

CHAP. I.

Renewal of
old projects.

North-west
passage.

Valueless-
ness of the
object.

Books and
memoirs.

were in 1818 renewed, and embraced with excessive ardour by the English government. For two or three years previous to that date, the captains of ships employed in the northern whale-fishery had generally concurred in representing the Arctic Sea as of a sudden become almost open and accessible to the adventurous navigator. By the more speculative relaters, it was supposed that the vast icy barrier, which for many ages had obstructed those dreary regions, was at last, by some revolution of our globe, broken up and dispersed. The project of finding a north-west passage to Asia,—a project so often attempted and so long abandoned,—was by consequence again revived; and the more daring scheme of penetrating to the Pole itself had likewise been seriously proposed. Of the complete success of either plan the hopes of sober thinkers were indeed extremely slender; yet the prospect held forth seemed to be more inviting, on the whole, than at any former period when such bold undertakings were attempted. The discovery of a north-west passage, were it ever attainable, could hardly, it is true, be of any real benefit to our commerce; since in such high latitudes, where alone it could be found, it would at all times be very precarious, and liable to interruption from the prevalence of ice. The scheme of actually reaching that northern point on the surface of our globe which terminates its axis of rotation, however interesting in a philosophical view, can only be regarded as an object of pure curiosity, and not likely to lead to any useful or practical results. Yet was it befitting the character of a great maritime nation to embrace every chance of improving geographical knowledge, as well as of extending the basis of natural science; and accordingly, about sixty years ago, the Board of Admiralty resolved to fit out an expedition for the express purpose of exploring the Arctic Ocean.

The books and memoirs which contained the latest accounts of the state of the northern seas, either suggested the enterprise then pursued, or were brought