

Into the very soul of cold, a review of the show at the Bulger Gallery



Antarctica A Group Exhibition

bulgergallery.com

January 14 – February 11, 2006

Our annual thematic group exhibition, ANTARCTICA, explores this hostile region through the eyes of three photographers: Frank Hurley; Joan Myers and Herbert G. Ponting.

ANTARCTICA features some of the most well-known and enduring images of the Antarctic by 2 famous individuals: Herbert Ponting (1870-1935), the official photographer for Captain Robert Falcon Scott's British Antarctic Expedition 1910-1913; and Frank Hurley (1885-1962), photographer for Ernest Shackleton's expedition that started aboard the Endurance, which set sail from England in 1914. This exhibition features vintage photographs as well as limited-edition modern prints from the original negatives by the Royal Geographic Society, for whom we represent this work in Canada.

We also see this mythic landscape through the lens of Joan Myers (American, b. 1944) who spent four months photographing scientific study and daily life in the world's "most hostile continent", as a recipient of an Antarctic Artists and Writers Grant from the National Science Foundation's Office of Polar Programs in 2002. Myers spent October 2002 through January 2003 based at the McMurdo Station, an American research facility built in the 1950s. Her large-format colour photographs offer a spectacular modern-day view of Antarctica. Her work has been honoured by the Smithsonian Institute through its production of a solo exhibition titled "Wondrous Cold: An Antarctic Journey," opening in Washington, D.C. in May 2006. It will then embark on a 15-venue national tour through the spring of 2010. A full-colour companion book complements this work and will be published by Harper Collins for release in February 2006.

Robert Falcon Scott (1868-1912) was an experienced naval officer who made

his second journey to the Antarctic as the captain of the Terra Nova Expedition, which left New Zealand in 1910. Scott was defeated in his bid to be the first man to reach the South Pole by Roald Amundsen, a Norwegian explorer who arrived there a mere 30 days earlier. On his journey back from the Pole, Scott and his four expedition members succumbed to unusually brutal weather conditions for which they were ill-prepared. Herbert Ponting, an experienced photographer previously best-known for his images of the Russo-Japanese War, was selected by Scott to be his official photographer. Our exhibition includes vintage prints made by Ponting which depict life at base camp, as the cumbersome nature of photographic materials of the day restricted his activities to the first leg of this expedition.

Sir Ernest Shackleton (1874-1922) began his career under Robert Scott, but eventually became his competitor. In 1909, during his expedition aboard the *Nimrod*, Shackleton came within 97 miles of the South Pole, a feat for which he was later knighted. By the time the *Endurance* set sail on the British Trans-Antarctic Expedition of 1914, the South Pole had already been conquered by Amundsen; Shackleton's ambitious goal was to cross the Antarctic continent on foot. However, their ship was besieged by ice, and had to be abandoned before they ever set foot on land. The *Endurance* was destroyed by ice, and Shackleton and his team spent six months adrift on an ice floe before reaching the relative safety of Elephant Island at the northern end of the Antarctic Peninsula. From this point, Shackleton, with a handful of his men, sailed on their largest surviving vessel, the *James Caird*, which they had dragged across the ice when they abandoned ship. After fifteen harrowing days at sea through terrible conditions, they reached the southern shore of South Georgia Island, which required them to traverse its central mountain range in order to reach civilization. Shackleton then set about mounting a rescue operation, returning to Elephant Island some four months after his departure and eventually rescuing all his men without the loss of a single life.

Frank Hurley, already a noted Australian photographer, accompanied the *Endurance* as expedition photographer and recorded the full remarkable story. This was his second trip to the Antarctic, having traveled with Sir Douglas Mawson on his 1911-14 Expedition to Commonwealth Bay. All told, it is estimated that he had made over 500 images by the time the *Endurance* was crushed. Seeing the imminent destruction of all his work trapped in the ship, he dove into the icy water to retrieve the glass-plate negatives. However, as the crew set out for their survival on foot, the weight of Hurley's negatives and equipment exceeded what Shackleton allowed, and he was forced to choose a small number of negatives to be retained. In all, approximately 120 were kept; the rest Hurley smashed to pieces on the ice, so that he could never change his mind and go back for them. These negatives survived intact, and have been preserved in the collection of the Royal Geographical Society's photographic archive. Recently, photographs from the original negatives have been offered as a limited-edition series for the first time.

