

LOST
IN THE ANTARCTIC

THE
DOOMED VOYAGE
of the ENDURANCE

TOD OLSON

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CHAPTER 1

THE LAST GREAT JOURNEY

Early in 1914, months before the *Endurance* took 28 men 9,000 miles from home, a new sign went up at 4 New Burlington Street in London. It read: IMPERIAL TRANS-ANTARCTIC EXPEDITION. The sign was 3 feet tall and hung at eye level. It stood out in the fashionable neighborhood of jewelry stores and clothing shops. To the wealthy men and women who lived nearby, it may have seemed like a romantic call to adventure.

To Ernest Shackleton it was the business at hand. He didn't like to be confined to an office, but he needed to hire a crew and he had to interview them all somewhere. He had announced the journey in the newspapers—an invitation to spend the next couple of years in the coldest, least populated place on Earth.

Five thousand people responded.

Some of the applicants were lifetime sailors who couldn't



The offices of the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition, open for business.

stand more than a year at a time on dry land. Some were scientists, hoping for a chance to study the strange conditions in a frozen land. Others were drawn by the promise of adventure, of a ripping good tale to tell their kids and grandkids. Still others simply wanted a seaman's job that would pay them decent money for a couple of years.

Shackleton worked closely with his longtime friend and second-in-command, Frank Wild. Together they divided the applications into piles: "Mad," "Hopeless," and "Possible." It was the Possibles who filed through the office on New Burlington Street in the spring of 1914. Rarely did the interviews last longer than five minutes.

When Leonard Hussey walked in the door and sat down, Shackleton was too restless to sit with him. Instead, he paced the floor and talked nonstop. As a meteorologist, Hussey was applying for one of the more important jobs the expedition had to offer. He would attempt to predict the brutal weather on the journey. But his experience hadn't exactly prepared him for blizzards and sub-zero temperatures. He'd spent the last year working in the African desert.

Shackleton didn't seem to care where Hussey had been or what his qualifications were. He walked around for a few minutes, talking more than listening. Finally, he decided he liked Hussey's sense of humor. "Yes, I like you," he declared. "I'll take you."

Reginald James had an equally baffling experience. James applied to be the expedition's physicist, but Shackleton didn't ask a thing about science. He wanted to know instead if James could sing. Not opera, he said, "but I suppose you can shout a bit with the boys?"

Shackleton also asked if James had good circulation. James told him that one of his fingers tended to go numb in the cold. In response, Shackleton asked how attached to that finger James was. Would he mind losing it to frostbite on the way across Antarctica?



To the scientists, the interview process may have seemed like a joke. But Antarctica had taken a lot more than fingers from the humans who dared to travel there. And few people knew more about the dangers than Ernest Shackleton.

When Shackleton was in his twenties, Antarctica was one of the last great mysterious places on Earth. European soldiers and explorers had marched across nearly every other part of the globe. But here was a continent bigger than Europe, and barely anyone had set foot on its shores.

For thousands of years, people had only guessed at its existence. The ancient Greeks knew there was land near

the North Pole, and they decided there had to be a continent in the south to balance out the globe. This legendary place became known as *Terra Australis*, or South Land. In the 1500s, geographers put *Terra Australis* on their maps, even though no one knew for sure it was there. Some people even imagined a land full of rivers, parrots, and “good, honest” people.

The British explorer James Cook finally sailed below the Antarctic Circle in 1773 and put an end to the Great South Land fantasy. Dodging through a maze of icebergs—which he called “ice islands”—he made it farther south than anyone had ever gone.

No one would get farther, Cook predicted. In his opinion, there was no reason to try. All he had seen was a “horrid” region of blizzards and soupy fog. The entire place was “doomed by Nature never to feel the warmth of the sun’s rays, but to lie for ever buried under everlasting snow and ice.”



Shackleton first ventured into the snow and ice in 1901. By that time, Antarctica had been discovered and named. But no one had gotten near the South Pole.

A British navy officer named Robert Scott made the first serious attempt. In August 1901, he left England on

the ship *Discovery* with Shackleton as his third officer. After wintering in Antarctica, Shackleton, Scott, and the scientist Edward Wilson set off toward the Pole in November 1902 with 19 dogs and five sleds packed with supplies. None of the men had much experience skiing or handling dogs. Three months later they stumbled back to their ship, frostbitten and snow-blind. Shackleton was spitting blood and nearly dead from the nutritional disease scurvy.

But he couldn't wait to try again.

In 1908 he went back, as leader of an expedition. This time he almost reached the Pole. He set out from the coast with three men, including his friend Frank Wild. They bumbled their way south with four ponies to pull supplies. When the ponies sunk to their bellies in the snow and had to be put down, the men harnessed themselves to the sleds and trudged on. After 10 weeks of misery, they made it to within 100 miles of the Pole, farther south than anyone had gone before. They nearly starved to death on the way back.

