

The Heroic Antarctic Explorers and the South African (2nd Anglo-Boer) War

By Sydney Cullis

Abstract

As the Anglo-Boer (South African) War (ABW) - 1899 to 1902 - took place in the middle of what is known as the Heroic Era of Antarctic Exploration – 1895 to 1922- it is not surprising that many men (about 20) took part in both events. Less well known, however, is that for several of the prominent Antarctic explorers, it was the ABW that, either directly or indirectly, was responsible for their subsequent careers as explorers. They are

Sir Ernest Shackleton – nowadays considered the most famous of the Antarctic explorers. He was only able to join Scott's first Antarctic expedition on *Discovery* as a result of meeting a young lieutenant when his ship, *Tintagel Castle*, was commandeered as a troopship during the ABW.

Frank Wild, Shackleton's 2-i-C and most experienced of all the Antarctic explorers. He was only able to be selected for *Discovery* as he had enlisted in the Royal Navy. This was due to a threat that Germany would join the war on the Boer's side and his younger brother has died in Kroonstad during the War.

Ernest Joyce – the only person, other than Frank Wild, to have four bars on his Polar Medal. He was serving on HMS *Gibraltar* in Simons Town during the ABW when selected by Scott to replace seamen from *Discovery* who had been sent back to the UK for disciplinary reasons.

John King Davis – the most celebrated of the sailing skippers of the Heroic Era. When in Cape Town during the ABW he was afforded the opportunity to “run away to sea” that led to his signing on to a sailing ship.

Lawrence Oates – a member of Scott's fateful Polar Party who famously left their tent in a blizzard to increase the chances of his companions' survival. He was selected by Scott to be in charge of the horses on his *Terra Nova* expedition as he was a member of an elite cavalry regiment- and he had only been able to join that regiment as a result of a shortage of officers during the ABW.

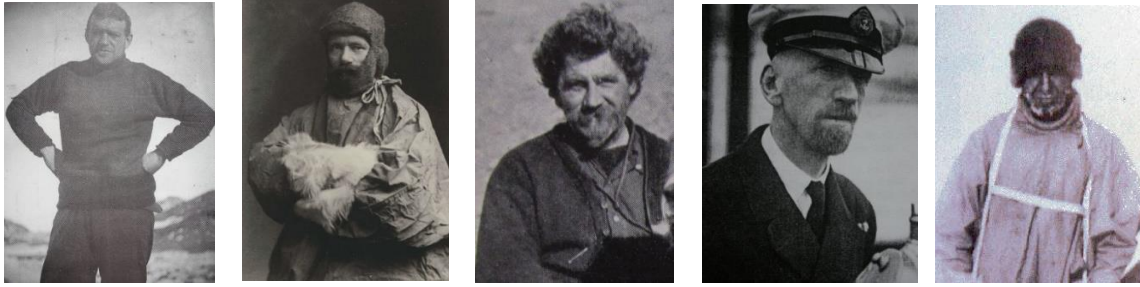
As the South African or 2nd Anglo- Boer War (1899-1902) occurred during what is known as the Heroic Era of Antarctic Exploration (1895-1922), it is not surprising that many men took part in both. (Table 1)

Paper / notes

Table 1: Antarctic Explorers involved in Anglo-Boer War

Name	Expedition	ABW involvement
Ernest Joyce	Discovery	HMS SYBILLE
	Nimrod	HMS GIBRALTAR
	Ross Sea Party	
Horrace Buckridge	Discovery	Imperial Light Infantry
	Morning	Scott's Railway Guards
George Vince	Discovery	HMS BEAGLE
Gerald Doorly	Morning	Hospital Ship
Alister Mackay	Nimrod	London Imperial Volunteers
	Quest	South African Constabulary Civilian Surgeon
Bertram Armytage	Nimrod	6 th Dragoon Guards (Carbineers)
Jameson Adams	Nimrod	Unknown service
Lawrence Oates	Terra Nova	6 th Inniskilling Dragoon Guards
Cecil Mears	Terra Nova	1 st Scottish Horse
Mortimer McCarthy	Terra Nova	Royal Navy
Francis Drake	Terra Nova	HMS PELORUS
Alfred Jackson	Terra Nova	HMS MOHAWK
John Close	Aurora	1 st Kitchener's Flying Scouts

