

Penguins Watched these Polar Printers

John Feely

[probably John Andrew Feely 1902-1965]

THIS IS THE STORY of the first and only book printed, illustrated, and bound in Antarctica—the treasure selected by the Trustees of the Public Library as the Treasure of the Week.

Aurora Australis is indeed a collector's piece. A very small edition was published and most of the copies are probably in the hands of the surviving members of the expedition or their descendants.

Our copy was presented to the people of Victoria by Campbell D. Mackeller. It is the copy given him by Shackleton “on behalf of the members of the British Antarctic Expedition 1907-09, as a remembrance of his unceasing interest, great generosity and personal friendship to all.”

The story of the production of the book itself is fascinating. It has to be pieced together from odd sentences and paragraphs in Shackleton's own book *Heart of the Antarctic*. Shackleton had been invalided home at the close of the *Discovery* expedition a few years before, and the great unknown Antarctic waste fascinated him.

He determined to go south again to find out “what lay beyond the mountains to the south of latitude 82° 18'.” It was the old urge that has driven explorers in every century—to find out what “lay beyond.”

He fitted out the famous expedition, overcoming financial difficulties, hand-picking the men who were to spend the winter with him, completely cut off from civilisation.

The men who most concern this particular story are Joyce, Wild, Marston and Day. Frank Wild was then 35. His mother was a direct descendant of Captain Cook and one of his uncles had been three times to the Arctic. The call of the white wastes must have been in his blood.

G. C. Marston was a qualified art teacher and the official artist of the expedition. He had received the greater part of his education at the Regent Street Polytechnic. He was 26.

Ernest Joyce was an old Antarctic hand, having been with the *Discovery* expedition. He wore the Polar medal and clasp and the Geographical Society's silver medal. He was 33. B. C. Day was an engineer, aged 22.

The book had its genesis in all probability in the fact that on the *Discovery* expedition Shackleton had “edited and published” the *South Polar*

Times during the long months in winter quarters. This newspaper had been typewritten and the explorer recollected the intense interest with which each issue had been received. He thought that something similar would help pass the long winter nights and also leave a permanent record of their stay in the south.

Says Shackleton in *Heart of the Antarctic*—"I had tried to provide for every contingency; there was a printing press with type, paper and other necessities for the production of a book during the winter night."

The printing press and other necessities had been presented to the expedition by the firm of Sir J. Causton and Sons Ltd. But, as a printing press is to the uninitiated an obscure and somewhat frightening piece of apparatus, it was necessary to give some instruction to the men who were going to use it.

Seven years was the time usually allowed for apprenticeship in the printing and lithographic trades. The expedition could only allow its would-be printers three weeks in Causton's works. Joyce and Wild went through a compressed course in type setting and all the other mysteries. Marston was rushed through a course in illustration reproduction. Then, with the united blessings of the principals and foremen of the Causton works, they were sent off into a world that was "cold and hard" to do the best they could.

When the expedition finally arrived at its objective and the stores were landed on a rocky coast in heavy seas, the *Nimrod* sailed away north and left the shore party to its own devices.

Their first job was to dig out of the ice most of the expedition's stores which had been left exposed during a blizzard and buried feet beneath the frozen surface. Luckily, the printing appliances were rescued unharmed.

The only things not recovered were one case of beer and one case of heavy volumes of the old *Challenger* expedition. Later, great argument was to arise in the hut as to whether, if they had the time or the inclination, they would rescue the beer or the reports.

Just before the expedition finally left the south, one or two of the shore party, poking round the old site of the store dump, noted a likely looking protuberance in the ice and, after some heavy hopeful digging, they unearthed—the reports. The beer is probably still there.

The hut was at last set up and the fifteen members of the shore party settled in for the winter. The sides of the hut were divided up into cubicles—each one occupied by two members of the expedition.

That occupied by the printers was six feet by seven feet. It contained two bunks, a large sewing machine, the printing press, type cases and two large men. Here the main work was done. The cubicle was known as the Rogues'

Retreat, because the most prominent feature of it was a painting of two very tough looking characters drinking beer out of pint mugs. The picture must have been an ever present reminder of the buried case.

Marston and Day's cubicle was the same size and here was the press for reproducing the pictures that were to illustrate the book. On account of its peculiar architecture, it was known as The Gables.

Once the party settled down to winter routine, the publishing department got busy. While Joyce and Wild were adding to their hurriedly acquired knowledge of the printing art by experimenting with the tools of the trade, Day cast about for some material to cover the book.

He decided to use the wood from the case in which the provision had been packed. These cases were made of a composite board prepared by uniting three layers of birch or another hardwood with waterproof cement. After Day finished sawing, planing and polishing, they made more than presentable covers.

Says Shackleton: "The early days of the printing department were not exactly happy, for the two amateur type setters found themselves making many mistakes and when they had at last set up a page, taken a proof, made all the necessary corrections and pulled off the required number of pages, they then had to distribute the type and begin all over again with the next page."

Never have printers worked in such conditions. It was necessary to keep a lamp burning under the type-rack, otherwise the metal letters were too cold to handle with bare hands. These men always had before their minds the old jingle that lists the

*perils that environ
The man who meddles
with cold iron.*

A lighted candle had to be kept burning under the inking plate to make sure the ink did not freeze solid. If the candle was kept there too long or too close to the plate, the ink got too thin. If the temperature of the plate fell below a certain degree, the ink got too thick. The even inking of the page was a problem indeed. However, says the editor, they "soon became more skilful and, at the end of three weeks, were able to print two pages per day."

Marston was meanwhile experimenting with his portion of the work. He reproduced his own drawings by alagraphy—or printing from aluminium plates. He had no proper litho press, so had to use the etching press. He was further handicapped by the fact that all the water contained traces of salt, which reacted on his plates. "But," says the editor, "Marston managed to produce what we all regarded as creditable pictures." And the fifteen ice-

bound adventurers are not alone in regarding them as creditable—the reproductions are very fine indeed.

Great Australian names appear as contributors. Edgeworth David, later to be knighted, provides an enthralling account of the ascent of the volcano Erebus, in the shadow of which the hut was built. He closes a story of blizzards and frost bites, with slides down precipitous slopes, with the remark that “throughout the whole of our trip we were singularly favored.”

One “Veritas” who as nightwatchman, beguiled the long hours by listening in on the muttered sleep-talking of his comrades jingles

*Darling, do you really lover me?
Stutters on dreaming swain;
The watchman whispers Never!
And the dreamer writhes in pain.
Another sails north in the broken ice,
Just dressed in Nature’s clothes,
And the seals and penguins grin
with delight
And the frost plays hell with his
toes.*

The messman writes on the trials of his occupation, particularly table setting—“On one occasion I forgot the pepper Now the menu for the morning was porridge, fruit and preserves; what use anyone could find for pepper in that breakfast, I do not know. But, within ten seconds of their arrival at the table, every second man had asked for it.”

A brilliant fantasy by Douglas Mawson closes this historic book which, according to the title page, was

Published at the winter-quarters of the British Antarctic Expedition during the winter months of April, May, June, July, 1908. Illustrated with etchings by George Marston. Printed at the Sign of the Penguins by Joyce and Wild; latitude 77° 32’ south, longitude 166° 12’ east Antarctica.

—JOHN FEELY

Each week this magazine will tell the story of the book selected by the Trustees of the Public Library as the “Treasure of the Week.” The Treasure may be viewed for a week from each Saturday in the Swanston-st. foyer of the Library.

State Library of Victoria, 328 Swanston Street at LaTrobe Street,
Melbourne, VIC.