

Time to raise a glass, with ice, to Irish hero Ernest Shackleton

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High on the wall of a terraced house in Dublin's Donnybrook district, scarcely visible to passers-by, a small circular plaque can be found commemorating the Irish-born explorer, Sir Ernest Shackleton.

The curiosity is not that Shackleton's incredible life in the remote Antarctic wilderness is remembered in a leafy Dublin suburb where he lived briefly as a child. Even more remarkable is that the modest little plaque is the only official memorial in Ireland to an Irishman whose feats place him alongside history's great explorers such as Christopher Columbus, James Cook and Roald Amundsen.

Shackleton's current popularity across the world stands in stark contrast with the apparent official indifference to a major historical figure. However, it remains just one of the many paradoxes involving this complex, beguiling and often contradictory character.

Shackleton today is one of the most recognisable figures from the past, a man synonymous with the great adventures in the Antarctic. He is widely celebrated as the charismatic and outstanding leader who never lost a man. Modern-day adventurers are queuing up to replicate his famous journeys, especially the epic *Endurance* expedition which sailed south exactly 100 years ago.

Business management schools in America teach Shackleton's leadership style to aspiring entrepreneurs and earlier this year UCD opened the Shackleton Lounge at the O'Brien Centre for Science. The paradox is that Shackleton was a spectacular failure as a businessman.

Yet Shackleton's cult status is a relatively new phenomenon. For decades after his death he was a marginal, half-forgotten figure who spent longer in the shadows than in the spotlight. The first comprehensive biography, written in the mid-1950s, reported how Shackleton had become a "surprisingly vague" character.

Friends struggled to raise money to erect a statue and *James Caird*, the little boat which made the memorable 800-mile

crossing of the Southern Ocean in 1916, gathered dust for years in a corner of the London's National Maritime Museum or at Shackleton's old school, Dulwich College.

Nor was it possible for Shackleton to be commemorated in Ireland, largely because he sailed under the ubiquitous Union Jack. With suitable timing, Shackleton died in January 1922, two days before the end of British rule was formally approved by Dáil Éireann, and he subsequently became one of many Irish characters quietly overlooked by history. It would be 80 years and into a new century before any explorer from the heroic age of Antarctic exploration was formally commemorated in Ireland, which largely explains why the small plaque on the house in Dublin remains the only memorial to Shackleton in his home country.

In addition, Shackleton was a member of the Anglo-Irish ascendancy, who tried – and failed – to become an MP on a ticket of no Home Rule for Ireland. He was born in 1874 on a farm at Kilkea, near Athy, Co Kildare. On his father's side, the family came from old English Quaker stock that fled to Ireland in the early 18th century and established the school at Ballitore where later pupils included Edmund Burke. Shackleton's mother came from the old-established Fitzmaurice clan of Kerry and provided a strong Irish bloodline. He left Ireland for England at the age of 10 and never returned, except for a few short visits.

The pendulum of popularity began to swing in Shackleton's favour in the 1980s onwards, partly as a result of Roland Huntford's brutal demolition of Captain Scott which prompted a drastic reappraisal of a British national icon. As Scott's stock sank, Shackleton fame rose.

The role-reversal saw Shackleton catapulted to celebrity status as the flawless adventurer who never lost a man and saw Scott demoted to the role of bungling amateur whose failure symbolised the wider national decline of British pomp and power. Neither claim is quite true.

Delving into Shackleton's character shows there were two different men – one on the ice and an altogether different man at home.

Shackleton in the icy wilderness was a charismatic, ambitious, Edwardian explorer with a love for poetry who touched greatness on four expeditions to the Antarctic. He first went to the ice in 1901, forcing his way onto Scott's *Discovery* expedition because he became friendly with the enterprise's principal sponsor.

In 1907, he led his own expedition to Antarctica on what became his greatest feat of exploration. Despite unbearable hardships and poor provisioning, Shackleton's party of four men discovered the route to the South Pole and pioneered the way for Amundsen and Scott to reach 90° south soon after. Shackleton led his weak and starving men to within 97 miles (geographic) of the Pole and took the brave decision to turn back within sight of his goal because he did not have enough food to get back to base camp. With a few extra pounds of food, the first person to stand at the South Pole would have been the man from Kildare.

The critical life-or-death decision exemplified Shackleton's leadership and putting the safety of his men first. One said all four would have died had they waited another hour before turning for home – a remarkable piece of judgement in a four-month trek of almost 1,800 miles (2,800 km).

Above all, Shackleton was a survivor and saw no merit in noble sacrifice. To his wife he simply said: "I thought you would prefer a live donkey to a dead lion."

After Amundsen reached the South Pole in 1911, Shackleton looked for a new challenge. He found it in an audacious plan to cross the Antarctic continent from coast to coast, a journey of nearly 1,800 miles. It was a failure of epic proportions but became Shackleton's finest hour.

Endurance, the expedition ship, was crushed by the ice and the 28 men survived for 16 months on an ice floe. After taking three lifeboats to the bleak Elephant Island, Shackleton sailed the *James Caird* to South Georgia to fetch rescue for 22 castaways left behind on the island. Assisted by the indestructible Kerryman Tom Crean, Shackleton marched across South Georgia's mountains and glaciers and, months later, returned to rescue his men from Elephant Island. Not a man was lost. On the other side of the continent the men assigned to lay supply depots for Shackleton's crossing party were not so lucky. Three men died, demolishing the myth that Shackleton never lost a man.

Nevertheless, Shackleton's genius for leadership was the crucial difference in the struggle for survival. He never took unnecessary risks or asked his men to do anything he would not do himself. His unwavering optimism inspired his men to believe they would survive and chimed with Napoleon's remark: "A leader is a dealer in hope".

Away from the ice, Shackleton cut a very different figure. At home he was a flawed, restless and hopelessly unproductive character who struggled to come to terms with day-to-day routine and domestic responsibilities. His private life was chaotic and messy, interspersed with affairs and gripped by pangs of guilt at letting down his wife. He limped from one hopeless

commercial venture to another and Shackleton's only notable achievement in business was that he failed at virtually everything. He maintained a child-like longing to search for buried treasure, as though unearthing a pot of gold would solve all his money worries. El Dorado, though, always remained beyond his grasp.

However, the domestic flaws cannot obscure the fact that Shackleton was a one-off, a unique and compelling character who wrote his own history. He raced through life, rarely glancing sideways and never looking back.

Apsley Cherry-Garrard, part of Scott's last expedition, wrote: "For a joint scientific and geographical piece of organisation, give me Scott; for a Winter Journey, Wilson; for a dash to the Pole and nothing else, Amundsen: and if I am in the devil of a hole and want to get out of it, give me Shackleton every time."

Amundsen, the most accomplished Polar explorer, declared: "Sir Ernest Shackleton's name will for evermore be engraved with letters of fire in the history of Antarctic exploration."

A modest little plaque in a Dublin suburb hardly does justice to Ireland's greatest explorer.

Shackleton – By Endurance We Conquer by Michael Smith, is published by The Collins Press, priced €24.99