In addition, the careers of five prominent explorers started, directly or indirectly, as a result of the Anglo - Boer War. They were Ernest Shackleton, Frank Wild, Ernest Joyce, John King Davis, and Lawrence Oates.



The Heroic Era of Antarctic Exploration started in 1895 with the Sixth International Geographical Congress in London, which passed a resolution that “the further exploration of the Antarctic regions should be undertaken before the close of the century”. Over the next 25 years 17 expeditions from 9 countries visited Antarctica (Table 2).

Table 2: Heroic Era of Antarctic Exploration

1895	6 th International Geographical Congress	
1897-1899	<i>Belgica</i>	Belgium
1898-1900	<i>Southern Cross</i>	UK/Norway
1901-1904	<i>Discovery</i>	UK
1901-1903	<i>Gauss</i>	Germany
1901-1903	<i>Antarctic</i>	Sweden
1902-1904	<i>Scotia</i>	<i>Scotland</i>
1903-1905	<i>Francais</i>	France
1907-1909	<i>Nimrod</i>	UK
1908-1910	<i>Pourquoi Pas?</i>	France
1910-1912	<i>Kainan Maru</i>	Japan
1910-1912	<i>Fram</i>	Norway
1910-1913	<i>Terra Nova</i>	UK
1911-1913	<i>Deutschland</i>	Germany
1911-1914	<i>Aurora</i>	Australia
1914-1917	<i>Endurance</i>	UK
1914-1917	<i>Aurora</i>	UK
1921-1922	<i>Quest</i>	UK

Two of them, Scott’s *Discovery* and von Drygalski’s *Gauss*, spent several weeks in South Africa during the War. While in Simon’s Town, Scott and some of his officers and scientists visited the Boer POW camp which was situated on what is now the Simon’s Town golf course. Most of the prisoners there had been captured at the Battle of Paardeberg and were awaiting shipment to St Helena – one of them asked to be allowed to join *Discovery* instead! (1)

The Era ended when Shackleton died from a heart attack when anchored in *Quest* off Grytviken in South Georgia on 5th January 1922.

