# Harry McNish and Shackleton’s

# Imperial Transantarctic Expedition

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# A special tribute to Harry McNish,

# a much neglected hero

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# As readers may have seen, there was a recent Exhibition at the National Library, about Shackleton’s ill-fated *Transantarctic* Expedition and featuring Frank Hurley’s celebrated photographs. Over the years interest in Shackleton has grown massively, to the extent that he is now held up as an icon and role model, and has even been used in management courses as a paragon of leadership virtues. However, what the Exhibition brought back to my mind was the injustice done by Shackleton to the Scot, Harry McNish.

# The regular picture painted of Shackleton, particularly as a role model, needs rebalanced for a good number of reasons. Shackleton certainly had good attributes: he had the ability to cheer the crew when matters were very bleak; he had genuine concerns for the welfare of those who were suffering badly from frostbite; and he showed great determination to get help for those stranded at Elephant Island. But such good attributes should not blind us to another side of Shackleton: [quote] And there are many or to the question as to whether better management and better preparation might have avoided much of the suffering of the crew. Examination of the diaries kept by some of the crew show a Shackleton that was a chancer of the highest order. There were many areas in which his work was haphazard. These include lack of preparation for the expedition, and failure to secure enough of the necessary finance: he failed to take on board the information given by the whalers at South Georgia on the unusually ice bound state of the Weddell Sea; he did not involve members of the crew, particularly the captain, Worsley, in his plans and changes of plans. In public, he appeared always an optimist, but he could spend days in his quarters in a mood where it was advisable not to bother him.

Harry McNish, the carpenter on the *Endurance*, is due a special tribute. Unlike anyone else on the ship, including doctors, scientists and other professionals, he stood up and, based on his knowledge and experience, rightly told in fairly plain language what he thought of Shackleton’s plans. Showing his gratitude for being telt that his plans were crazy, Shackleton rewarded McNish by denying him a Polar Medal. Harry was one of only four denied a medal; the other three were seamen, of which at least one was known as morose, unhelpful, and troublemaking.

# McNish had strong socialist views, hardly likely to share the views of Shackleton who had stood as a Unionist in the Dundee Parliamentary elections. He also had strong religious views being a member of the United Free Church of Scotland. As such, he would be likely to reject higher powers, particularly if they were giving orders to pursue which were clearly dangerous, if not mad. In 1914 Harry McNish responded to an advert for a carpenter on the *Endurance,* a ship which was to take a crew from England to Buenos Aires, on to South Georgia and then to the Weddell Sea in Antarctica. He got the job, and so, joining the hotchpotch of the professionals on the crew: - a photographer, an artist, two surgeons, a physicist, a cook, and an officer who became storekeeper, many of whom did not know one another, came Harry McNish. He did not have the Oxbridge background that made Frank Hussey, the photographer on the expedition, comfortable. He had a rasping Clydeside voice, he did not tolerate fools gladly, he was quick to show people their mistakes, but he gave of his time to help others when needed. As the voyage progressed, the others realised his talents and his qualities.

# Thus began, at least as far as the crew were concerned, the most important time in Harry McNish’s life. Through his hard work, his ingenuity, and his skills in carpentry and metal work, he made life just that little bit more comfortable both on the ship and on the ice floes. When the ship was trapped in the ice he re-engineered the inside of the boat to provide sleeping cabins for the crew: some of the crew asked if he might make them shelving or chests of drawers and he obliged. But his *pièce de résistance* was contributing enormously to the saving of all the men that had sailed on the *Endurance*.

# Harry McNish came into his own while the *Endurance* was in its final throes, water was pouring in, and the pumps were unable to work hard enough keep the water down. McNish built a coffer dam, working without break through the night. This was no easy task: standing in ice cold water up to his knees and already suffering from frostbite. McNish knew himself that it would not be able to save the ship but it would give time to get supplies out from the ship and ready to shift on to the nearest ice floe.

# After the *Endurance* sank, Shackleton ordered the men to put the boats on sledges and load them with equipment and provisions. His plan was to march across the ice to land and so continue his transantarctic crossing. With the ice being in rough hummocks, in no way flat, and full of crevasses and at times open water, the journey time was extremely slow and pulling the sledges was exhausting. After seven days of this hell on earth, they had gone only 8 miles and the boats they were hauling were getting badly damaged. There was only one man, Harry McNish who stopped pulling and refused to follow what he saw as madness. This got under Shackleton’s skin: that a working class Scot had been so subordinate.

