

ALLEN MAWER DESCRIBES THE
INGENIOUS CREATION OF *AURORA
AUSTRALIS*, THE FIRST BOOK WRITTEN
AND PUBLISHED IN ANTARCTICA

LIGHT IN THE SOUTH

INTELLECTUAL RECREATION AND distraction were at a premium during the Antarctic winters of the heroic age. Without them—and even with them—the blackness outside could infiltrate the hut, threatening sanity and morale.

Robert Falcon Scott's Discovery Expedition (1901–1904), also known as the British National Antarctic Expedition, was heir to a Royal Navy tradition of using theatricals and education to beguile the winter months.

Scott's men agreed that they would publish a monthly house journal.

The first editor of their *South Polar Times* was Ernest

Henry Shackleton (1874–1922). Apart from his editorial, there was a monthly summary of events and weather, instructive pieces about science and the environment and, according to Scott, articles 'written in a lighter vein'. To these, over time, were added caricatures, puzzles and acrostics. There was a running joke in the form of satirical coats of arms devised for expedition members, all lavishly illustrated by Dr Edward Adrian Wilson (1872–1912). Although typewritten and hand drawn, its modest format did not deter contributors or discourage readers. Seldom in the history of literature could there have been such competition to get one's hands on the single copy as it appeared.

Shackleton went one better when it came to his own expedition, five years later. The British Antarctic Expedition (1907–1909), also called the *Nimrod* Expedition after its ship, carried small printing and etching presses lent by the printer and stationery manufacturer, Sir Joseph Causton and Sons Ltd. On them Shackleton intended to print the first book written and published in Antarctica. It was not an idle fancy and he did not underestimate the difficulties; it would, after all, be the first manufacturing process undertaken in Antarctica. In the back of his mind may have been the thought that copies could subsequently be sold to defray expedition expenses, which were always a worry. He was prepared to invest three precious weeks of pre-embarkation time in having Frank Wild (1873–1939) and Ernest Edward Mills Joyce (c.1875–1940) trained by Caustons in typesetting and printing. The

firm also instructed George Marston (1882–1940), the expedition artist, in etching and lithography. On arrival in Antarctica, the equipment was installed in the winter quarters that Shackleton's men constructed at Cape Royds in the shadow of Mount Erebus.

The two presses, small though they were, each took up nearly as much room as the stove (mislabelled as 'store' on the plan), which arguably provided

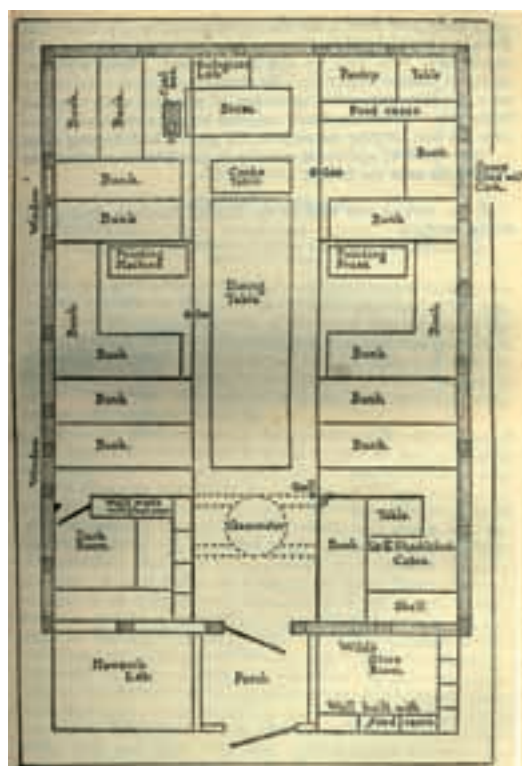




more crucial services. Wild and Joyce had to find room for a large sewing machine and the type-case as well as the printing press in their four-square-metre 'Rogues Retreat'.

After a few days of type-sorting, they were ready for contributions to what would become *Aurora Australis*. On the opposite side of the hut, Marston and Day ran the lithography shop and bindery from their four square metres, which they called 'The Gables'.

