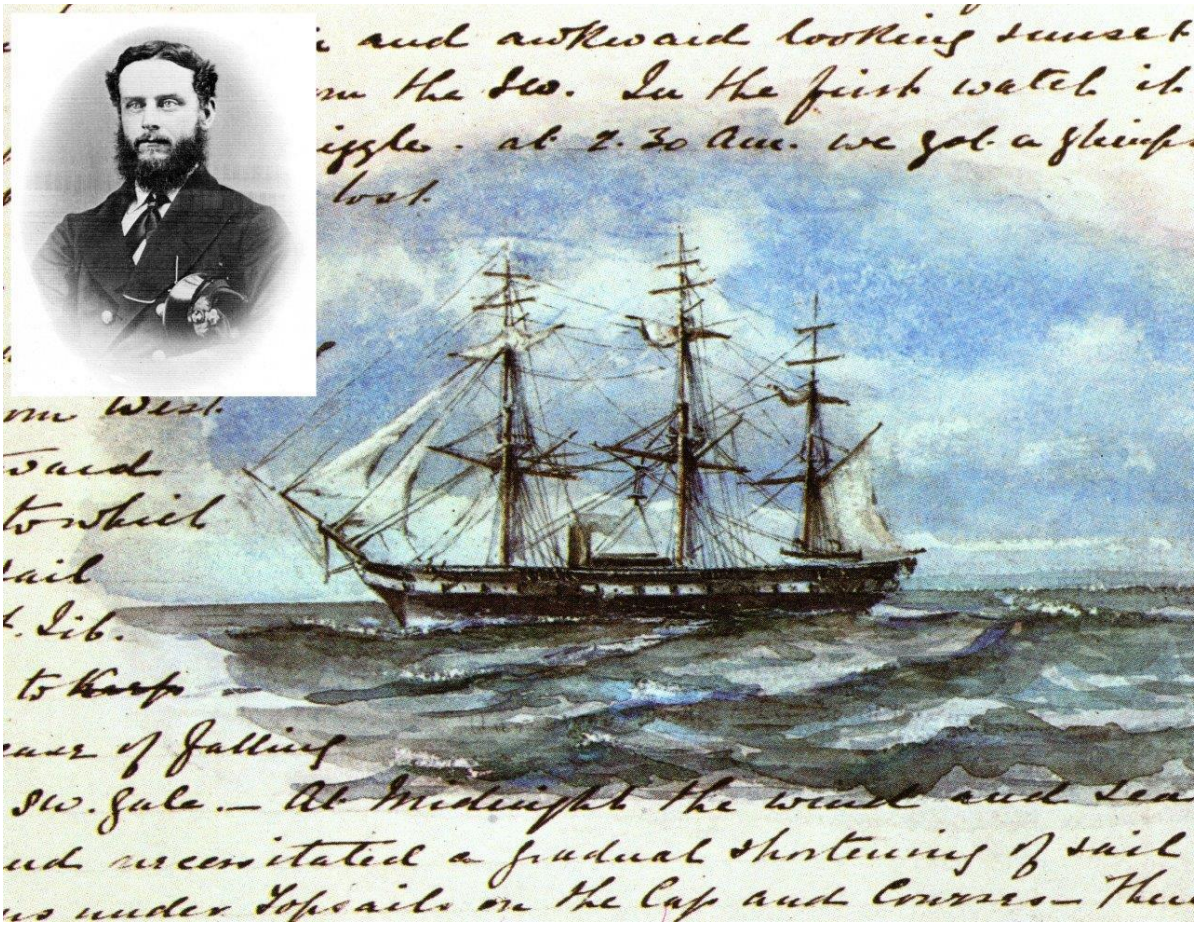
Able Seaman George Winstone: Three Historic Journeys

by Glenn M. Stein, FRGS, FRCGS

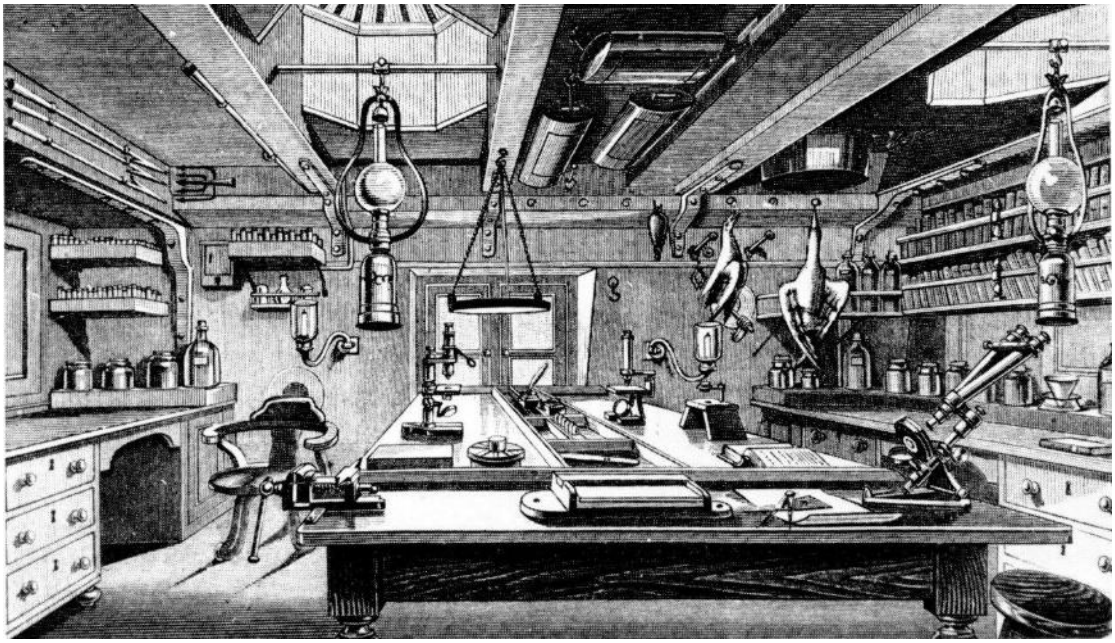
A greatly expanded version of “Able Seaman George Winstone” from *The Polar Times* (July 2007).

