

ANTARCTICA

the farthest place close to home

PUTTING ANTARCTICA ON THE MAP

**EXPLORER JOURNAL****Excerpt: *The Voyage of the James Caird*
by Ernest Shackleton****Ernest Shackleton, 1874–1922**

Ernest Shackleton was born on the 15th of February 1874 in Ireland. His father wanted him to study medicine, but at the age of sixteen he went to sea, and by twenty-four had qualified to command a British ship anywhere on the seven seas. Shackleton made four voyages to Antarctica, the first as a member of Captain Robert F. Scott's expedition of 1901–1903. Shackleton put this valuable experience to use in 1907, when he led his own Antarctic expedition. It got within ninety-seven miles of the South Pole and conducted much valuable scientific research; the explorers climbed Mt. Erebus, and located the south magnetic pole. Upon his return in 1909, Shackleton was knighted.

In 1914, the explorer set out again. Since Amundsen had already reached the South Pole, Shackleton planned to cross the continent from one sea to the other, a 2,000-mile (3,200-km) journey of great scientific as well as historic importance. One day's sail away from the continent, his specially constructed ship, the *Endurance*, was trapped in pack ice; 281 days later, crushed, the boat sank. The fifty-six-man crew survived as castaways on the ice for five months, after which Shackleton led them some 180 miles to the relative safety of Elephant Island. He and five men then embarked on an epic, 800-mile ocean crossing to South Georgia Island, the nearest inhabited area, in a twenty-two-foot lifeboat called the *James Caird*. An account of this journey follows.

In 1921 Shackleton led a final expedition southward to explore Enderby Land, but he died near the outset and was buried on South Georgia. Shackleton is remembered as perhaps the greatest of the Antarctic explorers, less for his achievements than for his unfaltering leadership and courage under unthinkably grueling circumstances.

As the question remained concerning their rescue, the whaling station on South Georgia seemed the only answer. The ocean south of Cape Horn in the middle of May was known to be the most storm-swept area of water in the world. The men would have to face these conditions in a small, open boat for an anticipated month's voyage.... On Easter Monday, April 24, the men launched the *Stancomb Wills* and loaded her with stores, gear and ballast which would be transferred to the *James Caird* when the heavier boat was launched. The ballast consisted of bags made from blankets and filled with sand. Some 250 pounds of ice was gathered to supply fresh drinking water. As for instruments, they had a sextant, aneroid, prismatic compass, anchor, some charts, and a pair of binoculars.... When the *James Caird* was afloat in the surf, she nearly capsized before the men could steer her clear of the rocks as Vincent and the carpenter were tossed into the water. This was



terrible luck as it would be very difficult to get their clothes dried once underway. But soon they were free from the heavy surf and rocks. The Stancomb Wills came alongside, transferred her load, and headed back to the shore for the next load.... By midday, the *James Caird* was ready for the voyage.... Shackleton, along with Worsley, Crean, McNeish, McCarthy, and Vincent, began a voyage of a lifetime.

The men left behind [on Elephant Island] made a hut from the two remaining boats and scraps of old tent fabric.... Midwinter's Day was celebrated on June 22 with a drink made from hot water, ginger, sugar, and a teaspoon of methylated spirits. At Saturday night concerts, Hussey would play his banjo as the men sang vulgar songs. By the beginning of August, food was growing scarce. They dug up old seal bones and stewed them in sea water along with seaweed, which they found "very tasty." The last of the methylated spirits was drunk on August 12 and from that date forward their toasting was done with hot water and ginger. McIlroy and Macklin amputated the frostbitten toes of Blackborrow's feet by the light of the blubber stove.

Meanwhile, the *James Caird* was making three miles per hour between the icebergs. Worsley described structures and creatures etched into the mighty bergs: "Swans of weird shape pecked at our planks, a gondola steered by a giraffe ran foul of us, which much amused a duck sitting on a crocodile's head. Just then a bear, leaning over the top of a mosque, nearly clawed our sail.... All the strange, fantastic shapes rose and fell in

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stately cadence with a rustling, whispering sound and hollow echoes to the thudding seas...." They were making a fairly good distance each day.... some sixty to seventy miles. But the going was very rough. The sleeping bags became soaked, making it increasingly difficult to find warmth. The boulders taken aboard for ballast had to be shifted continually in order to trim the boat and give access to the pump, which became clogged with hairs from the molting reindeer sleeping bags. The insides of their thighs were rubbed raw by wet clothing which had not been changed for seven months, with seawater increasing the pain.

Meals were regular in spite of the stormy weather.... They had six and a half gallons of fuel for the oil lamp which complemented their supply of candles. On the fourth day out, a severe storm hit them. During the



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afternoon they spotted small bits of wreckage, probably the remains of some unfortunate vessel. The next day the storm was so fierce that they had to put out the sea anchor in order to keep her heading into the sea, take in the double-reefed mainsail and hoist the small jib instead. A thousand different times it appeared the small boat would capsize but she lived on. The south-westerly gale was born above the Antarctic continent and with it came temperatures near zero. The sea spray froze on the boat, coating everything with a heavy layer of ice that the men had to chip away at continually.

