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978-1-108-07675-3 - The Voyage of the Why Not? in the Antarctic: The Journal of the Second French South Polar Expedition, 1908–1910

Jean Charcot

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

**T**HE distance between Europe and the Antarctic is the principal cause of the apathy so long shown toward exploration in the latter region, while in the direction of the North Pole, on the contrary, explorations grew more and more numerous.

Recently, however, the South Pole has emerged from darkness. Voyagers and scientific men during the last two centuries have realized that our knowledge of the natural physical conditions of the globe must necessarily remain incomplete as long as there continues so large an unknown zone as that represented by the great white spot covering the southern extremity of the world, twice as vast as the whole of Europe.

The general public, too, has been aroused to a passionate interest in the subject. There is good reason, for there is no other region of which the study is more gratifying to explorers or to the scientific men who give their attention to the observations and collections made by the explorers. Everything there, indeed, is new, much is unexpected, and whoever makes up his mind to go thither is certain of important discoveries to reward his pains.

The circumnavigatory voyages and the expeditions of the Englishmen Cook and Ross, the Russian Bellingshausen, the American Wilkes, the Frenchman Dumont d'Urville, combined with the gallant incursions of the English and American sealers, Biscoe, Morrell, Weddell, Palmer, Pendleton and Balleny, the German Dallmann, and the Norwegians

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Larsen and Evensen, narrowed very considerably the limits of the great Terra Incognita which is supposed to exist, and already warranted the view that if the Arctic polar cap is composed of a frozen sea bounded by the northern coasts of Europe, Asia, and America, the Antarctic polar cap, on the other hand, is solid land or at least a vast frozen archipelago surrounded by sea.

A Belgian officer, Commandant de Gerlache, has the credit of spending the first winter amid the Antarctic ices on board the *Belgica* in 1897, his achievement being from all points of view a fine and productive piece of work. It had also the merit of exciting public attention, and undoubtedly it is to his example that we owe the very fruitful pilgrimages of the last few years to the Antarctic. In fact, after the wintering of the Anglo-Norwegian Borchegrevinck Expedition on Ross Land, Europe organized a regular siege of the Antarctic. Beginning with 1902, there were to be seen the English captain, Scott (who had just started out again, having Shackleton with him as a partner) exploring Ross Sea and Victoria Land and making a magnificent raid across the great ice barrier; the German professor, Van Drygalski, on the *Gauss*, wintering in the pack-ice in that difficult sector of the Antarctic Circle which lies south of Kerguelen and discovering new lands there; the Swedish professor Nordenskjöld, accompanied by the Norwegian captain Larsen, wintering under dramatic conditions—but conditions very important for science—east of Graham Land, whence the audacious dash of the Argentine captain Irizar brought him home; the Scottish doctor, Bruce, on board the *Scotia*, discovering Coates Land in Weddell Sea and bringing to a close one of the greatest of surveying campaigns; and finally, in 1904, the little ship *Français*, commanded by me, attempting to verify and continue the discoveries of De Gerlache, while wintering on the west coast of Graham Land.

In connexion with this great joint effort one is pleasantly

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struck by the absolute harmony between the heads of the expeditions and the savants who organized them; and also by the genuinely scientific spirit which animated them all. It is to be hoped that in the conquest of the Antarctic such will always be the case, to the great benefit of universal science. I am sure that in our enlightened age there will be thereby no diminution of the slight glory which explorers are able to shed on their own countries.

In 1908 Sir Ernest Shackleton accomplished his fine and gallant piece of exploration, too well known to all for it to be necessary to dwell on it here, which brought him within 179 kilometres (112 miles) of the Pole. And we on the *Pour-quoi-Pas?* were doing our best—without, however, any desire to challenge comparisons—in the region to the south-west of South America, with results which, thanks to the zeal and energy of my colleagues, the scientific world has been pleased to consider important.

The exploration of the Antarctic, therefore, has started and seems as though it will never cease until the conquest, however arduous and long of accomplishment it may still look, is complete. Captain Scott, indeed, has just set out again for the conquest of the South Pole itself, and we hear of great expeditions preparing in Germany and America. Lastly, the Argentine Republic, which has for several years kept up a permanent observatory on the South Orkneys, is anxious to establish another on the west coast of Graham Land, at the place where we wintered.

