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## Polar Books: Cold Is Hot at Swann

by Jeanne Schinto

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*Swann Galleries, New York City*

by Jeanne Schinto

A first edition of the first book published in Antarctica sold to a collector for \$84,000 (includes buyer's premium) at the highly successful auction by Swann Galleries of the polar library of Dr. John M. Levinson in New York City on May 24. The book is *Aurora Australis*, edited by British explorer Ernest H. Shackleton, and this example of it is known as the Veal copy because boards from a wooden packing crate containing that type of meat were used to create its cover. On one part of it the word "Veal" is clearly visible in black stenciled letters.

Shackleton, who had the foresight to bring a small printing press with him on the Nimrod expedition of 1907-09, devised the book project for his men to help relieve boredom and bolster morale during the months they were holed up in their base camp. The essays, etchings, and lithographs they produced, in an edition of approximately 100 copies, may be seen page by page on the Web site of the State Library of New South Wales ([www.sl.nsw.gov.au](http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au)).

"Now, seven years is the usual time to serve as apprentice to the printing and lithographic trades," the preface notes, "and as only three weeks could be spared by the producers of this little book to learn the business, any shortcomings will be leniently viewed both by the small public in this colony and by our friends at home to whom we trust these pages will be of interest."

Printed, bound, and issued from Shackleton's Cape Royds hut under conditions that could be described in an understatedly British way as challenging, it truly is a publishing marvel. Captain James Cook, the first navigator to cross the Antarctic Circle (in 1773), wrote that the southern continent was "a country doomed by nature never once to feel the warmth of the sun's rays, but to lie forever buried under everlasting snow and ice." Apsley Cherry-Garrard titled his own classic book about Captain Robert Falcon Scott's ill-fated 1910-13 expedition to the South Pole *The Worst Journey in the World*.

Other extant copies of the Aurora Australis, about half of which are in institutions, have been nicknamed for their own stenciled descriptions of what the packing cases that went into the making of their covers contained. There are copies known as Chocolate, Coffee, and Oatmeal. There is a Julienne Soup copy (issued by a New Zealand publisher in a facsimile reprint in 1988). A copy known as Marmalade, sold by the British auction house Anderson & Garland in Newcastle upon Tyne on March 21, 2006, for £53,000 or approximately \$92,000, is the one that is thought to be the auction-price record holder.

Undoubtedly the Veal copy would have gone higher if not for its rebeked facsimile covers. Some observers also believe Marmalade's price may have been surpassed if more bidders had known about Veal what was discovered only during the previews. In a catalog addendum Swann announced that the book is one of a very few copies of a first-issue variant.

In any case, by Swann's reckoning, six new auction-price records for polar books were set at this 159-lot offering, 98% of which sold for a total of \$536,981. Many of the rest brought sums that were variously described by dealers as "crazy," "amazing," "outrageous," and "driven by that collecting mentality."

David Lilburne of Antipodean Books, Maps & Prints, Garrison, New York, said he and his fellow dealers bought sparingly. (Results released by Swann's press office show that only two of the top 20 lots went to the trade.) "I think most of us realized it was going to be difficult to buy for stock," he told us. "[Successful bidders] were totally disregarding condition." These bidders as a group were also "seemingly disregarding" what was available on the Web sites of Lilburne and his colleagues.

Speaking of Raymond E. Priestley's Antarctic Adventure: Scott's Northern Party, published in London in 1914, Lilburne said, "I've got three copies of the dang thing, and what it went for at this sale [\$2400] is more than what I have on mine."

Chet Ross of Chet Ross Rare Books, Southworth, Washington, "managed to pick up three items," he said. "I went there planning to purchase more than that. Some I didn't even bid on. Once it gets out of hand, you don't even touch it."

Ross cautioned against using this sale's results to draw conclusions about the state of the polar market in general. "I thought the sale was an anomaly, and I'm not alone in that consensus," he said. "Many books sold for much more than their market value. One book that sold for six thousand dollars is readily available, in better condition, for twelve hundred to fourteen hundred dollars. And that is not an unusual case." Ross added that he has come to treat auction prices in general in the same way judges treat Olympic diving scores. "I throw out the high and the low and average the rest. This sale is definitely the high."

Greg Glade of Top of the World Books, Williston, Vermont, who went home empty-handed, said the market has been strong "ever since Caroline Alexander's book came out," i.e., *The Endurance: Shackleton's Legendary Antarctic Expedition* (1998), that tied in with the traveling exhibition of the same name, on view at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City from April 10 through October 11, 1999.

"A number of people 'discovered,' as it were, the Antarctic field and Shackleton through the amazing photographs by Frank Hurley, and they delved further into it and discovered [Robert] Scott, [Roald] Amundsen, and the other explorers. [They were] introduced to a broader group, although I think the number of people willing to spend a thousand dollars or more on a single book is limited," Glade said.

