

George Marston: Shackleton's Antarctic Artist

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[Note: The illustrations have been omitted
although the captions have been included.]

With the onset of winter, the men were effectively confined to their hut and Marston now played a leading role in a unique venture: the printing and publication of an entire book in the Antarctic, *Aurora Australis* (fig. 6). Shackleton had himself edited and produced the *South Polar Times*, a typewritten expedition magazine, on Scott's expedition. The smaller scale of the *Nimrod* expedition precluded a periodical such as this, but Shackleton determined to produce multiple copies of a full-scale book, written, illustrated, printed and bound in the Antarctic. Those most concerned in its production were Wild, Joyce, Marston and Day; 100 copies were printed at Cape Royds but they were not in fact sold because of a dispute over fees. However some of the contents were reprinted in a limited edition of 300 of *The Antarctic Book*, which formed the third volume in the de luxe edition of *The Heart of the Antarctic*, Shackleton's account of the *Nimrod* expedition (Shackleton 1909).

The book is a serious anthology of writing by some nine members of the expedition and ranges through descriptive accounts of events during the expedition, a humorous account of domestic life, poems, fantasy and the life history of the rotifer (a microscopic animal). Marston's article 'A Pony Watch' describes the severe storm which marked the early stage of the voyage from New Zealand, when the pony 'Doctor' had to be shot. Marston also provided the title page (a lithograph of the Aurora framed in an elaborate scroll topped with two sailing ships) and ten illustrations, in a diversity of styles but each imaginatively related to the article it accompanied and offering a particularly personal view. The Fishers, in writing of Marston's contribution to the book, commend the 'workman-like, pleasing design' and 'flamboyant colours' as 'characteristic' of Marston. As an artist he was not in the same class as Wilson, the chief scientist on Scott's expedition and a fine water-colourist, but his natural exuberance and his sense of wonder at the Antarctic come out in his paintings, just as his skill with his hands can be seen everywhere in the book, in the neat line-drawings and the good plain layout. (Fisher and Fisher 1957, 189.)

The publication was the result of substantial planning. Messrs Joseph Causton and Sons, an Eastleigh printing firm, had provided a crash course in typesetting and printing for Joyce and Wild, and in etching and lithography for Marston, together with a complete printing outfit and the necessary paper (fig. 7). But the conditions in which the book was produced were excessively difficult. James Murray noted that Marston had to do most of the printing ‘in the early hours of the morning, when the hut was as nearly quiet and free from vibration as it ever became, and there was a minimum of dust’. He continued:

I do not pretend to know the nature of the special difficulties that the climate introduced into lithography, but I know this, that I've frequently seen Marston do everything right—clean ink, and press—but for some obscure reason the prints did not come right. And I've seen him during a whole night pull off half a dozen wrong ones for one good print, and he did not use so much language over it as might have been expected.

(Murray and Marston 1913, 106-7; fig. 8.)

The printed sheets were bound by Day between ‘Venesta’ board, a primitive kind of plywood which was used to construct the expedition’s packing cases. These boards were cut, cleaned and polished, but it was not possible to obliterate entirely the stencilled titles identifying the original contents of the cases. Thus the various volumes are known, for example, as the ‘Julienne Soup’, ‘Butter’, ‘Bottled Fruit’, ‘Irish Stew’, ‘Tartic’ etc.

Fig. 6. The title page of *Aurora Australis*, a lithograph by Marston. *Aurora Australis* was intended to be commercially published as the first book produced entirely in the Antarctic, but in the event it was distributed to expedition members and supporters. Nearly 60 copies are known to have survived and this is probably close to the total number actually bound. *Photograph: Hampshire County Council Museums Service.*

Fig. 7. The printing press and typecase used for the printing of *Aurora Australis*, photographed in ‘The Rogues’ Retreat’, the cubicle occupied by Ernest Joyce and Frank Wild, who together with Marston and Bernard Day, produced this unique publication. *Photograph from The Heart of the Antarctic (1909).*

George Marston (19 March 1882 – 22 November 1940) was an English artist who twice accompanied Sir Ernest Shackleton on expeditions to Antarctic, first from 1907–09 on the Nimrod expedition, and then later from 1914–17 on the Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition, which ended with the crew being marooned on Elephant Island. Early life. George Marson was born in Southsea (Portsmouth, England). He studied art at Regent Street Polytechnic (now the University of Westminster). Nimrod expedition. During the Nimrod expedition, George helped to print the book *Aurora Australis* whilst stationed on Antarcti...