

# Ross Sea party

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The **Ross Sea party** was part of Sir Ernest Shackleton's Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition 1914–17. Shackleton's plan was to land with a group on the Weddell Sea coast of Antarctica from his ship *Endurance*, and to march across the continent, via the South Pole, to McMurdo Sound, Ross Island. As they would be unable to carry sufficient fuel and supplies for the whole distance, a second expedition ship, *SY Aurora* was acquired, to transport a supporting team, the Ross Sea party, to McMurdo Sound. Their function was to lay a series of depots across the Ice Barrier along the established polar route<sup>[1]</sup> to the Beardmore Glacier. The survival of Shackleton's party would depend absolutely on these depots being laid. The *Aurora* would winter in the Sound in order to pick up Shackleton's party on completion of their march.

Despite a late start for the Antarctic, and various misfortunes including the loss of the *Aurora* when it was carried away from its moorings during a blizzard, the Ross Sea party survived inter-personnel disputes, extreme weather, illness and death to carry out its depot-laying mission in full. This success proved ultimately without purpose, because Shackleton's main expedition was unable to land after *Endurance* was crushed in the Weddell Sea ice. An epic adventure of hardship and survival then followed, but the trans-continental march did not take place. Compared with the public attention given to Shackleton's heroic failures on the other side of the continent, the Ross Sea party has been generally overlooked, acquiring the soubriquet "Shackleton's Forgotten Men", but it is a story of endurance in its own right. Dick Richards, the last survivor of the party,<sup>[2]</sup> was without regrets and did not regard the struggle as futile. Rather, he believed, it was something that the human spirit had accomplished, and that no undertaking carried through to conclusion was for nothing.<sup>[3]</sup>

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## Personnel

*For more details on this topic, see List of personnel of the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition.*

Shackleton appointed Aeneas Mackintosh as leader of the Ross Sea party, having first attempted to persuade the Admiralty to provide him with a naval crew.<sup>[4]</sup> Mackintosh, like Shackleton, was a former P&O officer who had been on the *Nimrod* expedition until his participation was cut short by an accident that resulted in the loss of his right eye.<sup>[5]</sup> Another *Nimrod* veteran, Ernest Joyce, whose Antarctic experiences had begun with Captain Scott's *Discovery* Expedition, was appointed to take charge of sledging and dogs. Joyce was a somewhat controversial character, described (by Huntford) as "a strange mixture of fraud, flamboyance and ability",<sup>[6]</sup> but he had impressed Shackleton with his depot-laying work. Ernest Wild, a Royal Naval seaman with 20 years' service, was added to the party on the advice of his brother, the renowned Frank Wild, who was travelling as Shackleton's second-in-command on *Endurance*.

Some of the appointments were cobbled together rather hurriedly, reflecting the limited time frame that Shackleton had allowed for preliminary organisation. Joseph Stenhouse, an able young officer from the British India Steam Navigation Company, was appointed at the last minute as the *Aurora's* First Officer.<sup>[7]</sup> An oddity in the party was the Reverend Arnold Spencer-Smith, a Scottish Episcopal Church priest and former schoolmaster, who joined as a replacement for one of the original members of the expedition who had left for active service in the First World War.<sup>[8]</sup> Victor Hayward, a London finance clerk with a taste for adventure was taken on as a general assistant despite his inexperience, seemingly on the grounds that he was prepared to "do anything".<sup>[9]</sup>

Although the Ross Sea party had a specific role as a depot-laying support group, in the traditions of polar exploration a scientific team was taken, to continue biological, meteorological and magnetic research in the region. The chief scientist was Alexander Stevens, an austere Scots geologist and former theology student.<sup>[10]</sup> John Cope, a 21-year-old Cambridge graduate, was the team's biologist; a would-be medical student, he later became ship's surgeon as well.<sup>[9]</sup> Two other scientists were appointed in Australia, the physicist Dick Richards (who signed up for a nominal wage of £1 per week) and industrial chemist Keith Jack.