Sir Ernest Shackleton

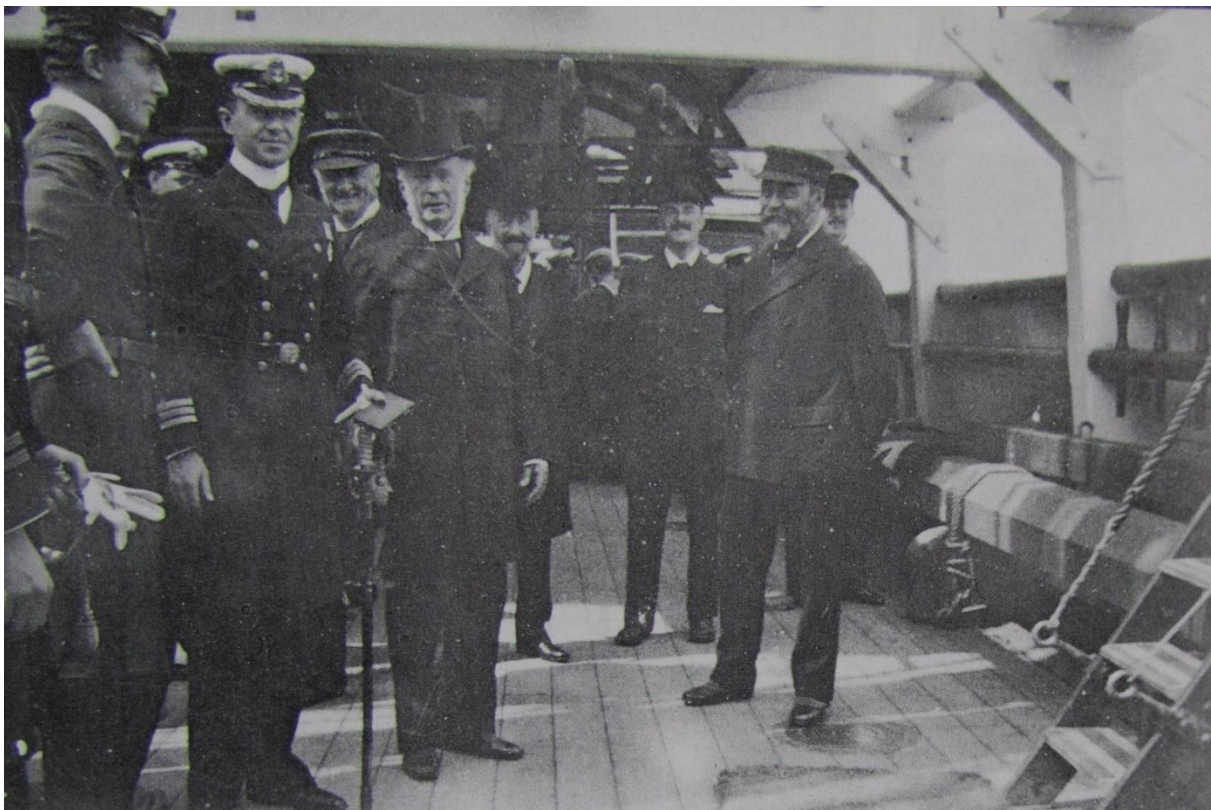
After leaving Dulwich College at 16 he joined the Merchant Navy and worked his way up through the ranks so that in 1899 he was 3rd Officer on *Tintagel Castle*, part of the Mail Service to South Africa. She had been commandeered as a troopship to bring out reinforcements to the Cape after the reverses of Black Week. Together with the ship surgeon, W Maclean, he published his first book, an illustrated account of the voyage, entitled *OHMS or How 1200 Soldiers went to Table Bay*.

Tintagel Castle left Southampton on 10 March 1900 and as entertainment officer he was responsible for organising the Crossing the Line ceremony. One of those inducted was President Kruger who “was discovered by a soldier concealed in a wash-house, the last place where anyone would have looked for him... He appeared ill at ease, for he feared the water, with which he was little acquainted, would soon be liberally applied to him” (2).



President Kruger being shaved – with pipe and Bible

They arrived in Cape Town on 31st March but during the voyage he had met up with a young lieutenant in the 2nd East Surrey Regiment named Cedric Longstaff. When Shackleton returned to the UK, he went to visit Cedric's father, Llewellyn Longstaff, to report that his son had arrived safely in South Africa. The previous year Longstaff had donated £25,000 to Scott which had made his first Antarctic expedition in *Discovery* possible. It is, therefore, highly probable that Longstaff persuaded Scott to take Shackleton, a Merchant Navy officer, on the *Discovery* expedition which was very much a Royal Navy operation – justifying the proposal that the Anglo-Boer War was directly responsible for Shackleton beginning his career as a polar explorer (3).



Scott (2nd from left) and Llewellyn Longstaff (5th from left) prior to *Discovery's* departure

When *Discovery* reached Antarctica, Scott chose Shackleton and Edward Wilson, the Junior Medical Officer, to accompany him on his attempt to reach the South Pole. They only achieved a furthest south of 82° 17 minutes, nevertheless it was considerably further south than anybody had achieved previously. They had developed scurvy - and only just managed to struggle back to their base. Shackleton was the most severely affected and, much to his disappointment, was sent back to the UK on the relief vessel, *Morning*.

