

TO THE FAR SOUTH

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AUGUST 1954 saw five of us embark in Glasgow on the *Southern Opal*, a 10,000 ton whaling tanker and transport, *en route* for South Georgia, a small island on the fringe of the Antarctic, latitude 56 south, and some 1,000 miles east of Cape Horn. The purpose of the expedition was primarily survey and mountaineering with glaciology, natural history, and a general extension of the current knowledge of the interior of the island as secondary objects. All members of the party were mountaineers, the venture being the 1954-55 British South Georgia Expedition. Six months were spent on the island.

South Georgia is one of the Falkland Island Dependencies and was first sighted and annexed to Britain in 1775 by Captain Cook on one of his southerly cruises. The island is about 120 miles in length and anything from 10 to 25 miles in breadth, its main feature being a great backbone of mountain range nearly 10,000 feet in height, from which countless glaciers, separated by rock and ice ridges, radiate and find their way to the sea.

Sir Ernest Shackleton died and was buried in South Georgia in 1922. Here was played the final drama which followed his epic trip across the Antarctic and South Atlantic Oceans in 1915 in a small open boat and his landing on the wind-swept south-west coast of South Georgia. To reach the north-east coast it was necessary to cross the mountains which run the length of the island, and Shackleton felt that divine guidance showed him the way. If that was not the case he was certainly very lucky, as we found only two places where it was possible to make a quick crossing. We looked for signs of his 1915 party but could find no trace of the abandoned primus stove or other equipment.

Vegetation is sparse, growing only on the first thousand or so feet above sea-level and consisting of tussock grass, four varieties of alpine flowering plants, and a few lichens and mosses. Because of the rich food content in the surrounding seas, including plankton, krill, and squids, bird and animal life around the coast is prolific. Every beach is littered with colonies of elephant and other types of seal, whilst four types of penguin, including the well-known king penguin, are encountered in large numbers. It is a breeding ground

for many different members of the petrel family and other sea birds, including that very famous wandering albatross. The island even boasts three birds of its own, namely the South Georgia teal, pipit, and blue-eyed shag.

South Georgia is the centre of the land-based Antarctic whaling industry on which the economy of the Falkland Islands Dependencies is balanced. Because of this, it is quite an important place. Three whaling companies—one Norwegian, one British, and the third Argentinian—operate their catcher fleets from its shores in the summer months. In addition, the Argentinian company holds the sole licence to kill elephant seals, and six hundred of these grotesque bulls, which weigh about three tons each, are shot yearly, their skins being rendered down to provide a high-grade oil.

During the summer months, when the whaling ships arrive at the beginning of the season, the population of South Georgia rises to about twelve hundred. This dwindles again in the winter to some two hundred people, who consist of a skeleton staff at each whaling station together with the dozen or so permanent British staff under the charge of a resident magistrate responsible for the affairs of the island and its government, weather forecasting, and radio communications.

The expedition used a small hut at the British colony as a base and from here made trips of from four to five weeks into the interior. The local sealers and whalers proved most co-operative and landed us complete with equipment on different parts of the rocky and berg-strewn South Georgian shores. Ski and man-hauled sledges provided our transport over the glaciers and snowfields, and on the more broken-up rocky terrain, the uneconomical method of back-packing, using Everest carriers and rucksacks, had to be resorted to. Because of this, all equipment had to be as light as possible and kept down to a minimum. Food was the heaviest item and special sledging rations were used, consisting mainly of pemmican and other dried and compressed items high in calorific value. The two-man nylon fabric tents and protective clothing were the same as used on Everest. Radio communications were maintained with Great Britain by way of the transmitter at the British colony.

All the expedition members being climbers, mountaineering ranked high in the programme. No climbing had ever been done in South Georgia. In fact, only a few surveying parties have been in the interior and that only in areas adjoining the better-known



SLEDGING IN SOUTH GEORGIA

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north-east coastline. We had had high hopes of making ascents of several of the high peaks. Mount Paget, 9,200 feet, the highest on the island and located in the main Allardyce mountain range, naturally attracted us and we made it the target of our first five-week trip. The approach over the broken-up Nordenskjold glacier took seven days, before we found ourselves encamped at the base of the impressive north-east face of the mountain—a vast horse-shoe-shaped precipice, 6,000 feet in height, almost vertical and swept by ice avalanches, the whole looking rather like the north face of the Eiger. Several prospective routes on the flank of this face were attempted and explored, but all to no avail, and we got no higher than 5,000 feet. A combination of steep ice and rock, bergschrunds, avalanches, and most important of all, weather conditions, beat us. In the mountains of South Georgia it is rare to get two successive fine days, so that to reach the summit of a high peak it is necessary to find a relatively easy route which will enable the whole ascent and descent to be completed in one day rather than one requiring the establishment of a small assault camp higher up. All expedition work in the interior of this island is limited by wind and gales which occur very frequently. From calm conditions a raging hurricane of 100 miles per hour can develop within minutes, and our last trip came to an untimely end when our tent was ripped to shreds by wind force alone. Prototypes of these tents had reputedly been tested in wind tunnels to withstand wind of 120 miles per hour!