## Delays in Australia



Map of the sea routes of *Endurance*, the *James Caird*, and *Aurora*, the overland supply depot route of the Ross Sea party, and the planned overland route of the Weddell Sea party led by Ernest Shackleton on his trans-Antarctic expedition of 1914–15:  
 Voyage of *Endurance*  
 Drift of *Endurance* in pack  
 Ice drift after *Endurance* sinks  
 Voyage of *James Caird*  
 Planned transcontinental route  
 Voyage of *Aurora* to Antarctica  
 Drift and retreat of *Aurora*  
 Supply depot routes



Ross Sea party members: Back row from left: Joyce, Hayward, Cope, Spencer-Smith. Centre: Mackintosh 3rd from left, Stenhouse 4th from left

When Mackintosh and the nucleus of the party arrived in Sydney, Australia late in October 1914 to prepare their expedition, they were faced with an unexpectedly chaotic set of circumstances, bequeathed by Shackleton. The *Aurora* was in no condition to sail, requiring a far more extensive refit than had been anticipated. Shackleton had seemingly misunderstood the terms under which he had acquired the vessel,<sup>[11]</sup> and Mackintosh found that it required virtually total re-equipping.<sup>[12]</sup> To compound the problem, Shackleton had reduced the funds available to Mackintosh from £2,000 to £1,000, expecting him to bridge the difference by soliciting for supplies as free gifts and by mortgaging the ship.<sup>[13]</sup>

Well-wishers in Australia, appalled at the plight in which Shackleton had left this key element of his programme, raised sufficient funds to keep the expedition alive. However, several members of Mackintosh's party resigned, having lost confidence in the venture. Some of the last-minute replacements were raw indeed: wireless operator Lionel Hooke was an 18-year-old electrical apprentice. Also added to the party as a "general assistant" was sportsman, adventurer and future fighter pilot Irvine Gaze, a cousin of Spencer-Smith.<sup>[14]</sup>

Despite all these difficulties, progress was sufficient for the *Aurora* to set sail from Sydney on 15 December 1914, bound for Hobart, where she arrived on 20 December to take on final stores and fuel before departing south. On 24 December, three weeks later than the original target sailing date, the *Aurora* finally sailed for the Antarctic, arriving off Ross Island on 16 January 1915 and thereafter establishing its shore base at Cape Evans, Captain Scott's old headquarters.<sup>[15]</sup>

## First season, 1914–15

### Depot-laying, January–March 1915

Believing that Shackleton might attempt a crossing during the first season, Mackintosh decided that depots had to be laid without delay at Minna Bluff, a prominent Barrier landmark at 78°30'S 169°00'E,<sup>[16]</sup> and at 80°S. These were, in his view, the minimum that would enable Shackleton to survive. The delayed arrival of *Aurora* in the Antarctic had given little time for acclimatisation for the dogs and for the untrained men, and this led to differences of view about how to proceed. Ernest Joyce, by far the most experienced Antarctic traveller in the party, favoured a more cautious approach and wanted to delay the start by at least a week.<sup>[17]</sup> Joyce claimed that Shackleton had given him independent control over sledging activities,<sup>[18]</sup> a view rejected by Mackintosh and later demonstrated as without foundation,<sup>[19]</sup> but it remained a source of grievance to Joyce, and affected the unity of the party.

Mackintosh's view having prevailed, on 24 January 1915 the first of three parties set out for the Barrier journey, the others following on the next day. Further dissension soon arose between Joyce and Mackintosh about how far south the dogs should be taken. Joyce wanted them to go no further than the Bluff, but Mackintosh's sense of urgency meant that they were taken on to 80°S.<sup>[20]</sup> A further setback was the utter failure of the attempts to move stores by motor tractor.<sup>[21]</sup> Although, ultimately, the depots were laid, after a fashion, at the Bluff and at 80°S, the overall operation was a serious disappointment. Not all the stores had reached the depots,<sup>[22]</sup> and, as well as the motor tractor failure, all ten dogs taken on the journey perished during the return. By the time that all parties were reunited at Hut Point on 25 March, the men themselves were exhausted and frostbitten and there was a significant loss of confidence in Mackintosh. The condition of the sea ice in the Sound made the journey back to Cape Evans impossible, so the party was temporarily stranded, forced to make the best of the spartan conditions and to rely on seals for fresh meat and blubber fuel. Their isolation was to last until 1 June.

