

The First Book Printed in the Antarctic

by Mary P. Goodwin

ERNEST SHACKLETON'S polar exploits and popularity as a leader are legendary. His editing and publishing accomplishments, though less well known, nevertheless shed an intriguing light on facets of his complex character.

Few people are aware that Shackleton was responsible for the first book printed in the Antarctic. Titled *Aurora Australis*, it was written, edited, illustrated, printed and bound in a very small hut on the edge of the Antarctic Sea in the winter of 1908.

How did it occur, that on a serious exploration whose ambitious plan it was to be the first to reach the South Pole, a printing press would be included in the precious space allotment?

Shackleton had been third officer of the *Discovery*, Robert Scott's ship. This expedition explored the Antarctic in 1901-1903. During the long winter Shackleton had been editor of the *South Polar Times*, a monthly typed paper, which, along with a much less intellectual sheet *Blizzard*, was very popular among Scott's men. The writing, illustrating, and reading of them made the four-month, dayless winter less wearisome.

Going back to the Antarctic consumed Shackleton. In a letter the day after his first child was born he wrote, "What would I not give to be out there (Antarctic) again doing the job, and this time really on the road to the Pole!". He was also bent on bettering anything that Scott had accomplished. When the opportunity arrived for Shackleton to go south on his own expedition in 1907, he determined to produce a real book, not just papers.

He carefully picked his men for the expedition, some of them from the placement of newspaper ads. Four of these men were destined to become amateur publishers. They were Ernest Joyce, Frank Wild, George Marston and Bernard Day.

Joyce, a thirty-three year old sailor in the Royal Navy, had been a member of Scott's *Discovery* voyage. He was signed on to be in charge of dogs and sledges and depot laying. On the later fateful *Endurance* expedition he would achieve the Antarctic record for sledging, more than 2000 miles, and receive the Albert medal for a heroic rescue.

Frank Wild, an able seaman in the Royal Navy and, like Joyce, a veteran of the *Discovery* expedition, was thirty-five years old. He had become

Shackleton's close friend in spite of the difference in their backgrounds. As a capable leader and Shackleton's right hand, he was in charge of all food and supplies. He later returned to the Antarctic on three more expeditions, with Shackleton and Australia's Sir Douglas Mawson. During World War I he was sent to Northern Russia and Spitzbergen because of his vast ice experience.

Twenty-six year old George Marston was on a walking tour in Cornwall when he saw Shackleton's newspaper ad for volunteers. He raced back to London and landed a berth. He had been a student at Regent Street Polytechnic Institute and was a certified art teacher. It was immediately apparent that his personality, physical strength and willingness, plus his ability as an artist, would be assets. He was signed on to do topographic drawings and record the expedition in sketches though all members were expected to do some sledging as well.

An amusing note about Marston is in the preface of *Antarctic Days*, a book by James Murray and Marston printed in 1913. Shackleton writes, 'Why I say Marston is not a scientific man is because of the following story. On our expedition we had a learned Professor and Geologist, who had undoubtedly a reputation for extreme politeness. Marston met the Professor one day, laden down with specimens of rock in a bag. Said Marston to the Professor, 'Can I carry your bag?' "Oh, don't trouble, Marston, really it is too good of you.', but somehow or other the 50lb bag was transferred to Marston's broad and willing shoulders. Instead of being content with the haul of rocks, the Professor began picking more of the debris scattered along the mountain side, and the 50lb bag soon became 60lbs. Marston thought he had had about enough of it, so every time that the Professor knelt down to coax rock out of its surrounding ice I saw Marston discharging from the bag a rock of similar size and weight. The Professor arrived at the hut fondly imagining that he had got everything that he had worked for, and received with profuse thanks the bag from Marston. For this reason I say that Marston is not a scientific man."

