

South

The *Endurance* Expedition

Ernest Shackleton
ISBN: 0-14-243779-4

Read: 2010 August 8 - 25
Reviewed: 2010 September 20

Trying to get to it for ten years notwithstanding, I don't think I would have read **Antarctica** (Kim Stanley Robinson) this summer if I'd known that Men's Book Group would be reading **South** by Shackleton immediately following. On the other hand, "In The Footsteps" hired adventures from **Antarctica** was an interesting introduction to this *real* volume.

I spent most of August shivering, or worse with the two bottom-of-the-world adventures.

This is not a novel or a dramatized account, nor is it written by a novelist. It was dictated by Shackleton himself and is a diary or logbook-like record of the expedition of the *Endurance*, a sailing and steaming ship outfitted for Antarctic exploration in 1914. Also there are several appendices that might be useful to future explorers, including a complete list of all the huts build on the continent for supply caches and how to access them.

Ernest Shackleton was arguably the greatest antarctic explorer. He obviously belonged in the arctic-antarctic environment and love and was expert at every nuance of it that was known at the time, all the technology, technique, equipage, expectations, and natural occurrences. He was clearly meant to be involved in the exploration of the vast white wilderness, but he was one of many who were in the right place at the right time for conquest of the final continent and, as so often happens in history, was denied any of the all-important "firsts."

Scott had made it to the south pole but had not made it back. Amundsen had been first to get there and return alive. Byrd had flown over. Even the magnetic south pole had been conquered, by Mawson. Shackleton himself had been knighted for his activities in a previous expedition. But what great "first" remained to test his mettle as a commander in the place where he truly belonged?

As so often happens, the mission Shackleton proposed and the one that occurred were quite different. He proposed to be the first to cross the continent of Antarctica, by way of the pole. This would indeed be a significant new challenge in the polar exploration community, if only "ho hum, what's next" to the rest of the world, much like Apollo 12. Half of his trip, if not more, would be over much more difficult and less accessible, mostly unknown terrain. Someone with money agreed and so an expedition was mounted in the southern summer of 1914, that is, December.

The *Endurance* was a fine sailing ship that also had a steam engine and screw. The amount of coal that could be carried was, however, limited. They also had radio equipment, but this was during the “200 meters and up” era. They only hoped to hear timing signals from the southern continents, but heard nothing during the whole expedition and were not heard on any of their own transmissions.

The expedition was divided into two parts. A support group aboard the *Aurora* went the more traditional and closer route to the Ross Sea and Ice Shelf south of New Zealand. They were to lay in caches of supplies along what was to be the post-pole portion of the journey over familiar ice. That half of the expedition was less organized, run more by consensus, and lost three men, two of them in a late stage, foolhardy, unequipped crossing of ice that floated away. Nonetheless, they were mostly successful in laying in their caches and in locating others from prior expeditions, though they did have to use some of their cached material for their own survival as they returned across the ice cap.

The expedition started out strangely in that they left England during the week of the outbreak of World War I. Shackleton and the crew stopped and wired the admiralty that they were all prepared to volunteer for duty in service to their country at that point. The authorities cleared them to continue with their prestigious voyage, clearly because one ship was near inconsequential in a world war effort and their expedition would be great press for its country when successful. The exigencies of the war would cause them trouble later as they were needing to be rescued from the south while a lot of military hardware was tied up in the north.

The prime group was aboard the *Endurance*, sailing into the Weddell Sea south of South America in search of a place to land, set up a base camp with their supplies, equipment, personnel, and dogs, and to depart for the pole during the 1915-1916 season. (As with most such outings, any hope of starting in the 1914 - 1915 season was quickly lost to the relentless calendar and related issues of non-optimum life.)

The Weddell Sea was much less explored and known, though there were maps and whaling communities in the region. Really, the story of this expedition is, from beginning to end, the story of the pack ice and what it did and did not do during the time that Shackleton and his party were on it. I knew nothing of the behavior of pack ice or how men navigate and otherwise use it before reading this book. A brief digression into some of the things pack ice can do is warranted.