In the decade leading up to the First International Polar Year (1882-83), during which 11 nations were set to cooperate in the study of the physical nature of the polar regions by establishing 14 research stations, three British naval expeditions made major contributions to science. Only three individuals participated in all three voyages – one of them was a Gloucester County youth.



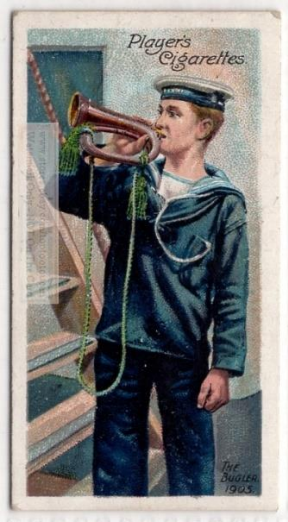
The first page of Senior Lieutenant Pelham Aldrich’s journal, with his watercolor sketch of *Challenger* (Royal Geographical Society) **and Aldrich, inset.** (Moseley Albums, University of Oxford)

When HMS *Challenger* put to sea from Portsmouth on December 21, 1872, under Captain George S. Nares, the three-masted corvette was equipped with auxiliary steam power and had been converted from a ship of war into a floating laboratory. Seventeen-year-old, 5’ 6” Boy 1st Class George Winstone formed part of her crew.



Zoological laboratory on *Challenger*'s main deck. (*Challenger* Reports)

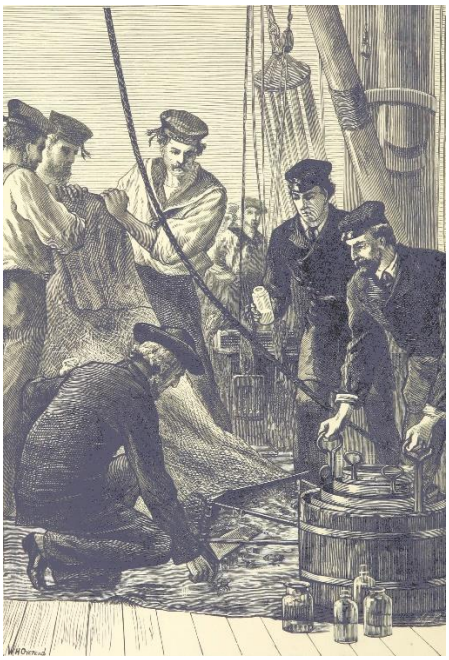
Over 75 1st class boys (aged 16-18) were aboard under training, having previously shown sufficient proficiency in seamanship while serving between nine months and 18 months rated as 2nd class boys. One of these *Challenger* youths, George Laybourne, was designated the "Boy's Bugler Boy," and tasked with sounding orders like reveille – the morning wake up call.



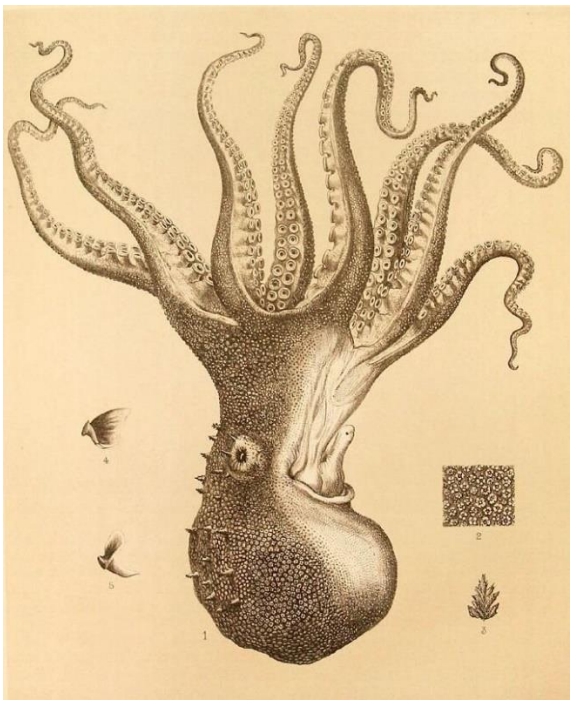
Royal Navy Bugle Boy. (Player's Cigarettes card, c. 1905)

Part of boys' development included sessions with Naval Schoolmaster Adam Ebbels, who taught reading, writing and arithmetic. By regulations, while all boys were required to be instructed by the schoolmaster, education for petty officers, sailors and marines was strictly voluntary. In practice it was up to commanders of vessels to allow men and boys to attend school "consistently with the proper discharge of the duties of the ship".

Ebbels looked after one young boy onboard in particular, wrote Ship's Steward's Assistant Joseph Matkin: "The Captain has his only son on board, a little lad of 10 years, he intended taking him as far as Sydney with us where he was going to school. The Schoolmaster was educating him in the meantime".



