The Author. The Antarctic. November 2014

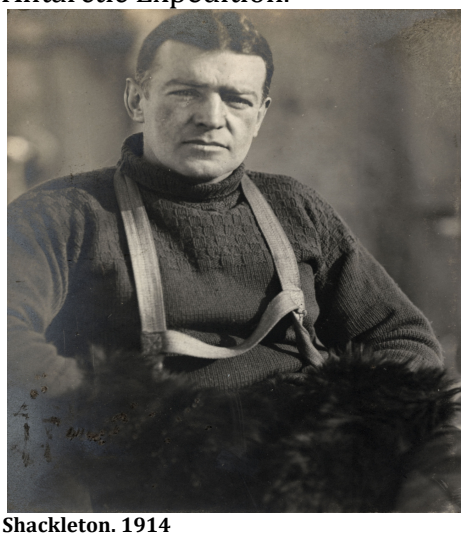
White or Black or Shackleton Gray

By Neil Thomas Proto*

There are moments, sometimes seconds or minutes in duration, when the risk of being outdoors in the cold or the water or on the ice is no longer diminished by gear, clothing, the learned rules of safety, or even the proximity of colleagues. It is when the white clarity of preparation confronts the black reality of nature's deadly unpredictability, where judgment, physicality, and luck meld together to form the intuitive response to save your limb or life or your journey's purpose. You're in the gray.

That experience connects you, albeit only momentarily, to the reality that confronted the explorers to the South Pole. They lived it daily and constantly, in an era when neither gear, nor mapping, nor nutrition, nor communication bore any relationship to ensuring safety that we have available, that I have available to me, in the 21st century. They were in the gray. Ernest Shackleton and his men endured and conquered it in his failed journey to traverse Antarctica in 1914.

Experiencing risk also begins to form confidence about how to prepare physically, which gear to bring, who your colleagues should be, and the journey's purpose. That confidence comes to bear in the moment that matters. It began in elementary ways for me in the Pacific Northwest and the culture and history of the Royal Geographical Society. It has played out on only a few occasions, most recently in the National Geographic expedition to the Falkland Islands, South Georgia, and Antarctica—the 100th anniversary of Shackleton's Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition.



Shackleton. 1914

Shackleton now seems different to me than he once did.

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On December 5, 1914, he and his crew of 27 departed on the Endurance from the Norwegian-operated whaling station at Grytviken, a bay along the northern coast of South Georgia. South Georgia's inhospitable interior had never been mapped. Before departing, Shackleton and his crew—with the curiosity of scientists and geographers—became familiar with the mountains and glaciers that surrounded the whaling station in Stromness, nearby. These facts turned out to critical to their fate.

We visited both whaling stations—their skeletal remains continue to be the only habitable places in South Georgia where, periodically, guides will stay. They are approachable only by water.

The Endurance traveled east out of Grytviken, and turned south toward the Weddell Sea and Antarctica. To get there, the ship traveled through the Drake Passage, which has the strongest sustained westerly winds in the world and a water flow rate 150 times all the globe's rivers combined. We traveled through it three times—now in a southwesterly direction toward the Antarctic Peninsula. The National Geographic Explorer is a modern, sophisticated vessel, with GPS, depth display signals, and ballast and turning capabilities that only astonish. But it is not disconnected from the past it now sought to emulate: Explorer's crew remains conversant in conventional charts, the sextant, and the use of hand held tools and visual observation to map the way. We were pulled and slammed by 20-foot swells for two long days of discomfort for some. Shackleton commanded a three mast sailing vessel, 144 feet in length, with a coal-fired steam engine, and sledge dogs onboard. It was among the sturdiest ship's built in this era, known appropriately as "The Heroic Age" of exploration. He did not make it to the continent. The Endurance was caught in the Weddell Sea's pack ice and, eventually, crushed. The story from that moment on is well chronicled.

Seeing the story's geography—even as travelers in time—is a different matter altogether.