Edward Wilson's views on the Anglo-Boer War are interesting as they would not have been shared by many on *Discovery*. "The very thought of killing someone is a ghastly nightmare to me, chiefly the result of a very realistic account of our sinful --- cruelty over the bombardment of Cronje in the Modder" and "As a nation we have the vilest of sins which everyone extols as the glories of Imperialism. One day all this part of our history will be looked upon in its proper light" (4).

Not long after Shackleton returned to the UK he started planning his own attempt to be the first to reach the South Pole. *Nimrod* left London in August 1907 and on 9th January 1909 he, accompanied by Frank Wild and two others, reached 88°23' South, 180 kilometres from the South Pole. He realised that, although they would be able to reach the Pole, they would not make it back to their base and made the decision to turn back. (5)

With the South Pole having been reached by Amundsen and Scott in 1911/12, he then planned to cross the Continent of Antarctica from the Weddell Sea to the Ross Sea. This resulted in the dramatic sagas of the *Endurance* and Ross Sea Party expeditions (6).

By 1921, with failing health and disastrous financial and family commitments, Shackleton decided to "get away from it all" by heading for Antarctica in *Quest*. On 5th January 1922, when *Quest* was anchored off Grytviken in South Georgia, he had (another) heart attack and died. At his widow's request he was buried in the Whalers Cemetery there (7).

Frank Wild

Shackleton's 2-i-C and confidant on all his expeditions and was without doubt the most experienced explorer of the Heroic Era, having played a prominent part in five major expeditions.

Like Shackleton he joined the Merchant Navy as a teenager and by 1900 had sailed around the world nine times and was 2nd officer on the Premier of New South Wales's yacht, *Sunbeam*, when, as he recorded in his memoirs.(8)

"Then came the Boer War – It will be remembered that relations between Germany and England were somewhat strained at the time and hundreds of men, of whom I

was one, joined the Royal Navy from the merchant service expecting to have a smash at the German Navy”

In addition, in July 1900 his younger brother, Benjamin Eustace Wild, who was in the Army Service Corps died of typhoid in Kroonstad, aged 19(9). Two months later Frank Wild joined the Royal Navy as a seaman - so when Scott asked for volunteers from the Royal Navy to join the Discovery expedition he was eligible to apply - and was chosen from more than 3000 other applicants. In his case, too, his subsequent career as a polar explorer was a result of the Anglo-Boer War. He was Shackleton’s right-hand-man in his other expeditions and took over command of *Quest* when Shackleton died. He was also in command of one of the bases on Douglas Mawson’s Australian Antarctic Expedition – so his Polar Medal had four bars.



Shackleton and Wild's graves in South Georgia



Frank Wild's Polar Medal

Ernest Joyce

The only other person to have four bars on his Polar medal is Ernest Joyce.⁽¹⁰⁾ He came from a very deprived background in London’s East End and joined the Royal Navy as a seaman at the age of 16. In October 1900 he left Portsmouth on HMS *Sybil* bound for South Africa to provide reinforcements as the guerrilla phase of the war was continuing longer than had been anticipated.

HMS *Sybil* arrived in Simon’s Town in January 1901 but made a quick turnaround and then headed north to Lamberts Bay. This was because news had arrived that General Hertzog’s commando had made its way from the Orange Free State to

Calvinia - and was probably heading for the coast to collect arms that had been secretly landed by ship.

One of his commandoes under Commandant Nieuwoudt made it through to Lamberts Bay where they rounded up the town's inhabitants, and relieved them of anything they might find useful -especially raincoats - but with the arrival of 50 sailors from HMS *Sybille*, the so-called Naval Brigade, which included Ernest Joyce, they beat a hasty retreat without any damage to either side. During the night the weather deteriorated and, as the captain had remained ashore, the first officer decided to take HMS *Sybille* out to sea to ride out the storm. In the early hours of the morning the weather abated and a decision was made to return to port. However, no account was taken of the strongly flowing southerly current and she ran aground at Steenbokfontein, 5 km south of Lamberts Bay. The following day attempts to pull her off were unsuccessful but, with the help of the Naval Brigade, they were eventually able to salvage most of her equipment. Quite a few items of memorabilia from HMS *Sybille* can still be seen in the Strandveld Museum in Lamberts Bay (11).