***Challenger*'s main deck with dredging & sounding arrangements** (*Challenger* Reports) **and examining a haul onboard, by W.H. Overend.** (Whymper, 1887)



Octopus and Tasmanian Giant Crab, by Artist & Secretary J.J. Wild. (*Challenger* Reports)

A sailor's life was hard, and deck operations were hazardous. As Matkin wrote from Bermuda to a cousin, the *Challenger*'s crew experienced sharp blows when mortal souls were carried away from their ship:

The dredge was hove overboard, and the strain on the line was so great when it reached the bottom, that when they commenced hauling it in, it carried away an iron block that was screwed to the Deck, and had all the strain to bear. The block as it flew up struck a sailor boy, named [William] *Stokes, on the head, & dashed him to the deck with such a terrible force, that his thigh was broken, and his spine dreadfully injured. He was carried to the Sick Bay and attended to by the Surgeons, but he was insensible the whole time, and only lived two hours.*

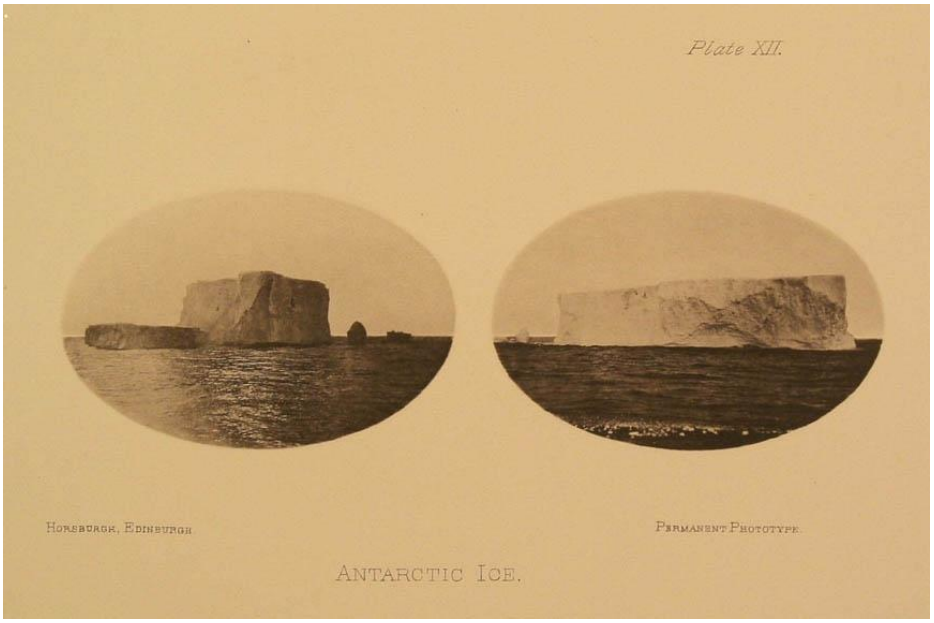
Stokes' body was buried at sea the next day, during the final week of March 1873.

Ebbels' grave and memorial to Stokes in Bermuda, 1873
(Moseley Albums, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford)

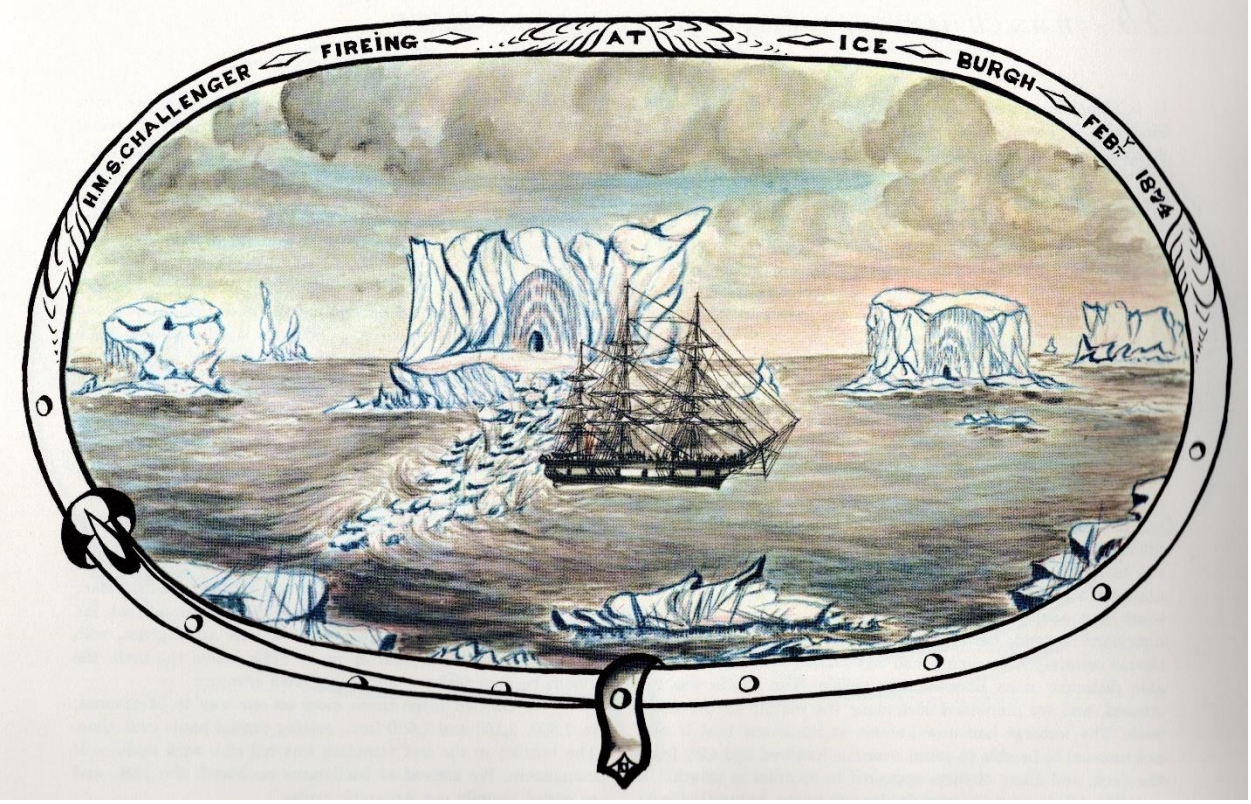
Then, the schoolmaster Ebbels died in his sleep of a stroke on April 4 – on his 32nd birthday. "This makes the fourth sudden death on board since we commissioned, and hope we shall have no more," lamented Matkin. It was November before a 21-year-old naval schoolmaster named Christopher A. Storry took over the teaching duties for the rest of the voyage.

