

## ANTARCTIC VIGNETTES III: SHACKLETON'S AB – WILLIAM FREDERICK WILLIAMS

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(with four plates)

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William Frederick Williams was born in Tasmania in 1886. He joined Ernest Shackleton's British Antarctic Expedition, signing on in the name of W. Williams, and served as an AB (Able Seaman) on the Steam Yacht *Nimrod* on her second voyage south (1908–09). On return to Tasmania he tried his hand at a variety of jobs before settling in the Lakes district of Tasmania as the manager of guest houses catering for trout fishermen in the 1920s. He retired to Lorne, Victoria, and died in Melbourne in 1964 aged 77.

**Key Words:** William F. Williams, Able Seaman, S.Y. *Nimrod*, Shackleton's British Antarctic Expedition.

### INTRODUCTION

Serendipity often plays a role in the discovery of information relating to projects undertaken and has played its part for some of the men from the early Antarctic expeditions whose stories are forming the basis of the Antarctic Vignettes series of papers. William Williams is not an uncommon name; indeed there are two men with that name who served on expeditions during the heroic age of Antarctic exploration – an Able Seaman with Shackleton's British Antarctic Expedition 1907–09 (BT 100/28, Crossley 1997, Riffenburgh 2004), and a Chief Engine Room Artificer with Captain Scott's British Antarctic Expedition 1910–13. The second William Williams was a Royal Navy man so his service papers are accessible at the National Archives, Kew, but the possibility of finding out anything about the first William Williams appeared remote. Indeed when my mother-in-law's next door neighbour told me that her late husband used to go fishing with the son of a man who had sailed with Shackleton I did not believe her. Fortunately, investigation of this contact proved fruitful and her claim was vindicated.

### WILLIAM FREDERICK WILLIAMS

William Frederick Williams was born on 23 December 1886 at Scottsdale, Tasmania, the eldest son of Frederick William Williams and his wife Sarah Sheehan. Frederick (WFW's father) was a huge man, who despite having only one arm – his right arm had been severed in a chaff cutter when he was aged only nine – was a world champion axeman. He was often away and Sarah (WFW's mother), a nurse and midwife, was the main supporter of the family of ten children. Nothing is known about WFW's early life, but the family lived in Port Sorell, near Devonport, where most of the boys drifted into seafaring jobs when they left home.

### ABOARD THE NIMROD

WFW was nearly 22 when he joined the S.Y. *Nimrod* at Lyttelton, New Zealand, on 24 November 1908 (pl. 1). He signed on as W. Williams and served throughout the second voyage taking his discharge when the ship returned

to Poplar, London, on 31 August 1909 (BT 100/28). He was fond of the ship but considered Ernest Shackleton, the expedition leader, cavalier about the *Nimrod*, which WFW called the *Thunderin' Ice Berg Chaser* in his diary. Amongst the personal items he took south were a jew's harp and a banjo. It is interesting to speculate whether WFW's prowess on the banjo was instrumental in Leonard Hussey's appointment as a banjo-playing meteorologist on Sir Ernest Shackleton's later Imperial Trans-Antarctic expedition, in 1914, and also that of Joseph Williams, the banjo-playing carpenter with Douglas Mawson's BANZAR Expedition in 1930–31. Whilst on the *Nimrod* WFW kept a small notebook/diary, in which



PLATE 1  
*William Frederick Williams.*

he records the weather and notes the principal actions of his watch. This notebook also contains a brief summary of the voyage south (text and spelling as written):

