

# Ernest Henry Shackleton

Stephen Scott-Fawcett FRGS

- **1874** - Ernest Henry Shackleton, the eldest son of tenant-farming parents, was born on 15<sup>th</sup> February 1874 at Kilkea House, County Kildare, Eire. He was the oldest male and, therefore, the ‘elder statesman’ of eight sisters (one older than him) and one brother. His sibling role might well have shaped his destiny as a leader.
- **1884** - As a newly-qualified medical doctor, Mr Shackleton Senior gathered his family tribe about him, crossed the Irish Sea and ventured into the suburbs of south London to seek employment.
- **1887** - At the tender age of 13, a young Ernest attended the rarefied atmosphere of Dulwich College for boys. He was not the most-engaged student and never the scholar. He did, however, embrace the works of Keats and Browning and his love of poetry stayed with him throughout his life, on and off the ice.
- **1890** - Grabbing his chance (and with the tacit help and approval of Dr Shackleton) he entered the Merchant Navy, age 16. It was a defining moment for the youngster. From mediocre, ‘landlubber’, academe Ernest positively flourished in his new-found maritime environment.
- **1898** - In only a short span of time and after many hours relishing the steep learning-curve of seamanship he was certified ‘Master Mariner’.
- **1900** - Shackleton found himself on a troopship and, by pure chance, in contact with the son of a wealthy father who was in the throes of financing Britain’s first foray into Antarctic waters (under the leadership of Captain Robert Falcon Scott RN). And here is the rub – Shackleton loved the sea life, no question, but he wanted more, much more. He wanted, like many alpha males before (and after) him, fame. He wanted to be recognised and paraded. Fame, he imagined, would lead inexorably onto fortune. Fame and fortune – a heady and inevitable mix (or so he thought). They went well together, like gin and tonic. Now age 26, the Irishman desperately wanted to win his fortune and enjoy more of the ‘high’ life – the life of the derring-do male about town (vibrant London City being a great favourite). He knew, also, that one day soon he would be expected to provide for a wife (in fact, four years later he was to marry the very capable Emily Dorman).
- **1901** - Through a network of naval contacts Ernest found himself (on 31<sup>st</sup> July) sailing south as Captain Scott’s third officer on the expedition ship *RRS Discovery* bound for the polar regions.
- The story of Shackleton’s four polar expeditions 1901-2 [with Scott as leader and him at No.3]; 1907-9/1914-16/ 1921-22 [as leader] are the stuff of history.
- **1901/4** – The National Antarctic Expedition (NAE) (aka ‘Discovery’ expedition). Shackleton (along with Edward Wilson) was selected by Scott to attempt a ‘Furthest South’ which they achieved 82 deg 17” but Shackleton became ill and was sent home on a relief ship in early 1903.

- **1903** – Shackleton attempted to enrol in the Royal Navy via the Supplementary List but failed, despite support from the RGS and Sir Clement Markham's support ( a leading light in the world of 19<sup>th</sup> century geographical discovery and the man behind the NAE). He became a journalist for a while.
- **1904** – He was appointed Secretary of the SRGS (Edinburgh) in January and in April married Emily Dorman (eventually producing 3 children – Raymond, Cecily and Edward – the latter becoming a renowned explorer and politician (the father of the Hon Alexandra (Zaz) Shackleton).
- **1905** – Shackleton became a shareholder in a speculative business transporting Russian troops between Russia and far East – it failed.
- **1906** – He stood for election as the Liberal Unionist Party's candidate in Dundee (failed to be elected) + worked for Clydesdale industrialist William Beardmore. Plans to return to the South as his own leader began to formulate.
- **1907/9** – The British Antarctic Expedition (BAE) (aka 'Nimrod' expedition) – was sponsored by Beardmore and others. Its declared aim – to reach the geographical South Pole and South Magnetic Pole.
  1. 10<sup>th</sup> March 1908 Mount Erebus was climbed for the first time (led by Edgeworth David).
  2. The SMP was attained by Douglas Mawson, Alistair MacKay and Edgeworth David on 16<sup>th</sup> January 1909.
  3. Shackleton and three men (Frank Wild, Eric Marshall, Jameson Adams) reached a point 97 geographical miles from the South Pole on 9<sup>th</sup> January 1909. (88 deg 23"). Alas, they were forced to turn back due to lack of food and the advancing austral winter.
  4. Shackleton had blazed a trail and returned home to a popular hero's welcome. There were accolades, awards, a knighthood (November 1909) and endless celebrations and celebrity lectures – he was a man in demand. He had found the fame he wished for (albeit not the fortune). The general public loved him - even the Royal Family. And yet..... the Establishment (The Royal Geographical Society, and many in the corridors of power), 'suffered' him, often ungladly. For them he was the maverick Irishman, the merchant seaman, son of an anonymous doctor from Sydenham Hill. They saw him as a square peg in a round hole.
- **1910** – Despite the acclaim, Shackleton had little money and for a short while he, Emily and his (two) children de-camped to the 'wilds, of north Norfolk (Sheringham) where an aunt of Emily let them rent a rather splendid house. Later they moved to Putney, London. Emily was quite happy there but her husband needed to earn money in order to pay off his huge debts (which he never really did!) - some of the men of 'Nimrod' had received no pay for 2.5 years!. He became engaged in a strenuous schedule of public appearances, lectures, social engagements (in the UK, the Continent, US and Canada) over the next two years. He dabbled in various business adventures (promoting the tobacco industry/selling postage stamps overprinted ' King Edward VII Land' and speculating with mining in Hungary) – all these enterprises failed. At this time he made a

