All seal hunting and no letterpress printing makes Jack a dull boy

In 1908, Sir Ernest Shackleton and his British Polar Expedition made publication history: they created the first book ever produced on the continent of Antarctica.
Produced “at the Sign of the Penguins” while the team overwintered at Cape Royds before attempting the South Pole, Aurora Australis consists of about one hundred and twenty unnumbered loose sheets laced in wooden covers and bound in seal skin.

Its ten pieces of writing make up a serious anthology with surprising literary merit. There is a poem by Shackleton, attributed to Nemo in the table of contents and to Veritas at the end of the text (this poem is also signed “Veritas” in some copies).
MIDWINTER NIGHT.

The汽群ANEsE and Henc. 
Tha right GIN into no one. 
Cenidre Ane and Tier 
Are menting on a beem. 

And this is the idle wandaeon. 
Awake in the end of night. 
Talk of the fowem deepere. 
When using give him the light. 

The worm r of Ese and Bacaste 
Are sweet in some of their done. 
For the songs they pasty green. 
Are ailin in liberous done. 

And subjects t hira an and lights. 
Whisky and drinks of her. 
Are mixed with manese phemoer. 
That mean deadly quc. 

AURORA AUSTRIUS.

Dating you may look one! 
Stemmen are standing near. 
The wandermn whispe “Ee.” 
And the dower writable is yet. 

From the corner with a miner, 
The forever lives out what: 
It seeds like “pu pile more.” 
Or some other jester not. 

Mother is fore in another’s done. 
And feels from daddling height. 
Bene to done or on the an 
And the dower face each is right. 

Another asks while in the buirest it 
So dined in Weaver’s citizen 
An antediluvian gym in single 
And the tree plays fall with his son. 

And some we taken they know of pur, 
Walk in with their calculog tile. 
And everyone when morning broke 
Made a call for solemn pills. 

VERITAS.
Petty officer Frank Wild, under the pseudonym Wand Erer, wrote an essay in the style of the King James Bible.

Immediately before the expedition set sail in 1907, Wild and another petty officer, Ernest Joyce, took a crash course in typesetting and letterpress printing. A traditional seven-year apprenticeship was compressed into three weeks’ intense training by the renowned London firm of Sir Joseph Causton and Sons Ltd., who equipped Shackleton with a miniature printing plant: two presses (a 10’ x 7’ Albion and a small etching press, labelled “printing machine” and “printing press” in the hut plan below), high-quality handmade paper with handsome deckle edges and a generous supply of ink.

And there is a fanciful short story by geologist Douglas Mawson, “Bathybia,’’ proposing that the South Pole, still unseen in 1908, might in fact be a deep crater filled with giant insects and luxuriant plant life, including a forest of toadstools into which an unsuspecting polar explorer might tumble.

**AN ANCIENT MANUSCRIPT.**

NOW it is written in the 21st chapter of the 2nd book of the chronicles of the Great King, how that he did in the first year of his reign, and six moons after the Good Queen his Mother had been taken to her fathers, send forth the ship which was called Discovery;

And did say unto the captain, who was a captain of one of the King’s own ships, even a fighting ship;

Go thou unto the uttermost ends of the Earth, to that place where no man has yet trod, and which the wise men of the land do call Antarctica, and spy it out, and come back to me with tidings thereof.

And also it is written that the captain whose name was called Scott, did go with his ship and a goodly company of officers and men, and did diligently seek for that land until he found it.

And all the great works they did accomplish, and the trials and tribulations which did betset them, are they not also inscribed therein, and it is not of
The ingenuity of *Aurora Australis* is apparent in Shackleton’s clever scheme to furnish the book with covers by repurposing the crates in which the team’s perishables had been imported from Europe and New Zealand.

*Aurora Australis* is richly illustrated with etchings and watercolors by the expedition’s official artist, George “Putty” Marston. These depict daily life in close quarters as well as the natural wonders of the antarctic landscape.
Marston’s style is spare and somewhat workmanlike. When he used color he did so flamboyantly, as in this frontispiece showing the southern lights of the book’s title.
Marston also created the book’s design. It is a pleasure to read and features suitably vast expanses of blank white space.

In *The Heart of the Antarctic, Being the Story of the British Antarctic Expedition 1907-1909*, Shackleton tells of two purposes behind *Aurora Australis*: to create a unique record of the moments before his first ascent of the South Pole plateau (this mission was not quite achieved, in part because the expedition had insufficient food and no skis), and as one of many cultural activities intended to keep the men occupied for four long, cold, dark months.
From Shackleton’s description, the print shop in the hut at Cape Royds sounds like a constant source of fascination and frustration: Joyce and Wild were inexperienced, the ink froze, the plates were sensitive to the salt in the water and of course the hut was very cramped and dark.

Those overwintering in Antarctica today must still labor to fend off “polar ennui.” The U.S. Antarctic Program Participant Guide, 2013-2014 promises “radio programming from volunteer DJs, a library, clubs, climbing wall, gymnasium, weight room, aerobics room, art shows, chili cook-offs, running races, yoga classes, dances, league play, lessons, lectures, etc.”

Copies of *Aurora Australis* are not numbered. It is believed that no more than a hundred were manufactured, possibly intended for sale but in the end distributed as gifts to the expedition’s friends and financial supporters. There was no institutional or governmental support for the British Polar Expedition; Shackleton was entirely reliant on private loans and gifts and returned to England with heavy debts.

The *seventy or so copies* whose present whereabouts are known can be identified by the words stencilled on their boards, as the packing crates could be cut, cleaned and polished but were indelibly stamped with their original labels: there are Petit Pois, Stewed Kidneys and Chocolate copies, for example.
Thanks to Christina Linklater, Project Music Cataloger, for contributing this post.

1 Comment

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