

Freemasons in Antarctica

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The Beginnings Antarctica is a land that can only be described in superlatives. It is unique, it is cold, it is beautiful and it is dangerous. Mankind has been fascinated by it for more than a century. The ancient Greeks wondered about what lay in the southernmost parts of the world. Magellan showed that it was possible to navigate around the Earth. It was Captain James Cook who provided a clear basis for speculation. He was the first to circumnavigate Antarctica, even though he did not see it. He was able to say that if a landmass existed at the southern extremities of the globe, then the stormy seas, the heavy fogs and the masses of pack ice such as he encountered most certainly made it inhospitable. In the early 1770s, Cook made three forays into those icy climes. Although he reached latitude 71 degrees South, he saw no land. However, his reports of whales and seals had a big influence on later developments because the whalers and sealers who followed him made many discoveries.

Captain Cook was not a freemason but he did have a Masonic sponsor. The founder and first Governor of Nova Scotia was Edward Cornwallis who arrived there 21st June 1749. As soon as he could, he established a lodge under a dispensation from Major E. J. Phillips of Annapolis Royal, representing Henry Prince of Boston, at that time styled as Grand Master of North America. The lodge was St. Andrews No. 1 meeting in Halifax. At its first meeting, Alexander Colville and a number of other Naval Gentlemen were initiated.

It was Lord Colville who first recognized the outstanding talents of Cook. It was his recommendation that set Cook on the path to fame as an explor-

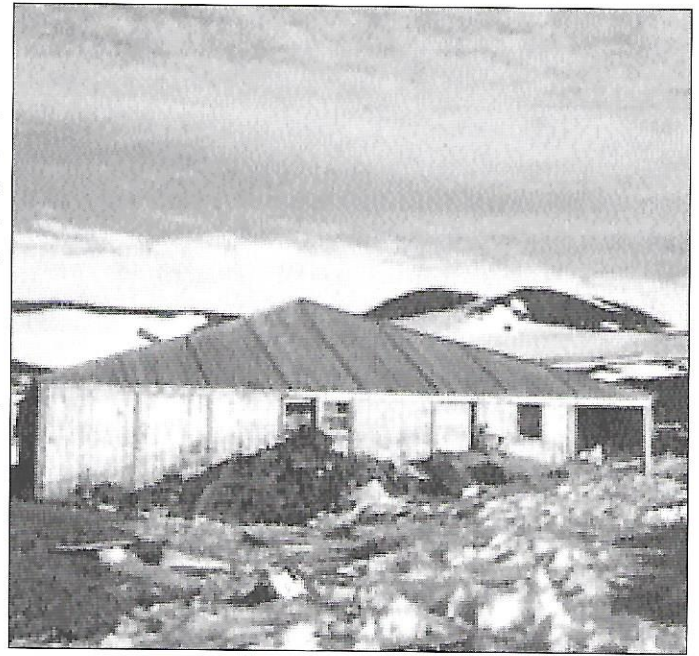
er, a navigator, a surveyor and leader. Cook never forgot the debt he owed to Colville and saw to it that his name was inscribed on the map of New Zealand - Cape Colville and Colville Channel.

Were they Freemasons?

Who were the men who risked everything to challenge the elements and reveal the secrets of Antarctica? Who sent them there? Were they entrepreneurs seeking fame and fortune or were they high principled men who wanted to push back the barriers of the unknown? These are some of the questions that occurred to me back in 1981 when I was asked to manage the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Curriculum Project based in Hobart, Tasmania, Australia.

As I read more and more about the seventh continent and its earliest visitors and as I remembered meeting Sir Douglas Mawson in 1949, I usually came up with more questions than answers. I soon became aware that men like Scott and Shackleton confided their innermost thoughts to their diaries and journals. Therein they disclosed their attitudes to life and to the deity. As well as having a deeply held faith, many of them pushed themselves to the boundaries of human endurance in order to help their companions and serve their country. Copies of the Bible accompanied the expeditions.

I soon began to wonder if any of these remarkable men were freemasons. Subsequent research shows that



Scott's Hut in foreground, Williams Air Operations Facility at McMurdo Sound in background, with part of the Memorial Cross honoring Scott, Evans, Oates, Wilson and Bowers on the right of the picture.

freemasonry did have an influence on the lives of many of the men who explored the frozen wastes at the extremities of our planet - both Arctic and Antarctic.

