

Across the top of the world: The quest for the Northwest Passage

By James P. Delgado

The following excerpt is reprinted with permission from James P. Delgado, Executive Director, Vancouver Maritime Museum, from his book *Across the top of the world: The quest for the Northwest Passage* (p.p. 180–195). — Editor



Britain, its interest in the Northwest Passage at an end, had ceded its interest in the Arctic to the new Dominion of Canada in 1880, largely to forestall American claims to the archipelago. Yet Canada had done little to claim, hold or protect its interests in the Arctic, leaving it to whalers, traders, occasional explorers and missionaries. Many of these were foreigners, including Norwegians and Danes who contested Canada's ownership and control of the Arctic archipelago.

Ottawa had remained unworried about the north until the influx of American gold seekers into the Yukon induced it to send in the North West Mounted Police in 1894. A few years later, the Canadian government began to view the major American whaling outpost on Herschel Island, 90 miles past the United States-Canadian border, as a threat to its claims of sovereignty in the Arctic. Missionary complaints that the whalers who wintered at Herschel were "debauching" the Inuit were another concern. Plans to send the Mounted Police into the Arctic to establish a detachment at Herschel Island had been tentatively formulated in 1900, but it was not until 1903

that the Mounties made their first patrol of the island and the surrounding region.

Despite the difficulties of supply and isolation, and the hardships of a barren, desolate land, the Mounties established a permanent post on Herschel Island. The two-man detachment collected customs, maintained law and order, and stopped the trading of liquor to the Inuit. Over the next few years, the force, now renamed the Royal Northwest Mounted Police, established other posts on Hudson Bay and in the eastern Arctic. Canada's interest in the north was growing, particularly after Otto Sverdrup's 1902 northern islands expedition and Amundsen's traverse of the Northwest Passage in 1903–6.

In 1904, as part of a national plan by the government of Sir Wilfrid Laurier to assert sovereignty in the Arctic, the Canadian Polar Expedition, under the command of Joseph Elzear Bernier, was diverted from its intended three-year exploration of the maritime approaches to the North Pole. Instead, Bernier and his vessel, *Arctic*, were placed under the command of Mounted Police Superintendent J.D. Moodie and sent north to "show the flag," as well as to serve as a base for patrols through the region. In a series of three voyages (1906–7, 1908–9 and 1910–11), the "eastern Arctic Patrol" of the Mounted Police and Captain Bernier left a series of plaques and cairns proclaiming Canada's ownership of the Arctic archipel-