The diary of our late expedition forms the subject of my new book; but I think I ought first of all to explain why I chose as my working-centre this inhospitable region, so unpromising at times and so distant from the actual Pole.

James Ross in 1841, while skirting, in the sector of the Antarctic Circle lying south of Australia, a line of coast trending to the south—called by him Victoria Land—discovered an immense ice-cliff rising absolutely vertical and continuing

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eastward. This has since been known by the name of the Great Barrier.

Borchegrevinck in 1900 climbed this cliff and ascertained the existence of an ice-plain stretching as far as the eye could reach. Lastly in 1902 the *Discovery* Expedition, skirting the Great Barrier, found King Edward VII Land bounding it on the east, and then, during the course of the winter on Victoria Land, crossed the barrier in a magnificent dash as far as 82° 17' South latitude. It was quite natural that Shackleton should return to these same regions, staked out by the explorers of his own country; and it was equally quite natural that, after he had announced his intention of going there, I should abstain from directing my course thither, in spite of the attractions; for one can sail as far south as 78° and from that point a vast flat plain seems to extend to the earth's axis. But, of necessity, two expeditions of different nationality, with the best intentions in the world and with the best of hearts, could not have avoided coming into rivalry over the glorious prize of the Furthest South; and, great sporting interest as this rivalry would have had, it could not but have prejudiced completely the observations and perhaps the ultimate results. I must hasten to add, too, that I have no reason for supposing that we should have rivalled the magnificent results attained by my friend Sir Ernest Shackleton; and therefore the pecuniary sacrifices which my country made would have been entirely wasted.

Besides, the Antarctic is a vast enough field to allow a number of expeditions to work there together with advantage. I resolved to return to the region which I had begun to explore on the *Français* in 1903–1905, i.e. that mountainous projection, due south of Cape Horn, which seems as if it had once been a continuation of America and is improperly known under the general name of Graham Land. There I should be able to continue the researches of the *Français* (themselves considered so valuable) in all branches of science, and to

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verify, complete, and expand them. To the South Graham Land came to an abrupt end in 67° of latitude. Beyond, Alexander I Land rose amid the ice, scarcely visible and never yet approached. Was it a solitary island or part of a continent? West of it an unknown zone stretched as far as King Edward VII Land. The *Belgica*, carried along by the drift, was able to make some interesting soundings in part of this zone, but the work required continuing as far as possible westward, where nothing had been made out except a small island, reported by Bellingshausen but questioned by some geographers. Had we any right to go on calling by the name of the 'Antarctic Continent' this portion of our globe where the only indications of land to which we could point were two isolated peaks at a distance from one another?

My exact object was to study in detail and from all points of view as wide a stretch as possible of the Antarctic in this sector of the circle, regardless of latitude. I knew that I had chosen the region where ice confronts the navigator as far north as 61°, where innumerable icebergs dot the sea, and where the coast-line is fringed with high mountains, to all appearance insurmountable. I had no hope therefore of approaching the Pole. Nevertheless, lest any one should cry 'Sour grapes!' I must hasten to say that if I had had the chance of stumbling on a road by which I could realise the dream of all Polar explorers I should have made for the Pole enthusiastically and should certainly have spared nothing to reach it.

I had no means of foreseeing, however, what we might discover, and the unknown nature of my undertaking when I made choice of this sector of the circle rendered the organization of the expedition all the more difficult, since it was necessary to be ready for any emergency, and it was impossible, as in the case of an attack on familiar ground, to concentrate one's preparations for a struggle against forces which could not be foreseen.

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I had entertained this project of a new expedition even before the end of my former one, and since my return to France, encouraged by the satisfaction the scientists showed with the results I had achieved, I had been looking for the means of realizing my plan. I submitted my programme to the Academy of Sciences, which appointed a committee to consider it and after a favourable examination decided to give its gracious patronage to this new expedition, issuing detailed instructions as to the work which it would like us to undertake. The Museum and the Oceanographical Institute similarly consented to be patrons. With such backers, success was surely inevitable.