Scott - Greater in Death

Many books have been written about Scott's two voyages to Antarctica. First there was the Discovery voyage of 1901- 04 and then there was the ill-fated journey to the South Pole 1910 - 12. Scott's background, training and temperament did not adequately prepare him for the task that he tried to accomplish. His big mistake was to rely on manpower to pull fully laden sledges for hundreds of miles over icy, mountainous terrain when, as Amundsen showed, dogs were able to do it better. But he was a man of tremendous courage and tenacity, and so great a hero did he become, that at least in the English speaking world, he became more famous in death than his Norwegian competitor, Roald Amundsen who so brilliantly completed his mission to the South Pole ahead

of Scott in December 1912, and sped to Hobart to notify the world of his success.

Robert Falcon Scott was initiated into Drury Lane Lodge No. 2127EC in London on 9th April 1901 at the age of 31 years. He was passed in the same lodge one month later -14th May. Drury Lane Lodge met, as it still does, at the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane. Scott was proposed by his colleague, Brother Albert Armitage and seconded by Brother Dr. Tatham Armitage, father of Albert. Scott's Discovery Voyage took longer than expected because the ship became frozen into the pack ice of the Ross Sea. When they reached Christchurch, New Zealand on the return trip, Scott was raised in St. Albans Lodge No. 2612 EC. The First Lieutenant on the Discovery, Brother Charles Royds of Navy Lodge was raised in the same ceremony. Brother Lieutenant Albert Armitage was in attendance together with Brother Dr. Reginald Koettlitz, who was the expedition's doctor and botanist.

Upon his return to London, Scott affiliated with Navy Lodge, on 13th December 1904. However, his Masonic career was short. He resigned from both lodges in the second half of 1906.

It may be of interest that his brother-in-law Sir William Ellison-Macartney became Governor of Tasmania (1913 -17) and then Governor of Western Australia (1917 -20), serving as Grand Master of the respective Grand Lodges.

At its Communications of March 1913, the United Grand Lodge of England voted 100 guineas to the Lord Mayor's Antarctic Disaster Fund for the relief of the dependants of Scott and his party.

Armitage - Overshadowed

Brother Lieutenant Albert Armitage who had proposed Scott for initiation



Tracked vehicle on the way to a grounded iceberg near Mawson Base.

into freemasonry was second in command to Scott as far as land parties were concerned. He had already taken part in an expedition known as the Jackson-Harmsworth North Polar Expedition which went beyond the Arctic Circle- 1894-7. While Scott explored to the south of the base, Armitage led a party to the mountains of Victoria Land in the west.

Armitage became the first man to reach the Antarctic Ice Cap. This was in fact a more significant achievement than Scott's at that time and it was immediately recognized as such by members of the expedition. Bernacchi, the physicist and meteorologist from Tasmania recorded in his diary: "A typical Antarctic glacier followed to its source, a distance of about 240 miles, sledged over in a mountainous glacial region at 78 degrees South, reaching an altitude of about 14,500 feet."

Armitage's feat was impressive. He showed himself to be a fine, balanced leader. He successfully coped with crevasses, altitude sickness and the beginnings of scurvy. Armitage had the good sense to turn back while he still had food, energy and health in

reserve, even though the Antarctic Plateau rolled seductively on to the horizon. Brother Armitage is one of Antarctica's unsung heroes. He acted on the square with all men.

Armitage was initiated into Drury Lane Lodge on 8th February 1898. He remained a member of that lodge until 1929. He had joined Author's Lodge No. 3456 EC and remained with that lodge until 1940. He was also a member of

the Author's Chapter. Brother Captain Armitage died in 1943, after a distinguished career with both the Royal Navy and the P.&O. Co. He was resident Governor of the Royal Merchant Seaman's Orphanage 1926-32. He wrote three books:

- *Two Years in the Antarctic (1905)*
- *Cadet to Commodore (1925)*
- *Cold Lands (1931)*

Royds - Forgotten

Charles Royds is one of Antarctica's forgotten men. He was born into a family distinguished for its service to the Royal Navy. He became associated with Scott at an early stage and became his First Lieutenant. In this role, he was responsible for the work of the crew, the economy of the ship and the meteorological observations. Royds was an accomplished musician and for this reason endeared himself to the crew. He made good use of an organ which was presented to the Discovery by the Bishop of Christchurch in December 1901.

