



Brother Ernest Shackleton Antarctic Explorer and Survivor ©

by **Dr. Ivan M. Tribe**, KCT, KYCH, 33°

In past generations, Americans and Europeans generally held polar explorers in high esteem. Those who endured great hardship won wide acclaim for their achievements, sometimes giving their lives in the process of their quest for fame. Among those who devoted their energies to such endeavors were a number of Masons, both American and British including Nathaniel Palmer, Elisha Kent Kane, Robert Peary, Robert Falcon Scott, Admiral Richard E. Byrd, and the subject of the following sketch, Sir Ernest Shackleton. While he discovered neither the North nor the South Pole, his exploits in the Antarctic rank as some of the major accomplishments of the age, particularly his 1914-1916 expedition where his name and character became virtually synonymous with the ship, *Endurance*, that bore him and his men to the far south.

Ernest Henry Shackleton was born at Kildea in County Kildare, Ireland, of a farmer-physician father, whose ancestors hailed originally from Yorkshire, England, and an Irish mother. In 1884 the Shackletons moved to suburban London. In 1887 young Ernest became a student at Dulwich College. He seems to have been somewhat indifferent to academics, and his teachers held him up as an example only after he became famous. Shackleton dropped out of school in 1890 and joined the Merchant Navy, making his first voyage from Liverpool to Valparaiso, Chile, aboard the *Hoghton Tower*. He made other journeys in the next few years, becoming certified as a First Mate in 1896 and as a Master two years later. Somewhat later, he gained commission as a lieutenant in the Royal Naval Reserve. During this time, he served on two voyages that transported soldiers and supplies to Cape Town in the Boer War. That 1890 trip around Cape Horn always stuck in his mind and whetted his sense of adventure. He later told a journalist that "I felt strangely drawn to the mysterious south."

Ernest Shackleton's pathway to international fame and "the mysterious south" began when he joined the *Discovery* expedition organized by the Royal Geographical Society and led by

Robert Falcon Scott, a navy officer and member of Drury Lane Lodge 2127 in London. In fact, prior to the group's departure, Shackleton took his Entered Apprentice degree on July 9, 1901, in Navy Lodge No. 2612, also in London. Several years would pass before he took additional Masonic work.

Antarctic expeditions were a dangerous business. A legend concerning the Discovery voyage is that a 1901 recruiting advertisement in the Times of London read, "Men wanted for hazardous journey. Small wages. Bitter cold. Long months of winter. Constant danger. Safe return doubtful. Honour and recognition in case of success." The trip of 1901-1902 fulfilled many of these promises, although most members survived. While Scott, Shackleton, and a Dr. Edward Wilson journeyed overland to a new record of 82°17'S latitude on December 31, 1902, they were still 463 nautical miles from the South Pole. Ernest became seriously ill with scurvy, and Scott had him sent back home. Back in England Shackleton married Emily Dorman on April 9, 1904. Emily had been a friend of Ernest's sister that he had first met in 1897 after returning from a sea voyage to Japan. The marriage would result in three children; Raymond, Edward and Cecil; but would be characterized by long separations in which Emily often had to support herself and the children. Hoping to return to the Antarctic, Shackleton worked for Royal Magazine as a journalist and Secretary of the Royal Scottish Geographical Society. The following year, the thirty-one-year-old explorer made an unsuccessful attempt for political office "standing" for a seat in the House of Commons from Dundee, Scotland. Soon after he began to work at securing financial support for another trip to the "far South." Much of the monetary help Shackleton needed was provided by a Glasgow industrialist named William Beardmore. A grateful Shackleton would subsequently name a newly discovered mountain range and glacier after his chief benefactor.

This journey, which commenced in August 1907, would become known to history as "the Nimrod Expedition" and provide Ernest Shackleton the "honour and recognition" he had so desperately sought. New innovations used by these explorers included the use of an automobile and Manchurian ponies as beasts of burden, but they proved of limited value. The leader's three goals included the exploration of that portion of Antarctica known as King Edward VII Land, reaching the South Pole, and reaching the Magnetic South Pole. All of the objectives were accomplished except for that of reaching the South Pole. Since Shackleton divided them into three groups, the trio of Douglas Mawson, Edgeworth David, and A. F. Mackay reached the Magnetic Pole in January 1909, enduring considerable hardship in the process. The exploratory group among other things ascended Mt. Erebus, the active volcano on Ross Island.