***Challenger* seamen and marines, St. Thomas, West Indies (March 1873); Winstone sitting far right.** (Moseley Albums, Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford)

During the voyage Winstone's grey eyes saw an astounding variety of plants, creatures and formations in the natural world. Among these were icebergs in both the Arctic and Antarctic, captured in rare early images by the camera's eye.



Antarctic Ice. (*Challenger* Reports)



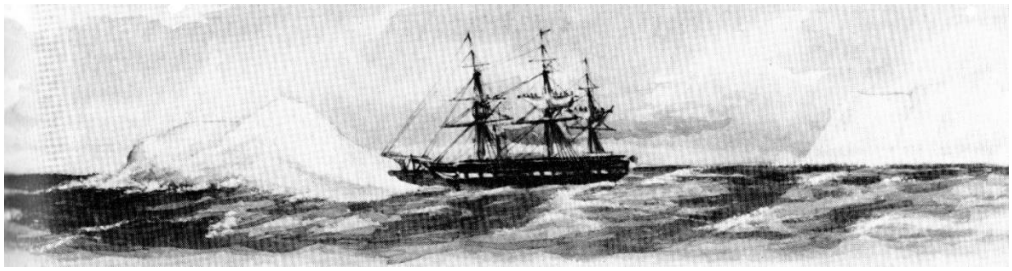
"H.M.S. CHALLENGER FIREING AT ICE BURGH FEB^{Y} 1874" – A series of watercolors originally attributed to Benjamin Shephard/Shepherd for the last 50 years, have now been correctly assigned to John J. Arthur, Painter 1st Class (Arthur, 1967 and Stewart & Henderson, 1972)**.**

Benjamin Shepherd's Egypt and Sudan Medal 1882-89/Suakin 1885 and Khedive's Star (1884-6), earned while he was a cooper (barrel maker) in HMS *Tyne*. (ex-Glenn M. Stein Collection)

In addition, many uncharted harbors and coastlines were surveyed, including the sub-Antarctic island of Îles Kerguelen, in the southern reaches of the Indian Ocean. In January 1874, an observation station was set up on Kerguelen for tracking the transit of Venus later that year. This was *Challenger*'s main reason for visiting the island. A transit across the Sun occurs when

Venus passes directly between the Sun and a superior planet, and becomes visible against the Sun. Venus can be seen from Earth as a small black dot moving across the face of the Sun.

On February 16, 1874, ten days after leaving Îles Kerguelen, *Challenger* became the first steamship in history to cross the Antarctic Circle. But the enchanting beauty of the southern polar regions, with its glimmering floating ice palaces, was soon masked by a gale and snowstorm. The ship took shelter under the lee of a huge iceberg, and in the process, a circular current flung the ship headlong into the ice, carrying away her jib boom. A narrow shave, but she survived.



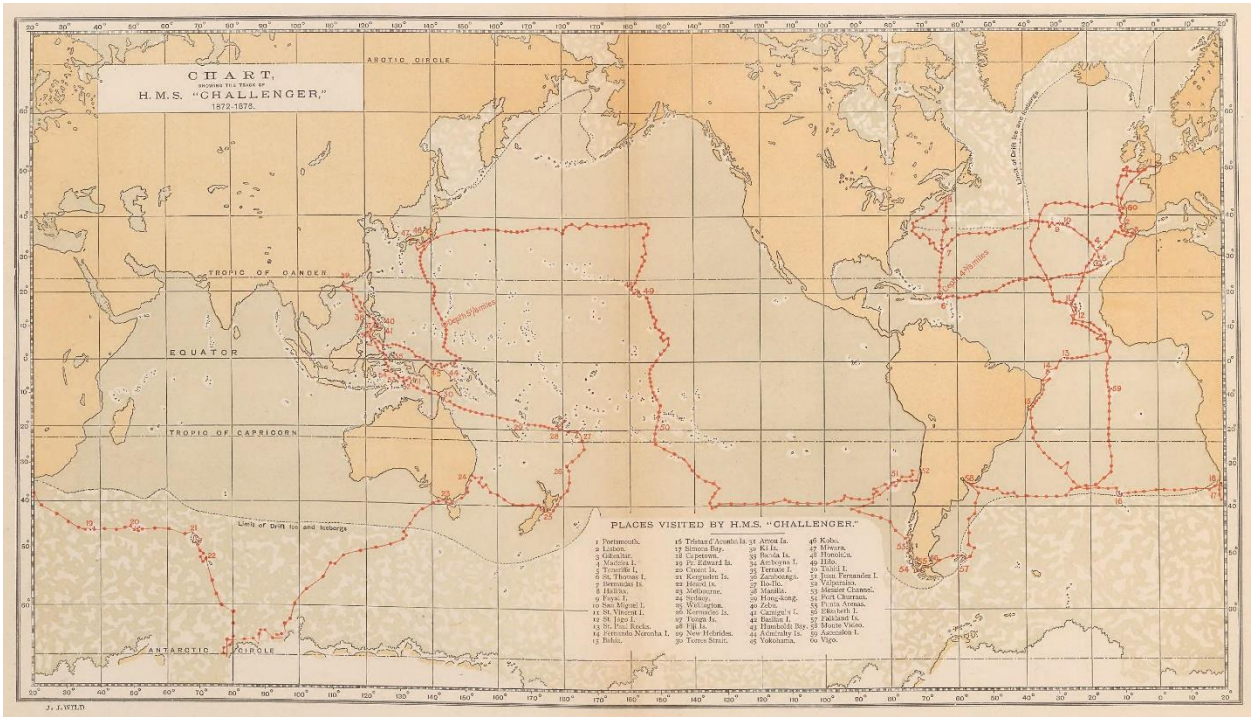
***Challenger*'s encounter with an iceberg in Aldrich's journal** (Royal Geographical Society)

After leaving Antarctic waters, *Challenger* made her way to Melbourne, Australia and eventually found herself in Hong Kong by year's end. It was at this Far Eastern British colony that Captain Nares, Senior Lieutenant Pelham Aldrich, Petty Officer 1st Class Joseph Good – along with his nephew George Winstone – and Domestic 1st Class Spero Capato parted company with the expedition. Good was the captain's coxswain and described by Joseph Matkin as "one of the finest and most popular seaman we had in the ship," while Capato was his steward. It seems most likely Good put in a word with Nares, and young Winstone was off on his next adventure. They all returned to England to prepare for a major Arctic expedition.

