

J.E. Bernier's Claims to Fame

Alan MacEachern

Volume 33, Number 2, 2010

Comparative Issues in the History of Circumpolar Science and Technology

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1006150ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1006150ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

CSTHA/AHSTC

ISSN

0829-2507 (print)

1918-7750 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

MacEachern, A. (2010). J.E. Bernier's Claims to Fame. *Scientia Canadensis*, 33(2), 43–73. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1006150ar>

Article abstract

On 1 July 1909, in the course of patrolling the Arctic on behalf of Canada, Captain J.E. Bernier claimed for Canada the territory between its east and west mainland borders all the way to the North Pole—that is, the entire Arctic Archipelago. Although the legitimacy of his act was considered dubious even by his own government, it introduced the “sector principle” to international practice and has since become a staple in the nation’s claims to Arctic sovereignty. But focus on Bernier’s sector claim has obscured attention from his four voyages for Canada in the first decade of the century, and paradoxically left the broader context for his claim unexplored. This essay frames his 1909 act in relation to his decade-long quest to win fame as Canada’s competitor in the race to the North Pole. The article’s specific contributions are in revealing that Bernier actually made a sector claim during his previous cruise; that his connections in 1908 with American polar challengers Peary and Cook encouraged his 1909 decision; and that although the Dominion Day proclamation was what he would be remembered for, Bernier himself later ascribed surprisingly little significance to it.

J.E. Bernier's Claims to Fame¹

Alan MacEachern
University of Western Ontario

Abstract: On 1 July 1909, in the course of patrolling the Arctic on behalf of Canada, Captain J.E. Bernier claimed for Canada the territory between its east and west mainland borders all the way to the North Pole—that is, the entire Arctic Archipelago. Although the legitimacy of his act was considered dubious even by his own government, it introduced the “sector principle” to international practice and has since become a staple in the nation’s claims to Arctic sovereignty. But focus on Bernier’s sector claim has obscured attention from his four voyages for Canada in the first decade of the century, and paradoxically left the broader context for his claim unexplored. This essay frames his 1909 act in relation to his decade-long quest to win fame as Canada’s competitor in the race to the North Pole. The article’s specific contributions are in revealing that Bernier actually made a sector claim during his previous cruise; that his connections in 1908 with American polar challengers Peary and Cook encouraged his 1909 decision; and that although the Dominion Day proclamation was what he would be remembered for, Bernier himself later ascribed surprisingly little significance to it.

Résumé : Le 1^{er} Juillet 1909, au cours de patrouilles dans l’Arctique menées au nom du Gouvernement du Canada, le capitaine J.E. Bernier revendique pour le pays un territoire allant de ses frontières continentales est et ouest jusqu’au Pôle Nord – c’est-à-dire, l’ensemble de l’archipel Arctique. Bien que la légitimité de cette action soit considérée comme douteuse, même par son propre gouvernement, elle marque néanmoins l’introduction du principe de « secteur » dans la pratique internationale, devenu depuis un élément crucial dans les revendications canadiennes de souveraineté en Arctique. L’importance accordée aux revendications sectorielles de Bernier a toutefois mis en arrière-plan ses quatre voyages effectués pour le Canada dans la première décennie du siècle, et paradoxalement, a occulté le contexte plus large dans lequel ces revendications ont pris forme. Cet essai situe l’acte de 1909 par rapport à la longue quête de Bernier – s’échelonnant sur plus de 10 ans – pour être reconnu en tant que compétiteur canadien dans la course au pôle Nord. Cet

1. Versions of this paper were presented at the Peary Centennial Symposium held at the Peary-MacMillan Arctic Museum, Bowdoin College, Maine and to the University of Western Ontario History Department Seminar Series; my thanks to both audiences for their useful comments. I also wish to express my gratitude to editor Liza Piper and two anonymous reviewers for their insightful critical comments; to historian Janice Cavell for discussing relevant archival collections with me; to Library and Archives Canada art archivist Geneviève Morin for helping straighten out the provenance of the Bernier plaque in LAC’s possession; and to the UWO Faculty of Social Science’s Agnes Cole Dark Fund for supporting this research.

article apporte une contribution spécifique en révélant que Bernier a déjà fait des revendications « sectorielles » lors de voyages précédents; que ses relations avec les explorateurs américains Peary et Cook ont encouragé sa décision de 1909; et que si on se souvient de Bernier pour sa déclaration du Jour de la Confédération, Bernier lui-même lui attribuera étonnement peu d'importance par la suite.

After dinner on Dominion Day, 1 July 1909, the captain and crew of the Canadian Government Steamer *Arctic* assembled at Parry's Rock to take their place in history. Since the previous autumn the *Arctic* had been moored in the ice at Winter Harbour on Melville Island, where ninety years earlier ships under the command of British explorer Edward Parry had overwintered—the first intentional overwintering while attempting a Northwest Passage. Parry's men had inscribed the names of their ships *Hecla* and *Griper* on what became known as Parry's Rock, and the names were still plainly visible. Now, with the men of the *Arctic* gathered, Quebecois captain Joseph-Elzéar Bernier unveiled a plaque that had been made onboard, and that was now bolted firmly to Parry's Rock. It read,

This Memorial, is Erected today to Commemorate, The taking possession for the "DOMINION OF CANADA," of the whole "ARCTIC ARCHIPELAGO," Lying to the north of America from long. 60° w. to 141° w. up to latitude 90° n. Winter Hbr. Melville Island, C.G.S. Arctic, July. 1st 1909. J.E. Bernier, Commander.²

It was an act of considerable audacity. Having claimed possession of islands one at a time for Canada in this and previous voyages, Bernier was now claiming the entire archipelago in one sweeping gesture. He was introducing to international practice the emergent concept that northern nations owned all the territory from their east and west boundaries all the way to the North Pole—a concept that became known as the sector principle.³ What's more, although he was claiming the territory for Canada while working for the Canadian government, he was making the claim unilaterally, without instruction from the government to do so. And he was ensuring that his exploit would not be forgotten, by having his name forever associated with Parry's, but above all by plaquing himself directly into history. To further memorialize the event, the crew crowded together for a group photo, Bernier joined by a baby muskox that seems to be licking his hand (fig. 1). Then the men dispersed to pick wildflowers.⁴

2. Joseph-Elzéar Bernier, *Report on the Dominion of Canada Government Expedition to The Arctic Islands and Hudson Strait on Board the D.G.S. 'Arctic'* (Ottawa: Government Printing Bureau, 1910) [henceforth, *Report... 1908-09*], 195.

3. The most useful and detailed discussion of the sector principle and its history is Donat Pharand, *Canada's Arctic Waters in International Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

4. *Report... 1908-09*, 192. This muskox was presumably the same one acquired from Bernier that fell by the New York Zoological Society. See "A Newcomer at the Zoo," *Harper's Weekly*, 18 December 1909, 29.

Figure 1. Taking possession of the Arctic Archipelago, Parry's Rock, Melville Island, 1 July 1909.



Source: Report on the Dominion of Canada Government Expedition to The Arctic Islands and Hudson Strait on Board the D.G.S. 'Arctic' [1908-09] (Ottawa: Government Printing Bureau, 1910), 196.

As an act of historical self-promotion, Bernier's sector claim was a great success—although not immediately. After being celebrated in the fall of 1909, it was shelved for years by Canadian governments that rejected the concept and Bernier's authority to declare it. But its reputation eventually grew: as a few other northern countries tentatively employed or considered employing the sector principle to define their own boundaries; as Canada, too, began to see the principle's strategic merits and occasionally invoked it; and as time made more significant the lingering materiality of Bernier's claim—the photo, the cruise's published report, and especially the plaque that is still mounted to Parry's Rock, a century later. The 1 July 1909 claim has become a staple in present-day analyses of Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic. So, for example, the authors of the 2008 book *Arctic Front* call Bernier's action "totally symbolic" and rightly dispute another writer's contention that the captain "did more than any other person to solidify Canada's claim to the Arctic islands," but they nevertheless feel obliged to discuss his claim in some detail.⁵ In a 2008 statement on Arctic sovereignty, Prime Minister Stephen Harper quoted the plaque and called Bernier's mission "a critical event in

5. The authors accidentally reinforce the contention's importance by quoting and disputing it twice in two pages. Ken S. Coates, P. Whitney Lackenbauer, William R. Morrison, and Greg Poelzer, *Arctic Front: Defending Canada in the Far North* (Toronto: Thomas Allen Publishers, 2008), 28-9.

Canadian history, as important to our national destiny in the North as the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway was in the West.”⁶

And yet the very fact that Bernier’s four voyages on behalf of Canada at the beginning of the twentieth century could be compressed down to one claim, one day, and indeed one thin metal plaque has made the context for Bernier’s action all but unexplored. A claim that has been interpreted as a more-or-less impetuous act—or at least as impetuous as the casting and mounting of a plaque can be—needs to be understood in relation to Bernier’s campaign over the previous decade to have the Canadian public and Canadian government sponsor him on an expedition to the North Pole, and then him being sidetracked into patrolling the Arctic on the nation’s behalf instead. He made his 1909 claim only when it became clear that one or both of the American challengers Robert Peary and Frederick Cook might reach the Pole first. For Bernier, taking possession of the Arctic Archipelago for Canada was something of a consolation prize.

The turn of the twentieth century saw a great interest across the Western world in Arctic exploration, focused increasingly on the race to reach the North Pole. As historian Lyle Dick notes, the quest for the Pole received more column inches in the *New York Times* than any other event from 1900 to 1913.⁷ And indeed, the public interest was fed by a popular press that was growing more commercial and, with it, more sensational.⁸ Arctic expeditions, whether they made it near the Pole or not, were ideal newspaper fodder, offering great potential for adventure, drama, heroism, and tragedy. They introduced alien landscapes and exotic peoples. They could be couched in universal terms of scientific knowledge and geographic discovery, while simultaneously heralding individual accomplishment. What’s more, the cohort of experienced and would-be Arctic explorers who launched expeditions in this era—men such as Norway’s Fridtjof Nansen and Otto Sverdrup, Great Britain’s Frederick George Jackson, Sweden’s Salomon August Andrée, Italy’s Duke of the Abruzzi, and, of course, the United States’ Peary and Cook—relied upon and in turn intensified the national nature of the competition. These adventurers stood in for their

6. See www.pm.gc.ca/eng/media.asp?id=2259, accessed 4 February 2011. In that speech, Harper mistakenly stated that the federal government had dispatched Bernier specifically to claim the archipelago. According to Michael Byers, Harper “surrendered” the sector theory in 2006 when in a speech he defined Canadian possessions in a fashion that came hundreds of kilometers short of the 141st meridian on its northwest flank. Byers, *Who Owns the Arctic? Understanding Sovereignty Disputes in the North* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2009), 44.