# Two days later Shackleton stopped the march and the crew made camp. The boats, the only means of escaping from Antarctica, were indeed being damaged by being pulled over very rough ice. It was this episode that led to the Ship’s Articles being read out by Shackleton and the latter’s undying bad feeling for McNish. There can be little doubt that it was Harry McNish’s intervention, albeit like a fiery Trade Unionist, that made Shackleton think again about the foolhardiness of his plan. His anger that a Carpenter had the nerve to stand up to him and outline the folly of his plan rankled. While Shackleton can only be described as “nursing HIS wrath to keep it warm”[[1]](#footnote-1), McNish repaired the boats that had been damaged on the march. All he had as implements were a saw, a hammer, a chisel, and an adze. The boats needed re-caulking but there were no ready materials to make the joins in the planks watertight. Harry made his own material for the caulking.

# When the ice broke up in the Weddell Sea, his repairs and restructuring of the boats allowed the men to make their way to Elephant Island, and, using his skills as a shipwright, he then re-engineered the largest of the boats to make it possible for six of them to leave Elephant Island and make their way 800 miles across one of the roughest seas in the world to South Georgia, and so get help from a whaling station to enable the rescue of the men left on Elephant Island. This was a journey fraught with difficulties of high winds and high seas and one of the most dangerous oceans in the world. All of these repairs and alterations were carried out not only in appalling weather and climate conditions, but with McNish’s fingers badly frostbitten.

# All told, Harry had raised the sides of the *James Caird* in order to keep out the worst of the waves: he made an entire deck by assembling a wooden frame and secured a canvas cover over it. He caulked the boat using his own mixture of flour, oil paint and seal blood. Although the boat was far from comfortable, and was difficult to row as the sides had been raised, he had done enough. The boat got them to South Georgia. The only other on the boat really contributing to their successful sea journey was the captain, Worsley. Worsley was an excellent navigator and with only a sextant and a chronometer he was able to steer the boat to South Georgia. And, of course, if the six men had not made it to South Georgia, no one would have been alerted to the fate of the men who were on the other leg of the journey and were boat-less at the Ross Sea side of Antarctica. Three of them had died.

While Harry McNish continued working in the Merchant Navy for some years, the frostbite he had endured gradually took its toll and he ended up destitute, begging in the docks in Wellington, New Zealand. He was a great story teller and was looked after to some extent by dock workers interested in his exploits. It is believed that at this stage and needing money and food, he embellished some of his stories. It is possible that here he came out with the cat story. (The ship’s cat was liked by all but was called Chippy, possibly after Harry). When Shackleton had reached the conclusion that there was not enough food to feed both men and dogs, he ordered the killing of most of the dogs; the cat had to go, as it would have been eaten by the remaining dogs. Somehow the story became that Harry vociferously objected to the cat being killed and Shackleton then denied him a polar medal. This does not seem likely. Harry’s anger at the boats being damaged, his outburst which showed Shackleton’s decision making in a bad light, his ill health through frostbite and piles, and being forced to haul a sledge while roped to a team of men, is far more likely to be the reason.

Shackleton is worthy of a damning indictment for getting the men into such a perilous position as he did. How unlike the other explorer who had recently gone to the Weddell Sea: namely, William Spiers Bruce, who had been there in his expedition of 1902-04. WS Bruce was the greatest meteorologist of his day and had been keen to explore the Weddell Sea for scientific purposes. When he had entered the Weddell Sea earlier in Scotland’s self-financed *Scotia* expedition, the Captain cautioned that conditions were too poor. WS Bruce acceded to the Captain’s better knowledge and they turned back. Not so Shackleton. When Worsley, who was the one with the proper experience and knowledge of seafaring, recommended sheltering in a bay on their journey up the Weddell Sea, after several days of being trapped in ice, Shackleton refused. Two days later they were stuck solidly in ice – ice that moved with the current and took them back further North.

As to raising the issue of giving a posthumous medal to Harry, the family already worked hard, gained the support of a Member of the Scottish Parliament, but all to no avail. It is time that the Scottish people recognised themselves as a nation with their own system showing appreciation of those who set a real example to the rest of us – ordinary people who give of their best, like Harry McNish.

*Ye see yon birkie ca’d ‘a lord’, Wha struts an’ stares, an’ a’ that?
Tho’ hundreds worship at his word, He’s but a cuif for a’ that.
For a’ that, an’ a’ that, His riband, star, an’ a’ that,
The man o’ independent mind, He looks an’ laughs at a’ that.*

Robert Burns - ‘A Man’s A Man For A' That

Note

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1. Robert Burns “Tam o’Shanter [↑](#footnote-ref-1)