

DOUBLE BOOKED

Nick Smith

The perils of polar printing

A century ago Ernest Shackleton's *Aurora Australis* became the first book to be printed and bound on the continent of Antarctica. Nick Smith recently came face-to-face with an extremely rare copy at the National Maritime Museum...

AS SAMUEL PEPYS might have noted: up betimes and we come to the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, to a special exhibit of part of the Caird Library's collection of polar manuscripts, artefacts and printed books. Among the items on display: a wonderfully preserved copy of *Aurora Australis*, along with a decidedly rickety *South Polar Times* bearing Rudyard Kipling's bookplate pasted onto the front endpaper. Both publications were of course edited by Sir Ernest Shackleton, the latter, according to Bonham's catalogue, one of the 'scarcest and most desirable books of polar literature, with copies selling for many thousands of pounds on the rare occasion when a set comes on the market'. For those of us who cannot wait for such a contingency, and who are prepared to unbuckle the purse to the tune of £600, there is of course the Centenary Facsimile edition.

Published exactly a century ago in 1908, it is the *Aurora* that fascinates me more. It's intrinsically no more important than the *South Polar Times*, but its romance lies in it being the first book to be printed and bound on the 'white continent'. I'm already on thin ice here, as Bernadette Hince's *Antarctic Dictionary* sternly disagrees with me, claiming that honour for the *Times*. The Royal Geographical Society's website described the *Times* as the 'in-house magazine' of Captain Robert Scott's *Discovery* expedition, and while this may sound flippant it is an important reminder of the nature of the publication. While I accept the *Times* pre-dates Shackleton's *Nimrod* expedition, during which *Aurora* was published at the 'Winter Quarters on the British Antarctic Expedition', I don't accept it is a printed book. I don't want to squabble with the *Antarctic Dictionary*, but Shackleton himself, in his Editor's Preface to *Aurora*, says that there were 'essential differences between the two efforts, for the *South Polar Times* was typewritten and only one copy could be issued, whereas *Aurora Australis* is actually printed, and therefore allows of a larger edition.'

This 'larger edition' has a different print run depending on who you talk to, but the most sensible estimates vary from a conservative fifty-five (quoted by the National Maritime Museum) to 'about a hundred', a number traditionally bandied about by prospective buyers looking to drive down the price. The explorer's only granddaughter, Alexandra Shackleton, tells me that the actual quantity of copies printed is probably somewhere in between: 'I think there were more than fifty-five.'

The story of how *Aurora* was printed is a tale of publishing derring-do that is strangely in keeping with [the] spirit of the Heroic Age of polar exploration. In his 'Additional Preface' to *Aurora*, Sir Ernest writes: 'though I can see but little not up to usual standard in bookmaking, the printers are not satisfied that it is everything that it ought to be.' He goes on to explain that, due to the sub-zero temperatures in the hut where the printing took place, the only way to keep the ink in 'fit state to use' was to have a candle burning under the inking plate. The men responsible for the printing were petty officers Ernest Joyce and Frank Wild, who had taken a crash course in printing in London before heading south. They completed an apprenticeship that would normally occupy seven years in a mere three weeks at Sir J. Causton & Sons Ltd who not content with supplying the know-how, also kitted out *Nimrod* with 'an entire printing and lithographic outfit', including paper.

The Caird Library is named after Sir James Caird of Glenfarquhar, ship owner and benefactor of the National Maritime Museum. This particular James Caird should not be confused with another Sir James Caird, jute baron and philanthropist, who was the main sponsor of Sir Ernest Shackleton's Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition of 1914-16 (or *Endurance*, after the ship that sailed Shackleton and his men to the southern Polar Regions). This expedition has passed into legend, not because it succeeded in meeting its objective (Shackleton never got to the South Pole), but more for a Herculean rescue mission that has ensured Shackleton's place in history as one of the greatest ever leaders of men. Against all odds, 'the boss' successfully navigated 800 nautical miles in an open boat to South Georgia in order to relieve his crew that had been stranded on Elephant Island after the loss of the *Endurance*. The 23-foot whaler that braved the bleakest of conditions was the *James Caird* (named after the philanthropist, not the ship owner). Returned to Britain in 1919, the *James Caird* now has a permanent home in the north cloister of Dulwich College (which also happens to be the home of the James Caird Society which is dedicated to the preservation of Shackleton's memory). Prior to taking up residence at the college, the plucky little whaler was kept at the National Maritime Museum, where there

is now a life-size replica that was commissioned especially for the 2002 film *Shackleton*, starring Kenneth Branagh.

But I digress. The National Maritime Museum's copy of *Aurora Australis* is particularly interesting because it has been disbound for 'conservation reasons'. What this means is that it can be seen in its two component parts: the text block, which is as clean as a whistle, and the binding, which is made of plywood from recycled packing cases and spare harness leather. The plywood is actually a brand called Venesta, named after the London-based company that manufactured it, and clearly bears parts of the stencilled words 'British Antarctic'. Constructed by crewman and motor expert Bernard Day, the binding gives a fascinating insight into how the book was crudely stitched together, with three pairs of eyelets neatly drilled through the boards. A rather grand prelims page declares *Aurora* to have been: "Printed at the sign of "The Penguins"; by Joyce and Wild. Latitude 77°.32' South / Longitude 166°.12' East / Antarctica / (All rights reserved)".

About a dozen copies of *Aurora* have come up for sale since the turn of the century, all of them at auction. The most recent fetched £43,200 at Bonham's in 2007 (it had been fantastically described in the catalogue as the 'Black Tulip of any Antarctic collection'). This was by no means the most expensive, with one going in 2006 for £53,000. Compared with the decades leading up to the millennium, today the market is awash. Despite this (or maybe even because of...?) it is unlikely, as one of my sources tells me, we'll see a copy go for 'less than US\$100,000 again'.) For the general reader it is perhaps as well that there is a print-on-demand edition of *Aurora Australis* available from the Classic Travel Book imprint of the Long Riders Guild Press who will let you have a copy for under £20.

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