



Antarctic Hero

Few men have ever matched the courage and superhuman tenacity of Ernest Shackleton. **Martin Chown** on an Edwardian Ulysses

Resolute, strong-jawed, barrel-chested and fired by patriotic fervour, Ernest Shackleton embodies the Indian summer of empire as powerfully as the grand, melancholy romanticism of Elgar. Yet until five years ago he was close to forgotten, overshadowed in perceptions of the heroic age of Antarctic exploration by his great rival, Robert Falcon Scott. In 1912, Scott lost the race to the South Pole to Roald Amundsen by a month, and his entire five-man party to cold and hunger on the journey back. Yet the popular press canonised them as heroic martyrs because of the nobility with which they perished. Even now Captain Oates's sleeping bag is the most venerated relic of the Scott Polar Research Institute in Cambridge, set up as a permanent memorial in 1920.

Fast forward to 1959, though, and you find Peter Cook spoofing Scott's stiff-upper-lip Englishness in his Footlights

sketch 'Polar Bores'. After that came John Cleese as 'Scott of the Sahara' and in 1979 Roland Huntford's debunking biography, *Scott and Amundsen*. Today Shackleton seems infinitely more attractive than Scott: charismatic, caring, classless and brimming with courage and tenacity. He was, insisted one of his men, 'the greatest leader that ever came on God's earth bar none'.

Rediscovered in part thanks to the fine photographs that chronicle his *Endurance* expedition of 1914–16, Shackleton is feted today in books, movies and exhibitions, the latest of which is 'Shackleton: The Hidden Collections', now on show at the Scott Polar Research Institute. Even the red-and-gold sledging flag Shackleton set up at farthest south in 1909 is on display.

It was the closest to the Pole he got. Defeated by his choice of Burberry jackets over furs to keep warm and ponies over dogs to pull sledges – not to mention

90mph winds and temperatures of -40°F – he had the courage to turn back. As he later said to his wife, he thought she would prefer a live donkey to a dead lion.

None of his expeditions achieved their aims. Yet as Beau Riffenburgh points out in his excellent new book on the *Nimrod* expedition of 1907–9, to focus on that is to miss the essence of the man: 'the struggle, the fight, the attainment of goals that others might think unachievable'.

Shackleton's first polar trek was at 28, with Scott and Edward Wilson (Caius 1891), the doctor who died with Scott on his last expedition. He and Wilson became close, but he fell out badly with Scott, the expedition leader, who invalidated him home when they struggled back to base. Shackleton never forgave the humiliation.

Above. Ernest Shackleton, photographed on the Endurance by Frank Hurley, 1915

Discovery expedition 1901-4



Shackleton, Scott and Wilson on arrival back at the Discovery, 3 February 1903, after reaching 82° 17' south and becoming the first men to pass the eightieth parallel. All were debilitated from scurvy. Shackleton, exhausted, had been coughing blood

► Cambridge graduates often served on polar expeditions, usually as scientists or doctors. Scott's geologist Hartley Ferrar (Sidney Sussex 1898) was only 22 when he first went south. Even younger, at 20, was Philip Brocklehurst (Trinity Hall 1904), a beefy, boxing, Etonian baronet who paid £2000 to be included in Shackleton's *Nimrod* expedition. In the event, he stood up to the gruelling conditions at least as well as the other alumni in the fifteen-man party: the depressive Bertram Armytage (Jesus 1887), who a few years later donned dinner suit and medals and shot himself in his club; and Eric Marshall (Emmanuel 1897), a tough, abrasive doctor who eventually had to amputate Brocklehurst's big toe when it went gangrenous after frostbite.

The *Nimrod* expedition brought great triumphs: the first ascent of a major Antarctic peak, Mount Erebus (12,448ft); the discovery of a huge, 125-mile-long glacier (named the Beardmore after the expedition's chief backer); and the first ever hoisting of the Union Flag at the South Magnetic Pole, on 16 January 1909. Shackleton's own four-man party (which included Eric Marshall) got to within a hundred miles of the geographic pole. In June, he returned to London to acclaim and was knighted.

Five years later Shackleton returned to the Antarctic in the *Endurance*, again with Cambridge scientists on board: this time the geologist James Wordie (St John's 1910) and the physicist Reginald James (St John's 1909). His 28-man party never landed. They saw pack ice three days out, and by 19 January 1915 were trapped. Over the next ten months the *Endurance* drifted 1300 miles locked in the ice, succumbing finally to the pressure and sinking on 21 November. For five months the men drifted out to sea in a remorseless current on slowly melting ice floes. When these disintegrated they took to the lifeboats, and after a perilous seven-day voyage against wind and tide landed on a remote uninhabited rock called Elephant Island on 15 April 1916.

