

TRAVELS THROUGH TIME

Michael Palin Podcast: From Pole to Pole on HMS Erebus 1841-8 (Transcript)

[Intro music]

Peter Moore: Hello and welcome to *Travels Through Time*. In each episode of this podcast we invite a special guest to take us on a tailored tour of the past. If you could travel back through time where would you go, what would you like to experience what would you like to find out? These are the kind of questions I'll be putting to guests in this new podcast. My name is Peter Moore and, in each episode, I'm going to invite a special guest to become a time traveler for half an hour or so. There will be rules to their travels, they will not be allowed to interfere with the history or to participate directly in events. Instead they had to be the silent witness like Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*: the cloaked figure in the corner, peering in, watching, eavesdropping if they like, but nothing more. They will choose their historical year and, within that time, travel to three different scenes. Now we have the ideal tour guide for this first foray into the past.

Michael Palin is an actor a writer and explorer, a fish slapping Python, and a former president of the Royal Geographical Society. He has written many books of his travels from Pole to Pole or across the Himalayas, and in September he released his latest work: the *Sunday Times* best-selling *Erebus: the story of a ship*. A few days ago, I met with Michael by the banks of the River Thames in London, deep in the basement of his publishers Penguin Random House, in a darkened little room that was to become our very first time-machine. Our destination was the 1840s, and I began by asking Michael what it was that enticed him towards this time.

[Interview begins]

Michael Palin: A ship called *Erebus* and a love of the sea and the love of exploration and a fondness for a particular period when enormous risks were taken by very small ships and very dedicated men to chart the world, really. It was a Golden Age of exploration, which is largely ignored. I mean, I read history at Oxford and I loved history at school I never heard anything about *Erebus* or Sir James Ross's expedition. I did know about *Erebus*'s fate in the Arctic later, but the first extraordinary Antarctic journey is what enticed me to look at the story.

Peter Moore: It might be good actually if you told us about *Erebus*. What was she like? Was she a graceful ship?

Michael Palin: *Erebus* was quite a chunky ship. She was designed to take mortars, ten inch and 13-inch mortars, on her deck which would lob shells at towns under siege from the sea. So it was all about dealing with the recoil from these very, very strong cannon. And so her deck would have been strengthened with diagonal timbers as well as horizontal and also her boughs would be very strong. She was not a big ship. She was a hundred and four feet long, she was about 350 tons, so she was chunky, by all accounts not a graceful ship, but people were fond of *Erebus*. People onboard wrote lovingly of her attributes of sailing not fast but being very solid. Sometimes very solid below decks if not when you are on deck.

Peter Moore: So she rolled?

Michael Palin: She rolled, but she rolled well. Ships had to undergo a report when they came back, at Chatham, and when she returned the ships report said that she rolled well.

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Peter Moore: I suppose rolling well is a subjective thing to the person who is on deck! It might not roll so well if you were getting accustomed. And of-course *Erebus* was not quite a loner, she was often in company with another ship as well?

Michael Palin: She was in company on her two major voyages with *Terror* which is another bomb ship, like *Erebus*, but built slightly earlier. *Terror* had seen action against the Americans in the war of 1812. So she had lobbed shells at Baltimore.

Peter Moore: So by the 1840s, *Terror* was a bit of a veteran?

Michael Palin: *Terror* was certainly a veteran. She'd also seen the Arctic in the 1830s. Whereas *Erebus*, actually once built, went for a very short journey round the Mediterranean, on patrol really, nothing more than that. And after that spent 13 years in ordinary, waiting for a job.

Peter Moore: I get the feeling that this meander around the Mediterranean was a prelude to something that came after, which was a bit more stern. Shall we go to a first scene? You have picked June the 1st 1841, do you want to tell us what was happening that day?

Michael Palin: Well, yes, I'm in Hobart in Tasmania, and in the small bay later called Ross Cove, after the captain of *Erebus*, two ships were moored up very close to the bank. They had been lashed together and decorated with balloons, mirrors, lights, awnings, walkways with the palm fronds above them, and there was a big entertainment going on on board these two ships, *Erebus* and *Terror*. *Erebus* had been cleared for dancing and for dining, and a large number of these society people of Hobart were coming on board to enjoy the hospitality of the Royal Navy, because two ships wanted to thank the people of Hobart for being a haven to them as they came back.