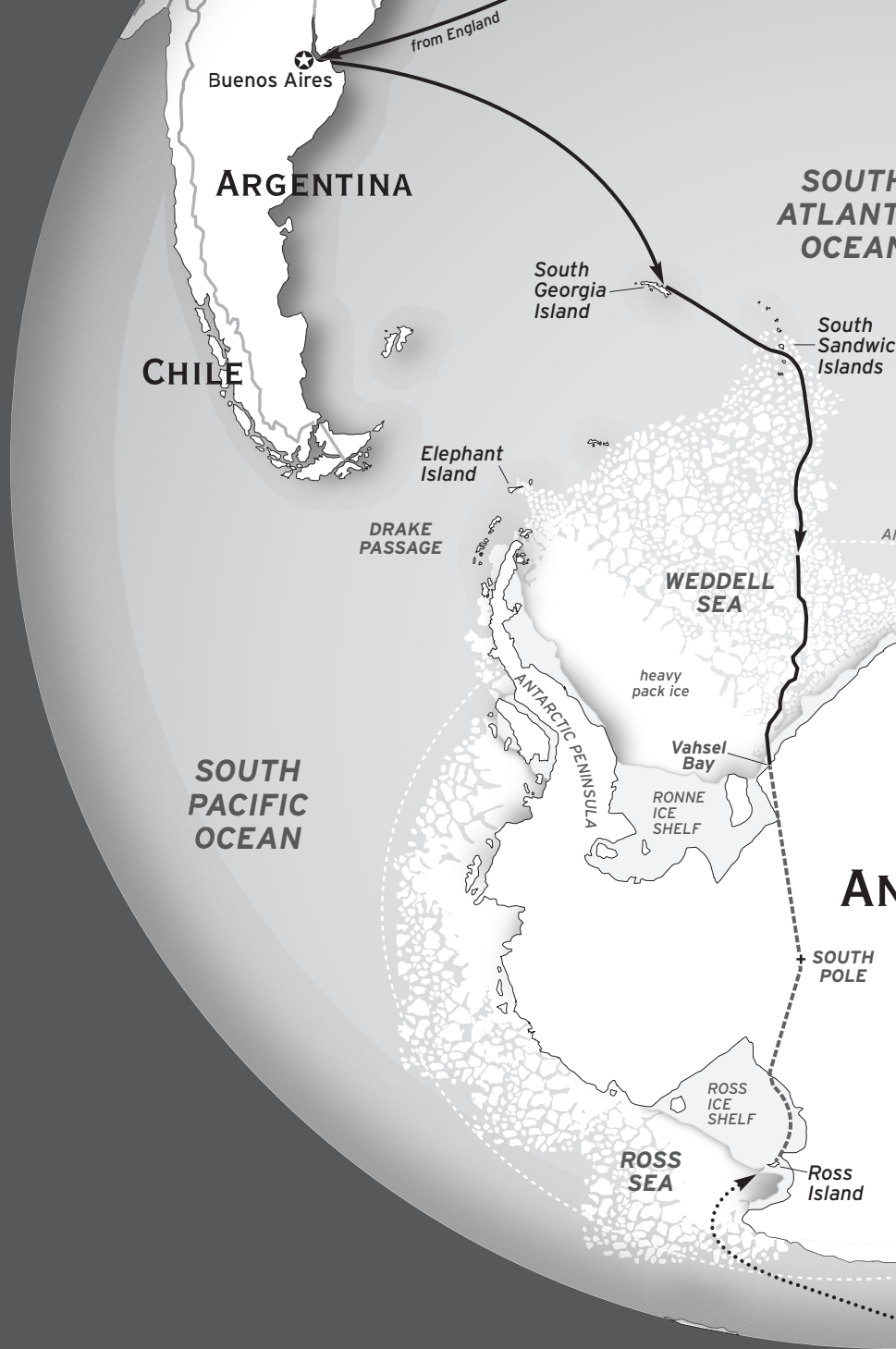
At one point, while packing sleds for another brutal day, Wild looked like he wouldn't last much longer. Shackleton handed over his biscuit ration for the day and insisted Wild take it. "All the money that was ever minted would not have bought that biscuit," Wild wrote in his diary, "and the remembrance of that sacrifice will never leave me."

Shackleton came back to England a hero. He spent the next couple of years touring Europe, giving lectures about his voyage. He dined with dukes and lords. He met the tsar of Russia; the prime minister of Canada; and the American president, William Howard Taft.

By 1912, he was sick of it all and scheming to get back to Antarctica. But while Shackleton had been touring, the Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen had made it to the Pole. And Robert Scott had frozen to death trying to beat Amundsen there.

While the British were still mourning the loss of Scott, Shackleton announced an even bigger, more audacious plan. “We have been beaten at the conquest of the North Pole and beaten at the conquest of the South Pole,” Shackleton wrote. “There now remains the most striking journey of all—the crossing of the Continent.”

To do it he would take the *Endurance* through the Weddell Sea to Vahsel Bay. From there he would lead a sledding party of six men 800 miles overland to the South Pole. A second ship, the *Aurora*, would sail into the Ross Sea on the other side of the continent. The *Aurora* would send a sledding party toward the Pole to stash supplies along the second half of Shackleton’s journey. If all went well, Shackleton and his team would reach the Pole and trek another 800 miles to the Ross Sea, well supplied along the way.



Buenos Aires

from England

ARGENTINA

CHILE

South Georgia Island

SOUTH ATLANTIC OCEAN

South Sandwich Islands

Elephant Island

DRAKE PASSAGE

WEDDELL SEA

heavy pack ice

Vahsel Bay

RONNE ICE SHELF

ANTARCTIC PENINSULA

SOUTH PACIFIC OCEAN

AN

SOUTH POLE

ROSS ICE SHELF

ROSS SEA

Ross Island

THE IMPERIAL TRANS-ANTARCTIC EXPEDITION 1914–1917

- ← Route of *Endurance*
- Planned route across Antarctica
- ←···· Route of *Aurora*

0 ————— 500
MILES

ANTARCTIC CIRCLE

ANTARCTICA

SOUTH
INDIAN
OCEAN

TASMANIA