7. Lyle Dick, “Robert Peary’s North Polar Narratives and the Making of an American Icon,” *American Studies* 45, 2 (2004): 7.

8. For the role of the press in Arctic exploration, see Beau Riffenburgh, *The Myth of the Explorer: The Press, Sensationalism, and Geographical Discovery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

country, symbolic of its scientific, technological, economic, and colonial might and its people's robust ethnic character.

J.E. Bernier became, by default, the sole Canadian competitor in this international contest, and so, by default, is of some interest in Canadian Arctic history. But his story is also illuminating to the broader history of Arctic science. Although he entered the polar field in 1898 a retired seaman with no scientific background and no experience in the Arctic—indeed, he premised his public campaign on the idea that his skills as a navigator would improve upon the scientist Nansen's plan to drift a ship over the Pole—he promoted his hoped-for expedition in terms of enhancing scientific and geographical knowledge. His subsequent patrols for Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier's government continued and to some degree lived up to these scientific and geographical claims: besides exploring and surveying throughout the Arctic islands, the men on the *Arctic* performed some of the earliest meteorological and geological work there. But Bernier's desire to expand knowledge was always subordinate to his desire for fame. In this, Bernier was hardly alone among his fraternity of Arctic explorers: Peary once told a sponsor, "we both know that no man would give a few facts of so-called scientific information the slightest weight, if balanced against the Pole."⁹ Yet short of making the Pole, some notable feat—such as a farthest North, a great scientific finding, or the discovery of a new land—was still required to win a voyage lasting recognition. Bernier's 1909 sector claim was in accordance with that. What makes the claim especially remarkable is not just its signaling that once the relatively civil international race for the Pole was over, the underlying geopolitical desire for knowledge, control, and possession of the Arctic would remain, but its signaling this even before Cook's and Peary's announcements they had reached the Pole.

The following essay frames Bernier's 1909 sector claim in the broader context of his decade-long attempt to win fame as Canada's competitor in the polar race and foremost Arctic explorer. Despite the heightened scholarly and public interest in Bernier in the run-up to his claim's centennial, recent work has continued to rely almost exclusively on published sources such as Bernier's official reports and memoirs, and on older secondary sources.¹⁰

9. F. Green, *Peary: The Man Who Refused to Fail* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1926), 239, cited in Riffenburgh, 168. Riffenburgh offers a compelling analysis of how Arctic explorers weighed the relative merits of knowledge and fame; see especially 152-7; 165-9.

10. The most important new work is Marjolaine Saint-Pierre, *Joseph-Elzéar Bernier: Capitaine et coureur des mers* (Sillery, Quebec: Septentrion, 2004). While this biography positions the captain in his Quebec world far better than any previous writing had, it suffers from its author's steadfast devotion to her subject, which skews what analysis there is. Saint-Pierre's book was translated into English by William Barr and published by Montreal's Baraka Books in 2009; my page references will be to that English edition. Other recent works include David Eric Jessup, "J.E. Bernier and the Assertion of Canadian

This essay relies at its foundation on three primary source collections which would seem elementary to the topic, but which have gone almost entirely unutilized: the records of the Department of Marine and Fisheries for which Bernier was working, the *Debates* of the Canadian House of Commons and Senate, and, most critically, Bernier's extensive papers at the Archives nationales du Québec (ANQ). The first two collections flesh out Bernier's relationship with his department and his government, the third offers a more candid portrait of his thoughts and motivations. Together, they help in explaining what the 1 July 1909 proclamation meant to Bernier, and what brought him to devise it as a sensible action for Canada and, perhaps more important, as the surest path to his own fame. Bernier's ANQ papers are especially valuable in this regard, but for unclear reasons they were long closed to researchers and are essentially untapped. Even Marjolaine Saint-Pierre's 2004 biography of Bernier only cites the ANQ material twenty-five times in its three hundred pages.¹¹

The essay seeks to make three specific contributions to our understanding of Bernier's act to take possession of the Arctic Archipelago for Canada. First, it not only explores Bernier's interest in the sector concept prior to 1909, but also reveals that he actually made a sector claim during his previous cruise, two years earlier. That the Laurier government silenced this claim and that he nonetheless made an even more open declaration in his next voyage makes his action all that more unilateral. Second, the essay

Sovereignty in the Arctic," *American Review of Canadian Studies* 38, 4 (2008): 409-29; and Season L. Osborne, "Closing the Front Door to the Arctic: Capt. Joseph E. Bernier's Role in Canadian Arctic Sovereignty" (unpublished M.A. thesis, Carleton University, 2003). Important older secondary works include Yolande Dorion-Robitaille, *Captain J.E. Bernier's Contribution to Canadian Sovereignty in the Arctic* (Ottawa: Indian and Northern Affairs, 1978); and T.C. Fairley and Charles E. Israel, *The True North, the Story of Captain Joseph Bernier* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1957). Notable primary works are J.E. Bernier, *Report on the Dominion of Canada Government Expedition to the Arctic Islands and the Hudson Strait on Board the C.G.S. 'Arctic' 1906-1907* (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1909) [henceforth, *Report... 1906-07*]; Bernier, *Report... 1908-09*; Bernier, *Report on the Dominion Government Expedition to the Northern Waters and Arctic Archipelago on the D.G.S. 'Arctic' in 1910* (Ottawa: King's Printer, 1911) [henceforth, *Report... 1910-11*]; and Bernier, *Master Mariner and Arctic Explorer: A Narrative of Sixty Years at Sea from the Logs and Yarns of Captain J.E. Bernier, FRGS, FRES* (Ottawa: Le Droit, 1939).

11. The bulk of the ANQ's Bernier collection consists of material purchased from geographer Benoît Robitaille in 1980. In her 1978 book on Bernier, Yolande Dorion-Robitaille repeatedly cited "BR collection" without any further description—or mention that BR was her husband. It is not clear when Saint-Pierre accessed these papers for her 2004 biography, in that she cites them as the "Benoît Robitaille Collection" and, like Dorion-Robitaille, offers no information as to specific files or dates. I have not found a single work that cites Bernier's ANQ papers as such. The Collège de Lévis also has a significant collection of Bernier's papers but has, without explanation, long refused researchers access to it. See Saint-Pierre, 17 and 359. I attempted to access the Collège records in 2009, but was refused. There is also a small collection of Bernier papers at Library and Archives Canada.

documents the unwitting role that the American polar challengers Peary and Cook played in the 1909 claim. That Bernier had connections to both men in 1908, as they headed to the Pole while he was stuck patrolling lower Arctic latitudes, encouraged his action; that both Americans claimed the Pole in the fall of 1909, to great worldwide attention, in turn encouraged the Laurier government to support and broadcast Bernier's claim. And third, the essay shows the surprisingly limited significance with which Bernier himself later ascribed his achievement. Although the Dominion Day proclamation became his greatest claim to fame, he regarded it not as a capstone to his work for Canada but rather as simply one of many ways he asserted Canadian sovereignty in the North. Perhaps that is because he, better than anyone, understood the circumstances in which his sector claim was made.

J.E. Bernier was born in the harbour town of L'Islet, Quebec in 1852. His grandfather and father were sea captains with over one hundred years of experience between them, and he followed in their footsteps, first captaining his own vessel when he was just seventeen. Over the next quarter century he sailed countless voyages before retiring, of sorts, in 1895 to become warden of the Quebec City jail. While there, he became fascinated with Arctic exploration literature and began to develop the idea of becoming the first to reach the North Pole. His plan mimicked that of the Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen: plant a ship in the Bering Strait icepack and let it drift over the Pole. The difference, he believed, was that whereas Nansen was a scientist, he was a navigator, and he would be better able to gauge the wind and water to determine the perfect place to enter the ice.¹² In 1898, he resigned as jailer and launched what would become a five-year, cross-Canada campaign to raise money for his intended assault on the Pole. His decision to resign, it must be said, was likely influenced by the cloud of scandal surrounding his having run a winery out of the jail—the first but not the last time Bernier's employment in government would be investigated.

12. By the time he published his memoirs, Bernier claimed that he had formulated the plan before Nansen. Bernier, *Master Mariner*, 290. Bernier initially promoted a second plan, to start from Franz Josef Land with dogs and reindeer, and make a beeline over the ice, killing reindeer along the way for food. See, for example, *Liverpool Courier*, 16 January 1901(?), as seen in LAC, Nazaire LeVasseur papers, MG30 B21, 1898-1900 file, correspondence related to Bernier voyages; as well as *Times* (London), 22 January 1901(?), as seen in LAC, Sir Wilfrid Laurier papers, MG26 G, vol. 187, p. 53412-37. Either because this scheme did not make much advantage of Bernier's seagoing expertise, because it might confuse potential supporters of Bernier's campaign, or simply because it was farfetched, mention of it petered out.

Bernier was indefatigable in seeking financial, public, and political support for his proposed polar trek. He gained the support of the Quebec Geographical Society, convinced Governor General Lord Minto to be his patron, raised subscriptions from some of the leading figures in the Laurier government, gathered a petition of a majority of House of Commons members supporting his expedition, received sponsorships from suppliers such as Bovril Ltd. and Mason and Risch pianos, and gave hundreds of lectures across Canada. There was no other Canadian initiative to explore beyond the mainland Canadian North, let alone reach the Pole, at the turn of the century, and Bernier's campaign attracted some patriotic interest among Canadians. And yet he raised far less money than the proposed expedition required, and still lacked a ship.¹³

Two things held Bernier back. The first was his manner. Although he was popular in Quebec, the English-Canada press tended to mock this salty little sailor—5'3", 200 pounds—with the thick French accent. (One editor parodied an interview with him, rich with double entendres: "Do I haf' much trouble answering questions? Yes, de ladies – Oh! dey are awful – dey say: 'Captain is it cold at de pole? Is dere much ice? And w'at does de pole look like?'"¹⁴) He could also be self-absorbed and belligerent. For example, when Canadian banks hosted collections for him at their teller's windows, but did not raise much money, he pushed them to have their managers ask customers directly for money.¹⁵ The second thing holding Bernier back was the reticence of Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier and his government, whose support was vital both in terms of funds and in making the expedition officially on behalf of Canada. Laurier saw only pitfalls in getting tied to Bernier's scheme. There was the cost, and the danger that seeking active possession of the North would upset the United States. Besides, as Laurier told the head of Bernier's fundraising drive in 1901, if American Robert Peary reached the Pole in his present attempt, where would be the glory be for a Canadian to make it? And if Peary failed, what chance did Bernier have?¹⁶

13. Bernier's estimates of how much money was needed and how much was raised cannot, frankly, be trusted. The letterhead for the "Canadian North Pole Expedition" referred to "Capital required \$150,000" and "Amount secured \$70,000." See Archives nationales du Québec, Bernier papers, 1960-01-140/1, letters 1902-5 file [henceforth, "ANQ, Bernier papers"]. Dorion-Robitaille (pages 30 and 32) has him raising \$20,000 in pledges of the \$75,000 he required.