Captain George S. Nares, wearing his Arctic Medal 1818-55. (Wellcome Collection)

Aldrich, Good, Capato and Winstone as they appeared in 1875. (National Maritime Museum)

Captain Frank T. Thomson saw the oceanographic expedition through to its conclusion on May 24, 1876, when *Challenger* arrived at Spithead. The ship and crew had logged 127,634 kilometers (68,890 nautical miles) and spent 719 days at sea. Along with daily magnetic observations from around the world, and establishing 362 observation stations, thousands of new species of marine life were added to science. Her worldwide oceanographic voyage ushered in the modern science of oceanography.

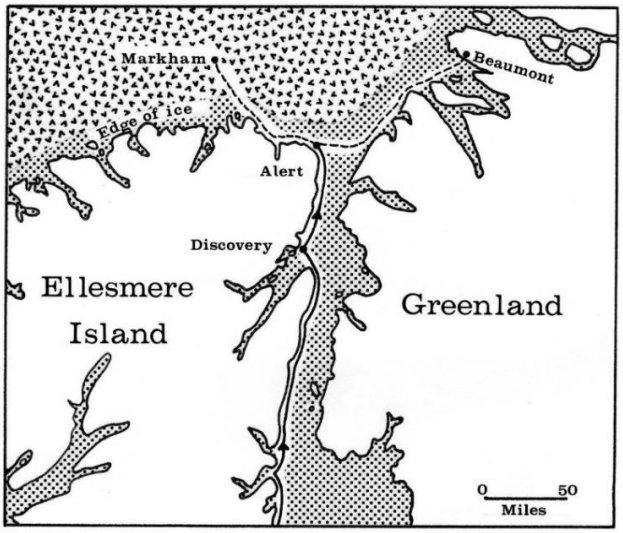


***Challenger*'s Route** (Wild, 1878)

The *Challenger* Medal (1895) awarded to Dr. George Busk, a parasitologist, zoologist and palaeontologist, for his work on polyzoa from the expedition. The medal was privately issued to mostly expedition officers and scientists onboard and scientists who afterward worked up the results. The obverse commemorates the voyage, while the reverse commemorates work on the *Challenger* Reports. (Dix Noonan Webb; ex-Glenn M. Stein Collection)

Winstone had the distinction of being the youngest member of the new Arctic expedition composed of a two-ship squadron, HMS *Alert* and *Discovery*, with Nares in overall command. In the midst of his time aboard *Challenger* Winstone was promoted to ordinary seaman, and by March 1875, he was rated an able seaman in the *Alert*.

In the fall of that year, *Discovery* established winter quarters at the north end of Kennedy Channel in the High Arctic, a place now known as Discovery Harbor. *Alert* went further up the coast of Ellesmere Land (later discovered to be an island) making her winter quarters on the northeastern corner, at Floeberg Beach.



Winter quarters of *Alert* and *Discovery* 1875-76, and tracks of Markham's and Beaumont's sledge parties in 1876. (Glenn M. Stein, 1996)

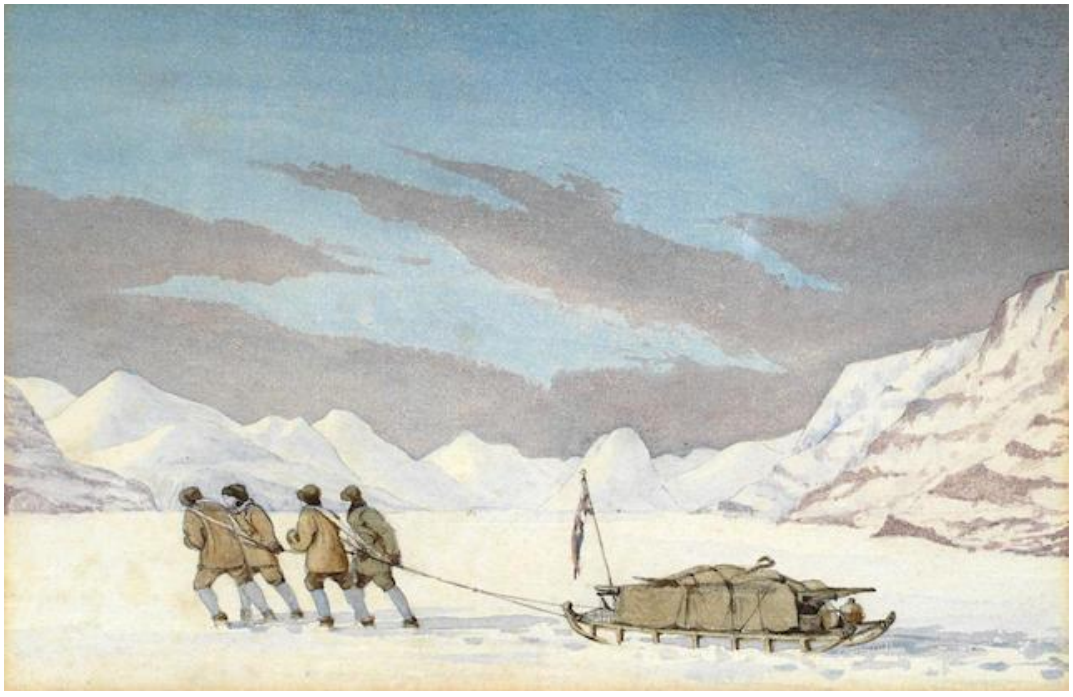
***Alert* cutting an ice dock in Dobbin Bay, August 14, 1875.** (*Photographs of Arctic Expedition of 1875-76*)

