



Scott Polar Research Institute



‘British Antarctic Expedition 1907-09 Expedition Summary’

For use with the Shackleton and Leadership Assembly Plan

Expedition: British Antarctic Expedition

Ship name: “Nimrod”

Leader: Ernest Shackleton

Date: 1907-1909

Shackleton organised and led the Nimrod Expedition as an attempt to reach the South Pole and also to continue the scientific and geological survey work of earlier expeditions.

A shore party of 15 set up a base on the Antarctic continent at Cape Royds; they discovered nearly 500km of the Trans Antarctic Mountains flanking the Ross Ice Shelf. A small party of men climbed Mount Erebus (3794 m), an active volcano on Ross Island. They were the first reach the summit where they took photographs and collected rock specimens from the mount. Long, steep slopes meant they were able to slide back down. This was the first ascent of one of the world’s largest active volcanoes.

Three sledging parties were planned for the Antarctic summer, to go north, south and west. These were known as the Northern, Western, and Southern parties.



The Northern Party of Professor Edgeworth David, Alexander Forbes Mackay and Douglas Mawson reached the South Magnetic Pole at 72.42 degrees South and 155.27 degrees East on 16 January 1909 when they raised the flag and claimed the area for King Edward VII.

The Western Party set off 1 December to leave a depot (supplies of food and fuel) at Butter Point for the return of the Northern Party. Once the depot had been set they proceeded up the Ferrar Glacier undertaking a geological survey as they went. Just after Christmas they began to set off back towards Butter Point where they were due to meet with the Northern Party and be collected by the *Nimrod*.

On 29 October 1908 the Southern Party consisting of Shackleton, Jameson Adams, Eric Marshall and Frank Wild set off to reach the pole. The main party found that soft, deep snow was problematic for their ponies, who were meant to be hauling the sledges. Many of the ponies were ill and the men had to resort to pulling the sledges themselves (manhauling). Shackleton cut the party's rations to make the supplies last longer and as the ponies collapsed they were shot, their meat used for depot laying and their maize added to the men's rations. Realising they had not brought enough food for the return journey the men's rations were continually reduced, existing on two biscuits per day in the hope this would stretch their food to make the Pole attainable.



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An unopened tin of pemmican, a staple food in Heroic Era explorer's diet. The tin was taken from the hut of the British Antarctic Expedition 1907-09 (*Nimrod*) at Cape Royds, McMurdo Sound. Accession no: Y:2008/31/2

On 18 December they reached the foot of the Beardmore Glacier where they had to relay the loaded sledges. As the altitude increased, the men began to suffer the effects of altitude sickness, and the air was so cold that their beards were frozen solid by their breath. At this point Shackleton became concerned for the fate of his men; he realised that whilst the Pole was attainable they would not survive the return journey. On 4 January 1909 Shackleton decided they should turn and head back. They walked a few more miles south and on 9 January they reached their southernmost position (88° 23') just 97 miles from the Pole. After taking a photograph with the Union Flag they turned around. They had come closer to the Pole than anyone else in the world at that time.

Eight days after turning round they reached the Ross Ice Shelf where they had stored enough pony meat to last 6 days. This meat had become contaminated and the party developed dysentery, resulting in a much slower pace. They continued on to their various food depots. At one depot they found some frozen blood from one of the ponies lying in the snow. This became a welcome addition to their rations. They continued marching, sighting Mount Erebus and reaching a further two depots, however, the health of the party was poor and on 27 February Marshall collapsed with severe dysentery. Shackleton left him with Adams, while he and Wild struck out for some old expedition huts (Hut Point) where they hoped to find help.

Shackleton had ordered the *Nimrod* to leave on 1 March. They made it to the old hut to find plenty of supplies and a note saying the ship would wait in the area until 26 February. It was now the 28 February; they had missed *Nimrod* by two days. In the morning they set fire to the magnetic observation hut and the old hut, hoping the *Nimrod* would be close enough to see the flames. The ship had been returning with a final search party and spotted the fire so Shackleton and Wild were on board by mid-morning. Shackleton was then able to guide a rescue party to Marshall and Adams. Once on board, Shackleton was reunited with the other sledging parties and base camp members he had not seen since his departure in the October of the previous year. By 4 March 1909 everyone was on board and they set sail for New Zealand.



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A 1:72 scale model of *Nimrod*, the ship used on the British Antarctic Expedition 1907-09 (*Nimrod*), made by Wyndham B. Williams in 2008. Accession no.Y: 2008/7