

A few days ago I sat at the small Formica desk that comprises the Reference Library reading section of the Scott Polar Research Institute in Cambridge. I was wearing white gloves and leafing carefully through two small and fragile loose leaf books, one in fact an actual diary and the other a cheap notebook acting as a diary with the dates written in pencil at the top of each page. As I turned the pages it was hard to keep them from coming away from the fragile remains of the binding. I read quickly, almost furtively, particularly nervous as I was almost certainly the first person to read these pencilled fragments in their entirety for almost forty years and was conscious of the extraordinary journey that they had traveled to reach to the Institute, for what I held in my hands were the diaries kept by Sir Ernest Shackleton on his legendary 'Endurance' expedition from 1914 to 1916. These diaries were long believed lost, indeed Shackleton's biographer the distinguished Polar Historian Roland Huntford told me that he believed that they had been burnt. Their survival is a tale almost as dramatic as that which the diaries themselves tell. I have spent the last two years buried in diaries of one kind or another researching and writing about the 'Endurance' expedition in preparation for a film which I have written and directed. Looking for a project after completing the film 'Longitude' with Jeremy Irons and Michael Gambon based on Dava Sobel's best selling book, I was immediately drawn to the idea of telling the story of Shackleton's legendary journey.

In recent years one major US, and two British exhibitions, at the National Maritime Museum and at Dulwich College (where Shackleton was educated), together with a best selling account of the 'Endurance' expedition written by Caroline Alexander have conspired to bring Shackleton increasingly back to public attention. There is even a book published in America extolling the virtues of his 'managerial techniques' for the benefit of the modern businessman. The basic facts of the story are well known. Shackleton set out with a party of twenty-seven expedition members and ships crew in the summer of 1914. His intention was to lead the first expedition to cross the entire Antarctic Continent. The Norwegian Amundsen had won the so-called 'race' to the Pole two years before, when Captain Scott's Expedition had tragically died in the attempt. Two years before that Shackleton had failed to reach the Pole when he made the dramatic decision to turn back less than ninety miles from his goal believing that he could not otherwise ensure the survival of his men. Thus on 4th of August 1914 Shackleton was aboard the SS Endurance sailing down the Thames as war was declared with Germany. He telegraphed Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, offering the services of his, Churchill responded with a single word: "Proceed". Aged forty Shackleton knew that this was his last chance to achieve a goal that had long eluded him, he and his men traveled to Buenos Aires and then on to a whaling station in South Georgia, the last outpost of human habitation before the desolate Antarctic Continent, which they reached in October of the same year.

Winter in Europe is summer in the Antarctic, and the moment when the frozen Weddell Sea begins to break up and allow access to the 'mainland'. The Antarctic Summer of 1914 however was not a typical one, the whalers warned him that there was little sign of the ice breaking up and that the summer thaw was looking unlikely.

However with rumours of German battleships in the seas off South America, Shackleton knew that if he turned back his chance would be lost forever. He sailed on towards the frozen sea heading for Vahsel Bay where he intended to establish a base camp for the actual crossing of the pole. He was never to reach his destination, after struggling through the treacherous ice flows for nearly nine hundred miles his ship the Endurance finally became stuck in the early weeks of 1915. Although she was to travel in grip of the ice a further four hundred miles, she was never again to move under her own power. Finally in October 1915, almost exactly a year after he had left Buenos Aires, Shackleton was forced to abandon the Endurance and take to the ice a few days before she was finally crushed by the ice floes and sank.

Miles from land and facing the prospect of the ice breaking up as a second Antarctic Summer approached, Shackleton led his twenty-seven crew members across the frozen sea, dragging what supplies they could and the three 'lifeboats' from his ship. The boats proved very difficult to move across the heavily ridged surface of the ice, but Shackleton knew that without them the men could not survive when the ice finally broke up. Living by what they could kill in the way of seals and penguins the expedition spent six-month living on the uncertain ice, until on April 9th 1916 they finally launched the boats. Despite being weakened by hunger and exhaustion they managed to row out of the ice and across ninety miles of open water to the nearest land, the desolate and uninhabited Elephant Island. When they arrived on the narrow strip of inaccessible beach, now known as Point Wild, after Shackleton's loyal second in command, Shackleton quickly realised that with no hope of rescue his men would not survive long. He decided to take five men in one of the small boats, named the James Caird after one of the expedition's financier's, and attempt the eight hundred and sixty mile journey back to South Georgia to seek rescue.

