Desperate Journey; Philately of the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition

by Steve Pendleton

Throughout history there have been many treks, some undertaken against incredible odds. The goal? Simple survival. Sometimes they are successful; sometimes not. The march and ultimate victory over a superior Persian force made by 10,000 Greek warriors at the battle of Marathon in 490 B.C. led to Herodotus’ masterpiece of historic writing. Robert Falcon Scott’s disastrous 1912 attempt to be the first expedition to journey to the South Pole created a legend of heroic failure.

Yet, for pure audacity and the victorious end to an incredible gamble, no trek can match the rescue journey undertaken by Sir Ernest Shackleton in the Antarctic in 1914–1917. It was my privilege to retrace this adventure — although in the opposite direction — in October 2013. We sailed aboard the tiny expedition ship Ushuaia, with only forty passengers. I can say that the journey, even today, was no picnic. We hit a Force 6 storm in the Scotia Sea and later barely avoided a Force 10. I learned that I do not seem to suffer from seasickness. (Of course, I had a patch, which worked even when the ship was heeling at about a 20-degree angle.) Luckily, those among you who do not wish to climb into a bobbing zodiac life raft and cruise the ice-filled seas can follow Shackleton’s story through a number of stamps and covers.

The Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition

Sir Ernest H. Shackleton (1874–1922) was a veteran Antarctic explorer. He had gone with Scott to the Ross Sea in 1901–1904; a few years later he led his own expedition to reach the South Pole, 1907–1909. They got within ninety miles of their goal when he realized they had to turn back or starve. That was the beginning of the Shackleton legend: care for his men over glory. His portrait continues to appear on the stamps of many nations, particularly those touching on the Antarctic regions: Ross Dependency, Chile, Falkland Islands Dependencies, British Antarctic Territory, Australian Antarctic Territory, and South Georgia.

After the success of Amundsen in his 1911 quest to be the first to reach the South Pole — and the tragic loss of the Scott Expedition — the “Boss” (as his men later nicknamed him) needed a new goal. He settled on an audacious idea: leading the first crossing of the Antarctic continent from the Weddell Sea to the Ross Sea. Shackleton was able to secure an old sailing ship that the explorer renamed Endurance. Originally named Polaris, it had been built to take polar bear hunting parties to sites in the Arctic. Arrangements were made for a second ship, the Aurora, to sail to the Ross Sea where it would meet and resupply the main expedition when it had completed the crossing.

It was a hurly-burly of fund-raising, finding sponsors, and filling crew spaces. Shackleton placed a now-famous ad in The Times:


Nearly 5,000 men applied. His London office buzzed with visitors.
Somewhat strangely, Shackleton did not use philately in his search for money, although during his 1907–1909 expedition he served as Postmaster and had arranged for a stamp to be overprinted “King Edward VII Land” (New Zealand Scott 121a). Due to bad weather, however, the expedition actually landed at Victoria Land and the stamp was never released to the public. This means that philatelic mementos of the 1914–1917 expedition itself are extremely rare.

The centenary of the expedition’s departure from England in November 1913 was commemorated in a six-stamp set issued by British Antarctic Territory (BAT) in November 2013 (Scott number not yet assigned). The first three stamps in the set are valued at 65p, the second three at 75p. The first stamp shows a picture of the Boss and his wife Emily on deck. The second shows a group of expedition members identified as: How, Barr, Irwin, Macloed [sic — should be Macleod], and Macaulay. The third shows Lt. Mackintosh and Shackleton’s second-in-command, Frank Wild. The fourth stamps shows the scene at Millwall docks in London as the Endurance departed. Shackleton, alone and in naval uniform, is shown on the fifth stamp. The final stamp, fittingly, shows the Endurance as she sets sail.

There are several stamps that show the Endurance at sea. Falkland Island Dependencies issued a definitive stamp in its 1954 ships issue (Scott 1L27). The Endurance also can be seen on Australian Antarctic Territory Scott L45, issued as part of a 1974–1981 set featuring polar exploration vessels. British Antarctic Territory released a stamp showing Shackleton and Endurance (Scott 56) as part of its 1975–1980 Polar Explorers and Their Crafts issue. The ship also can be found on a miniature sheet commemorating the Rescue of Shackleton Expe-
dition issued by Chile in 1991 (Scott 960d). The 1995 Ross Dependency set honoring Antarctic Explorers included one depicting Shackleton and the Endurance (Scott L350). And in 2000 the Falkland Islands issued a set of three stamps honoring Shackleton, two of which featured the Endurance (Scott 758, 759). The first showed it off Caird Coast (a part of the southeast coast of the Weddell Sea); the second showed one of the iconic night photographs of the ship trapped in pack ice.