The contents of *Aurora Australis* are like those of any small literary magazine of the day. There are ten written contributions, seven in prose and three in verse. The two poems that appear under the pseudonym 'Nemo' were written by Shackleton, who had also contributed under that name to *the South Polar Times*. The third poem, 'Midwinter Night', is also attributed to Nemo in the contents but



to 'Veritas' at the end of the text. Veritas was a pseudonym that five years earlier had been used by Shackleton's successor as editor of the *Times*, Louis Charles Bernacchi (1876–1942). As this poem is the only surviving example of Shackleton's comic verse, its provenance might have been suspect had it not been for Dr Eric Marshall's diary, in which he recorded that Shackleton had been working on a night-watch poem. Marston's illustration shows a figure thinking poetical thoughts but, if it is meant to be Shackleton, it is not a good likeness. Nor does it look like Bernacchi, who in any event was not a member of this expedition.

Of the prose pieces, two can be classified as humorous fiction and another two as scenes from expedition life. There is also a scientific paper on Antarctic life forms, a long account of the first ascent of Mount Erebus and a science-fiction story. All but the last three are published under pen names or initials, which would have to be flimsy camouflage under the circumstances. Marston illustrated several of the works, wrote a piece of his own and contributed a caricature of the expeditioners.

Of the 15 men confined in that 60-square-metre hut, nine had work published in the book. Shackleton, who was editor and censor, does not tell us whether he issued any rejection slips. There was also non-literary participation by Joyce, as one of the printers, and by Bernard Day, the motor mechanic, who made the bindings. Shackleton tells us that, after Joyce and Wild got into their stride, they could set two pages a day, which can only have been when the sewing machine was not in use.

After printing, the types were 'dissed' (distributed, broken up) for use in subsequent pages. The book contains about 120 pages of print, so the printers would have had to work on it at least every second day during the months of darkness. Their imprint records that the work was published between April and July 1907, but some contributions were late and Joyce was still typesetting in November, when Wild was off with Shackleton heading for the Pole.

Although Day's contribution could only begin when that of all the others was complete, he first had to prepare his materials. He made the covers from Venesta board packing cases. The board was stout plywood, 4 millimetres thick, made of three layers of birch or other hardwood held together with waterproof cement. Day cleaned, cut, bevelled and polished the boards but left on show the

OPPOSITE
The packing-case cover of the Library's copy of *Aurora Australis* still bears its 'BUTTER' stencil

LEFT
Unknown photographer
The Type-case and Printing Press for the Production of the 'Aurora Australis' in Joyce's and Wild's Cubicle, Known as the 'Rogues' Retreat' reproduced from *The Heart of the Antarctic* by Ernest Shackleton (London: William Heinemann, 1910)

BELOW LEFT
Unknown creator
Plan of the Hut at Winter Quarters reproduced from *The Heart of the Antarctic* by Ernest Shackleton (London: William Heinemann, 1910)

CONTENTS

The Ascent of Mount Erebus	T. W. EDGEMORTH DAVID.	NEMO.
Midwinter Night		
Trials of a Mesman	A MESMAN.	
A Pony Watch		PUPPY.
Southward Bound	LASSIE LEBUCK.	
An Interview with an Emperor	A. F. M.	
Erebus		NEMO.
An Ancient Manuscript	SHELLBACK.	
Life under Difficulties	JAMES MURRAY.	
Bathybia	DOUGLAS MAWSON.	



do with a press designed for etching rather than lithography. James Murray, the expedition's biologist who, like Marston, saved his delicate work for the midnight quiet, admired his colleague's patience and devotion:

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 out 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.

stencilled words that identified their former contents.

The result is that most of the copies can

be referred to by their stencils. For example, the National Library of Australia's copy is referred to as 'Butter 267' (with 'BUTTER' stencilled on the inside of the front cover and '267' stencilled on the inside back cover). The pages are laced together with green silk cord and the spine is bound in Weddell seal skin, with the title and printer's mark (two penguins) impressed.

Few printers before them could have encountered conditions as extreme as those endured by Joyce and Wild. The type would freeze to their fingers. The ink would congeal, and could only be made to flow by holding a candle under the inking plate. Stove dust would settle on the paper as it was being printed. Any page that fell on to the floor, as filthy as that of a whaling station, was lost. A jostle of the compositor's elbow could tip a tray of type into the mire. There were many failures and a consistent standard was difficult to maintain.

Marston also struggled. He reproduced the illustrations by algraphy, printing from aluminium plates. With traces of salt in the water, which scarred the plates, quality control was difficult, the more so as he had to make

In the end, Shackleton treated the finished product as 'a memento of the winter months' and many of the bound copies were later given as presents to members, friends and supporters of the expedition. He described it as an interest and a relaxation, but one that had 'at least assisted materially to guard us from the danger of lack of occupation during the polar night'. William Heinemann published extracts in *Antarctic Book: Winter Quarters 1907-1909* (1909), issuing it as a third volume of the deluxe edition of Shackleton's *Heart of the Antarctic* (1909). The two extracts chosen were Shackleton's poem 'Erebus' and Douglas Mawson's science-fiction story *Bathybia*, which may fairly be regarded as the pick of the collection.

