

A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ?

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THE CRIMSON CLIFFS

Nowadays red snow is an old story. It has been found in many parts of the world and its color is known to be due to the presence of microscopic organisms of more than one species, the commonest of which is called *Sphaerella nivalis*. When, however, Sir John Ross conducted his exploration of Baffin's Bay in the year 1818, though such snow had occasionally been seen before in the Alps and elsewhere, it is unlikely that Ross and his companions had ever heard of it. On August 17, when their ships were off the northwest coast of Greenland, near Cape York, they beheld a strange sight.

"We discovered," writes Ross, "that the snow on the face of the cliffs presented an appearance both novel and interesting, being apparently stained or covered by some substance which gave it a deep crimson color. Many conjectures were afloat concerning the cause of this appearance."

A colored drawing of the cliffs with their immense patches of red snow, made by Ross himself, is contained in the published report of his expedition, and the Crimson Cliffs, marked on his chart of Baffin's Bay, became a well-known name in Arctic geography. A boat was sent ashore in charge of two officers, who found that "the snow was penetrated even down to the rock, in many places to a depth of ten or twelve feet, by the coloring matter." Samples of the snow were obtained and subsequently examined under a microscope, revealing "particles like a very minute round seed, which were of exactly the same size and of a deep red color." Samples of the melted snow and also of the sediment deposited from it were taken back to Europe, where the red snow organism was given the now obsolete name of *Protococcus nivalis* by the Swedish botanist Agardh.

A natural-color photograph of red snow, also found on the northwest Greenland coast, was published in the National Geographic Magazine for March, 1926.

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