

centuries elapsed before explorers once more sought the northern seas. Then it was other nations, especially the Dutch and the English, that led the van. The sober observations of the old Northmen were forgotten, and in their stead we meet with repeated instances of the attraction of mankind towards the most fantastic ideas; a tendency of thought that found ample scope in the regions of the north. When the cold proved not to be absolutely deadly, theories flew to the opposite extreme, and marvellous were the erroneous ideas that sprang up and have held their own down to the present day. Over and over again it has been the same—the most natural explanation of phenomena is the very one that men have most shunned; and, if no middle course was to be found, they have rushed to the wildest hypothesis. It is only thus that the belief in an open polar sea could have arisen and held its ground. Though everywhere ice was met with, people maintained that this open sea must lie behind the ice. Thus the belief in an ice-free northeast and northwest passage to the wealth of Cathay or of India, first propounded towards the close of the 15th century, cropped up again and again, only to be again and again refuted. Since the ice barred the southern regions, the way must lie farther north; and finally a passage over the Pole itself was sought for. Wild as these theories were, they have worked for the benefit of mankind; for by their means our knowledge of the earth has been