By the next day the weight of the ice became a serious problem as she became more like a log than a boat. First the men broke away the spare oars, which were encased in ice and frozen to the sides of the boat, and threw them overboard. Two of the fur sleeping bags, frozen stiff as a board and weighing a good forty pounds each, went next. About 11 a.m. the boat fell into a trough, losing the sea anchor in the process. They had no choice but to set sail and trust that it would hold. They beat the canvas until the bulk of the ice had cracked off and, fortunately, it worked, as the little boat came up to the wind again. Frostbite became a serious problem as large blisters developed on exposed fingers and hands. By the dawn of the seventh day, the wind had subsided... it had been six days since an observation had been made. The Sun came out and the men hung their sleeping bags to the mast and spread their socks and other gear all over the deck. The ice began to melt away as porpoises came blowing alongside the boat. Cape Pigeons and an occasional Stormy Petrel swooped within a few feet of the tiny craft. Wild “snapped” the Sun and determined they had gone over 380 miles and were nearly half-way to South Georgia. The eighth, ninth, and tenth days of the voyage had little to report.

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On the eleventh day (May 5), a tremendous cross-sea developed and at midnight, while Shackleton was at the tiller, a line of clear sky was spotted between the south and south-west. Shackleton wrote, “I called to the other men that the sky was clearing, and then a moment later I realized that what I had seen was not a rift in the clouds but the



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white crest of an enormous wave. During twenty-six years’ experience of the ocean in all its moods I had not encountered a wave so gigantic. It was a mighty upheaval of the ocean, a thing quite apart from the big white-capped seas that had been our tireless enemies for many days. I shouted ‘For God’s sake, hold on! It’s got us.’ Then came a moment of suspense that seemed drawn out into hours. White surged the foam of the breaking sea around us. We felt our boat lifted and flung forward like a cork in breaking surf. We were in a seething chaos of tortured water; but somehow the boat lived through it, half full of water, sagging to the dead weight and shuddering under the blow. We bailed with the energy of men fighting for life, flinging the water over the sides with every receptacle that came to our hands, and after ten minutes of uncertainty we felt the boat renew her life beneath us.” The cooking stove was floating around in the bottom of the boat and portions of their last rations seemed to soak everything. It was 3 a.m. before the stove was finally functional again. The next day, May 6, Worsley determined that they were not more than a hundred miles from the northwest corner of South Georgia.... Thirst took possession of them. Their mouths were dry and tongues were swollen. On the morning of May 8, about 10 o’clock, a little bit of kelp was passed. An hour later two birds were seen sitting on a big mass of kelp, and at 12:30 p.m., McCarthy caught a glimpse of the black cliffs of South Georgia, just fourteen days after departing Elephant Island.

They looked for a landing place but the presence of blind rollers proved the existence of uncharted reefs along the coast. Here and there were rocks close to the surface and over them great waves broke, spouting thirty to forty feet in the air. Night was drawing near and despite their craving for water, there was no choice but to wait until the following morning to make shore. At 5 a.m. the wind shifted to the northwest and increased to one of the worst hurricanes ever experienced by Shackleton, and when dawn appeared, no land was in sight. At 1 p.m. land was once again sighted but no safe landing place. It was not until dawn arrived on the morning of May 10 that they sighted an indentation which they thought was King Haakon Bay.... That afternoon, after tacking five times into the strong wind, between angry reefs and great glaciers on both sides, they made it through the small entrance into the wide mouth of the bay.... The entrance was so small that they had to take in the oars but in the gathering darkness, the *James Caird* ran on a swell and touched the beach. At 2 a.m. on the first night ashore, Shackleton woke everyone, shouting, “Look out boys, look out! Hold on! It’s going to break on us!” It was a nightmare.... Shackleton thought the black snow-capped cliff above them was a giant wave.



Unfortunately, the men had landed on the unpopulated side of the island. A seventeen-mile journey over South Georgia's mountains and glaciers to the Stromness whaling station awaited them, an effort no one had ever accomplished. McNeish and Vincent were too weak to attempt the trek so Shackleton left them in the care of MaCarthy. On May 15, Shackleton, Crean, and Worsley set out on their adventure. They climbed over icy slopes, snowfields, and glaciers up to an altitude of 4,500 feet. Since they had no sleeping bags or tent, it was essential to reach a lower elevation before night set in. They managed to descend 900 feet in two or three minutes by sliding, like children, down a snowy slope. A meal was had