Peter Moore: So what were they celebrating? What was this great ball - should we call it the *Erebus* ball?

Michael Palin: Yes, it was called the *Erebus and Terror ball*.

Peter Moore: And did invitations go out with that at the top of the invitation?

Michael Palin: Yes an invitation went out. They were very keen on the proper printed invitations.

Peter Moore: So there was form?

Michael Palin: Yes, it was all very properly organized. And the people of Hobart then, it was a sort of increasing sore swelling middle class who liked social events, but they hadn't seen anything quite like this before. In fact one of the people who was on board was an eighteen year old girl who described as a lady of fashion in the papers later said that this was the greatest ball had ever seen in Hobart, she danced with both the captains.

Peter Moore: And how would she get on to the ship? How would she enter the ball, the *Erebus*, from the shore?

Michael Palin: Well you have to well go across some stepping stones where you go to Government House which was just about sort of hundred yards about the hill. You go there and carriages would stop there and then you walk down, and an area had been cleared and then there

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was a walkway out to the two ships, probably about 50 or 60 yards, and this was a covered walkway which had flowers and plants growing over it. And it was quite dark, so he went through his passage and suddenly you came to the end stepped on board HMS *Erebus*, so the first ship you'd step on, the two captains were there everything was bright lights, so you would go from the darkness to this sudden bright light. And they had the wonderful idea of using mirrors that they brought on board to give to natives, you know, in remote islands, in exchange for sort of food or something like that you'd give them a few mirrors. So all these mirrors, like 700 mirrors had been hung up and we're reflecting the light so it must have been a sparkling, a sparkly occasion.

Peter Moore: Brilliant, we're coming into Christmas party season, so this seems like the right time to be talking about the Erebus Ball. What were they celebrating? What were all these mirrors out for?

Michael Palin: They were celebrating the safe return of the two ships from their first Antarctic expedition which has lasted about four and a half months. They'd set out from Hobart and returned having discovered a volcano, having discovered that Antarctica was a continent, having discovered the extraordinary ice shelf - which was sort of like 200 feet high - stretching for hundreds and hundreds miles and miles later known as the Ross Ice Shelf, and also gone further south and any other ship had gone in history. And this is a sailing ship with no power to turn it around if the wind is in the wrong direction they'd be stuck in the ice. So they came back having had an enormously successful expedition. They were also relieved, so they were wanting to thank the people of Hobart.

Peter Moore: So it sounds to me like a blend of fashion, almost like the old Regency fashion that we think of slightly earlier, and something of the Victorian exploration spirit, and I don't they just transplanted into this little bay at the far end of the world from British people at least. Who would be there? And if you were if you were among the crowd they would you like to watch?

Michael Palin: Well, that made a number of friends, the crew, and the officers particularly in Hobart and there was a wonderful man called McCormack who was naturalist on board he was actually surgeon on board *Erebus*, who loved making friends whenever they stopped anywhere he'll be the first to get off the ship usually shoot a few birds - he loved wildlife.

Peter Moore: Seems paradoxical.

Michael Palin: It seems paradoxical. But of course at the time they couldn't photograph what they saw then and these were strange and weird creatures and wouldn't see them again probably, so the best thing is just to get their hide or their fur or their skeleton or something. Anyway, so I'd love to see McCormick, because he obviously loved company and he had become very friendly with a family just outside Hobart. Also I'd love to see Captain Ross, he was a relative dashing with a fine head of hair and he was called the handsomest man in the navy by Lady Jane Farnklin so I'd like to see what he was wearing and how he turned out. And then there was Frances Crozier who was the captain of HMS *Terror*, and he was rather different sort - a kind of solid bluff Northern Irishman. Never really got the recognition he deserved. He was a very good captain and a very good navigator, but he was always second to somebody else. I'd like to see how he would have dealt with the dancing.

Peter Moore: He might have been second on the dance floor.

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Michael Palin: Second on the dance floor, first at the bar maybe, I don't know. It's nice that the two captains that, you know, sort of shook hands with people as they came on board, and of course they would have opened the dancing.

Peter Moore: Because in one sense it seems quite frivolous but on another it seems it had quite a formal purpose it was thanking people it was to say thank you for their hospitality. And I suppose it's one of these exciting things that we think of now, about it being a gateway town to them. For them it was the gateway to the Antarctic which was unknown.