14. "Captain Bernier," *Prince Edward Island Magazine*, 4 March 1902, 7. And yet because English had been Bernier's working language during his decades at sea, his biographer Saint-Pierre goes so far as to call his French "poor," p. 155.

15. See ANQ, Bernier papers, 1960-01-140/1, letters 1885-1901 file.

16. LAC, Laurier papers, MG26 G, vol. 208, p. 59245-7, Laurier to J.X. Perrault, 2 July 1901. Some Members of Parliament also expressed the opinion that devoting attention to the Arctic only reinforced the international opinion that Canada was a northern wasteland.

But the Canadian position changed in 1903, after the commission to arbitrate the boundary between Alaska and Yukon favoured the American position. Suddenly, Canada realized that its claim to the Arctic islands—based largely on Great Britain's 1880 transfer of all its northern possessions and “all Islands adjacent to any such territories” to Canada—would need to be more strongly asserted and defended. Just five days after the Alaska boundary commission's decision reached Canada, Senator W.C. Edwards wrote Laurier supporting Bernier. His wording is suggestive both of Bernier's inconsequentiality and how his plan could serve Canadian interests nonetheless:

At the risk of being regarded as troubling you with what may be thought a very trivial matter, I write a few lines with regard to Capt. Bernier. In view of recent events, would it not be well for an exploring expedition to go to the North with the object of a far more important mission than that of the North Pole, and if incidentally the North Pole is discovered, no harm will be done.¹⁷

Laurier replied that the Geographical Survey's H.M. Ami had already approached him, suggesting that the British government be asked to issue a proclamation claiming jurisdiction over the entire territory. (Since such a proclamation would presumably have been based on British discovery and possession, and not on an extension northward of Canada's east and west boundaries, it would not strictly have been a sector claim, although it would have involved the same territory.) But Laurier believed this would only arouse opposition. Better, he said, for Canada to continue what it had begun doing of setting up NWMP posts in the North and

quietly assume jurisdiction in all directions. ... Next year, I propose that we should send a cruiser to patrol the waters and plant our flag at every point. When we have covered the whole ground and have men stationed everywhere, then I think we can have such a proclamation as is suggested by Dr. Ami.¹⁸

Laurier did not stray from his go-quiet strategy in the years that followed, making his government's growing reliance on the bombastic Bernier all the more surprising.

This opinion had to be counteracted if Canada was to attract immigrants. Richardson, House of Commons *Debates*, 1 May 1902, 3968; also Ross, 1 May 1902, 3977; and Arthur Puttee, 30 September 1903, 12820.

17. LAC, Laurier papers, MG26 G, vol. 288, p. 78415-16, Edwards to Laurier, 28 October 1903.

18. LAC, Laurier papers, MG26 G, vol. 288, p. 78417-18, Laurier to Edwards, 29 October 1903 (Laurier wrote similarly in 1905, “In my estimation, we have taken the best course possible in the matter ... that is, the policy of having the northern waters patrolled by our people, and our jurisdiction quietly extended to every island,” LAC, Laurier papers, MG26 G, vol. 375, p. 99974-7, Laurier to Minister of Justice Charles Fitzpatrick, 25 July 1905). It is worth noting that Ami suggested Britain, not Canada, issue the proclamation of possession, and that apparently neither he nor Laurier were concerned that such a proclamation might weaken Canada's claim to the territory.

In the spring of 1904, the Canadian Liberal government bought from Germany the exceedingly slow but well-built Antarctic exploration vessel *Gauss*.¹⁹ There had been confidential discussion with the Conservatives first to ensure there would be no parliamentary opposition to buying the ship, for fear of weakening Canada's position in the North vis-à-vis the U.S. The Conservatives later insisted they had supported the purchase of a vessel for a sponsored expedition to the Pole, not merely for patrolling the Arctic.²⁰ Considering that Bernier had cited the *Gauss* specifically as the kind of ship he hoped Canada would build for him,²¹ and that the Laurier government sent him to purchase the ship and sail it home, it would be reasonable to conclude the captain was finally getting his polar expedition. Instead, the government's plan was to have the *Gauss*, renamed *Arctic*, deliver supplies to the *Neptune*, already in Hudson Bay, and then assert Canadian jurisdiction in the North by patrolling the environs with a contingent of NWMP officers aboard. In his memoirs Bernier essentially writes that he was deceived: he was hired on a pretense, he supplied the ship in Quebec as if for a five-year polar trek, and he was told the truth only at the last moment. His biographers support this version.²² But in fact, Bernier's correspondence makes clear he knew the nature of the coming expedition even before heading to Germany. He may have hoped, as one newspaper reported, that he would be allowed to drop off the Mounties at their posts and head north, but that was entirely wishful thinking.²³

The 1904-05 *Arctic* voyage itself was largely without incident, but the chaotic events before and after it were indicative of the problems Canada faced in trying to establish quickly its Arctic jurisdiction—and, one could argue, in having taken on Bernier as its commander of northern

19. On the *Gauss*, see Erich von Drygalski, *The Southern Ice-Continent: The German South Polar Expedition aboard the Gauss, 1901-1903*, trans. M.M. Raraty (Bluntisham and Harleston: Bluntisham Books and Erksine Press, 1989).

20. See House of Commons *Debates*, 1906, 3561, 3379-81, 3394, 3572-3, 3653-4, and especially 6441. Also, House of Commons *Debates*, 1908, 4164. This does not seem to have been a matter of deceit on the part of the Liberal government (or the opposition, for that matter), but rather entirely a misunderstanding. There is nothing to indicate the Liberals either supported an expedition to the Pole or told the Conservatives that they did. See House of Commons *Debates*, 11 May 1906, 3223-27, 3251, and 3359.

21. J.M. Charlton, House of Commons *Debates*, 1 May 1902, 3956.

22. Bernier, *Master Mariner*, 305; Dorion-Robitaille, 36; and Saint-Pierre, 190.

23. For example, he wrote the head of his fundraising campaign that March, "I am extremely obliged for the congratulations... but the North Pole Expedition has not begun... This intended voyage to Hudson Bay and the Mackenzie River district is only a preliminary step and I am now here at work to get from the Hon. the Minister of Marine & Fisheries a little more latitude when at the Mackenzie River, I only want a few more degrees than that locality would give," LAC, LeVasseur papers, MG30 B21, 1898-1900 file, Correspondance related to Bernier voyages, Bernier to LeVasseur, 11 March 1904. See also *Ottawa Citizen*, 15 September 1904.

expeditions. Before the cruise, the government admitted to having such limited knowledge of the Arctic that it could not supply the expedition with firm instructions.²⁴ Members of Parliament and other men of influence interfered with the selection of crew, saddling Bernier with a number of unsuitable men who wished to be a part of what many still believed to be Canada's assault on the Pole.²⁵ There was no time to tender for supplies, and considerable confusion about what supplies were needed—there was a photographer, for example, but no camera. And just days before sailing, Bernier resigned his commission because the NWMP's Superintendent Moodie, not he, was to have command of the expedition; he withdrew his resignation a day later, apparently because the department went looking for a replacement.²⁶ Events after the cruise were equally tumultuous. In the spring of 1906, the opposition in Parliament began criticizing the lavish manner in which Bernier had supplied the *Arctic*. Even more than the purchase of five cases of 1878 vintage port or six thousand pounds of Bovril, Bernier's old sponsor (it was noted that the Bovril bill was more than that of Nansen's entire expedition), criticism focused on the four thousand unfortunately-named Laurier cigars. There were also accusations of rampant overpricing by Quebec merchants, of goods placed aboard one side of the ship and carried off the other, and of Inuit plied with goods so that Bernier could engage in a fur trade for profit. For the second time in less than a decade, Bernier's conduct while working for government was investigated, this time by a Parliamentary

24. LAC, RG42, vol. 105, file 25447, F. Gourdeau, Deputy Minister of Marine and Fisheries, to James M. Smart, Deputy Minister of Interior, 4 August 1904.

25. Frank Douglas McKean was hired as artist and photographer on the recommendation of William Ross, M.P. although McKean has no experience with photography, LAC, RG42, vol. 105, file 25447, 3 August 1904. Minister of Marine and Fisheries Raymond Préfontaine told Members Russell and Fielding that although "you will of course understand that to find a position for a lawyer on board a ship, is rather difficult," he would nevertheless appoint John T. Ross purser, LAC, RG42, vol. 105, file 25447, Préfontaine to Russell, 4 July 1904. Others approached Captain Bernier personally: Paul LeVasseur, the son of his fundraising chair, sailed with him because of his father's pressure. The son was hired as waiter and assistant steward, a job his father later described as one "his course of studies at the Seminary of Quebec, did not qualify him for..." LAC, RG42, vol. 136, file 27149, Nazaire LeVasseur to Gourdeau, 5 April 1906, translated within Marine and Fisheries. The applications that poured in from across Canada, including that of surveyor J.W. Tyrrell, may be found in LAC, RG42, vol. 105, file 25447. The crew selection hampered the voyage. One reason that the *Arctic* returned south in 1905 was that nine men were found unfit for the long Arctic winter. Even before that, NWMP Superintendent Moodie recommended sending one man south early, because for him, like some others, "the glamour of an expedition to the north has worn off," LAC, RG42, vol. 119, file 26160 pt. 2, Moodie, 18 January 1905. Also, LAC, RG42, vol. 118, file 26162, Gourdeau to Moodie, 28 July 1905.

26. *Daily Telegraph*, 15 September 1904; *Ottawa Citizen*, 15 September 1904, as seen in LAC, RG42, vol. 105, file 25447.

select committee that met for eighteen days. Perhaps not surprisingly, the majority Liberal members of the committee acquitted the Department of Marine and Fisheries and its representatives, including Bernier, of all wrongdoing, while the Conservative members offered a scathing minority report.²⁷ It was hardly an auspicious beginning to Bernier's work asserting Canadian sovereignty in the North. Yet by virtue of his interest, experience, and even international reputation—he was elected Vice President of the New York-based Arctic Club in 1905²⁸—and the fact that no other Canadian sea captain seemed a viable alternative, he was becoming the Laurier government's and thus Canada's champion by default. Even while the select committee was finishing up, Bernier was preparing to embark again in the *Arctic*.²⁹

Cleared by the special committee, Bernier's run of good luck continued in July 1906 when the *Arctic* was struck by the Norwegian steamer *Elina* in Quebec harbor.³⁰ It was entirely the *Elina's* fault, and damage was minimal, but it forced the *Arctic* to delay sailing for a week. Bernier informed the ministry that the setback would make it impossible to make a quick trip north and return that fall, so he asked to be permitted a longer voyage with a planned overwintering, which would allow him to take possession of more lands. Marine and Fisheries agreed.³¹ The change in plans occurred so suddenly that two University of Toronto biologists who were to be naturalists aboard almost failed to learn of it until too late; they resigned their commissions only the day before the *Arctic* sailed.³²

This was the first time Bernier had full control of an Arctic expedition, and his first voyage above the Arctic Circle. His instructions were to

27. On the scandal, see House of Commons *Debates*, 1906, especially the marathon, thirteen-hour debate on the select committee's report, 28-29 June 1906, 6371-538; *Journals of the House of Commons Sessional Papers*, 1906, 444-57; and *The "Arctic" Expedition* pamphlet, circa 1908, Canadian Institute for Historic Microreproduction (CIHM), 74061.