Very little postal history survives from this expedition. There are a few covers addressed to the members, sent to intercept the ship at Buenos Aires. It also was during a stop in Buenos Aires that, along with the mail, the expedition picked up a stowaway: a 19-year-old Welshman named Perce Blackborow. He is shown on a stamp from South Georgia’s 2011 Pets issue, along with the ship’s cat, Mrs. Chippy (later discovered to be a male) (Scott 420). Sir Ernest himself is shown with a sled dog puppy in the same set (Scott 421).

After a stop at South Georgia, the Endurance sailed for the Weddell Sea. The plan was to break through the notorious ice pack there and land the expedition on the continent itself. From there they would march across the icecap to the Ross Sea.

I have only experienced the Weddell in its northern-most reaches, but the immense icebergs we encountered were enough for me to have the utmost respect for Shackleton’s attempt.

I have only experienced the Weddell in its northern-most reaches, but the immense icebergs we encountered were enough for me to have the utmost respect for Shackleton’s attempt. It is a place that usually has far more ice than any other Antarctic waters. Often the pack never clears out. It is also extremely rare that any ship can reach the Antarctic coast in this area.

By February 22, 1915 the ship had attained is farthest southern position — tantalizingly close to land. However, shortly thereafter they became entrapped in the ice, as shown on Falkland Islands 759. Shackleton had prepared for this possibility. Expedition photographer Frank Hurley took a number of classic images of the ship in the ice — some at night, lit by hundreds of lights strung along the masts and all timed to light at once (South Georgia 31 and BAT 350). Kennels for the sled dogs were set up on the ice and they were kept in training (BAT 361–363). No one knew that, in the end, all the animals would have to be humanely destroyed.

For about eight months the ship remained frozen in place. The men busied themselves with tasks to enhance the expedition supplies. They also had soccer competitions, helped Hurley make photographs, and even held variety shows. Nonetheless, they remained aware of the precariousness of their position. The ice continued to tighten its hold on the ship, and on October 26, 1915, the dreaded order came — abandon ship.

As the ice pushed against the ship’s hull, the Endurance heeled to one side and began to collapse under the pressure. Eventually all that was left was a tangle of wreckage on the ice. This scene is shown on BAT 285 and Falkland Islands 759. The men erected temporary shelters on the pack (shown on BAT 286) and waited and watched as the remains of the Endurance slipped under the pack. They were alone.

Since no one knew where they were, the only hope of survival was to haul their remaining gear and the ship’s lifeboats manually across hundreds of miles on the Weddell ice pack.
to open water. For more than five months the men pulled three craft, always towards the north. Finally, in April 1916 they came to the end of the pack. But now they were faced with another dilemma — where to go? The only human habitation within hundreds of miles was the summer whaling station at Deception Island. There was, however, one piece of land more or less within reach — Elephant Island.

Elephant Island

In three journeys to the Antarctic, I have seen some chilling places. So far, however, none has matched the hostility I felt at Elephant Island. This is a fairly large island to the east of the main South Shetland chain. It is almost completely surrounded by huge cliffs and glaciers running down to the sea from a mountainous interior. This place is so unfriendly to man that no scientific station has ever been established here (although the Brazilians did erect two rescue huts). Even after the Shackleton expedition it remained relatively unexplored. It was not until two British Joint Services Expeditions (1970–1971 and 1976–1977) ventured there that the interior was mapped.

After leaving the pack, the three lifeboats sighted the eastern cape of Elephant Island on April 15, 1916. They rowed along the northern coastline, searching for a suitable refuge. They finally came on a small
beach, but it was unsuitable because it was vulnerable to being inundated by large waves. Rowing farther west, they rounded a small point, later called Cape Wild. Here, on April 17, 1916, land was reached at last.

Almost a century later, we also sailed into the tiny bay. There is a very small beach, much eroded since Shackleton’s day. In fact, the beach today is really too dangerous to land on unless you have completely calm waters — which doesn’t happen often. The bay is otherwise completely surrounded by ice-covered black cliffs. We cruised along the cliffs in our zodiacs, coming almost within touching distance of the rocks. We got close enough to the landing site to see, rather incongruously, a statue erected there.

As you might expect, postal history from Elephant Island is pretty scanty. Obviously, Shackleton’s men had no way of sending mail. It was not until the two Joint Services Expeditions in the 1970s that mail originating on the island became available to collectors. Since then such mail usually comes from visiting ships. Occasionally there might be an Elephant Island cachet, but usually the documentation is a notation on the cover such as the one I made during our visit.