Michael Palin: Yes absolutely, and I think that of all the places they visited on this long voyage, Hobart was the most congenial in terms of climate, in terms of facilities, friends, social life. I know that some of the crew - a man called William Cunningham who was a marine, who left a very good diary - he was on HMS *Terror*, and he made very good friends with the military who in a barracks in Hobart. And of course being a marine he was with his sort of fellow military men, as it were, they became very friendly. There was a play put on after they returned from the Antarctic at the local theatre, which described the adventures the ships had been on - apparently it wasn't very good. James Clarke Ross didn't go, McCormack went but hid behind the curtain. So, you know, there was a lot of links with Hobart. They had come all the way from London, which had taken them almost a year to get to Hobart, and they've been in appalling storms and the Southern Ocean. They'd been to islands that were very inhospitable, but they had to go there to take scientific measurements and describe the flora and fauna and all that. But Hobart, they called it our southern home that was how James Clarke-Ross referred to it.

Peter Moore: Good. I think one word which is echoing around my head is geniality, this genial reception they had, and from that - I like contrasts - so let's go to your second scene not too far away or maybe a long way away. I'm not sure about distances but we've gone to the 1st of January in 1842, can you tell us where you are at all what's happening?

Michael Palin: The two ships *Erebus* and *Terror* had set out, probably a month before, on their second Antarctic voyage and of course they went in you know our winter their summer so it was December, but it was unlike their first voyage conditions were very much more difficult the ice was much thicker it was altogether much colder, and on New Year's Day they found themselves absolutely stuck fast - again towards the ice shelf further south than any other ships had ever been apart from themselves - but the two ships were absolutely stuck. There were no channels ahead.

Peter Moore: Was this a distressing situation?

Michael Palin: I would think so, I would think it's very distressing because they had very little mobility of the sails. If there is no wind, and there's no wind at that time, they were just stuck. But the interesting thing is that the attitude of the men on both the ships was to sort of make light of it, and sort of celebrate their predicament on New Year's Day. It's going to be a new year rather than, you know, sort of feel that they were stuck and they were coming to the end of their voyage. And what do they do? They had a party and a wonderful party on the ice because the ice was so thick, they could walk from one ship to another, so it was really like being, you know, in the harbor or something.

Peter Moore: It sounds like one of these iconic frost fairs on the Thames. That kind of thing? And I think it's interesting how you describe it as there's an almost ironic reaction, it's the 'this is the British Navy of the 19th century' when you used to talk about shooting and being shot at

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with great good humour, you know, it's that opposite reaction to what you would expect. So what was going on?

Michael Palin: Well I think that it seemed largely led by the crew themselves, it wasn't officer led and although Clarke Ross approved of what was going on, but James Hooker, who was the assistant surgeon on *Erebus* later they're very famous botanist, (and friend of Charles Darwin) he went out with another sailor aboard *Erebus*, and they they went out of the ice and they carved an eight-foot woman in the ice, I thought that's a very jolly and then they they later carved a dance floor, and they carved tables, and they carved a nice sofa, and generally they prepared themselves for a new year's party. This is what they were going to do and they created a pub using sort of some of the masts or spare masts whatever they had to put erect signs and the pub was called the "Pilgrims of the Ocean", and what is interesting is that when the party happened New Year's Day the idea was to make as much noise as possible, so there were a lot of trumpets and all that, they banged drums, they had pigs on board and they put the pigs under their arms to squeeze them till the pig squealed, "Why? Why was this terrific cacophony going on in this utterly remote part of the world? Answer being, I think, because it was just reaction to the silence. The silence down there must be total and complete especially if there's no wind at all the ships are stuck the no creaking timbers there's no sound of water.

Peter Moore: There's a real strong gothic undertone here. Of course the 1840s is around the time that we're getting the Bronte novels coming out of Yorkshire. There's kind of great rise of the Gothic. And then down there - you have in your head I think: the whiteness of the snow, the clear skies, the silence ...

Michael Palin: They must have been the only people on the sort of bottom tenth of the planet. I mean huge, huge silence in this previously undiscovered area. And I think that's what I must have driven them to make the noise and have the party and have as much fun as possible just to say "We're here!" "We exist!" "We're not gong to be intimidated!" "We're not going to be frozen up!"