Shackleton with a crew of five then sailed for South Georgia to get help in a 22-foot-long open boat, the *James Caird*. Without waterproofs, endlessly pumping and bailing, they covered 800 miles in seventeen days in one of the greatest boat journeys ever made. After a 20-mile march across South Georgia, Shackleton reached a whaling station, and three months later succeeded in rescuing his men from Elephant Island. Every one survived. ■

Nimrod expedition 1907-9



Nimrod leaving Lyttleton Harbour, New Zealand, on 1 January 1908. A crowd of 50,000 turned out to see off the first expedition Shackleton led. On his return he was knighted – an honour that never came to Scott



George 'Putty' Marston at base camp, Cape Royds, 1908. Measuring only 33ft by 19ft, the expedition hut was built of matchboarding and roofing felt, and held fifteen men. Granulated cork in the space between the inner and outer walls provided insulation



Top: Shackleton (right) with Adams and Wild at 88° 23' south, the closest to the South Pole explorers had yet come, 9 January 1909. Exposure and shortage of supplies forced the team to turn back 97 miles from their goal. Below: back aboard Nimrod on 4 March, with Shackleton second left

Endurance expedition 1914-16



Endurance trapped in the ice in the Weddell Sea, 1915. The aim of Shackleton's expedition was to cross Antarctica from sea to sea, passing the South Pole on the way, but his 28-man party never reached shore. The gruelling 1500-mile crossing was not finally achieved until 1958, by Vivian Fuchs (St John's 1926) and Edmund Hillary



Midwinter dinner on the Endurance, 22 June 1915. Though trapped in the ice for over five months, the crew celebrated at 6pm with 'roast pork, stewed apples & preserved peas with plum pudding' in the best tradition of Antarctic explorers. Shackleton set great store by good, nutritious food, both to prevent scurvy and to keep up morale



The Endurance crew. Shackleton first met Wild, his indispensable second-in-command, on Scott's Discovery expedition. Worsley, the Endurance captain, was the superb navigator who ensured the party got to Elephant Island and Shackleton reached South Georgia. Hurley was the photographer. Wordie and James, the two Cambridge scientists, had been good friends at St John's



Ocean Camp, November 1915. Set up on the colossal raft formed by a 20-foot-thick ice floe a mile and a half from the wreck of the Endurance, Ocean Camp was the expedition's home for two months. In the background are the three salvaged lifeboats. The conical tents proved very effective, unlike those on Shackleton's previous Antarctic expedition which had whippy bamboo poles and were without sewn-in groundsheets



Shackleton at Patience Camp, 1916. The tent was shared with the resourceful photographer, Frank Hurley, who is skinning a penguin to feed the home-made blubber stove behind him. When fired up, it 'acted like a blast furnace'



Launching the James Caird at Elephant Island, 24 April 1916. The Caird carried Shackleton and his five-man crew 800 miles to South Georgia in an epic seventeen-day voyage. Just 22ft long, with a 6ft beam, the boat was stabilised with 2000lbs of ballast to stop it capsizing. The decking was improvised from canvas and sledges

Quest expedition 1921-22



Shackleton and Wild on board the Quest, 1921. The last photograph of Shackleton ever taken shows him sailing south to circumnavigate Antarctica. Returning to wartime London in 1917 after the 22-month Endurance ordeal, he received little public recognition. Restless, pursued by creditors and in failing health, he embarked on Quest to leave his cares behind him, but died in South Georgia on 5 January 1922



The exhibition 'Shackleton: The Hidden Collections' can be seen at the Scott Polar Research Centre, Lensfield Road, Cambridge. Open Tuesday to Saturday, 2.30-4. Admission free. For more details, see www.spri.cam.ac.uk/ Visitors to the website can browse an impressive on-line picture archive of the centre's Shackleton and Scott photographs.

Just out is Beau Riffenburgh's fascinating book Nimrod. Ernest Shackleton and the Extraordinary Story of the 1907-9 British Antarctic Expedition (Bloomsbury, £17.99). Copies are available to CAM readers for £14.99, including UK postage. Call 01256 302685, quoting GLR A45, before 28 February 2005