Apparently, it's not limited enough. Collectors also found the competition tough. Robert B. Stephenson of Jaffrey, New Hampshire, owner of a vast library widely considered to be the finest Antarcticana collection in private hands, said he did not bid on any items for himself because he already has virtually all of the materials that were offered, including his own, unnamed copy of a variant Aurora Australis. But he did try to bid for three other collectors, including Jonathan Shackleton, a member of the explorer's extended family, and David Wilson, grandnephew of Dr. Edward Wilson, who died with Captain Scott. He was successful on only two lots overall.

Stephenson, who is coordinator of the Antarctic Circle Web site ([www.antarctic-circle.org](http://www.antarctic-circle.org)), an informal international group of scholars and "knowledgeable amateurs," entertained an audience of more than 100 on the night before the auction with a talk that recounted days when polar books could be bought for the proverbial song. He brought with him Swann catalogs from the early 1970's that contained Arctic and Antarctic items, whose realized prices, he noted, were "of course, amazingly low." One of those catalogs, from a sale on October 14, 1971, featured a first edition of James Clark Ross's *A Voyage of Discovery*, published in London in 1847. Stephenson bought it for \$22.40. On the day following Stephenson's lecture, Dr. Levinson's copy of the same book was sold by Swann for \$4080.

Stephenson's first purchase of a polar book, on May 22, 1969, was a first edition of Cherry-Garrard's *The Worst Journey*, which he bought from a catalog issued by the London bookseller Francis Edwards. He paid 30 shillings. Dr. Levinson's copy of the same book sold to a collector for \$6240. What is believed to be the record price for a first edition in dust wrappers stands at \$14,950; it was set on January 25, 2007, at PBA Galleries in San Francisco.

David H. Stam of Syracuse, New York, who, with his wife, Deirdre, collects materials related to both poles, spoke to the pre-auction crowd about the explorers' own libraries. The retired librarian, who is currently a history department senior scholar and the librarian emeritus at Syracuse University, said that Norway's Amundsen, who beat Scott to the South Pole, started at age 15 reading Sir John Franklin's accounts of his expeditions. "That's what hooked him on polar stuff," Stam said. "[Canadian explorer Vilhjalmur] Stefansson started collecting books in the 1920's and 1930's. He had a Greenwich Village apartment and filled it with Arctic books; then he bought the adjoining apartment, and then a third apartment, and a fourth."

Those books became the nucleus of the collection at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire, where Stefansson was curator as well as something of a legend for doing things such as building igloos on the Dartmouth Green. (A signed first edition of Stefansson's *The Friendly Arctic: The Story of Five Years in Polar Regions*, published in New York in 1921, brought \$180 at the Dr. Levinson sale. A box lot of 14 other Stefansson titles made \$720.) Many other explorers were eminent book collectors, Stam told his audience. "Cherry-Garrard became an inveterate auction-goer and is said to have become rather paranoid about those bidding against him. Both Robert Peary and Richard Byrd dabbled in books."

The explorers didn't just read at home. They brought large libraries with them on their expeditions. Many of them brought the very titles represented at this sale. "In the eras long before global positioning systems, they were heavily reliant on books and other printed materials," said Stam, "using them for navigation, for negotiation of treacherous terrain or water, for information on health and well-being, above all for their mental stability in matters of life and death."

Sir Franklin had two ships, the *Terror* and the *Erebus*, and between them they had a library totaling at least 3000 volumes, Stam said. What survived of Franklin's last expedition was six volumes, found with his skeletal remains 12 years after he and his whole 128-man expedition were lost. Those books are now in the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, England. "One of them was *The Vicar of Wakefield*; the other five were religious, one a small prayer book. Very little of anything else from the Franklin expedition survived."

Some explorers learned too little from the literature written by their predecessors. "Sir Franklin ignored Ross's advice about fresh meat and scurvy, though even that knowledge wouldn't have saved his fated expedition," Stam said. "Douglas Mawson could have learned from [Fridtjof] Nansen about liver toxicity but didn't and consequently lost his companion, parts of his ears, and the soles of his feet."

The explorers also used these books "with varying degrees of candor or embellishment" in preparing their own published accounts.

Stam did not buy anything at the sale. "We were interested in a few things, but everything went high," he said. "The few things that went at reasonable prices would have gone high if we had been bidding," he joked.

In 2005 he and Deirdre, who is director of the New York Center for the Book, headquartered at Syracuse University's library, curated an exhibition at the Grolier Club in New York City, *Books on Ice: British and American Literature of Polar Exploration*. (Quickly out of print, the exhibition catalog of the same name is just now becoming available from a few antiquarian book dealers.)

"Some of our acquisitions zeal was diminished after our exhibition," Stam said. "We bought some things because they were ideal for it, and they were more expensive." Among their most prized possessions is a printed catalog of the library of Scott's Discovery. "There are only three or four copies known. Ours belonged to one of the officers. We bought it five years ago, but we're not buying on the four-figure scale anymore. We might later. Who knows?"