Shackleton's group included Frank Wild, Eric Marshall, and Jameson Adams. On their unsuccessful quest to reach the pole the foursome managed to cross the Trans-Antarctic mountain range and became the first humans to set foot on the South Polar Plateau. Stretched almost to the breaking point, they reached 88°23'S latitude on January 9, 1909, a new record but still 97 miles short of the pole. Fearing death and disaster if they tried to go further, they wisely returned to their base. Returning to England, they were, nonetheless, treated like heroes for their valiant effort. Shackleton was knighted for his efforts and basked in the glory of having led a party farther south than anyone had ever gone. His book, *The Heart of the Antarctic*, won him further acclaim. Of his failure to reach his main goal, he is said to have philosophically remarked, "Better a live donkey than a dead lion." He received additional

Masonic light, being passed to Fellowcraft on November 2, 1911, and raised a Master Mason on May 30, 1913, both in Guild of Freemens Lodge No. 3525. According to a very well researched article by Leon Zeldis, Shackleton remained a member of both Guild of Freemens Lodge and Navy Lodge for the rest of his life.

During these years back in England, other polar explorers reached the long sought destination of 90°S. The Norwegian Roald Amundson arrived late in 1911, followed five weeks later on January 18, 1912, by Shackleton's sometimes friend, sometimes rival, Brother Robert Falcon Scott, who unfortunately perished with his companions on the return back to his base. Shackleton now sought a new goal crossing the southern continent from the Weddell Sea to the Ross Sea. Seeking new financial supporters, he found three in the persons of Sir James Caird, a well-to-do jute manufacturing tycoon and member of Parliament; Dudley Docker; and Stancomb Wills. All three had lifeboats named in their honor. The principal ship was the well-named Endurance. By now Greenland sled dogs had been established as the most successful animal companions for Antarctic exploration, and English schoolchildren were said to have raised the money to buy and train them with participating schools getting a dog named for their school. A second ship, the Aurora, would meet Shackleton on the Ross Sea side of the continent. World War I was just starting in early August 1914 as the twenty-eight voyagers prepared to depart England, but Winston Churchill, first Lord of the Admiralty, told Shackleton to "proceed" as he had originally planned.

The Endurance reached the Weddell Sea in January 1915, after an earlier twoday stop at the whaling station on the island of South Georgia. The weather in 1914 was exceptionally cold in the Antarctic, and by January 18, 1915, the ship was surrounded by ice floes and soon became trapped, frozen into an ice floe at 76°34'S. Under normal condition they were only a one-day journey from their proposed land base at Vahsel Bay. For 281 days this situation continued, although the ice floe shifted several hundred miles in the process. The men occupied themselves with a variety of work and activities initially supplementing their food supply with seal and penguin. But then in September conditions became worse. Temperatures became colder, and the water beneath the ship began to freeze and on October 23 crushed it "beyond all hope of ever being righted," but as Shackleton further noted in his journal, their supplies were saved and "we are alive and well, and we have stores and equipment for the task that lies before us." The task before them had now become survival. Against overwhelming odds, they succeeded.

The immediate goal of Shackleton and his men was to reach Paulet Island, some 346 miles away where they knew that a cache of supplies existed that had been left by a 1902 expedition (frozen food preservation did have some positives in Antarctic trips). They also had three lifeboats which they could drag across the ice and use in the chilly waters whenever they had the opportunity. After considerable hardships and near brushes with death, the weary sojourners reached Elephant Island in the South Shetlands on April 12, 1916. They had made land on a barren island, but real safety still eluded them. Shackleton decided that he and five others would take the largest life boat, the James Caird, and attempt to reach the whaling station on South Georgia, an 800-mile journey.

Brother Frank Wild, the second in command and an Australian, would remain behind with the others with instructions to move to Deception Island if Shackleton had not returned by a

certain date. After seventeen days and surviving storms in an open boat, the James Caird made landing but some 130 miles by sea from the whaling station, so he and two others went over the rocky hillside of South Georgia to the station and a rescue party soon went out and picked up the other three. Relieving those twenty-two men back on Elephant Island still remained a daunting task. Chartering a small whaler from South Georgia proved impossible as Elephant Island was now blocked by ice floes and the rescue ship could only get within seventy miles of the men. Shackleton then went to Port Stanley in the Falklands and appealed for help, but his only immediate offer for aid came from Uruguay, which sent out a small fishing ship, but it, too, was forced to turn back thirty miles from its destination. Journeying now to Punta Arenas, Chile, a third rescue effort via the Emma had to turn back when that ship was damaged by an iceberg. Finally, a fourth attempt to reach Elephant Island on a ship called the Yelcho, under the command of a Chilean navy officer and Mason named Luis Pardo (of Aurora Lodge No. 6 in Valparaiso) managed to reach the island on August 30, 1916, and rescue the castaways, who had survived their own share of hardships-including one pair of amputated toes- for 105 days on the island and were down to their last four days of food rations. Back in Punta Arenas, on September 4, the outside world, that had heard nothing of the Shackleton Expedition since October 1914, soon learned of their incredible but successful struggle in that all members of the party had survived.

