

Wednesday 15th June 2013. Michael Smith: *Sir Ernest Shackleton – the Amazing Exploits of a great Explorer.*

Michael Smith is a writer who specialises in the history of Polar exploration and is currently working on a biography of Sir Ernest Shackleton. In June last year Michael



Michael Smith

contacted the Society to ask whether any of our members could provide information on a family who lived in Wadhurst over a century ago. This family was Charles and Jane Dorman of Towngate farm and they happened to be Shackleton's in-laws. Apparently Shackleton had been a regular visitor to the Wadhurst area when he was courting the Dorman's daughter Emily. Furthermore, his former school friend and later financial supporter, John Quiller Rowett, lived in Frant. In view of these interesting Wadhurst

associations, Michael was invited to give a talk on Shackleton to the Society.

Michael started by explaining that after Shackleton died in 1922 he remained a somewhat shadowy figure for the next 50-60 years, his role in leading three British expeditions to the Antarctic being largely eclipsed by the memory of Captain Scott's heroic failure to return from the South Pole. Whereas Scott's polar party was commemorated in numerous monuments, including stained glass windows, statues, busts and memorial tablets, public memorials to Shackleton were relatively scarce. This was because Scott was very much an English establishment figure, Shackleton, on the other hand, was an Irishman and somewhat of an outsider – even in Ireland where he was perceived to be tainted by his close associations with Britain. It was only in the late 20th century that interest in Shackleton revived and the extraordinary nature of his achievements fully recognised.



Sir Ernest Shackleton

Shackleton was born on 15 February 1874 in County Kildare, Ireland, one of ten children. His Anglo-Irish family moved to Sydenham in south London when he was ten and, at the age of 13, he was sent to Dulwich College where he proved to be an indifferent scholar. However, this was due more to his boredom and unwillingness to apply himself rather than any lack of intelligence. Shackleton's discontent at school was such that he was allowed to leave at 16 and go to sea. However, because his father could not afford a Royal Naval cadetship he was indentured as an apprentice "before the mast" on a sailing vessel in which his first year long voyage involved him sailing "the wrong way" round Cape Horn. During the following three years in which he served in a range of merchant ships, Shackleton travelled widely and eventually qualified as a Master Mariner.

In 1897 Shackleton met Emily Dorman, a girl six years his senior who had already had 16 proposals of marriage. Initially, Emily was not particularly impressed but they were

eventually drawn together through a mutual love of poetry (which apparently Shackleton could recite "by the yard") and even start to write to each other using their favourite poet, Browning, as the basis of a secret cipher. However, Shackleton was eternally restless and in 1901, partly to impress Emily and her family, he applied to join Captain Scott's Discovery Expedition to the Antarctic and was appointed as third officer. Before he left on *Discovery*, he wrote a letter to Emily's father for permission to marry Emily but, because letters to the expedition took years to arrive, by the time he received the letter of assent Mr Dorman had died.

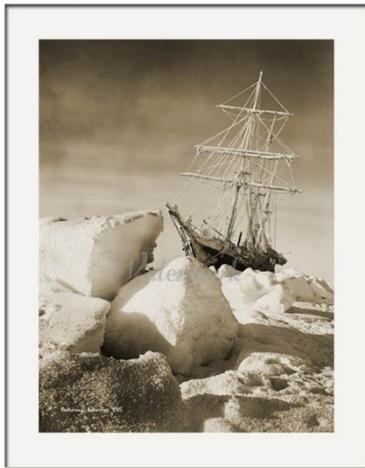
Scott ran his expedition on strict Royal Navy lines and required all his staff to accept the conditions of the Naval Discipline Act. Although he had left the Merchant marine and had been commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Royal Naval Reserve, Shackleton disliked this intensely since he favoured a far more informal style of leadership. Ultimately this soured his relationship with Scott. During the Antarctic winter of 1902, when *Discovery* was iced-in in the McMurdo Sound, Scott chose Shackleton to accompany Wilson and himself on a march southwards to achieve the highest possible latitude in the direction of the South Pole. Although a record latitude of 82° 17' was reached, the journey was marred by the death of all the dogs and by serious health problems including frostbite, malnutrition, dehydration and scurvy. By the time the party had struggled back to the ship in February 1903, Shackleton was in a seriously weakened condition and Scott decided to send him home on medical grounds. He returned to Britain devastated but determined to return to the Antarctic to make amends for what he regarded as a personal failure.