Bernard Day was a twenty-two year old motor engineer. He was the general handyman of the expedition. Shackleton was the first to take a motor vehicle to the Antarctic. This was a much-strengthened car with high wheels, intended to pull sledges across snow and ice. Day could do anything with metal parts and often had to dismantle and put together the carburetor in freezing wind. He got the motor car up to eighteen miles per hour pulling a light sledge, quite an achievement on those surfaces in 1908. We will see how his inventiveness put the finishing touches on the book, *Aurora Australis*.

Since Joyce and Wild had had no experience in printing and Marston very little, Shackleton sent them on a crash program to learn the process at Sir Joseph Causton's firm in Hampshire (now Sir Joseph Causton and Sons, Ltd.). In three weeks they were rushed through courses in typesetting, the use of inks and dyes, design, cutting, acid baths and pulling. Practice with a variety of paper, pressure and temperature gave these rookie compositors a just-sufficient introduction to the printing process. Sir Joseph lent the printing press and a small etching press. He also donated the rich paper, type and ink to the expedition.

The men of this expedition of 1907-1909 sailed in the small ship *Nimrod*, wintered at the edge of the ice, and climbed for the first time the smoking 12,000-foot Mt Erebus. They made two great sledging journeys, one of 1755 miles to within ninety miles of the South Pole and the other to the South Magnetic Pole, 1260 miles to the northwest and back. In addition, Shackleton's was the first Antarctic base to become an international postal region. He was sworn in as postmaster before a New Zealand magistrate and handed a supply of one penny New Zealand stamps overprinted 'King Edward VII Land' in green. When the *Nimrod* left the men, their properly franked and dated letters went with her. And before the returning of spring light and sledging, Joyce, Wild, Marston, and Day, with Shackleton as editor, had completed the first book printed in the Antarctic.

The conditions under which *Aurora Australis* was printed are described in *Antarctic Days* as follows:

“It was winter and dark and cold. The work had to be done in the intervals of more serious occupations, in a small room occupied by fifteen men, all of them following their own avocations, with whatever noise, vibration and dirt might be incidental to them.”

The immense difficulties of this job in a hut almost impossible to keep clean can be imagined. “Fifteen men shut up together, say during a raging blizzard which lasts a week. Nobody goes out unless on business; everybody who goes out brings in snow on his feet and clothes. Seal blubber is burned, mixed with coal, for economy. The blubber melts and runs out on the floor; the ordinary unsweepable soil of the place is a rich compost of all the filth, cemented with blubber...Dust from the stove fills the air and settles on the paper as it is being printed. If anything falls on the floor it is done for; if somebody jogs the compositor's elbow...and upsets the type into the mire...”

From outside the hut at Cape Royds (not far from the present day base of McMurdo) resembled a pile of packing cases mixed with a coal dump and covered with a gable of tar paper. The outer walls of two sides did in fact

consist of cases, fuel and stores. Manchurian ponies were stabled on another side, the dogs not far. A store room, also constructed of packing cases and bales of fodder, partially sheltered the fourth side. Rope stays supported a slender iron stove pipe.

If the outside was a bleak scene, inside the tiny hut was an ingenious crowded arrangement of men and equipment. Around the walls were various utilitarian and living compartments, and the space in the center was taken up by a mess table and benches. When all was working confusion the table was suspended just below the roof and secured with slings. The table came down for meals or a large group project. "Up under the roof, it occupied much the same position as the sword of Damocles...it once gave way and landed the majority of the tinware on the heads of one or two members of the party! The table in itself is a curiosity, built rather ingeniously of the lids of the cases, and in one place the legend informs the diner that the table contains a 'theodolite' and some 'ranging poles'...while another legend remarks that it is 'Only to be opened on Christmas Day.' etc." ("Trials of a Messman," by Raymond Priestly, in *Aurora Australis*).