Following this rebuff on Mount Paget we turned our attention to other peaks and several fine ones were ascended—the highest being Mount Gregor, of 6,200 feet. The approach to this, across the extremely broken-up Ross Glacier, took a week and involved some rather harrowing experiences in quickly blowing-up storms, the party being caught out on the glacier without protection. This ended with myself and my companion being snow-blind for twenty-four hours following the ascent, through being unable to wear goggles in the mist near the summit. This mist came upon us some 200 feet from the top, but rather than submit to defeat, after waiting in our tracks, freezing, for nearly two hours, we literally crawled and hacked our way up the final ice-cone.

Possibly the highlight of our expedition was a three-week visit to part of the south-west coast of South Georgia. This coastline faces the Antarctic continent and is continually lashed by gales. Approach to the shore is always difficult because of brash ice and heavy surf. A sealing boat gave us a lift and tried to drop us at a point fairly

near Mount Paget, once again our target, but landing there was impossible because of the ice-bound coast so we had to be contented with a site some 20 miles to the north. This turned out to be difficult enough, and everyone got soaked in the freezing water—not a pleasant start to a sojourn on an unknown and inhospitable shore. Unfortunately the time of our landing here was only some three weeks before the end of the sealing season. The skipper of the ship named two days, on one or other of which he would attempt to pick us up, so we had to be back from the interior by then.

Taking stock of our surroundings, we found that we were surrounded on three sides by very broken-up glaciers and mountain ridges through which we would have to break, before reaching the high snowfield leading up to the plateau of Mount Paget, whose gradient we believed to be much more feasible and climbable from the south. We set off, carrying loads, and it eventually took us two weeks to break through these ramparts by way of one of the glaciers, finding a route through a maze of crevasses and bergschrunds, and at times lowering all our loads and sledges on ropes down ice-cliffs, anything up to 200 feet in height. The time factor was against our getting to Mount Paget and back in time but we hoped for the best, and the five of us carried loads slowly through the glacier (we called it Eclipse glacier) in an attempt to let two members set off on the last long sledge and ski trip towards our goal. My two companions started off on the last 15 miles of relatively easy going at a height of only 1,500 feet four days before our rendezvous with the sealers. At least forty-eight hours had to be put aside for the return through the Eclipse glacier. Slowly they gained height and got nearer, but it eventually became clear that the mountain was going to win. After eighteen hours of continuous going the party were on the slopes of Mount Paget. The way looked reasonably clear, but the top was still very distant and, of course, there might be sundry hidden difficulties. It was 6 o'clock at night, getting dark, so they regretfully had to turn back, reaching the bivouac about midnight to snatch a few hours exhausted sleep. Then followed a hurried dash back to the glacier where all members of the expedition were waiting to carry the gear up the ice-falls and down the broken ground to the shore.

The sledge, unfortunately, in the haste, got out of control and went careering downhill, to be totally wrecked against a rock buttress. Eventually all our equipment and personnel were assembled at the base camp and everybody was privately deliberating on the prospect.

of the arrival of the relief ship, or worse still, that she might be unable to reach the shore because of ice. However, not many hours later, to everyone's relief and cries of "God bless Captain Hauge," smoke appeared round the headland, and boats came towards the shore, brilliantly-handled by grinning Norwegians, to pick us up successfully. We were very happy to know that we should not have to exist on a diet of seal and penguin for a further nine months, till the start of a new sealing season.

Each part of the island that we visited was surveyed for mapping purposes and two glaciers were intensively observed, so that their rate of flow might be evaluated. I took a special interest in the bird-life and spent many days with camera and tape recorder. In addition I took it upon myself to count the island's largest rookery colony of king penguins. These totalled some twenty-five thousand birds, and they had increased threefold in the space of ten years.

It was not all work and no play. Christmas and New Year brought the inevitable reunions at the whaling stations and the British colony. The highlight was a fancy dress party at which there was a treasure hunt, first prize going to the team who procured, among other things, a penguin and an elephant seal! The prize was won in less than ten minutes after frantic searchings along the beach. Just before our departure a shooting competition with the officers from an Argentinian ship was followed by a barbecue at which the individual ration was a kilo (2.2 lb.) of beef and 2 litres ($3\frac{1}{2}$ pints) of "vino rosó"!