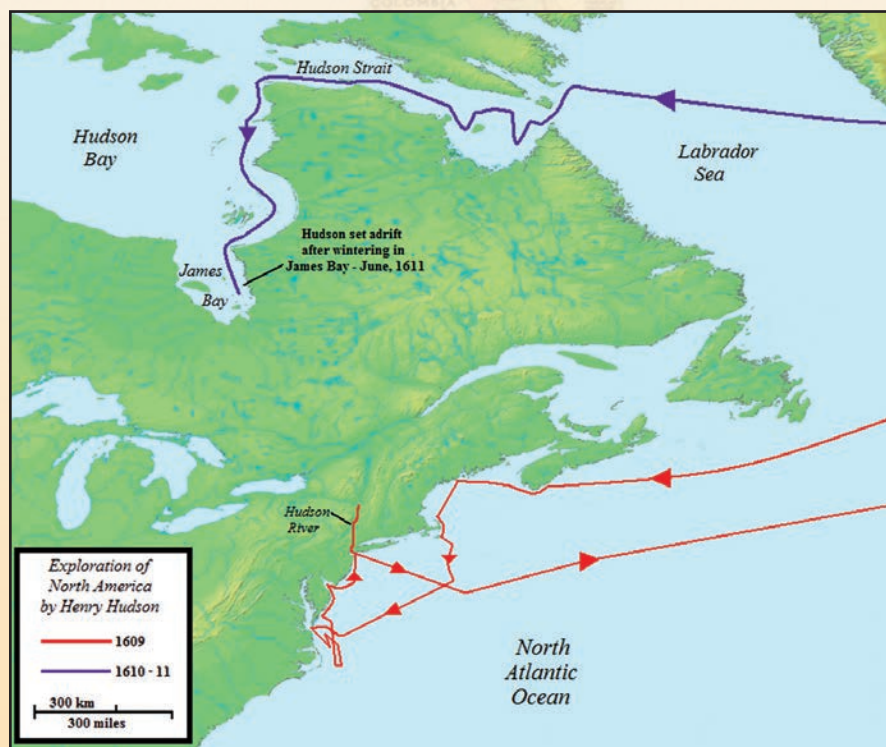
Henry Hudson was looking for a sea route to Cathay and landed near today's New York City. But since at the time he was in the employment of



A 1587 illustration from a report on England's Sir Martin Frobisher's third trip to North America in search of the Northwest Passage in 1578, describing the inhabitants as "strange unknown multitudes".

the Dutch East India Company, the Dutch claimed and colonized the area. Henry did get the river that flows past the city and empties into New York harbor named after him, however. On his last voyage, Hudson found a strait between Baffin Island and the northern tip of Quebec that could have

served as an entrance to the Northwest Passage except for the fact that the path through was always blocked by ice farther ahead. But Henry didn't know that. He did discover an immense bay, and both the strait and the bay were named after him. He wanted to press on farther west, but his men mutinied



Henry Hudson's expeditions to North America in 1609, and in 1610-1611.

and set hapless Henry, his son, and a few others adrift, never to be heard from again.

Then there was William Baffin, who served as pilot under English Captain James Hall, who was employed by the Danish King Christian IV to reestablish dominion over the Norse settlements in Greenland and to ascertain what had happened to them. The three voyages on behalf of the Danish Crown failed in their purpose, and a fourth sponsored by some investors, was directed to find the ever-elusive Northwest Passage instead. However, some annoyed Inuit put a spear through Captain Hall.

William Baffin escaped, and after a brief stint working for a whaling company at Spitzbergen far above the Arctic Circle, came back to further explore for a Northwest Passage. He progressed farther north on the west side of Greenland than anyone had before, and discovered a new bay that now bears his name. Because he had proved that there was no passage to the west that was not blocked by ice, his steps were not retraced by other

explorers for a couple hundred years. By this time, people were wondering, did a Northwest Passage even exist?

### Russia gets curious

Meanwhile, on the other side of the North American continent, the question of the day was, could a passage across the continent be achieved by going in the opposite direction, from west to east, from the Pacific to the Atlantic, from Asia to Europe? Was there a break between the eastern Asian landmass and the western edge of the North American continent? Vitus Jonassen Bering was a Danish seaman who enlisted in the Russian navy and trained in



Amsterdam. He worked on Danish whalers in the North Atlantic and had occasion to visit European colonies in the Caribbean and even the eastern seaboard of North America. He was entrusted with two expeditions by Peter the Great to find out if there was navigable deep water between the two continents. Both expeditions were named after the Kamchatka peninsula from where they originated. Even though he did not actually see North America on the first expedition, he believed it was obvious that there was clear unobstructed sea between the two continents. In 1741, he sailed for North America, sailed past Kodiak Island and made a landing at Kayak Island. On his return trip he discovered some of the Aleutian Islands. Unfortunately, he and 28 of his men never made it home, apparently succumbing to scurvy.

Captain James Cook, an excellent seaman, explorer, surveyor and cartographer, had already mapped out

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Sunrise on Eclipse Sound, which opens into Baffin Bay—named for English explorer, William Baffin.