The fifteen men lived in cubicles ranged along each side of the hut. The "walls" were heavy duck cloth hung from wires strung the length of the hut and stretching seven feet to attachments on the outside walls. Each two-man bedroom was thus seven by six-and-one half feet! The variety of hand-constructed bedroom furniture, logistics of stowage, decorations and living arrangements reflected the differing personalities and fancy of the occupants of these quarters. Shackleton had the end "room" to himself.

The most orderly cubicle was called "No. 1 Park Lane." The doctors' duck partition had a magnificent painting of Napoleon and Joan of Arc, the two occupants of this space being interested in French revolutions, The beds ran the gamut from Indian Army collapsible bamboo and canvas, plain fitted boards, to painted empty dog biscuit boxes and stacked petrol cases, from which the smell eventually disappeared,

In each "bedroom" was the professional and personal paraphernalia of both men, whether rocks, ice axes, chronometers, medicines, wet fur boots, photochemicals, the complete works of Dickens, curtains and blue ribbons, biological equipment and captures, and various stacks of things on and under or hanging over the bunks. One such "home" was called the "pawn shop," as a multi-faceted collection occupied all of the space except when the two men were asleep amid the assortment.

Marston and Day had one wall of painted packing cases, bunks upholstered with wood shavings and covered with blankets. The wall boasted a painting of an Edwardian scene, a glowing fireplace and ornate

mantel with a delicate vase of flowers on it. “The dividing curtain between this cubicle and No. 1 Park Lane did not require to be decorated, for the color of Joan of Arc and portions of Napoleon had oozed through the canvas.” (*The Heart of the Antarctic*, Shackleton, William Heinemann, London 1910). Occupying much of the space left in the six-by-seven foot room was the small etching press.

Most disorderly of all was the printers Joyce and Wild’s “Rogues Retreat.” The scene on their front “wall,” painted by Marston (as were all the others), was simply two very tough beer drinking characters. Crowded in with their gear in terrible disarray were the type case, printing press, and sometimes a foot-pedal sewing machine on which they made sledge harness for their spring trip towards the South Pole.

Using original contributions from most members of the expedition, Joyce and Wild began slowly, and within two weeks could set type for and print two pages a day. A lamp under the type case kept it warm enough so that they could handle the cold metal. Murray describes how they kept the ink useable: “The temperature varies from cold to colder. If it is too cold the ink will get sticky and freeze. Joyce and Wild set a candle beneath the inkplate, and by moving the candle about, they can keep the ink more or less fluid.” In examining three copies of *Aurora Australis* the author could see the difference between the pages in contrasting copies, but it is a remarkably fine work considering the conditions. The author knows of seven copies of some twenty five to thirty which were bound. The ones studied are at Christ’s College, Cambridge; The Scott Polar Research Institute, Cambridge; and The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

Marston had only a small etching press for both lithography and etching. He used aluminum plates for imposing. His illustrations and delicate illuminated letters with floral backgrounds at the beginning of each piece are of excellent quality. The designing of the book and the ordinary printing could be done during the day or evening, not so the delicate artwork. James Murray, who used the same night hours for biological studies, watched Marston work. Without the day’s vibration and moving dust and dirt, and with only two or three “loafers around the stove,” the artist sketched and carefully accomplished the etchings and lithographs, printed and pulled them. Murray says, “I had the opportunity of watching his tribulations... I do not pretend to know the nature of the special difficulties that the climate introduced into lithography, but I know this, that frequently I’ve seen Marston do everything right—clean, ink, press—but for some obscure reason the prints did not come right. And I’ve seen him during a whole night pull off half a dozen wrong ones for one good print, and he did not use so

much language over it as might have been expected’.

Aurora Australis has some 120 pages, and while these were being printed, the young engineer set to work to devise a binding. Three holes were punched in each page and then all were sewn together with a strong green twine. Day used packing cases for the books’ boards. The cases were made of Venesta board, a primitive kind of plywood, three layers of birch or other hard wood impregnated with waterproof cement. It is light, strong, and weatherproof. Bernard Day had his choice of 2,500 packing cases. He cut, cleaned and planed the wood; then softly bevelled the edges and polished the outside to a sheen. Brown leather covers the spine and edges of the front and back boards. The spine is imprinted *Aurora Australis*, and bears their invention, the Penguin Press trademark.

