

Empty Boots — A Whaling Story

ALAN INNES-TAYLOR

FOREWORD

The following is a heretofore unpublished account of a small but significant part of the 1st Byrd Antarctic Expedition, 1928-1930. It recounts one man's first journey to Antarctica. The author is the late Alan Innes-Taylor, polar survival expert, and the manuscript was recently made available by his family. Only minor grammatical changes have been made.

By the sheerest of coincidences, Innes-Taylor in December 1928 was visiting Edward Farn, manager of the Pacific & Arctic Railway and Navigation Company in Vancouver, B.C. The phone rang; the caller was Captain Railey, Admiral Byrd's New York manager, desperately asking for help in procuring fresh sled dogs. Some of the expedition's original 94 sled dogs had died from distemper and diarrhea en route from North America to New Zealand. Farn knew of Innes-Taylor's dog-mushing experience — Innes-Taylor had been an RCMP constable in Whitehorse and was at that time a freighter for a Yukon mining company — and turned from the phone to enquire whether he was interested in collecting and delivering the dogs. He was, and his life was changed forever.

Innes-Taylor obtained the dogs from Pat Hardy at Grouse Mountain near Vancouver and sailed south on 9 January 1929. All his dogs arrived safely in New Zealand, having suffered only from seasickness. In the tropics he had fed them barley water twice daily and wetted down their sun shades to keep them cool. When the weather cooled, he changed the dogs' diet to solid feed and exercised them by harnessing them to a wooden sled which they hauled around the deck, to the delight of the passengers and crew.

With 15 tons of new dog pemmican, mixed up by Norman Vaughan and others at the Hudson's Candy Factory in Dunedin, New Zealand, Byrd's expedition had moved on to Antarctica. The remaining dogs improved sufficiently to allow the offloading of supplies and the establishment of base camp, the first Little America, at the Bay of Whales.

Meanwhile, Innes-Taylor sailed after them bringing the canine replacements, but his ship could not penetrate the pack ice barring the way to Little America. He returned to winter over in New Zealand with his dogs.

During this second quarantine, Innes-Taylor asked for permission to take his dogs to the mountains and train them until October. The thought of his ferocious sled dogs loose amid all those New Zealand sheep raised a furor among the Kiwi stockmen. However, Sir Joseph Ward, Prime Minister of New Zealand, and the *Christchurch Star* newspaper were amenable to the idea and after Innes-Taylor met with the ranchers to agree to keep the dogs tied and to depart in October, government permission was granted. "Husky Camp" was set up at the Tasman Glacier, 12 miles from the Hermitage Hotel at Mt. Cook. Four miles up the trail was Ball Hut, run by the well-known alpine painter, Duncan Darragh. Innes-Taylor and his dogs moved 70 000 pounds of food and building materials that

austral winter to erect the Malte Brun Hut 16 miles farther up the glacier. A trail was shoveled across the Ball Glacier, and the dogteams once rescued a Mr. Egglestone, saving his frost-bitten hands and feet.

On 29 November 1929, Admiral Byrd, piloted by Bernt Balchen and assisted by June and McKinley, made the first flight over the South Pole. At that time, Innes-Taylor was again working his way south with his dogs, which now were needed to speed the expedition's evacuation. He reached Little America on 18 February 1930. Innes-Taylor returned there three years later as chief of field operations for the Second Byrd Antarctic Expedition. He died in Whitehorse, Yukon Territory, on 14 January 1983.

Some explanatory remarks may be in order. Quail Island is a traditional quarantine station in Lyttleton, New Zealand, harbor for Christchurch. It was also used by Scott and Shackleton to prevent the introduction of new animal diseases into agricultural New Zealand. Other notes by Innes-Taylor indicate that his first quarantine was in Dunedin, his second in Lyttleton, not Wellington.

The other expedition ship was the *City of New York*, Amundsen's *Samson* from Tromsø, Norway. It was a spruce-and oak-hulled barque built in 1882 and fitted with an auxiliary steam engine.

The *Eleanor Bolling* was the first metal-hulled ship to reach the Bay of Whales. The Bay of Whales is an indentation on the barrier of the Ross Ice Shelf used by Amundsen as Framheim, base of his first expedition to the South Pole in 1911.

Otago Heads is off the entrance to Dunedin's harbor.

Ice blink is a glare on the underside of a low cloud cover, produced by light reflecting from an ice-covered surface in an otherwise open-water area.

Currently the Soviets, Peruvians, and Japanese are still whaling in southern waters.

The 1930 cargo of whale oil was \$21.55/barrel. A similar volume of petroleum at today's prices of \$29.00/barrel would be worth \$3.4 million.

The Plimsoll mark is a set of lines on the outside of a ship's hull which, when compared to the waterline, indicates how loaded the vessel is.