For the expedition’s men, however, the landing must have seemed like a godsend after so many months of ice and open water. But Shackleton faced one more almost insurmountable problem. There was still no way of letting anyone know where they were. Whaling ships would not be arriving at Deception Island for several more months. Shackleton realized that there was only one possible solution — he had to sail to the whaling stations on South Georgia for help.

The Journey to South Georgia

The sturdiest of the lifeboats, the James Caird, was selected for the task. First, however, it had to be prepared for the long sea journey. Small masts were installed and the boat was “decked” over with canvas. Shackleton selected five other men to accompany him. The boat was only twenty-three feet long, and a photograph of her launch from Elephant Island shows that with the decking, oars, etc., there was barely room for the six-man crew.

While the Caird was being prepared, those who would re-
main overturned the two remaining boats to form the basis of a shelter. The resulting space became known as “The Snuggery,” for it was surely that. Frank Wild was selected to head this group, with the primary mission of keeping up morale. In this he was remarkably adept. It was his fourth expedition to the Antarctic in fifteen years. Wild would serve on a total of five polar expeditions:

- 1901–04 *Discovery* Expedition with Robert Falcon Scott
- 1907–09 *Nimrod* Expedition with Ernest Shackleton
- 1911–14 Mawson/Aurora Expedition with Douglas Mawson
- 1914–17 *Endurance* Expedition with Ernest Shackleton
- 1921–22 *Quest* Expedition with Ernest Shackleton

In 2011 South Georgia issued a set of four se-tenant stamps recognizing Wild and the four major expeditions in which he participated and for which he was awarded a four-bar Polar Medal (Scott 439a–442a). And in 2013 an issue from Australian Antarctic Territory marking the centennial of the Mawson Expedition included one honoring Frank Wild as leader of the Western Party of the Expedition (AAT Scott L176).

On April 23, 1916 the *Caird* was launched on its quest, hoping to reach one of the active whaling stations. Despite the fact that South Georgia was 800 miles away and this was the southern winter, Shackleton hoped to reach their goal in about four weeks. The historic image taken by expedition photographer Frank Hurley as the *Caird* was pushed into the surf has appeared on several stamps, notably South Georgia 32 and 386, and BAT 287. Their planned route is shown in South Georgia 33, while the craft under sail can be seen on South Georgia 254–255.

The relatively calm water shown on South Georgia 254, however, is not the norm for the Scotia Sea. When I crossed it, we experienced more typical conditions: about 40 mph winds and a bouncing ship. I can only imagine what it was like for the men of the *Caird*, with ice buildup constantly needing to be chipped away, clothes that were...
never dry, and in constant danger of capsizing as storm waves broke over the tiny vessel. Luck and good seamanship were with them, however, and in an astonishing fifteen days they caught sight of South Georgia. The seas were too rough to attempt a landing, and during the next night hurricane force winds carried them back out of sight of land. They regained the ground lost and on the afternoon of May 10, 1916, despite heavy seas and hidden reefs, they finally managed to ship oars and slip the Caird through a narrow opening into the relative calm of King Haakon Bay. They had made the crossing, but now they were faced with one more hurdle: the bay was on the west coast of the island, the whaling station on the east.

Having spent a week on the eastern shore of South Georgia, I can truthfully say that it is one of the most magnificent but rugged coasts you can imagine. Mountains rise up to 9,000 feet within a few miles of the coast. The few whaling stations located there at the time huddled at the ends of steep fjords. The interior was little known and it was across this unmapped terrain of mountains and glaciers that help lay — some twenty miles away.

Shackleton left three men with the Caird and with two companions, Crean and Worsley, began the final trek to Stromness, one of the whaling stations. For more than thirty hours they struggled across the mountains, knowing one misstep could cause their deaths. The fiftieth anniversary of their heroic trek was commemorated in 1996 by a set of four stamps from South Georgia (Scott 204–207). The crossing also was depicted on South Georgia 296d and 387.

At last, on the morning of May 20, they heard in the distance the sound of a factory whistle. They were at the head of a valley and at the foot of it lay the tiny whaling station of Stromness. The 7 a.m. whistle was blowing to summon the men to work. When the exhausted expedition members staggered into the settlement, they were so filthy that no one recognized them at first. A boat was sent round to King Haakon Bay to rescue the remaining three men and the news of the survival of the expedition was radioed to the rest of the world. The men prepared to return to civilization and Shackleton began to organize a rescue of the men left behind on Elephant Island.

Today, Stromness is a site abandoned for more than fifty years and slowly decaying. Tourists cannot wander into the ruins as there is a lot of exposed asbestos and rusting machinery. However, I was able to see the manager’s villa where Shackleton and his companions were finally welcomed. It is boarded up and getting blasted by the elements. It was snowing when I was there.