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National Geographic managed risk throughout the expedition in dangerously frigid waters, on fast moving, wind-buffeted Zodiacs, through "wet" landings including in ice, climbing up steep inclines of snow, ice, wet tussock grass, or glacier-shattered rock, standing on ice not 20 yards from the sea underneath, and with passenger/photographers intent on wandering alone and often far distant, up hills, among penguins and mating, ferociously territorial fur seals and 5-6 ton elephant seals who move against perceived intruders with stunning alacrity. More than 100 of us with whom to contend, each with different skills, physicality, and judgment.

"We … often could not avoid the radical, often abrupt changes in the weather… and the potential for the accident."

There was mathematics involved in the staff's daily judgments, and intuition based on experience for those judgments made in the moment. They worked with the Explorer's Captain to ensure narrow passageways were passable, bays could provide Zodiac excursions to shore, and the ship's speed accommodated the rigorous schedule and, with regular notice and instruction, accommodated a modicum of safe movement for passengers on board. The variables were substantial in number and complexity; and the fact that many among us—but not all—had insurance was not a basis for judgment about liability, commercial embarrassment, or the need to ensure we experienced the fullness of this expedition with as much safety as they could provide.

A calm "wet" landing. 2014

We did not avoid risk, and often could not avoid the radical, often abrupt changes in the weather, ice conditions, the rough sea and wind currents in the Drake Passage, and the potential for the accident. I found myself by choice always going higher and longer, often with others yet, as I realized early, always with distance between us compelled by the terrain, or wind, or individual choice to stop and look, and always with only my own skill to manage the risk.

In search of the higher and better view. The Author. 2014

Around and beneath us was ice, snow, loose rock, wet grass when you found it, and on occasion, the easy misstep to

the slide into water. The physical force and hurricane sound of the katabolic wind drew me inward, thinking, emphasizing my aloneness, and, sometimes, momentarily threw me off balance, when only prudent movement and core muscles held me in place. There where uneasy moments, but I understood safety and gear, and the limits of my physicality—I might have done a few things differently to manage risk, but I melded guidance from others about not compounding mistake by making another, and remained conscious of the proximity of colleagues.

Which brought me and others back to Shackleton: His respect for risk taking in the dangerous unpredictability of these settings; and the judgments he made to manage risk that ensured the survival of his crew.

* * *

I began to learn "respect for risk" on the edge of America, in the Pacific Northwest, on the 6 mile long Dungeness Spit that jutted into the gray-green churning tumult of the Straights of Juan DeFuca. With three friends of practical experience, we hiked Dungeness' length at high tide, in the cold, fog, and rain of late winter, to reach the comfort of its lighthouse, and then returned. Only the shoreline—constantly erupted by incoming waters and impeded by gigantic broken tree limbs, and ungainly, slippery sea grass—was available to us. It was an introduction to equipment, clothing, rules of safety, the physicality to anticipate and respond to peril, and the camaraderie critical in the outdoors. Other experiences introduced risk, including the 4-seater seaplane flight to the San Juan Islands in February's bleak rain and my reliance on the confident culture of the pilots. Hard-earned lessons followed through the guidance of prudent colleagues—judging terrain, weather, wind, geographic direction, and the equipment culture and forms of physical demands of snowshoeing, sea kayaking, and sailing. Visits to REI to probe books and ask questions about camping and mountain climbing, and then flight on the ski-converted twin engine Otter, off an ice pond, up Mount McKinley, in January, and what I learned about the history and gamely, risk taking, exploratory culture of "bush pilots." [1]

The most enduring education came at Oregon's Mount Hood. We intended to snowshoe. The wind chill had brought the temperature to minus 12. The snow continued to fall in blinding waves. We couldn't retain surface traction or keep our hands, toes, or faces warm enough. After a hundred yards we agreed to turn back. It was an education in limits.

There were other experiences in times and settings where risk was involved—the Soviet Union in 1975,[2] the Sierra Madres with the Mexican Army in 1978 [3] —but none seemed comparable to understanding and managing the risk taken in the outdoors.

The prelude to all these experiences was reading about British explorers, their temperament and broad knowledge—especially Richard Francis Burton in Mecca and Africa, and those archeologists and explorers who tempered the life of T.E.