Peter Moore: It would have been a very puzzling sight for the penguins watching on! And Mr Palin watching this, at the far side of the scene, would their have been a grin on your face?

Michael Palin: Absolute. I'd have joined in, just this wonderful thing that you could have done in that extreme situation. It is it is extraordinary.

Peter Moore: You can't imagine. It's almost like the British character in extremis, isn't it? And the response to that is to build a pub.

Michael Palin: Yes. But it's also the fact that the hierarchy of the ships, which are very clear you know, the captain at the top ... they all joined in. And the captain, James Clark-Ross, almost literally let his hair down because he danced, they did the first dance on the ice with Crozier and the witness said Captain Crozier and Miss Ross opened the dancing. So Ross must have been in drag, which actually was not anything new for him he'd been in drag expedition 1831 in the Arctic.

Peter Moore: Can I find a very strange comedic antecedant for you - underpants on head - is this James Clark Ross as a Python, a hundred and fifty years before. Can we imagine him there with the rouge on his cheeks maybe?

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Michael Palin: Music hall definitely, I don't know whether it was "Python". The whole situation it was very Pythonia- the idea of carving a woman and creating a pub - and the sofa! I think that's just lovely you could sort of sit down on the ice and relax.

Peter Moore: Maybe we could send you all back down there to recreate this wonderful moment. Great, okay, the cold winds are blowing through us and they're going to continue because we're going to go on to your third scene which is a little bit later on. Time has passed. We've gone from the jovial early 1840s at one end of the world, and it's now the 22nd of April 1848. Where are we, what's happened?

Michael Palin: We are in the Arctic, almost saying the Canadian Arctic, but there was no calendar at the time so we're in the Arctic Islands off the coast of North America. *Erebus* and HMS *Terror* had been stuck fast in the ice, not just for a New Year's Day as it was before, or a few days afterwards, but for one and a half years. They've just been unable to move. This combined with the earlier delays meant there was almost three years since they had left London to try and discover a passage – a way through the Northwest Passage - which had not yet been achieved. It had almost been achieved the last, sort of, 200 miles had not been covered. Things had gone wrong for them. The ships were stuck fast and on this particular day the decision was taken to abandon ship and try and make their way south to the North American mainland, hopefully find a Hudson's Bay post or somewhere where they could get food.

Peter Moore: So we're looking at a big group of sailors leaving a ship which was their home, so it's an incredibly emotionally powerful scene for them while they realize they're in grave danger here. Which individuals would be involved in this?

Michael Palin: Well the leader of the expedition Sir John Franklin was one who would not have been involved, because he had died 10 months earlier onboard the ship. We know all this from one note that was discovered - the Victory Point Note - discovered in a cairn by people 10 years later. Franklin had died, nine of the officers and 15 of the men had died in the previous 10 months. So something was going wrong very fast, whether there was scurvy onboard ship we don't know, but one feels that the people who left must have been weak and really unable to travel very far, which proved to be the case.

Peter Moore: So would you be interested to see who is taking the decision. What would your hunch be? Who do you think was marshalling the soldiers at this point?

Michael Palin: My hunch is Fitzjames, who was the second in command of *Erebus*, I think was probably one of the leaders. He left the note. They knew it was his handwriting on the note.

Peter Moore: Can you tell us a little about him? What kind of person was he?

Michael Palin: Fitzjames - jovial bloke. Thirty-one, thirty-two. He had no Arctic experience when he was chosen to be Franklin's deputy. Most of his experience had been out in the East, as an artillery officer in the Opium Wars in China. But the men liked him and he was a very good writer, he wrote very interesting diaries and letters and he seemed to have a very good positive spirit. As they left England and were about to set out, he was the one was saying "oh we'll get through, it's all going to be fine," so I think his optimism would probably have kept him going. The other one I think who was probably leading them was Crozier.