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The two pair of sea boots stood outside their cabin doors, mute reminders that Pilot Lief Lier and Doctor Ingvald Schreiner would return no more to fill them. This was aboard the whaling factory ship *SS Kosmos*, launched at Belfast in

early 1929 and now on her first voyage to the Ross Sea, via Curaçao, the Panama Canal and New Zealand.

We were lying at South latitude 67 and 174 degrees East longitude some 20 miles west of Scott Island and it was the 26th of December 1929. This giant ship, 570 feet long with a beam of 70 feet and a crew of 300 men, could bunker some 120 000 barrels of oil and with her super-heated steam-reciprocating engine make some 11 knots fully loaded. Along with the ship were seven chasers, 135-foot trawler-type vessels with a speed of 14 knots and carrying a harpoon gun in the bow firing an explosive-head harpoon. These small vessels carried a crew of thirteen including the captain who was the gunner.

Just before sailing from Sandefjord, Norway, the owners of the *Kosmos* decided to include a light aircraft for spotting whales. This was how it came about that we had a skilled pilot on board, who would test out the feasibility of using an aircraft for spotting whales.

In early January of this year 1929, I had sailed from Vancouver, British Columbia, with 30 sled dogs aboard the passenger liner *Niagara* to join the Byrd Antarctic Expedition which had lost many dogs while passing through the tropics. Arriving in Auckland, New Zealand, I quickly transferred to a coastal steamer, the *Katoa*, for passage down to Wellington, thence to Dunedin, the expedition's headquarters. Here on Quail Island, a quarantine station, I awaited passage south to Antarctica. Both expedition ships had made one trip to the Bay of Whales, and the *Eleanor Bolling*, a small Chelsea Class minesweeper of WWI vintage, was due in a few days for a second. She finally arrived and loading began immediately as the season was late. With the dogs on the highest deck and 60 tons of coal in 200-pound sacks on the after hatches, we sailed down the harbour under the guidance of our Scottish pilot. As he went over the side at Otago Heads he remarked to me: "Well, my lad, I've seen all sorts of ships but none loaded as heavy as this one. I wish you good luck; you'll need it if I'm to see you again".

Some six days later [17 February 1929] when well into the great westerly storm area, we found out what it meant to take an overloaded vessel into these parts. In a matter of two hours we were headed into a full gale and high seas. The skipper laid the ship into the weather. We rolled as much as 50 degrees and it was difficult to keep the ship from broaching owing to our heavy deck cargo. The dogs were all seasick.

During the first night of the storm I was on the 8 to 12 watch at the wheel when the chief engineer came to report that we were making water in the after hold which had a cargo of coal, and that the bilges were clogged with coal dust and he could not pump out. The captain called all hands on deck to rig life lines and to jettison the after deck load of coal. Each sack, weighing two hundred pounds, was water-soaked and partly frozen. It was a man-killing job on the wildly pitching vessel, accomplished in the desperation to save us from foundering. Meantime in the engine room, the chief engineer drilled through the bulkhead into the after hold some five feet above the keel to let the water into the engine room bilges where it could be handled. This worked, and further holes were drilled

down to below the engine room plates. On deck after eight hours, the last sack of coal went over the side. The ship rode higher in the mountainous seas and became more manageable. The storm persisted for another 18 hours; then the seas moderated and we were able to proceed south again towards the pack ice.

Finally we saw the ice blink ahead, but found the pack ice impenetrable. The *City of New York*, our other barque-rigged ship, advised that she was leaving the Bay of Whales as everything was freezing up and that we should return to New Zealand. Reluctantly we put about.

The sled dogs and I on our arrival in Dunedin were transferred to a quarantine island in Wellington harbour, which at one time had been a leper station. Here we remained for about a month until special permission was granted by the New Zealand government to go to the Tasman Glacier. We could continue training our dogs there, and also assist in transporting equipment and material for the erection of shelters in the high mountains.

The winter passed, and then one day in late September a message came from Admiral Byrd telling us to report to Wellington and there go aboard the whaling factory ship *Kosmos*, which would take me as far as the ice pack where I could transfer to the barque *City of New York* when she came down. There was also the possibility that the *Kosmos* would hunt whales in the Ross Sea in which case they would drop me off at the Bay of Whales with one of the chasers.

Loading dogs, sleds, and gear aboard trucks we travelled up to Wellington where we were welcomed aboard the *Kosmos* by Captain Andreason and his crew. Eight hours after I was on board we sailed and as the tugs warped us out from the dock, with most of the crew lining the rail, hats went sailing ashore to the hundreds who had come to see us off, sure sign that we'd be back. As we proceeded out of the harbour, I was introduced to Lief Lier, the airplane pilot, and Ingvold Schreiner, the ship's doctor. We were to become fast friends.