28. "New Yorkers to Live Like the Eskimos," *New York Times*, 17 December 1905, 8; also, "Bernier Off to the North," *New York Times*, 23 September 1905, 9 and "To Drift to the North Pole," *New York Times*, 28 January 1906, 7.

29. A.P. Low, commander of the earlier *Neptune* expedition, became director of the Geological Survey of Canada, but not before telling Marine and Fisheries that its ships, including the *Arctic*, were entirely unsuitable for Arctic patrol, and it was a matter of time before a ship would shipwreck, resulting in loss of life, and the department would face intense criticism. LAC, RG42, vol. 119, file 26160 pt. 2, Low to Gourdeau, 1 February 1905.

30. See Bernier, *Report...* 1906-07, 10.

31. LAC, RG42, vol. 142, file 27330 pt. 2, Bernier to Louis-Philippe Brodeur, Minister of Marine and Fisheries, 20 July 1906; and LAC, RG42, vol. 142, file 27330 pt. 2, Gourdeau to Bernier(?), July 1906.

32. See LAC, RG42, vol. 136, file 27149A pt. 2.

annex all new lands he came across and to leave proclamations in cairns at each point of call. But his superiors insisted he not make waves:

In a cruise of this nature a great deal of course must be left to your own discretion, but by the Minister's instructions I am to impress upon you the necessity of being most careful in all your actions not to take any course which might result in international complications with any Foreign country. When action on your part would seem likely to give rise to any such contingency, you will hold your hand but fully report the facts on your return.³³

The Laurier government was still feeling its way forward in the North. It had just passed an act that would allow Canadian representatives, like Bernier, to issue licenses to international whalers. The act, an expression of sovereignty in itself, also explicitly defined Hudson Bay as Canadian territorial water. But ownership of the lands and waters of the far Arctic were less clear. Bernier was instructed that "for the present" Canada's waters were limited to the international three-mile limit.³⁴ When Scottish whaler Robert Kinnes subsequently asked how Canada was defining its marine boundary, considering he had been made to pay a license while whaling more than three miles from land, the ministry informed him that it was "not prepared at the moment to give any specific definition of the extent of the claim of the Canadian government" to northern waters.³⁵

The *Arctic* sailed up the Greenland coast and west up the passage now called the Parry Channel, which links Lancaster Sound, Barrow Sound, and Melville Sound, laying claim to islands along the way. The standard practice, detailed in deadening monotony in the cruise's official report, was to land, build a cairn, and leave a statement signed by Bernier and witnessed by his officers that this island "was graciously given to the Dominion of Canada, by the Imperial Government in the year 1880, and being ordered to take possession of it in the name of Canada, know all men that on this day the Canadian Government Steamer *Arctic*, anchored here, and I planted the Canadian flag and took possession of" the island in the name of Canada.³⁶ Bernier passed up no opportunities to assert sovereignty, claiming Baffin and Ellesmere Islands for Canada although well aware that Wakeham and Low had already done so. He also claimed islands he never visited, or even saw. Landing on Melville Island was

33. ANQ, Bernier papers, 1960-01-140/1, letters 1906-7 file, Gourdeau to Bernier, 23 June 1906.

34. ANQ, Bernier papers, 1960-01-140/1, letters 1906-7 file, R.N. Venning, Assistant Commissioner of Fisheries, to Bernier, 24 July 1906.

35. ANQ, Bernier papers, 1960-01-140/1, letters 1908 file, G.J. Desbarats, Acting Deputy Minister of Marine and Fisheries, to Robert Kinnes, Dundee, Scotland, 8 May 1908.

36. For example, *Report... 1906-1907*, 12. The crew members consistently witnessing the proclamations were "historiographer" Fabien Vanasse, Doctor J.R. Pepin, customs officer James Duncan, and photographer George Lancefield.

considered sufficient to take possession of “all the Parry Archipelago,” including Prince Patrick and Eglinton islands to the distant northwest.³⁷ The crew of the *Arctic* then returned to Albert Harbour at Pond’s Inlet, northern Baffin Island to overwinter.

While Bernier was iced into Albert Harbour, his longtime supporter Senator Pascal Poirier introduced the concept that Bernier would soon endeavour to put into practice: the sector principle. On 20 February 1907, Poirier proposed to the Senate “That it be resolved that the Senate is of opinion that the time has come for Canada to make a formal possession of the lands and islands situated in the north of the Dominion and extending to the North Pole.”³⁸ Drawing on Canada’s long history from John Cabot through the Charter of the Hudson’s Bay Company to the British North America Act (and, oddly, omitting the 1880 transfer from Great Britain), he claimed that Canada owned all these lands by virtue of discovery and outright possession. What transformed Poirier’s resolution from a bit of nationalist bluster to a footnote in international law was his argument that the equation by which Canada should determine its North was also an equation that all other northern nations could apply:

a country whose possession to-day goes up to the Arctic regions, will have a right, or should have a right, or has a right to all the lands that are to be found in the waters between a line extending from its eastern extremity north, and another line extending from its western extremity north. All the lands between the two lines up to the north pole should belong and do belong to the country whose territory abuts up there. Now, if we take our geography, it is a simple matter.³⁹

And so the Senator carved up the far North of the entire planet, giving sections to Canada, the United States, Russia, Norway, and Sweden. The Liberal Sir Richard Cartwright spoke against Poirier’s resolution, saying that the current government agreed that the northern boundary issue should be resolved, but warning that a formal declaration from the Senate would only obstruct negotiations; Poirier’s motion was not even seconded.

Poirier’s 1907 speech is generally credited with introducing the sector principle to international debate.⁴⁰ What is rarely mentioned is that in it he gave Capt. Bernier credit for advancing the sector concept a year earlier at the New York Arctic Club and having it accepted there.⁴¹ This is not to

37. LAC, RG42, vol. 142, file 27330 pt. 3, Bernier to “Colonel,” 29 September 1909.

38. Cited in Pharand, 8.

39. Poirier, Senate *Debates*, 20 February 1907, 266 and 271.

40. See, for example, Gustav Smedal, *Acquisition of Sovereignty over Polar Areas* (Oslo: 1 Kommissjon Hos Jacob Dybwad, 1931), 54; Leonid Timtchenko, “The Russian Arctic Sectoral Concept: Past and Present,” *Arctic* 50, 1 (1997): 29-35; and Shelagh D. Grant, *Polar Imperative: A History of Arctic Sovereignty in North America* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 2010), 12.

41. Senate *Debates*, 20 February 1907, 271. Bernier’s talk to the Arctic Club is also mentioned in Lucien Wolf, “Canada’s Claim to the Pole,” *Times* (London), 20 September 1909.

argue that the sector theory was therefore Bernier's—Poirier may well have introduced the idea to him—but rather to highlight that such a method of dividing up the polar regions already existed prior to Poirier giving voice to it in Parliament. It was, in fact, an established principle that nations could claim possession of unutilized hinterlands beyond their occupied territories: the United States had long made such claims longitudinally when moving across the western frontier, and Germany had likewise claimed the hinterland in Africa in the 1880s.⁴² There had even been government of Canada-produced maps in 1897 and 1904 that drew the boundaries of Canada's North in sector terms.⁴³ Thus journalist Lucien Wolf in the London *Times* called Poirier's speech not an innovation but rather “a combination of the right of discovery and the doctrine of *Hinterland* with a considerable dash of Jacobean Monroeism thrown in.”⁴⁴ Poirier was rejecting the formulation being promoted by newspapers and by explorers themselves, that ownership of the Pole was to be a race between nations, an opportunity to contest their skills, technologies, and ethnic characteristics. Instead, he was arguing that it should be determined by international precedent, practice, and law—a matter not of romance but geometry.

When the ice retreated in the summer of 1907, the *Arctic* left Albert Harbour, with Bernier having no knowledge of Poirier's speech, or at least how it had been received. The ship sailed north to the southern edge of Ellesmere Island—an area then called “North Lincoln land”—and returned to Port Burwell off Labrador's coast. Before heading home to Quebec in early October, Bernier wrote to Ottawa of what had been accomplished on the voyage, and gave the letter to the Moravian missionaries in Port Burwell for posting, a precaution in case the *Arctic* met misfortune.⁴⁵ Bernier's letter is entirely unexceptional but for his description of the claim he had made in August, when at the voyage's most northerly point: “We took possession of North Lincoln and Cone Island, and all adjacent islands, as far as ninety degrees north.”⁴⁶ The “as far as ninety degrees north” is, of course, a sector claim—though, because it is longitudinally imprecise, a less expressive and

42. The *Daily Witness* of 22(?) January 1901 wrote of Bernier, “It is quite natural that a Canadian should want to enter the international race for the North Pole, seeing that we own quarter of that institution,” LAC, Laurier papers, MG26 G, vol. 184, p. 53412-37.

43. The 1904 map, Department of Interior's “Explorations in Northern Canada and Adjacent Portions of Greenland and Alaska,” may be found in LAC, Laurier papers, MG26 G, vol. 847, p. 123525-607.

44. “Canada's Claim to the Pole,” *Times* (London), 20 September 1909. See also Nancy Fogelson, *Arctic Exploration and International Relations, 1900-1932* (Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 1992), 72 fn 17.

45. See *Report... 1906-07*, 66.

46. LAC, RG42, vol. 142, file 27330 pt. 4, Bernier to Brodeur, 3 October 1907.

expansive one than that which he would make in 1909. Nevertheless, based on this letter it would seem when J.E. Bernier made his audacious 1909 claim for Canada of all the lands to the Pole, the claim that would give him whatever fame he still possesses, he was essentially repeating something he had done two years earlier.

It is easy to imagine Bernier making such a claim in August 1907. He had introduced the sector principle at the Arctic Club a year earlier, and may have known that Poirier planned to raise it with the Senate in his absence. His voyage had so far consisted of rather un-heroic island-hopping—"we have made three attempts to take possession of Prince of Wales Island, which we have not taken yet"⁴⁷—and his annexation of all the Parry Islands while on Melville Island had acquainted him with the idea of claiming islands beyond those on which he actually landed. When he arrived at North Lincoln land and nearby Cone Island, more than 76° N, he was as close to the Pole as he had ever been, and knew he was about to turn home and see the lines of latitude fall away. If J.E. Bernier were to make a sector claim in 1907, this would be when he would do it.