Michael went on to describe in vivid detail the two expeditions on which Shackleton's reputation now rests: the Nimrod expedition of 1907-1909 and the Imperial Trans-Antarctic expedition of 1914-17. Shackleton was not a good organizer and because he was not an establishment figure, finance for the former was hard to come by. Some of his associates were less than respectable and one of his brothers was even accused of stealing the Irish Crown jewels!

The Nimrod expedition set off, in Michael's words "in a shambles and a flurry of mismanagement". A lot of mistakes were made, for example using ponies from the northern hemisphere which shed their coats in the Antarctic winter. Nevertheless, what the expedition achieved against overwhelming odds was remarkable. In January 1909 Shackleton and three companions made a march which achieved a record southern latitude at 88° 23' S, a mere 97 geographical miles (112 statute miles) from the South Pole. En route they discovered the Beardmore Glacier, became the first people to see and travel on the South Polar Plateau and to ascend Mount Erebus. It was a very brave decision to turn back so near to the Pole but their return journey proved to be an ordeal in which the group suffered from severe hypothermia and barely survived on half rations – an appalling race against starvation. According to his wife Emily, the only comment he made about not reaching the Pole was "a live donkey is better than a dead lion, isn't it?" On his return Shackleton received a knighthood and many other honours in addition to expressions of admiration from fellow polar explorers, notably Roald Amundsen.

However, the expedition had left Shackleton deeply in debt and it required a government grant to clear his most pressing obligations.

After Amundsen won the race to the South Pole in 1911, Shackleton started to make preparations for what became the Imperial Trans-Antarctic expedition. Its aim was to achieve what he regarded as the next major challenge of polar exploration: the crossing of Antarctica from sea to sea via the South Pole. This expedition set off in 1914 but disaster struck when its ship, *Endurance*, became trapped in pack ice in the Weddell Sea and was slowly crushed. This was dramatically illustrated by slides of some remarkable photographs taken by the expedition's photographer, Frank Hurley. In November 1915, the ship sank leaving its crew marooned on a large ice floe. There followed several failed attempts to cross the ice to terra firma but when the ice floe broke up Shackleton and his



Endurance by Frank Hurley

men took three lifeboats and after five grueling days at sea, during which they covered 346 miles, they landed at the desolate Elephant Island. Because this was far from any shipping routes, Shackleton then selected six men and in a tiny modified lifeboat (christened *James Caird* after the expedition's chief sponsor), risked an 800 mile open-boat journey across the turbulent Southern Ocean to try to reach South Georgia whaling stations to get help. After 15 harrowing days on the ocean they saw South Georgia but hurricane force winds initially prevented them from making shore. Eventually they managed to land on the unpopulated Southern end of the island. From there Shackleton and three of his crew then crossed overland to the Northern end, travelling 32 miles over mountainous terrain for 36 hours – a feat not repeated until 1955. They

reached the whaling station at Stromness on 20 May 1916. Shackleton subsequently returned to Elephant Island by ship to rescue the remaining 22 members of his crew. Miraculously all were still alive. Amazingly, within a short time after returning home they were all thrown into the maelstrom of the war.

Away from his expeditions, Shackleton's life was often unsettled. Despite being devoted to Emily, by whom he had two sons and a daughter, he engaged openly in many affairs. He launched many business ventures and money making schemes but few proved successful. By the 1920s, despite heart problems, he was considering a last expedition. Initially he thought of going to the Arctic but in 1921, with financial support from his friend John Rowett, he returned to the Antarctic in his ship *Quest*. The aim of the Shackleton-Rowett Expedition was to carry out a programme of scientific and survey activities and possibly a circumnavigation of the continent. However, in January 1922, when his ship was moored in South Georgia, Shackleton died of a heart attack. His widow requested that he be buried there.

In Michael's view, Shackleton deserves to be regarded as one of the greatest explorers of all time and few, if any, of those who heard his descriptions of his epic feats of leadership and endurance would be inclined to disagree. Shackleton's simple grave in South Georgia

is now a site of pilgrimage and he has now become a cult figure. He now is even presented in Business schools as an exemplar of how to lead under extreme circumstances.

Arthur Dewar