When Joyce returned to Simon's Town he was posted to HMS GIBRALTAR and so happened to be in Simon's Town when *Discovery* arrived in October. Scott had decided to send four members of the crew back to the UK for disciplinary reasons and asked the Navy for volunteers to replace them. Joyce was one of those chosen from over 400 applicants. Therefore his subsequent career as a polar explorer is again directly due to his presence here during the Anglo Boer War.

During the *Discovery* expedition, he learnt how to handle sledge dogs and so, four years later on Shackleton's *Nimrod* expedition, he was put in charge of the dogs. Although Shackleton left them behind on his polar journey as he, like Scott, had put his faith in his ponies, it was Joyce's team of dogs that laid the Bluff depot which actually saved the lives of Shackleton and his party as they struggled back from their furthest south, cold, tired and hungry.(12)

He was selected by Shackleton to be part of the Ross Sea party tasked with laying depots on the Ross Ice shelf for Shackleton to use at the end of his attempt to cross the continent. Despite a mountain of difficulties, including *Aurora* being blown out to sea and leaving them stranded before their equipment could be unloaded, they managed to fulfil the task. Joyce had to take over command of the party when the

leader, Aeneas Mackintosh, was incapacitated by scurvy. He and two others eventually received the Albert Medal for their bravery- the highest civilian award for bravery in the UK at the time - and had there been an equivalent award for animals, his dog team would undoubtedly have been similarly rewarded.(13)

Thereafter he never really achieved anything substantial and died in London during World War II.

John King Davis

He is recognised as the foremost skipper of the Heroic Era of Antarctic exploration, having been involved in four major voyages.

In 1900 as a 16-year-old he found himself in Cape Town, accompanying his father who was functioning as what we would now call a financial adviser to the officers of the British Army during the Anglo-Boer War. When his father was sent to Kimberley he was left on his own to wander around the docks which were overflowing with ships as a result of the War. Although the plan was for him to train as a mining engineer in Johannesburg after the war, his real love was for the sea and he looked around for a position on one of the ships. Within two days he signed on as a passage worker in the steward's department of the *Carisbrooke Castle*. Having left a letter for his father at the boarding house together with most of his personal possessions, he sailed with 25 shillings in his pocket and his one grey suit in a cardboard box.

After surprising his family by his unexpected arrival, he soon departed as he had signed on to the sailing ship, *Celtic Chief*, as a seaman at £3.10 a month. It was however the beginning of his distinguished career in sailing vessels - again as an indirect result of the Anglo-Boer War.(14)

He returned to Cape Town in October 1907 as first officer on Shackleton's Nimrod expedition and again 1911 in command of *Aurora* on her way to Australia for Douglas Mawson's Australian Antarctic expedition - and finally in 1929 in *Discovery* prior to its BANZARE voyage - the British Australian and New Zealand Antarctic Research Expedition, as a result of which the worldwide ban on whaling came into effect 5 years later.

Lawrence Oates

Not only was Lawrence Oates's career as a polar explorer indirectly due to the Anglo Boer War but he himself played a major role in the war. He is, of course, famous for leaving the tent and walking to his death in a blizzard in order not to further delay Scott and his companions when returning from their failed attempt to be the first to reach the South Pole



"A very gallant gentleman" – a 1913 painting by Charles Dollman - in Guards Club, London.

