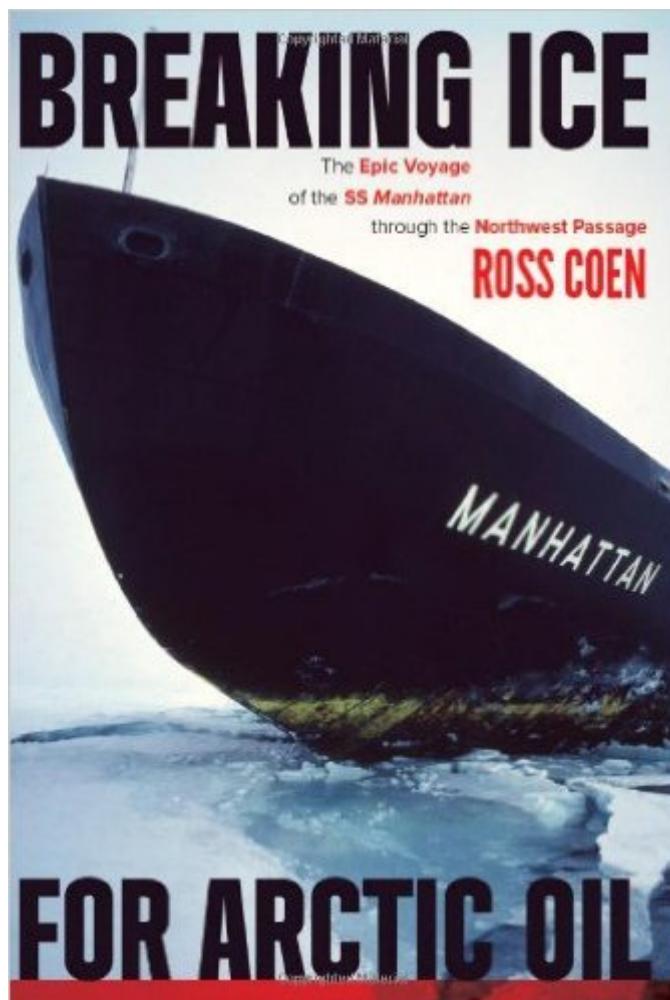


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Breaking Ice For Arctic Oil: The Epic Voyage Of The SS Manhattan Through The Northwest Passage



Synopsis

In 1969, an icebreaking tanker, the SS Manhattan, was commissioned by Humble Oil to transit the Northwest Passage in order to test the logistical and economic feasibility of an all-marine transportation system for Alaska North Slope crude oil. Proposed as an alternative to the Trans-Alaska Pipeline, the Manhattan made two voyages to the North American Arctic and collected volumes of scientific data on ice conditions and the behavior of ships in ice. Although the Manhattan successfully navigated the Northwest Passage, "closing a five-hundred-year chapter of Arctic exploration by becoming the first commercial vessel to do so," the expedition ultimately demonstrated the impracticality of moving crude oil using icebreaking ships. *Breaking Ice for Arctic Oil* details this historic voyage, establishing its significant impact on the future of marine traffic and resource development in the Arctic and setting the stage for the current oil crisis.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I purchased this book because I was interested in both the Arctic and large ships. Having visited remote Alaska during the heyday of building the trans Alaska pipeline, I found but did not expect a larger story than just about the SS Manhattan. The author takes a long walk 'all the way around the block' to discuss almost every possible aspect of the tanker story. As a result, there were times when I was keenly interested in this larger than a ship story. The details regarding the ship itself were worth the price of admission. However, the title has a dual meaning, in retrospect. Having to do with the politics, commerce, and culture of the arctic North, this story is more of a case study of the

exploration for and exploitation of Alaskan north fields and the Canadian waters of the North Passage. I give it four stars for an excellent tale of the creation, voyage, and ultimate fate of one of the world's largest tanker vessels. The author also provides us something of a glimpse into the oil industry from a time when 'Exxon-Mobil' was not yet conceived of. In fact I grew up with the smaller oil companies and even worked briefly for a Phillips service station. Somehow, I lost track as the conglomerate big oil companies were formed and suddenly there was an Exxon-Mobil in our world. If you have been reading about big oil, the arctic, and transoceanic shipping, then you may just enjoy this story about how an ambitious Humble Oil placed a wager on the Northwest Passage.

The author shows how the 1968 discovery of oil in Prudhoe Bay changed the commercial shipping dynamics of the Arctic. Oil companies quickly latched onto a pipeline as the best way to get the oil out of the frozen north, but Humble Oil, now Exxon, thought that a fleet of tankers could get the oil to east coast markets more cheaply, and thus more profitably. It refitted one of the world's first super-tankers, the SS Manhattan, as an icebreaker, and sent it north in 1969. At first glance, the venture seems audacious, even foolhardy, but Coen successfully shows that the voyage was strictly business. Though he does an excellent job of laying out the political and economic context of the voyage, Coen's story shines as he describes the incredible natural barriers that literally held the huge ship back and the determination of her crew to get her to Prudhoe Bay. If the predictions of climate change come to pass, the Arctic will no longer be choked with ice in the next few decades, and ships may follow the trail blazed by the tanker through the Northwest Passage as easily as they pass through the Panama Canal.

I enjoyed very much reading this book. It puts together subjects such as oil exploration, business decisions, technology, maritime challenges, project management.

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