

# Shackleton and the Heroic Age

Over four sales and eighteen months, the dispersal of Franklin Brooke-Hitching's magnificent library celebrating British Exploration & Discovery, 1576–1939, raised a grand total of around \$15 million on some 1,400 lots. The final, Q-Z sale, held at Sotheby's London on September 30, 2015, was especially strong on polar exploration, and one of the highlights was the first book printed and bound in Antarctica.

At most, around one hundred copies of *Aurora Australis* were published “at the Sign of the Penguins”—that is to say at Cape Royds, the winter quarters of Ernest Shackleton's 1907–09 British Antarctic Expedition.

Produced in conditions that saw ink get sticky and freeze if candles were not kept burning under the printing plates, this compilation of fact and fiction, humor, and prose and poetry, illustrated with lithographs and etchings by George Marston, the expedition's official artist, was an extraordinary achievement.

The tradition of taking printing equipment on polar expeditions, as a useful diversion in the long winter months, had begun in the Arctic in the previous century, but *Aurora Australis* took polar publishing and printing to a very different level.

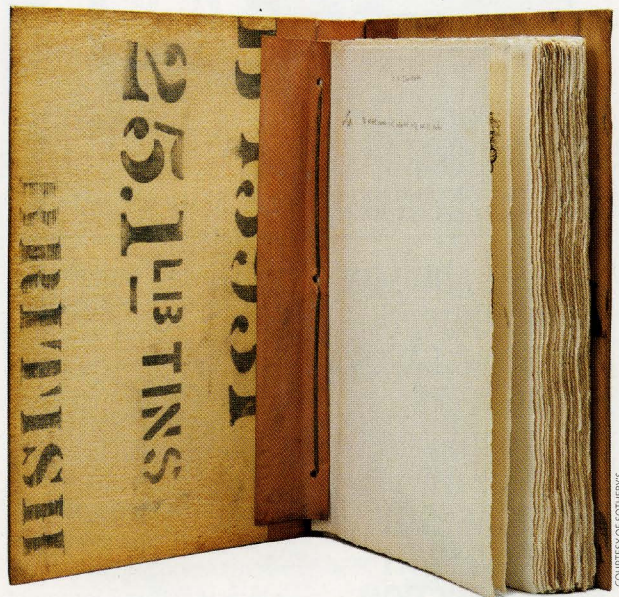
Edited by Shackleton and printed by Ernest Joyce and Frank Wild, each copy was bound by yet another expedition member, Bernard Day, in Venesta plywood boards salvaged from expedition packing crates that still bear stenciled clues as to their original contents.

The chest from which the binding for this copy was fashioned had held tins of tea—‘beer’ and ‘marmalade’ bindings are also known—and it also features most of the name of the expedition's ship, *Nimrod*. These stout bindings had spines made from recycled leather horse harnesses, stamped in blind with the work's title and a penguin motif.

The ninety-four leaves that make up this most famous of Antarctic books, among them the colored title-page and eleven other plates, are uncut and held in place by green silk binding cords. This example more than doubled the previous best in selling at £122,500 (\$185,415), but then record-breaking prices were commonplace throughout the Brooke-Hitching sales.

One of three hundred copies of the 1909, first limited edition of Shackleton's account of the expedition, *The Heart of the Antarctic*, signed in the slim third volume by Shackleton and all other members of the shore party, made £50,000 (\$75,680), once again more than doubling the old record.


Much more of a surprise was provided by a first separately



**At the final sale of Franklin Brooke-Hitching's library at Sotheby's London, several items related to polar explorer Ernest Shackleton broke auction records, including this copy of *Aurora Australis*, the first book printed and bound in Antarctica. It sold for £122,500 (\$185,415).**

published account of the epic, eight hundred-mile open boat journey from Elephant Island to South Georgia and its whaling stations that Shackleton and five companions made to bring help to those stranded in the Antarctic after the *Endurance* was sunk by pack ice during Shackleton's Antarctic expedition of 1914–17.

Published in 1933, eleven years after Shackleton's death, it was the work of Commander Frank Worsley, captain of the *Endurance*, whose remarkable dead reckoning and skill with a sextant had brought them safely to that remote island in one of those extraordinary, almost superhuman feats that has seen this era dubbed “The Heroic Age of Antarctic Exploration.”

Bearing a Shackleton family stamp on an endpaper, this copy of *Shackleton's Boat Journey* had been valued at just £700–1,000, but sold instead for £35,000 (\$52,975). 

Ian McKay's weekly column in *Antiques Trade Gazette* has been running for more than thirty years.