The sea, though it is highly salty, ultimately freezes in the arctic and antarctic extremes. This causes a layer of ice to form over the water. It can be thin, a meter or two, and temporary, or can be very thick, thousands of meters, and seemingly “permanent,” such as the Ross Ice Shelf. Typically it is something in between and forms up in great packs across vast areas of the ocean. These packs seem nearly alive in their motions driven by the currents but mostly by surface winds. In one episode, the *Aurora*, held firm in the ice, was anchored to the shore. One day the men in camp went out only to find that the ice and the *Aurora* were gone, for the season it turned out. If they’d known this was going to happen they would have unloaded and arranged

accommodations differently. The ice had blown out in the night, breaking the mooring cables (after all, mere cables were not going to hold down an entire ice floe). They had thought that the pack was settled in for the winter.

Vast areas of the sea freeze up. Sometimes it is new ice, sometimes it is very old. Sometimes floes crash up against islands or other floes and make mounds or “hummocks”, crunching up the ice all around. Sometimes killer whales will come up from great depth and crash into the floes in order to break through and secure a seal meal, or just make a hump of a meter or two height when they don’t quite make it. Sometimes old ice bergs off, and sometimes it runs aground. You can tell a berg is aground by the tide lines up out of the water. Sometimes “pools” or gaps will form in the midst of a floe. Sometimes ice is crushed up, “growlers.” One assumes that’s an apt name.

Ice is hard to either navigate through or hike over. Sometimes there are leads that run off towards open water, or the shore, or somewhere else. Sometimes one tries to form leads with the ship by ramming the sharp bow into floes. Sometimes the ship will rise up in crushing ice and lay over, intact, only to settle back in on the next relaxation of the floe. Sometimes it gets stuck and is crushed. Sometimes there are breaks in the pack ice. Sometimes a floe will break up unexpectedly, right through the middle of a campground.

In Appendix I, pages 338 - 340, several technical terms for various states of the ice are listed: slush or sludge, pancake ice, young ice, land floes, floes, field, hummocking, hummocky floes, pack, pack ice, drift ice, brash, bergy bits, (pieces about the size of a cottage, of glacier ice or of hummocky pack washed clear of snow....), growlers, crack, lead or lane, and pools. This terminology is needed in the art of antarctic exploration, as it is in the narrative.

The basic narrative is that the *Endurance* set off into the Weddell Sea in December 1914 and was looking to get to a shoreline as far south as possible for the winter encampment of 1915 from which they would leave across the polar cap towards the south pole and the supplies beyond, during the next day season in the south, the summer of 1915 and/or 1916. Though comfortable and well controlled, this part of the expedition on the boat required great skill in sailing and great understanding of the seas of the antarctic. There was a lot of ice in the sea and they kept going east trying to find lanes south, occasionally doing so. (At least *Endurance*, a wooden ship, could touch the ice floes and floating hunks. Not true of the metal ships.) In the end, the *Endurance* became trapped in the ice and spent several months at the mercy of the motions of the pack. It would growl and pop and make distressing sounds all the time and the expedition was ready, for a long time, to abandon ship at any moment. They were also ready for a lead to open and allow them to continue, or retreat, and they lived on and off the ice for much of this time.

There are many descriptions of technical daring and skill in the face of grave danger, as when the rudder or screw would be removed from the water, or the ship piloted in such a way as not to have them contact the ice and become damaged, though the rudder was lost before the ultimate crushing of the rest of the ship. Attempts to start up the steam engine in the presence of water

and steam pipes frozen solid, and bilge rising at a listing angle in the engine room, were also harrowing.

At length, on November 21, 1915, the *Endurance* was lost, crushed in an unfortunate confluence of pack ice movements. After that Shackleton and his men lived on the ice full time, unstable though it was.

Suddenly the situation was different. Much of the stores had been moved off the ship, but there was only so much they could carry on the marches. It had been much more convenient to have had the ship as a base, and it would have been much more convenient to have had their subsequent base on land that held still and did not require constant watch due to the dangers of the ice.