The seventeen-day journey across the most dangerous seas on the planet is regarded as unequalled in the history of open boat seamanship. Arriving on May 10th Shackleton was found himself on the wrong side of the mountainous island. Leaving three men behind, too exhausted to travel, he set out on foot with Tom Crean, a veteran of Scott's expeditions, and the Endurance's New Zealand captain, Frank Worsely. None of the party had ever climbed a mountain before but together they became the first men ever to make the crossing of South Georgia. They finally reached the whaling station of Stromness on 20th May 1916, eighteen months after they had sailed from the Island. It took several weeks to get back to Elephant Island but Shackleton was finally to achieve his ambition of getting every single one of his men back alive. Ironically, while he had fought so hard to keep these twenty-seven men from death, millions were being slaughtered in the name of civilization on the battlefields of Europe and most of the Expedition members quickly found there way to the front line. For the past eighteen months I have been following, occasionally too literally, in Shackleton footsteps, even to the extent of finding myself this summer trapped in a frozen sea with a crew of over a hundred actors and technicians. Fortunately I eventually broke free, but that is another story. The beginning of this adventure however was more literary. Although there were several authoritative

accounts of the expedition, none were detailed enough for the purposes of the film, however Shackleton had contractually require his expedition members to keep diaries and retaining the copyright himself as part of the financing mechanism of the expedition. Miraculously most of these diaries survived the long journey and they formed the basis of my research for the film.

No one diary quite told the whole truth about any one incident each offered complementary slivers of information and together it was possible to piece together the events of each day of the expedition. But there were gaps, one of these was the sailing crew of the *Endurance*. These men who included a young welsh stowaway and an American disguised as a Canadian, did not keep diaries. They had been hired to deliver the expedition to the Pole and depart, but instead found themselves becoming an integral part of the expedition. Eventually I found myself in correspondence with seventeen different sets of relatives including several of these seamen some of whom produced unpublished accounts held in their families and never before seen. However amidst all this research the obvious question was the whereabouts the diary of the expedition leader himself. It was known that he had kept one because James Fisher in his 1958 biography quotes from the diaries and took detailed notes from them. However his interest was in the whole of Shackleton's life not just the single expedition that I was researching and the details were frustratingly brief. There was also, of course, Shackleton's own account of the expedition in his book 'South', but this was largely ghost written and in any case is a rather impersonal account of the events which offered few clues to the man himself.

Neither Caroline Alexander whose 1998 book 'Endurance' expertly chronicles the expedition nor Roland Huntford Shackleton's biographer could offer any clue as to what had happened to them. Huntford told me that he understood that the diaries had been left to Cecily Shackleton (the explorer's daughter) and it was his belief that she must have burnt them. This of course raised the question why? What secret did they hold? Was there a further scandal yet to be understood? Already the portrait that was emerging as the subject of the film was a complex one. A man with a young family and few resources, struggling between the demands of a wife whom he loved, and a powerful American mistress, forced to raise the money for his expedition from private sponsorship in the teeth of a scientific establishment suspicious of his motives. His efforts threatened by the scandal of his younger brother Frank who in that same year was sentenced to fifteen months hard labour for financial fraud as the country moved with a slow inevitability towards world war. What more was there to learn?

The mystery of the diary started to obsess me. If they had survived the expedition (which they demonstrably had) why would they be destroyed unless they contained some information that someone wanted to suppress, and yet if this was the case why had Fisher, who had received total access to them, not reported anything? While Fisher, a friend of the Shackleton family, did draw a veil over some matters that he did not consider appropriate (Shackleton's mistresses and his brother's criminality for

example) it is unlikely that he would have covered up a scandal that was part of the expedition story. I started with the wills, which were easily obtainable from the Probate Department. Shackleton who died of a heart attack in 1922 left his estate to his wife Emily. When Emily herself died after a series of strokes in 1936 her will, dated 28th July 1925, dictated that her assets be transformed into cash and a trust set up to benefit her three children: Cecily, Raymond and Edward. Each child was to be an allowance until they were thirty at which point the boys would be entitled to claim their share of the fund. Cecily's share however was to remain in trust and in the event of her dying childless the trust would revert to her brothers.

At the time of their mother's death the three children were still living together in the family home near Hampton Court. Living with them on an occasional basis was the daughter of Emily Shackleton's first cousin Rena Dodds, who was a friend of Cecily and had helped nurse Emily in her final weeks of illness. When the children moved apart to live in separate flats in London, Rena stayed with Cecily and was to remain with her for the rest of her life. As there was clearly no sense in dividing their father's effects it seems to have been informally agreed that Cecily should be their custodian. Certainly it was to her that researches, Fisher included, applied for access to his papers. Cecily herself died in October 1957, unmarried and childless her will, which I also applied for, shows that she left her estate to Rena, although it again makes no direct reference to any family memorabilia. From this point on the diaries and other letters and papers seems to disappear from sight.