Off the harbour mouth the pilot left us and soon the green hills of New Zealand disappeared and the seas came to meet us as we pointed towards the Roaring Forties and the Antarctic. In six days we were off the pack ice which lies across the southern approaches to the Ross Sea. It wasn't long before the chasers were hunting and the *Kos 3* brought in the first whale, a large blue, 85 feet long and weighing approximately a ton to a foot. As soon as the seas became calm the *De Havilland Moth* on floats was slung over the side and Lier made his first flight. There were problems to be met in this experiment: how did an airplane flying 75 knots/hour spot whales travelling slowly and then guide a chaser sailing 14 knots to where they were? Nowadays they use helicopters and the whale doesn't have a chance.

Whales were being killed at the rate of eight to ten every 24 hours, mostly blues with a few finbacks and Knøll, or humpbacks. Suddenly in November the whales disappeared and chaser after chaser reported no catch. Captain Andreason and the chaser captains believed that the whales had gone through the ice pack into the Ross Sea. This could mean the pack was opening up and so it was decided to attempt a penetration. The

airplane was sent up to spot the best place to enter the ice, and shortly we turned south with a chaser on each side of us breaking the ice and the other five following in our wake. We proceeded slowly for four days and then encountered heavy pressure ice and were stopped.

We couldn't go astern or ahead. No open leads in sight and the pressure was increasing hourly. Within 12 hours plates at the waterline and below buckled and we began to take water at some 20 000 gallons an hour in the forward hold. Pumps were brought up onto the forward deck and were able to handle the incoming water. Twelve-by-twelves were used to shore up the forward bulkhead. Finally the pressure eased and we were able to turn the ship and proceed north again towards the edge of the pack ice. I was always amazed at the calm way in which the captain and his crew dealt with major difficulties encountered, and also how they always seemed to have on board the necessary gear to do the job.

As soon as we reached the northern edge of the pack and it was calm, a soft patch was lowered over the damaged plates on the outside of the ship and a coffer dam was constructed inside the hull. This took care of the situation. The chasers meanwhile were hunting again and reported that whales had reappeared. It seemed likely they had run into trouble trying to get through the pack as we had, for after all, a whale must come up to breathe every 45 minutes.

On the meat deck of a whaling ship there are some 27 winches, two of which are used to pull a whale up through the stern aperture, and the others for the flensing operation and to haul chunks of meat and blubber to the press boilers where they are pushed in by men with long hooks. In the cold raw sea air and especially when it is foggy, the sight of 100 men tearing a whale to pieces in the awful stench of corrupt blood and slopping around in it is a carnage beyond description, and sticks in the mind forever. Each workman wears a pair of rubber pants and seaboots made of waterproof leather with wooden soles. When the men come off a 12-hour shift, the seaboots are always left outside the cabin doors. After a while one gets used to the stench which permeates everything, but one never gets used to the sight of a beautiful streamlined whale being hacked to pieces for oil which eventually ends up in margarine and cosmetics.

This meat deck was a dangerous place. One day [6 December 1929] a workman [Nils Hansen] put a winch hook into some 600 pounds of whale intestine to drag and drop it over the side, and when he gave the signal to begin pulling, suddenly the hook pulled out and caught in the top of the man's boot, pulling him quickly into the winch where the steam shut-off valve broke and he was whirled round and round, each time smashing his head against the steel bulkhead. Signals were sent below to shut off all steam in that part of the ship. The man had been killed instantly.

The doctor and I carried his broken body up to the surgery, followed by his son who had seen the whole thing happen. Later he went to the captain and asked if his father's body could be taken back to Norway. Men who go to sea have superstitions about death at sea and Captain Andreason was no exception. Burial at sea was the custom, but he felt sorry for

the young man and his father who had died so far from home. He agreed to the request and the doctor and I did the embalming. The blacksmith built a steel casket and the body was laid inside, the top welded and through a small opening in the top we poured in a mixture of formaldehyde and alcohol. Finally with the coffin sealed it was placed aft in a locked room. There were mutterings amongst the men that surely now we'd never reach land again. The damage to the ship, their friend killed on the meat deck; surely, they said, a third catastrophe will overtake us all.

About this time one of my dogs, a bitch called Maggie, gave birth to 13 pups. She was in no condition to handle that many. The doctor suggested that we take half the litter away from the mother and bring them up on whale's milk. We went to the captain and asked if it would be possible for one of the chaser captains to take a she-whale with calf. This was against international law on whaling and we had a whaling inspector on board. One of the chaser captains was consulted and he said that under the circumstances it would be possible and that after all the inspector had to sleep sometime. 24 hours later, unbeknownst to anyone, we were advised that many gallons of whale's milk, in fresh frozen blocks, were in the refrigerator section. We got a small block, thawed and then tasted it — thick and bittersweet, but not bad. We both decided that it was probably too rich for the pups so we broke it down by adding 20% sterile water. Next medicine bottles and nipples were made from rubber thumb stalls. Six weeks later the pups were twice the size of those left with the mother. We decided that whale's milk was the answer to raising giants. So far as I know no further experiments with whale's milk on either animals or humans have ever been tried, but it's certainly worth looking into.