***Discovery* in winter quarters.** (*Photographs of Arctic Expedition of 1875-76*)

Morning inspection and prayers in *Alert*, by Surgeon Edward Moss. (Moss, 1878)

***Alert* in winter quarters, by Surgeon Edward Moss.** (Moss, 1878)

Newly formed floebergs; *Alert* visible in the background. (*Photographs of Arctic Expedition of 1875-76*)



Team pulling a sledge, by Sub-Lieutenant Crawford Conybeare, HMS *Discovery*. (Bonhams)

In the autumn Winstone joined the Northern Depot Laying Party, putting down supplies for next spring's sledge party and the expedition's primary objective: the North Pole.

During the spring of 1876 the main sledge parties departed from both ships. One party from *Discovery* surveyed a deep fjord to the south, now called Archer Fjord, after the officer commanding the party. The Greenland Sledge Party (Lieutenant Beaumont) also set off from this ship to determine the distance land extended to the north. Meanwhile, the Western Sledge Party (Lieutenant Aldrich) made its way from *Alert*, along the northern coast of Ellesmere.

Preparing to start on a sledge journey. (*The Illustrated London News*, May 25, 1875)

Winstone had a place in the Northern Sledge Party under Lieutenant Markham. As it proceeded on its journey over the frozen sea, Markham's men not only dragged sledges, but also two sledge-mounted boats, in case leads of water were encountered on the march. The journey was agonizing, and one boat was abandoned on the way.

On the sledging trail. (from a contemporary publication)

In its 72 days away from *Alert*, the party encountered massive pressure ridges and shifting ice. Progress was very slow, and insidious scurvy attacked the men. If left untreated, scurvy is invariably fatal. The early stages of the disease produce any of the following symptoms: gums become soft, tender and spongy, and teeth fall out; internal bleeding, and spots appear in various parts of the body, more so on the thighs and legs, looking like small blood-blisters, red and purple in color; severe joint and muscular pain; skin becomes pale, eyes are sunken, and the victim may be extremely irritable and appears depressed. Exhaustion, diarrhea, fainting, kidney or lung disease follow.

Tuesday, May 9: "… [three men] and George Winstone (A.B.), of the [sledge] "Victoria," are also complaining of great stiffness and soreness of the legs, some of which show slight symptoms of discolouration on the inside parts of their thighs and under the bends of their knees."

Sunday, May 21: "Ferbrache can scarcely move one leg before another; Rawlings, Simpson, and Winstone, are nearly as bad; yet they resolutely maintain their places on the drag ropes. … All the of the party are more or less suffering from stiffness and aching bones."

By the time a furthest north record was achieved on May 12 (latitude 83º 20' 26" N), it was a fight for survival to get back to the ship. One by one, crippled sledgers fell out of the drag ropes and some were so bad off they had to be put on sledges. The other boat was also eventually abandoned. Markham recorded the sufferings in his sledge journal:

Tuesday, June 6: “Winstone will scarcely last the day, and is of very little use on the drag ropes; but he perseveres bravely.”

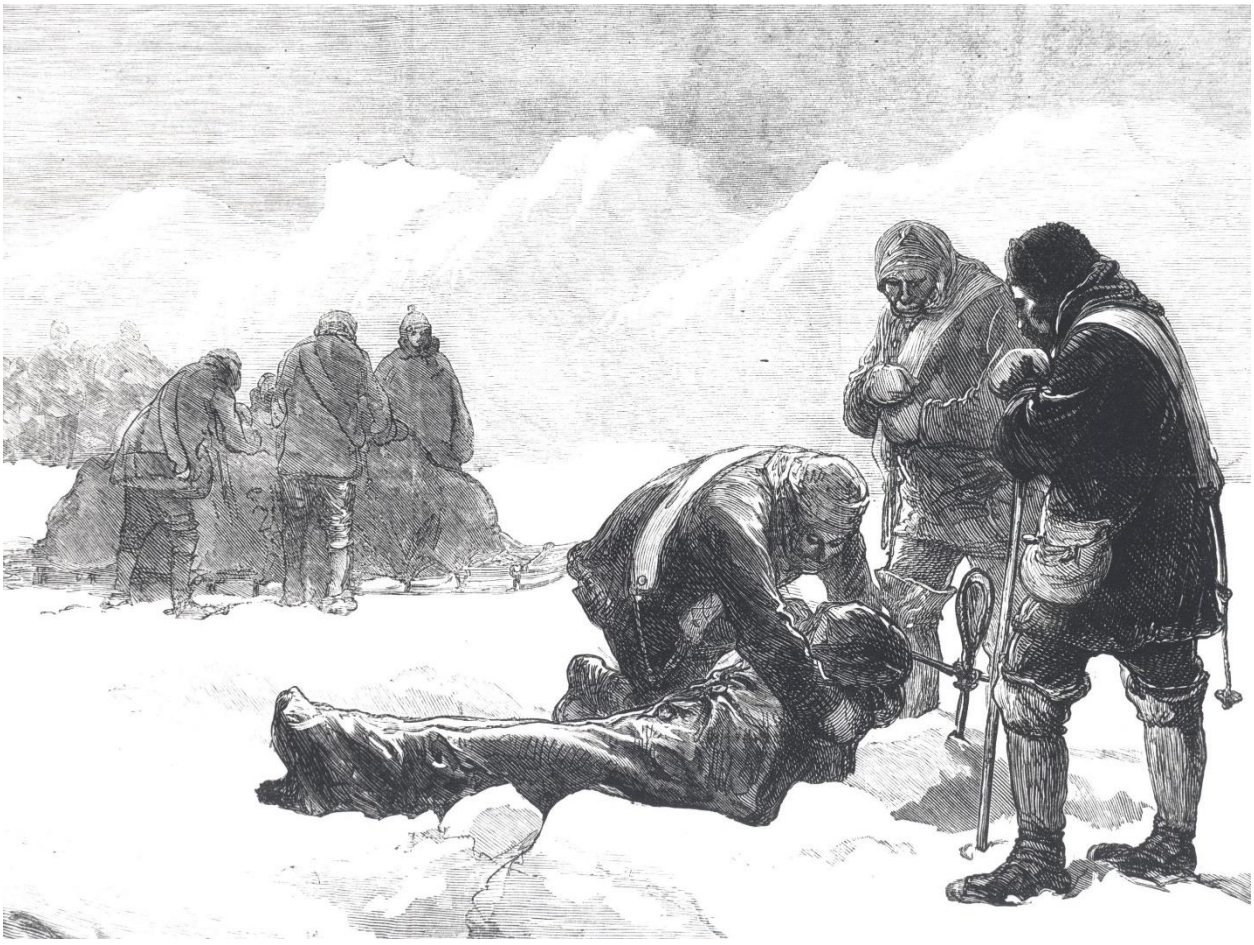
Wednesday, June 7: “Winstone is unable any longer to work on the drag ropes, and has to join our trail of “hobblers” in rear of the sledges.” … “We are pulling 220 lbs. per man, and, as the snow is very deep, we find it hard work.”