But on Bernier's typed letter in the Marine and Fisheries papers at Library and Archives Canada, after the phrase "as far as ninety degrees north," there is a small, handwritten "x." When ministry officials received the missive from Port Burwell, they would have interpreted the extension of the claim to the Pole as just the sort of presumptive action the captain had been instructed to avoid. They then presumably told him, either in Quebec or when he went to Ottawa that fall, to speak no more of it. And he did not. In the official report of the cruise published in 1909, Bernier described the North Lincoln land annexation with reference to specific adjacent islands off to the north and west that were also claimed, rather than in blanket terms to the Pole.⁴⁸ He made no mention of a sector claim in any subsequent correspondence, even to staff within the ministry.⁴⁹ He did not mention it in his memoirs years later. That Bernier made reference to having made a sector claim in 1907 has gone completely unnoticed for the past century because, after the Port Burwell letter, he never made reference to it again.

There is the very real possibility, however, that Bernier never made such a claim at North Lincoln land in the first place. He had expressed no plan to do so in advance, stating in a note to the department in July only that he

47. *Report... 1906-1907*, 31.

48. *Ibid.*, 50. These islands included Axel Heiberg, Amund Ringnes, and Ellef Ringnes— islands whose very names, given to them by their Norwegian discoverer Otto Sverdrup just a few years earlier, called into question the strength of the Canadian claim.

49. For example, ANQ, Bernier papers, 1960-01-140/1, letters 1908 file, Bernier to Brodeur, 17 February 1908.

was heading north from Albert Harbour “to annex some new lands.”⁵⁰ What’s more, if the captain had chosen to annex all the way to the North Pole he would likely have done so with some ceremony. But the diary of the ship’s customs house clerk, J.A. Simpson, makes the North Lincoln claim out to be entirely without fanfare—indeed, even without the captain himself: “Arrived at Cone Isle early this a.m. and Mr. Hayes [Chief Officer] went ashore and took possession. Arrived North Lincoln at 5 bells and Mr. Morin [Second Officer] went ashore and took possession.”⁵¹ There is also the matter of the official report. With the actual proclamation sitting in a cairn on North Lincoln, accessible to explorers of other nations, it seems inconceivable that the Canadian government would knowingly let the published report misstate what the proclamation actually said. Discovery of the discrepancy would call into question the validity of all such Canadian claims in the North.⁵²

But why would Bernier claim to have claimed “as far as ninety degrees north” if he had not done so? It may have been just his unthinking shorthand for all the known islands beyond Ellesmere, although it is difficult to imagine the captain not appreciating the significance of the phrase, given his own promotion of the sector principle in New York a year earlier. His wording may alternatively have been an after-the-fact reflection of what he wished he had done. In any case, the phrase apparently precipitated discussion in the fall of 1907 between the department and Bernier about the sector principle—otherwise, it is impossible to imagine the vain and voluble captain never mentioning it again. That Bernier’s desire to make a sector claim was known to the Laurier government in 1907 puts his 1909 claim in a new light. It indicates that he was explicitly forbidden from making such a claim, but that the lesson he took was that if he were to make such a unilateral claim again, it could not be by half-measure.

If J.E. Bernier returned from the Arctic in 1907 thinking he would be feted for his exploration work, he soon found himself mistaken. He learned that he had been paid \$150/month for the past year, not the \$200/month he was under the impression he would be earning and the amount that expedition commanders Moodie and Low had been paid

50. LAC, RG42, vol. 142, file 27330 pt. 4, Bernier to Brodeur, 22 July 1907.

51. LAC, John A. Simpson papers, MG30 B48, Simpson diary, 12 August 1907.

52. And, in fact, a record Bernier left on Cone Island—not the actual proclamation—was discovered by an Inuk in 1920 and turned over to Canada by way of the Danish government. The record discovered in 1920 matches word-for-word the description of it in the *Arctic’s* official report. See LAC, RG12, vol. 593, file 1654-22; and *Report... 1906-07*, 50.

before him.⁵³ He also discovered that the 1906 scandal about supplying the *Arctic* had soured public opinion of him: he had become a target of derision. It was not just a Conservative member calling the affair “one of the biggest frauds ever perpetrated in this country,” but the Liberal-leaning *Toronto Star* that stated, “It was felt that the captain had established his right to take his ship anywhere that a man may go on pemmican, paté-de-fois-gras, truffles, and certain other bare necessities of life.”⁵⁴ Perhaps surprisingly, the 1906-07 expedition, in which Bernier claimed so much land, reinforced rather than counteracted such negative opinions. The image of Bernier planting flags on some faraway, barren lands in the name of Canada was simply one too ripe for ridicule. A newspaper spoke of Bernier’s habit of “arriving nowhere and then coming back again” while another called him “the greatest island namer and claimer in the business. With its terrific speed—four knots an hour under forced draught—the ‘Arctic’ can overhaul any island that was ever made.”⁵⁵ Conspicuously, as the opposition’s derision of Bernier grew, the Laurier government’s defense of him did not rise to match it.

Bernier was the immediate target, but underlying such attacks was a critique of the manner by which Canada was asserting sovereignty in the North. What did the captain mean when he said he took possession of the Parry Archipelago, one Conservative member asked: “Were these islands British possessions before? They were not created by Captain Bernier. Was there any doubt that they were British territory? What does he mean by taking possession of them? What is the process, what is the result, what does it all mean?”⁵⁶ Another Conservative mused, “As near as I can understand from Capt. Bernier it means that he plants a post on some of these barren lands up there and then covers it with something and this is supposed to be taking possession in the name of the Canadian government.”⁵⁷ Still another noted that to stay in the government’s good books Bernier had every incentive to return from every voyage saying he had discovered a few more islands but no incentive to find them all, for fear of making himself redundant.⁵⁸ The Opposition’s arguments did not always hit the mark, of course: Bernier’s discoveries were not beyond

53. LAC, RG42, vol. 136, file 37149A pt. 2, J.B. Boudreau, Marine and Fisheries, to Brodeur, 28 February 1907; and LAC, RG42, vol. 136, file 27149A pt. 2, Bernier to G.J. Desbarats, 23 April 1908.

54. Taylor, House of Commons *Debates*, 10 January 1908, 1066; and citing *Toronto Daily Star* editorial, September 1907, see House of Commons *Debates*, 10 January 1908, 1067.

55. Cited in *Toronto Globe*, 27 September 1909; and Taylor, citing *Toronto Daily Star* editorial, September 1907, House of Commons *Debates*, 10 January 1908, 1067.

56. G.E. Foster, House of Commons *Debates*, 27 February 1908, 4158.

57. W. Wright, House of Commons *Debates*, 27 February 1908, 4176.

58. W.H. Bennett, House of Commons *Debates*, 27 February 1908, 4145-6.

verification, and planting a flag did constitute an internationally recognized, though not incontrovertible, act of taking possession.⁵⁹ But they challenged what it was to claim new land on the basis of something that was not quite discovery and not quite possession. (They are also useful in reminding us today that our possession of these lands was not incontrovertible, that Canada was not merely reclaiming what was indisputably “ours.”) Maybe Bernier had even harboured such questions at Port Burwell. If one could claim islands without visiting them, why not claim all the way to the Pole at once? Why were the words left in a bottle in the North truer than the ones submitted to the government? Did the government have the power to rescind a claim made in good faith by its representative? How publicly must a claim be communicated, how loud a proclamation was required? When was a claim a claim?

Whether the Laurier government entertained any doubts as to how it was proclaiming sovereignty in the North and to whom it had given responsibility for doing so, by this point it had few alternatives. The Americans Robert Peary and Frederick Cook had both recently announced that they were leading expeditions to the North Pole, so the need for a strong Canadian presence was greater than ever, but the means of doing so unchanged. By the spring of 1908, plans were underway to have Bernier and the *Arctic* head north once more.

The *Arctic's* departure from Quebec City on 28 July 1908 must have been especially satisfying for Bernier, given the criticism he had faced in recent years. The city was in the middle of its tercentenary celebrations, so the wharf was packed with people, the harbour with ships. Bernier had chosen his crew himself, forty-two men between the ages of fifteen and sixty, two-thirds of them French-Canadian, one-third of them having sailed with him before. Within view of the city jail where little more than a decade earlier Bernier had first dreamed of reaching the North Pole, he was now received and bid farewell by the Prince of Wales, soon to be King George V. As the crowds cheered, as ships from Canada, Britain, the United States, and France saluted, and as the band aboard the HMS *Indomitable* played “Auld Lang Syne,” the *Arctic* steamed away. It was the last time in the cruise that the *Arctic* would be in the spotlight; her trip was eclipsed by the public interest in Peary and Cook's race to the Pole.

Seeing that this would turn out to be the expedition in which Bernier would openly make a sector claim on behalf of Canada, it is natural to look for an indication that the Laurier government ordered the action in

59. See Grant, 209.

advance. But there is none. Instead, Bernier's private instructions were essentially the same as those of previous voyages, and repeated the directive to avoid all controversy.⁶⁰ While it is true that the government would have kept a plan to declare possession of the archipelago quiet, so that other nations could not protest or deny the Canadian claim in advance (or simply in case the *Arctic* met with difficulty), there is no evidence from either before or after the voyage that the government directed, or even expected, Bernier's eventual action.

The whole matter of annexing land was clearly more central in Bernier's thoughts than it was in the government's. For Bernier, it was an end in itself—or, rather, because it connoted discovery, it was what transformed him from a civil servant into an explorer. But for the Laurier administration, it was just one of a number of means of asserting sovereignty in the North. That past spring, Marine and Fisheries Minister Brodeur had described to Parliament the *Arctic*'s upcoming voyage as one that would be largely reactive, determined by the actions of whalers. From a base at Pond's Inlet at the mouth of Lancaster Sound, the *Arctic* would patrol "all those islands around where there are some whalers carrying on their operations. It is proposed to go there specially for the purpose of collecting the licenses and customs duties, also to get a little more west than they went last year. It is proposed to go and reclaim three islands which are lying a little more west than the Magdalen [sic] islands." If as seems likely Brodeur had meant (or said) Melville Island, these were probably Prince Patrick Island, Eglinton Island, and Emerald Isle, at the far west of the archipelago. Asked how many years Canada would need to continue such patrols, Brodeur replied, "It is hard to say. If we have one post at the mouth of Lancaster Sound, I suppose it will cover all that territory. But we may be obliged to go further north. It depends altogether upon where the whalers go. It is proposed to go further west than Melville Island to see the American whalers. [...]"⁶¹ In stating that the *Arctic* might well travel from Pond's Inlet to beyond Melville Island, Brodeur in essence had the ship make a Northwest Passage, but the term is never mentioned, the idea never entertained. Administration, not accomplishment, took precedence for the government.