Still it took me many long months before I could discern the possibility of raising the necessary funds, though I had no lack either of sympathy or of encouragement. The Paris Press never ceased to raise its powerful voice in my behalf, while devoted friends like MM. Joubin and Rabot, and my own family, too—in spite of the prospect of a long and painful separation—never let me be discouraged.

At last my efforts had a result. I was lucky enough to interest in my work MM. Berteaux, Doumer, and Etienne, who were joined first by MM. J. Dupuy and R. Poincaré, and then by M. Briand, Minister of Public Instruction and M. G. Thomson, Minister of Marine. Soon, after a favourable report had been issued by the Committee on Exploration, I was assured that a handsome grant-in-aid would be included in the Budget for presentation to the Chambers.

On the proposal of M. Doumer, indeed, the Chambers agreed to a vote of 600,000 francs in the Budget of the Ministry of Public Instruction.<sup>1</sup> This proof of confidence on the part of the French Government and the patronage of our great learned societies were to me the finest recompense for the

<sup>1</sup> While the expedition was at work in the Antarctic, M. Doumer twice persuaded the Chambers to vote a sum of 50,000 francs, which brought the Government grant up to 700,000 francs.

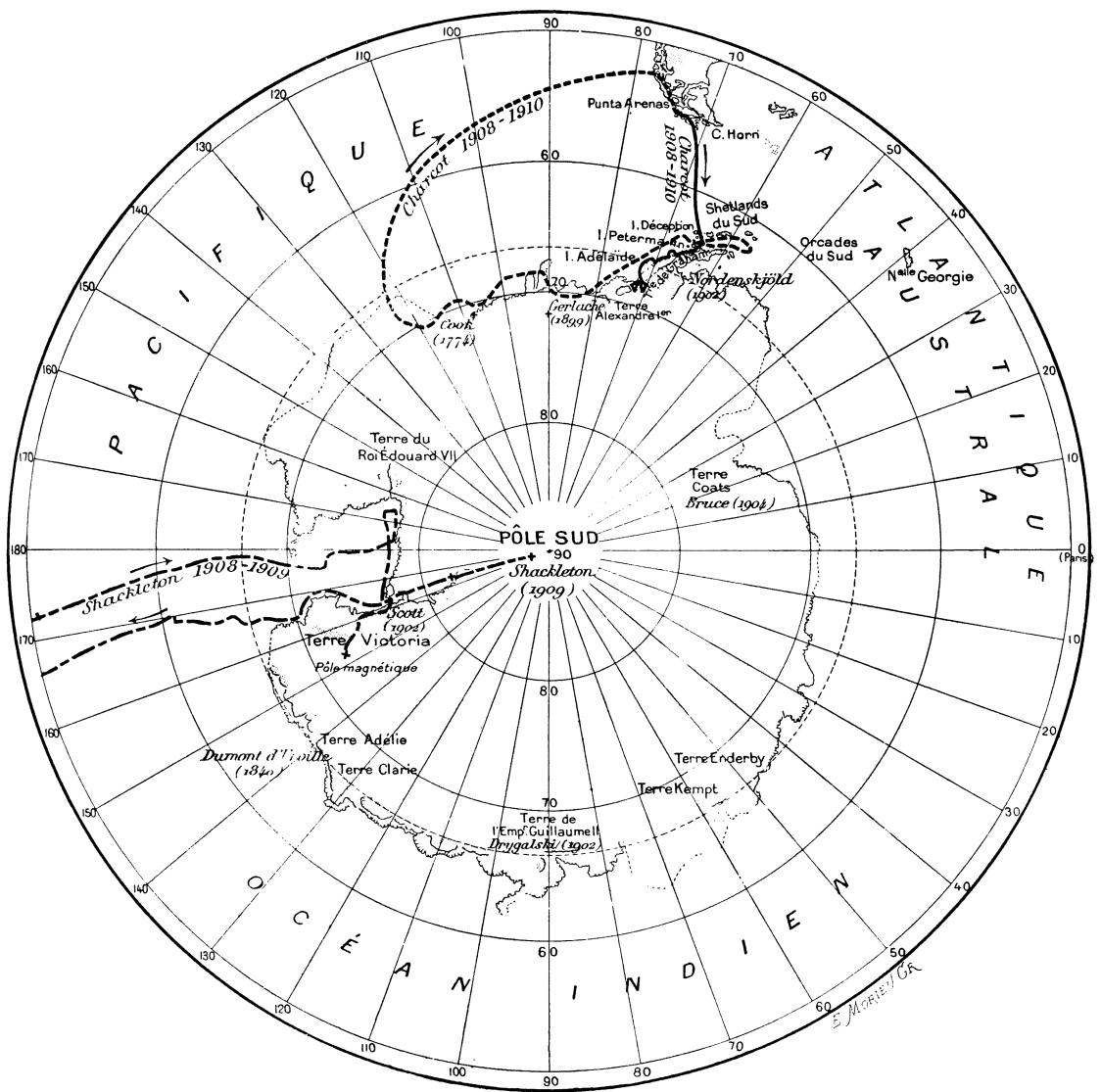
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SOUTH POLAR CHART.