On the same day, the strongest man of the party, Lieutenant Alfred Parr, made a dash for help, 30 miles to the *Alert* – it was their only chance of everyone getting back alive.

Lieutenant Parr setting off to bring help. (*The Illustrated London News*, November 11, 1876)

The following day Royal Marine artilleryman George Porter died and was buried on an ice floe; hoping to save his life, his comrades had dragged him on a sledge for seven weeks.

An advance dog sledge rescue party arrived from the ship on June 9. Out of the Northern Sledge Party’s original 15 men, only three were capable of dragging a sledge. In view of their condition, Nares sent out relief for the Ellesmere Sledge Party; as it turned out, it too was ravaged by scurvy, with only its officer fit to pull the ropes.



Marine George Porter's funeral on the ice, 82º 41'. (*The Illustrated London News*, November 11, 1876)

Sledgers from *Discovery* were facing similar agonies, and had to be rescued. By June 1876, four sledgers had lost their lives to disease and the elements, and scurvy was eating away at many of their shipmates.

Though he was expected to stay in the Arctic until 1877, Captain Nares realized his people could not survive another winter, and he prepared to head for home.

Because the press oversold the entire venture to the public (particularly the unrealistic goal of reaching the North Pole), people lost sight of the expedition's geographical and scientific accomplishments: Three hundred miles of new coastline was discovered, as well as a large section of the Arctic region; attainment of the highest latitude known to have been reached by humans; discovery of a fossil forest at 82º north latitude; observations of mammals and birds, and a complete collection of flora of the most northern known region were but some of its achievements.

Individual recognition from the British government was forthcoming in the form of a specially struck silver Arctic Medal. Suspended from a plain white ribbon, the obverse features the crowned and veiled bust of Queen Victoria, with the legend VICTORIA / REGINA / 1876. The reverse depicts the *Alert* in winter quarters, and has the feel of a telescopic view of the ship in the vast polar landscape, punctuated by broken ice, with heavy clouds above. Notably, the scene is devoid of human life, further adding to the reality of isolation and starkness in an ocean of chaotic ice and snow.

Winstone's Arctic Medal 1875-76; it can be traced to Sotheby's London auction house as early as 1894; now in a private collection. (Spencer J. Fisher; ex-Glenn M. Stein Collection)

Every man on the expedition, or their next-of-kin, was entitled to the award. It was the first time a British medal's reverse design was taken directly from a photograph, and there may have been a practical reason for this choice. The *Alert* and *Discovery* did not reach England until November 1876, and the earliest dispatch of the medal was apparently April 1877. A time element was at work, with bureaucratic wheels were set in motion upon the expedition's return, so some medals reached recipients within six months; each medal's edge being engraved with the recipient's name, rank/rate and ship.

And what of George Winstone? He was only 21 years of age when the *Alert* returned home, with "Exemplary" conduct noted during the expedition. He then went to the gunnery training vessel *Excellent*, however at one point his conduct dropped down to only "Fair". While onboard he qualified as a diver in August 1878.

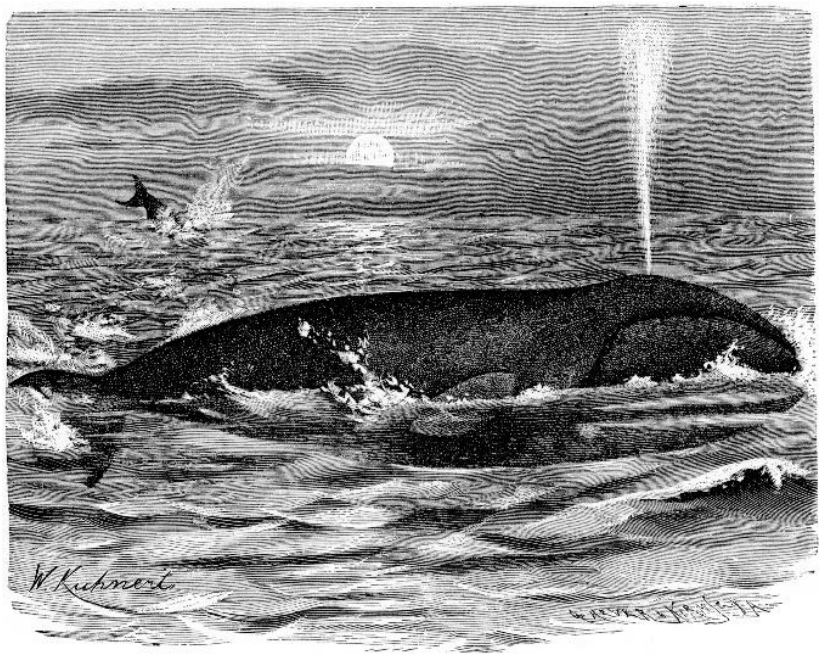
The very next month, Winstone returned to *Alert*, and was again under Nares' command. Spero Capato also returned as his captain's steward. This time the mission was a survey expedition to