Lawrence visited South Africa on two occasions as a youngster as he was thought to be "a sickly youth". He stayed with relatives near Cape Town, particularly with the Metcalfes at their farm Dieprivier on the road between Caledon and Greyton. Towards the end of his schooldays at Eton, Oates desperately wanted to join one of the prestigious cavalry regiments in the British Army – but in those days you needed a university degree, preferably from Oxford or Cambridge. Despite going to a cram school, he was never able to pass the entrance examination. When his father died from typhoid in 1896, he had to return to take charge of the family estate at Gestingthorpe, near Cambridge, and was able to join a local volunteer regiment.

However, with war having been declared in South Africa in October 1899, and particularly after the reverses of Black Week, the British Army lowered their

qualifications and he saw an opportunity to obtain a proper commission in an elite regiment. He was now successful, and was accepted as a 2nd Lieutenant, in the 6th Inniskilling Dragoon Guards.

Oates arrived in Cape Town on 10 January 1901 and soon after arrival he and his draft went by train to Piketberg where they were supplied with the horses and immediately sent on a scouting manoeuvre in the Cederberg mountains to look for General Hertzog's commando. They did not encounter any Boers and then spent two weeks doing further training at Groenfontein in the Kouebokkeveld - before entraining to Prince Albert Road. They then made their way by road to Towerwater, halfway between Klaarstroom and Willowmore.

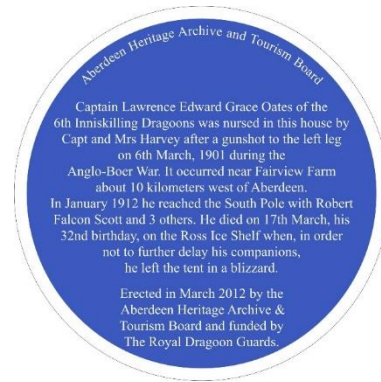
It was here Oates had his first taste of action when they were attacked by a small number of Boers. Writing later to his mother he said "I got a shot with Carbine at one of the blighters but I regret to say that I missed. If only I had a good long-range rifle with me I might have hit one"

They were recovering from their long march at Willowmore (over 300 kilometres in 6 days) when news came that Aberdeen had been attacked. The Dragoons arrived in Aberdeen on the afternoon of 5 March and the next morning Oates led his platoon in a westerly direction to search for the Boers. When about 10 km west of the town they came under fire from Willem Fouche's commando and took cover in a dry river bed near Fairview farm. As his men ran out of ammunition they were given covering fire as they crept back along the riverbed to Aberdeen, leaving Oates with a small handful of men, three of whom were injured. Although Commandant Fouche had Oates surrounded, instead of moving in for the kill, he sent a message under a white flag suggesting they surrender. Oates refused – famously replying "we came here to fight, not to surrender" About midday the Boers, rather surprisingly, withdrew - but a parting shot struck Oates in the left thigh causing a compound fracture of the femur. His commanding officer, Col. Parsons, refused to allow a rescue party to be sent out - so Oates had to remain in the hot Karroo sun with no analgesia and very little water until the ambulance cart eventually arrived at about 6 pm. They obtained some packing case wood from the nearby farm to splint his leg but it still must be a very painful journey back to Aberdeen, arriving 11 hours after having been shot.

He spent the next three weeks - including his 21st birthday - at 16 Brand Street being cared for by Captain and Mrs Hartley - he was in charge of the Town Guard and she was a nursing sister. He was then taken by ambulance cart to the railhead at Aberdeen Road and then on to Noupoort – “the journey was terrible, three days in a red hot tin baggage van which nearly rattled your teeth out.”



16 Brand Street, Aberdeen



Oates's plaque

Here at 6 General Hospital, after a slight delay in order to obtain his x-rays from Bloemfontein, he was operated on under chloroform anaesthesia, the bullet was removed and the wound debrided. He made an uneventful recovery although he was left with his left leg being 2 cm shorter than the right. One wonders how this must have affected him when, 10 years later, he had to walk 1300 km to the South Pole and three quarters of the way back.