It later became known that Shackleton had admitted, in a letter sent from South Georgia on 5 December 1914<sup>[23]</sup> to Ernest Perris of the Daily Chronicle, that he had "no chance of crossing that season". Mackintosh was to have been informed of this, but "the cable was never sent".<sup>[24]</sup> The first depot-laying season, and its attendant hardships, had thus been unnecessary.

### Loss of the *Aurora*

When Mackintosh departed on 25 January to lead the depot-laying parties he left the *Aurora* under the command of First Officer Joseph Stenhouse.<sup>[25]</sup> The priority task for Stenhouse was to find a winter anchorage in accordance with Shackleton's instructions not to attempt to anchor south of the Glacier Tongue, an icy protrusion midway between Cape Evans and Hut Point.<sup>[26]</sup> This search proved a long and hazardous process. Stenhouse manoeuvred in the Sound for several weeks before eventually deciding to winter close to the Cape Evans shore headquarters. After a final visit to Hut Point on 11 March to pick up four early returners from the depot-laying parties, he brought the ship to Cape Evans and made it fast with anchors and hawsers, thereafter allowing it to become frozen into the shore ice.

On the night of 7 May a severe gale erupted, tearing the *Aurora* from its moorings and carrying it out to sea attached to a large ice floe. Attempts to contact the shore party by wireless failed. Held fast, and with its engines out of commission, the *Aurora* began its long drift northward away from Cape Evans, out of McMurdo Sound, into the Ross Sea and eventually into the Southern Ocean. It finally broke free on 12 February 1916, reaching New Zealand on 2 April.<sup>[27]</sup>

### Improvisation

The loss of the ship was a devastating blow to the expedition. Fortunately, the sledging rations intended for Shackleton's depots had been landed. However, because Mackintosh had intended to use *Aurora* as the party's main living quarters, most of the shore party's personal gear, food, equipment and fuel was still aboard, leaving the ten men stranded ashore with "only the clothes on their backs".<sup>[28][29]</sup> With no knowledge of the ship's fate, or when or if it might return, they were dependent on their initiative and resourcefulness for their survival, with the knowledge that not only their own fate, but that of Shackleton's party, rested on their reactions to the present crisis.

It would appear that Mackintosh, in this critical situation, displayed qualities of leadership that impressed his men, even the usually adversarial Joyce. He summarised their situation bluntly: "We have to face the possibility that we may have to stay here, unsupported, for two years. We cannot expect rescue before then, and so we must conserve and economize on what we have, and we must seek and apply what substitutes we can gather".<sup>[30]</sup> Their first recourse was to the food and materials from supplies left behind by Scott's and Shackleton's earlier expeditions.<sup>[31]</sup> These supplies provided a harvest of material, which enabled clothing, footwear and equipment to be improvised, while the party used seal meat and blubber as extra sources of food and fuel. "Joyce's Famous Tailoring Shop" fashioned clothes from a large canvas tent abandoned by Scott's expedition.<sup>[32]</sup> Even a brand of tobacco—"Hut Point Mixture"—was concocted by Ernest Wild from sawdust, tea, coffee and a few dried herbs.<sup>[33]</sup> On the last day of August, in his final diary entry, Mackintosh summarised the work that had been completed during the winter, and ended: "Tomorrow we start for Hut Point".<sup>[34]</sup>



The *Aurora*, pictured in New Zealand after the drift

## Second depot-laying season 1915–16

The second season's work was planned in three stages. First, the transfer of all depot stores from Cape Evans to Hut Point; then, the transport of these stores from Hut Point to a base depot at Minna Bluff; finally, a journey south to reinforce the 80° depot and lay new ones at 81°, 82°, 83° and at the foot of the Beardmore Glacier at 83°45'S 171°00'E.