There was however one curious clue in an account written by a member of the James Caird Society, a distinguished assembly of Shackleton experts and enthusiasts. Margaret Slythe, one time archivist of the Dulwich College Library had consulted Lord Edward Shackleton in 1981 in connection with a proposed exhibition at the College. He informed her that a number of articles and documents were in the possession of his late sister's companion, Rena, and that he had tried repeatedly to gain access to them but had been denied by Rena. She finally, he explained, refused to speak with him further. He suggested however that Margaret Slythe might like to try and speak to Rena herself and gave her Rena's address. Slythe wrote to Rena and received a courteous reply suggesting they meet for lunch at the nearby Hyde Park Hotel. "She was there before me, and immediately in charge of the occasion," Slythe later wrote. Over a lunch at which she was clearly enjoying herself Rena produced what appeared to be, "a collection of somewhat shabby personal keepsakes, but quite soon I realised they were artefacts of the highest and most significant quality... diamond pins, ornamented sashes, a gold mason's brooch.... and a few books of varying sizes filled with Sir Ernest familiar writing which I took to be diaries".

However as predicted, Rena refused to lend anything to the Dulwich Exhibition, but showed no animosity towards the family declaring that she felt that the collection should go to a museum named after Shackleton, not one named after Scott. "As we parted", Slythe writes, "she asked me to order a taxi and pay the driver the fare to her flat and a generous tip, and to tell him to come and find and page her at the hotel".

This account suggested that the diaries had existed in 1981 and there appeared to be no intention then to destroy them. The final will that I obtained was that of Rena Dodds herself who died in November 1999. The will was written in 1982 shortly after the above meeting, it named four beneficiaries, but again made no specific mention of any memorabilia. It was by now late February, I had finished writing the script of the film called simply 'Shackleton' and Kenneth Branagh had agreed to take the principle role. My office at home was pile high with photocopied diaries and handwritten accounts old newspaper cuttings, but my attention was now occupied by the complex planning requirements of the film schedule which was due to begin in May. However I could not quite let go of the mystery of the diaries and bit by bit as my relationship grew stronger with the parties involved the final pieces of the puzzle began to fall into place. It was in fact the legal firm acting as Rena Dodds executors who gave me the first solid evidence that the diaries existed, making some educated guesses they were understandably reluctant to deny outright their existence. Time however was running out and I was very keen to see them before I started shooting.

Armed with more information I went back to those intimately connected to the affair and I finally learned that the whereabouts of the diaries was known, and in fact they had been under my nose the whole time because they were held in trust at the Scott Polar Institute where they had been there for over a year. It was however a condition of their remaining there that their existence could not be revealed to any outside party while a dispute over ownership was settled. The dispute was a complex one and was in two parts. . The Shackleton family, who unanimously wished to place the collection in the hands of the Scott Polar Research Institute where they would be permanently available to both public scrutiny and to scientific research, felt that the collection was not legitimately Cecily's to leave to Rena and therefore not Rena's to dispose of. They sought the return of the collection so that it could be preserved intact. Sir Ernest himself had indicated his intentions when in 1920 at a meeting to discuss the creation of a Polar Research Centre he said: "Anything I can give to the Institute in the way of records, equipments or experiments I shall be very glad to hand over". When they sought Legal opinion however it was suggested that it would be hard to prove their right to ownership after the long period that the items had spent in Rena Dodds possession. Neither the Shackleton family nor the Scott Polar Research Institute was in a position to fund a costly legal case whose outcome was judges at best uncertain.

Rena Dodds executors were charged to represent the interests of her beneficiaries, not those of the Shackleton family, although to complicate matters further one of these beneficiaries was The Hon Alexandra Shackleton, Sir Ernest's granddaughter. Rena Dodds had however left her estate to be divided between four separate parties. If the collection was discounted this led to a series of modest payments. However if the Shackleton were valued on the open market this amount would be dramatically increased. While the majority of Rena's wanted to see the collection preserved and placed on display at the Scott Polar, a minority felt that the collection should be put up for sale and the profits divided between the beneficiaries. This feeling was

strengthened when Sotheby's, asked to value the collection suggested it was worth in excess of a million pounds. While the matter was debated the executors were determined that it was impossible to view the collection and the Scott Polar, according to their terms of it's agreement could not admit its existence. Although I was by now on the edge of starting to shoot I wrote a series of what I hope were persuasive letters to the executors arguing that my reading the diaries could not prejudice the interest of any of their clients. I was politely but firmly refused. Finally filming intervened and I set out on my own Polar expedition with a cast of actors and technicians living and working out of a Norwegian Icebreaker on the East Greenlandic Ice shelf.

