

Legends of the Arctic

EXHIBITION

The recent discovery of one of the British explorer Sir John Franklin's abandoned ships, *HMS Erebus*, in the Canadian Arctic has awoken the popular memory an era of European expeditions to the North. Franklin and his crew set off on two ships in 1845 on an ill-fated voyage

to chart the Northwest Passage — a long-sought-after sea route across the Arctic to China. An exhibition this winter at the British Library, *Lines in the Ice: Seeking the Northwest Passage*, presents a collection of books, maps, and images that document the European pursuit for the fabled trade route through the Arctic.

The exhibition begins in the 1500s. The Spanish and Portuguese controlled the southern sea routes to the East Indies, spurring northern European nations to find a northwest route to the wealth of the Far East. With each failed attempt, the legend of the Northwest Passage grew in public imagination, as shown by a map of the mythical island Thule on which great riches were believed to lie. In 1775, the British government offered a £20,000 prize to the discoverer of the Northwest Passage, a huge sum at that time.

Perhaps the most fascinating item in the exhibition is not from the explorers, but from Arctic natives. Two pieces of undulating wood carved by the Inuit are in fact 3D maps of Greenland's coastline. These maps are designed to be felt, not looked at, and are the precursors to the modern era of 3D map-making from remote sensing data.

The second part of the exhibition begins at the end of the Napoleonic wars when Britain had the men, ships, and confidence to pursue the challenge of conquering the Northwest Passage. The two contrasting sides of multi-year voyages — excitement and boredom — are captured in the juxtaposition of an image of crew members playing cricket while their ship was locked



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A photograph taken during the Arctic expedition of 1875–1876 on display in *Lines in the Ice*.

in ice over winter with documents relating to failed rescue attempts to find Franklin's doomed expedition.

The Northwest Passage was finally navigated by the Norwegian Roald Amundsen between 1903 and 1906. His journey put an end to almost 400 years of European attempts to find the elusive fabled way through the ice. The exhibition ends a century later in modern times. The climate is warming and Arctic sea ice is retreating. Once again, northern Europe is looking at the Arctic and its resources as new sea routes become navigable.

The exhibition is audibly overwhelmed by a soundtrack of Arctic nature sounds

that distracts from the carefully selected collection of old books and maps. The growling polar bears, creaking icebergs and splashing waves are from the British Library's sound archive, a reminder that there is much more to curate from the human experience of the Arctic than can be found on paper. □

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■ *Lines in the Ice: Seeking the Northwest Passage* (<http://www.bl.uk/events/lines-in-the-ice-seeking-the-northwest-passage>) runs until 29 March 2015 at the British Library, London, UK.