*It was on November 23 that I joined the Nimrod in Lyttelton N.Z. to go to the frozen South on the return trip to bring Lieut Shackleton back and his party that went to find the South Pole but did not have the luck to reach it but very near he discovered the Magnetic Pole but I am running away from my story we left Lyttelton on Dec 1<sup>st</sup> and a big crowd down to see us off we got under way at half past 3 amid deafening cheers from all man of wars crews as we were leaving the wharf the tug boat came down to the Heads with us & then left us to go on our own. We had fine weather we were three weeks going down to the ice pack which was in 67 degrees South it was a lovely sight the sun was shining all day and all night so we had no look out to keep all hands were up on the fore castle Head watching the progress we thought there was nothing like it but we soon go full up of seeing ice we had three months down there it was deadly we had to do some heavy work sledging when we got up to the hut where the Party where living we had some great fun catching seals and penguins and skying we never had the pleasure of being on them before we used to get some lovely spills off them. but we soon had to give them a spell when we could work. When we got up to the hut we were all excited to see living people and a house they were as pleased as we where so we gave them some fresh provisions and then went off to look for the two men that left the ship off Cape Bird for the Hut with the mail (Second Officer Aeneas MacIntosh and Able Seaman Michael Thomas McGillion) but we could not get to Cape Bird on account of the ice coming down on top of us and drove us to the Western Mountains, where we put in*

*ten days iced in. on the tenth day we forced our way out and made for the Hut we reached it with some difficulty and was pleased to find our two men where there or at least one. Mr. MacIntosh had gone with the supporting party for Shackleton. McGillion came on board and we were all glad to see him his face was all skinned where they had had a terrible time comeing over the mountain they had a very heavy blizzard for two day they had no grub so they had a very hard time when they were seen they where sliding down the side of Mount Erebus they slid over 3000ft so one of the shore party seen them. & when they found them they were just about done they had to carry MacIntosh into the hut where the two of them where laid up for 4 days so things where only fair down there then we started exploring south Victoria land where we nearly lost the ship a dozen times we were all glad to get out of that place, back towards the hut searching all the time for Prof David [Professor Tannatt William Edgeworth David] and his party [Douglas Mawson and Dr. Alistair Forbes MacKay] so we had the good luck to pick them up then.*

### HIS SUBSEQUENT LIFE

From Poplar, WFW made his way back to Australia where in Sydney he married Elizabeth Grace Smith in 1911. Back in Tasmania, WFW was always restless and he tried his hand at a number of jobs including policing in Hobart and Launceston, and working for the railways at Andover before going on to manage, for the Tasmanian Government, a number of guest houses catering for trout fishermen.

After a few years at Lake Leake the family moved to Interlaken, located on the shore of Lake Sorell. Here the fishing was again superb, the lakes were not overfished;



PLATE 2  
The Rainbow Chalet.

indeed most of the guests arrived in horse-drawn coaches and sulkies as motor vehicles were still a rarity. When the fish weren't biting, WFW's younger son (William Reginald Williams) recalled:

*Alternative methods had to be used. When one is running a resort and you cannot put trout on the menu, your credibility goes for nought, so when we could not catch them fair dinkum, after dark I would slip a sock over the rowlocks of the dinghy and move silently to a quiet corner, connect my spot light to my motor bike battery, grab my long handled gaff and in quick time have enough trout for breakfast. The guests were amazed as there was no refrigeration in those days in the Lake country. I used to tell them about the "lucky luminous" spinner I used.*

Smoked eels were also a favourite and WFW and his younger son used to set a tail net in the creek that runs between Lake Crescent and Lake Sorell from where they

could always guarantee a good catch. One morning there was a bonus when they retrieved the net – a beautiful 29½ lb (13.4 kg) brown trout. But the fish, which was badly net-marked, had been caught out of season and illegally so they did the only sensible thing and ate it.

From Interlaken, WFW and his family moved on to the Great Lake where in 1929 they opened the brand new Rainbow Chalet (pl. 2). This building could accommodate 50 paying guests. Anglers from all over the world came to stay at what was considered the best trout fishing venue in Australia where rainbows averaged 3½lbs (1.5 kg) and brownies 5½ lbs (2.5 kg) (pl. 3).

Notable guests included Robert Baden Powell, founder of the Scouting Movement. He stayed for a few days in April 1932. On the last day of the season Baden Powell was out with WFW's son. It was particularly cold and bleak, and they hadn't caught a thing. Deciding to call it a day as darkness fell, Baden Powell caught an 8 lb (3.6 kg) rainbow whilst winding in his line just as the launch got back to the jetty (pl. 4).