Other whaling ships now came into the area: the *Nielsen Alonzo*, the *C.A. Larsen* and the *Southern Princess*, a British whaler with a Norwegian crew. Within 100 miles from each other those ships drifted while 27 chasers slaughtered these great and beautiful creatures, that with a flick of their tail could bend the steel plates of a ship and who in their dying moments could leap free of the sea, 100 tons of blooded flesh.

Whenever the seas were calm and the weather clear, Lier made flights over the area spotting whales. I frequently accompanied him and at the end of the day we'd forgather in the doctor's cabin to talk of future adventures: crossing Antarctica with dogs, exploring remote areas of the Yukon, and, of immediate interest, a flight over the Balleny Islands which lay west of us and towards which we were slowly drifting. We agreed that sometime around Christmas would be a good time for such a flight. We went over the airplane most carefully and made some adjustments. The normal range was 4½ to 5 hours. We would have to take off with 1810 lbs. On December 20th we made a test flight with all our weight. We found the aircraft sluggish, but after 30 minutes flight, control was normal. We now felt confident that when we had a perfect day, with calm and unlimited visibility, we could go. The plan was to fly over the chasers that were along our course and spot whales, then hop a further 75 miles to the Ballenys. The Balleny Islands are mountains rising some 10 000 feet out of the sea, with sheer

rock shorelines. A forbidding area surrounded with churning pack ice. So we waited and Christmas came, the only day during the entire whale-hunting season when the work of killing whales stops for 24 hours.

On this day there was feasting and meeting with all the chaser crews. Maggie's puppies were flourishing, especially those fed on whale's milk. Everyone aboard was given a generous lashing of brandy. Each man had his thoughts of home. Christmas packages put aboard in August were opened. It was a good day with the sun shining, but there was little mention of what this day really meant to mankind.

The following day was clear and calm. Lier said we should go and so we got our gear together. While I was getting dressed the doctor came to my cabin and asked me if he could go in my place. There was no sickness aboard at the moment, he said, and it was a chance for him to get away from the ship for a few hours. I didn't have the heart to refuse him, but I said he should be sure to get the captain's permission to go. He went off and returned shortly, happy that the captain, after a lot of persuading, had said yes, he could go. It was disappointing, but then I thought there would be another time.

Soon the airplane N42 was in the water and being refueled, then towed away from the ship. I had said goodbye to my friends and hoped they'd have a good flight to the Ballenys. They took a long run to get off, but finally were airborne and soon disappeared to the west. One hour later I went to the radio room to find out how they were doing and was somewhat disturbed to find out that Lier had taken the radio out to lighten the plane. However, one of the chasers reported that Lier had landed alongside and then taken off flying to the west.

The hours went by with no further word and at 1600, one hour before they would be out of fuel, the captain and I were on the bridge scanning the horizon. Word was sent out to all the chasers to post special lookouts. 1700 came and the captain ordered all chasers in for full bunkering and immediate search. At 1900 all chasers were steaming west in a search pattern and the other factory ships were alerted to the situation. At 2300 all chasers of the factory ships were asked to assist and by 0800 of the following day 27 chasers were searching the seas to the west.

The weather stayed clear and calm for a whole week, but not a sign, no wreckage — nothing. On the eighth day the fog blew in and the search was discontinued. Chasers that had penetrated far to the west reported that there was a belt of heavy ice all around the Ballenys. All hope of finding the two men and their aircraft was now abandoned. Captain Andreason stated he would send two chasers around the islands in March when the ice would be away from their shores.

Now each day seemed like an age. As we came to mess there were two pairs of empty boots outside their cabin doors. There were the two empty seats at the table. No more plans for future adventures. They were gone, swallowed up in the immensity of the Antarctic.

In March we were deep in the water. 116 000 barrels were in the tanks, worth 2½ million dollars. But we were six feet over the Plimsoll mark, badly damaged in the bow, missing two men and carrying one body home for burial. Two chasers

circumnavigated the Ballenys. Nothing was seen, nothing found. The winds still raged across the bleak peaks of the Ballenys and solitary Adelie penguins coasted along on bits of ice going nowhere; whales spouted as they moved swiftly to the west. The waves thundered against the sheer walls and the white spume made a touch of light against the dark islands. Then on the last day of the final search the wind died, the sea became calm, and for a few moments it was still. I had a feeling then that has persisted since, that somewhere high on the islands' mountaintops, my two friends lie amidst the wreckage of their plane, enveloped by that peace to be found where no man has ever trod or ever will, and I have wondered many times why I was not along on this adventure into the unknown.