We finished shooting in the final days of July and when I returned to London I immediately applied to catch up with news of the dispute. The news was good, reason had prevailed and a compromise plan suggested by the Shackleton family had been agreed. The plan ensured that all the major items of the collection be donated to the Scott Polar Institute and a small selection of artifacts be put up for sale on behalf of the beneficiaries. Everyone was happy, the Scott Polar because they receive a collection of crucial papers, the Shackleton Family who felt that Sir Ernest's wishes have finally been respected and the beneficiaries who stand to gain when the items appear next month at Sotheby's as part of the largest sale of Polar items ever assembled. So could I see them now? No not till the sale is announced I was told. I fought on and finally and graciously I was allowed in to view these two specific articles amongst the mass of papers that due to be released. I picked them up with quite literally trembling hands. Reading them after the filming was complete was very different from reading as a piece of research, most of the days he described I knew very well and many we had stage as part of the film. I had suspected the Shackleton had given up writing his diary early in the expedition, not trusting to setting down his true feelings as the expedition progressed.

This was not in fact the case, there appeared to be long gaps, but the crucial periods, covering the abandonment of the Endurance and the launching of the small boats were covered on a daily basis. Unlike other diarists however the entries were for the most part brief and factual listing wind direction and weather like a ships log. The recurring phrase was 'No news. All cheerful'. Some entries however were more poignant, on 20th Nov 1915, the day the Endurance sank, he writes: "She went today. I was standing by H's sledge at 4.50 saw the funnel dip behind a hummock suddenly – ran up the look out at 5pm she went down by the ????. The stern the cause of all the trouble was the last to go under water. I cannot write about it.... Sunday always seems to be the day on which things happen to us. All cheerful. Cut a ventilation in galley it was so hot." A few weeks later on New Years Eve 1915 three days after the so called McNish revolt when the ships carpenter refused to obey his Captains orders Shackleton writes: "The last day of the old year. May the next one bring us good fortune, a safe deliverance from this anxious time and all good things to those we love so far away. Nothing – this day... Thinking much makes one not desirous of writing much."

But his spirits recover, and two weeks later he writes: "Anxious thinking but AM SURE we will soon come out of it all right. Will be glad to reach Paulet safety soon. All cheerful." A month later however on Jan 26th his weariness is evident:

No news. Seal brought in. Snowing at time.

Waiting.

Waiting.

Waiting.

Rice cakes for lunch.

Six days later the entry is equally brief:

No news. SE winds.

Fine weather.

Patience.

Patience.

Patience.

The entries cease as the ice starts to break up in the early spring of 1916 and the men take to the boats. The final entry is perhaps the most poignant dated 23rd April 1916 Elephant Island. It is addressed to Frank Wild, his second in command, and reads:

Dear Sir. In the event of my not surviving the boat journey to South Georgia you will do your best for the rescue of the party. You are in full command from the time the boat leaves the island, and all hands are under your orders. On your return to England you are to communicate with the committee. I wish you Lees and Hurley to write the book. You watch my interest. In other letters you will find the terms as agreed for lecturing. You to do England Great Britain and Continent, Hurley the USA. I have every confidence in you and always have had. May God prosper your work and life. You can carry my love to my people and say I tried my best.
Yours sincerely EH Shackleton.

There was no new revelation in the pages that I read but I recognised immediately the man that we had spent the preceding months trying to capture on film. We need 'heroes' to remind us what we as a race are capable of but we are perhaps fickle in our choices. While Scott's act of 'heroic self sacrifice' satisfied an earlier generation forced to embrace the ultimate sacrifice as the norm. Today Shackleton's independence of spirit, the importance he put on the preservation of the lives of his men, and above all his sheer bloody minded determination not to be beaten makes him I think admirable to us. The Scott Polar Research Institute, which now includes the Shackleton Memorial Library, like many small museums must fight hard for funding. Next year is the eightieth anniversary of Shackleton's death, and I hope that it will be given the resources to appropriately exhibit this remarkable collection which has finally, thanks to the diplomacy of the Institute and perseverance of the Shackleton family, reached it's proper resting place. As a contemporary said of their ancestor: "For scientific leadership give me Scott, for swift and efficient travel give

me Amundsen, but when you are in a hopeless situation, when you're seeing no way out, get down on your knees and pray for Shackleton".