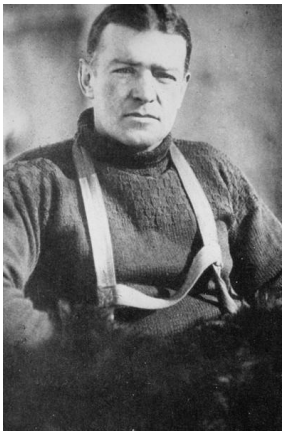
The Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition



Ernest Henry Shackleton was born in Ireland in 1874. His Anglo-Irish family moved to England when he was ten. Although he came from a successful landowning family, and had a private education, he yearned for adventure and at the age of sixteen he joined the Merchant Navy. He rose to become qualified as a Master Mariner in 1898. Through the father of a friend he met as an officer on a troopship in the Boer War, Shackleton got a place on the Discovery expedition to the Antarctic in 1901. He proved to be a very effective and well-respected officer, although the expedition had a bad effect on his health. Despite this, he became determined to mount his own expedition to the Antarctic and make an attempt to be first to reach the South Pole. He was a successful fundraiser and his Nimrod expedition set off in 1907. He and his party failed to reach the Pole, but they made several important discoveries and Shackleton returned to Britain a hero. He was knighted by King Edward VII in 1909. His dream to be the first man to reach the South Pole was dashed when news came in early 1912 that the Norwegian Roald Admundsen had already got there.

Nevertheless Shackleton was a man driven only to explore. He was ill-suited to any 'regular' job and his investments turned sour. On the other hand he was nationally popular, a great public speaker, and highly persuasive. On 1st January 1914 he announced that even though the Pole had been conquered no-one had yet crossed the Antarctic continent and he was setting up the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition to do just that. He managed to secure £10,000 from the British Government and then raised money from a small number of wealthy patrons – perhaps as much as £40,000 (equivalent to £2.5 million today) – and sell product endorsements, press and film rights. Frank Hurley (who had been to Antarctica before) was engaged as photographer and film cameraman. On 1st August his ship *Endurance* and his party were equipped, ready and waiting at anchor in the mouth of the River Thames. The whole scheme was suddenly put in jeopardy when the First World War broke out on 3rd August. Probably mindful of the propaganda value of a successful expedition the First Lord of the Admiralty, Winston Churchill, sent the crew a terse telegram: 'Proceed'. *Endurance* reached Buenos Aires, Argentina in September where Shackleton joined the expedition, having dealt with last minute arrangements in London.

The plan was for the main party to be put ashore in the Weddell Bay and make their way directly to the South Pole. From there they would head to the Beardmore Glacier and thence to Ross Island. At the glacier they would find supplies laid in by a second party, who would pick them up from Ross Island and sail them to Australia. Shackleton appointed a previous expedition colleague, Aeneas Mackintosh, as commander of this second party. In December 1914 *Aurora* set out from Hobart, Australia under Mackintosh's command. This party had been assembled more hurriedly than the main one, and had already suffered difficulties getting the ship Shackleton bought for them seaworthy. The party was poorly funded and several members left before departure and had to be hastily replaced. The ship arrived at Ross Island on 16th January 1915 and Mackintosh established a base at Cape Evans.

Also in December 1914 *Endurance* departed from the South Atlantic island of South Georgia for the Weddell Sea, where worsening conditions meant that on 15th January 1915 the ship became trapped in an ice floe. On 24th February Shackleton realised the ship would be trapped until the following Spring (around September). From here on the events are recorded month by month.

January 1915 In Cape Evans Macintosh believes that Shackleton will attempt the continental crossing without delay. Ignoring the advice of more seasoned explorers he orders an immediate expedition to place depots of supplies along the intended route. There are many problems, including arguments within the party, the loss of several dogs and sea ice conditions that prevent their return to Cape Evans until June. By that time the men are exhausted and frost-bitten, they have been living off seal meat and they have lost confidence in their commander. All this was unnecessary. Shackleton wrote to a journalist at the London Daily Chronicle in December 1914 that his party would not cross the Pole before October 1915, but had failed to advise Macintosh.

