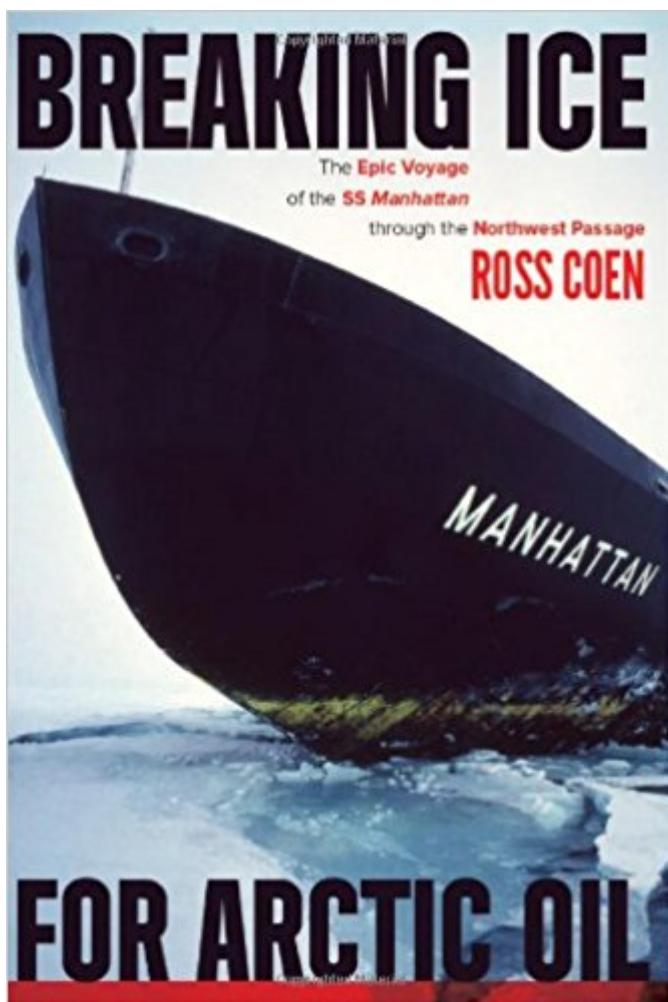


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# Breaking Ice For Arctic Oil: The Epic Voyage Of The SS Manhattan Through The Northwest Passage



## 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

Paperback: 215 pages

Publisher: University of Alaska Press; First American Edition edition (April 15, 2012)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 1602231699

ISBN-13: 978-1602231696

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.7 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 14.1 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.6 out of 5 stars 3 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #1,739,256 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #33 in Books > History > Americas > Canada > Exploration #467 in Books > Engineering & Transportation > Engineering > Energy Production & Extraction > Fossil Fuels > Petroleum #498 in Books > History > Arctic & Antarctica

## Customer Reviews

"[Coen] has plucked a rare gem from the dust bin of Alaska's relatively brief but colorful petroleum history and endowed it with a fresh voice that speaks to a new generation of adherents largely unaware of its historic genesis....Prof. Coen's book is arguably the most important book written by an Alaska author on any subject. It's a must read for anyone dealing with or engaged in the far-reaching implications of the overarching state, national and international issues it explores." (Joe E. LaRocca Anchorage Daily News 2012-07-14) "A great read—well organized, well written, and fully referenced—providing many lesser known

details about SS Manhattan's history and the role it played in the Alaska pipeline debate. (Shelagh D. Grant, author of *Polar Imperative*) "Breaking Ice for Arctic Oil is an informative, accessible, and enjoyable read. Those interested in Arctic and Alaskan histories will undoubtedly find much to enjoy in [Ross] Coen's detailed and personable narrative, while scholars of northern and transportation histories will recognize important linkages to contemporary northern affairs." (Arctic Sounder) "As the discussion of marine travel in the Arctic continues to ramp up, the release of Fairbanks' author Ross Coen's newest book couldn't be timelier." (Arctic Sounder) "In *Breaking Ice for Arctic Oil*, Fairbanks-based historian Ross Coen recounts the voyage of the Manhattan and places it in the larger context of the heady early days of Alaska's entry into the world oil market. The result is a fascinating look at what happens when politics, big business, and technology dovetail to accomplish what has never been done before." (Daily News-Miner)

Ross Coen works at the Alaska Center for Energy and Power at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, where he oversees a program of rural energy development jointly sponsored by the Tanana Chiefs Conference. He also teaches at the university and has published numerous articles on Alaska and arctic history in the *Northern Review*, *Alaska Magazine*, *Alaska History*, and other publications.

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 Northwest 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.

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

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.

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