



This is the print version of the [Skeptical Science](#) article '[Northwest passage has been navigated in the past](#)', which can be found at <http://sks.to/northwest>.

What The Science Says:

Anyone relying on the fact that [the Northwest Passage was navigated in the 1940s](#), to claim that the Passage obviously must have been ice-free then (as it is more regularly now), is not being truly sceptical, but is relying on half-truths to confirm a pre-conceived belief. If you read the original sources, a very different picture reveals itself.

Climate Myth: Northwest passage has been navigated in the past

"Here is a photo of the St. Roch. It's a wooden ship, not some massive, metallic icebreaker. According to the [Vancouver Maritime Museum web site](#), this 104 foot wooden ship sailed through the Northwest Passage from 1940 to 1942, that was from west to east. In 1944 it did it again from from east to west...Once "global warming" is mentioned all critical faculties are shut down in the media. They don't verify facts. They just repeat the claims that are made" ([Classically Liberal](#))

These are the basic details, from the original account given in the sources listed at the end.

The first voyage through the Northwest Passage by the '[St. Roch](#)' took about 28 months (850 days), between June 23 1940 and Oct 11 1942. The voyage itself certainly wasn't meant as a non-stop attempt, because they had duties to perform as a Royal Canadian Mounted Police ship, but it did get frozen in on two occasions (from mid/late September to July/Aug 1940 and 1941), and the description of the journey refers often to heavy, packed ice and a scarcity of consistent open water - as well as the use of gunpowder to create breaks in the ice. In fact, the overall description of the conditions experienced during the journey (given by [Henry Larsen](#), the Captain of the boat, in his autobiography - see below) reveals how bad it was :

"The three seasons of the short Arctic Summers from 1940-42 had been extremely bad for navigation, the worst consecutive three I had experienced as far as ice and weather conditions were concerned, and in my remaining years in the Arctic I never saw their like. Without hesitation I would say that most ships encountering the conditions we faced would have failed. I also believe that had we missed the single opportunity we had to get out of Pasley Bay, we most certainly would still be there, in small bits and pieces."

So, not ice-free at all.

The second journey took a total of 86 days (from July 22 to Oct 16 1944), although it actually involved 43 days of actual sailing. That certainly sounds like it was more straightforward and sounds like it may have involved steaming through an ice-free Passage, doesn't it ? Well, the reality is rather different. The description again is of heavy, tightly-packed ice and atrocious weather - so much so that the only really fine day was actually noted in the account. Again, most of the open water they experienced consisted of leads between the ice, which they had to follow as far as they could before anchoring on the ice to shelter from the persistently bad weather. It was reported by Larsen that that particular season was "the worst in years."

Again, hardly ice-free by any description.

In fact, as Larsen himself [later acknowledged](#), the only reason the voyages were attempted had nothing to do with any widespread opening-up of the Passage and everything to do with WWII and Canada's determination to re-iterate its sovereignty over the Northwest Passage, and its concern to show that there were no physical obstacles to prevent it defending its territory.

Compare those voyages above with more recent ones : such as the '[St. Roch II](#)' catamaran, which did the journey in 2000 in three weeks and encountered [very little ice](#); the '[Cloud Nine](#)' ketch, which completed the journey in 45 days in 2007, encountering "[hardly any ice](#)";

the '[Babouche](#)', which completed the journey completely by sail [for the first time](#); the [Rigid Inflatable Boat \(RIB\)](#) which completed the journey in two weeks in 2010; and the [yacht](#) and [trimaran](#) which traversed both the Northwest and Northeast Passages [in one season](#). You can even [take a cruise](#) along those waters these days, if you fancy it.

And compare those 1940s conditions with those more usual now : such as [2007](#), when the Northwest Passage demonstrably opened up for the first time officially recorded; [2008](#), when both the Northwest and Northeast Passages demonstrably both opened up at the same time for the first time officially recorded; [2010](#) and [2011](#), when the Northwest Passage was officially open again. Have a look at the satellite pictures [here](#) and [here](#) to see what it looks like.

All in all, the Northwest Passage has most definitely been open and ice-free in recent years (and is now more regularly open and navigable); and there is no proof whatsoever that it was ice-free back in the 40s (or, indeed, in any other recent period) - but definitely wasn't open and ice-free when the 'St. Roch' made its difficult transits.

Sources:

***The Conquest of the North West Passage : The Arctic Voyages of the St. Roch, 1940-44 - Inspector Henry A. Larsen, R.C.M.P. The Geographical Journal, Vol CX Nos 1-3, July - September 1947 (The first page is accessible for free at : <http://www.jstor.org/pss/1789190>)*

***The North-West Passage, 1940-42 and 1944 : The Famous Voyages of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police Schooner "St. Roch" Sergeant Henry Larsen, F.R.G.S., Commander Edmond Cloutier, C.M.G., 1958*

***The Big Ship : An Autobiography by Henry A. Larsen, in co-operation with Frank R. Sheer and Edward Omholt-Jensen, 1967*



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