There is a difference of opinion about how many books were printed and bound in the Antarctic. We know that there were extra pages printed beyond the number bound. In studying the sources, including Marston and Wild, I believe that between seventy-five and 100 copies of each page were printed, but that only twenty-five to thirty copies of the book were sewn and bound. This makes it a very rare book indeed.

The quality and flavor of the writing differs widely. In 1908, quite naturally, some of the poetry sounds like Kipling or Robert W. Service. This is perhaps appropriate coming from early “heroes” of the Antarctic.

A brief collation: The first blank end paper usually has an inscription as these few volumes were reserved for the members of the expedition, and many were given by them to family and friends or sponsors. The “Butter” edition (the word appears on the back inside board) had been Lady Shackleton’s and was given to the Antarctic historian, Hugh Robert Mill, then by him to the Scott Polar Research Institute in Cambridge, England. The “(Bottled F)ruit” copy (word inside front board) was Edith Shackleton’s, purchased by A. S. W. Rosenbach and given to Henry E. Huntington. It is one of the more unusual volumes in the rare book section of the library. The “(Ir)ish Stew” copy (inside front board) belonged to Sir Raymond Priestley, geologist on the *Nimrod* expedition. He presented it to his school in Cambridge where it is shelved in a fine old library belonging to the Masters and Fellows of Christ’s College. In Christchurch, New Zealand, there is a presentation copy given to a friend of the expedition. Part of the inscription in Shackleton’s hand reads, “This book was made in the Antarctic.” The stencilled letters on the Venesta board say, “-tartic”. It thus becomes the “Tartic” edition. Another volume in a private United States collection is believed to have been Frank Wild’s own copy.

The title page is the only one to have color other than the coral ink in the

trademark and the initial letters. There is a brilliant blue auroral display. *Aurora Australis* and the dates, “1908- 1909” are framed in bold scrolls. Two ships in full sail constitute the finials of the scrolls.

The publisher’s page has nicely placed, “Published at the Winter Quarters of the British Antarctic Expedition, 1907, during the winter months of April, May, June, July, 1908. Illustrated with lithographs and etchings; by George Marston Printed at the sign of ‘The Penguins’; by Joyce and Wild. Latitude 77° .. 32’ South Longitude 166° .. 12’ East Antarctica (All rights reserved).” There is a delightful double Emperor penguin trade mark in the lower right corner printed in coral ink. The verso is blank as it is for each illustration.

Shackleton wrote two short prefaces, and there is a dedication page to two ladies, “who have ever shown the deepest interest in Antarctic Exploration, and our welfare.”

There are ten pieces in *Aurora Australis* and eleven full page illustrations. A provocative title page for a twelfth etching is bound towards the end of the last story, “A giant tick was investigating the carcass” (sic), but there is no such illustration in any volume. Perhaps sledging began before Marston got around to the drawing. The other two illustrations for this story are fine work with many elaborate details.

After a lithograph, “Under the Shadow of Erebus,” there is an engrossing account of the first ascent of Mt. Erebus. It is written by Professor T. W. Edgeworth David. Besides climbing Erebus, David led the three-man party to the South Magnetic Pole. At fifty he was the oldest member of the expedition.

Five lithographs illustrate the writings, “At The Edge of The Crater,” “Night Watchman,” “The Messman,” “Struggle for the Broom,” and “In the Stables.” A sketchy lithograph of caricatures, “Fourteen Good and True,” is tipped in rather than printed on the page. In the “Butter” copy the figures in this drawing are identified in ink, probably the hand of Shackleton.