Peter Moore: He's the one that we met before of course

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Michael Palin: He was the one at the ball He was the one commanding *Terror* at that New Year's Eve party, dancing with Captain Ross. Again dogged, loyal, decent man, never given the sort of leadership of the expedition in some people thought he should have been given. But he probably was, in the end, he would have been one of the people who was leading the men south. We know that - a lot of the what I know about this period is Inuit testimony, which of course was oral testimony - but they do describe the Inuit meeting a party of people and the leader of the party sounds very much from their description like Crozier, a sort of middle aged man, quite stocky, quite very strong. And they met not long after they left the ship, and they talked to the Inuit, and they exchanged some food with them, and that was it. They couldn't speak to each other because they didn't know each other's language, and this lifeline for these people was cut at that moment. The Inuit went off their way and the Inuit, in the end, they may well have been able to say "look come with us, we will take you here," but because they couldn't communicate this was one of these terrible moments where probably the last hope was dashed, and after that they died as we know fairly soon.

Peter Moore: They didn't they didn't manage to travel very far at all. Is that correct?

Michael Palin: Well some of them did get to the North American mainland which is about 300 miles away, but they all died and most them died at a place called Starvation Cove. The others died on the way south. Some of the auxiliary boats on the ship had been towed along they found dead bodies in them, but a lot of people think and then again, and Inuit testimony bears out the fact that some of them may have returned to the ships, and taking command of ships again, because they were seen on board the ships in 1849 - which is a year after.

Peter Moore: And this is an incredible length of time after they've not just only left, but gone missing. If you think how long a day, or a month, or a year is, that we're talking multiples of these. People living in solitude ...

Michael Palin: And often in darkness for several months of the year. But I think the fact that some of them went back is probably very likely and that they survived because they were just fewer of them. I don't know how many went back far as we can tell, maybe fifteen or twenty of them, so they would have been perhaps enough food to go around for them. But it's pretty certain that all the crew of both ships have all died by 1850, which was five years after they had set out.

Peter Moore: Still an extremely long period of time but it strikes me that it is, geographically speaking, as well as this perfect mystery. You've got these clues which are hidden in cairns, or you have messages which are coming down through Indigenous histories and there's maybe enough to tantalize but not enough to give you anything just definitive so we're working on it as you put it a succession of hunches. I suppose that's the intriguing thing about you being there at this point, you'd probably be able to become a historical detective.

Michael Palin: I think there are so many hypotheses and so many people: very good scholars have written about it - we'd all be there. That's where everyone wants to be, to see what happened to those men.

Peter Moore: So this is the day, it's the moment, it's the scene and perhaps we might go so far as or be so bold as to say this is the one of the greatest mysteries in maritime history or the history of explanation.

Michael Palin: Of course.

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Peter Moore: Well what better place to leave it suspended than that. I think my final point is you describe it beautifully in the book, you come and see towards the end of your story and as you describe it you say “if *Erebus* was indeed named after the darkest depths of Hell it must have felt as if she had come home.” That's quite a quite a thought, and it's a story which really strikes me is having a massive range because you go from the excitement of the unknown, this lure of something which propels us all forward: curiosity. To the tragedy of the second voyage, so there's light shades and there's dark, there's enormous landscapes but small personal battles that people are fighting.

Michael Palin: What I think comes through very clearly is the optimism and the positive attitude of the people at that time, doing these amazingly difficult journeys. As they left Greenland, as I say, to go up the Northwest Passage, we know from the last letters that “was going to be fine”, “we'll see you in the Pacific next summer”, and something like that. And the same with the Antarctic voyage, but that worked out because their optimism was rewarded with success. In the Northwest Passage, I think, because there was an element of sort of national pride as well involved with it slightly more of a sort of imperial moment I think that dashed their hopes.

Peter Moore: It almost bookends the long period of exploration history, because this is really the end for wooden sailing ships and in the way they had been understood and used - because we have the great age of iron on the cusp of coming to be. We have one last question I'm going to put to you; if you could bring one memento back from your travels, if you could reach your hand down and pick up on thing, is there anything you'd like to bring?

Michael Palin: Oh yeah, I'd bring the pub sign “Pilgrims of the Ocean”, I would just love to have that.

Peter Moore: And that would be hanging in the Palin office?

Michael Palin: Oh yes, I'd have it in my garden and on a cold day I get to sit out there carve an eight-foot woman. My garden's not that big. Maybe an eight inch woman.

Peter Moore: Well, we'd know where you live if there was an eight-foot woman in the garden.

Michael Palin: Yes. [*Laughter*]

Peter Moore: Michael Palin, it's been an absolute pleasure to travel through time with you, thank you.