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the coast of Newfoundland in great detail, and had circumnavigated the globe; from Australia and New Zealand to Hawaii; around South America and Africa; and he mapped out the west coast of North America from Mexico to Alaska. In 1778, while the American colonists battled the British in a war of independence on the east coast, Captain Cook sailed through the Bering Strait on the west coast of Alaska, concluding that a water passage across the North American continent was unlikely. In passing through the Bering Strait he noticed that he was west of Hawaii, longitudinally speaking. That's where he went next, and unfortunately the natives there bludgeoned him to death on the beach.

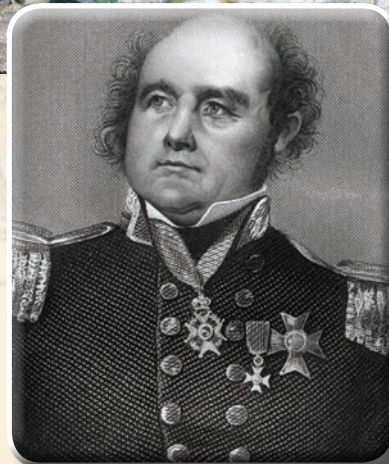
In one of the last 18th century explorations of the high northwest coast, George Vancouver, an officer under Cook in a prior voyage, also agreed that there was no passage, at least not south of the Bering Strait.

This conclusion was supported by Alexander Mackenzie, who explored the Arctic and Pacific Oceans in 1793.



### Never underestimate the Arctic

In 1845, the British Crown decided the only way to get to the bottom of this Northwest Passage mystery was to throw overwhelming resources into the effort, in true empire fashion. They lavishly equipped two ships led by Sir John Franklin. As far as they could tell, the entire Arctic Archipelago had been mapped out except for about 500 miles in the center that no one



**"The Franklin Expedition" oil painting in the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, England.**

**Left: Sir John Franklin**

incredibly, by means of DNA, forensic science may even yield the precise identity of the subjects.

### Sir Robert McClure limps across the finish line

Contemporaneously with the travails of the dying crew of the Franklin expedition, another explorer, Sir Robert McClure, finally connected all the dots at the center of the archipelago and



**Sir Robert McClure**

could seem to get through because of the ice. According to one source, the heavy ships were equipped with the latest scientific instruments, over 1,000 books, a crew of 128 men, and enough food stores to last three years. They left England, crossed the Atlantic, sailed up the west coast of Greenland, turned westward into uncharted waters, and were never heard from again. It took more than 150 years before scientists pieced together all the evidence: the ships became landlocked, the food supply was tainted, and after two years, the crew abandoned the ships and attempted escape overland by sledge.

Apparently the last starving crew members survived by cannibalism. One of the doomed ships from the Franklin expedition was discovered quite by accident just last year and some skulls of sailors have been found, that

correctly guessed the route through.

Even though the history books credit him with the discovery (at last!) of the Northwest Passage, Sir Robert never got to confirm his conviction by sailing on through, because, of course, ice blocked everything. He was locked in the ice for three winters before he and his starving crew were rescued by a search party from another explorer's ship. Sir Robert gets credit for discovering the Passage, even though he barely made it out alive.

### A Norse seafarer the first to sail through the Northwest Passage

We have to fast-forward another half century before someone actually made a verified and complete crossing of the Northwest Passage by sail only.

Perhaps learning from the Franklin debacle, Norwegian polar explorer Roald Amundsen decided to keep it small, with only six crew members, and they made the crossing in three years. Amundsen finally anchored in the west on Herschel Island, ironically discovered and named by Sir John Franklin half a century before. What is perhaps as remarkable as Amundsen's crossing of the Northwest Passage itself, is the fact that he was so exultant with his achievement he skied 500 miles one way to Eagle, Alaska, so he could telegraph his success to the world, before skiing 500 miles back to his ship



**Roald Amundsen**



**Beautiful Arctic landscape**

PHOTO: JI PEABODY

and sailing home.

Since then, all kinds of people and ships have found their way through the Northwest Passage. As the ice cap melts, there are now up to seven potential different routes through the ice pack. Adventurers of every stripe have completed the Passage, from row boats to cruise ships. Even with modern technology, satellite phones and ice updates every few minutes, the trip is fraught with danger, people continue to die and ships are lost. Even passage through the Bering Strait on the western side of the continent is no final guarantee of safety, and ships—and their masters, breathe a sigh of relief only when they make it to safe harbor in Nome, Kodiak Island, or Dutch Harbor.

Nome, of course, has a reputation all of its own to uphold, as the home of the Nome Gold Rush. As luck would have it, it was a Norwegian-American and two Swedish-Americans who discovered the gold on a beach near Nome. Word spread and soon people all over the world descended on Nome to find gold.

While Amundsen was completing his Northwest Passage, the population of Nome was swelling to 20,000, including prospectors, gamblers, claims jumpers, prostitutes and saloon keepers, including Wyatt Earp, who established the Dexter Saloon and who is reputed

to have returned to California with the tidy equivalent of over \$2 million dollars in today's money. It must have been hard to leave. After all, there's no place like Nome.

**Look for Part II in an upcoming issue of Scandinavian Press: "A Finnish captain closes a very long chapter and opens another".**



John Bechtel is a professional freelance writer for the food, wine, and tourism industries; ghostwriting non-fiction books; and web content strategist for businesses.

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