For several months they stayed at “Patience Camp” and “Ocean Camp” a mile and a half away on a side of the floe before the order was finally given to get underway in the three lifeboats that had been salvaged. Once they did this, their supplies diminished again to what they could carry in the boats.

The weeks at sea were spent bailing the boats, round the clock, dealing with heavy seas, freezing water, chafes and rashes, and other round-the-clock inconveniences and desperation. Shackleton describes all of this well; it cannot be summarized.

At length and in grave desperation they managed to land on an inlet on Elephant Island, previously untouched by humans, and to survive there in a cliff stream waterfall for a few days before working their way around to a more permanent camp on a beach under glaciers.

Once this was established, Shackleton himself and a very small handpicked crew took one of the boats on another unlikely 800 mile voyage east to South Orkney Island where there was a whaling camp from which they could secure relief. Unfortunately, after more weeks at sea, they landed on the opposite from the inhabited side of the island and had to make another desperate march across unmapped territory to reach the town. Every part of that march continued to present new challenges and problems. The three men were in such straights that they felt a fourth man was with them during parts of their march. The last challenge before arriving in the whaling town was a waterfall that they had to descend using the last of their rope that was then lost.

Once Shackleton and his two companions were in town and cleaned up the distress was not over. It was Shackleton’s sole purpose then to rescue the remainder of his crew. Several steel steamers attempted to go to Elephant Island for the rescue but were always shut out by ice, or by lack of fuel, or other exigencies. At last, a Chilean tug happened to be there at the time of a suitable lead into the beach and got close enough to the shore to move the men off in under an hour, before fleeing back to open water. It is a fascinating story in itself all of the politicking Shackleton had

to do with various nationalities and authorities to keep making these attempts until his men were rescued, in the midst of an ongoing, protracted world war.

All of this was done with celestial navigation, when the sky was even visible, and dead reckoning, the well-named technique by which one splices together knowledge of course and speed into an idea of current location. This was long before any radio aid, and longer still before any satellite-based navigation or communication technology.

And it wasn't just the ice. It was rare for the weather not to be bad then get worse. Several times throughout the story the ubiquitous brisk breeze "freshened to a gale" for several days, after which they could take next steps, other environments permitting.

Strangely, explorers in the antarctic used daylight savings time, of which Shackleton said, "This is really pandering to the base but universal passion that men, and especially seafarers, have for getting up late, otherwise we would be honest and make our routine earlier instead of flogging the clock." Who would care, under these circumstances, how their clock was set? It was daylight all day, or night, depending on the time of year.

South was hard to read because it was day after day of stupendous, voluntary and involuntary suffering and endless life-and-death challenges for weeks, months, even years on end. Interestingly, the explorers preferred temperature to be well below freezing. When it got "warm", like 27 F, things started to get slushy and messy. Hard frozen was preferred.

As a reader, I could put down the book and return to a hot August day. As a member of the expedition, one could just persevere and hope in the slim chance that one might get out alive one of these days. Though none of Shackleton's part of the expedition perished, many were injured, most with frost-bight and diseases of malnutrition. For months on end, much of what they ate was seal blubber. Anytime a seal walked close enough they would club it and eat it. Even this got scarce after a while.

And, though none of Shackleton's party perished in the antarctic, when they returned to the homeland, they immediately went to places in the war effort for which they were imminently qualified, such as the arctic. Many of them then died in the war.

None of the great (ant)arctic explorer-leaders seemed to live to be very old. On a return to the region in 1922, Shackleton died, probably of a heart attack, at age 47. He was indeed getting "old for this sort of thing" and seemed to lack his former drive and ambition in the months leading up to his death. I couldn't help but think that eating all that seal blubber couldn't have been easy on the arteries, despite the heroic exercise routine that all the parties endured. Appropriately, he is buried in a whaling camp on South Georgia Island.

I fear that I haven't done Shackleton's opus justice here, for example, I haven't talked about any of the manifest beauty of the region, as expressed once in a while by Shackleton in his narrative.

Nor, the immensity of the “bottom of the world.” As with all such endeavors, I must leave it to an actual reader to share the ice and the extravagant joy of living, just barely, with this author.