Joyce and Wild are said to have printed between 75 and 100 copies of each page. In 1913, Mawson told J.P. Morgan that 80 copies of each page had been pulled but only 30 copies collated and bound. The bound copies do not have identical contents. There are at least two variants of the fifth and sixth pages of Frank Wild's *An Ancient Manuscript*, his Biblical parody of the origins of the expedition and written under the pseudonym 'Shellback'.

ABOVE LEFT
The table of contents, with contributors' pen-names, reproduced from Ernest Shackleton (ed.), *Aurora Australis* (Antarctica: Printed at the Sign of the Penguins by Joyce and Wild, 1908)

ABOVE RIGHT
George Marston (1882-1940) *Nightwatchman* reproduced from Ernest Shackleton (ed.), *Aurora Australis* (Antarctica: Printed at the Sign of the Penguins by Joyce and Wild, 1908)

OPPOSITE
George Marston (1882-1940) *Fourteen Good and True* (left to right: Mackay, Armytage, Marshall, Marston, Roberts, Joyce, David, Wild, Murray, Adams, Day Priestly, Brocklehurst and Mawson) reproduced from Ernest Shackleton (ed.), *Aurora Australis* (Antarctica: Printed at the Sign of the Penguins by Joyce and Wild, 1908)

In 'Butter 267', there are five paragraphs critical of persons unsuccessfully approached by Shackleton for financial support. They are not named but could have been identified by their attributes (a landed magnate, a cigar-giver, a bibliophile, a money-grubbing investor and a stockbroker). Shackleton owed them nothing, but there might be another expedition and it would not do to give offence.

'Butter 267' is regarded as the first state of the book, of which there may be no more than ten copies, a rarity within a rarity. In the second state, Wild has replaced the provocative paragraphs with a more general reference to the difficulties Shackleton had faced in raising funds. This copy also lacks a lithograph of the ship *Nimrod*, which illustrates Wild's *An Ancient Manuscript* in at least two of the other bound copies. A deeper mystery is the third algraph that Marston made to illustrate Mawson's *Bathymia*. A plate title page, inscribed 'A giant tick was investigating the carcass', shows where it was meant to appear but Mary P. Goodwin, an American scholar who devoted much effort to researching the history of the book, reported that the algraph was missing from every copy she had been able to consult. She was looking in the wrong place. It had found a home in Heinemann's *Antarctic Book*. The illustration shows the expedition's scientist, passed out drunk on alcoholic algae, on the point of being eaten by a giant 'Antarctic'. Marston had probably discarded the algraph as a process failure, given that it is an indistinct image.

Aurora Australis brings together most of the attractions that books have in our culture. It is a repository of imagination, inspiration and experience. It is an object of rough beauty. It is an historical first in its own right as well as a memento of historical events. In some ways it is a superior sort of Edwardian brag book. Content and form convey complementary messages: this is what we are, and this is what we can do, against the odds. Goodwin, who wrote the introduction to the 1988

New Zealand facsimile edition of the book, was charmed by the identifying stencils. Among those she mentions are '[J]ULIENNE SOUP', '[IR]ISH STEW', '[AN] TARTIC', 'PEMMICAN', 'BURBERRY', 'TWELVE PAIRS OF' and 'THIS END UP'. In 1986, Bluntisham Books and Paradigm Press published the first public edition, a facsimile of the Scott Polar Research Institute's copy. In his introduction, John Millard reported that he had been able to locate 56 originals.

Demand far exceeds this limited supply—the more so given that about a third of Shackleton's 80 are in institutional collections—but still copies turn up. 'Marmalade' was found in a Northumberland stable in 2006. More recently, John Clark, clearing his deceased uncle's house in Kent, found a copy at the bottom of a filing cabinet. It sold at auction in 2007 for £43 200; in the early 1970s, you could have had it for one hundredth of the price. Bonhams, the auctioneers, described the book as the 'black tulip' of Antarctic bibliomania. The price inflation is sure to continue. Even if Shackleton's upper limit of 80 possible copies is taken at face value—and some think that it is on the high side—fewer than 20 remain to be accounted for.

ALLEN MAWER is the author of *South by Northwest*, a history of the quest for the South Magnetic Pole. His next book, *Incognita*, will be published by Wakefield Press in 2009