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May With half the second party on board, Macintosh's ship *Aurora* breaks free from its moorings in a severe gale at Cape Evans. It drifts in the ice for nine months before coming free in February 1916. Ten men are left stranded at Cape Evans. Mackintosh realises that rescue might not come for two years, if ever. Some supplies are available, left over from previous expeditions, but soon they have to survive on what they can kill.

September In spite of their privations, the second team persevere with putting in the depots they expect Shackleton's party to need as they advance from the South Pole. Three men (including Mackintosh) die before the remnants of the party re-join the others at Cape Evans on 15th July 1916.

October The ice around *Endurance* in the Weddell Sea does not melt and in fact pressure intensifies to the point where on the 24th water pours into the hull and the vessel slowly begins to sink. Shackleton and the party abandon ship and camp on the ice. They hope that the ice floe will drift some 400 km to Paulet Island where Shackleton knows there are stores.

March 1916 The ice floe in the Weddell Sea breaks in two 100 km from the island and Shackleton orders everyone into the lifeboats. On 9th April they reach Elephant Island, some 500 km from where *Endurance* sank. Shackleton decides to take five men and himself in one of the boats to try and reach the whaling stations in South Georgia for help. Supplies to last four weeks are packed for the 1,300 km voyage, the logic being that if they do not reach South Georgia within that time they will have perished.

April *Aurora* arrives back in New Zealand. There are no funds for a rescue mission, and support is hard to find (in the middle of a global war) until the Australian, New Zealand and British governments offer assistance but insist on full control. Organising the rescue takes eight months.

May On 8th May Shackleton's tiny boat reaches the barren southern shore of South Georgia, having ridden out a fierce storm. The party rests for several days and then Shackleton and two of the men set out to cross South Georgia on foot with the minimum of equipment. It takes 36 hours to cover the 50 km to the whaling station where they arrive on 20th May. The three men on the south of the island are quickly rescued.

June Shackleton plans the mission to rescue the men stranded on Elephant Island. Three attempts are foiled by sea ice, and he seeks the help of the Chilean government who provide a stouter vessel, the *Yelcho*.

August *Yelcho* reaches Elephant Island on 30th August, where all 22 men, who have been stranded there for four and a half months, are rescued alive. Huge crowds welcome the survivors when *Yelcho* arrives in Valparaiso, Chile.

December Shackleton is allowed to be a supernumerary officer on the repaired *Aurora*, but not commander, when it sets off to find the rest of the second party. On 10th January 1917, the seven survivors of the second party are picked up from Cape Evans. They were stranded for over eighteen months.

In the midst of World War I these heroic exploits were not a major story. On his return to Britain Sir Ernest Shackleton attempted to find a role in the Army but was rebuffed. Other ventures failed. In spite of all they had gone through, many of his expedition colleagues were still owed pay. Shackleton published an account of the fateful expedition, entitled 'South', and returned to the lecture circuit. He put together another expedition to Antarctica but was suffering from a chronic heart condition. He died of a heart attack on board his ship at South Georgia on 5th January 1922. He was 47.

The Imperial Trans-Antarctic expedition certainly failed in its original objective. Yet the successful rescue of all the members of the main party remains an achievement in the same bracket as the saving of the Apollo 13 astronauts 54 years later. Frank Hurley's stunning photographs (some in colour) and films showed what those media could achieve in both educating and entertaining audiences. For many years Shackleton's achievements were eclipsed by the public view of his sometime associate Sir Robert Scott, who died with his companions returning from the South Pole after discovering that Amundsen had beaten them to it. But over the past twenty years Shackleton has come to be regarded by many as a model leader, although this must be set against his failure to make adequate arrangements for the second party and keep them properly informed.

In 1958 the Commonwealth Trans Antarctic Expedition, led by Vivian Fuchs, succeeded in making the first passage across the continent via the South Pole. Sir Edmund Hillary led the second party.

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