Lawrence—, the meaning of preparation, the scientific, literary, and artistic skill (that is, the integrative skill) the Royal Geographical Society often expected of those expeditions it funded and, a decade ago, a deeper introduction to the mentality and imperatives of Ernest Shackleton and the documented camaraderie of his crew under conditions unique on the globe. I was learning about respect for risk. It's when I began to form the idea of seeing Antarctica.

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From the ice that disemboweled the Endurance, Shackleton led his men in three small boats—each about 25 feet in length—hundreds of miles from the Weddell Sea until they eventually found land in a barren, snow covered inlet reeking of guano on Elephant Island, just north of the Antarctic Peninsula. They had camped on ice flows for months before that. Until they couldn't.

"[I]t was hard to imagine the… the compelling display of courage,ingenuity,collaboration camaraderie, persistence, and good luck."

Only a few days after we left South Georgia, I was up at 5 am and headed to the Bridge to scan the horizon, looking, as a few others already were, for Elephant Island. The sun was rising in the east. The photos of Elephant Island taken by the Endurance photographer Frank Hurley in 1916 were laid out for us to compare to what we were seeing. The sun illuminated a steep mountain in glowing white, covered at its peak by gray moving clouds until, within moments, the Captain confirmed, Elephant Island was visible. In the beauty of this setting, the Shackleton story overwhelms you and determines immediately how you think about the setting: forbidding, uninhabitable, and dangerous. It was summer for us. Shackleton's men were there in winter, in clothes worn, tattered, and wet, on land for the first time in months, and with utter uncertainty they'd ever be rescued.

The small, rocky beach on which they set up camp with two inverted boats to sleep under—named, affectionately, Cape Wild (Shackleton's next in command)—has been eroded by brutal wind and evolutions in the landscape that once provided protection against the sea's high tide. By 9 am we were in Zodiacs, surrounded by hardening ice and the feel of deadly cold. The pilot handled the Yamaha engine with care, moving toward Point Wild.

Where the crew lived. Elephant Island.2014

For all I know about Shackleton and this history, and even with the depth of knowledge provided by the NG staff and fellow passengers, and the availability of Frank Hurley's photographs, it was hard to imagine

the power of what happened in this place: the compelling display of courage, ingenuity, collaboration, camaraderie, persistence, and good luck.

Shackleton left 22 of his men (under Wild's command) and headed northeast, with five others, to South Georgia to find the help necessary to rescue them. They had to sail, once again, through the Drake Passage, making the most of the winds, and with the benefit of a sextant and the canny, intuitive knowledge of the sea held by the Endurance's skipper, Frank Worsley.

Once reaching the uninhabited south side of South Georgia, Shackleton and two of his crew hiked across the unchartered mountainous interior, filled with hidden crevasses and almost impassable ice fields. It took them 36 hours, until he recognized the familiarity of Stromness.

Stromness. Whaling station, l. r.,2014

While we were there, I was in a group of perhaps 40 who took the "long hike," more vertical than I suspected, to the edge of the interior, to reach the elevation where Shackleton sighted Stromness' whaling station and knew he had made it. Our few mile trek was over glacial-crushed stones, uneven terrain, and through fast gushing streams filled with moving rocks.

"Physically and mentally, Shackleton was intent on speeding through life with intense velocity….[A] force into the 21st Century."

Once there, I turned to see the perspective—but could hardly experience the relief he may have had, looking at the hoped-for sight yet still deadly in risk from snow, ice, and the mountain waterfall they needed to scale. Before him remained months of effort to rescue all of his men from Elephant Island. He succeeded on the fourth attempt.

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We ended that day in Gryvitken, at the small cemetery located on a wind sweep hillside surrounded by a white fence. We all stood near Shackleton's gravesite, the only one that is laid out north to south and faces the sea**,** cup of scotch in hand, sipped slowly, as a toast was made to his memory
Next to him is the grave of Frank Wild, his second in command and long time friend. Beneath his feet is the grave of the famed Norwegian explorer, Roald Amundsen, who was the first to reach the South Pole.

The failure of Shackleton's Trans-Antarctic expedition, and the way he carved out choices amid almost indescribable harshness, has made him endure as a force and temperament worthy of study by

academics and business leaders into the 21st Century.[4] Books and articles on his life and times and fateful journey have been published, reissued, and revisited.[5] His life-size statute stands outside the Royal Geographical Society, to be viewed daily.