Toronto Star

Into the very soul of cold

Jan. 14, 2006. 01:43 AM

PETER GODDARD

You'd be right in accusing Stephen Bulger of opportunism with the timing of his group show "Antarctica."

But it won't be because he anticipated that we'd be desperate for a hint of real winter by now, or that he might cash in on March of the Penguins, already a shoo-in to be short-listed for the Academy Awards in March.

Where Bulger's timing was right was in understanding there is still some mileage left in iconic Antarctic images, even if they're reminiscent of a faded National Geographical past. The sense of wonder that the images evoke is our natural response to a visual landscape not yet fully explored or understood.

"Last year, with everyone complaining about it being so cold, I wanted to show (images) of a place that's much colder," says Bulger, whose 1026 Queen St. W. gallery is displaying the photographs until Feb. 11. "This is the time of year when the images in the show were originally taken, when it was summer in Antarctica."

On a planet with so few topographic secrets left, Antarctica remains a mystery bathed in a piercing 24-hour light for half the year. There is a sense of infinite space there that you find nowhere else," says Joan Myers, the New Mexico-based photographer with three images in the Bulger show, alongside work from two pioneers of Antarctic photography: Herbert Ponting, who died in 1935, and Frank Hurley, who died in 1962 — "my heroes," as Myers describes them.

Supported by a grant from the National Science Foundation's Office of Polar Programs in the U.S., she was based at McMurdo Station, the American Antarctic site, from October 2002 to January 2003. Her resulting work has been distilled into a solo exhibition, "Wondrous Cold: An Antarctic Journey" — opening in Washington, D.C., on May 17 at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History — as well as a companion book from HarperCollins.

Myers's Imax Crevasse, a print on watercolour paper, is one of the most dominant images in the Bulger show.

"As a photographer, you're always trying to fit space into a small frame," Myers continues, noting "the Antarctic is different. I've been above the Arctic Circle and in Greenland, briefly. There are similarities (with the Antarctic). But in the Antarctic you sense you could walk and walk and walk and never reach the end of it."

In strictly commercial terms, the Antarctic's "Great White Mystery" has done great box office business over the years. Decades before French documentary director Luc Jacquet even thought of hiring Morgan Freeman as his voiceover artist in March of the Penguins, crowds lined up to see the 1919 film In the Grip of the Polar Pack, filmed by Hurley in 1916. Ponting's own 1910-11 movie, Ninety Degrees South: With Scott to the Antarctic, was a huge hit in England in 1933.

In the early days of Antarctic exploration, adventurers and photographers found a good living by heading out on the lecture circuit to show scenes of scary ice floes and dogged penguins. Ponting eventually stopped photography entirely to go out on tour. Hurley, however, photographed up to a few days before he died.

The two figures were poles apart in terms of personality. Ponting, a California resident born in England, was fastidious and methodical during his stint as official photographer for Robert Scott's British Antarctic Expedition from 1910-13, churning out 1,000 photographs.

"He actually slept in his darkroom under his bench, next to an outside wall covered in frost," says Myers.

Hurley, a raw-boned Australian, haughty and self-centred, was a fearless risk-taker — "a warrior," as a colleague famously described him. He jumped into bone-chilling Antarctic water in 1914 to save some glass plate negatives left behind in the sinking Endurance, the ship that had brought the photographer with the rest of the expedition led by Sir Ernest Shackleton.

What Ponting and Hurley had in common was their belief that they were artists with cameras.

"They were the first two fine-art photographers who had the training to do more than just record images," says Myers. "Hurley had the wonderful advantage of

being on a disastrous expedition. He took wonderful images of Endurance sinking in the ocean. Ponting was less macho. I think I can relate to him better. I don't like the cold, either." (In the Oct. 13, 2002, entry in her Antarctic journal, Myers wonders to herself: "How did the English do it in their cotton clothes? How did their bodies survive it?")

With Ponting's photographs, you can practically feel the cold in the men's eyes. Early shots show the explorers as hearty English club-going hearties out on some sort of grand adventure. His later images show them gaunt from all the hardship.

Among Hurley's contributions to the Bulger show is perhaps the most famous image of the Antarctic, of the Endurance, listing 30 degrees on its side, surrounded by ice, another wondrous piece of complex technology crushed like a toy made from matchsticks.

[Top of the Page](#)