Nine men in teams of three would undertake the sledging work. The first stage, hauling over the sea ice to Hut Point, started on 1 September 1915, and was completed without mishap by the end of the month. The second stage, hauling back and forth between Hut Point and the Bluff, proved more problematic, with unfavourable weather, a difficult Barrier surface, and more dissension between Mackintosh and Joyce over methods. This time, Mackintosh favoured man-hauling while Joyce wanted to use the four fit dogs.<sup>[35]</sup> Mackintosh, whose authority was starting to crumble, allowed Joyce to proceed in his own way whilst he, Wild and Spencer-Smith continued to man-haul. Joyce's methods proved the more effective in terms of loads carried and the fitness of the men.<sup>[36]</sup> The base depot at Minna Bluff was completed by 28 December, but by then some of the men, particularly Spencer-Smith and Mackintosh himself, were visibly weaker through the combination of heavy sledging and poor diet.

Shortly after the main march to the Beardmore began, the failure of a Primus stove led to three men (Cope, Jack and Gaze) returning to Cape Evans.<sup>[37]</sup> The remaining six (Mackintosh, Wild, Spencer-Smith, Joyce, Hayward and Richards) sledged south, with Spencer-Smith failing rapidly and Mackintosh showing signs of scurvy. They battled on, laying the depots, using only minimum provisions themselves although, at Joyce's insistence, keeping the dogs well-fed.

As they neared the foot of the Beardmore, the site of their final depot, Spencer-Smith collapsed, unable to proceed. The others left him alone in a small tent and travelled the remaining few miles to lay the final depot on 26 January 1916. Ernest Wild left a letter for his brother Frank whom he imagined was travelling across from the Weddell Sea with Shackleton. They turned for home, picking up Spencer-Smith on 29 January. He was by now physically helpless and had to be loaded on to the sledge. Mackintosh was soon unable to pull; shortly afterwards he joined Spencer-Smith on the sledge and the leadership of the party unequivocally passed to Joyce.

All the men were now affected by scurvy and snow blindness, but they made good progress on the homeward journey and were within 10 miles (16 km) of the Bluff depot when a blizzard halted them, on 12 February. They remained tent-bound for 10 days and their supplies ran out. In desperation, Joyce, Richards and Hayward sledged through the blizzard to the depot, leaving the invalids in the care of Wild. The round trip of 20 miles (32 km) took a week. After immense personal hardship they returned with food and fuel to sustain their comrades. The march resumed, although scurvy was now rampant throughout the party and, before long, Hayward too collapsed. The three men still on their feet were by now too weak to haul three invalids, so on 8 March Mackintosh volunteered to stay in the tent while the others attempted to take Spencer-Smith and Hayward to Hut Point. A day later Spencer-Smith died, utterly worn out by exhaustion and scurvy, and was buried in the ice. Joyce and Wild reached Hut Point with Hayward on 11 March and went back for Mackintosh. By 16 March the whole party had reached the hut.



Mackintosh and Spencer-Smith being drawn on the sledge by Joyce and Wild

From the start of the hauling of loads from Cape Evans on 1 September 1915 to the final arrival of the exhausted party back at Hut Point, a total of 198 days had passed, easily the longest sledging journey in terms of elapsed time undertaken on any expedition up to that time.<sup>[38]</sup>

### Deaths of Mackintosh and Hayward

The five survivors slowly recovered their strength with a diet of seal meat. The ice was too thin for them to risk the final trip to Cape Evans, and the monotony of their diet and surroundings became wearisome. On 8 May Mackintosh announced that he and Hayward intended to risk the ice and walk to Cape Evans. Against the strenuous objections of their companions they departed, and within the hour disappeared into a blizzard. The others went to look for them after the storm and found only tracks leading to the edge of the broken ice. Mackintosh and Hayward were never seen again. They had either fallen through the thin ice or had been carried out to sea on an ice floe.<sup>[39]</sup> Richards, Joyce and Wild waited until 15 July to make the trip to Cape Evans, where they were at last reunited with Stevens, Cope, Jack and Gaze.