RGS. London.

He was the imperative for my choice of this expedition (and for many others on board), and the public rationale for National Geographic framing the expedition as it did.

When you reach the cemetery, you're struck by the thoughtfulness and design of Shackleton's large vertical granite headstone. There is nothing comparable for the others buried there. The headstone was made in Edinburgh and erected in 1928, six years after he was buried. What was jolting to me was the choice of inscription engraved on the back. Robert Browning: "I hold that a man should strive to the uttermost for his life's set prize."

It may have been Shackleton's choice or his wife's, or a judgment of history by the men who commissioned the headstone. Far more applicable, and Browning's and Shackleton's connection to the temperament of the 21st century, are the words from *Prospice*, which were among Shackleton's professed favorites for reasons that seem fundamental to what he understood about himself, the meaning of risk-taking, and the way history has judged him: "For sudden, the worst turns the best to the brave."

Physically and mentally, Shackleton was intent on speeding through life with intense velocity, with a capacity for sound judgment elevated in moments of danger when his men's lives were at stake that was largely flawless and fundamentally humane. That judgment was never overshadowed by his need for recognition. After Endurance, he volunteered his skill in Murmansk, in northern Russia, sent there by the Allied governments during the close of the Great War to organize an alternative government to the Communists and to give Murmansk an urban identity. They were grand visions in a setting he understood. Frank Wild joined him until the War's conclusion. In 1921, he raised private funding for a new Antarctic expedition, its purpose less important than the fact he attracted many of his old colleagues, including Wild, and could not, as his life reflected and his own acknowledgment recognized, remain idle, as he uniquely understood that condition. [6]

He would not be diverted by the commonplace. He sought only things that were big and required imagination. He was intent on skimming through seemingly sensible opportunities until he found what he knew was of value and involved risk in the unknown, then latched on to it and defined it in a way his temperament and nature expanded. Even at the end of his life, at a stop of memory and expectation in South Georgia, the velocity remained undiminished until the limit of his own physicality, not the loss of speed overwhelmed him. He was buried where he and most explorers and historians find imminently sensible: Grivitkin. The gravesite only elevates his continued relevance into this century: distinctive, boldly placed by others in the snow, and wind, and fog, and the full meaning of Shackleton Gray.

Antarctica. 2014

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[1] See, for example, "On the Edge of America," http://neilthomasproto.com/site/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/NTProto_OntheEdgeofAmerica.pdf ; and "Implicit Danger," . http://neilthomasproto.com/site/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/NTProtoImplicitDanger.pdf

[2] The Soviet Union. January 1975—snow falling heavily, the sidewalks ice-crusted, and then a late night journey on the Moscow to Leningrad train, where getting between cars required battling winds, snow drifts, and slippery railings and where falling headlong into the oblivion of an endless, dark embankment stiffened your legs and grip. It was a restless, black journey broken only by seeing a bundled, robust woman sweeping foot deep snow off train platforms at places we stopped under a glaring white light that illuminated her and the arduous, impossible task she was assigned. Imagination was at play, in a mysterious Zhivago-tempered land, where we were followed indiscreetly, and one of my fellow passengers actually sought, without success, to smuggle in a banned Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn novel. The real risk came from the Soviet Union—the novel was returned eight days later, in a small room, in the Pa-Am terminal, when we were moments from departure.

[3] 1978. The Sierra Madre Mountains, on Mexico's western coastline, in the cocaine-growing region on our border that its government did not control. I was in a Vietnam era helicopter, with a dozen Mexican Army soldiers and a Drug Enforcement Administration agent charged with protecting my safety. Below us was a smaller helicopter filled with raw herbicide. Its purpose was to eradicate opium poppies grown along steep hillsides before its by-product reached the United States. Drug and gun smugglers regularly shot down the helicopters. Thirty minutes into the journey, deep in the

mountains, we landed. The smaller helicopter was to pump water from a stream into its tank. The soldiers formed a perimeter to protect it; the DEA agent pulled his pistol to protect me. We got out of the helicopter. Within minutes we were off. I sat near the window to watch the process first hand. I was an attorney in the United States Department of Justice, representing the State Department in litigation. We agreed I should experience how this eradication operated.

