

An Excerpt from *Print at the Poles* by John Bowles that appeared in 'Discover NLS', the magazine of the National Library of Scotland, Issue 7, Winter 2008

The culmination of British polar printing came with the publishing of the *Aurora Australis* by men of Sir Ernest Shackleton's Nimrod expedition of 1907-09. Shackleton had edited the first volume of the *South Polar Times* and appreciated its value in maintaining morale during the Antarctic winter. He had sent expedition members Ernest Joyce, Frank Wild and George Marshall to Sir Joseph Causton's firm for a crash course on printing and typesetting before the expedition set out. Causton also donated presses for printing and etching, along with other printing materials. In the difficult cramped conditions of the base hut at Cape Royds, Ross Island, Antarctica's first book was created. Joyce and Wild saw to the printing and typing while Marston illustrated it with etchings and lithographs. The *Aurora Australis* was published in fewer than a hundred copies of which no more than 60 have survived and contains some 120 pages of essays, poems and stories. Its unique feature is that some copies have been bound in Venesta (an early kind of plywood) boards from the packing cases which had contained the expedition's provisions. The expedition's mechanic Bernard Day was responsible for the binding work and covered the spine and edges of the front and back boards with brown leather. The spine is imprinted *Aurora Australis* and also carries the printers' own invented Penguin Press trademark. Different copies have the original contents of each case, e.g. 'BUTTER', 'COFFEE' and '(IR)ISH STEW' stencilled inside the covers. The Library's copy has 'HONEY' inside its front cover and '(FR)UIT' inside the back one. Despite the difficult conditions, the design and presswork are of a surprisingly high standard and the *Aurora Australis* has been called 'a monument to the remarkable spirit of men of a now long-gone age'. Indeed all the various printed items in the Library's polar collections are a tribute to human ingenuity and resilience displayed in extraordinary circumstances.