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Discovery

Although set in the Antarctic, the greatest adventure of all time began off the coast of Africa, on a steamer carrying British soldiers out to the Anglo-Boer War. This conflict pitted the most powerful empire on earth, Great Britain, against a small nation of a few million Boers and showed that in the twentieth century determined smaller nations might hold their own even against the most powerful nation states.

A chance occurrence signaled the start of this story. An affable and gregarious Anglo-Irish third officer befriended a young soldier, Cedric Longstaff, who was returning to the battlefields. They began a friendship during the long relaxed days at sea that allowed opportunities for pleasant discussions of favorite topics. Hundreds of similar acquaintances grew up on dozens of

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other ships plying the sea lane between England and South Africa, but unlike those other friendships, this one changed the course of Antarctic history.

The young third officer's name was Ernest Shackleton (1874–1922), and although exploring the south polar regions may not yet have entered his mind, other ideas had. He wanted to be famous and he wanted to be wealthy enough to enjoy life. The venue for success was immaterial—politics, literature, or business were all the same to him. Recently he had acquired an additional motivation to seek fame and fortune—he had met the woman he would marry, and he wanted a financially assured future for them both.

Returning from one of his cruises, Shackleton saw a newspaper article describing the National Antarctic Expedition and thought it a possibility for fame and adventure. The newspaper noted that the principal patron of the endeavor was Llewellyn Longstaff, a name Shackleton recognized as that of the father of the man he had befriended en route to South Africa.

Correspondence between the elder Longstaff and Shackleton resulted in Longstaff putting Shackleton's name forth as one of the officers of the ship; the primogenitor of the expedition, Sir Clements R. Markham (1830–1916), had little choice but to agree to naming Shackleton to the expedition. The adventure had begun.

Given the importance of the *Discovery* expedition to Shackleton's personality and career, a brief account

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of it is appropriate here. From the time that Sir Clements became the president of the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) in 1893, he was determined to launch a great national Antarctic expedition, officered and manned by the Royal Navy. Markham had been part of the voyages of the Royal Navy in the Arctic in the nineteenth century and sought to repeat what he perceived as great successes in the north polar regions with new adventures in the South.

Markham was a determined and stubborn old man. Although few would argue today that the British navy's activities in the Arctic in the nineteenth century were successful, Markham believed that polar work was a superb training ground for naval officers, and this proposal matched his ideas about romantic exploration. To use naval personnel was central to his plan, but by the time the crew of the *Discovery* had been assembled, several key players were not from the Royal Navy.

Two individuals stand out most clearly: Albert B. Armitage (1864–1943) and Shackleton. The choice of both was influenced by wealthy patrons—the second largest donor, newspaper magnate Alfred Harmsworth, recommended Armitage—and Markham again acquiesced to the wishes of those who had funded the endeavor. Armitage was appointed pilot, a title that moved him out of control of the ship's day-to-day affairs in favor of a Royal Navy lieutenant, Charles Royds (1876–1930), while Shackleton, the other non-naval man, was appointed third officer.

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The *Discovery* expedition played an important part in making Shackleton a famed explorer. Markham chose Robert Falcon Scott (1868–1912) to lead the *Discovery* expedition, which was to be a largely naval effort with government support, to the south polar regions.

Scott was to cooperate with contemporaneous Swedish, German, and Scottish national expeditions. In July 1901 Shackleton departed on the *Discovery*, which had been built specifically for this endeavor. The expedition was to be away only two summers and a winter since lack of funding prohibited a longer stay.

From the beginning of the voyage Shackleton proved an immensely popular member of the expedition. Scott put Shackleton's experience in sailing ships as well as his skills in handling cargo to good use. Always willing to take on whatever task was at hand, Shackleton impressed his captain with his talents and his affability.

The *Discovery* sailed to McMurdo Sound and established a base at Hut Point on Ross Island. A range of scientific work was begun that fall and continued through the winter.

