

Correspondence

Shackleton, James Caird, and *Discovery*

Ann Savours

Little Bridge Place, Bridge, Canterbury, Kent CT4 5LG

Received July 1993

I would like to make a belated contribution to the recent correspondence in *Polar Record* (28 (166): 233–237; 29 (168): 75; and 29 (169): 164–166) regarding the achievements of Sir Ernest Henry Shackleton. One day in 1973, when at my desk in the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, I received a phone call from HM Customs asking if I would take delivery of six sacks of shingle. This was no ordinary shingle — it came from Cape Rosa on the west coast of South Georgia, where *James Caird* landed at the end of Shackleton's voyage from Elephant Island, 24 April–10 May 1916. Members of the British Antarctic Survey and Mr Duncan Carse had collected the rocks, bits of tusk, and desiccated birds' wings to form a realistic and appropriate beach on which *James Caird* was to be displayed. The boat had been lent to the museum since the early 1960s by Dulwich College, and I was responsible for a new display in the cramped quarters of the Half Deck. Mr Jim Lees, senior conservator in the Ships Department, covered the open boat with canvas again and heightened its sides. The only surviving original sail was the jib. Because the shingle from South Georgia had to be spread very thinly under the boat, the museum backed this up with a lorry load of large pebbles from the beach at Aberystwyth. This 'new beach,' in addition to the boat itself, was removed to Dulwich College some years ago.

In my recent study of *Discovery* (London: Virgin, 1992), I devoted a chapter to the relief voyage organized by the Admiralty in 1916 to rescue Shackleton's men on Elephant Island. *Discovery* left Plymouth escorted by two trawlers and was towed by the collier *Polesley* to Montevideo, where news came that Shackleton had effected the rescue himself. However, I have just been lent by a

descendant of Lieutenant Commander James Fairweather, the captain of *Discovery*, a batch of papers relating to this abortive relief voyage, supplementing the ship's log and other material in the Public Records Office on which my account was largely based. These papers show that the rights of the publication, binding upon Shackleton (who was to embark on *Discovery*) and the master and ship's company, were vested in His Majesty's government. The responsibility for writing the expedition's narrative was given to the surgeon, Dr Martin, and an 'operator' from the International Film Service of New York was to be embarked at Montevideo. Profits from the sale and distribution of film and stills were to be given by the Admiralty to naval charities.

The carpenter of *Endurance*, Harry McNeish; boat-swain J. Vincent; and able-bodied seaman Tim McCarthy were interviewed at the Admiralty Hydrographic Department in London before the departure of *Discovery* on 10 August 1916. McNeish and Vincent drew sketches of the coast and camp on Elephant Island, which were given to Captain Fairweather, as was a typed copy of Vincent's statement relating to the camp and its seaward approach. Shackleton was said to have left orders for his second-in-command, Frank Wild, 'that if he did not hear from him by the beginning of the summer — November next — he was to send the boats through to the Whaling Station on Deception Island.' The party was said to have 'farinaceous food enough to last for a couple of months on full rations — plenty of seals, killed 14 seals, 6 sea-elephants, 500 to 800 penguins — plenty of meat, 22 men left behind.'

One cannot fail to be struck by the careful preparations (including the re-rigging of *Discovery* at Devonport) for the relief voyage, sent in the midst of the Great War. The relief committee was chaired by Admiral Sir Lewis Beaumont, who had served in the British Arctic Expedition of 1875–1876, and among its members were Sir Douglas Mawson and Dr W.S. Bruce. Nevertheless, Shackleton appears to have not been grateful at all.

In Brief

WELLMAN POLAR AIRSHIP WRECKS LOCATED ON DANSKØYA. An expedition from Rutgers University has located the remains of two airship wrecks on Danskøya, in the Svalbard archipelago. The airship wrecks, believed to be the two oldest aeronautical artifacts ever found in the Arctic, are from the 1906 and the 1907 and 1909 North Polar expeditions of the American journalist Walter Wellman. Between 1894 and 1909, Wellman, a

correspondent for *The Chicago Record-Herald*, led five unsuccessful expeditions in search of the North Pole. The 1906, 1907, and 1909 expeditions were by airship.

For three weeks in July and August 1993, P.J. Capelotti, a doctoral student in historical archaeology under Dr Carmel Schrire of the Rutgers University Department of Anthropology, surveyed the archaeological remains at Virgohamn on Danskøya, including the site of Wellman's