

Ernest Shackleton: A Biography

Model Text

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Ernest Shackleton was a famous explorer, who with relentless drive, was one of the first men to successfully explore and return from Antarctica. He is remembered for his ambitious efforts and drive, and was best known as a dynamic leader and an intelligent master mariner.

Early life

Born on 15 February 1874 in County Kildare in Ireland, Ernest Shackleton was the second of ten children. In his early life, Shackleton moved to Dublin and then London. Always restless, he left school at 16 to go to sea. School did not motivate Shackleton; however, he was a prolific and diligent reader – which has been credited to giving him a great sense of adventure. Shackleton had a keen interest in unexplored parts of the world from an early age.



Portrait of Ernest Shackleton

Early career

16-year-old Shackleton joined the merchant navy, which was a profession that both he and his father had always had a shared interest in. Unsurprisingly, ambitious Shackleton achieved the rank of first mate by the age of 18 and became a certified master mariner six years later. This qualification meant Shackleton could command a British ship anywhere in the world.

Early expeditions

His first journey to the polar region was in 1901. He was recruited to be third officer for Robert Falcon Scott. With Scott and one other, Shackleton trekked towards the South Pole in extremely difficult conditions, getting closer to the Pole than anyone had come before. Sadly, this adventure was cut short as Shackleton fell ill and it was essential he was sent home on medical grounds. It was a valuable experience for Shackleton and one which further fed his curiosity in Antarctica. During his second expedition in 1907-09, Shackleton and three companions set a new record for being the first explorers farthest south – at the latitude of 88°S. This was just 97 geographical miles from the South Pole: it was the biggest advance to the South Pole in history. To mark this magnificent achievement, Shackleton was knighted by King Edward VII.

Trans-Antarctic Expedition

Devoted to creating a legacy, he led the Trans-Antarctic Expedition starting on 8 August 1914. Inspired by the challenge, Shackleton raised money through sponsors and selected a competent crew after a very successful recruitment process. 69 dogs were also chosen and trained for the expedition.



Shackleton and his expedition team

He bought the ship, Endurance, for a fraction of the cost and adapted it ready for the expedition. The ship set sail from Plymouth to Buenos Aires: it then spent a month making final preparations before heading for Antarctica.



In December 1914, the team departed Georgia Island, the last time Shackleton and his men would touch land for an astonishing 497 days. In January 1915, the *Endurance* became trapped in ice, ultimately forcing Shackleton and his men to vacate the ship and set up camp on the floating ice. After the ship sank later that year, Shackleton embarked on a heroic escape in April 1916; in which he and his men crowded into three small boats and made their way to Elephant Island (which is off the southern tip of Cape Horn).



Braving the brutal conditions

On 25 August 1916, Shackleton returned to Elephant Island to rescue the remaining crew members. Astonishingly, not a single member of his 28-men team died during the nearly two years they were stranded.

In late 1921, he set off on a fourth mission to the South Pole. His goal was to circumnavigate the Antarctic. However, on 5 January 1922, Shackleton suffered a heart attack on his ship and tragically died (aged 47). Posthumously, Shackleton was diagnosed as having a hole in the heart. Some of his ship mates had been concerned when he had repeated attacks of breathlessness and weakness on several of his expeditions. Dying a hero, Ernest Shackleton is recognised and remembered as one of the most significant and pivotal figures in the Heroic Age of Antarctic Exploration.