decision *not* to travel South again – and wrote to Emily this intention. ‘...my place is at home now’.

- **1910/12** - The fate of Scott’s expedition to the Pole, however, reignited Shackleton’s dream of achieving fame and fortune South. A Scotsman (William Speirs Bruce) had announced his plan to cross the Antarctic continent from the Weddell Sea to McMurdo Bay (via the South Pole) - it was the greatest Antarctic challenge left – now that Amundsen and Scott had attained the pole. Alas, he failed to get the finance and Shackleton grabbed the chance and began his very own, grandly named, ‘Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition’ (ITAE).
- **1914/17** - With the generous (albeit last-minute) backing of a jute magnate in Dundee (Sir James Caird) Shackleton embarked on what was to become his most renowned expedition (his second trip to the South as leader of his own expedition).
  1. In August, his expedition ship *SY Endurance* slipped anchor at Millbay Docks, Plymouth and headed towards the polar regions. The plan was to navigate through the (mostly uncharted) icy Weddell Sea towards the Antarctic continent and establish a base on the coast. From there, the Boss (with a small but select group of men) intended to cross the whole continent, west to east, arriving at the Ross Sea coast some 1800 miles later.
  2. As part of the ITAE, Shackleton sent a second expedition ship (*SY Aurora*) with another team of men to the Ross Sea (the ‘Ross Sea Party’ (RSP)). Their mandate - to lay depots of food and equipment from the coast of Ross Island southwards, to the foot of the Beardmore Glacier. Without these provisions, Shackleton would most certainly fail (with fatal consequences). The RSP was poorly-funded and conceived. The expedition ship was blown away in a great storm early on, leaving just ten men on shore to accomplish the task with minimal provisions. Three men perished (severe cold/exhaustion and accident on the sea ice). There was some tension among the men with two of them ‘at odds’ over leadership. That said, the depots were laid (in the face of huge adversity) and Shackleton’s path was made ready – except, he never appeared over the polar horizon! The men were finally relieved in January 1917.
  3. Unbeknown to the RSP the *SY Endurance* had been trapped in the Weddell Sea on its outward journey and was sunk by the vice-grip of the early winter sea ice. Instead of achieving landfall and setting out on a journey to end all journeys across ‘Terra Incognita’ Shackleton was forced to take emergency action. He had to devise an escape mission which eventually involved: camping out on sea floes in mid-winter for just over 5 months; sailing in makeshift converted lifeboats on the open sea to a desolate, uninhabited, island for 14 days; leaving twenty eight men on the island for 4 months; sailing with six men in a converted lifeboat for 16 days over a distance of 800 nautical miles to the island of South Georgia; three men crossing the mountainous interior of the island (the first ever such crossing) to Stromness (a Norwegian whaling station) to, finally, raise the alarm. The subsequent quest to retrieve the men marooned on Elephant Island reached a successful conclusion in early September 1916.