“Midwinter Night” is by Shackleton:

“And this is the tale of the Watchman,
Awake in the dead of the night,
Tells of the fourteen sleepers
Whose snoring gives him the blight.” (etc)

Another Shackleton poem, “Erebus,” is a longer combination of Tennyson and Masefield.

“Trials of a Messman,” by Raymond Priestley, is a well-written, amusing satire. “A Pony Watch,” by Marston, is a pedestrian description of managing these animals on board the *Nimrod* during a great storm between New

Zealand and the Antarctic. It describes life aboard ship in such seas.

The finest etching in the book, "Southward Bound," illustrates a poem by a man who obviously loves the sea, the surgeon, Eric Marshall. It shows the *Nimrod* in heavy seas weathering south.

"Interview with an Emperor" is an imaginative piece written by the other surgeon, A. F. Mackay. A haughty Emperor penguin with Scottish accent accosts two expedition members as poachers. The dialogue is original and amusing.

Frank Wild wrote, "An Ancient Manuscript," to describe the trials of setting up the expedition to the Antarctic. Shackleton's restless spirit and "charge," the search for funds, a ship and responsible men, are all told in language reminiscent of the King James Bible. Referring to his leader's main purpose, Wild writes, "There is set up a great pole of value, which all the Nations of the Earth do strive to possess..., and it shall also be that thy hand shall uproot the Great Pole which the wise men do call The South Pole, when I say unto thee that it shall not be forgotten of thee..." Wild continues his account of the search for expedition members, "...then took he one who had studied at the seats of learning..., and also one cunning in the art of making pictures in many colours and pleasing to the eye" (Marston). Of the trip south from New Zealand, "And the rest of the Acts of Shackleton and his people and the dangers and tribulations that did beset them, will ye find in the next book of these chronicles, which are not yet completed." The narrative is signed 'Wand ER ER.'

"Life Under Difficulties" is a straightforward account of the behavior of rotifers. The author, James Murray, mentions an illustration by title, "Portions of these Cape Royd Natives are shown on the Plate, Highly Magnified." But there is no such drawing. Marston, or Murray, who also sketched, may never have made the drawing, but it was intended, as there is a blank page bound in the middle of the account in the "Irish Stew" copy.

The final piece in this remarkable book, "Bathybia," is by the Australian, Douglas Mawson. This young man, who was later knighted for his own Antarctic explorations, has given us a fascinating and well-written early science fiction tale for which Marston did two intriguing etchings, "Executing Evolutions in Mid Air" and "Each Sheltered Under one of the Novel Umbrellas." "Bathybia" is an imaginary journey towards the South Pole (which in reality is on a 14,000 foot high plateau), in which explorers discover a vast crater 20,000 feet deep, with swamps, tropical streams and a lake at the bottom. Written as though it had been an actual trek and descent to below sea level in the Antarctic, the story includes daily entries in a log, descriptions of fanciful plants and fights between giant insects. The records

of scientific findings and modes of travel are ingenious. Told with wry humor and a choice use of words, it is a gripping tale which turns out to be Mawson's dream between the first and second call for breakfast at the base, "Rise and Shine, you sleepers, 8.45—time for down table!"

One charming aspect of *Aurora Australis* is the whimsical accident of Day's choice of packing case boards for his covers. We've mentioned the "Butter" edition, "Bottled Fruit," "Irish Stew," and "Tartic." One wonders where are the others: the "Hypsometer" (measures altitude with the boiling point of water) copy, the "Pemmican" edition, the "Burberry," the "Huntley and Palmers wheat-biscuit," the "Twelve pairs of" and the "This End Up" copy.

In Shackleton's second preface he pays tribute to Joyce and Wild, Marston and Day: "...and I trust that all who have a copy will think kindly of the first attempt to print a book and illustrate it in the depth of an Antarctic winter."

This article first appeared in 1979 in *Terra*, a publication of the Natural History Museum of Lost Angeles County.

It also appeared as the Introduction in the Airlife Publishing edition of the *Aurora Australis*, 1988.