

Wealden Business Group

Book Review 14 Oct 2015 "Endurance" by Alfred Lansing

Report by Bill Ferguson

After the race to the South Pole ended in December 1911 with Roald Amundsen's conquest, Shackleton turned his attention to the crossing of Antarctica from sea to sea, via the pole. To this end he made preparations for what became the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition, 1914–17.

Disaster struck this expedition when its ship, Endurance, became trapped in pack ice and was slowly crushed before the shore parties could be landed. The crew escaped by camping on the sea ice until it disintegrated, then by launching the lifeboats to reach Elephant Island and ultimately the inhabited island of South Georgia, a stormy ocean voyage of 720 nautical miles; Shackleton's most famous exploit.

In 1921, he returned to the Antarctic with the Shackleton-Rowett Expedition, but died of a heart attack while his ship was moored in South Georgia. At his wife's request he was buried there.

[Reference: Wikipedia]

Report by Bill Ferguson

100 years ago, almost to the day, Shackleton set sail for the South Pole. Like any fledgling start-up he had a business plan, some sponsors and had invested in some necessary equipment; including staff (or as he called them: Crew)

Advertising standards were more relaxed at that time; no equality legislation and the concept of a statutory minimum wage had not been thought of yet: he advertised for staff in the newspaper

Shackleton received more than 5,000 applications for places on the expedition, including a letter from "three sporty girls" who suggested that if their feminine garb was inconvenient they would "just love to don masculine attire."

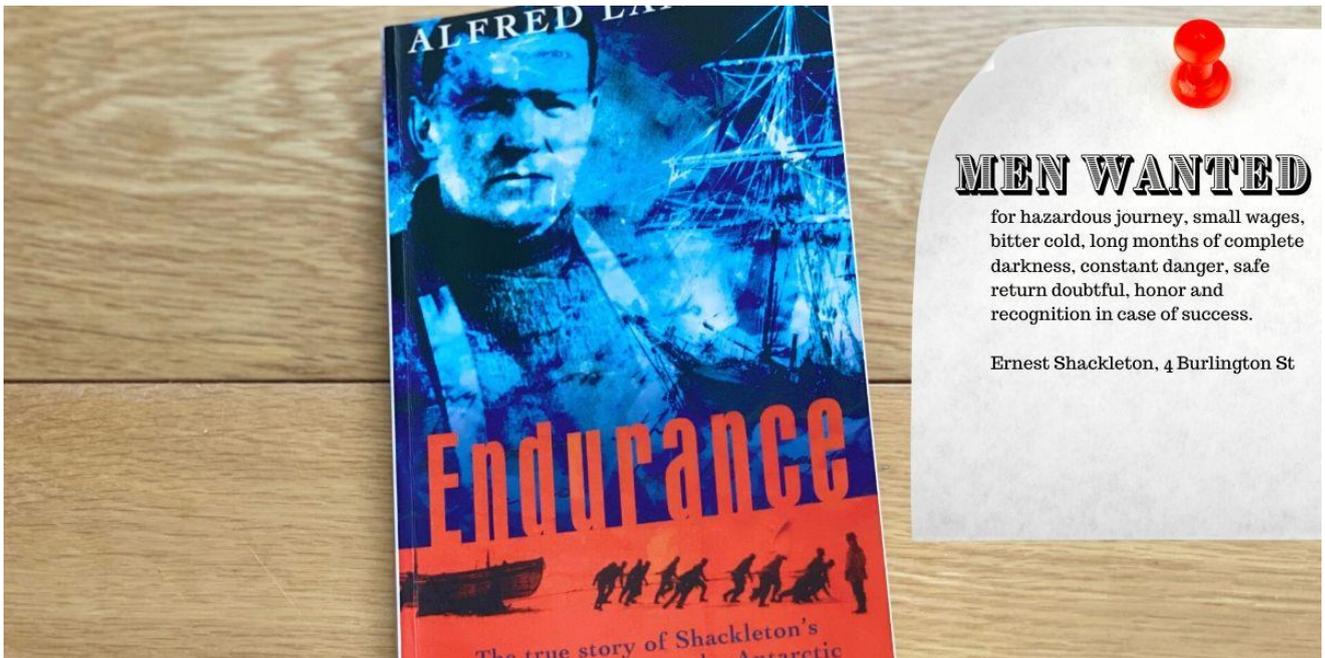


Figure 1: the American spelling of honour makes me suspect the authenticity of the advert, but let's not spoil a good story

With this book we have a metaphor for a new company setting out full of hope and the dreams of fame and fortune. Hoping to seize a position in a new, undeveloped market that seemed ripe for exploitation.

We often talk about the business climate, the constraints put on businesses by external factors, the forecast: will tomorrow be bright or gloomy for the markets. We have cycles of boom and bust. Are you riding the wave or in danger of going under?

This was a business start-up with no safety nets. You couldn't Google what to do. You couldn't phone a friend (satellite phones hadn't been invented yet). There were no fancy wristwatches that called for helicopter rescue teams (helicopters hadn't been invented either)

Like many start-ups it wasn't long before they got into trouble. With his ship trapped in the ice Shackleton was at the mercy of outside forces and was forced to make some unpleasant choices.

