



## THE ROYAL COLLECTION TRUST

### The Heart of the Great Alone: Scott, Shackleton and Antarctic Photography

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#### Frank Hurley and the *Endurance* expedition

The Australian photographer Frank Hurley (1885-1962) was already an experienced polar adventurer when he was invited to join Ernest Shackleton's ill-fated journey to Antarctica in 1914. His photographs from the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition capture the extraordinary environment of the region and record the dramatic and heroic story that unfolded during the voyage.

Hurley began his photographic career in 1905, when his photograph of a seascape was published in a magazine. A few years later, he became a partner in a picture-postcard business. In 1910, when the adventurer Douglas Mawson was looking for an official photographer to accompany the Australasian Antarctic Expedition of 1911-14, Hurley talked his way into the position during a short train journey with Mawson. He took a very active role within the expedition, in particular undertaking a lengthy trip to the South Magnetic Pole in November 1912. In March 1913 he returned to Australia, where he prepared his work and compiled a film of the expedition, *Home of the blizzard*, first shown as *Life in the Antarctic* in July 1913. According to Hurley's later account, it was the success of *Home of the blizzard* that led Shackleton to ask him to join the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition, also known as the Weddell Sea Party Expedition, aboard *Endurance*. Shackleton intended to make the first crossing of the continent on foot, and it was suggested that Hurley accompany the group to provide photographic evidence.

Hurley joined *Endurance* in Buenos Aires on 12 October 1914. He threw himself into his work, photographing activity on board from all angles, including climbing the rigging to obtain the best viewpoints. Once the ship became stuck fast in the ice, Hurley photographed the activities of the stranded crew and dogs. When the ship began to disintegrate in October 1915, Hurley spent almost three days out on the ice, intent on not missing the final moments of the vessel. His dramatic sequence of shots follows the fate of *Endurance* as it was forced on to its side by the impact of the ice floes and became a wreck.

Initially Hurley salvaged most of his plates and equipment. On 2 November 1915, he went on board into the icy water and pulled the film canisters and negatives to safety. In *Shackleton's Argonauts* (1948), his account of the expedition, Hurley wrote:

*We hacked our way through the splintered timbers and, after vainly fishing in the ice-laden waters with boathooks, I made up my mind to dive in after them. It was mighty cold work groping about in the mushy ice in semi-darkness of the ship's bowels, but I was rewarded in the end and passed out the three precious tins.*

About a week later, Hurley had the difficult task of selecting, with Shackleton, 120 plates to keep and smashing the remaining 400 plates. This was done to reduce the weight of the equipment that the men would have to carry as they trekked away from the wreck to find shelter. A great deal of money had been advanced to the expedition against the rights to the films, and Shackleton and Hurley recognised that they were valuable assets. Indeed when the crew was later faced with an overloaded boat and had the choice of discarding food or the photographic plates, the food was thrown overboard and the plates were saved.

Shackleton launched a heroic bid to get help by travelling in an open boat to South Georgia. Hurley was among the 22 men left behind on Elephant Island for more than four months. He kept with him one small pocket camera, which he used to photograph the camp at Elephant Island and Shackleton's team as they left in the *James Caird* in April 1916. Hurley later altered a photograph taken at the time of the *James Caird's* departure to represent the moment of rescue when Shackleton returned in August 1916.

After the expedition, Hurley travelled to London, and his images began to appear in publications. The first photograph had in fact been published in the *Daily Mirror* on 10 July 1916, as Shackleton had taken some of Hurley's photographs with him when he set off for South Georgia. In 1917 Hurley returned to South Georgia, where he spent a month taking more photographs of wildlife and the scenery, and filming additional material for his motion picture. The film was eventually released as *In the Grip of the Polar Pack Ice*, and its enormous success enabled Shackleton to pay off many of the expedition's debts.

Like Ponting, Hurley printed his work in a large exhibition format as both silver prints and carbon prints. He also created a number of albums for friends, members of the expedition and sponsors. Hurley compiled these albums using relatively small prints, each approximately 6 x 8in (154 x 204mm), in mounts, with handwritten captions in black ink on the page. A number of 'deluxe' albums were created for particularly important individuals, such as Janet Stancomb-Wills, one of Shackleton's main sponsors. The album presented to King George V is one of these 'deluxe' albums. It is likely that Shackleton gave it to the King during his audience at Buckingham Palace on 30 May 1917 or when he visited Sandringham on 10 October 1917 to give a lecture to the Royal Family on his experiences.

Hurley went on to join the Australian Imperial Force as Captain in 1917. He was posted to Flanders, where, as the army's official photographer, he saw action at Passchendale during the summer. He resigned from the army in July 1918 and returned to Australia. His career continued to flourish and took him on further expeditions to New Guinea, to the Antarctic again with Mawson and as a war photographer in the Middle East during the Second World War.