Royds led many sledging journeys to set up supply depots for Scott. He commanded the battleship, "Emperor

of India," during World War I. He served with distinction and was awarded the CMG in 1919. Later on, Royds had the honour of unveiling Britain's official memorial to Scott at the Devonport Naval Barracks. He was promoted to Rear-Admiral in 1926 and became Vice-Admiral upon retirement. He was knighted in 1929.

When Royds died in 1931, one of his biographers wrote: "His powerful influence for the happiness and good of everybody was always being unostentatiously exerted and he contributed more than anyone else under Captain Scott to make the Discovery 1901-04 Expedition one of the happiest of polar expeditions." As mentioned above, he was a member of Navy Lodge. The only "black mark" we have against Royds is that he and Scott shot "a very tender bull" when they called at Auckland Islands on their way home in 1904. The New Zealand farmer made no concessions for heroes, he was angry and he sued them.

Shackleton - Survivor

Sir Henry Ernest Shackleton is best known for his incredible journey from the Weddell Sea to Elephant Island and South Georgia after his ship, *Endurance*, was lost in pressure ice. However, he first came into prominence when he accompanied Scott on the Discovery Expedition and was part of the group that travelled across the ice shelf in November - December 1902 to reach latitude 82-17.5. It was a difficult journey back, their dogs died and they suffered from the onset of scurvy as they man-hauled the sledges. As a result Shackleton was repatriated and it soured his relationship with Scott.

Shackleton felt that he had something to prove. As soon as he returned to England, he set about securing support for his own expedition, aiming to get to the South Pole. He obtained a schooner, *Nimrod*, and set off in 1907.

They made their base at Cape Royds near the foot of the formidable, smoking volcano, Mt Erebus. His Australian geologists scaled Mt. Erebus and located the Southern Magnetic Pole as well. Once again the Geographic South Pole was out of reach.

Shackleton was initiated into Navy Lodge on the 9th July 1901, but it was not until November 1911 that he was passed and in May 1913 that he was raised in the Guild of Freemen Lodge No. 3525 EC. Shackleton attended the first regular meeting of that lodge on 15 June 1911. In 1914, he was unanimously elected as an Honorary Member of that lodge. He remained a member of both lodges until his death in 1922.

There are many who believe that Shackleton deserves to be regarded as the greatest of the polar explorers during what has become known as the Heroic Period. After his rescue from South Georgia, he proceeded to bring back the members of his group that had gone to the Ross Sea to await his planned crossing of Antarctica. At this time, he visited New Zealand and attended Tutanekai Lodge No. 156 NZC which met at Wellington. He stated on that occasion that eight members of the craft had accompanied him on his Antarctic Expeditions. Some of these were with him when they got to within 97 miles of the South Pole. It is noteworthy that in turning at that point, he considered his men first. Fame and fortune beckoned but disaster threatened because they were running out of food. Shackleton had the distinction of never losing a man under his personal command, even though many of them went through the most extreme ordeals.

There are two more matters which must be mentioned in connection with Shackleton. The commander of the Chilean coastguard cutter, *Yelcho*, which recovered the men from

Elephant Island in 1916 was himself a mason. Both Shackleton and Commander Luis A. Pardo attended a meeting of Harmony Lodge No. 1411 EC in Valparaiso after the rescue. On July 8 1980, the then WM of Harmony Lodge, Mario Pino Carvajal, read a paper commemorating the association of the lodge with Brother Sir Ernest Shackleton.

Before Shackleton left England on the *Endurance* mission, he was presented with a Bible by Queen Mother Alexandra of England. The words which she inscribed on the flyleaf were: "May the Lord help you to do your duty and guide you through all dangers by land and sea. May you see the Works of the Lord and all His Wonders in the deep."