In February 1916 he told the crew that they must winter in the pack ice and be freed in the spring thaw, 9 months away - no hysterics or anger, just a clear business plan. Shackleton took responsibility freeing his crew from worry and letting them focus on preparation for the future.

March 1916: they moved accommodation deeper into the ship and the dogs onto the ice (keeping everyone busy). They named it the Ritz, they all ate there together, and sport and comradeship was encouraged.

As winter progressed, worse than any credit squeeze, the ice crushed and pushed in unpredictable ways eventually destroying the boat and forcing the crew onto the temporary safety of an ice floe.

They had three small, lightweight boats, two teams of dogs and some sledges, and some dwindling rations. They salvaged some timber from the drowning ship. They had guns and could shoot seals and penguins for fresh meat. When it came to carnivorous Leopard seals, twice the size of a dairy cow, it was kill or be killed. A bit like Wall Street traders!

There were long periods when there was nothing to do but wait for conditions to improve. There were brief windows of opportunity that came and went and no guarantee that any gamble would make life any better, in fact there were constant risks that any action could be fatal. Although eventually a decision was forced as warmer weather arrived and the ice floe began to break up.

This is the time when you bet the farm on a good leader.

What makes a good leader?

Good leader: humble, continually learning and reflecting. Learn from mistakes. Change your mind and your strategy if something isn't working. Share some problems and let everyone share in the remedy. When crisis strikes: immediately consult the crew - offer a plan of action - ask for support and show absolute confidence in a good outcome.

Balanced within dichotomies:

- too close vs too distant to crew, (diaries) friendly, respectful, instructive, fun, reward individual as well as group, make people feel appreciated, occasionally indulge individuals (especially in stressful times). Keep malcontents close. Try to win them over
- micromanage vs fail to inform, modifies plans and even gives dates, consistent

positive feedback on performance. Streamline and simplify procedures. Give staff reality checks. Keep staff busy (eg building the Ritz in March)

- aggressive vs foolhardy, Take the chance when it comes. Be patient - sometimes watch and wait is best
- confident vs arrogant, cheery, optimistic. Have alternative plans thought out - monitor the big picture. Give people time to adapt to unpopular decisions (shooting the dogs)

Know the value of comradeship - team building (eg Army)

Develop individual talents: make the workplace as inviting as possible - think Google

Form teams when necessary: select well - give big tedious jobs to workhorses and show appreciation. Empower team leaders and keep an eye on detail.

When a chance appeared to reach open water and later to head for land we get some insight into Shackleton's people management. Splitting the crew into teams he keeps potential troublemakers close to himself and delegated according to skill and experience.

Leaving most of the crew on Elephant Island while he headed a task force to seek rescue was a difficult decision but the only alternative was to give up, not an option for this management style.

When crisis comes: Let go of past - be in the moment (ref book Andy McNabb - plan only hours ahead)

The outcome in the end was a successful rescue, there were physical and no doubt mental scars but no one perished.

What can we learn from this story?

It's lonely at the top - trust is fragile and has to be maintained

As well as having all the above virtues, "If you are a leader, you've got to keep going" although we should also recognise that sometimes you need to know when you have had enough - Shackleton came back four years later and died at the age of 47 from a heart attack in 1921 while his ship was moored in South Georgia...

Extra facts [Reference: Wikipedia]

Shackleton estimated that he would need £50,000 (current value £4,286,000) to carry out the simplest version of his plan. He did not believe in appeals to the public: "(they) cause endless book-keeping worries". His chosen method of fund-raising was to solicit contributions from wealthy backers, and he had begun this process early in 1913, with little initial success. The first significant encouragement came in December 1913, when the Government offered him £10,000, provided he could raise an equivalent amount from private sources. The Royal Geographical Society, from which he had expected nothing, gave him £1,000—according to Huntford, Shackleton, in a grand gesture, advised them that he would only need to take up half of this sum. Lord Rosebery, who had previously expressed his lack of interest in polar expeditions, gave £50. In February 1914 The New York Times reported that playwright J. M. Barrie – a close friend of Captain Scott – had confidentially donated \$50,000 (about £10,000). With time running out, contributions were eventually secured during the spring and early summer of 1914. Dudley Docker of the Birmingham Small Arms Company (BSA) gave £10,000, wealthy tobacco heiress Janet Stancomb-Wills gave a "generous" sum (the amount was not revealed), and, in June, Scottish industrialist Sir James Caird donated £24,000 (current value £2,060,000). Shackleton informed the Morning Post that "this magnificent gift relieves me of all anxiety".

Shackleton now had the money to proceed. He acquired, for £14,000 (current value £1,200,000), a 300-ton barquentine called *Polaris*, which had been built for the Belgian explorer Adrien de Gerlache for an expedition to Spitsbergen. This scheme had collapsed and the ship became available. Shackleton changed her name to *Endurance*, reflecting his family motto "By endurance we conquer". For a further £3,200 (current value £274,000), he acquired Douglas Mawson's expedition ship *Aurora*, which was lying in Hobart, Tasmania. This would act as the Ross Sea party's vessel.