**Rescue at Last**

The first rescue attempt was made by a whaler from South Georgia; however, the ice forced the ship to turn back. Another two efforts to reach the
stranded men were blocked by ice or bad weather. Not receiving much help from the British Admiralty, Shackleton went to Puntas Arenas, a Chilean city on the Strait of Magellan. There he managed to persuade the Chilean government to lend him a small tug, the Yelcho.

Although captained by a brave man, Luis Pardo, the vessel was really unsuitable to sail to the Antarctic in the winter; nevertheless, in late August they made the attempt. The Yelcho and her captain appear on stamps from Falkland Islands (Scott 760) and Chile (Scott, 361, 960a-b). Another 1967 issue by Chile (Scott C271), based on Scott 361, shows Captain Pardo beside a map showing Chile's claim to a slice of Antarctica. It is his statue that stands on the beach at Elephant Island, to honor his skill and courage in bringing the tiny rescue tug safely to its destination.

August 30, 1916 was just another cold day on the beach at Elephant Island. Plans were well underway for a desperate attempt of their own. They had been preparing one of the remaining boats to sail along the coast in an effort to reach the whaling station at Deception Island. All they had to do was continue to survive until the weather broke in early October. Some of the men were preparing a soup made from seal backbones. Others were collecting limpets along the shore. Frank Hurley first spotted the rescue ship, and George Marsh alerted the other men, who came running down to the water's edge. Shackleton came ashore in a lifeboat, and swiftly, almost as if they had never been there, the men were transported to the tug. Every man had survived.

And After....

The expedition itself, of course, was considered a failure. However, the successful rescue of the entire expedition, despite the incredible hardships they endured, has entered Antarctic lore as the most dramatic of journeys.

Once the rescue was competed the crew went their separate ways. World War I was raging, and most of the men returned to England and entered military service. Two of them, Alf Cheetham and Tim McCarthy, were killed in action. The last member of the Endurance crew, First Office Greenstreet, died in 1979.

After the war Shackleton returned to South Georgia
aboard the Quest on an expedition to circumnavigate the Antarctic by sea. Eight members of the original Endurance crew signed on with him, among them the ship’s surgeon, Dr. Alexander Macklin. The Quest reached Grytviken, South Georgia on January 4, 1922. It was a beautiful evening, but Shackleton had not been feeling well and Dr. Macklin stopped by his stateroom that night. Shackleton’s last words to his friend, who had repeatedly urged him to slow down, have been widely reported: “You are always wanting me to give up something. What do you want me to give up now?” Minutes later, in the early hours of January 5, Shackleton died of a massive heart attack. He was forty-seven years old.

Although his body began the return journey to England, Lady Shackleton requested that her husband be buried where he loved to be. On March 5, 1922, the great explorer was laid to rest in the Norwegian Lutheran Cemetery in Grytviken, South Georgia. His grave can be seen on FID IL44 and South Georgia 256, 400. A Memorial Cross erected across the bay by members of the Quest can be seen on FID IL43 and South Georgia 296e.

The day after we visited Stromness, we landed at the old whaling station of Grytviken. One of the traditions of visiting tourist ships is for the passengers to gather at the head of The Boss’s grave. Suitable poetry is read, copious amounts of liquor are consumed and the remainder doused on the grave site. I saluted his adventure in a single word: “Indomitable.”

In November 2011 Wild’s ashes, which had long been forgotten, were discovered and re-interred alongside Shackleton’s grave in the whaler’s cemetery on South Georgia. It had been the final wish of Shackleton’s longtime second-in-command.

**Philatelic Note**

The years 2013–2016 comprise the centenary of the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition. If past events are any indication, there will be a number of additional stamps issued by such entities as British Antarctic Territory, South Georgia, and probably Chile in honor of the expedition.

**Acknowledgments**

I am indebted to expedition leader Monika Schillat (from whom I have learned much about the Antarctic in two trips), plus her staff of irrepressible lecturers aboard the good ship Ushuaia.

**References**

**Books:**

**Websites:**

**The Author**

Steve Pendleton, a retired teacher, has collected Antarctica and Pacific and ocean isles for more than thirty years. He has had more than 750 articles published in philatelic and regional magazines.

The Falkland islands Philatelic Bureau recently announced a new South Georgia issue to be released November 5, 2014 in honor of the expedition’s centenary. The twelve stamps recognize three members of the group: Frank Hurley, Frank Worsley and Tom Crean. In addition, the stamps feature many photographs shot during the venture.