

The Paper Chase

By Penny Carey Wells, State Library of Tasmania

One of my favourite items in the Heritage Collection of the State Library of Tasmania is the first book printed and bound in Antarctica.

This astounding item was the centrepiece of an exhibition on a polar theme held in the Tasmanian Library during 2002. For me this is the ultimate Artists' Book although, of course, it was never considered as such when it was produced. The intention behind its execution was as an activity to help pass the time during the idle hours of a long, dark, freezing Antarctic winter.

Entitled *Aurora Australis* it was published during the 1907-09 expedition led by Ernest Shackleton. Four members of the party – Ernest Joyce, Frank Wild, George Marston and Bernard Day, were involved in producing the book, although other expeditioners contributed stories and illustrations.

Shackleton told the incredible story of its production in his book *The Heart of the Antarctic*. “Through the generosity of Messers Joseph Causton and Sons, Ltd we had been provided with a complete printing outfit and the necessary paper for the book, and Joyce and Wild had been given instruction in the art of typesetting and printing, Marston being taught etching and lithography.”

The early days of the printing department were not exactly happy, for the two amateur typesetters found themselves making many mistakes

“They plodded ahead steadily, however, and soon became more skilful, until at the end of a fortnight or three weeks they could print two pages in a day.

“A lamp had to be put under the type-rack to keep it warm and a lighted candle was put under the inking-plate, so the ink would keep reasonably thin in consistency.

“Day meanwhile prepared the binding by cleaning, planing and polishing wood taken from the venesta cases in which our provisions were packed.”

It is believed that only about 25-30 copies of this book were bound in the Antarctic although an edition of 100 was planned. The individual copies of the books have become known by the contents stencilled on to the boards of the packing cases used for the books' covers. The library's copy is “Julienne Soup”. Others are “Butter”, “Bottled Fruit” and “Irish Stew”. Each book contains approximately 95 pages of single sheet, deckled-edged handmade paper, bound into the packing case board covers with green silk cord. The spine is formed with leather from horse harnesses, which is also used for

hinges to hold the text block in place.

The library's copy was presented to Captain John Davis, the Master of the *Nimrod*, who in turn presented it to the State Library of Tasmania in 1961, in recognition of the welcome he received whenever he visited Hobart.

To hold this book gives me shivers down my spine, and the story of its making is incredible. While one is fully aware of the huge efforts and long hours that these men spent huddled over difficult ink and cold, damp paper to produce the work, the book itself truly does transcend its birth. It is such a warm, inviting, thrilling object with its carefully hewn boards, soft glowing leather and the quiriness of the stencilled food label. I am in no doubt that despite the incredible difficulties the men endured to produce this object they absolutely loved what they were doing and were immensely proud of the results.

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