After their ship had sunk and they packed the sledges, Shackleton impressed on his men that no article was of any value when weighed against their ultimate survival. He exhorted them to be ruthless in leaving behind every unnecessary ounce regardless of its value. To demonstrate that he meant what he said he reached into his pockets. He threw a gold cigarette case and several gold coins into the snow at his feet. This was well depicted in the film, "Shackleton" that was recently shown on Australian television (ABC June 2002). Shackleton then opened the Bible that Queen Alexandra had given them. He ripped out the flyleaf, the page containing the twenty-third Psalm and a page from the Book of Job:

"Out of whose womb came the ice?
And the hoary frost of Heaven,
Who hath gendered it?

The waters are hid as with a stone,
And the face of the deep is frozen."
Shackleton laid the Bible in the snow and walked away.

But that is not the end of the story of the Bible. Seventy years later, I personally held that very same Bible in my own hands. No, there was no

divine intervention. It was human concern for the sacred scriptures. It was not until 1971 that the Bible was presented to a very surprised Commander M K Burley, leader of a Joint Services Expedition to Elephant Island. After he had given a lecture at the British



Murray Yaxley holding the Shackleton Bible in the Library of the Royal Geographic Society in London

Embassy in Buenos Aires, an elderly lady, Miss I. McLean, explained that the VSL had been given to her parents as a token of thanks after they billeted Able Seaman Thomas McLeod who was from the Endurance. McLeod did not reveal to anyone that he had rescued the ship's Bible even if it did add weight to his few belongings. The volume is now housed in the library of the Royal Geographic Society, London. The pages removed from it by our brother are treasured by the Shackleton family.

The Australians

The most famous and most admired Australian who took expeditions to

Antarctica was the geologist, Sir Douglas Mawson. He first went to Antarctica with Shackleton in 1907. He was a member of the party which reached the South Magnetic Pole. He returned with his own expedition in 1911. From a scientific point of view, it was a successful enterprise but two of his companions lost their lives and Mawson's terrible journey is legendary. If you study the list of lodges that meet in South Australia, you will find Sir Douglas Mawson Lodge No. 244. Mawson himself was not a freemason but he is so widely respected that a lodge has been named after him, with the approval of his family.

Another South Australian, John Riddoch Rymill was studying at Cambridge University in England when he became involved in exploratory work in Canada and Greenland. He led the British Graham Land Expedition 1934-37. His ship, a three masted topsail schooner, the Penola, was named after his birthplace in South Australia. It was a very successful expedition and the official narrative, "Southern Lights" makes interesting reading. In 1943 he became a member of Naracoorte Lodge No. 42 SA/NT. Rymill served in the Royal Australian Navy during World War II.

The Admiral - Man of Controversy

Richard Byrd was first and foremost, an adventurer and a naval officer second. He was a pioneer aviator at a time when ground support was minimal and navigation aids rudimentary. Whether

or not he actually reached the goals that have been attributed to him is regarded as conjecture in some quarters but that need not concern us here. His first Antarctic voyage was 1928-30 and the second in 1933-35. Byrd had a sense of the dramatic which bordered on foolishness when applied in the harsh Antarctic environment. He put himself at risk by spending a long period by himself at Bolling Advance Weather Base on the ice shelf in the winter of 1934 and put the lives of some of his men at risk when it was obvious to them, from radio contacts, that he was suffering from carbon monoxide poisoning and needed to be brought back to the main camp. Subsequently, he played a major role in American Expeditions to Antarctica in both 1946 and 1956.

Byrd joined Federal Lodge No. 1 in Washington D.C. in 1921 and affiliated with Kane Lodge No. 454 in New York City in 1928. Kane Lodge was named after Brother Dr. Elisha Kent Kane who was himself an explorer of note. He was a member of one of the rescue missions which set out to find Sir John Franklin, a former Governor of Tasmania, who was lost whilst seeking the North West Passage. Many of Byrd's colleagues were masons, including Bernt Balchen who was his pilot when they flew over, or at least near to, both the North and South Poles.