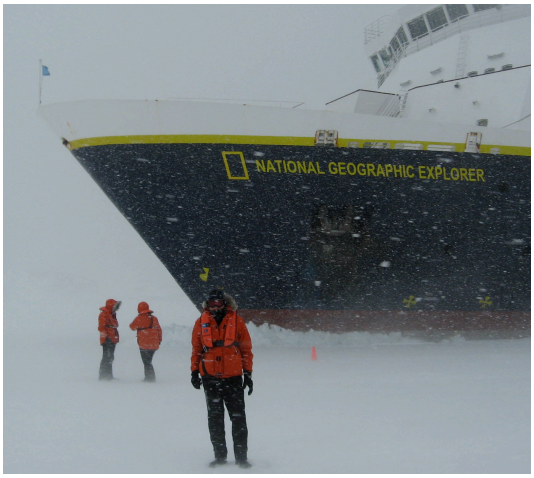
[4] "Ernest Shackleton's Lessons for Leaders," https://hbr.org/2012/11/ernest-shackletons-lessons-for/; Business Section, NY Times (December 24, 2012, "Leadership Lessons from the Shackleton Expedition;" Morrell and Capparell, *Shackleton's Way : Leadership Lessons from the Great Antarctic Explorer*, (2002) Preface by Alexandra Shackleton; and Perkins, Dennis. *Leading at the Edge: Leadership Lessons from the Extraordinary Saga of Shackleton's Antarctica Expedition* (2000).

[5] Listen to Ernest Shackleton describing his 1908 South Pole Expedition and Ernest Shackleton speaking on Antarctic attempt. Movies include "Shackleton" (2002) with Kenneth Branaugh; "Scott of the Antarctic" (1948) with John Mills; "The Last Place on Earth" (1985) with Martin Shaw, Shackleton's influence is poignantly displayed; and "South"(1919) by Frank Hurley (shown during NG expedition in November). Books include Shackleton's, *South*(1919); Edward Larson, *Empire of Ice, Scott, Shackleton, and the Heroic Age of Antarctic Science* (2011); Alfred Lansing's *Endurance* (1955, reissued in 1999, was mailed by National Geographic in the fall of 2014 to each expedition participant as a primer); Illustrated picture book, *Shackleton's Journey* by William Grill(2014); *Shackleton: Antarctic Odyssey* by Nick Bertozzi (2014);and James Mayer, *Shackleton: A life in Poetry*(2014). Worsley, Frank A., *Endurance: An Epic of Polar Adventure* (1931); and Mill, Hugh Robert. *The Life of Sir Ernest Shackleton (*2006*).*

[6] In the January 2015 Newsletter introducing this essay, I wrote that Antarctica's "beauty and brutal roughness is a powerful lure: it's easy to see… why Ernest Shackleton could not stay away." Shackleton may have found solace—if not reasoning—for his exploratory imperative in poetry, and often-recited poetry as an inspiration for his men. James Mayer, *Shackleton: A life in Poetry*(2014). In Murmansk, one of Shackleton's officers heard him "declaim" poetry by Robert Browning, as he looked over "vast expanses of snow…as though he wished to imprint it on his memory." The officer later recounted Shackleton's revealing observation about himself as if in a third person dialogue:

"'You don't know who said that,' he affirmed."
"'No, I don't know who said that,' the officer replied."
"'Well, Shackleton said it.'"
"'That explorer-man?' I asked. 'He must be a man of parts. I never knew he was a poet!'"
"Again he turned on me. 'Then why the devil do you think he became an explorer?'"
"I can't remember when my eyes were more completely opened." (Huntford, *Shackleton*, 669, A.F. Birch-Jones letters to Margery Fisher. October 26,1918, and January 21,1919.See also Huntford's discussion of T.S. Elliot's reliance of Shackleton's recollections of crossing South Georgia, when he wrote "The Waste Land").

In tribute. Gryvitkin.2014



On ice. 2014