But not for Bernier. He told a Quebec newspaper a month before the *Arctic* sailed that "he expected to annex the balance of land in the far north."⁶² Desbarats' instructions by comparison mentioned blithely only

60. Bernier's instructions are at ANQ, Bernier papers, 1960-01-140/1, letter 1908 file, G.J. Desbarats, Acting Deputy Minister, to Bernier, 18 July 1908. The *Toronto Globe* on 27 August 1908 reported, "Captain Bernier is under strict injunctions to take no course which might result in international complications."

61. Brodeur, House of Commons *Debates*, 10 March 1908, 4747-8.

62. "Another Northern Cruise for Captain Bernier," *Quebec Daily Telegraph*, 13 June 1908, 1.

that he should take possession of Banks Land “and any other land in the vicinity.” As for how to do so, “You have already been instructed as to the procedure of taking possession of these northern lands, and you will carry this work out in the same manner as you did on the previous occasion.”⁶³ Upon receiving these instructions, Bernier wrote Desbarats emphasizing his “duty to make it clear to the Department what work has yet to be done to annex the balance of the Arctic islands. [...]” He impressed upon the ministry that the whalers would no longer be in the North this time of year, so it was the perfect time to focus on claiming land. He outlined at which known islands he hoped to leave cairns. He mentioned that “At Winter Harbour our cairn will be at the large stone on which the name of Parry’s ship has been cut,” but gave no indication of planning to make a sector claim there.⁶⁴

The *Arctic* sailed uneventfully north in August 1908, along the Labrador and Greenland coasts, as far as Etah, Greenland—the ship’s northernmost point ever. The Canadian government had agreed to the request by the wife of American explorer (and Bernier’s friend from the Arctic Club) Frederick Cook that the *Arctic* carry two tons of supplies for him while he was somewhere in the North. On arrival, the Canadians learned that they had missed Robert Peary by just a day as he set off for the Pole. Bernier tried to buy some dogs in Etah, but though Peary had left with almost 250, his men refused to sell any of the few that remained.⁶⁵ The *Arctic* was stuck with just the few teams Bernier had brought along (none of which

63. ANQ, Bernier papers, 1960-01-140/1, letters 1908 file, Desbarats, Acting Deputy Minister, to Bernier, 18 July 1908.

64. LAC, RG42, vol. 142, file 27330 pt. 5, Bernier to Desbarats, 20 July 1908. Bernier also stated explicitly in this letter that if McClure Strait was open he could make the Northwest Passage and winter at Herschel Island. As it turned out, the Strait was clear and Bernier told the Canadian Club the following year that when he saw “the passage as open as the St. Lawrence tears came to his eyes because he was not at liberty to press forward. But he was too old a sailor not to obey orders,” ANQ, Bernier papers, 1960-01-140/4, Expeditions 1907-9 file, Typescript report of Bernier’s talk to the Canadian Club. His official report stated that “if our instructions had included making of the Northwest passage, I feel confident that it could have been made,” *Report... 1908-09*, 38. Actually, Desbarats’ 18 July letter, cited earlier, did not expressly mention the Passage one way or the other. Indeed, its instruction to “push down” Lancaster Sound to Melville Sound and “proceed as far west as possible” could reasonably have been interpreted as permitting a Passage. Historian Dorion-Robitaille oversteps, however, when claiming, “Desbarats’ instructions gave Bernier permission to pass through the NorthWest Passage...,” Dorion-Robitaille, 62. Although there is no written evidence of Bernier being refused outright an attempt at the Passage, it is quite possible that his 20 July request resulted in a more explicit refusal by Brodeur when the two met in Quebec during the tercentennial.

65. Peary had become possessive of the dogs of Etah, which he had previously utilized in attempting the Pole, since learning that Cook planned to use them, too. Riffenburgh, 171.

would survive the voyage).⁶⁶ There is no way of knowing how much bearing Bernier's stop at Etah had on his decision to make a sector claim later in the voyage—he may have planned to do so before leaving Quebec—but there can be no doubt that the experience had both emotional and logistical import. Having long desired to be the first to the Pole, Bernier could not help but notice that he was stuck helping supply one contender and watching another head north while he was to turn south and resume patrol duties. His dream of being first to the Pole was all but gone. Moreover, the inability to buy dogs narrowed whatever opportunities for exploration that still existed for this voyage: fewer dogs would mean fewer and shorter expeditions from the ship. If Bernier were to gain fame from this trip, he would have to do so in some other fashion. When the *Arctic* left Etah, it sailed south and then west more or less directly—and quickly, making a personal best of ten miles per hour at one point—to Winter Harbour on Melville Island. Just a month after having sailed from Quebec, the crew began securing the ship for what would be almost a full year.

Bernier's first action upon landing at Winter Harbour was to visit Parry's Rock. From this beginning—indeed, in choosing Melville Island as the location to overwinter—Bernier positioned the voyage in terms of Arctic history. To some degree, he had always behaved so: he had lectured on Britain's proud Arctic tradition when lobbying for an expedition, and he had ensured that his ship was well-stocked with Arctic exploration literature.⁶⁷ But in 1908-09 Bernier took this to new heights. He was assiduous in having crewmen seek out and collect the documents and artifacts of earlier explorers. The results would ultimately be apparent in the expedition's published report. The 1906-07 report had been fewer than one hundred pages, of which less than a page was quoted historical material. By contrast, the 1908-09 report was five hundred pages, of

66. Two dog teams would escape in a blizzard and never be seen again, and the remaining dogs were eaten by an expedition party. Bernier planned to bring one hundred dogs next time. Generally, the Canadian expeditions were significantly behind the American ones in terms of learning from the Inuit. For example, whereas Peary brought along fifty Inughuit—"the best people", in the words of the *Arctic's* geologist J.G. MacMillan (*Report... 1908-09*, 419)—Bernier hired none. Likewise, whereas Peary's men dressed as the Inuit did, Bernier's dressed as Canadian woodsmen. Bernier was dismayed at the outset of the 1908 voyage to learn that some of the men had brought no warm clothing whatsoever, having assumed that everything would be provided for them, *Report... 1908-09*, 3. On the *Arctic's* next voyage, Bernier hired Inuit and outfitted his men in Inuit gear.

67. In an undated letter, Bernier requested that the *Arctic* be supplied with the official publications of the voyages of Parry, Lyon, Rae, McClure, Collinson, Hall, Nares, Greely, Peary, Sverdrup, Nansen, Ross, Belcher, and Low, along with some miscellaneous scientific reports. ANQ, Bernier papers, 1960-01-140/5, Bernier, memorandum 1903-30 file. Laurier's hiring of Vanasse as ship's historian further signals how these expeditions were recognized as linked to history.

which almost a third dealt with the past.⁶⁸ There was a twenty-five-page appendix transcribing documents that had been left by Captain Henry Kellett. There were twenty pages of photographs of such documents, plus photos of coins and other found pieces. There was a list of fifty-five artifacts—objects from British and Canadian expeditions, Inuit tools, and natural history specimens—returned to the museum of the Department of Mines. After detailing these discoveries and discussing their historical contexts throughout the report, Bernier concluded with a chapter on “Historical Summary of Canadian Expeditions to Hudson Strait, Hudson Bay and Northern Waters.” The report’s text ends with the *Arctic* itself, the culmination of British and Canadian activity in the North.

Bernier defended this focus on the past as a requirement for the present. As he wrote in the official report with respect to 26 September 1908, the anniversary of Parry’s entrance to the harbour,

I took advantage of the occasion to refer to the bravery and courage of the early mariners who had endured hardship in their voyage of discoveries, in the same waters as we were now exploring, and commended their example to the men on board. The life on board ship, in Arctic regions, where men are frost bound and in darkness for over more than 90 days, is by no means a pleasant one. It, therefore, was considered my duty as commander, to employ every means to encourage the men to look forward to accomplishing something that will be recognized by their fellowmen as more than an ordinary voyage. To look with pride upon the fact that the early discoveries made by Parry [...] are now yielding a practical result by enabling the *Arctic* expedition to annex all islands and land as far north as the pole, to Canada.⁶⁹

This was a spot of foreshadowing, the first time in the report he mentioned the sector claim that was to come.

From the fall of 1908 through the late spring of 1909, the crew of the *Arctic* did what conditions permitted, working in and around the ship, fur trapping, and entertaining themselves. Bernier also sent men on expeditions for exploration and scientific purposes. They were instructed to claim for Canada the lands they found; for example, second officer O.J. Morin led a party that claimed Banks Island on 9 June 1909. There was no indication that Bernier was about to make a comprehensive claim that

68. This increase was likely not Bernier’s decision entirely. The opposition in Parliament had complained that the (at the time unpublished) report of the 1906-07 expedition was not very informative. As a result, the Minister of Mines suggested to Brodeur that more scientific work take place, LAC, RG42, vol. 136, file 27149A pt. 2, Minister of Mines to Brodeur, 12 June 1908. The presence of geologist J.G. McMillan and his survey of Melville Island’s south coast—“one of the first of its kind dealing with the northernmost region of the Arctic archipelago” (Dorion-Robitaille, 66 fn 100)—may well have stemmed from criticism that the previous report was too thin.

69. *Report... 1908-09*, 75.

would make all limited claims superfluous. And yet the crew knew of Bernier's plan to claim the entire Arctic region for Canada come 1 July. Chief engineer John van Koenig was enjoined early on to construct the wooden mould for the metal plaque that would be placed on that day.⁷⁰ Bernier also reported in February that the men built a large cross and in March that he and the third officer erected it on Northeast Hill. The cross was described in both passages as intended "to commemorate the annexing of the Arctic archipelago to Canada."⁷¹

When the cross was next mentioned in Bernier's report, however, its stated purpose was greatly muted. The captain wrote that on Sunday, 13 June, he went with crewmen "to Northeast hill, where a cross had been erected, to commemorate by a praise service our safe sojourn at Winter harbour during the long season of short days. [...]"⁷² No mention of a sector claim was made, and the entire day merited less than one hundred words in the report. But historian Fabien Vanasse described the gathering by the cross much more expansively. While Protestant crewmen stayed aboard the *Arctic*, the ship's Catholics (excepting a few away on expeditions)—in essence, almost all the Francophone crew—listened to a concert by the ship's "Catholic choir" and then held a full Catholic service. It was presided over by Bernier, whom Vanasse described as "charged with taking islands located between the meridians of 60° and 141° West, as far as the latitude of 90° North, transferred to Canada, in North America, by the Imperial Government in 1880." After the service, the captain thanked the men for their act of Christian faith and patriotism, and all men present "signed their names to this act of taking possession of Canada's arctic regions."⁷³ The fact that Vanasse, a wildly procrastinatory writer whose free-form histories of the expeditions were ultimately deemed unusable by the ministry,⁷⁴ wrote and preserved a succinct, five hundred-word account of the 13 June ceremony suggests its significance to those who attended. Although Bernier was careful in the official report that it in no way upstaged what was to come, it nevertheless celebrated the Catholic, and by extension French, and by extension Quebecois character of the *Arctic* voyages.⁷⁵

70. Dorion-Robitaille, citing the published report, writes that on Christmas Day 1908 Bernier "called upon everyone to prepare himself for what was to happen next July 1," but no such statement appears in either the English or French edition, Dorion-Robitaille, 81.