Shackleton's new goal was to learn the fate of the Aurora and its crew that was to meet him on the Ross Sea side of Antarctica. However, first he, together with Brothers Luis Pardo, Frank Wild, and Dr. A. Mcilroy, the ship surgeon, and the other Mason on the expedition were honored on September 30, 1916, at a special meeting of Lodge of Harmony No. 1411 under English charter in Valparaiso. Shackleton was escorted to the East and honored for his achievements. Some 44 members and 85 visitors from other English speaking and Chilean lodges attended this historic meeting. Brother Luis Pardo, the Chilean connection in the historic cue, was promoted by the navy for his heroic efforts and eventually spent four years in Liverpool, England, as a Consul, dying in 1935.

Leaving Chile for New Zealand, Ernest Shackleton learned in December 1916 that many of the personnel from the Aurora expedition were stranded in the Ross Sea region. This group was not so lucky as those who had sailed on the Endurance as all of this party did not survive. Nonetheless, the intrepid leader did what he could, and to make a long story short, the survivors were on their way to Wellington by February 1917. By May Shackleton was back in England, and World War I continued to rage.

With his health increasingly shaky, the adventurous explorer still hoped to get into military action but was instead sent on a diplomatic mission to South America in hopes of persuading Argentina and Chile to abandon neutrality and join the allies. This proved an utter failure. Shackleton then became involved in an effort to establish a British presence on the Island of Spitzbergen, a property of neutral Norway. His Masonic Brothers from the Endurance, Frank Wild and Dr. Mcilroy, were also in on the plan. In the Norwegian town of Tromso, Shackleton experienced what Mcilroy assumed was a heart attack, but "the Boss" would not undress so his physician friend could examine him. Nonetheless, he had to return to London, and Wild took over the expedition. It was Shackleton's first trip north of the Arctic circle. He soon returned in October 1918, however, as part of a British force bound for Murmansk, where he held the position of "Staff Officer in Charge of Arctic Equipment," a glorified term for storekeeper.

Three weeks after his arrival in Murmansk, the Great War ended, and the Allies were now in opposition to the Bolsheviks who were trying to solidify their control of Russia. In a letter to home, Shackleton had some prophetic and astute comments about the evils of bolshevism, but he was drinking heavily, and his health continued to decline. By March 1919 he was back in London and demobilized after five months of service. Although hoping for another polar expedition, the symbol of British endurance was now virtually broken financially and lecturing twice a day about the Endurance Expedition. His last book, simply titled *South: The Story of Shackleton's Last Expedition* (1919) sold well, but he had signed over royalties to pay debts.

Despite his deteriorating health, Shackleton still planned a return to Antarctica; this time his goal was to circumnavigate the continent. A wealthy old friend from school days, John Q. Rowett, came forth with finances. Several veterans from earlier journeys joined him, and a ship renamed the *Quest* was outfitted for the journey. They left England on September 17, 1921, but the ship was not a good one and had to be repaired enroute more than once. The leader was also frequently ill. The *Quest* reached South Georgia on January 4, 1922. Later that night the noted explorer-old before his time-had another heart attack and died in the early morning hours on the 5th. Comrades were transporting his remains back to England, but when his widow got the news, she asked that his body be returned to South Georgia. She wrote that "His spirit had no place in England...if he had a home on earth, it must be among the mystic craigs and glaciers of the island in the Southern Ocean which had meant so much to him." Receiving the word at Montevideo, Uruguay, they returned him to South Georgia where he lies in the cemetery at the whaling station at Grytviken.

In his day Shackleton was celebrated as one the great explorers of the age. Largely forgotten for a time, interest in his exploits revived a few years ago when documentary films about his adventures revived interest in the man. Although he never discovered the South Pole, he did contribute much knowledge of Antarctica through his expeditions. His cool leadership in the face of the adversity encountered during the *Endurance* episode revealed an extraordinary talent for "grace under pressure." Members of the fraternity worldwide can take pride in the determination and skill that Brother Ernest Shackleton exhibited during his lifetime.



Further reading: Books about Shackleton are numerous. The most detailed is Roland Huntford's *Shackleton* (1996), while Caroline Alexander's *The Endurance: Shackleton's Legendary Antarctic Expedition* (1998) is also quite good. His own accounts have been reprinted. Internet searchers can benefit from the biography at [Of particular interest to Masons](#)

is Leon Zeldis' "Sir Ernest Shackleton and Luis Pardo: Two Masons Joined by Fate and Heroism" at the Freemasonry in Israel website. His Masonic record is also on the website of the Grand Lodge of British Columbia and the Yukon.

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[Top](#)