There is a myth, perpetuated in a number of publications, that he established First Antarctic Lodge No. 777 of the New Zealand constitution in 1935. We are indebted to Wor. Bro. J.S. Sissons, a New Zealand radio officer, who acted as Senior Warden at the meeting of February 5, 1935, who has enabled us to set the record straight. It was purely an informal shipboard meeting. There was no charter from any Grand Lodge. And the brother who took charge, a Brother Mitchell was not at that time an Installed

Master. The number 777 was merely the invention of the brethren concerned. To give the meeting some semblance of Masonic flavour, they gave themselves a lodge name and number. They appointed "officers" for the purpose of a simulated opening and closing. Brother Mitchell gave a lecture on the First Tracing Board. The officers for the occasion were limited to the crew of the "Jacob Ruppert" as they had a few rehearsals. Brother Byrd and others on the ice shelf were invited to be present and they did attend. Brother Mitchell is known to have lectured about his Antarctic experiences and the meeting in particular. Perhaps his listeners read too much into his accounts of the occasion.

There is no doubt that Richard Byrd, promoted to Rear Admiral in 1930, was a colourful and persuasive man. He did a great deal for his country. Freemasonry was an important part of his life.

Remaining Puzzles

Everyone who has studied the career of Roald Amundsen, Norway's favorite son, admires him immensely. Everyone wants to claim him as friend and brother. His name appears in many lists of famous masons. Alas, I have found no one who can say where he was initiated, what lodge was favoured with his membership, or indeed, whether or not he really was a mason.

The story of how Captain Lawrence "Titus" Oates, a member of Scott's ill-fated polar party, felt that he was a burden to his team because of his gangrenous feet walked out into a blizzard and was never seen again has been told and retold. The following quotation appears in a book, "Captain Oates: Soldier and Explorer." ".....he was commemorated by a Masonic lodge in South Africa." The co-author, Lt.-Col. Patrick Cordingley says that it did not

occur to either of the biographers that Oates was a freemason. The United Grand Lodge of England has no record of him joining and the grand lodges working in South Africa have no idea of what is meant by the above quotation. His biographers have not given any further explanation.

The Antarctic Masonic Circle Club

This Club was formed in December 1956 on board the U.S.S. Curtiss which was participating in Operation Deepfreeze, a precursor to the American involvement in the Antarctic segment of the International Geophysical Year. Sixteen Master Masons were at the first meeting. Upon the closure of the Operation Deepfreeze activities at Little America, the Club records were handed over to the Navy Chaplain at the Naval Air Facility at McMurdo Sound on Ross Island.

From time to time, the Club was reactivated. Over the years, the Club was instrumental in making a number of donations to charities in Busan, Korea and Christchurch, New Zealand. Through the Club, the Grand Chapter, Order of the Eastern Star of New York was able to donate electric pianos for use at Byrd Station, Hallett Station, McMurdo Sound and the South Pole. At McMurdo Sound, the Club held at least some of its meetings in "The Chapel of the Snows."

In 1983, Brother Don Christiansen, a dental technician who made six journeys to the frozen continent, kindly made me a member of the Club on the basis of my working visit to Macquarie Island. Brother Don was a member of St. Andrews Lodge No. 56, Portsmouth, New Hampshire. He told me that a bronze plaque dedicated to Antarctic Freemasonry was to be placed near Admiral Byrd's Monument at McMurdo. It was planned that Brother Muldoon, Prime Minister of

New Zealand, would unveil it. I cannot confirm that this was carried out.

Epilogue

The men who have ventured across the southern seas to Antarctica have included many freemasons, only some of them known to us. In some cases, their names appear on the map of Antarctica - Scott, Byrd, Shackleton, Armitage, Royds. The darkness of day and night, during the long winters, the spartan living conditions, the long hours of toil and the isolation have been such that the tenets of freemasonry have helped to provide the inner strength that was required.

When I read the July 2, 2002 issue of the Australian news magazine, *The Bulletin*, I found a preview of an exhibition related to the work of Sir Douglas Mawson, that has been prepared at the State Library of New South Wales. It is called "Lines of Ice." The preview refers especially to the problems associated with isolation in the desolate environment, in inadequate tents and huts on the Shackleton Ice Shelf. And then there is a quote from a civil engin, E N Webb. "Such an experience brings one face to face with the Great Architect of the Universe, from which no one returns without a greater understanding of himself."

But above all, I believe that it has been the adherence to Masonic principles that has ensured that the frozen continent, the highest, driest, windiest on earth, remains a place where all men are equal. A man in need can expect spontaneous support from all stations regardless of race, religion or nationality.

See following page for Yaxley's Bio.