The major event of the *Discovery* expedition was an attempt on the South Pole. Scott planned to lead this trip himself and chose as his companions Edward A. Wilson (1872–1912), who became one of the legendary figures of the Heroic Era of Antarctic exploration (1901–22), and his young third officer, Shackleton.

The trio set out 2 November 1902, accompanied

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for the first week by a support party. When that group turned back the three men were on their own, assisted in their southward trek only by eighteen dogs.

Much has been written about Scott's lack of skill in dog sledging. Little else needs to be said other than that he put Shackleton, who had never worked with dogs, in charge of the animals. Still, the dogs pulled the sledges southward, assisted by the men who were manhauling, whereby humans tied ropes around their bodies, over the shoulder and waist usually, and attached a line to a sledge. By this means they pulled the supplies and equipment over the ice.

Nineteenth-century British Arctic expeditions had used manhauling, and Markham believed it to be the "true British way." That humans, without the modern freeze-dried foodstuffs of today, could not haul sufficient provisions for an assault on the pole—a journey of more than 1,400 miles from winter quarters to the pole and back—was unknown to Markham. When the dogs died, in all likelihood of exhaustion and poisoning from their dried fish diet, the three men struggled on, ironically glad to be rid of the dogs. Since they drove the dogs ineptly, the animals did not perform well.

Scott was determined to get as far as he could before 31 December 1902, the date he fixed in his mind for the last southern camp. Surfaces were so bad that for a month Scott, Shackleton, and Wilson had to relay, pulling one of the two sledges until lunch and

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then returning to fetch the other to bring it up to the camping place for the night.

The work was exhausting and the food insufficient. Their basic meal was a thick concoction of pemmican, a fatty meat soup. Inadequately nourished by their food, the men first used up their body fat. Continuing on, their bodies began to consume themselves for fuel. They were cold, suffering from exposure, and as the days wore on their minds fixated on food. In addition, they were dehydrated because scarce fuel supplies limited the amount of water they could melt for drinking.

By mid-December their appearance was gaunt. Each step was a struggle, yet they pushed on for “King and Country,” only to have another disaster overtake them: scurvy. Even though in the eighteenth century Captain James Cook (1728–79) had sailed around the world and made voyages to Antarctica without a scurvy problem, the disease was still poorly understood in the late nineteenth century. At the time Scott sailed, many scientists believed that scurvy was caused by a toxin in badly canned meat; regrettably Scott, Wilson, and Shackleton labored under this erroneous information.

By late December 1902 all three men showed signs of scurvy, but Shackleton was clearly the most seriously afflicted. Wilson, a physician, noted the problem and reported it to Scott. After changing their diet from what the captain perceived to be tainted food, all three seemed to improve.

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Scott was overly optimistic, and when the trio turned north from 82°16' S, Shackleton's health problems worsened: he was coughing blood and suffering from shortness of breath. Shackleton's health continued to deteriorate. Scott prudently stopped his lieutenant from pulling the sledge. The northbound party rigged a sail in a following wind to help propel their sledge; at one point Shackleton rode on the vehicle both to help steer it and to rest.

Shackleton's health waxed and waned on the way back to the ship. By the time they returned to the *Discovery*, all three men were in very bad shape, but Shackleton was the worst. Scott was up and about fairly quickly, while Shackleton recovered more slowly, and Wilson was plagued for a month with a leg ailment related to the scurvy.

Even though Shackleton appeared to be recovering, Scott invalidated him home on the relief ship in January 1903. This change in fortune—to be sent home on Scott's opinion that Shackleton's constitution was not up to the rigors of polar work—was the defining moment in Shackleton's life. He returned to England in 1903 determined to prove not only that he was *fit* to survive but that he could *succeed* in the Antarctic. Shackleton had found his goal in life—to lead an Antarctic expedition. His route to fame and fortune was now settled: he lacked only the financial wherewithal to make his dream a reality.