71. *Report... 1908-09*, 112 and 113-14.

72. *Report... 1908-09*, 163. Bernier does not mention that day in his memoirs.

73. Archives du Séminaire de Trois-Rivières, Vanasse papers [no more specific reference given], Saint-Pierre, 357-8.

74. On the difficulty the ministry had getting Vanasse to produce reports, and make them of publishable quality, see LAC, RG42, vol. 136, file 27149; vol. 136, file 27149 pt. A; vol. 138, file 27149A; vol. 137, file 27149A pt. 3; and vol. 142, file 27330 pt. 5.

75. Consider the names of those attended—Bernier, Desjardins, Bolduc, Bolduc, Gosselin, Bourget, Leclerc, Lahaye, Tremblay, Vaillancourt, Thibault, Goulet, Hennessey, Holden,

This is not to say that the Dominion Day ceremony at Parry Rock was without meaning, or anticlimactic. It was there that the whole crew assembled (although ten are missing from the group photo), that the plaque was unveiled, and that Bernier officially claimed for Canada all the land area to the Pole. Rather, it is to suggest that to be understood Bernier's 1 July 1909 proclamation must be considered in the context of the entire expedition, as the culmination of his efforts over three expeditions, and indeed as the product of his decade-long drive for the North Pole.

The ice retreated in August and the *Arctic* slipped free. Bernier soon had to decide whether to keep the steamer in the North for another year. The ship was fitted out to do so, his orders allowed for it—indeed, the first sentence of his report called this a “two years’ voyage”—and the expedition had a number of duties, of which annexing land was only one.⁷⁶ But on arriving at Albert Harbour in Pond's Inlet, he learned from the Inuit that no more whalers were expected that season. So, as he wrote in his report, “I decided to go south.” That is the extent of his explanation, and it is not a strong one—especially considering that he wrote a letter to the Canadian government and left it for any stray whalers to post from Scotland.⁷⁷ Bernier likely chose to head south so that his sector claim could be communicated as soon as possible. One could argue that he had no more land to annex: claiming even a newly discovered island within the sector might have the effect of weakening the sector claim. As will be shown, however, Bernier never made that argument.

Regardless, Bernier's timing was fortuitous. On 1 September, the day he arrived at Albert Harbour, Frederick Cook was announcing to the world that he had reached the North Pole a year earlier. On 6 September, when Robert Peary announced that he had reached the Pole and was challenging Cook's claim, the *Arctic* was down the coast of Baffin Island, Bernier

Robitaille, Brace, Bouchard, Gagné, Chassé, Vanasse—compared to those who did not—(1st officer) Braithwaite, (3rd officer) Green, Weeks, Jackson, McMillan, Johnson, Vigneau, Robson, Pike, Lane, White, Anderson, LeBel, Burk, Simms, Wakeham, Bodeker, Wistle. Saint-Pierre reproduces Vanasse's summary of the 13 June ceremony as an appendix to her Bernier biography, suggesting she believes it significant, and yet she makes no mention of the ceremony in the text.

76. *Report... 1908-09*, 1. Marine and Fisheries officials thought it likely the *Arctic* would stay in the North a second winter, as seen in a letter to the wife of a crew member, LAC, RG42, vol. 136, file 27149 pt. 2, C. Doutre to Mrs. Reuben Pike, 28 June 1909.

77. *Report... 1908-09*, 269. Also, LAC, RG42, vol. 142, file 27330 pt. 8, Bernier to Brodeur, 2 September 1909. Bernier's letter included a sentence on having claimed all the way to the Pole.

accepting \$50 from American sportsman Harry Whitney for a Canadian fishing license (an action that arguably had greater long-term significance for Arctic sovereignty than Peary's). On 16 September, the *Arctic* reached the northern tip of Labrador just as Peary held his first press conference in southern Labrador. Because of Bernier's nationality, he would be considered unbiased, and because of his being in the North contemporary to Cook and Peary he would be considered an authority and hence an arbiter on what was becoming a matter of great international interest.⁷⁸ The *Arctic* thus arrived in Quebec on 5 October to much more attention than it had received on its previous voyages. With newspapermen and well-wishers thronging the wharf, Bernier stated his willingness to believe the claims of both Cook and Peary; he was clearly flattered by Cook's public appreciation for having provided him with supplies. Describing the *Arctic*'s own voyage, Bernier recounted in particular how Morin and Green had travelled from Melville Island to Banks Island by sled, making what he called a Northwest Passage. He said nothing of the sector claim; when asked what islands had been annexed or discovered, he demurred, stating that this was a matter for him to report to government.⁷⁹ Then he was off to Ottawa.

This time, the Laurier government did not respond to Bernier's news of a sector claim with a figurative "x". That may have been because a metal plaque bolted onto rock was harder to erase than was mention in a private letter, or because such a plaque actually stood as a more tangible claim to possession. The Cook/Peary dispute likely played a part, too. It put the Arctic in the public eye, and so gave the Laurier government reason to showcase both Canada's involvement there and how that role differed from the Americans'. (When the Canadian High Commissioner in London expressed concern about what the Polar dispute meant to Canadian sovereignty, Laurier cheerfully replied, "It is our policy to claim everything in sight and out of sight, but as to the North Pole I do not think that we shall worry very much about it."⁸⁰) In short, it was useful to take Bernier's sector claim public. On 14 October, Bernier announced to the press in Ottawa that he had annexed all the way to the Pole—adding, he

78. The Montreal *Witness* introduced in humorous fashion the notion of Bernier's authority when it questioned the veracity of both Cook's and Peary's accounts on the basis that "neither of them makes any mention of Santa Claus or Captain Bernier, who are both understood to move in the most exclusive of Arctic circles." Cited in "Things to be Cleared Up," Toronto *Globe*, 11 September 1909, 15.

79. "Captain Bernier's Story of Voyage," Toronto *Globe*, 6 October 1909, 1.

80. LAC, MG26 G, vol. 590, p. 160088-92, Laurier to W.L. Griffith, High Commissioner for Canada, 21 September 1909.

said, five hundred thousand square miles to Canada.⁸¹ He presented Parliament with a duplicate of the Melville Island plaque, which was subsequently installed in the entranceway of the Library of Parliament.⁸² And he spoke at the Canadian Club in Ottawa, with Laurier himself in attendance. There was laughter and applause when Bernier crowed that he had secured for Canada the entire archipelago, “in detail and in wholesale.” Laurier rose to thank him, hoped that he would be ready to head off in the *Arctic* again early next year, and promised, “He will have no instructions but to take possession of the lands for the Dominion. The Government is determined to keep a patrol of the northern seas. [...] Capt. Bernier’s mission will be to resume his work and come back when he thinks he has accomplished it. He shall not be fettered by this or that. He shall go to the Pole or beyond it if he desires.”⁸³

This was a time, in Bernier’s words, of “beautiful sunshine over *Arctic* matters.”⁸⁴ He gleefully wrote his friend and fellow Arctic Club member B.S. Osbon, “At last the Canadian Government have come to their senses. Ascertain from Cook how much of the pole I could take, and if there a part left for me to share, I will push ahead. [...] That little boat called the ‘Arctic’ is now at my disposal for a trip north with as much latitude as I want and longitude too.”⁸⁵ He also asked Osbon’s advice as to how much

81. “Capt. Bernier’s Report,” *Toronto Globe*, 15 October 1909, 9. This is a high figure, considering that the entire Arctic Archipelago is 550,000 square miles. It is worth noting that Bernier had used the 500,000 figure in 1907, too—the year he (briefly) made a sector claim—when describing what land he had claimed that year. See, for example, *Dawson City Daily News*, 26 December 1907. The sheer incomprehensibility of such a figure is evident in the *Daily News* headline: “Claims He Has Added Five Hundred Square Miles to Dominion.”

82. House of Commons *Debates*, 16 December 1909, 1596. That the member describing the plaque meaninglessly referred to Melville Island’s location as “longitude 60 min. west to 141 min. west” indicates to what degree Canada’s far North was still very much an abstraction. The Library of Parliament copy was soon after joined by a tablet relating to the “Royal William” steamboat. In 1926, with plans afoot to install a plaque commemorating those who had died in the Canadian Arctic expedition of 1913-18, Department of Public Works Deputy Minister J.B. Hunter balked, saying that the proliferating plaques had no place in Parliament, and that they should instead go to the Archives. See LAC, RG11, file 1575-107 - Parliament buildings—tablet in memoriam to the Canadian Arctic Expedition 1913-1918. Over the decades, the LAC lost track of how it had acquired the copy and came to the mistaken belief that it had acquired the original Melville Island one.

83. “Canadian Rights to the Arctic,” 16 October 1909, in ANQ, Bernier papers, 1960-01-140/4, Expeditions 1907-9 file.

84. Cited in ANQ, Bernier papers, 1960-01-140/1, letters 1909 file, John van Koenig to Bernier, 11 November 1909.

85. ANQ, Bernier papers, 1980-06-000/16, Dorion-Robitaille material, Bernier to Capt. B.S. Osbon, 26 October 1909. For Osbon’s response, ANQ, Bernier papers, 1960-01-140/6, telegrammes file. Bernier elsewhere told another correspondent that now that he had claimed all the way to the Pole, “our people are temporarily satisfied,” ANQ, Bernier papers, 1960-01-140/1, letters 1909 file, Bernier to Robert Stein, 19 October 1909.

he should charge for lectures (The answer: \$200 plus expenses).⁸⁶ He was receiving invitations from all over the continent to talk about his Arctic experiences, and in particular his opinion of whether Cook and/or Peary reached the Pole. Today, Bernier's archival papers at the ANQ contain much more correspondence from the fall of 1909 than from any other time in his life, a disproportionate number of those letters dealing not with his sector claim but with the Cook/Peary affair.⁸⁷ Bernier tried to translate his temporary fame and his government's good feeling into a more permanent position, asking Minister Brodeur that he be appointed Commissioner for the District of Franklin on a salary of \$5000, in return for patrolling the North and "adding new possessions for Canada."⁸⁸ The Laurier government declined the offer, but did let him buy 960 acres at Pond's Inlet for \$1—a site he dubbed "Berniera"—and honoured its commitment to let him command another voyage in the summer of 1910.