### Rescue



Ernest Shackleton

On 31 May 1916 the world was informed of Shackleton's whereabouts after a two-year silence, through a telegram to his London headquarters from the Falkland Islands. After summarising the history of his adventures following the loss of *Endurance*, he outlined his plans for the rescue of the men stranded on Elephant Island. Because of the southern winter, this could not easily be accomplished, and it was early September before he could turn to the rescue of the Ross Sea party.

By now his expedition funds were entirely exhausted. He also faced opprobrium and distrust, the legacy of the chaos that had preceded *Aurora's* departure in 1914. The Australian, New Zealand and British governments reluctantly agreed jointly to fund the refit of *Aurora* for a relief expedition, but were adamant that Shackleton should not lead it. At their insistence John King Davis,<sup>[40]</sup> who had refused command of *Endurance* in 1914 and was a veteran of Douglas Mawson's Australian expedition, was appointed. Shackleton was permitted to sail as a supernumerary. On 10 January 1917, when the ship reached Cape Evans, the survivors were astonished to see Shackleton approaching them; they then learned for the first time the futility of their labours. After a further week spent in a vain search for the bodies of Mackintosh and Hayward, *Aurora* headed north for New Zealand, carrying the seven survivors of the original shore party.

## Aftermath

The Discovery and Terra Nova huts remain, protected by the Antarctic Heritage Trust and the New Zealand government. The deteriorating condition of the huts has caused concern,<sup>[41]</sup> and some schemes for preservation have led to controversy.<sup>[42]</sup> An inscription by Richards on the wall near his bunk in the Cape Evans hut, listing the names of those lost, can still be read. Of the four dogs who survived the trek, Con was killed by the other dogs in a fight before the rescue. The others, Oscar, Gunner and Towser, returned in the ship to New Zealand and were placed in Wellington Zoo, where Oscar lived, allegedly, to the age of 25.<sup>[43]</sup>

The *Aurora* survived for less than a year after her final return from the Ross Sea. Shackleton had sold her for £10,000, and her new role was as a coal-carrier between Australia and South America. She disappeared in the Pacific Ocean, on or about 2 January 1918, having either foundered in a storm or

been sunk by an enemy raider. Aboard her was James Paton of the Ross Sea ship's party, who had signed on as her boatswain.

Ernest Wild was also a victim of the First World War. He died of typhoid in Malta, on 10 March 1918, whilst serving with the Royal Navy in the Mediterranean.

On 4 July 1923, Joyce and Richards were awarded Albert Medals by George V for their bravery and life-saving efforts during the second depot-laying journey. Wild and Victor Hayward received the same award, posthumously.

Many of the survivors enjoyed long and successful careers. The young wireless operator, Lionel Hooke, joined Amalgamated Wireless Australasia Ltd and was responsible for many technological innovations. He became the company's managing director in 1945 and its chairman in 1962, having been knighted for services to industry in 1957.<sup>[44]</sup>