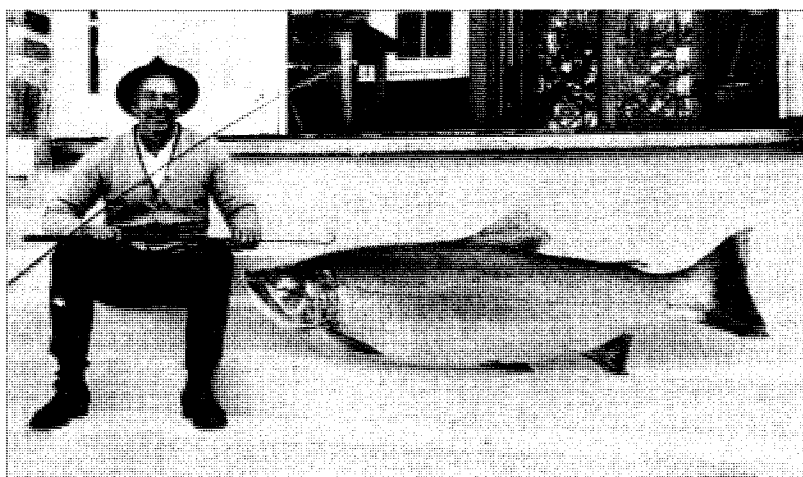


PLATE 3

*WFW seated on the steps of the Rainbow Chalet with the monster trout used in advertising photographs.*

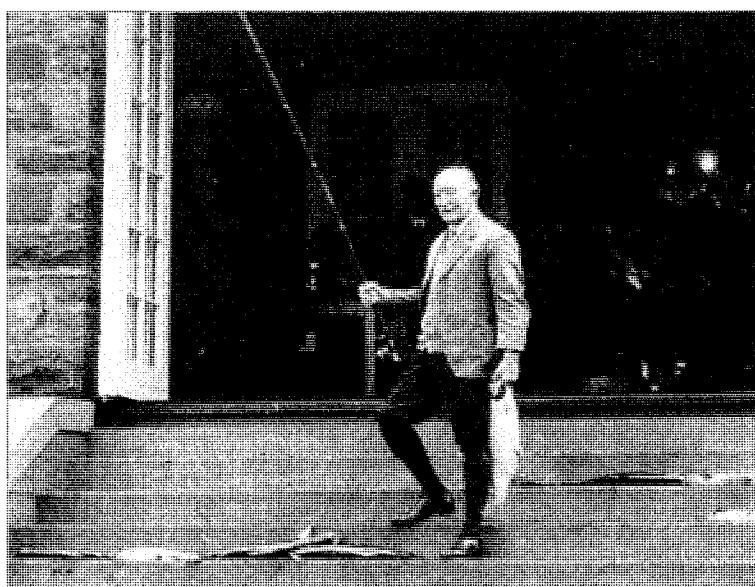


PLATE 4

*Robert Baden Powell with the 8-lb rainbow trout he caught on the last day of the 1932 season.*

The Australian and England Test Cricket teams also visited. In the days before air travel the Australian team would tour Tasmania before going overseas. Douglas Jardine, captain of the infamous bodyline test series of 1932–33, also spent a week there. He possessed some fine trout fishing equipment, mostly from Hardy Brothers – equipment valued at £400 (\$800) at a time when the weekly tariff at the Chalet was £5.12.6d (\$12), all meals, morning and afternoon tea included.

The Williams subsequently moved to Victoria where WFW tried chicken farming in Werribee with his elder son Claude but ended up as a cobbler at Williamstown. In the late 1940s WFW retired to Eastern View, Victoria, purchasing a gracious house with outstanding views towards Lorne some 11 km away. Here he cleared the land behind the main house and built a small shack where he would live when the house was let to holiday makers. WFW was a wonderful, enthusiastic gardener, providing the local guest houses with home-grown fruit, vegetables and flowers. He was renowned for his strawberries and gladioli.

William Frederick Williams died in Elstetnwick private hospital, Melbourne, on 25 July 1964, from emphysema – he had been a heavy smoker all his life. He was 77 years old.

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