But Bernier's mention of "adding new possessions for Canada" hints at the awkwardness of his position after having made the 1 July 1909 sector claim. On the one hand, since the claim was the basis by which he sought continued reward from Canada, he was motivated to accentuate its importance. On the other hand, if the claim did conclusively grant Canadian sovereignty over the entire sector, the need for his services declined. Bernier navigated these two shoals in 1910 by stressing his accomplishment in terms of the archipelago, not the Pole. Thus he wrote the minister that he had "annexed to our great Canada all the Arctic Archipelago without any mishap. I am now ready to annex reported lands farther North than anyone cared to go [...]."⁸⁹

86. Peary was in the same period receiving \$1000-\$7500 per appearance, Riffenburgh, 188.

87. As evidence and public opinion moved against Cook's claim, Bernier became decidedly more neutral in his judgment. Compare the *New York Times* of 15 October 1909—in which Bernier declared that the evidence suggests Cook reached the Pole, whereas Cook's reliance on Inughuit testimony cannot be trusted—with that of 17 December—in which Bernier said he did not "believe nor disbelieve" either explorer, stating that the evidence of both was insufficient. Bernier's most detailed and considered response on the matter was written as a letter several years later to a New York librarian, ANQ, Bernier papers, 1960-01-140/2, 1912 letters file, Bernier to Clark Brown, New York, 16 February 1912. Bernier's own claim was never allowed to distract from the Cook/Peary dispute in the American press. Even the *Bulletin of the American Geographical Society* in 1910 introduced Bernier as having taken "formal possession of the whole archipelago from 60° to 140° W and up to the North Pole (?)"—the question mark sufficient to express doubt about the statement, in lieu of any debate, "Editorial Notes and Comments," *Bulletin of the American Geographical Society* 42, 1 (1910): 124.

88. He also requested a one-time \$10,000 payment to recoup his personal expenses through the years, LAC, RG42, vol. 138, file 27149A, Bernier to Brodeur, 11 November 1909.

89. LAC, RG42, vol. 138, file 27149A, Bernier to Brodeur, 20 May 1910. See also LAC, RG42, vol. 138, file 27149A, Harrison to Desbarats, 9 March 1910.

What Bernier had called the *Arctic's* period of beautiful sunshine was short-lived.⁹⁰ The ship sailed north in 1910 and returned in 1911 just days after Canada had elected a new Conservative government. Initially, Bernier was optimistic that the new regime would treat him better than the last, and he sought to arrange a five-year contract for Arctic patrols.⁹¹ But then a crewman accused him to the ministry of treating the recent voyage as a private fur trading expedition. Following every one of Bernier's cruises for Canada there had been allegations that his ship had been overly committed to trapping animals, but he had always defended the practice by saying it gave the men exercise and something to do while the ship was moored in ice. The fact that he had always been sure to give furs to Prime Minister Laurier, other leading Liberal politicians, and senior staff at Marine and Fisheries may have helped his argument.⁹² This time, when Bernier's defence to the ministry contradicted earlier statements he had made, he was suspended and in spring 1912 an investigation launched—the third such investigation of his dealings with government, it was noted. Rather than fight the allegations, Bernier left the ministry's employ and headed north on a ship of his own, this time to look for minerals.⁹³ He may have concluded that the new Conservative government would never accept him as its representative in the North; that it was time for him to focus more directly on private wealth rather than public fame; that with the Pole attained and the archipelago claimed, there was no great feat left to be accomplished in the North; or a mix of all these. In any case, although he continued sailing north in the 1910s and was even called back into government service to patrol the Eastern Arctic in the early 1920s, J.E. Bernier never again found, or even sought out, the bit of fame he had experienced in the first decade of the century.

90. Even before heading north in 1910, Bernier got in trouble with Laurier for being quoted in the newspapers as proposing to spearhead a multinational expedition to divide up the Pole. Laurier stated frostily in Parliament that if the captain spoke "as he is reported to have spoken, all I can say is that I think he had better keep to his own deck." Laurier, House of Commons *Debates*, 31 January 1910, 2711-12. See also Senate *Debates*, 1 February 1910, 184. Bernier categorically denied the quotes attributed to him, LAC, MG26 G, vol. 613, p. 166358-67, Bernier to Laurier, 8 February 1910.

91. ANQ, Bernier papers, 1960-01-140/2, 1912-13 letters file, Bernier to Edward MacDonald, 1 March 1912; and ANQ, Bernier papers, 1960-01-140/4, Expeditions 1879-1905 file, Bernier to Marine and Fisheries, 11 December 1911.

92. See ANQ, Bernier papers, 1960-01-140/2, 1912 letters file, J.E. Mathe to J.D. Hazen, Minister of Marine and Fisheries, 1 March 1912. On earlier allegations against Bernier, see for example House of Commons *Debates*, 1906, 6422-3, 6432, 6481, and 6534. Bernier's papers contain a small ledger listing the at least 179 souvenirs he presented between 1908 and 1911: polar bear skins mostly, but also muskox and fox, and "unick horns" (narwhal horns). See ANQ, Bernier papers, 1960-01-140/7, Carnets de notes file.

93. It is not clear whether an investigation was held, or whether Bernier leaving the ministry's employ was deemed sufficient. On the 1910-11 voyage and its aftermath, see Alan MacEachern, "Cool Customer: The Arctic Voyage of Captain J.E. Bernier," *The Beaver* 84, 4 (2004): 30-5.

The Laurier government had been happy to fete Bernier publicly in the fall of 1909, but there is no indication that it or subsequent governments had genuine confidence in his sector claim as a declaration of sovereignty. No attempts were made to reaffirm the claim, and by 1920, a confidential memo admitted that in terms of the archipelago “the Low and Bernier expeditions may have established a ‘fictitious’ title which has probably lapsed [...]”⁹⁴ Five years later, when Canada learned that the American Donald B. MacMillan planned an aerial expedition of northern islands with stations on Ellesmere and Axel Heiberg Islands, it defended its claim to northern territory in sector terms, but did so by citing the 1904 map and not mentioning Bernier at all.⁹⁵ In the decades that followed, Canada periodically took up the sector principle to bolster its case for Arctic sovereignty, but with the Soviet Union the only other nation to accept the principle outright, Canada did not press the case.⁹⁶ Bernier’s proclamation did not add much to the discussion, so in political and diplomatic terms it largely disappeared.

One might assume that the captain was disheartened by this later in life (he died in 1934), but that may not have been the case. Considering that he had poured such energy into being Canada’s authorized Arctic explorer at the beginning of the century, that the 1909 sector claim would seem to have been his last and best chance for fame, and that the fundamental characteristic of the sector principle was its simplicity, Bernier was always unaccountably sloppy in describing it. At the conclusion of his published report of the 1908-09 voyage, for example, he noted that the lands annexed by the *Arctic* extended “from the 60th meridian to 141 west and from parallel 61 to 83 north latitude”—in effect, weakening Canada’s claim to any discovered or undiscovered land between 83° and 90°.⁹⁷ In similar fashion, Bernier submitted to Marine and Fisheries a handwritten list of the men who on 1 July 1909 were “présent à la prise et possession de l’Isle Melleville au nom de la Puissance du Canada.”⁹⁸ But the declaration that day was pointedly not of just Melville Island—which he had previously claimed anyway—but of the entire sector. What becomes clear in reading

94. Minutes of a special meeting of the Advisory Technical Board, 1 October 1920, cited in William R. Morrison, *Showing the Flag: The Mounted Police and Canadian Sovereignty in the North, 1894-1925* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1985), 164.

95. Governor General to Chargé d’Affaires in United States, 12 June 1925, cited in *Documents in Canadian External Relations*, vol. 3 (Ottawa: Department of External Affairs, 1970), 575.

96. Pharand, 46-63.

97. *Report... 1908-09*, 320. Citing the previous voyage would also seem to suggest that the all-encompassing 1909 claim did not supersede earlier ones.

98. See LAC, RG42, vol. 142, file 27330 pt. 8.

Bernier's correspondence after 1909 is that he saw the sector claim not as the culmination of his career, but as just one of the important components of the 1908-09 voyage, itself just one of the important expeditions he commanded for Canada. Thus seaman and author Alfred Tremblay, who knew Bernier well and sailed with him twice early in the 1910s, could spend twelve pages detailing the 1908-09 *Arctic* voyage's accomplishments without ever referencing the sector claim.⁹⁹ More remarkable, when sometime in the 1910s Bernier himself provided Marine and Fisheries with a summary of what the *Arctic* had achieved, he called 1908-09 "the most important voyage made," and yet focused on prospecting, on learning about wildlife, and on looking for Sir Robert John McClure's ship *Investigator*. He made no mention of the sector claim whatsoever.¹⁰⁰

It would seem that Bernier, like the Canadian government, could in the end not fully grasp the sector claim's significance because the claim was so fundamentally symbolic. While he had wholly engaged with symbolism in making himself for a short time the foremost Canadian Arctic explorer, he was not quite modern enough to imagine that his act of bolting a plaque to Parry's Rock might have more permanence than a string of small but measurable scientific, geographical, or historical findings. But it did. Bernier helped put the Arctic in the Canadian imagination. Historian Janice Cavell has noted that whereas authors of Canadian history books in the first decade of the twentieth century wrote as if the Arctic Archipelago was not part of Canada, in the second decade they wrote assuming it was.¹⁰¹ Bernier's polar campaign and *Arctic* voyages was a reason for that. Even when portrayed as comical or criminal, he was still Canadian, and Canadians were naturally interested in following one of their countrymen representing them and competing for international glory. And the manner in which he proclaimed Canadian sovereignty in the North—imposing himself directly into the historical record—has only helped his reputation grow over time. Doubts about Cook's and Peary's claims of ever having reached the Pole have persisted, even mounted, over the past century and as a result their places in history are still not fixed, floating like polar ice.¹⁰² Captain Bernier's renown is certainly smaller, but its foundation is more strongly fixed, as if to rock.

99. Alfred Tremblay, *Cruise of the Minnie Maud: Arctic Seas and Hudson Bay, 1910-11 and 1912-13* (Quebec: Arctic Exchange and Publishing Ltd., 1921).

100. ANQ, Bernier papers, 1960-01-140/4, Expeditions 1879-1905 file, Bernier, [post 1911].

101. Janice Cavell, "Arctic Exploration in Canadian Print Culture, 1890-1930," *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of Canada* 44, 2 (2006): 26.

102. See, for example, Robert M. Bryce, *Cook and Peary: The Polar Controversy, Resolved* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 1997); Wally Herbert, *The Noose of Laurels: The Discovery of the North Pole* (New York: Atheneum, 1989); and William R. Hunt, *To Stand at the Pole: The Dr. Cook-Admiral Peary North Pole Controversy* (New York: Stein and Day, 1981).