the Straits of Magellan – a navigable sea route in southern Chile, separating mainland South America to the north and Tierra del Fuego to the south – and then on to the South Pacific. The latter covered the coasts of northeastern Australia and Torres Straits, and among the groups of Oceanic Islands in the Western Indian Ocean situated between Madagascar and the Seychelles.

Via Madeira, St. Vincent, Montevideo and the Falkland Islands, the Straits of Magellan were reached on New Year's Day 1879. During 1879 and the first half of 1880, *Alert* surveyed the coast of Patagonia, that vast southernmost tip of South America shared by Argentina and Chile and divided by the Andes Mountains, which yielded a variety of strange creatures.

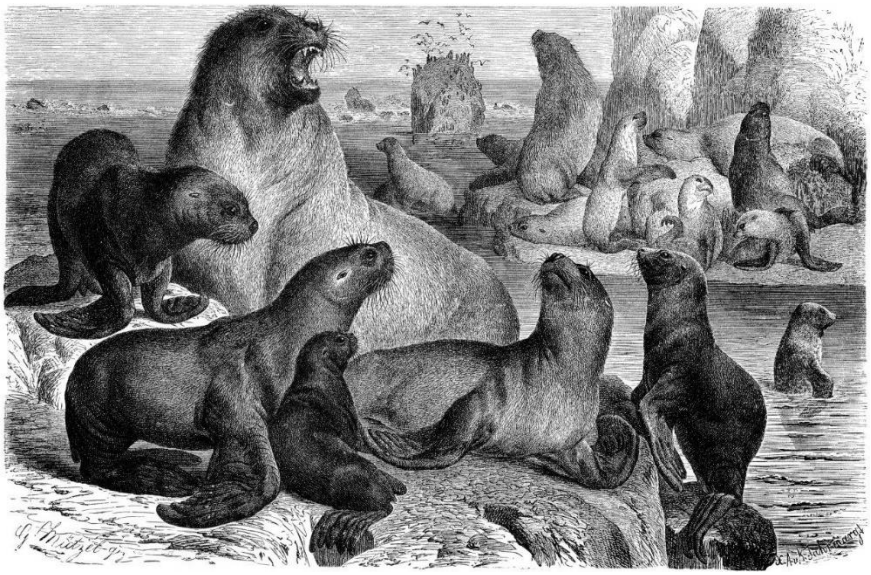
The Chilean Patagonian Coast. (travel.usnews.com)

Nares was recalled after only one season to take up the post of Marine Adviser to the Board of Trade and left the ship in March 1879 (Capato departed two months later). Captain John Maclear, Nares former second-in-command aboard *Challenger*, took over the helm until Alert returned to port in September 1882.



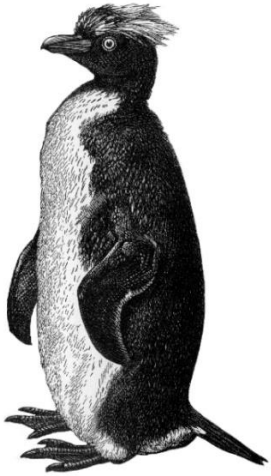
Southern Right Whale. (W. Kuhnert; Harter, 1979)

Mainly through the efforts of naturalist Staff Surgeon Richard W. Coppinger (a *Discovery* veteran), there was shallow dredging, tow netting and other biological collecting throughout the voyage. This work eventually added 1,300 species to the National Collection; "of these more than one third (490) were new additions, if not to science, at any rate to the Museum."



Southern Sea Lions (G. Mitzel; Harter, 1979)

Reports on the Patagonian collection appeared in a series of papers published in the *Proceedings* of the Zoological Society for 1881, and were presented to the British Museum. The collection amassed from the other regions was presented to the British Museum (Natural History), and was so extensive, at the suggestion of Dr. Günther, the Keeper of the Zoological Department, "the Trustees sanctioned the publication of a special volume to carry the reports on it."

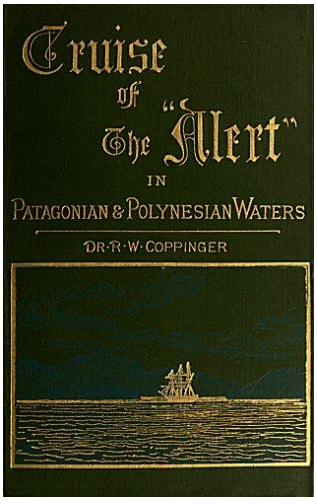


Southern Rockhopper Penguin (Harter, 1979)

Coquimbo, Chile, 1885. (httpchiledel1900.blogspot.com)

Even though Winstone's conduct had risen to "Very Good" on this second cruise aboard *Alert*, evidently something changed, and he became disenchanted with the Navy and/or seagoing life. While the ship was anchored at Coquimbo, Chile in June 1880, Able Seaman Winstone deserted. Perhaps a more romantic explanation might be that he was lured away by stories of the Australian gold rush and the South African diamond and gold mines?

Whatever the reason, Winstone's thoughts during this time are like unfilled pages of a journal.



Dr. Coppinger's book on the *Alert* expedition.

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