Showing routes of the Charcot (1908–10) and Shackleton (1908–9) Expeditions.

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efforts which I had made. To this sum were added later 100,000 francs subscribed by generous donors, including a sum of 10,000 francs from the Geographical Society of Paris and grants from the Museum, the Paris Municipal Council, and the Chambers of Commerce of the big French towns.

The Ministry of Marine put at the disposal of the Expedition three naval officers and promised me 250 tons of coal, the dredging outfit which had already been used on the *Français*, and all the necessary instruments, maps, and documents which could be provided by the Surveying Department and the arsenals.

The Prince of Monaco, whose own labours and great generosity have given such an impulse to surveying work, offered the Expedition a complete oceanographical outfit.

The Museum, the Bureau des Longitudes, the Montsouris Observatory and private observatories, the Meteorological Department, the Agronomic Institute, the Pasteur Institute, and several celebrities in the world of science enriched with loans and gifts our scientific arsenal, already increased by purchases from the funds of the Expedition, until it became one of the richest and completest ever carried by a polar expedition.<sup>1</sup>

Large as was our banking-account in the end—800,000 francs—most South Polar expeditions sent out by other countries have had at their disposal much larger sums, and it is not one of the least of my grounds for pride that we succeeded in organizing ours in so perfect a way at so small an expense, especially when one considers that the ship (which alone cost 400,000 francs) was brought back with the greater part of the equipment in good condition. Account must be taken of the outlay necessary on the wages of the crew for two years, the costly scientific instruments of which I have just

<sup>1</sup> When we reached Buenos Aires the Meteorological Department of the Argentine Republic, under the direction of Mr. Davis, lent us still more instruments.

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spoken, the food for thirty men for three years, and all the stores required. If I was able to attain so good a result, my thanks are due for the generous interest shown by individuals, including perfect strangers, by the governments of Brazil, the Argentine Republic, and Chili, and also by the great majority of our own purveying firms.

As soon as the scientific staff was definitely constituted, my future colleagues had several months in which to perfect themselves in the duties they would be called upon to perform, while availing themselves of the bounteous hospitality offered them on the yachts of the Prince of Monaco, at the Montsouris and Paris Observatories, at the Meteorological Department, and in the Museum laboratories.

May I be allowed to make special mention here of the excellent relations which have always existed between other Antarctic explorers and myself? Seeking to gain every advantage, I have frequently addressed myself to MM. de Gerlache, Bruce, Scott, Shackleton, Otto Nordenskjöld, and Van Drygalski, and all of them have been kind enough to pour out for my benefit their precious stores of experience.

The ship was not only the most important factor in the Expedition, but also that which demanded attention from the very first. My earliest idea was to try to buy back my old vessel the *Français*, and I caused negotiations to be opened with the Argentine Republic for this purpose. But I learnt that this excellent little ship, renamed the *Austral*, was to be used for the revictualling of the station on the South Orkneys and in the establishment of a new observatory on Wandel Island.<sup>1</sup> Next, with the aid of my friend M. Charles Boyn, ex-Naval Paymaster and now Director of the Agence Générale Maritime, we tried to purchase a whaler, either in

<sup>1</sup> In December, 1907, while leaving Buenos Aires on this double duty the *Austral* was wrecked on a shoal in the Rio de da Plata, going down with all the instruments she had on board, while the crew were saved by the French liner *Magellan*.