The sale included several non-book items, the most interesting of which was a message buoy from a 1901-02 North Pole expedition that sold to a collector for \$8400. The buoy, whose wire metal top unscrews to reveal a place for the message, was designed to be either tossed overboard or left at a designated place for another ship to pick up. Found without a message inside it in northeast Greenland, it was gifted to the Geographical Society of Philadelphia, which sold it 12 years ago at Freeman's in Philadelphia, where it was bought by Dr. Levinson.

There were also five lots of artifacts: a pottery shard found outside Shackleton's Cape Royds hut; two candles from Scott's hut on Cape Evans; a piece of a wooden crate found at Mawson's hut at Cape Denison; rocks from Franz Josef Land; and the top of a metal can found on Beechey Island near the graves of seamen from Franklin's fatal expedition. None of the lots was estimated at higher than \$100/150. A large group of them constituted a box lot (est. \$80/120).

The fact that they were up for sale at all was controversial, and Dr. Levinson withdrew them, planning a donation to the Antarctic Heritage Trust, a partnership of British and New Zealand preservationists ([www.heritage-antarctica.org](http://www.heritage-antarctica.org)). "People have gotten so sensitive about this material," Dr. Levinson told us. "It's like God and motherhood." In his opinion, these curiosities were not comparable to, say, the British flag that Shackleton took with him on the *Nimrod*, an item that Dr. Levinson purchased at Christie's in London in 1997; then donated to the University of Cambridge's Scott Polar Research Institute. "And that's been valued by an English consultant at two hundred thousand dollars," he said.

The 80-year-old "physician and adventurer" (as his bookplate states) sat in the front row with his wife during the sale. Some *M.A.D.* readers may recall that he deaccessioned a collection of duck and shorebird decoys through Guyette & Schmidt. ("If I hadn't sold all of them, I wouldn't have had any money to buy the books," he said.) He has also collected stamps, Oriental art, and other items, but considers his polar library his finest collection.

Of the bookplate, which notes the collector's 1985-87 presidency of the Explorers Club ([www.explorers.org](http://www.explorers.org)) and which appeared in each book, usually mounted to a pastedown, dealers we spoke with were not enamored. "The bookplate was a bit distracting," Chet Ross said. "Where some people may have seen it as an asset, I looked at it as a deficit. It all depends on what your association with Dr. Levinson is. Typically, you do not want evidence of prior ownership unless there is significant association with the book."

"If it's the bookplate of Shackleton, that's a definite plus," Greg Glade said. "Dr. Levinson was just a very strong collector. So I think perhaps some people may have held back on bidding as much as they would have without the bookplate. Still, it was surprising to see that it may not have played a role in some other bids at all." (Glade's general advice on bookplates is to "just insert them loosely.")

We asked dealer David Lilburne about how someone decides whether to specialize in Arctic, Antarctic, or, like Dr. Levinson, both types of materials. "Most Canadians will look for Arctic material, of course. With me coming from where I do," said the Australian native, "I have an automatic prejudice towards the Antarctic. What else I like about it is that it's finite. It starts with James Cook and goes up to the International Geophysical Year of 1957-58. And if you had a million dollars, you could put the whole lot together."

Lilburne also likes the certainty of its timeline. "You know who got to the South Pole first. You know who got where and did what when." The Arctic, by contrast, presents an entirely different challenge to collectors. "Now, Arctic starts when? You can't say. You could go all the way back to Viking stuff. Who got to the North Pole first? You can't say." And if you tried to be a completist on that topic, you would be attempting to gather 100,000 publications or more. The number of publications in the collection of Antarctica specialist Rob Stephenson is considered large at its current count of 1312.

Dealer Chet Ross, who describes himself as "bipolar" because he doesn't discriminate, mentioned that the North is also less geographically "boundable" than the South. "It's hard for a collector to know where to stop with the Arctic because you're getting into northern Canada. Where do you draw the line? Whereas, the Antarctic is not as cluttered."

Meanwhile, the polar regions themselves are undergoing climate change, making a sale like this one especially timely and these reports by the poles' first explorers all the more worthy of our attention. "Those books are the earliest documentation of what those regions were like, in a geological sense, a meteorological sense, an oceanographic sense," said Ross. "It's the benchmark documentation of it." No dealer could say that growing public awareness of climate change has affected sales, but reprint publishers must be seeing a surge, since many of these same titles are being reissued.

Dr. Levinson, who praised the professionalism of the Swann staff, along with the meticulousness of expert Jeremy Markowitz, said of his polar-book collecting days: "I had a wonderful time, learned so much, met a lot of neat people, and then the prices [at the auction] went so crazy. It was just sheer luck; the market was up. I was at the right place at the right time."

For more information, contact Swann Galleries at (212) 254-4710 or see the Web site ([www.swanngalleries.com](http://www.swanngalleries.com)).

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