Oates at Noupoort 1901



Oates with the horses on *Terra Nova* 1910

In June he returned to the family estate, Gestingthorpe, just south of Cambridge. His mother organised a huge party for village to welcome him back and paid for the restoration of one of the bells in the village church. This was inscribed "in gratitude to God for the safe return of my beloved son, Lawrence R G Oates, from the dangers of the war in South Africa".

On New Year's Eve 1901 he rejoined his regiment at Villiers in the Eastern Free State. They were now under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Michael Rimington and conducting massive cavalry sweeps to try to trap the Boers against the line of blockhouses. For Oates the remainder of the war was uneventful except for his nearly being shot by his own sentries near Frankfort and then contracting typhoid - so when peace was declared on 31st May 1902 he found himself in the Heilbron hospital. Fortunately, unlike his father and his brother, he survived. He was recommended for the Victoria Cross but only received a "mention in dispatches."(15)

Oates became rather disenchanted with the life of a cavalry officer in peacetime and was quick to apply to join Scott's proposed expedition to Antarctica when he heard about it when in India in 1909. Scott accepted him with alacrity because, being a member of an elite cavalry regiment, he would be the ideal person to be in charge of the horses which Scott hoped would take him to the South Pole. So in an indirect way his polar career – short but eventful – was also due to the Anglo-Boer War. The fact that Oates contributed £1000 to the expedition's coffers might have helped too!

It has been suggested that the difficulty he had keeping up with his companions on the return journey that led to his leaving the tent in a blizzard was not only due to the gangrene of his feet but also due to the fact that by then he would almost certainly have developed scurvy - and one of the features of the disease is that old scars tend to break down and that the scarring from his Boer War wound had also led to instability of his femur.(16)

On the centenary of his death in March 2012 a plaque (paid for by his regiment in the UK) was placed on the house at 16 Brand Street in Aberdeen where he had convalesced after his injury.

In conclusion, the fact that the careers of five prominent Antarctic explorers were directly or indirectly related to the Anglo-Boer War may constitute a new aspect of the fascinating history of this conflict.

References

- 1 Armitage AB. *Two years in the Antarctic*. London: Edward Arnold: 1905. p23.
- 2 McLean W, *Shackleton EH*. OHMS. London:Simkin,Marshall,Hamilton,Kent: 1900
- 3 Huntford R. *Shackleton*. London:Hodder and Stroughton: 1985. pp 25,26,29.
- 4 Seaver G. *Edward Wilson of the Antarctic*: London: John Murray:1933. pp 68-9
- 5 Shackleton EH. *The Heart of the Antarctic*: London: William Heinemann:1909.
- 6 Shackleton EH. *South*: London: William Heinemann: 1919.
- 7 Wild F. *Shackleton's Last Voyage*: London:Castell:1923
- 8 Butler A. *The Quest for Frank Wild* : UK: Jackleberry Press:2011. p 86.
- 9 Butler A. *The Quest for Frank Wild* : UK: Jackleberry Press:2011. p 9
- 10 Tyler-Lewis K. *The Lost Men* :London: Bloomsbury:2006 .p 254.
- 11 Dominy G. "Spoiling his Paint": A Chronicle of Anglo-Boer Naval Clashes,1901-1902:
Historia.1992: 37(1): 63-68.
- 12 Riffenburgh B. *Nimrod*: London: Bloomsbury: 2005. pp 216-7,260.
- 13 Bickel L. *Shackleton's Forgotten Men*: UK: Pimlico:2001
- 14 Davis JK. *High latitude*: Melbourne:Melbourne University Press:1962 .p 3-6.
- 15 Smith M. *I am Just Going Outside*: UK:Spellmount:2002. p 50-69
- 16 Butler AR. The role of scurvy in Scott's return from the South Pole; *J.R.Coll Physicians*
Edin 2013;43:175-8.