

The Geography Collection

Paul Auchterlonie

The nineteenth century was the century of exploration and discovery and the proprietors of the DEI followed the adventures of these brave men (and occasional women) all over the globe from the deserts of Arabia through the jungles of Equatorial Africa to the frozen wastes of the Arctic.

The geography collection on the DEI (class G now shelved in the gallery) contains some of the most interesting books of the period and Saturday's talk was an opportunity to discuss the Institution's collection chronicling the exploration of the North-West Passage which was undertaken under the aegis of Sir John Barrow, Second Secretary of the Admiralty for almost forty years.

During Barrow's time in office (1804-1845), he sponsored numerous voyages to the Arctic by John Ross, Ross' nephew James Clark Ross, William Edward Parry, and finally John Franklin, whose final voyage in 1845 ended in tragedy with the loss of both ships and all the crew. The DEI holds the published records of almost all these voyages, and indeed some of those undertaken after Barrow's death in 1846. Some modern critics (e.g. Fergus Fleming in *Barrow's Boys* – available in the DEI at 910.9 FLE) have criticised the use of so much money and so many men on such an economically unprofitable enterprise as the quest for the North-West Passage, but clearly the books, with their heroic tales of courage and endurance, fitted in the Victorian proprietors' view of Britain as a great imperial nation, and one whose Navy whose full of intrepid explorers who could rise to any challenge.