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at 6 p.m., after which they plodded along in nearly complete darkness for at least an hour. About 8 p.m. a full moon appeared from behind jagged peaks, lighting their pathway. By midnight they were once again at an elevation of about 4,000 feet. After 1 a.m., the stove was started again, and hot food renewed their energy.... Their high hopes were soon shattered as crevasses warned that they were on another glacier.... Shackleton knew there was no glacier in Stromness and realized it must be Fortuna Glacier. Back they turned.... At 5 a.m. they were at the foot of the rocky spurs of the range. The men were exhausted as they sat down under the lee of a rock, and wrapped their arms around each other to keep themselves warm. Within a minute, Worsley and Crean were asleep, but Shackleton realized that it would be "disastrous if we all slumbered together, for sleep under such conditions merges into death." After five minutes rest, Shackleton woke them up, told them they had slept half an hour, and gave the command to begin again. They were so stiff that for the first 300 yards they couldn't bend their knees. A jagged line of peaks loomed before them, the ridge that separated them from Stromness Bay. They went through a gap in the ridge at 6 a.m. with anxious hearts and weary bodies. While Worsley and Crean started the cooker, Shackleton climbed a ridge above them in order to get a better look at the land below them. At 6:30 a.m. Shackleton thought he heard the sound of a steam whistle calling the men from their beds at the whaling station. Shackleton descended to the others and told them to watch the chronometer for seven o'clock as this would be the time the whalers would be called to work; right to the minute the steam whistle sounded. Never had they heard a sweeter sound.



“Boys, this snow-slope seems to end in a precipice, but perhaps there is no precipice. If we don’t go down we shall have to make a detour of at least five miles before we reach level going. What shall it be?” They both replied at once, “Try the slope.” They plodded downwards to 2,000 feet above sea level, where they came upon a steep gradient of blue ice. It took two hours to cut and rope their way down another 500 feet.

Eventually they landed on a plateau 1,500 feet above the sea, and by noon they were well up the slope on the other side of the bay, with one more ridge between them and the settlement. Shackleton was leading the way over a plateau when suddenly he found himself up to his knees in water, quickly sinking deeper through the snow. They spread-eagled to distrib-

ute their weight and soon discovered they were on top of a small lake.

After lying still for a few moments, the men got to their feet and delicately walked 200 yards to a rise that indicated the edge of the lake. At 1:30 p.m. they climbed round the final ridge and saw a little whaling boat entering the bay 2,500 feet below.

They hurried forward and spotted the whaling factory and tiny figures wandering about. The men paused to shake hands and congratulate each other.

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The only possible pathway down the icy mountainside seemed to be a stream flowing to the sea below. Down they went through the icy water, wet to their waist, shivering and tired. Then their ears heard an unwelcome sound: the stream ended in a thirty-foot waterfall with impassable ice-cliffs on both sides. Too tired to look for another way down, they fastened their rope around a rock and slowly lowered Crean, who was the heaviest, into the waterfall. He completely disappeared and came out the bottom gasping for air. Shackleton went next and Worsley, the most nimble member of the party, went last. They had dropped the logbook, adze, and cooker before going over the edge and once on solid ground, the items were retrieved, the only items brought out of the Antarctic, “which we had entered a year and a half before with well-found ship, full equipment, and high hopes. We had ‘suffered, starved and triumphed, grovelled down yet grasped at glory, grown bigger in the bigness of the whole.’ We had seen God in His splendours, heard the text that Nature renders. We had reached the naked soul of man.”

Shivering with cold, they set off for the whaling station, now just a mile and a half away. They tried to straighten themselves up a little bit before



entering the station, but they were truly a sight to behold. Their beards were long, their hair matted, their clothes tattered and filthy.... They came to the wharf where the man in charge was asked if Mr. Sorlle (the manager) was in the house.

“Yes,” he said as he stared at us.

“We would like to see him,” said I.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“We have lost our ship and come over the island,” I replied.

“You have come over the island?” he said in a tone of entire disbelief.

The man went towards the manager’s house and we followed him.... Mr. Sorlle came out to the door and said, “Well?”

“Don’t you know me?” I said.

“I know your voice,” he replied doubtfully. “You’re the mate of the Daisy.”

“My name is Shackleton,” I said.

Immediately he put out his hand and said, “Come in. Come in.”

The three men waiting under the upturned *James Caird* were picked up the next day, and the following day Shackleton, Worsley, and Crean left for Elephant Island on the Norwegian whaler *Southern Sky*. Pack ice forced this boat to turn back, as well as the next rescue vessel, a Uruguayan trawler. With money donated by British and Chilean residents Shackleton then chartered a schooner out of Punta Arenas, which was stopped by engine trouble. Shackleton finally approached Elephant Island in the Chilean steamer *Yelcho*. “Are you all well?” he shouted to Wild from the bow of the ship. Wild replied, “All safe, all well!” and the Boss replied, “Thank God!” They had survived for 105 lonely days.

Thanks to Gary Pierson, from whose account (available at www.south-pole.com) this story is excerpted.