## See also

- List of Antarctic expeditions
- Heroic Age of Antarctic Exploration

## Notes and references

- ↑ Used by Shackleton himself in 1908–09 and Scott in 1911–12
- ↑ He died aged ninety-one on 8 May 1985
- ↑ Tyler-Lewis, p. 265
- ↑ Huntford, p. 371
- ↑ Ernest Shackleton, *The Heart of the Antarctic*, Heinemann, 1911 pp. 52–3
- ↑ Huntford, p. 194
- ↑ Tyler-Lewis, p. 32
- ↑ Huntford, pp. 412–13
- ↑ <sup>a</sup> <sup>b</sup> Tyler-Lewis, p. 50
- ↑ Tyler-Lewis, p. 41
- ↑ From Douglas Mawson, who had recently returned from his own Antarctic expedition
- ↑ Tyler-Lewis, p. 45
- ↑ Tyler-Lewis, p. 46
- ↑ Tyler-Lewis, p. 50, pp. 267–8
- ↑ Scott had erected a large accommodation hut at Cape Evans as base for his Terra Nova expedition 1910–13. An storage hut, 13 miles (21 km) further south at Hut Point, had been built for his earlier *Discovery* expedition 1901–04. Hut Point was used as a staging post on all subsequent expeditions
- ↑ Bluff depots were normally laid to the south of Minna Bluff, at 79°S
- ↑ M&J Fisher, p. 400
- ↑ Bickel, p. 38
- ↑ Tyler-Lewis, p. 260
- ↑ Huntford, p. 412
- ↑ This was a regular experience in early Antarctic expeditions. See Nimrod expedition 1907–09, Scott's Terra Nova expedition 1910–13
- ↑ Of 220lb of food and fuel planned for the 80° depot, only 135lb was actually deposited – Tyler-Lewis, p. 92
- ↑ This was the date that *Endurance* left South Georgia. bound for the Weddell Sea
- ↑ Tyler-Lewis, pp. 214–5
- ↑ Officially, Stenhouse had been in command since leaving Sydney. The mercantile marine officials there would not accept Mackintosh on the
- ↑ grounds of his impaired eyesight, though this change of command was not revealed to the crew and Mackintosh was still treated as the captain – Tyler-Lewis, p. 51
- ↑ John King Davis later said that, for the ship's safety, this instruction should have been disregarded and the ship wintered in the old *Discovery* berth at Hut Point – Tyler-Lewis, p. 225
- ↑ See Shackleton: *South*, Ch 20 for a full history of the ship's drift
- ↑ Tyler-Lewis, p. 130
- ↑ Spencer-Smith, Stevens, Cope and Richards were at the Cape Evans hut when the ship departed. Mackintosh, Joyce, Wild, Hayward, Jack and Gaze were at Hut Point, returning to Cape Evans on 2 June
- ↑ Bickel, p. 79
- ↑ Shackleton's Nimrod expedition has been based at Cape Royds, 6 miles (10 km) north of Cape Evans
- ↑ Bickel, pp. 80–1
- ↑ Bickel, p. 83
- ↑ Bickel, p. 92
- ↑ 6 dogs had survived the winter, but two were pregnant and could not work. The remaining four were Oscar, Gunner, Towser and Con
- ↑ Tyler-Lewis, p. 159
- ↑ Stevens had remained at Cape Evans to take weather measurements and watch for the ship. He played no part in the depot-laying
- ↑ Tyler-Lewis p. 249
- ↑ Mackintosh had had previous misadventures on the sea ice. In 1909 as a member of the Nimrod expedition he had been lost for several days while walking from the Nimrod to Cape Royds (Beau Riffenburgh: *Nimrod*, Bloomsbury Publications 2004, pp. 266–8), and at the start of the Ross Sea party's first depot-laying season he had got lost walking from Cape Evans to Hut Point
- ↑ See biographical details in Australian DNB online
- ↑ See Griggs article in BBC News Sci/Tech, online
- ↑ See "open letter" from Save the Huts.com
- ↑ Bickel, p. 235
- ↑ Tyler-Lewis, p. 273

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## External links

- The Trans-Antarctic Expedition 1914–1917 (http://www.south-pole.com/p000098a.htm)
- Nova Online – Shackleton's Lost Men (http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/shackleton/1914/lostmen.html)
- Arcane Radio Trivia – The Ross Sea Party's use of wireless (http://tenwatts.blogspot.com/2007/09/hooke-dismantled-wireless.html)
- http://www.xefer.com/2005/06/shackleton



Undated photograph of Ross Sea party members aboard *Aurora*. From the state of Joyce's hair (fourth from left) this was probably after the rescue.

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