- **1917** - On his return to England the Great War still waged and the general public had lost much of their appetite for polar heroes. Initially Shackleton spent time with his family, now living in Eastbourne. He also travelled to USA and South America.
- **1918/19** - After a number of delays, Shackleton was called to London in late August 1918 as a temporary major in the British Army and ordered to make all haste to prepare the supply of Arctic equipment for the troops in North Russia. Officially appointed 'Staff Officer, Arctic equipment, North Russia Expeditionary Force' (NREF), Shackleton hand-picked several polar explorers to join him at Murmansk to assist in his work.

1. He arrived at Murmansk in late October 1918 to play his part in assisting the British Army in pushing back Lenin's rebellious 'Red' army and defending British military positions. A winter offensive (1918/19) was planned, executed and succeeded. Shackleton, himself never saw the front line.
2. Shackleton knuckled down to his task under the authority of his military seniors who were very pleased with his contribution and loyal attitude.
3. In early April 1919 (and the winter campaign nearly over) there was little more for Shackleton to do in North Russia and he was recalled to London . Shackleton was likely to have been keen to return to England to pursue business opportunities and to raise funds for his next polar expedition. He, also, returned to the lecture circuit and published his own account of the ITAE in *South* (December 1919).
4. Although he may not have considered his uniformed service in North Russia to have been particularly compelling, one correspondent at Murmansk recounted Shackleton's service in rather bombastic terms:

*How I recall his striking figure during the North Russian campaign daily exhorting by his magnetic influence suffering humanity to greater tasks ... Eccentric in some ways; almost totally unheeded of cold, and clothed lightly for such parts, Shackleton forced upon all whom he encountered a lasting impression of real merit. An idol of the mobile columns, an inspiration to all, and effectively equipped the morale of the troops and effectively equipped the entire Russian Force against the rigours of winter with a scrupulous thoroughness.*

5. In the King's Birthday Honours list of 1919 (*London Gazette*, 3 June 1919) Shackleton was awarded the OBE for his services.
- **1920/22** - Shackleton became tired of the lecture scene and began planning another polar excursion – this time to an unexplored region of the Arctic (Beaufort Sea). The Canadian government showed some interest but in the end, due to a lack of funding, he switched his attention back to the Antarctic. With sponsorship from an old school friend (John Quiller Rowett) he planned a somewhat imprecise expedition to explore sub-Antarctica, do some oceanography and possibly circumnavigate the continent.
    1. In September 1921 the expedition ship *M/S Quest* set sail from London. At Rio de Janeiro Shackleton suffered a suspected heart attack. However, he continued on and reached South Georgia on 4<sup>th</sup> January 1922.

2. Tragically, he died in his cabin on-board as the expedition ship was moored at Grytviken, South Georgia. It was the very early morning (2:50 am) of 5<sup>th</sup> January 1922. He was just a five weeks shy of his 48<sup>th</sup> birthday.
3. As Shackleton's body was enroute back to England a message was received by Leonard Hussey (who was escorting the coffin) from Emily Shackleton. She requested that her husband be buried on South Georgia. And so, the body returned to SG - arriving on 27<sup>th</sup> February. On 1<sup>st</sup> March it was taken ashore. On 5<sup>th</sup> March Shackleton was buried at Grytviken cemetery.

### Post script

1. Sir Ernest Henry Shackleton failed gloriously in his attempt to be the first to cross Antarctica. He failed, also, to reach the South Pole at any time. Out of the ashes of these failures, however, rose the 'phoenix' of supreme endurance, ingenuity of leadership and survival. It is these attributes that are Shackleton's heroic legacy and they inspire people to this day – whether they be captains of adventure or industry. Shackleton's supreme example of leadership is, arguably, unsurpassable.
2. Ever since Roland Huntford's controversial biography *Shackleton* was published (1985, Hodder & Stoughton) there has been a groundswell of interest in this enigmatic Irish explorer, often (and unfairly) at the expense of Scott's polar reputation.
3. Shackleton was a hero and a failure. He was accoladed and ignored. On his return from the ice in 1917 there was a war on. Polar celebrities were out of fashion. From the turmoil of death and suffering people needed a new kind of hero, a new distraction - enter the pioneer aviator and film star. There is a sad irony here. Shackleton had sought fame and fortune but, in the end, only transient fame arrived. There was to be no fortune. By 1920, just 18 months before the Irishman's demise, Charlie Chaplin was a millionaire. In 1927, just 5 years later, Charles Lindbergh took his little plane, 'Spirit of St Louis' on a precarious jaunt across the Atlantic and into unbelievable fame and a level of wealth Shackleton couldn't even have imagined.